

THE ISOLATION OF ISRAEL

Genesis 12:1-3

*In this lesson we discover why the nation
of Israel is a sign to the world.*

OUTLINE

In the world of geo-eco-politics, it is not often that promises are kept over time. But a promise God made to Abraham more than 4,000 years ago is still in force. It is shaping our world today and will shape it even further as we approach the end of the age. God's promises are forever.

- I. An Unconditional Covenant
- II. A Personal Covenant
- III. A National Covenant
- IV. A Territorial Covenant
- V. A Reciprocal Covenant
- VI. A Universal Covenant
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OVERVIEW

Most Israeli Jews, and many Jews living outside Israel, know someone who has been a victim of Palestinian terrorism in the Jewish homeland. Living with the prospect of death or injury due to Palestinian terrorism is a daily reality for Jews in Israel.

"Palestinians" is a generic term used to refer to Arabs who occupied the land of Palestine prior to 1948 and who were displaced when Israel was made a nation. Palestinians resent that displacement; they want their land back and they want Israel to be erased from the map. They want Jews either to be killed or to leave their land and live elsewhere in the world. Acts of terrorism are their ongoing effort to attack Israel's right to exist.

Israel is a tiny, 9,000-square mile island in a 5 million-square mile sea of Arab nations that surround her. Her 68-year status as a legally reformed nation has resulted in a constant state of vigilance against attacks. Since the year 2000 an estimated 1,500 Israelis have been killed by Palestinian (Islamic) terrorists, and 8,000 Palestinians have died as a result of Israel's response to terror attacks. In spite of those unbalanced odds, the attacks against Israel continue.

In recent years, Palestinians have gained the sympathy of the world because Israel has built settlements on two percent of West Bank (Arab) land to create a buffer zone against Palestinian attacks and to create civil order in an otherwise chaotic region. But Israel has never been the aggressor in Arab-Israeli conflicts. Israel has been willing to find a two-state solution, making concessions to the Palestinians, but her offers are always rejected because they include Israel's right to exist as a nation.

Israel is fighting for her very existence. The subtitle of an article by *World* magazine editor Marvin Olasky succinctly summarizes Israel's dilemma: "Slammed if you do, dead if you don't." When Israel takes the tough but necessary measures to defend herself, she is slammed by world censure. If she fails to take those measures, she is attacked by hostile neighbors. In that article, Olasky filed this explanation of the impossible situation in which Israel finds herself today:

The Holocaust's 6 million murders led to the creation of the Israeli state in 1948 and the willingness of Jews to fight for it against enormous odds. . . . The hardened men and women who founded the state of Israel and fought to defend it in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, became known

for saying, "Never again." Never again would they make it easy for mass killers. Never again would they go down without a fight.

For several decades, non-Jewish Americans and Europeans understood that resolve. But then a generation grew up that did not know Adolf [Hitler]. Those without visceral awareness of the background saw Israelis not as victims trying to survive but as overlords acting unjustly to poor Palestinians. Manipulators took the opportunity to re-package the old anti-Semitism as sympathy for an oppressed third-world population.¹

Oppression and opposition to Jews is nothing new in world history. The descendants of Abraham were enslaved in Egypt for 400 years, then the ten northern tribes were captured by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. and the two southern tribes by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. (Granted, these captivities were due to the Jews' sins.) Then Rome crushed the Jews in A.D. 70, dispersing them into the world where they lived for 1,878 years until the United Nations declared them a nation again in 1948. During the dispersion—the diaspora—more than 6 million Jews were exterminated by Hitler in the 1940s.

Only one factor can explain why the Jews still exist as a people and a nation: the promises of God. As God said through the prophet Ezekiel, He has preserved the Jews for His own name's sake: "'the nations shall know that I *am* the LORD,' says the Lord God, 'when I am hallowed *in you* before their eyes'" (Ezekiel 36:23, italics added). And through Isaiah God reminded the Jews that many of her hardships were discipline for her sins (Isaiah 40:2).

But discipline looks to a more righteous future. Why does God have a future for the Jews? Because of promises made to them in times past. The Jews represent a conundrum illustrated by the saying, "How odd of God, to choose the Jews."

It does seem odd from a human perspective. But there are two reasons God has preserved Israel as a nation: (1) because of a promise made to Abraham and (2) because of God's faithfulness to His Word. As we will see, nothing can cause God to break His promises to His people.

(The promise made to Abraham began in Genesis 12:1-3 and was reaffirmed several times to Abraham as well as his son, Isaac, and grandson, Jacob. Their descendants would be the inheritors of the promise God made to Abraham.) Genesis 12:1-3 is a cornerstone,

a foundational block of Scripture on which a right understanding of the Bible rests. To disregard the promises God made to the father of the Jewish people is to be confused about biblical eschatology.

There are seven features of God's promise (God's covenant) in Genesis 12:1-3 that serve as mileposts in the journey from Genesis to Revelation.

AN UNCONDITIONAL COVENANT

When God says "I will" (five times in Genesis 12:1-3), that signifies an unconditional covenant. God is not asking Abraham to reciprocate; He is stating what He Himself will do for Abraham and his descendants. God confirmed the unconditional nature of this covenant in a unique ceremony in Genesis 15.

That ceremony was a common one in the ancient Near East. Sacrificial animals were cut in two and the parties to a covenant would walk between the pieces. They were saying, "May what happened to these animals happen to me if I break this covenant." But when God and Abraham conducted this ceremony, *God alone* walked between the pieces, taking full responsibility for the keeping of the covenant. This wasn't an agreement between equals; this was God promising to do something for Abraham and his descendants.

Paul Wilkinson notes that God alone signed and sealed the covenant, "since only He passed through the animal pieces. The inference drawn from Ancient Near Eastern custom is that in so doing, God invoked a curse upon Himself, should He ever break His promise."²

A PERSONAL COVENANT

God's promise to Abraham was personal: "I will bless you and make your name great" (Genesis 12:2). The personal pronouns *you* and *your* are used 11 times in verses 1-3. The promises have universal implications, but they began as personal promises to Abraham.

God directed Abraham to leave his home in Mesopotamia and settle in the rich and abundant land of Canaan (Exodus 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3). He prospered greatly and became wealthy with herds and servants (Genesis 14:14). The land of Canaan was promised to Abraham and his seed, a place where all his descendants could prosper as Abraham had done.

Abraham was revered in his own day as a powerful leader (Genesis 14:1-17) and is a pivotal figure in three world religions today: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The personal promise of the land

to Abraham's descendants through Isaac and Jacob was never rescinded and remains in force today.

A NATIONAL COVENANT

Part of the promise to Abraham was that God would make a great nation from his descendants (Genesis 12:2a). In spite of the millions of Jews who have been killed through the centuries, the Jews are indeed a great nation. Professor Amnon Rubenstein gives us an impressive summary of Israel's national achievements:

Minute in size, not much bigger than a sliver of Mediterranean coastline, [Israel] has withstood continuing Arab onslaughts, wars, boycott and terrorism; it has turned itself from a poor, rural country, to an industrial and post industrial powerhouse . . . it has reduced social, educational and health gaps between . . . Arabs and Jews. Some of its achievements are unprecedented: Israeli Arabs have a higher life-expectancy than most European whites; its democracy functions, inside Israel proper, in times of great national emergency . . . it has maintained freedom of the press in time of war; it stands out as a singular democratic, first-world island in a sea of Arab and Muslim poverty and backwardness.³

A TERRITORIAL COVENANT

Land—a homeland—was part of God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1): "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates" (Genesis 15:18). From the Mediterranean coast on the west to the Euphrates River on the east; from Kadesh in the south (Ezekiel 48:28) to Hamath in the north (Ezekiel 48:1), Abraham was promised a huge grant of land—all of modern Israel, Lebanon, the West Bank of Jordan, and large parts of Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia.

Because Israel has never occupied all that land, many scholars believe the promise of land should be spiritualized to refer to heaven instead of a literal homeland. But couldn't that promise have been made and fulfilled back in Abraham's previous homeland of Mesopotamia? Why travel all the way to Canaan to make a promise about heaven? No, this was a promise about literal land that will one day be fulfilled.

The promise was also reiterated to Abraham's son Isaac (Genesis 26:2-5) and Isaac's son Jacob (Genesis 28:13; 35:12)—and Jacob's descendants (Exodus 33:1-3). The land in this promise is the

most important block of real estate in the world. As such, it will be the most hotly contested land in the world until Christ returns. Israel has been removed from the land three times (the Egyptian sojourn, the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities, the diaspora), but today she is back in the land. God has kept His promise to Abraham and his descendants.

The Old Testament is replete with God's promises, made through His prophets, about the land belonging to Israel forever: Jeremiah 32:37, 41; Ezekiel 11:17; 20:42; 34:13; 37:21, 25; 39:28; Amos 9:14-15. Taking these promises at face value is important. The last line of Amos 9:15, for example, says: "'And no longer shall they be pulled up from the land I have given them,' says the LORD your God." This could not apply to previous occupations of the land since they were removed. But the day is coming when they will never again be "pulled up from the land."

When the United Nations created a homeland for the Jews in 1948, they carved off a portion of what had historically been Israel's land—part of Judea and Samaria, now called the West Bank—and gave it to Palestinians. But when these same Palestinians and others attacked Israel in 1967 in the famous Six-Day War, Israel won that West Bank territory back. They didn't take it by aggression. They won it while defending themselves from attack—land that had been given to Abraham by God centuries earlier!

God cares for this land, His gift to Abraham (Deuteronomy 11:12). Israel regaining the central part of her homeland in 1948 is a sign for all who know biblical prophecy. It is an indication that we are moving into the period prior to the Second Coming of Israel's King.

A RECIPROCAL COVENANT

God's promise to protect and bless Abraham had a corollary—a promise to bless those who bless Abraham and his descendants: "I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you" (Genesis 12:3). It's very simple: Nations that bless Israel will be blessed; nations that curse Israel will be cursed.

The prophet Zechariah warned the nations that came against Israel: "for he who touches [Israel] touches the apple of His eye" (Zechariah 2:8). And he warns nations of the future the same way (Zechariah 9:8). The pages of history (and the Old Testament) are littered with the decline of nations that came against Israel. In ancient times, powerful peoples like Egypt, Midian, Moab, Babylon, and Greece were ruined as a result of raising their hand against Israel.

In the modern era, Communist Russia was dissolved and Nazi Germany was crushed. Perhaps the most dramatic example of God's protection was the aforementioned Six-Day War in 1967. The United Arab Republic, and the Jordanian, Syrian, and Palestinian armies attacked Israel from three directions. Although hopelessly outnumbered, Israel defeated all these nations and captured vast amounts of land including the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank.

The most foolish thing any modern nation could do is to stand against Israel in its foreign policy.

A UNIVERSAL COVENANT

The universality of the covenant with Abraham reveals its most important purpose: "And in you [Abraham] all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). The purpose of God's promise to Abraham was not to exclude the rest of humanity from God's blessing, but to ultimately include them! Abraham's descendants would be the rich repository of the knowledge of God that all humanity needs.

For example, almost all the writers of the Bible were Jewish. And most importantly, Jesus was a Jew—a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Through "the blessing of Abraham" came a blessing for the Gentiles (the rest of humanity) in the person of Christ (Galatians 3:14). Finally, the land of Israel and city of Jerusalem exist because of the promises to Abraham being fulfilled through his descendants. It is to that land and city which the King of kings and Lord of lords will one day return to judge the world and establish His kingdom on earth. The entire human race has been blessed by the promises of God to Abraham.

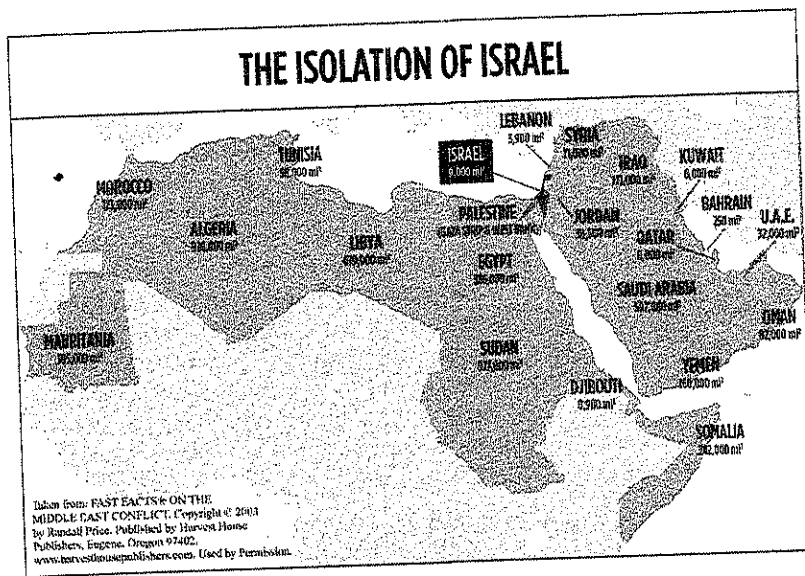
AN ETERNAL COVENANT

God's promise to Abraham came in three stages: initiated in Genesis 12:1-3, formalized in Genesis 15:1-21, and amplified in Genesis 17:1-18. In Genesis 17, Abraham is nearly 100 years old and God comes to him to affirm that the covenant is an "everlasting covenant" and the land of Canaan will be his descendants' "everlasting possession" (Genesis 17:7-8). That promise was affirmed graphically through the prophet Jeremiah: as long as the heavens and the foundations of the earth remain, so will God's faithfulness to Israel (Jeremiah 31:35-37; see also Psalm 105:8-9).

Particularly striking was the vision given to Ezekiel—dry bones (of Israel) coming back to life (Ezekiel 37:1-12). The dry bones

represent the scattered nation of Israel being brought back to life and reunited to inherit the blessings of Abraham's covenant. That is what we are seeing today! But rebuilding the "bones" of the nation is not enough. Israel has not been made totally spiritually alive yet. But Ezekiel saw the breath (Spirit) of God coming into the resurrected physical bodies (Ezekiel 37:8-10) and that will happen (Zechariah 12:10; Romans 11:27-28).

Two prophecies are yet to be fulfilled: Israel needs to inhabit all the land promised to her and she needs to turn to her Messiah, Jesus Christ. But those will be fulfilled in God's time. Israel is indeed a sign to the world that God keeps His promises and the end of the age is approaching.



Notes:

1. Marvin Olasky, "Israel at age 67: Slammed if you do, dead if you don't," *World*, April 21, 2015, http://www.worldmag.com/2015/04/israel_at_age_67_slammed_if_you_do_dead_if_you_dont. Accessed April 7, 2016.
2. Paul R. Wilkinson, *Understanding Christian Zionism: Israel's Place in the Purposes of God* (Bend OR: The Berean Call, 2013), 21.
3. Amnon Rubinstein, "Peace Won't Be Instant, but Can't Be Dropped," *JWeekly*, May 9, 2003, <http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/19844/peace-won-t-be-instant-but-dream-can-t-be-dropped/>.

APPLICATION

1. Identify each of the components of God's covenant promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3.
 - a. I will make you a _____.
 - b. I will _____ you.
 - c. [I will] make your _____.
 - d. You shall be a _____.
 - e. I will _____ those who _____ you.
 - f. I will _____ him who _____ you.
 - g. In you all the _____ of the _____ shall be blessed.
 - h. If you were the leader of a nation on earth, what would your foreign policy toward Israel be in light of the promise of verse 3?

2. Read Ezekiel 36:22-23.

- a. What would be God's purpose in redeeming and restoring Israel? (verse 22)

b. What had Israel (in Ezekiel's day) done to God's "holy name"? (verses 22-23)

c. What does the phrase "in you" in verse 23 say about Israel's restoration?

d. How does "in you" make the restoration of Israel a sign to the world about God? (verse 23)

e. How has the world responded to Israel's restoration to her homeland? Is the world seeing the sign?

f. When the nations gather against Israel at the end of the age, how will they finally understand the sign that is Israel? (Ezekiel 39:1-8)

3. Do you find the word "if" addressed to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3?

a. What does that say about conditions Abraham must fulfill?

b. How many times does God say "I will"?

c. Who is taking responsibility for the fulfillment of these promises?

d. How is Deuteronomy 28:1 different from Genesis 12:1-3? What does "if you . . . God will" suggest about this covenant? Is it conditional or unconditional?

e. How does the conditional nature of this covenant justify the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities? What could Israel have done to avoid those unpleasant experiences?

f. Is Jesus' promise in John 15:7 conditional or unconditional? If conditional, what are the conditions? What is the promise?

4. In Deuteronomy 7:6-8, how might God's words to Israel in verses 7-8 also be applied to God's election of you to salvation in Christ? (Ephesians 1:4-6)

DID YOU KNOW?

The term "diaspora" comes from the Greek word *diaspora*, a dispersion or scattering. While it can refer to the scattering of any ethnic or racial group from their homeland, "the diaspora" most frequently refers to the scattering of Jews from Judea. Greek *diaspora* is used three times in the New Testament to refer to Jews living outside Judea as a result of the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities or persecution (John 7:35; James 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1). Many Jews who had believed in Jesus were driven from Jerusalem (Acts 8:1) and all Jews were scattered from the city when Roman armies destroyed it in A.D. 70. Though most Jews still live outside Israel, a return from the diaspora began in the first half of the twentieth century and continues today.