

WHAT ABOUT ISRAEL? (1)¹

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Introduction

I am sure you will agree that “Israel” is a big subject. First, large chunks of the Bible are involved in this issue, especially Old Testament history from Genesis all the way through the book of Esther; the Old Testament prophets (the four major prophets and the twelve minor prophets, from Isaiah to Malachi); the four gospel accounts; the book of Romans, particularly Romans 9-11; and the book of Revelation. Second, Bible interpretation is also involved, because various groups understand the relevant passages in different, opposing ways. Third, we can throw into the mix historical and political matters. For many people, “What About Israel?” touches upon events leading up to the formation of the modern state of Israel in 1948, its history since then and its future, and the debates about the rights and wrongs of all of this.

From the foregoing, it will be evident that this big subject is also a controversial and emotional one. Obviously, it is a controversial and emotional subject for the Jews, because it concerns their salvation and standing before God, as well as the claim of theirs, or at least of many of them, regarding that strip of land on the other side of the Mediterranean. Some argue that Jewish “bloodstock” is very mixed historically. But even aside from this, there are, of course, various sorts of Jews ideologically. Some Jews are Zionists, that is, they believe Israel has a right to that piece of real estate in the eastern Mediterranean. Some of them believe this for reasons that are more political; for others it is more a religious issue. Some of the Jews, before 1948 and currently, are anti-Zionists. They believe that Israel has no right to the land and should not go back to it. Some Jews are atheists. A few Jews are Messianic Jews: they believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Therefore, when I say it is a controversial and an emotional issue for Jews, I want you to understand that it is a controversial or emotional issue for various sorts of Jews, since they are as diverse in their philosophies and religions as any nation on the planet.

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We should also add that this is a controversial and emotional subject, to say the least, for many Muslims. They argue that Palestine was theirs for centuries and that the Jews took it less than a hundred years ago. Moreover, in traditional Islamic thinking, once the Muslims govern a piece of land, they must always govern that particular area. It is unchangeable. No other group can take it back.

Not only is this a controversial and emotional issue for Jews and Muslims, but the subject of Israel can also be a hot topic for professing Christians. There are certain Christians who believe that the Jews are still God's special chosen people and that the land of Canaan rightly belongs to them. Others disagree.

Besides these three religious groupings, the various secular powers are also very concerned about Israel and the wider situation in the Middle East. American foreign policy is involved. Some people fear that escalating trouble in and around Israel could trigger World War III. It is a hot-spot in the political world today.

All this is background for this big, controversial subject. Now, I want to state briefly where this article is headed. The remainder of it will consist of three parts in more than one issue of the *BRJ*. The first part explains the idea of the land of Canaan. Here we will work mostly from the Old Testament. Next, we will move on to Christ's teaching regarding the Jews in the gospel accounts. Finally, we will consider the teaching on Israel in that letter from the apostle Paul which particularly addresses the subject of the Jews, the book of Romans, especially Romans 9-11.

I. The Idea of the Land

What is the idea of holy land? To be "holy" means essentially, and first of all, *separated*. Holy land, then, is land which is separated from the common use for sacred use. It is land that is set apart by God, because He is particularly present there and has revealed Himself there. Holy land is where God dwells, where God is especially present.

The book of Exodus begins the story of the nation of Israel's journey to the promised land. What is the first reference to "holy ground" in Exodus? It occurs in connection with the burning bush on Mount Sinai (Ex. 3:5). God

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appeared to Moses through Jesus Christ, the divine angel or messenger, in the burning bush, the bush that burned but was not consumed. God told Moses, "This is holy ground. Therefore, you must do two things: (1) take your sandals off and (2) do not come too close." Once Moses left the scene of the burning bush, was the ground around that bush holy? No. It was no longer holy because the pre-incarnate Christ, the divine messenger of the Lord, was no longer there. The divine presence was removed, so the land was no longer holy. The land around that bush *before* God came to Moses that day 3,400 or so years ago was not holy either. Christ came and so, for a while, the land was holy because God's special presence set it apart. When Moses and the Angel of the Lord went their separate ways, it was no longer holy. If someone were able to locate that part of ground today, he would not have to take his shoes off.

What is the second instance of holy ground in the book of Exodus? Again, it involved Sinai, but this time not just the area around the bush, but the mountain itself. This time, not just one person, Moses, but all of Israel was there. The mountain was declared holy by God's terrifying presence in Exodus 19 and following. Moreover, because the ground was holy, God told Israel, "Do not come too near" (Ex. 19:12-13, 21-24)! In order to stop them from coming too close, a fence was constructed and God said if anybody crawled under, broke through or jumped over that fence, they would be put to death. Is that mountain, Mount Sinai, holy today? There is a question over which mountain in the Sinai Peninsula it was, but are any of those mountains holy today? Is there any mountain today on which it is sinful and wrong to put your feet, where you ought to be put to death if you trespass? No.

It was also on Mount Sinai, in the book of Exodus, that a holy structure was built: the tabernacle. The tabernacle consisted of two chambers. The first and larger chamber was the holy place and the second smaller chamber was the Holy of Holies, in which was the ark of the covenant. The tabernacle was holy because God dwelt there. That was symbolized by the Shekinah, the cloud of glory. That structure once was holy, but it is not holy anymore. In fact, it no longer exists. Today, there is no earthly, literal tabernacle.

Having considered two holy pieces of ground and one holy structure in the book of Exodus, let us now follow the history of Israel from Mount Sinai onwards, emphasising the idea of the *land*. For the next almost forty years,

Israel wandered in the wilderness. God's special presence was not so much on a piece of land, but upon or in a structure, a *tent*. The tabernacle was moved and pitched in a piece of land and then moved again.

Then, under Joshua, God gave Israel the land of Canaan. At that point, not just an area around a bush, or even a mountain, but a whole country is holy. It is holy, because God gave it to Israel and He promised to bless that land as a land flowing with milk and honey. God, through the sword of Joshua, killed the idolatrous people in the land and populated it with the Israelites. This land was divided among the twelve tribes. On the east side of the River Jordan were Gad, Reuben and the half tribe of Manasseh, as Moses appointed. The remaining nine and a half tribes were on the west side of the river. Inheritance laws governed the ownership of this land, so that the land would stay in the possession of a particular tribe. Even if a man had no sons but only daughters, the daughters would inherit the land and would have to marry someone of the same tribe so the land would always remain in the possession of Naphtali or Ephraim, for example (Num. 36). Then there was the jubilee year. In that fiftieth year, if a piece of land had been sold to somebody else, that piece of land had to come back to the particular family which had originally owned it (Lev. 25).

Among the twelve tribes, there were forty-eight specific cities that were allocated to the tribe of Levi (Josh. 21). Thirteen of these cities were for the priests, the descendents of Aaron. In addition, thirty-five were for the non-priests who descended from the three sons of Levi: Gershon, Kohath and Merari. Among these forty-eight cities were six cities of refuge. The six cities of refuge were appointed for a person who accidentally killed someone (Num. 35; Josh. 20). For example, if you were chopping down trees and the axe head slipped off and killed your neighbour, you could flee to one of these cities and you would be spared. Three of the cities were on one side of the River Jordan and the other three on the other side.

Thus Canaan was a land divided up with twelve tribal allotments and with priestly and Levitical cities. This holy land of Israel, was to be governed by judges and elders, by priests and Levites, according to the law of Moses, the Pentateuch.

The next major development occurs when God begins to rule through kings, with Saul being the first king. In the days of Israel's second and third kings,

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David and Solomon, the kingdom rules over not only the twelve tribes, but also the surrounding nations to the north and east, all the way to the River Euphrates, and to the south and west, all the way to the river of Egypt. Thus, these two kings ruled over the twelve tribes proper and had an empire over other nations, such as the Syrians and the Moabites. These other nations paid tribute to David and Solomon.

After Solomon, in the days of his son Rehoboam, Israel was split into two. Most of Israel's foreign possessions were lost, with the rest lost soon thereafter. So, the kingdom was beginning to shrink as well as being divided. In the Northern Kingdom, there were ten tribes which were officially committed to idolatry, with the two golden calves stationed at Dan and Bethel. The Southern Kingdom consisted of the remaining two tribes.

As you know, the Northern Kingdom did not last very long. They were whittled down bit by bit as the tribes on the east of the Jordan were taken into captivity. The tribes way up in the north were carried away by the Assyrians, the central and southern regions were destroyed and, finally, the last to fall was the capital city of Samaria. That was the end of the Northern Kingdom—taken off into captivity by the Assyrians, never to return.

Then there were only two tribes remaining: Judah and Benjamin. The two southern tribes fell into idolatry as well. God sent the Babylonians that time (not the Assyrians who had destroyed the Northern Kingdom) and many of those who had not already been killed were carted away to the land of Babylon. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple smashed and the ark of the covenant was lost forever.

We have a very powerful and graphic presentation of the fall of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 9-11. In these chapters, the glory of God is presented as dwelling especially in the Holy of Holies above the ark of the covenant. But Israel walks in wickedness so the glory cloud moves out from the Holy of Holies and out of the holy place to the threshold of the temple. Then, because of Israel's sin, the cloud of God's glory moves to the gate that leads into the temple precincts. Again, because of Israel's rebellion, the cloud moves further east. It leaves the temple area, it departs from the city of Jerusalem and is seen on the Mount of Olives. Once God's gracious presence is removed from Jerusalem and the temple, then—and only then—can God destroy the temple and the city. This

is the point in Ezekiel's prophecy. The temple and the city, so to speak, are no longer holy. God does not dwell there to defend it. His protection is withdrawn and so in came the invading hordes. Ezekiel 11:16 explains where God dwells after this: "Although I have cast them far off among the heathen, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come"—a little holy place among the believing Jews in the Babylonian captivity! Where was this holy place? Where was the sanctuary after the fall of Jerusalem? It was with those Israelite believers in the pagan country of Babylon!

Some seventy years later, three main bands returned from Babylon to the land under Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah, respectively. They came back to a smaller piece of land than the twelve tribes possessed. It was a smaller piece of land even than the Southern Kingdom. Moreover, there were fewer people, who could not even fill the land. In addition, the new temple was a smaller, less glorious temple than Solomon's and there was no ark in it. Also, there was no earthly king from the line of Judah to rule over them and there never would be again. Moreover, there was no independent Jewish state for some 2,500 years. When the Jews came back to the land, they were under the dominion of the Medes and Persians. The Greeks defeated the Medes and Persians so they now ruled over the Jews. The Jews were independent, but besieged, in the days of the Maccabees only for a brief interlude. Then came the Romans, and the Jews still could not enforce their laws, for they were a conquered power paying taxes to an enemy conqueror. Moreover, in 70 AD, the Romans devastated Jerusalem and destroyed the temple as Christ prophesied in Matthew 24. The Romans in the middle of the second century killed yet more Jews after they had rebelled (135 AD). Then the Jews were further scattered around the Mediterranean. After that, there was a long period in which the Jews were dispersed around the world. But there always were a few living in Canaan or Palestine, until in 1948 the modern state of Israel was founded.

How *could* Israel and how *can* Israel keep the detailed law of Moses, which has dozens and dozens of regulations concerning the land? How can Israel do this when it does not occupy all the land? There is the Gaza Strip; there is the West Bank; there are the Golan Heights. These three regions, which were in the land of Old Testament Israel, the Jews do not now govern. In addition,

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since Solomon and apart from the period of the Maccabees, a united Israel has not been sovereign over all the land. How do you allot the land among the twelve tribes today? How can you have these inheritance laws? How can you enforce the law of Jubilee in which the land is returned to the original owners? Do the Jews today even know from what tribe their ancestors came? What about the forty-eight cities, with that city for the Levites, that city for the priests and that a city of refuge? Some of these cities can not even be identified now. Archaeologists may excavate a site with their shovels and brushes, and they think maybe that city is such and such, but somebody else says that it is some other ancient town.

Vital in all of this is the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The crucifixion was the culmination of all of Israel's sins, for at the cross they killed the incarnate Son of God, the promised Messiah. They excommunicated Him as not worthy of a place in God's church and kingdom. They executed Him as a blasphemer and a false prophet. Moreover, they whipped up the crowd who exclaimed, "Crucify Him, crucify Him." Now, remember Ezekiel 9-11: God removed His presence from the temple and Jerusalem because of their sins. How much more does the Lord remove His gracious presence from Israel for their killing His own Son? In 70 AD, with the fall of Jerusalem to the invading Roman armies, came the destruction of the temple and the diaspora of more Jews, as I mentioned earlier. Then came the Bar Kokhba revolt of 135 AD, when more were slaughtered by the Romans and the Jews were further scattered.

So we come to this question: Is the land of Israel the holy land today? Is the land of Israel a place where God especially dwells? The answer is *no*. Palestine was not the holy land before Joshua's conquest. Pagans lived in it and defiled it. Only after Joshua's conquest did God's people possess it. Palestine is not the holy land since Christ's crucifixion. Therefore, there was a period from Joshua to Jesus—this is easy to remember because "Joshua" is the Hebrew equivalent of the name "Jesus"—when it was the holy land because God dwelt there in a special way and blessed it. Nevertheless, before Joshua it was not the holy land. And after Christ's cross, it is not the holy land.

What about going on a tour and doing some sight-seeing in Israel? It is a good thing to do, if you can afford it. You can even call it the holy land, if by this you mean that it was *once* the holy land. There are sights of great

interest in Palestine, where important biblical events happened. If you go to Australia, Chile or Scotland, you are not going to see sights where biblical events happened. But if you travel to Mount Carmel, you can say that this is where Elijah took on the prophets of Baal and fire from God came down from heaven (I Kings 18). If you go to the Sea of Galilee, you can say that our Saviour walked on those waves. If you visit the water of Harod, you can go down like Gideon's men and try the different methods of drinking the water (Judg. 7:4-7). However, other sights may be more doubtful. Did the biblical event really happen *there*? Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly fascinating to go to Israel and it is helpful because it makes you think about biblical places, events, vegetation and so on. But the land is *not* holy, because God does *not* dwell there in some special way, even though important biblical events happened there.

How does the New Testament interpret the land of Israel? What is its theological significance? For our first text, let us look at Romans 4:13: "For the promise, that he should be heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith." Abraham is significant because he is the first person in the Bible who was promised the land of Canaan. Romans 4:13 does not say, however, that the promise that Abraham should be the heir of *Canaan* was not to him or his seed through the law, etc. The promise is that Abraham should be the heir of the *world* or cosmos. The *cosmos* was to Abraham and his seed. In the two previous verses, Abraham and his seed are explained as meaning believing Jews and believing Gentiles. The promise to believing Jews and Gentiles who are engrafted into Jesus Christ, i.e., Abraham's real, spiritual children, is not *Canaan* but the *world*. The promise concerning the land of Canaan is not that one day believing Jews will possess it. The promise is that in the eternal state, all believing Jews and Gentiles will inherit the whole world (not just Canaan, which is much less than one percent of the total land surface of the earth). However, some say, "But isn't it going to be great that the Jews are going to inherit the whole land of Canaan." Well, I say, "I am not a physical Jew and it is nothing too exciting for me." Then they say, "But it is great, this piece of land will belong to the Jews!" But, I say, "Chicken feed, we want the whole world in Christ" Jesus said that the meek shall inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5). Romans 4:13 declares, "the promise that he should be *heir of the world*, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith." Those who are justified by

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faith in Christ alone inherit the promise given to Abraham of being heir of Canaan, which is a picture of the whole world. That is bigger and far better!

Hebrews 11:9-16 is our second passage. How does the Holy Spirit interpret His own Word concerning the promised land? Hebrews 11:10 states, “For he [i.e., Abraham] looked for a city which hath foundations whose builder and maker is God.” Then run your eye down to verse sixteen: “But now they desire a better country, that is an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.” In other words, if Abraham and his seed were looking for an earthly city, God would have said, “I am ashamed of you; you are not really believers; you are carnal.” Nevertheless, because they are looking for a heavenly city, God says, “I recognize you as My children, I am not ashamed of you, and I will give you the heavenly land.” The promised land that is pictured and described in Hebrews 11 is a heavenly city and a heavenly country (vv. 10, 16).

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