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WHAT ABOUT THE LAND PROMISES TO ISRAEL?

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

So the LORD gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they possessed it and lived in it. And the LORD gave them rest on every side, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers, and no one of all their enemies stood before them; the LORD gave all their enemies into their hand. Not one of the good promises which the LORD had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass.

—Joshua 21:43-45

I have on more than one occasion heard Bible teacher Chuck Missler say that there is only one piece of real estate on planet earth where God has specifically said that it belongs to a specific people and that is Israel. Yet, that specified land is the most contested on the entire planet. This is true because God has spoken specifically on the matter. The fact that God's clear Word is contested by so many means that Satan is behind such a consensus.

The arrival of the modern state of Israel on the world scene in 1948 was a big boon to the premillennial understanding of the Bible. This vindicates—in history—our biblical belief that God has a future plan for the land of Israel and the Jewish people. In spite of these developments, there are a group of evangelicals who think that the current state of Israel has nothing to do with God's biblical promises. How could anyone who claims to believe the Bible hold to such error?

SOME BELIEVE THAT ISRAEL IS FINISHED

An increasing number of anti-Zionists, usually advocates of some kind of replacement theology, have been using a misinterpretation of Joshua 21:43–45 as a proof-text, which they believe nullifies God's land promises to Israel. They present God as Someone who is looking to discharge promises, in a legalistic way, by, in essence saying, "I have fulfilled the letter of the law on that one, now I can mark it off of my list of obligations." They claim that God has discharged all His promises to Israel regarding the land because of the statement in Joshua 21.

In the process of making this claim, they either ignore or claim that God's eternal and perpetual promises to Israel about her land are no longer in force today. They want to do away with Israel and they think they have found a biblical passage that supports their un-biblical notion. At least, that's what they think.

It is not surprising that Gary DeMar is one who believes as such. He says concerning Israel's future: "the text says nothing about the restoration of Israel to her land as a fulfillment of some covenantal obligation. All the land promises that God made to Israel were fulfilled (Joshua 21:43-45)."¹ DeMar's perspective should not surprise us since he believes that virtually all prophecy has already been fulfilled. He believes on that basis that the modern state of Israel has no legitimate biblical basis.

Anti-Zionist, Stephen Sizer, also believes that the Joshua 21 passage ends any future claims by the Jews to the Land of Israel. Sizer says, “To the claim that certain promises have yet to be fulfilled, Joshua is emphatic, *‘Not one of all the Lord’s good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled.’*”² Replacement theologian, Keith Mathison, declares, “Joshua 21:43–45 explicitly declares that *all* the land that God promised Israel was given to them.”³ So have the land promises to Israel been totally fulfilled so that there is no hope at all for national Israel? The answer is NO!

SO WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN?

A survey of commentaries reveal, that virtually no one takes such an understanding of this passage in the way outlined by the above anti-Zionists.⁴ That all of Israel’s land promises have forever been fulfilled in Joshua make not sense. Instead, most commentators see the opposite problem, as noted by John Calvin who says, “How then can these two things be reconciled, that God, as he had promised, gave possession of the land to the people, and yet they were excluded from some portion by the power or obstinate resistance of the enemy?”⁵ Calvin does not see this fulfilling God’s land obligations to Israel instead he sees the opposite problem. Calvin offers the following solution:

In order to remove this appearance of contradiction, it is necessary to distinguish between the certain, clear, and steadfast faithfulness of God in keeping his promises, and between the effeminacy and sluggishness of the people, in consequence of which the benefit of the divine goodness in a manner slipped through their hands. . . . The whole comes to this, that it was owing entirely to their own cowardice that they did not enjoy the divine goodness in all its fullness and integrity.⁶

Such a view is even supported by outspoken, anti-Zionist, Colin Chapman, who says, “There are many indications in the, however, that the conquest of the land was never complete (e.g. Joshua 13:1–32; Judges 1:1–36), and that many of the original inhabitants continued to live alongside the Israelites (e.g. Joshua 9:1–27).”⁷

The emphasis of this summary statement in the book of Joshua (21:43–45) must be seen against the backdrop of the Lord’s overall charge and promise to give them the land in 1:2–11. Joshua is recording the historical facts that God was faithful, even when the tribes of Israel were only partially true to their word. Keil and Delitzsch explain this aspect to us as follows:

Notwithstanding the fact that many a tract of country still remained in the hands of the Canaanites, the promise that the land of Canaan should be given to the house of Israel for a possession had been fulfilled; for God had not promised the immediate and total destruction of the Canaanites, but only their gradual extermination (Ex. xxiii. 29, 30; Deut. vii. 22). And even though the Israelites never came into undisputed possession of the whole of the promised land, to the full extent of the boundaries laid down in Num. xxxiv.

1–12, never conquering Tyre and Sidon for example, the promises of God were no more broken on that account than they were through the circumstance, that after the death of Joshua and the elder his contemporaries, Israel was sometimes hard pressed by the Canaanites; since the complete fulfilment of this promise was inseparably connected with the fidelity of Israel to the Lord.⁸

Joshua 21:43–45 must be understood within the overall context of the entire book, not simply trotted out as prooftext, which if not examined within the broader context of Joshua, appear to the ignorant as an argument of disinheritance of the land from Israel. Adrian Jeffers set the broader context of Joshua:

The Book of Joshua clearly shows that Israel conquered the land in Canaan in two major campaigns (Joshua 10, 11). At the end of these campaigns a summary is given (“So Joshua took all that land, the hill-country . . .” 11:16–20) which indicates that his work was done, the Conquest was completed. That this also is somewhat ideal is seen in that chapter 13:1–6 says “there remaineth yet very much land to be possessed . . .” and describes the various areas remaining with a list of unconquered cities (cf. Judges 1:27ff.). A similar example is given near the end of the book (Joshua 21:43–35—Israel possessed all the land, all their enemies were delivered, and all that Jehovah promised came to pass). Yet the Book of Judges makes it plain that this was not the case. Again the command to dispossess all the enemies in the land and to occupy their territory (Genesis 15:18; Exodus 23:23–31, Numbers 34:2, Deuteronomy 1:7, 8, etc.) has a similar implication. Ideally Israel was to dispossess all their enemies, but in actual fact many were left behind, and these became a snare to them. In fact it is indicated that this was part of the will of God—in order to, discipline them (Joshua 23:12, 13, Judges 3:1,2).⁹

GOD IS FAITHFUL EVEN WHEN MEN FAIL

“The theme here is the faithfulness of God in fulfilling his promises. God did his part,” explains Trent Butler. “No matter what the political situation of Israel in a later generation, be it the division of the kingdom, the fall of the northern kingdom, or the destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile, Israel could not blame God. God had faithfully done for Israel what he promised. Blame belonged on Israel’s shoulders, not God.”¹⁰ John Walvoord echoes this understanding and says, “The Lord had not failed to keep His promise even though Israel had failed by faith to conquer all the land.”¹¹ Donald Campbell speaks clearly to the issue in the following:

Some theologians have insisted that the statement in Joshua 21:43 means that the land promise of the Abrahamic Covenant was fulfilled then. But this cannot be true because later the Bible gives additional predictions about Israel possessing the land after the time of Joshua (e.g., Amos 9:14–15). Joshua 21:43, therefore, refers to the extent of the land as outlined

in Numbers 34 and not to the ultimate extent as it will be in the messianic kingdom (Gen. 15:18–21). Also though Israel possessed the land at this time it was later dispossessed, whereas the Abrahamic Covenant promised Israel that she would possess the land forever (Gen. 17:8).¹²

In fact there are a number of passages written after the time of Joshua that promises a future for Israel (Isa. 60:18, 21; Jer. 23:6–6; 24:5–6; 30:18; 31:31–34; 32:37–40; 33:6–9; Ezek. 28:25–26; 34:11–12; 36:24–26; 37:1–14, 21–25; 39:28; Hosea 3:4–5; Joel 2:18–29; Micah 2:12; 4:6–7; Zeph. 3:19–20; Zech. 8:7–8; 13:8–9). In addition, Deuteronomy 30:3–6 speaks of a still future restoration in belief. I believe that this will take place just before the second coming of Christ. Look at Amos 9:14–15, it is one of the clearest, future restoration passages.

“Also I will restore the captivity of My people Israel, and they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them, they will also plant vineyards and drink their wine, and make gardens and eat their fruit. I will also plant them on their land, and they will not again be rooted out from their land which I have given them,” says the LORD your God.

CONCLUSION

The Bible is clear that Israel has a national future in which she will dwell in blessing in her land. This will be after she has been converted to Jesus as her Messiah. However, in the mean time, the current regathering of Israel in unbelief is for the purpose of putting God’s covenant people through the fire of tribulation, which will result in the salvation of the remnant. If one misses the clear message of this biblical teaching it is only because their have a bias against this view. This explains why anti-Zionists evangelicals have abandoned the normal, literal interpretative approach of Scripture and are guilty of reading back into the text their *a priori* replacement theology. They have exchanged proper exegesis of Holy Writ for a false theologizing. In the process of developing their anti-Zionist doctrines, their rhetoric is increasingly sounding like Muslim Arabs who call themselves Palestinians. I would like to ask them, “What biblical texts speak specifically of this people?” Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), p. 332.

² (Italics original) Stephen R. Sizer, “Whose Promised Land: Israel and Biblical Prophecy Debate between Neil Cornell (CMJ & ITAC) and Stephen Sizer,” Guildford Diocesan Evangelical Fellowship St John’s, Working. Surrey, 18th March 1997. Taken from the internet at www.christchurch-virginiawater.co.uk/articles/debate.html, n. p.

³ Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg, PA: P & R Publishing, 1995), p. 27.

⁴ See for example Reformed commentator M. H. Woudstra who would be expected to raise such an issue, but does not in *The Book of Joshua* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 314–15.

⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Book of Joshua* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 248.

⁶ Calvin, *Joshua*, p. 248.

⁷ Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land? The Continuing Crisis Over Israel and Palestine* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), p. 119.

⁸ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I & II Samuel*, 10 vols., (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), Vol. II, p. 216.

⁹ Adrian Jeffers, "Ideal Versus Real History in the Book of Joshua," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Summer 1969), p. 183.

¹⁰ Trent C. Butler, *Word Biblical Commentary: Joshua*, Vol. 7 (Waco: Word Books, 1983), p. 235.

¹¹ John F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook: All the prophecies of Scripture explained in one volume* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), p. 44.

¹² Donald K. Campbell, "Joshua," in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), pp. 364-65.