

Who Owns the Land?

✖ Today's Palestinian-Israeli conflict can be reduced to one basic question: Who owns the land? To the Arabs, it was illegally seized from them after World War II by pro-Israel international governing bodies. To the Jewish people, however, the territory has always been rightfully theirs and was given to them by almighty God Himself.

The three great religions of the world—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—were all birthed in the Middle East and share one common denominator. They trace their lineage to Abraham.

Once, when I was in Jerusalem, I was introduced to a woman who was passionate about building financial support for Jewish settlements all over Israel—including the West Bank (biblically known as Judea and Samaria). She told me in no uncertain terms, “This is our land. God gave it to us, and we don't really care what politicians think or say. It will never change.”

This is the sentiment of untold thousands of Jewish people who have settled in Israel—including biblical Judea and Samaria—and do not have the slightest intention of living elsewhere. The Bible says the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying: ‘To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates’ (Genesis 15:18).

Out of Egypt

From the very start, Abraham knew the journey ahead would be filled with both anguish and achievements. For example, the Lord told him in advance the children of Israel would spend 400 years in captivity before being set free. God said, “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also that nation whom they serve

I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions" (Genesis 15:13-14).

This prophecy came true when the Almighty sent ten plagues upon Egypt and a frightened pharaoh liberated the Israelites from bondage. As Moses led the great Exodus, they were carrying with them the wealth of the land—silver, gold, and clothing. (See Exodus 12:35-36.) During their wanderings, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, built the Ark of the Covenant, and ordained specific rules for living and patterns of worship held sacred by Jewish people to this very day.

A Promise of Possession

The reason the Exodus is such a significant and revered part of Jewish history is because the Israelites were headed toward the Promised Land—the same territory that God earlier pledged to Abraham.

Near the end of their journey, Moses told the people that God would give to them the land that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had possessed and that they would prosper in that land even more greatly than their forefathers had (see Deuteronomy 30:5).

After Moses died and Joshua was about to enter the land of Canaan (which would become Israel and then renamed "Palestine" by the Roman emperor Hadrian in A.D. 135 in an attempt to suppress Jewish identification with the land), the promise was repeated. The Lord declared to Joshua:

"Moses My servant is dead. Now therefore, arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them—the children of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you, as I said to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the River Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your territory" (Joshua 1:2-4).

This possession of the land did not happen overnight. The Bible records battle after battle—Jericho, Ai, and Gibeon, to name just a few. Eventually, the conquered territory was parceled out among the tribes of Israel. Yet to this day, Jewish people still await the fulfillment of the entire promise.

Divided and Destroyed

Around 1025 B.C. Saul became the first king of Israel, and at last all the tribes were joined under one leader. He was followed to the throne by David, who established Jerusalem as the capital. Under the house of David, borders were defined and Israel became a prosperous and dominant nation. David's son Solomon rose to power and honored God by building the first great temple in Jerusalem.

But by 926 B.C. Israel became a fractured kingdom when the ten tribes of the north (Israel) refused to take orders from Solomon's son Rehoboam and revolted. The south, including the city of Jerusalem, was now a nation of its own—Judah. About 200 years later, the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel—and it was only a matter of time before Judah and Jerusalem were to meet a tragic fate.

The Years of Exile

The Babylonians invaded Judah for the first time in 606 B.C. This is when King Nebuchadnezzar took captive some of the most educated and esteemed young men to Babylon to be trained for service in the king's palace. Included in the captives were Daniel (renamed Belteshazzar), Hananiah (renamed Shadrach), Mishael (renamed Meshach), and Azariah (renamed Abednego) (see Daniel 1:1-7).

A few years later, Nebuchadnezzar sent his armies to Jerusalem once again and attacked the city (2 Kings 24:10). This time they looted the treasures of Solomon's temple and carried them

away. Nothing was left untouched. There was wholesale slaughter; every building was torched to the ground and the walls of Jerusalem were torn down. Thousands of survivors were taken into Babylonian captivity.

The Book of Lamentations details the horrors that took place during this time of devastation. In fact, in my conversations with Orthodox Jews, I learned that many of the tears that flow at the Western Wall in Jerusalem today are in memory of what occurred during this siege.

Exactly Seventy Years

One of the remarkable prophecies of the Old Testament concerns this exile of the Jewish people. God spoke through Jeremiah many years before the time of exile, promising, "After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place" (Jeremiah 29:10).

How did this fulfillment of prophecy occur? Cyrus the Great of Persia (now Iran) conquered Babylonia (now Iraq), and one of his first decrees was to authorize the return of the Jewish people from Babylonian captivity to the land of Israel—in exchange for giving their loyalty to Persia. He also issued the order to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, (see Ezra 1:1-2).

This was the God who said of Cyrus, "He is My shepherd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, saying to Jerusalem, 'You shall be built,' and to the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid'" (Isaiah 44:28).

Coincidence? I think not! The first stones for the second temple in Jerusalem were laid in 536 70 years after Judah was captured. And the temple was built during the preaching ministry of Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1-2; Haggai 1:1-15). God said, "The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former" (Haggai 2:9).

Rebuilding the Walls

In the next century, while Judah was still a province of Persia, a Hebrew named Nehemiah, who was a cupbearer to the king, was given permission to journey to Jerusalem to fulfill his passion to rebuild the ruined walls. Even though there was fierce resistance from the non-Jewish inhabitants, the restoration was completed in a record-breaking 52 days. This feat so impressed the Persian king that he allowed Nehemiah to be governor of Judah for the next 13 years.

Never-ending Conflict

Century after century, the Jews repeatedly asked themselves, "Will this land that was promised ever again be ours?" From all directions, invading armies came to claim power and rule the territory. On the horizon were the Greeks. Alexander the Great, as part of his world conquest, seized Persia in 332 B.C., and with this victory came rule over Israel. He established the city of Alexandria in Egypt, and Judah was controlled from there for more than 150 years.

Next, it was the Romans' turn. Under General Pompey, they captured Jerusalem in 63 B.C. Later, the Senate in Rome appointed Herod the Great to be king over Israel. During the reign of the Romans, many Jewish people were sold into slavery and scattered to the far corners of the known world.

Here is what's astonishing. Since the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, there has always been a continuous Jewish remnant in this land—regardless of who occupied or governed. For thousands of years the Jewish people have spoken the same Hebrew language and worshiped the same Jehovah God. It is also significant that the restored nation is still called by its original name—Israel.



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