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Replacement Theology & the Land Promises of Joshua 21:43-45

by David Dunlap

“So the Lord gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they possessed and lived in it. And the Lord gave them rest on every side, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers, and no one of all their enemies stood before them; the Lord gave all their enemies into their hand. Not one of the good promises, which the Lord had made to the house of Israel, failed; all came to pass.”

—Joshua 21:43-45

Sir Moses Montefiore, Queen Victoria's financial adviser, was a Jew. He was a towering figure in the social and financial world of England in the mid-1800s. Montefiore is mentioned in Charles Dickens's diaries, in the personal papers of George Elliot, and in James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*. When Montefiore visited the land of Israel over a hundred and sixty years ago, he found that the only land a Jew could possess was land for a synagogue or land for a grave. Through the help of the British ambassador, Sir Moses Montefiore purchased a plot of land outside the walls of Jerusalem. It was the first piece of property in Israel for twelve hundred years to be purchased and owned by a Jew. Today the Jews hold the land of Israel in their hands, despite the relentless complaints from Replacement Christians that the land does not belong to them.¹

There is only one piece of real estate on the planet Earth that God has expressly said belongs to a specific people, and that is Israel. Yet this land is the smallest, most debated, most fought over, most contested land in the history of the world. Since the formation of the modern state of Israel in 1948, careful observers have considered this incredible event as the fulfillment of the promises of God. It has caused many to conclude that God still has future plans for the land of Israel and the Jewish people. Despite these developments, however, there is a group of Christians who think that the current state of Israel has nothing to do with God's biblical promises.

Is God Is Finished With Israel?

More and more advocates of Replacement theology are using Joshua 21:43-45 as a proof text to nullify God's land promises to the nation of Israel. They portray God as One who, in some way, is looking to excuse Himself from fulfilling His promises to the nation of Israel. They characterize the Lord as saying: “I have fulfilled My promises on that one, now I can mark it off My list

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C. H. Spurgeon
(1834-1899)

of responsibilities.” Because of the statement in Joshua 21, they claim that God has fulfilled once and for all His promise to Israel regarding the land. In the process of making this claim, they either ignore the promises or assert that God’s eternal and perpetual promises to Israel regarding her land are no longer in force today. The existence of Jewish people prospering in the land of Israel is a tremendous obstacle to Replacement doctrine. In reality, Israel now appears to have the blessing and protection of God. Replacement leaders want to do away with national Israel, and they think they have found a biblical passage that supports their point of view.

It is not surprising that Preterist-Replacement leader Gary DeMar twists the plain meaning of Joshua 21. He says concerning Israel’s future:

The text says nothing about the restoration of Israel to her land as a fulfillment of some covenantal obligation. All the land promises that God made to Israel were fulfilled (Joshua 21:43-45).²

DeMar’s perspective should not surprise us since, as a preterist, he believes that virtually all prophecy has already been fulfilled. He believes on that foundation that the modern state of Israel has no legitimate biblical basis. Joining DeMar is Replacement theologian Keith Mathison, who states:

Joshua 21:43-45 explicitly declares that all the land that God promised Israel was given to them...God fulfilled the promises he made to Abraham.³

So have the land promises to Israel been totally fulfilled so that there is no hope for national Israel? The answer is no!

God’s Faithfulness and Israel’s Failures

A survey of the standard commentaries on the book of Joshua reveals that virtually no one takes such an understanding of this passage in the way outlined by current Replacement theologians. These commentators suggest that it does not make sense to conclude that all of God’s land promises have been fulfilled in Joshua 21:43-45. The central purpose of this passage is to emphasize the faithfulness of God. The majority of commentators suggest that Joshua 21:43-45 should be interpreted in light of the promise of God to the nation in Joshua 1:2-11, when they are about to enter the unconquered Promised Land. Joshua is recording the historical facts that God was faithful even though the tribes of Israel were only partially true to their word. The point of this latter section of the book of Joshua is to highlight the unconditional faithfulness of God despite Israel’s short-comings. Trusted commentator Matthew Henry (1662-1714) writes:

Israel’s experience of God’s faithfulness is here on record... “there failed not any good thing, no, aught of any good thing which the Lord had spoken unto the house of Israel”, all in due time came to pass (v. 45). ... (here we find) The inviolable truth of God’s promise, and the performance of it to the utmost...⁴

Joshua 21:43-45 must be understood within the overall context of the entire book of Joshua, and not simply trotted out as a proof text. The broad context is that Israel was only partially true to their charge, while God was unconditionally faithful to His Word. The late president of Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas, Dr. John Walvoord (1910-2002) writes:

The Lord had not failed to keep His promise, even though Israel had failed by faith to conquer all the land.⁵

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Therefore, we see that while God was faithful to His Promise to Israel, she was only partially faithful in fulfilling God's charge. On what basis then is Israel entitled to the land of Promise?

God's Future Fulfillment of His Land Promises

Why is it then that many Christians teach that the land promises by God to Israel are still binding and irrevocable? The answer to this question is two-fold. Firstly, the promise of the land to Israel was an everlasting promise, given to Abraham and his seed *forever* (Gen. 12:7, 13:15). This promise lies at the heart of Israel's claim to the land. These promises were given to Abraham, Isaac, and their descendants. God specified even the boundaries of the land: from the River of Egypt to the Euphrates and from the Great Sea (Mediterranean) to the desert beyond Jordan (Gen. 15:18, Josh. 1:4). Although the privilege of *occupying* the land was conditioned on obedience, the ultimate fulfillment of that promise was irrevocable in both the Abrahamic and Palestinian covenants (Deut. 28-30). It was guaranteed by the Lord's sovereign oath, not by Jewish behavior. That property was called a "land that the Lord has given to you and your fathers forever and ever" (Jer. 25:5, Amos 9:15).

Secondly, the land promises are still binding because of the numerous passages stating that the Jewish people will have future blessing in the land of Israel. A number of Old Testament passages written after the time of Joshua promise a future for Israel.

There are numerous passages that teach that Israel will be re-gathered to live in the land of Israel in a future day. If there were a single disputable verse on this subject that would be one thing; however, there are numerous verses throughout the Bible that state this fact. The following list is only a survey of some of these verses: Isaiah 60:18, 21; Jeremiah 23:6; 24:5-6; 30:18; 31:31-34; 32:37-40; 33:6-9; Ezekiel 28:25-26; 34:11-12; 36:24-26; 37:1-14, 21-25; 39:28; Hosea 3:4-5; Joel 2:18-29; Micah 2:12; 4:6-7; Zephaniah 3:19-20; Zechariah 8:7-8; 13:8-9. In addition, Deuteronomy 30:3-6 speaks of a yet future restoration in belief. This will take place after the second coming of Christ. Amos 9:14-15 is one of the clearest future-restoration passages in the Bible.

"Also I will restore the captivity of My people Israel; and they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them; they will also plant vineyards and drink their wine; and make gardens and eat their fruit. I will also plant them on their land, and they will not again be rooted out from their land which I have given them", says the Lord your God (Amos 9:14-15).

Donald Campbell, former professor of Theology at Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas, speaks clearly on the issue in the following:

Some theologians have insisted that the statement in Joshua 21:43 means that the land promise of the Abrahamic Covenant was fulfilled then. But this cannot be true because later the Bible gives additional predictions about Israel possessing the land after the time of Joshua (e.g. Amos 9:14-15). Joshua 21:43, therefore, refers to the extent of the land as outlined in Numbers 34, and not to the ultimate extent as it will be in the messianic kingdom (Gen. 15:18-21). Also, though Israel possessed the land at this time, it was later dispossessed; whereas the Abrahamic Covenant promised Israel that she would possess the land forever (Gen. 17:8).⁶

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Prophet Amos
7th century, Judah



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Conclusion

Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892), the great British preacher and author, was a great friend of the Jewish people. Concerning Israel's future restoration, he wrote:

I think we do not attach sufficient importance to the restoration of the Jews. We do not think enough of it. But certainly, if there is anything promised in the Bible it is this. I imagine that you cannot read the Bible without seeing clearly that there is to be an actual restoration of the children of Israel...May that happy day soon come! ⁷

The Bible is clear that Israel has a national future in which she will dwell in blessing in her land. This will be after she has been converted to the Lord Jesus Christ as her Messiah. However, in the meantime, the current re-gathering of Israel in unbelief is for the purpose of putting God's people in a position of testing, which in time will lead to salvation. "And all Israel shall be saved" (Romans 11:26). If one misses the clear lesson of this biblical teaching, supported by numerous passages, it is only because of a previously held bias. Replacement theologians have shown that, instead of accepting the teaching of Scripture, they are reading into the text their own Replacement viewpoint. Unfortunately, in the process, they give those who seek to persecute Israel a reason to increase their hatred even further.

Endnotes

1. Phillips, John, *Exploring the World of the Jew*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1981), p.131
2. Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Power Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), p. 322
3. Keith Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God* (Phillipsburg, PA: P & R Publishing, 1995), p. 27
4. Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible, vol. 2*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), p. 78
5. John Walvoord, *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook: All The Prophecies of Scripture Explained in One Volume*, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), p. 44
6. Donald K. Campbell, *Joshua, Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), p. 364-365
7. C. H. Spurgeon, *The C. H. Spurgeon Collection, Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, I, No. 28, 1855* (Albany, Oregon: Ages Software, 1998), 382