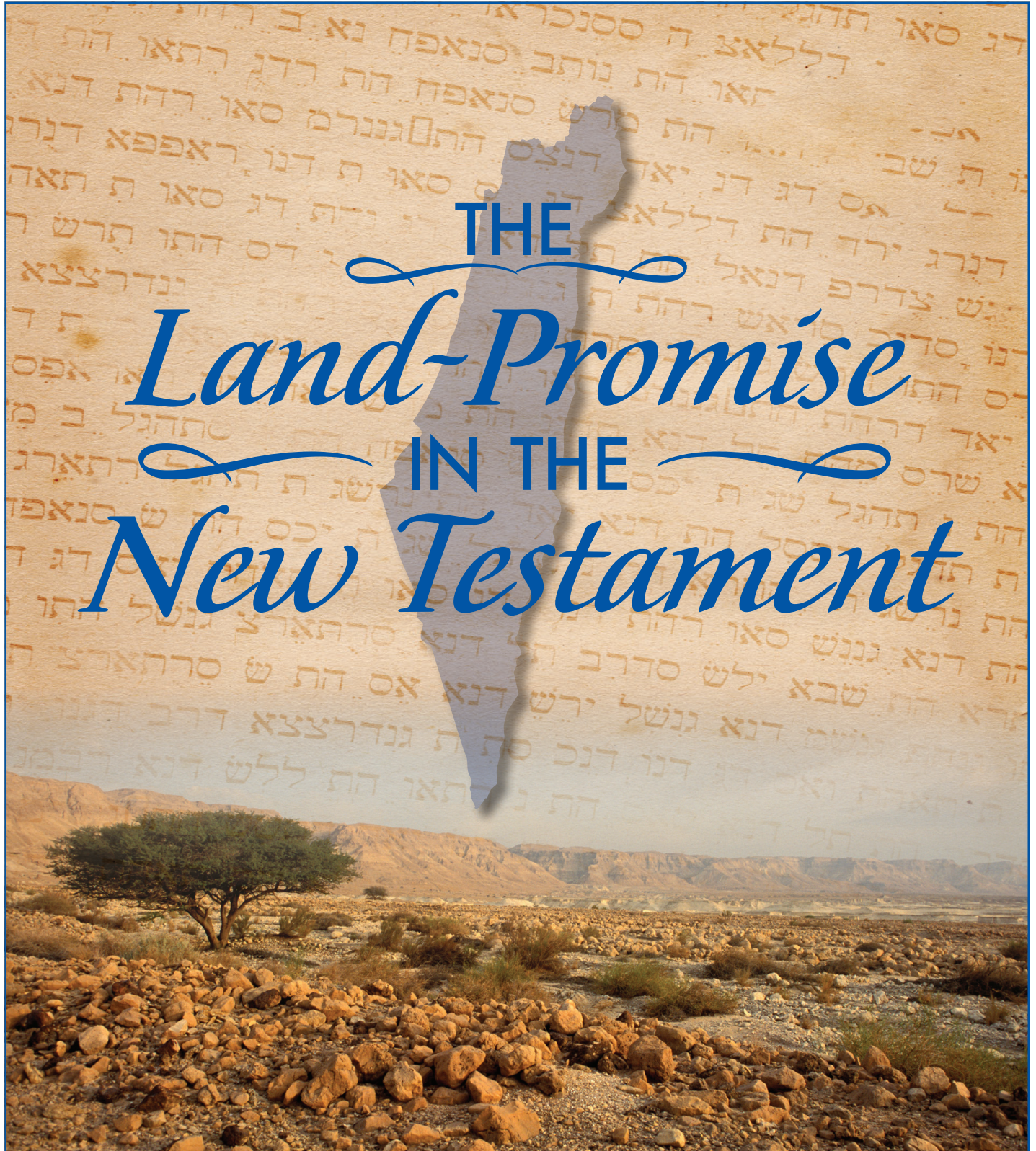


ISRAEL Teaching Letter

www.bridgesforpeace.com

Vol. # 771112 • November 2012



THE *Land-Promise* IN THE *New Testament*

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THE *Land-Promise* IN THE *New Testament*

The covenantal land-promise of the Older Testament (OT)—God’s promise of the land of Israel to Abraham—continues in the Newer Testament (NT), where it is implicit, if not explicit. This is self-evident; the burden of proof is on the critic who feels the need to delegitimize Israel’s claim to the land.

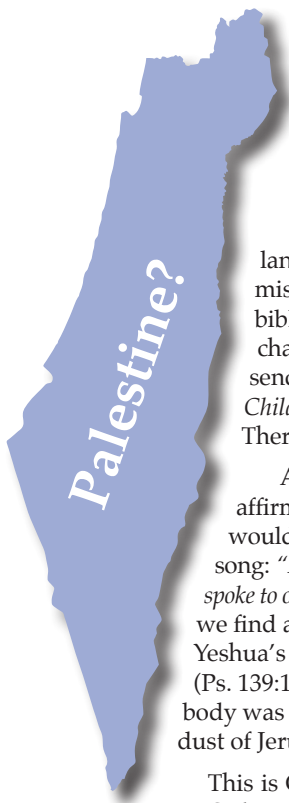
In Christian understanding, the Older Testament and Newer Testament are the canon, or unity of Scripture, and it establishes the land-promise in perpetuity. The promise secured in the Older Testament is not abrogated by anything in the Newer Testament. Because the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are still chosen, meaning God maintains covenant with them, the land remains reserved for the Jewish people. Right now, the regathered Children of Israel are standing on God’s promises as they stand on their land.

Fill in the blank: God wanted to redeem the world, so He sent _____. Of course, Christians should answer “His Son,” and that would be quite correct, in the “*fullness of time*” (Gal. 4:4). But God began His process of redemption on earth when He sent Avram (Abram, later Abraham) from Mesopotamia to a land that He would show him. God promised this old, childless man that He would make him a nation, produce many nations through him, bless him, bless those who bless him, and make him a blessing (Gen. 12:2–3). God wondrously initiated His plan of redemption on terra firma with a chosen man on a chosen land.

Abraham’s God was very specific: “*I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God*” (Gen. 17:8). With the covenant confirmed through Isaac and Jacob (Israel), this deeded parcel became forever known as the “Land of Israel.”



*The regathered Children of Israel
are standing on God’s promises as
they stand on their land.*



Yeshua's Land

A map in my Bible indicates that Yeshua (Jesus) dwelt in a land called "Palestine." Some insist on using that unfortunate misnomer that was assigned well after Yeshua's time. What is the biblically correct name? One need only read as far as the second chapter of the New Testament for the answer. There the Lord sends His heavenly messenger to tell Joseph, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel..." (Matt. 2:20a). There's evidently no confusion in heaven over whose land it is.

And who should argue with a Jewish mother? Yeshua's mother affirmed the covenant that established the very land in which she would bear God's Son. Miryam (Mary) concludes her magnificent song: "He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever" (Luke 1:54-55). Here we find another reason to call this Jewish girl "blessed" (v. 48). Ponder Yeshua's physical origins with me. He was knit together "in secret" (Ps. 139:13) from the substance of his mother's homeland. His precious body was fashioned from the elements of that soil. His blood soaked the dust of Jerusalem.

This is God's Land we're talking about: "...a land for which the LORD your God cares; the eyes of the LORD your God are always on it..." (Deut. 11:12). Let's set our eyes to search out God's Land in the New Testament.

New Testament References Explored

"The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). This is all about Israel. These are Israel's gifts the apostle Paul declares as everlasting, never to be revoked, and no gift is more central to God's calling on Israel than the land. The enduring olive tree that Paul calls the cultivated "root" into which Gentiles "were grafted in among them, and with them..." (v. 17) likewise recalls the land-promise. Malcolm Hedding extends the analogy: The olive tree must have land in which to take root and grow. Yes, Israel's very life requires the land.

"...Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham...and said to him, 'Come to a land that I will show you'" (Acts 7:2-3). How many preachers present the Gospel starting with the Land of Israel? Stephen, "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" (Acts 6:3), certainly did. Addressing the ruling council, this courageous son of Israel anchored the Gospel in the Land of promise and God's calling on "our father Abraham." Notice the word choice "come." Consistent with OT communication, Stephen locates God in the Land, summoning Abram to leave his pagan realm and come to the place where the One God would stage the world's redemption.

"For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself saying, 'Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you'" (Heb. 6:13-14). The writer to the Hebrews upholds the Abrahamic covenant and God's blessing of multiplication on Abraham's descendants. With all that multiplying, isn't it fitting that God reserved a land where the descendants would flourish? UK Bible teacher David Pawson muses, "God will always be known as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That is His name. Three human names now belong to Him forever." God's unconditional oath to Abraham, sworn on His own name, is powerfully affirmed.

"...at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers of the covenants of promise..." (Eph. 2:12). A commonwealth is a polity, such as a nation, state, or other sovereign entity. The Northern Mariana Islands, Australia, Virginia, and every other commonwealth on earth share something intrinsic to their existence: land. The commonwealth of Israel must not



The Lord calls Abram.



Abram journeys to the Promised Land.



Abram's trek from Ur to Canaan.



Abram and Sara in the Promised Land.



Isaac is born.

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Yeshua affirms both the promises to Israel and the promises to the grafted-in Church, which include the land of our Messiah's birth.

be denied its place on the earth, especially when its homeland is guaranteed in the "covenants of promise" to which no other nation can lay claim.

"When they had come together, they asked Him, saying, 'Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?'" (Acts 1:6). Consider the context: For 40 days, the resurrected Yeshua has been coaching His followers on how the Kingdom of God works. Now they ask if He will restore sovereignty to Israel in the midst of the Roman occupation. One theologian, seeking to undermine the validity of their inquiry, suggests "the question itself must have filled Yeshua with dismay" (Wood). Yeshua's response in verse 7—"It is not for you to know the times or seasons..."—actually validates their assumptions. The Teacher did not chastise His pupils for expecting Israel's restoration but taught them that the timing is completely in the Father's hands.

"The sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn..." (Matt. 24:30a). Where is the land in this verse? It's right there in the Greek commonly translated "earth." David Stern observes, "Here and in Revelation 1:7 where the same passage of Zechariah is cited, Greek *ge* is rendered 'earth,' not 'land.' Besides obscuring the Newer Testament's support for the Jewish people's claim to the land of Israel today, this erroneous translation ignores the fact that Zechariah is clearly speaking of the land of Israel and not the whole earth." The same issue arises in the Beatitudes where Yeshua teaches, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5). Yeshua is quoting Psalm 37:11 where the Hebrew *eretz* is a specific land, not the whole earth.

"All the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us" (2 Cor. 1:20). Yes, everything God has promised is affirmed in Yeshua, but this is very different from the notion that Yeshua took all of Israel's promises and gave them to the Church! Instead, Christians can rejoice that Yeshua affirms both the promises to Israel and the promises to the grafted-in Church, which include the land of our Messiah's birth, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and return.

The Fulfillment of "All Things"

Yeshua personally affirmed, "...all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms..." (Luke 24:44). Since we are certain that all things about Yeshua will be fulfilled, we can also expect the fulfillment of Israel's "all things." Consider these verses:

"That He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began" (Acts 3:20–21). The Apostle Peter declares Yeshua as coming once for atonement and again for kingship. In the interim, our Lord is seated in heaven until the time for "all things" to be restored. Peter directs his Jerusalem audience to the source of those things: the OT prophets. God's clarions spoke repeatedly on Israel's future restoration to sovereignty over the covenantal land. We see it happening today, just as they said.

"According to the Way...so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets" (Acts 24:14). Paul, addressing the Roman governor in Caesarea, delivers a powerful apologetic. He affirms his worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the manner of "the Way" established by Yeshua. In so doing, he believes "all things" that the *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.) and the Prophets record. If we believe it like Paul, we will be convinced of Israel's perpetual land-promise.

Confronting the Critics

Like Paul, we need an apologetic to confront the critics, both secular and religious, who try to deny Israel's promises. The primary theological challenge hinges on Yeshua's fulfillment of God's plan, as though "fulfillment" means that all former things have "come to an end."

Let's start by defining "fulfill." For a quick and easy dismissal of Israel, the critics slip past primary definitions to find *Merriam-Webster's* "to bring to an end." A better theology results from using *Webster's* other possibilities: "to make full, to put into effect, to meet the requirements of, to convert into reality, to develop the full potentialities of." While it is possible to approach NT fulfillment as "the end of" God's land-promise to Israel, the better approach is to see fulfillment as the fullness, reality, and ongoing potential of the promise. For Israel's covenant-making God, fulfillment of His sworn oath always means keeping a promise, not breaking it.

Alas, we find that different logics yield competing theologies. Logic is only an optional construct for reasoning. The critics approach the land-promise with "either-or" logic that frames the issue this way: God either has a physical land for the Jews or a spiritual reality for the Church. This does harm by setting one against the other. We find that "both-and" logic works differently: God has both a physical land for the Jews and a spiritual reality for the Church.

This allows for two things operating at once, something that bears out in Scripture repeatedly: God both sovereignly rules the universe and gives people freewill; prophecy is fulfilled both in the short-term and in the long-term; in Christian theology, Yeshua is revealed as both God and man. With the right logic, it's easy to see that God has a plan for both Israel and the Church.

*"Also I give to you
and your descendants
after you the land
in which you are
a stranger, all the
land of Canaan,
as an everlasting
possession..."*

Gen. 17:8

Answers to Common Challenges

Above and beyond human logic is God's revelation. Let's answer three of the critics' most common challenges from the canon of Scripture:

1. Does Israel hold the title deed to God's land forever?

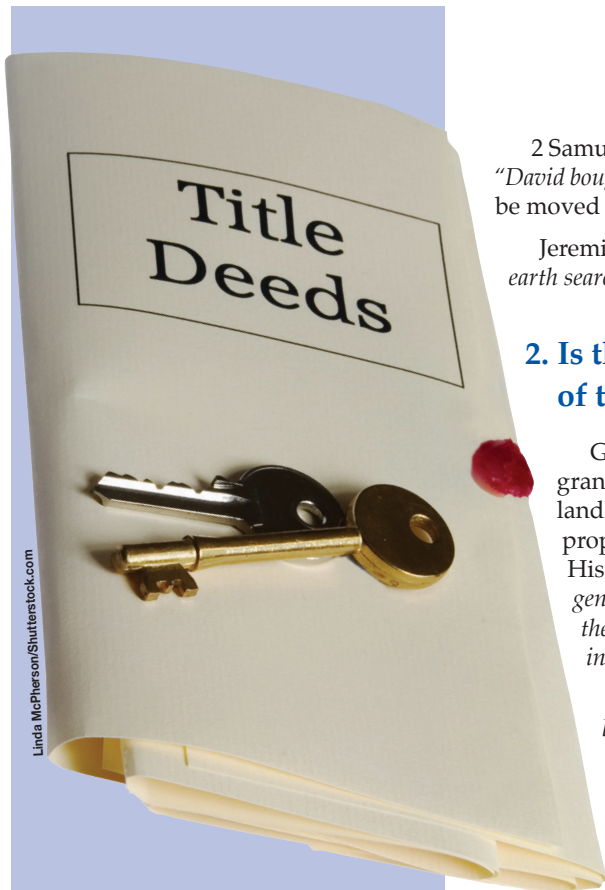
Genesis 17:8 establishes land ownership as a perpetual promise integral to the Abrahamic covenant: *"Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession..."*

Leviticus 26:42, 44 assures Israel that though God may banish them from the Land for disobedience, He will never forsake them or forget the Land: *"Then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham I will remember; I will remember the land... Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, nor shall I abhor them, to utterly destroy them and break My covenant with them;"*

Genesis 23:20 records the deed to the family plot that Abraham purchased 4,000 years ago: *"So the field and the cave that is in it were deeded to Abraham... as property for a burial place."*



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2 Samuel 24:24b attests to David's lawful purchase that became the heart of Jerusalem: "David bought the threshing floor..." That coveted bedrock and Zion that surrounds it cannot be moved (Ps. 125:1).

Jeremiah 31:35–37 settles it: "...If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel..." (v. 37).

2. Is there a difference between ownership and occupancy of the Land?

God owns the Land but deeds it to Israel, like a landlord who holds the right to grant occupancy or to evict his contracted tenant. The difference between an earthly landlord and the Lord is that while God could justly evict His people and give the property to another, He holds the unconditional contract in force no matter what His wayward tenant does. Of course, God wants an obedient Israel: "...if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God...the LORD will grant you plenty of goods, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your livestock, and in the produce of your ground, in the land of which the LORD swore to your fathers to give you" (Deut. 28:1, 11).

A disobedient Israel is at great risk of expulsion. "...you shall be plucked off the land which you go to possess. Then the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other..." (Deut. 28:63b–64a). Indeed, eviction is Israel's dire consequence for disobedience, but the critics overlook God's assurances of both a remnant and a return. Pawson exposes their error as confusing the Mosaic with the Abrahamic covenants, saying they are "failing to recognize that the former [Mosaic] was conditional with 'you must' demands matching the 'I will' promises, whereas the latter [Abrahamic] was unconditional, full of 'I will' promises, without 'you must' requirements."

Israel's foes tend to ignore the redemption that follows the eviction. The prophets repeatedly proclaim that He who scatters will also regather, for His glory, not theirs. "I do not do this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for My holy name's sake...I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land" (Ezek. 36:22, 24). Marvin Wilson explains, "God's preservation of Israel is for His own honor and cause in the world, not a reward for any inherent human value."

3. Why is the Land itself not more explicit in the Newer Testament?

The Newer Testament was written largely from the Land to the nations [Gentiles] who had no land-promise for which to hope. Also, the time of writing was before the Roman exile of the Jews; the question of their return to the Land was not yet being asked. With most of the action of the Newer Testament happening on the Land, it is easy to take the terrain itself for granted. Pawson brings clarity: "The land does have a major role in the New Testament. It is the stage on which the drama of our redemption was played out."

"I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land." Ezek. 36:24



Photo by Nefesh B'nefesh

However, Yeshua does not lead a land-based kingdom. *“My kingdom is not of this world...”* (John 18:36a). His aim is to expand the heavenly kingdom in the hearts of people. Even so, the Newer Testament admonishes us to submit to earthly sovereigns as under God’s authority. There is no good reason that the prophesied Jewish sovereignty on its God-owned land should be denied—no, not until *“the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord...”* (Rev. 11:15b).

The 12 Tribes Have a Land

God drew the lines for all nations based on the land allotments for Israel’s twelve tribes (Deut. 32:8–9). The Newer Testament reiterates that God has *“determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings”* (Acts 17:26b). Pawson observes, *“If God is responsible for the arrival and departure of all peoples, nations and empires, then it must follow that He is responsible for the reappearance on the stage of history of the nation-state of Israel.”* We see that God positions both Israel and the nations on the territory of His choosing. If the 12 tribes have a future, then they must have a territory. Consider three NT passages:

“To this promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain” (Acts 26:7a). Israel’s hope of redemption includes the land on which the tribes hope to dwell. We speak of *“the lost tribes”* (Jews scattered throughout the world) yet none are lost to God. He has their fullness in store: back on their land, serving their Lord.

“One hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel were sealed” (Rev. 7:4b). No mystery here. The 144,000 are the 12 tribes of Israel, the very core of the redeemed. They are *“the Lord’s portion,”* the number upon which God determines the *“boundaries of the peoples”* (Deut. 32:8). After them comes the fullness of the Gentiles: *“A great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues...”* (Rev. 7:9). Hallelujah!

“She had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel” (Rev. 21:12). At the climax of the glorious drama, we behold the New Heaven, New Earth, and New Jerusalem. Think of it—God could have preserved just heaven and earth and effectively covered *“all things,”* but He still chose Jerusalem, the heart and soul of His Land, to persist until the *“restoration of all things”* (Acts 3:21).

Twenty-four Jews’ names are forever inscribed there: 12 Jewish tribes on the gates and 12 Jewish apostles on the foundations. The hope of Israel is realized in this powerful picture of Israel and the Church.

Back to the Present

In Israel’s future, we found the land-promise under God’s sovereignty. Coming back to the present, we find the Land of Israel back on the map! Though trampled, conquered, and wasted over centuries of Jewish dispersion, the Land remained in the exiles’ hearts, prompting them always to pray, *“Next year in Jerusalem.”* With the right people rerooted in Zion, both the Land and the people have recovered to abundant fruitfulness. No matter how the arrogant chafe against the occupants, the Land and people are blessing the world, just as God promised Abraham.

Sadly, we must be wary of the broader agenda of those who seek to discredit the Jewish claim to their ancient homeland. One Christian source begins as an antithetical treatment of the land-promise and ends up blaming the Jews and their Christian Zionist friends for the Palestinian problem. The book features the Hamas Charter, vowing the destruction of Israel, as a chilling and unqualified appendix (Chapman).



If God is responsible for the arrival and departure of all peoples, nations and empires, then it must follow that He is responsible for the reappearance on the stage of history of the nation-state of Israel.

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In the face of opposition that leaves Israel isolated and vulnerable, we who uphold the land-promise are humble participants in God's plan for Israel. Christians are learning to respect, not replace, the people and the Land. The Church is recovering from centuries of ignorance as we learn to bless, not curse, the commonwealth of Israel. By praying, giving, and serving, we are helping Israel cooperate with God's longing to "plant them in their land," never again to be uprooted (Amos 9:15; Jer. 24:6).

Christians who have been on a biblical study tour of Israel can attest that we love Yeshua more after connecting with His family and homeland. We find that our spiritual roots run deep in that holy ground. As we humble ourselves and fear God who jealously watches over Israel, we are seeing what Isaiah foresaw: "The Lord will have mercy on Jacob, and will still choose Israel, and settle them in their own land. The strangers will be joined with them, and they will cling to the house of Jacob" (Isa. 14:1). It's true, we "strangers" are clinging to Israel, and we don't intend to let go.

By Rev. Bill Adams
USA Deputy National Director

Christian pilgrims praying at the Western Wall.



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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

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