

Inheritance Promises to Israel

One of the key promises of God in the Bible that has always made the Jews a special people is the promise of God that they would inherit the land of Canaan (which became Israel). In Genesis 15:7, God told Abram that He had brought Abram out of his previous home to give him the land of Canaan to possess, yet his descendants would have to be enslaved in a foreign land (Egypt) for 400 years. God would bring them out and return them to Canaan to possess the land. Therefore even though God had promised the land to Abraham, he would never possess it, but his descendants would. This inheritance of the land was repeated to his son Isaac, then Jacob, Joseph, and to each generation afterward, yet they never realized the inheritance of the land until Joshua.

In Hebrews 11:8, we are told that Abraham obeyed God when he was called by going out to Canaan which he was to receive as an “inheritance”, and he went out, not knowing where he was going. He lived like an alien in a tent in the land of Canaan, as did Isaac and Jacob who were fellow heirs to the promise of the land. All Jews from the time of Abraham lived by hope in this promise that some day God would not only promise to give the land, but they would actually physically own it, and live in possession of it. This idea of inheritance has always driven and defined Jews from the time of Abraham even until now. In the 21st century that we live in, a big part of the Jewish identity is still the inheritance of the land of Israel. As the song goes, and all Jews believe, “This land is mine, God gave this land to me.” Zion is the mount in Jerusalem where David built his palace (2 Samuel 5:7). The concept of Zionism is that nationalistic zeal that Jews have that is based mainly on owning the land. Zionism does not have a uniform ideology, but has survived almost 2000 years of not possessing the land because it has always been ingrained in their beings that God promised it to them as an inheritance.

What do Christians Believe ?

For 2000 years Christian theologians have debated the idea of inheritance as it pertains to Christians. The first Christian church was formed in Jerusalem about 30 AD, and thrived until persecution drove many out. By the 40s the center of Christianity was moving to Antioch, Syria where the church population was exploding, and Paul and Barnabas went there to minister. By the 60s the church was growing in leaps and bounds in Asia Minor and Greece. In

70 AD, the Romans completely destroyed Jerusalem, and dispersed the Jews around the empire. At the end of the first century, the center of Christianity was Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). Christian theologians in the second, third, and fourth century slowly progressed away from believing that Jews still had an inheritance in the land. You can imagine how easy this was since there was no Israel, and there were very few Jews in the area of Jerusalem. This remained the condition from 70 until 1948.

Many New Testament passages make it clear that since Christ inaugurated the New Covenant, and a new body of believers was formed on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 called the “body of Christ” or more commonly “the church”; Jews and Gentiles have been brought together wherever they are by Christ. Ephesians 2:13-19 is a key passage written by Paul. He wrote to the believers in Ephesus who were primarily Gentiles to tell them that all who believed in Jesus were now brought together as God’s chosen people with a new inheritance that was primarily spiritual. In Eph.2:11, he wrote that the Gentiles who had formerly been separated from God and excluded from Israel, have now in Christ “been brought near”. The enmity that had formerly existed between lands, peoples, and cultures had now been ended by Christ. Christ had reconciled all who believe into one body through the cross. They are no longer strangers and aliens, but all who believe are fellow citizens of God’s household wherever they are and whoever they are. This ended in the church the idea of any special land or physical inheritance. Peter, who was also a Jew, wrote in his first epistle that the church was made up of Jews and Gentiles, and was centered outside of Israel by then. The church was the new “chosen race” (1 Peter 2:9-10). Peter used the quote from Exodus 19:5-6 and Deuteronomy 10, concerning Israel’s special elect status, to refer to the church which was now God’s chosen instrument to reach out to the world and reveal Him. Peter said, “you (the church) are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of God who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.”

But What about the Land?

The New Testament authors don’t seem to be concerned about the land anymore, and the inheritance they write about is spiritual. Believers are heirs with Christ who has promised us that we also will be resurrected unto eternal life, and we will reign and rule with Christ. Since

the universal church is now the elect people of God, we are pointed away from any special piece of land. However, Paul made it clear in Romans 11 that God is not through with the Jews yet, but has a plan for them involving the end times, and the return of Christ. The last book in the Bible, Revelation, also seems to hold a special place for Jerusalem and the land of Israel during the end times and return of Christ. The last battle is fought in Israel, and Jesus returns to the Mount of Olives just as the angel said in Acts 1:11.

Joshua 14-19

The land of Canaan that had been promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their descendants was finally actually possessed by Israel in Joshua 14-19. After the exodus from Egypt, Moses had given instructions in Numbers 26:54-56 to divide up the land of Canaan by giving portions to the different tribes which were called by the names of the sons of Jacob. The land was to be divided up by "lot" which is by external appearances a random fair way to apportion it without any appearance of favoritism. Historians speculate that they took pieces of stone and wrote each tribes name on one, put them in a large jar, shook it up and "cast lots" by throwing one out at a time. The text makes no bones about inferring that God's providence was involved, and we the students can see this by referring to Jacob's predictions over 400 years before in Genesis 49. The first allotment went to the tribes of Judah, Ephraim, and Manasseh. We get more details of how they did it in the second allotment in Joshua 18. Three men from each tribe went out and walked through the land of Canaan making maps of all the landmarks, rivers, hills, valleys, etc. Then they returned to Joshua who divided it into portions, and then Joshua would cast lots for the tribes "before the Lord our God". In this way, all of the "promised land" was divided up and the various tribes settled in to live. Throughout this process the land is repeatedly called the inheritance of that tribe, and they understood it to be theirs forever as God had said to Abraham back in Genesis 17:8, "I will give to you and your descendants all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession."

So Do We Really Care Today Whose Land It Is?

Beginning with Augustine around 400 AD, all the traditional theologians have believed that Israel was replaced by the Church as God's chosen people per 1 Peter 2:9-10. The land ceased to become an issue because the church became an international body of believers that knew no boundaries. Added to this was the fact that the Romans destroyed Jerusalem

and Israel in 70 AD, and dispersed the Jews all over the empire. Therefore there was no Israel or land issues until after WWII when the United Nations created the new country of Israel in 1948. Nevertheless, the Jews always held onto the belief that the land was theirs, and some day they would return and possess it.

From a biblical viewpoint for today's Christians who interpret prophecy literally, the Jews presence in the land sets the stage for all the prophecies to be fulfilled. As we study the Old Testament prophets, we can't help but realize that though they predicted the demise of the Jews, they also predicted that in the end times the Jews would be restored to the land. Ezekiel 47-48 went so far as to predict that the land will be divided up again amongst the tribes of Israel as it was during Joshua's day. This vision of Ezekiel is much like the Revelation 21-22 description of the new heaven, earth, and New Jerusalem. It also has a river of life flowing out of the city. The allotments of land to the tribes is different than Joshua's, but includes the same overall boundaries. It appears from the prophet's perspective that Israel will be returned to the land in the Kingdom of God.

Conclusion

I must admit that I am not an expert, and I have more questions than answers, but there are certain facts that can be recognized. First, the land is God's to give. He created it, He can destroy it or recreate it, and He can give it to whomever He chooses. Secondly, Joshua 13-19 supports Israel's land claim over 3000 years ago. Thirdly, Israel was disciplined by God for breaking the covenant just as Moses predicted in Deut.28, and they were dispersed from the land. Fourth, the prophets predicted that Israel would be restored in the Kingdom. Lastly, we care about this because we look forward to Jesus returning to the land, and putting an end to this fallen world, and setting up His Kingdom. May we all say simply,

Come Lord Jesus

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