An aerial photograph of a desert landscape, likely the Negev region in Israel. The terrain is a mix of reddish-brown and tan earth, with a winding river or dry stream bed cutting through it. The overall scene is arid and rugged. In the upper right quadrant, there is a block of text. In the lower right quadrant, a large, stylized question mark is superimposed over the landscape.

God gave to Abraham
and his seed a covenant
that included the
"Promised Land."
Is this an everlasting
land grant to the Jews?

Whose Land Is It?

by Reed Lessing

As a parent who survived the toddler years with three children, I still clearly recall the “Toddler Property Laws”: If I like it, it’s mine. If it’s in my hand, it’s mine. If I can take it from you, it’s mine. If I had it a little while ago, it’s mine. It must never appear to be yours in any way; it’s always and forever mine!

Over the millennia, numerous rulers, governments, and nations have looked at the land of Israel and said, “Forevermore, mine!”

The land once belonged to the Amorites, as we learn in Genesis 15. Then it was possessed by the Israelites. The Assyrians (2 Kings 17:6), Babylonians (2 Kings 25:22), Persians (2 Chron. 36:23), Greeks (Dan. 11:1–5), and Romans (Luke 3:1) all claimed ownership at times during Old Testament history. And since the end of the New Testament period, the Byzantine, Ottoman, and British empires have looked at this land and said “Mine!”

So whose land is it?

Politically or theologically?

Generally speaking, the question of who owned Palestine was answered *politically* from 70 A.D., when the Roman army crushed the Jewish rebellion and dismantled Jerusalem, until the 1840s. Whoever had the military might and diplomatic ability owned the land.

In the 1840s, John Nelson Darby, a Plymouth Brethren minister from England, began teaching that the question of Palestine’s ownership needed to be answered *theologically*.

By introducing the method of biblical interpretation called Premillennial-Dispensationalism, Darby heralded the idea that biblical history is divided into seven “dispensations” or periods of time. The end of the sixth dispensation, he stated, would be triggered by Israel’s return to the land.

Picking up where Darby left off, Cyrus Scofield propagated Premillennial-Dispensationalism in his influential *Scofield Reference Bible*, first published in 1909. The *Scofield Reference Bible* is the single most important document espousing the teaching that God *permanently* gave the land of Palestine to the Jews.

Prior to these teachings of Darby and Scofield, most Christians (including Lutherans) understood the owner-

ship of Palestine to be a political issue, not a theological issue.

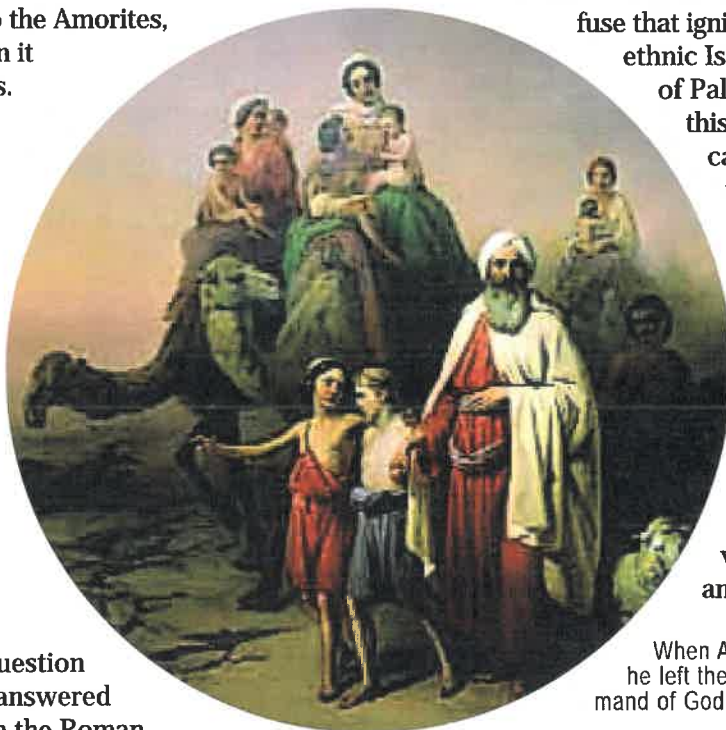
All of that has changed. It is estimated that 40 million Christians in the United States now embrace the idea that the present-day state of Israel created by the United Nations in 1948 is by divine decree and is a sign that we live in “the last days.”

The “Left Behind” effect

Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye have taken Scofield’s ideas and disseminated them via their “Left Behind” series of novels. The authors believe the fuse that ignited “the last days” was ethnic Israel’s return to the land of Palestine in 1948. They call this “the super sign of biblical prophecy” because they believe this event will trigger the rapture of the Church, which could occur at any moment.

The rapture will be followed by seven years of suffering and destruction, called the tribulation. After this, Christ will visibly return as Judge and usher in the seventh

When Abraham was 75 years old, he left the land of his father, by command of God, and went to Canaan.



dispensation, His 1,000-year reign on earth. During this time, unbelievers will increase in numbers. Christ will return (again) and bring all evil to an end. He will usher in the new heavens and new earth. The key to the unfolding of these events, they believe, is that the land of Palestine forever belongs to the Jews.

What does the Bible say?

The Old Testament declares that the land of Canaan (approximately present-day Israel and Palestine, plus adjoining coastal lands and parts of Lebanon and Syria) belongs to the Lord (cf. Ps. 24:1); He is the one who gave it to Israel (Deut. 6:10–11), and He is the One who can take it away (Lev. 26:33). Land could not be permanently bought or sold (cf. 1 Kings 21:1–16); it could not be given away, let alone stolen or confiscated. The land in the Old Testament was always a means for a greater end, the coming of Jesus Christ in the fullness of time (Gen. 17:1–7; Gal. 3:14, 29; 4:4). To a large extent, however, it was Israel’s belief that it—not the Lord—



The Dome of the Rock is a major Muslim shrine built around 690. It sits on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem where Solomon's Temple and the second Temple for Christ's lifetime stood. According to some Christians it is also the site of the third and final Temple to be built before Christ's Second Coming.

the home of righteousness" (2 Peter 3:13).

Until the Day of Pentecost, the disciples shared the same nationalistic understanding of the land as the other Jews of the first century (cf. Luke 24:21; Acts 1:6). But after the coming of the Holy Spirit, they began to use Old Testament language concerning the land in new ways. One example comes from Peter, who speaks of our inheritance that, unlike the land of Palestine, "can never perish, spoil, or fade" (1 Peter 1:4).

The book of Hebrews is

filled with examples of how the New Testament reinterprets "the land." Christians have the land, described as the rest into which they have entered through Christ (Heb. 4:1–11). In Heb. 11:13–16, the central Gospel motif is the land. The pilgrimage of faith is set in three scenes: a land from which they set out in faith, the present context of wandering, and the hoped-for homeland that is a "better," indeed a "heavenly" city.

owned the land that led to the Northern Kingdom's exile of 721 B.C. to Assyria and the Southern Kingdom's exile of 587 B.C. to Babylon.

When Jesus speaks about the land in Luke 19:41–44, He makes no reference to it ever being restored to the Jews. Rather, He taught His disciples to look forward—not to a Jewish return to the land—but to the coming of the Son of Man in His glory on the Last Day (Matt. 24:30–31; Luke 21:25–28; Dan. 7:13–14).

Jesus makes only several explicit references to the land in the Gospels. The strongest is in the Beatitudes. In Matt. 5:5, the Savior quotes from Ps. 37:11, where the blessing of the meek is the inheritance of the land. Yet, it is not the land of Israel, but the entire earth that the meek will inherit (cf. Rom. 4:13). And, in light of the strong eschatological dimensions of the Sermon on the Mount, this earth is the "new heaven and the new earth,

The Church—not Jews or the Israelis—is the true Israel of God, and the baptized are the children of Abraham.

A Quick History of the Holy Land

Before Christ

Some scholars use Bible lineages to date Abraham around this time. Commanded by God, he leaves Ur, a wealthy, corrupt city in today's southern Iraq, and later, leaves Haran in today's southern Turkey. He receives God's word to "give you this land."

1450: Egypt's pharaohs subjugate the Canaanites, including Abraham's descendants.

1250–1200: A probable period when the Israelites enter the Holy Land after their Exodus from Egypt and reclaim the land from diverse Canaanites.

980 to 935: Kings David and Solomon build a rich Israel empire. Solomon's Temple is built.

930: Shortly after Solomon's death, the Kingdom is divided between North (Israel) and South (Judah).

722–721: The Assyrians conquer the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The 10 tribes are deported and disappear from history.

606–581: King Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army conquers Judah, destroys Jerusalem, including the Temple. Judeans are taken to Babylon.

539: The Medes and Persians (from modern-day Iran) capture Babylon. God induces King Cyrus to allow the Jews to return to their land. They rebuild the Temple.

332: Alexander the Great's Greek army sweeps across the Holy Land.

323: After Alexander's death, his generals, Ptolemy in Egypt and Seleucid in Syria battle for the land.

63: Roman armies under Pompey overrun the land and begin a 600-year rule. Herod the Great becomes ruler of Judea.

Shadows or reality?

Premillennial-Dispensationalists believe that Israel's resettlement of the land in 1948 is the key to a correct understanding of the end times. They contend that Old Testament prophecies regarding not only the land, but also such promises as the rebuilding of the Temple and the reinstatement of its sacrifices, must be literally fulfilled.

It is clear from Scripture, however, that these Old Testament promises are to be read in light of the New Testament. The Old Testament revelation of God's acts in the history of Israel consists of shadows, images, forms, and prophecies. The New Testament announces the reality, substance, and final fulfillment of these promises in the person and work of Jesus Christ (John 5:39; Luke 24:44).

The question, then, is not whether the land-promises of the Old Testament are to be understood literally or spiritually. Rather, it's a question of whether they should be understood in terms of Old Testament shadows or in terms of New Testament realities.

When the New Testament is allowed to interpret the Old Testament, it follows that the 1948 state of Israel is *not* a prophetic realization of the Messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ. His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). Furthermore, a day should not be anticipated in which Christ's kingdom will manifest Jewish distinctives, whether by its location in the land of Palestine, its capital in Jerusalem, its constituency, or its ceremonial institutions and practices. The Old Testament needs to be viewed in light of Jesus Christ.

The land-promises that God gave to Abraham were made effective through Christ, Abraham's true Seed (Gal. 3:16). All spiritual benefits are derived from Jesus, and apart from Him there is no participation in the promises made to Abraham (Gal. 3:26–29). These promises

The hope of the baptized is not placed on current events in the Middle East. Rather we are called to fix our eyes on Jesus.

are not directed toward any particular ethnic group. The Church—not Jews or the Israelis—is the true Israel of God, and the baptized are the children of Abraham.

When Premillennial-Dispensationalists point to the modern state of Israel as a concrete manifestation of God's presence, they overlook the fact that God has left visible and tangible signs indicating that He is with His people. First John 5:7–8 states: "For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement." God testifies to being present with His Church right now by means of the Spirit-inspired and Christ-centered Old and New Testament Scriptures,



Fishing on the Sea of Galilee looks much the same today as it did when Jesus called Peter and Andrew to "follow me."

After Christ

4 B.C. to A.D. 27: Christ's life and ministry in Israel.

A.D. 30–300: The new faith reaches out vigorously to gentiles, answering Christ's call to "teach all nations, baptizing them."

330: The Christian Byzantine Empire begins when Emperor Constantine is converted to Christianity.

By 640: Muslim armies drive Byzantine Christians from the Holy Land; they rule for a while from Baghdad. Jerusalem is recognized as a holy city in Islam and the Temple Mount as the place where

Muhammad ascended to heaven.

1099 to 1291: European crusaders establish the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem.

1516: Ottoman Turks overwhelm the Holy Land. It remains in Muslim control until World War II.

1920: Britain installs monarchies in Iraq and Transjordan. The latter governs Palestine. Fleeing Europe and Russia, Jews flood into Palestine from 1920 on.

1947: The United Nations divides Palestine into two states, one Jewish, one Arab. Jerusalem to be

administered by the UN to avoid conflict.

1948: Israel, populated by Jewish refugees from Europe, Africa, and Asia, proclaims itself a nation. Open warfare between the new Israel and its Arab neighbors makes refugees of Palestinians.



Some Important Definitions:

Amillennialism: This is the historic teaching of the Church that there will not be a literal, 1,000-year earthly kingdom of Jesus. This view is better termed “realized millennialism” because it embraces the idea that Christ is reigning now. The “thousand years” of Rev. 20:1–10 is intended to be understood figuratively as a reference to the time of Christ’s reign as King from the day of His Ascension until the Last Day. Hence, the millennium is a present reality (Christ’s heavenly reign), not a future hope (Christ’s rule on earth after His return).

Dispensationalism: This is a system of biblical interpretation that distinguishes seven distinct periods or “dispensations” in biblical history:

1. Innocence (before the Fall);
2. Conscience (from the Fall to Noah);
3. Human Government (from Noah to Abraham);
4. Promise (from Abraham to Moses);
5. Law (from Moses to Christ);
6. Grace (the church age);
7. the Kingdom (the millennium).

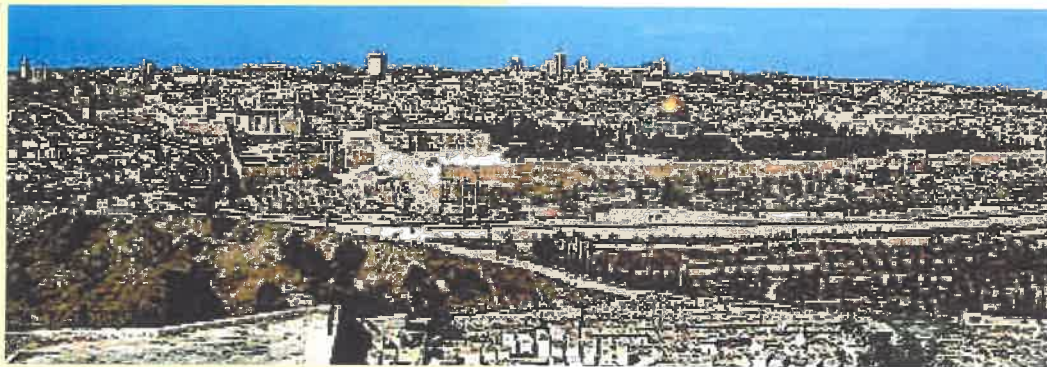
Dispensationalists believe that God’s redemptive plan focuses on national Israel.

Last Days: The phrase “the last days” appears 27 times in the New Testament. Premillennial-Dispensationalists teach that with the creation of the 1948 state of Israel, the world has entered the last days. However, in most biblical instances, it is used of the eschatological epoch, which began with the coming of Jesus Christ.

Millennium: Derived from the Latin for 1,000 years. Premillennial-Dispensationalists understand the 1,000 years of Revelation 20 as literal. But the Bible teaches that Christ is reigning now, and that His gracious rule that began on the day of His Ascension will continue until the Last Day, when He will hand “over the kingdom to God the Father after He has destroyed all dominion, authority and power” (1 Cor. 15:24).

Premillennialism: The belief that the Second Advent will occur before the millennium. This view holds that Scripture is to be interpreted in a “literalistic” manner; the Church and Israel are two distinct groups for whom God has a divine plan; the Church is a mystery, unrevealed in the Old Testament; and the “age of the Church” must be completed before God can resume His main program.

Rapture: This refers to the event described in 1 Thes. 4:14–17, when believers will be “raptured” or “caught up” (Latin: *rapiemur*) in the clouds to meet Christ in the air at His Second Coming. When used by Premillennial-Dispensationalists the term refers to Christ’s secret coming, when all believers and all children who have not reached the age of accountability are suddenly removed from the earth before the seven-year tribulation.



Premillennial-Dispensationalists understand these four terms to be synonymous: Israelite, Hebrew, Jew, and Israeli. In this way, they are able to apply God’s land-promises to the Israelites of the Old Testament to modern-day Jews, and especially with the 1948 state of Israel. But these four terms have different definitions:

Israelite: An Old Testament believer in Yahweh (the Lord), the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Hebrew: Used by Israelites in the Old Testament to identify themselves to non-Israelites.

Jew: This term means either an ethnicity or an adherent to “Judaism,” which is not the Christ-centered faith of the Old Testament.

Israeli: A citizen of the 1948 state of Israel, which is not the same Israel of the Old Testament. Israelis are sometimes called “secular Jews.”

— R.R.L.

For a more comprehensive response to the Premillennial-Dispensational theology that undergirds the “Left Behind” series, read the document from the LCMS Committee on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) titled, *The End Times: A Study on Eschatology and Millennialism* and the 2004 CTCR document titled, *A Lutheran Response to the Left Behind Series*, along with its accompanying Bible study.

the water of Baptism, and the true body and blood of Jesus in Holy Communion.

The assurance of God working in the world is therefore not based on the return of the Jews to their ancestral land, but rather on the sure Word of promise of forgiveness of sins imparted in the means of grace, the Gospel and the Sacraments.

There is no suggestion that Jesus or the apostles believed the Jewish people still have a divine right to the land, or that the Jewish possession of the land would be an important—let alone central—aspect of God’s plan for the world. The land was promised to Abraham, taken possession of under Joshua, lost in the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles, regained by Judah upon Cyrus’ decree in 538 B.C., and reinterpreted by Jesus, Paul, and others as a new heaven and new earth.

The hope of the baptized, therefore, is not placed on current events in the Middle East. Rather, we are called to fix our eyes on Jesus as we long and pray for His Second and Final Advent. On that day, He will raise us from the dead and usher us into the new heavens and the new earth. Then Jesus will lovingly gaze upon all the baptized and say, “I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are always and forevermore mine!” (cf. Is. 43:1).

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