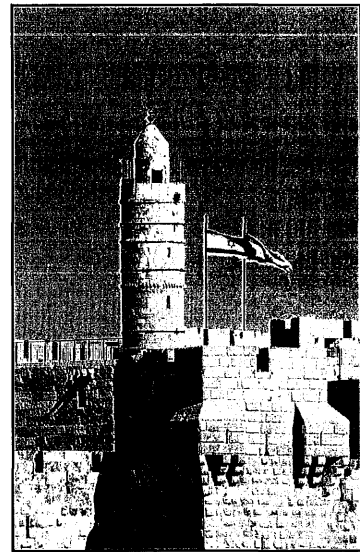


Who Really Owns The Holy Land?

Dr. Robert L. Reymond



Permission to reprint from The Trinity Review, Number 256, June 2006 granted by The Trinity Foundation, Post Office 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692, Phone: 423.743.0199 (www.trinityfoundation.org)

This essay is an address delivered by Dr. Robert L. Reymond, Professor Emeritus at Knox Theological Seminary, to "Advancing Reformation Truth and Spirituality" (ARTS) on April 21, 2006, at DeVos Chapel, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

PART I

The Challenge Facing Covenant Theology

A gigantic effort is underway today to convince the evangelical citizenry of the United States of America that the political state of Israel rightfully owns in perpetuity the so-called "Holy Land"² at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea by virtue of God's bequeathing it to Abraham and his descendants in the Old Testament. This

effort is being made not so much today by the secular leadership of the state of Israel as by self-acclaimed Christian scholars and televangelists who claim to speak for over seventy million evangelical Christians. These men, including Assemblies of God preacher and televangelist John Hagee, founder and pastor of the Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas;³ Kenneth Copeland, televangelist; Paul and Matt Crouch of the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN); Jack Hayford, founder and pastor of the Church on the Way in Van Nuys, California, and president of the Foursquare Gospel Church; Benny Hinn, pastor of the yet-to-be-built World Healing Center in Dallas, Texas; Rod Parsley, pastor of the World Harvest Church in Columbus, Ohio; Pat Robertson, founder and chief executive officer of the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) and the Bible teacher on the 700 Club;⁴ and Jerry Falwell, founder and pastor of the Thomas Road Baptist Church and founder of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, are all purveyors of

that system of hermeneutics known as Dispensationalism. Apparently convinced by this propaganda effort, President Clinton, after citing the words of his desperately ill Baptist pastor to him: "If you abandon Israel, God will never forgive you," declared before the Israeli Knesset in Jerusalem on October 27, 1994: "...it is God's will that Israel, the Biblical home of the people of Israel, continue forever and ever,"⁵ a statement that enters deeply into Biblical hermeneutics concerning the nature of the church and the kingdom of God, not to mention Biblical eschatology (note his "forever and ever"). President Clinton concluded his speech by saying: "Your journey is our journey, and America will stand with you now and always," a statement that illustrates this nation's deep involvement in both Middle East politics in general and its specific political commitment to Israel in the Israeli/ Palestinian conflict in particular in a way that cannot but affect the course of world politics for the foreseeable future. In my opinion, President Clinton's statement is bad

politics based on equally bad theology. I say this because, as I shall argue in this paper, all of God's land promises to Israel in the Old Testament are to be viewed in terms of shadow, type, and prophecy, in contrast to the reality, substance, and fulfillment of which the New Testament speaks. Consequently, contrary to John Hagee who insists that "Israel has a Bible mandate to the land, a divine covenant for the land of Israel, forever... [and] Christians have a Bible mandate to be supportive of Israel,"⁶ I will argue that it is we Christians, as members of Christ's Messianic kingdom, who are the real heirs to the land promises of Holy Scripture, but only in their fulfilled paradisaical character.⁷ Hagee terms this view "replacement theology" because, he says, it "replaces" in the economy of God the Jewish people who are, he says, "God's centerpiece" and "the apple of his eye" (Zechariah 2:8) with the church of Jesus Christ. Of course, Hagee's perception of ethnic Israel is in error, because ethnic Israel *per se* was never the center-piece of God's covenant program since, according to Paul, God's promises always applied only to the true spiritual Israel (that is, elect Israel) within ethnic Israel (Romans 9:6-13); and the land promises of the Old Testament, as we will show, were always to be viewed typologically. Nevertheless, Hagee has thrown down the Dispensational gauntlet; and it is high time that covenant theologians picked it up and responded to him Biblically. This is what I propose to do now. But I offer a word of caution, and it is this: Reflect carefully upon what I say

before you accept or reject it. With that caveat I will now begin with a discussion of

Eden and the Abrahamic Covenant

O. Palmer Robertson begins his treatise on the significance of the land as a theological idea by stating: The concept of a land that belongs to God's people originated in Paradise. This simple fact, so often overlooked, plays a critical role in evaluating the significance of the land throughout redemptive history and its consummate fulfillment. Land did not begin to be theologically significant with the promise given to Abraham. Instead, the patriarch's hope of possessing a land arose out of the concept of restoration to the original state from which man had fallen. The original idea of land as paradise significantly shaped the expectations associated with redemption. As the place of blessedness arising from unbroken fellowship and communion with God, the land of paradise became the goal toward which redeemed humanity was returning.⁸

In the Edenic paradise of Genesis 2 we see God, whose garden it was (Ezekiel 28:13; 31:8), and which garden was employed later as the prototypical ideal (Genesis 13:10) and type of the eschatological paradise of God (Isaiah 51:3; Revelation 2:7), placing the original pair he had created within it to tend and to keep it and to enjoy communion with him. But the paradisaical nature of Eden was lost in and by Adam's fall, and our first parents were expelled from this land of blessing. But

for many of the thoughts in this section of the paper, the idea of paradise was renewed by God's inaugurating with the guilty pair a second covenant — the covenant of grace of Genesis 3:15 — and later by his covenant with Abraham of Genesis 12:1-3 to redeem a people from their fallen condition and to transform the cosmos. Just as Adam and Eve had known God's blessing in Eden, so also God would bless his redeemed people in a new Eden, a land flowing with milk and honey, that lay somewhere ahead of them in the future. With the call of Abraham in Genesis 12 the covenant of grace established in Genesis 3:15 underwent a remarkable advance. The instrument of that advance is the covenant that God made with Abraham that guaranteed and secured soteric blessing for "all the families of the Earth" (Genesis 12:3). So significant are the promises of grace in the Abrahamic covenant, found in Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14-16; 15:18-21; 17:1-16; and 22:16-18, that it is not an overstatement to declare these verses, from the covenantal perspective, the most important verses in the Bible. The fact that the Bible sweeps across thousands of years between the creation of man and the call of Abraham in only eleven chapters, with the call of Abraham coming in Genesis 12, suggests that God intended the information given in Genesis 1-11 to be preparatory "background" to the revelation of the Abrahamic covenant.

Revelation subsequent to it discloses that all that God has done savingly in grace since the revelation of the Abrahamic covenant is the

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result and product of it. In other words, once the covenant of grace came to expression in the salvific promises of the Abrahamic covenant — that God would be the God of Abraham and his spiritual descendants (Genesis 17:7) and that in Abraham all the families of the Earth would be blessed — everything that God has done since that time, he has done in order to fulfill his covenant promises to Abraham (and thereby the eternal plan of redemption). If this representation of the salvific significance of the Abrahamic covenant seems to be an overstatement, the following declarations from later revelation should suffice to justify it:

1. It is the Abrahamic covenant and none other that God later confirmed with Isaac (Genesis 17:19; 26:3-4) and with Jacob (Genesis 28:13-15; 35:12).

2. The Scriptures state that God redeemed Jacob's descendants from Egypt in order to keep his covenant promise to the patriarchs: "God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (Exodus 2:24; see 4:5).

3. Again and again throughout Israel's history the inspired authors of Scripture trace God's continuing extension of grace and mercy to Israel directly to his fidelity to his covenant promises to Abraham (Exodus 32:12-14; 33:1; Leviticus 26:42; Deuteronomy 1:8; 4:31; 7:8; 9:27; 29:12-13; Joshua 21:44; 24:3-4; Psalm 105:8-10, 42-43; 2 Kings 13:23; 1 Chronicles 16:15-17; Micah 7:20; Nehemiah 9:7-8).

4. When we come to the New Testament it is no different. Both Mary and Zechariah declared the first coming of Jesus Christ, including the very act of Incarnation, to be a vital part of the fulfillment of God's gracious covenant promise to Abraham. Mary in Luke 1:54-55 said: "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers." Zechariah in Luke 1:68-71 said: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come...to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham." I may note in passing that, whereas Christians today mainly celebrate only the Incarnation of God's Son at Christmas time, Mary and Zechariah, placing this event in the covenantal context of Scripture, saw reason in Christ's coming to celebrate the covenant fidelity of God to his people. In their awareness of the broader significance of the event and the words of praise that this awareness evoked from them we see Biblical theology at its best being worked out and expressed.

5. Jesus, himself the Seed of Abraham (Matthew 1:1; Galatians 3:16), declared that Abraham "rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56).

6. Peter declared that God sent Jesus to bless the Jewish nation in keeping with the promise he gave to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, in turning them away from their iniquities (Acts 3:25-26).

7. Paul declared that God, when he promised Abraham that "all peoples on Earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3), was declaring that he was going to justify the Gentiles by faith and was announcing the Gospel in advance to Abraham (Galatians 3:8). Accordingly, he stated that all believers in Christ "are blessed [with justification through faith] along with Abraham" (Galatians 3:9).

8. Paul also declared: "Christ became a Servant of the circumcision...in order to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy" (Romans 15:8-9).

9. Paul further declared that Christ died on the cross, bearing the law's curse, "in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, in order that we [both Jews and Gentiles] might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:13-14).

10. Paul expressly declared that the Mosaic covenant and law, introduced several centuries after God gave his covenant promises to Abraham and to his Seed (Christ), "does not set aside the covenant previously established by God [with Abraham] and thus do away with the promise" (Galatians 3:16-17).

11. Paul also declared (1) that Abraham is the "father of all who believe" among both Jews and Gentiles (Romans 4:11-12); and (2) that all who belong to Christ "are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" that God gave to Abraham (Galatians 3:29).

12. Finally, Christ described the future state of glory in terms of the redeemed “taking their place at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of Heaven” (Matthew 8:11).

What this all means is that the promise of God, covenantally given to Abraham, that he would be the God of Abraham and of his spiritual descendants after him forever (Genesis 17:7-8) extends temporally to the farthest reaches of the future and encompasses the entire community of the redeemed and the renewed cosmos. This is just to say that the Abrahamic covenant, in the specific prospect it holds forth of the salvation of the entire church of God, is identical with the soteric program of the covenant of grace. It also means that the blessings of the covenant of grace that believers in Christ enjoy today under the New Testament economy are founded upon the covenant that God made with Abraham. Said another way, the “new covenant” whose Mediator is Jesus Christ is simply the administrative “extension and unfolding of the Abrahamic covenant”⁹ in redemptive history. The church of Jesus Christ, then, not ethnic Israel, is the present-day expression of the one people of God whose roots go back to Abraham.

These passages also highlight the unity of the one covenant of grace and the oneness of God’s people in all ages over against the discontinuities injected into redemptive history by the Dispensational heresy that lies at the root of all the bad “land theology” being espoused today

concerning Israel’s so-called “perpetual divine right” to the land of Palestine.¹⁰

That is to say, God’s redemptive purpose, first disclosed in Genesis 3:15, once it had come to expression in the terms of the Abrahamic covenant, was continuously advanced thereafter by the successive covenants with Israel, David, and finally the new covenant. Accordingly, in his letter to the Gentile churches in Galatia Paul described those who repudiate Judaistic legalism and who “never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,” that is, Christ’s church, as “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:12-16). In his Ephesian letter Paul told those Gentile believers that God had in Christ made them citizens of Israel and beneficiaries of the covenants of the promise (Ephesians 2:11-13). And in his letter to the Philippians Paul declared that those “who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh” are “the [true] circumcision” (Philippians 3:3). Clearly, the church of Jesus Christ is the present-day true Israel of God.

The Typological Nature of the Land Promises

Undoubtedly, temporal, earthly promises of land were given to Abraham and his descendants in the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12: 7; 13:15, 17; 15:18; 17:8). But the land promises were never primary and central to the covenant’s intention, and God never envisioned literal fulfillment of these promises under Old Testament conditions as

primary. Rather, the fulfillment of the land promises must be viewed as arising from the more basic and essential redemptive promises, and for their fulfillment they await the final and complete salvation of God’s elect and the recreation of the universe in the Eschaton (Romans 8:19-23). I say this because the Bible declares that Abraham dwelt in Palestine “as in a foreign country” (Hebrews 11:9), and he never inherited any land during his lifetime (Acts 7:5), which is just to say that Abraham believed that the fulfillment of God’s land promises lay antitypically in the eschatological future.

Was this really Abraham’s understanding of God’s land promise? Or did he think that God’s promise merely entailed the small portion of land bounded on the west and the east by the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan Valley and generally on the north and the south by the Sea of Galilee and the southern tip of the Dead Sea? Hardly. Was his faith such that he would have been satisfied in knowing that someday his offspring would inherit the land “from the river of Egypt [not the Nile River but the Wadi el Arish] to the great river, the River Euphrates” (Genesis 15:18)?¹¹

Again we must respond, hardly. His entire life experience of walking by faith and not by sight (see the recurring phrase “by faith Abraham” in Hebrews 11:8, 9, 17) taught him to look beyond the temporal circumstances in which he lived. To understand Abraham’s concept of God’s land promise to him, we must give special heed to the divinely revealed insights of the writers of the

New Testament. Just as Paul declared that the events of Israel's redemptive history were "types" for believers during this age (1 Corinthians 10:6), just as Paul said the religious festivals of the old covenant were "a shadow of the things to come" (Colossians 2:17), just as the author of Hebrews stated that the administration of redemption under the old covenant was "but a shadow of the good things to come" (Hebrews 10:1), so also he taught, in Hebrews 11:8-16, that Abraham knew that God's land promises in their fulfillment entailed something far more glorious, namely, a better and heavenly homeland whose designer and builder is God, than the land of Palestine per se that served only as the type of their fulfillment: By faith Abraham...went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.... These all died in faith, not having received the things promised,¹² but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and have acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the Earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland...a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Quite plainly, Abraham understood that the land promised to him actually had both its origin and its antitypical fulfillment in the heavenly, eternal reality that lay still in the future.

Possession of a particular tract of land in ancient times might have significance from a number of perspectives with respect to God's redemptive working in the world, but clearly the land promise under the Abrahamic covenant served simply as a type, anticipating the future reality of the coming of the Messianic kingdom with the Messiah himself assuming the throne of David in Heaven, and ruling the universe after his resurrection and ascension, and reigning until all his enemies have been put under his feet. How was it possible for Abraham to have the view of the land promise that the New Testament ascribed to him? What led him to "spiritualize" the promise to make it entail future heavenly, kingdom realities? The answer lies in the fact that he took seriously God's promise to him that "in [him] all the families of the Earth would be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).¹³ Therefore, he perceived that the promise to him and his offspring, who is Christ (Galatians 3:16), entailed that in Christ "he would be heir [not of Palestine but] of the [glorified] world [kosmou]" (Romans 4:13). Plainly, Abraham understood that God's land promise meant that God would restore the entire cosmos to its former paradisaical glory and in that he placed his hope and patiently waited for it. His faith and understanding would have been satisfied with nothing less! Moses too, and his contemporaries, wandered in the wilderness of Sinai for forty years, and died in faith, not having received the promise (Hebrews 11:39).

Under Joshua's leadership the Israelites conquered the

land, receiving in a limited fashion the paradise God had promised. But it quickly became obvious that this territory could not be the ultimate paradise. Undeclared Canaanites remained in the land as "hornets." And because of Israel's sin throughout the united and divided kingdom periods, finally the land was devastated by the Neo-Babylonians; the indwelling Glory departed from the Solomonic Temple (Ezekiel 9:3; 10:1-22), which Temple was then destroyed; and the people were banished and came to be known as *lo-ammi*, meaning "not-my-people" (Hosea 1:9). The once fruitful land took on the appearance of a desert, a dwelling place of jackals, owls, and scorpions. Paradise, even in its old covenant shadow form, was taken from them. Even the restoration after the Babylonian captivity, under Ezra and Nehemiah, designated by Biblical scholars as the Second Temple Period, could not be paradise. But the return to the land and the rebuilding of the Temple pointed the way to it. The glory of that tiny Temple, Haggai prophesied, would someday be greater than the glory of the Solomonic Temple. What did this hyperbolic language mean? It meant that God had something better for them than a temporal land and a material temple. The promise of the land would be fulfilled by nothing less than a restored paradise on a cosmic scale! As Isaiah predicted, someday the wolf would lie down with the lamb, the leopard would lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion would live in peace, and a little child would lead them. The nursing child would play over the hole of the

cobra, and the weaned child would place his hand on the adder's den, and the Earth would be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the places of the sea (Isaiah 11:6-9). No more would sin and sorrow reign nor thorns infest the ground. Then, writes Paul in Romans 9:25-26: Those who were not [God's] people [not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles, Romans 9:24] [he] will call "my people," and her who was not beloved [he] will call "beloved." And in the very place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," there they will be called "sons of the living God."

To Be Continued

Endnotes

1 (C) The Trinity Foundation

2 I say "so-called" because the phrase "holy land" occurs only twice in Scripture (Psalm 78:54; Zechariah 2:12) and in both instances the word "land" must be supplied. Apart from the holy God's manifested presence in it, there is nothing holy about the "Holy Land." But wherever God manifests his presence that place is holy, as God taught Moses at the burning bush in Sinai (Exodus 3:1-6).

3 According to Julia Duin, "San Antonio Fundamentalist Battles Anti-Semitism," in *The Houston Chronicle* (April 30, 1988), 1, Hagee does not believe that Jews must trust Christ in order to go to Heaven: "The Jewish people have a relationship to God through the law as given through Moses. I believe that every Gentile person can only come to God through the cross of Christ. I believe that every Jewish person who lives in the light of the Torah... has a relationship with God and will come to redemption." This radically Dispensational statement is heretical in its denial that faith in Christ is universally

essential for salvation.

4 Pat Robertson stated on public television on January 5, 2006, that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel suffered his massive stroke at the hand of God because he was in the process of giving a portion of Israel's land to the Palestinians in exchange for peace. He later apologized for his statement.

5 See *Vital Speeches* 61, no. 3 (November 15, 1994): 70, 3.

6 John Hagee, "Most evangelicals are seeing the error of 'replacement theology,'" online edition of the *Jerusalem Post*, March 20, 2006.

7 I happily acknowledge my great debt to O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 2000), 3-31.

8 Robertson, *The Israel of God*, 4.

9 John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), 46.


10 For the redemptive implications of this bad "land theology" see Knox Theological Seminary's "An Open Letter to Evangelicals and Other Interested Parties: The People of God, the Land of Israel, and the Impartiality of the Gospel" posted on the Seminary's website www.knoxseminary.edu under "Wittenberg Door."

11 This particular divine promise has already been literally and explicitly fulfilled by the conquest of the land under Joshua and Solomon's reign (Joshua 21:43-45; 23:14; 1 Kings 4:24). It does not require some future fulfillment in a Jewish millennium.

12 Abraham owned only the plot of ground, the field of Machpelah, that he purchased from the Hittites living in the land for a burial ground for Sarah his wife (Genesis 23).

13 Paul tells us in Galatians 3:8 that when God made this promise to Abraham he was in effect

"preaching the Gospel beforehand to Abraham," that is, he was declaring that he would justify the Gentiles by faith.



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