

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Faculty Publications

10-28-1976

God's Plan for Ancient Israel

Gerhard F. Hasel
Andrews University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs>

Recommended Citation

Hasel, Gerhard F., "God's Plan for Ancient Israel" (1976). *Faculty Publications*. 3647.
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/3647>

This Popular Press is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

God's Plan for Ancient Israel

Are Old Testament predictions
concerning Israel meeting their
fulfillment in Palestine today?

By GERHARD F. HASEL

OUR CENTURY HAS WITNESSED the phenomenal rebirth of the State of Israel and the return of the Jews to Palestine after almost two millenniums of wandering upon the face of the earth. The Jews' claim of the land of Canaan raises a multitude of questions, including the thorny issue of their moral right to a land that has not been theirs for many centuries, and whether their return—as many think—constitutes a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

Here we are concerned with the prophetic, not the political question. Are the Biblical promises made to ancient Israel relevant to modern Israel? What was, and is, God's plan as expressed in these repeated promises concerning the land of Canaan? Have these predictions and promises been fulfilled, or are they in the process of being fulfilled today? Were conditions attached to them, or were they unconditional? These and other questions beg for careful scriptural answers. What is the testimony of Scripture?

The Promise of the Land

God's plan for Israel as outlined in the Hebrew Bible is comprehensive and broad. Here we focus on one key issue—the divine promises regarding possession of the land of Canaan.

The pivotal call to Abraham is recorded in Genesis 12:1-3: "Go up from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (verse 1).¹ In unquestioning obedience he left Ur (chap. 11:31) and subsequently Haran "to go to the land of Canaan" (chap. 12:4, 5). Once Abraham had arrived in the land of Canaan, the Lord appeared to him at Shechem and promised, "To your descendants I will give this land" (verse 7). The divine promise that the "seed" of Abraham, that is, his descendants, will receive the land promised them is one of the key themes of the Bible.

Gerhard F. Hasel, Ph.D., is assistant dean in charge of the Doctor of Theology program and chairman of the Old Testament Department at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

After the peaceful separation between Lot and Abraham the Lord asks Abraham, "Lift up your eyes, . . . for all the land which you see I will give to you and to your descendants for ever" (chap. 13:14, 15). In His subsequent covenant with Abraham (chap. 15:7-21) the Lord obligates Himself by divine oath to give "you this land to possess" (verse 7). The covenant promise, "to your descendants I will give this land" is reaffirmed in verse 18. It appears repeatedly as secured by God's oath (Gen. 24:7; 50:24; Ex. 33:1; Num. 10:29; 11:12; Deut. 1:8; 11:21; 31:23). In the second stage of the covenant with Abraham the Lord stresses the permanence of the grant: "And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" (Gen. 17:8).

The promise of the land is repeated to Abraham's son Isaac (chap. 26:3) who passes it on to his son Jacob (chap. 28:4). Subsequently Jacob himself hears God say, "The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your descendants after you" (chap. 35:12) "for an everlasting possession" (chap. 48:4). The book of Genesis closes with Joseph's deathbed words, which epitomized the hope based on the Lord God's repeated promise, which had the guarantee of being an everlasting covenant and nothing less than God's own oath:² "I am about to die; but God will visit you, and bring you up out of this land to the land which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob" (chap. 50:24). Here the covenant promise of the land is *incorporated into* God's special plan for Israel, a plan that was to be fulfilled in the future. Possession of the land was promised to the patriarchs, the forefathers of Israel. For a time "they themselves were already living in the land, to be sure, but were not yet in possession of it, i.e., the promise was not yet fulfilled."³ The promise was to move on to fulfillment.

The Time of Fulfillment

In the revelation to Abraham God postponed, temporarily, his actual possession of the Promised Land because "the iniquity of the Amorites" was not yet "complete" (chap. 15:16). "For four hundred years" Abraham's descendants would be oppressed and serve as slaves (verse 13).⁴ This long delay in the fulfillment of the promise reflects the mercy and patience of God, who directs all history toward His appointed goal.

Fulfillment of the promise began during the days of Moses and Joshua. The book of Exodus recounts the preparation of Moses to be the deliverer of Israel, the deliverance itself, the covenant on Mount Sinai, the wilderness wanderings, instructions for the tabernacle, apostasy, and the renewal of the covenant. In Moses' farewell speeches the great leader reminds the people of Israel of the divine command, "Behold, I have set the land before you; go in and take possession of the land" (Deut. 1:8). He then recounts how they took possession of the territory of the Amorite kings of Heshbon and Bashan (Deut. 2:26-3:11; cf. Num. 21:21-35). God forbade Moses to lead the people of Israel into the land beyond the Jordan (Num. 20:12), and before his death He installed Joshua as his successor (Deut. 34:9).

The death of Moses signaled the conquest of the Promised Land (Joshua 1:1-9). The miraculous crossing of the

Jordan was the visible token of God's constant presence and His purpose in giving them the Promised Land (chap. 3:1-17). By the time of Joshua's death (chap. 23:1, 14) the Lord had given to Israel "all the land which he swore to give to their fathers; and having taken possession of it, they settled there. . . . Not one of the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass" (chap. 21:43-45; cf. chap. 23:14). The "remnant of these nations" (chap. 23:12) still among Hebrews was so powerless that they proved no threat to Israel, so long as the Israelites adhered faithfully to their God (verses 11-13). Notwithstanding that sections of the country remained in the hands of pagan nations (chap. 13:1-6), the promises had been fulfilled. God had not promised the immediate destruction of the Canaanites but their gradual extermination (Ex. 23:29, 30; Deut. 7:22; cf. Judges 2:1, 2; 3:1, 2; 2 Kings 17:17, 18). In all of this the Almighty acted in a way consistent with His own character. Still the question haunts the student of the Word of God, Has the promise of the land found its complete fulfillment? An answer requires that the territorial extent of the Promised Land be determined with some degree of certainty.

The Extent of the Promised Land

The land promised to the patriarchs and their descendants is commonly identified as "the land of Canaan" (cf. Gen. 12:5; 17:8; Ex. 6:4; Lev. 25:38; Deut. 32:49),⁵ which seems to refer generally to Syria-Palestine,⁶ west of the Jordan, but it may also include Bashan to the east.⁷ The familiar idiom "from Dan to Beersheba" (Judges 20:1; 1 Sam. 3:20) was a general north-to-south description of the extent of the land used in later times.

The first description of the extent of the Promised Land occurs in Genesis 15:18-21: "from the river of Egypt⁸ to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites." The Promised Land thus encompassed the territory bounded by the Euphrates on the northeast, "the entrance of Hamath" (Num. 34:8; cf. Eze. 47:15; 48:1) on the north (not yet certainly identified),⁹ "the Great Sea" (the Mediterranean; Num. 34:6; Joshua 15:4; cf. Eze. 47:20) on the west, and the river (Gen. 15:18), or brook, of Egypt⁸ on the south, and the wilderness (Ex. 23:31; Deut. 11:24; Joshua 1:4) on the east.¹⁰ On the basis of this description the Promised Land apparently included the territory on both sides of the Jordan River, and from Egypt to the Euphrates (Ex. 23:31; Deut. 1:6-8; Joshua 1:2-4).

What about the fulfillment of this promise? During the time of Joshua and the Judges there was a partial occupation of the land. The Israelites were at the height of their expansion in the time of David, whose realm extended from Labo-hamath and the Lebanese border on the north (2 Sam. 8 and 10; etc.) to the "Brook of Egypt" in the south, and from the desert in the east (1 Chron. 19) to the Mediterranean on the west. Of Solomon it is said that he "ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt" (1 Kings 4:21; in the Hebrew Bible chap. 5:1), that is, the brook of Egypt (chap. 8:65). This is as close

a fulfillment as the Old Testament knows. However, neither David's victories nor those of Solomon incorporated all of this territory. The defeated nations were reduced to tribute-paying vassals (1 Kings 4:21 [Heb. Bible ch. 5:1]) or slavery (chap. 9:21; 2 Chron. 8:7, 8). Nothing is known about Israel ever establishing control as far south as the Nile,⁸ or over the cities of Tyre and Sidon, which were allocated to Asher (Joshua 19:28, 29; Judges 1:31). It is evident, then, that the promise to the patriarchs was never completely fulfilled. Why not?

Conditions Attached to the Fulfillment

There is tension between Joshua 21:43-45, which speaks of a fulfillment of the promise of the Lord, and the fact that a complete fulfillment has not come about. How is this tension to be resolved? Did God fail to live up to His promise? Did He go back on His oath? As far as God was concerned "not one of all the good promises . . . had failed" (verse 45); He kept His word. The discrepancy between the promise and its complete fulfillment does not rest in a lack on the part of the divine promise or in God's ability and word, but in Israel's lack of compliance with God's explicitly stated requirements. "The complete fulfillment of the promise was inseparably connected with the fidelity of Israel to the Lord."¹¹ The people, God lamented, "have done what is evil in my sight . . . , since the day their fathers came out of Egypt" (2 Kings 21:15; cf. Deut. 1:26). As a result of their unfaithfulness they forfeited the promise. God did not fail; His people failed. They failed to fulfill the conditions on the basis of which they could experience the fullness of the divine promise.

A common misconception considers the covenant promise of the land made to Abraham as unilateral¹² and unconditional.¹³ To be sure, the first report of the covenant (Gen. 15:7-18) does not mention how Abraham is to conduct himself, but the second (chap. 17) clearly specifies that Abraham and his descendants are to "keep" the covenant (verses 9, 10) and the result of breaking it (verse 14). Abraham's obedience in not withholding his son keeps the promise functioning (chap. 22:16-18). Because Abraham "obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" (chapt. 26:5), the Lord promised to fulfill His oath and give to his descendants "all these lands" (verse 3). Abraham would not receive fulfillment of the promise

Canaan's Grapes

By HELEN KISH

With loving skill the Gardener trims
And patiently trains each tendriled branch.
He smiles in pleased anticipation.
Yes, these scions took firm hold.
The Parent vine is nourishing well.
In fact, the alien twigs had meshed so complete
No graft scar could be seen.
This last late harvest indicates abundance.
Amazing!
Perfect fruit from such unpromising saplings—
Branches which had come from an inferior stock
Called Laodicean.

as a result of his obedience;¹⁴ his obedience, on the contrary, kept the promise in operation. Without loyalty to God the promise could not be fulfilled. It was conditional on obedience. Those who despised the Lord would not see the Promised Land (Num. 14:23); those who refused to follow the Lord wholly would share the same fate (chap. 32:11, 12; Deut. 1:35, 36).

If untrue to the covenant requirements Israel would lose the blessings and incur the curses of disobedience (chap. 11:26-31), and forfeit the land (Deut. 28:63-68; cf. 31:20-22). The covenant between God and His people is conditional (Lev. 26). The conditional aspect of God's covenant¹⁵ and His promises is emphasized through a sharp contrast between the "if" of obedience (verse 3) and the "ifs" or "if not's" of disobedience (verses 14, 15, 18, 21, 23, 27). "If in spite of this you will not hearken to me, but walk contrary to me, then I will . . . chastise you. . . . I will devastate the land. . . . And I will scatter you among the nations" (verses 27, 32, 33; cf. Deut. 27:9, 10; Joshua 23:15, 16; Judges 2:1-5). In 722 B.C. Israel experienced the fulfillment of these threatened punishments (2 Kings 17:7-18), and a century and a half later Judah was plucked up from the Promised Land and scattered in the Neo-Babylonian empire (verses 19 f).

The Conditional Promise of Restoration

The exile of ancient Israel did not mean the end of God's plan for His people. God held out the hope of restoration and a return to their land. Isaiah predicted that the Lord would "extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant which is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea. . . . And gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth" (Isa. 11:11, 12). This promise envisions the recovery of only a "remnant" from Israel,¹⁶ in contrast to the former recovery of all Israel from Egyptian slavery.¹⁷ The expression "second time" did not imply a gathering in the distant future—such as the return of Jews to the present State of Israel—because the countries and places enumerated are all territories where the ancient Israelites were taken in the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. The phrase "four corners of the earth" means the four directions of the compass, corresponding to the territories enumerated in verse 11. Thus the second gathering to which Isaiah refers was the one that took place in Persian times. This prophecy¹⁸ has met its fulfillment in the return of the exiles, as recorded in the book of Ezra.

It does not come as a surprise that the prophet Jeremiah, who ministered during the last years of the kingdom of Judah, presented a distinct message of the divine restoration of his people. "They shall dwell in their own land," he assured them (Jer. 23:8). Promising to "restore their fortunes" (chap. 32:44) the Lord refers back to the promise made to the patriarchs: "I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers for ever" (chap. 7:7). These promises of return and restoration are based upon the covenant relationship: "I will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 31:33; 33:38). This must be seen against their background of failure already outlined in detail by Isaiah (Isa. 40:2; 42:24; 50:1; 54:7, 8), who also emphasizes the re-establishment of a genuine cove-

nant relationship with God (chap. 55:3-5; 54:9, 10; 42:6; 49:8). The constant interrelationship between restoration in the physical sense and restoration of the inner life of the people is also maintained by Jeremiah. Without the inner restoration, based on the new covenant "within them" and written on their hearts (Jer. 31:31-34), there can be no genuine restoration in the physical sense. The new covenant will make a new people.

From all of this it is evident that for the Exodus generation and their descendants the condition for the reception and possession of the Promised Land was the fulfillment of the covenant obligations on their part. It was failure to live up to the conditions of the covenant that deprived Israel of the complete fulfillment of the promise of the land, and ultimately loss of the land they did occupy; the new, or renewed, covenant to accompany restoration from exile likewise had conditions; the law must be written on the heart. Repentance was to be the condition for receiving and remaining in possession of the Promised Land.¹⁹ "Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you dwell in this place" (Jer. 7:3; cf. 18:11; 22:3-5). The manifold promises of restoration in Jeremiah²⁰ and other Old Testament prophets are all conditioned by the "ifs" of obedience and the "if not's" of disobedience.²¹

The Biblical teaching regarding God's plan for Israel's reception of the Promised Land and its restoration is consistent. Israel's title to the Promised Land is conditioned by fidelity to her covenant God. A wholehearted turning of Israel to God, and her active response to the divine faithfulness and abundant mercy, would secure a divine fulfillment of the conditional restoration promises. The Promised Land is God's gift, but it cannot be received without the divine Giver. Since no nation in the Middle East today fulfills the conditions God made prerequisite to the reception of the Promised Land under the covenant, possession of the land by any of them cannot be considered in any sense a fulfillment of any of the Old Testament promises of restoration. Yet God's plan is not frustrated, for the New Testament tells how He will work out His purpose on the basis of the new covenant with the new people of God.²² □

REFERENCES

- ¹ All Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.
- ² See Gen. 24:7; Ex. 33:1; Num. 10:29; 11:12; 14:23; Deut. 1:8; 10:11; 11:21; 31:23; 34:4; Joshua 1:6; 21:43; Judges 2:1.
- ³ G. von Rad, *Genesis, a Commentary* (1961), p. 245.
- ⁴ It should be noted parenthetically that there is no conflict between the figure of 400 and "the fourth generation" (Gen. 15:16), since the term "generation," *dōr*, can mean "duration," "time span," "lifetime," of which 100 years is a conservative equivalent in the patriarchal context. See W. F. Albright, "From the Patriarchs to Moses," *Biblical Archaeologist*, 36, 1973, pp. 15 f.
- ⁵ Y. Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible. A Historical Geography* (1967), pp. 61-70.
- ⁶ K. A. Kitchen, "Canaan, Canaanites," *The New Bible Dictionary* (2d. ed., 1967), J. D. Douglas (ed.), p. 183; S. H. Horn, "Canaan," *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary* (1960), p. 169.
- ⁷ A. R. Millard, "The Canaanites," *Peoples of O. T. Times* (1973), D. J. Wiseman (ed.), p. 33.
- ⁸ According to E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (1964), p. 114; cf. Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, p. 76, "the river of Egypt" designates the Nile. Other passages refer to "the brook of Egypt" (Num. 34:5; Joshua 15:4, 47; 1 Kings 8:65; Isa. 27:12), which is normally identified with the great Wadi el-'Arish that empties into the Mediterranean about 30 miles south of Raphia.
- ⁹ H. G. May, "Hamath, Entrance of," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1962), II, pp. 516 f.; Aharoni, *Land of the Bible*, pp. 65-67.
- ¹⁰ For details see Aharoni, *Land of the Bible*, pp. 67-70.
- ¹¹ C. F. Keil, "Judges," *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1949, p. 216.
- ¹² Hilliers, *Covenant*, p. 103, states that the covenant with Abraham "binds only God."
- ¹³ E. H. Malay, "Genesis," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1968), p. 20: ". . . the covenant is unilateral, unconditional on Abram's part."
- ¹⁴ M. Weinfeld, "berith," *Theological Dictionary of the O. T.* (1975), II, pp. 270 f.
- ¹⁵ Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, p. 146, points out that human responsibility is the basic presupposition of the covenant stipulations; D. J. McCarthy, *Old Testament Covenant: A Survey of Current Opinions* (1972), p. 3, emphasizes that "all covenants or contracts have their conditions."
- ¹⁶ G. F. Hasel, *The Remnant* (2d. ed., 1974), pp. 339-348.
- ¹⁷ E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (1965), I, p. 394.
- ¹⁸ See also Isa. 43:5, 6; 45:13; 49:9-13, 22-26.
- ¹⁹ Jer. 25:5; cf. 24:8-10; 35:15; Deut. 1:8.
- ²⁰ Jer. 23:1-8; 24:4-7; 30:8, 9, 18-21; 31:27, 28; 32:6-23.
- ²¹ Jer. 17:24, 27; 18:8-10; 22:5; Zech. 6:15.
- ²² Rom. 2:28, 29; 4:13-25; Gal. 5:6; Col. 2:11; Rom. 9-11, et cetera.