

## Whose Land is it: Jews, Gentile Arabs, or Jesus? (Genesis 15:7-21)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on May 20, 2012

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I've roamed and rambled and I've followed my footsteps  
 To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts  
 And all around me a voice was sounding  
 This land was made for you and me  
*Chorus:* This land is your land, this land is my land ...

Then there's the parody version of that song I learned in junior high school:

This land is my land, it isn't your land  
 I got a shotgun, and you don't got none  
 If you don't get off, I'll blow your head off  
 This land was made for only me

Unfortunately that joke is how some seriously feel when it comes to the land of modern Israel. Muslims jihadists are willing to use deadly force and suicide bombs to literally blow up Jews to make the point: "This land is *my* land, it is *not your* land... This land was made for *only me*." And even less radical adherents to religions on both sides of Israel's fence feel its land is theirs and not the others.

This is an explosive issue. Literally explosions erupt in the land of Israel in public places from Palestinian suicide bombers over this question and its implications, at least in part: whose land is it? That ancient land Arabs also consider holy is a heated issue for those who have hated the Jewish people and their mere existence there and want to annihilate Israel. For some the issue is not really Palestinian statehood, but prejudice and satanic enmity, the kind that has been going on between 2 seeds since Genesis 3:15. The animosity runs the other way too

The roots of the conflict go back 4,000 years to Genesis 15-16 and the land promises to Abraham, how they relate to his 2 seeds, Ishmael and Isaac and their respective descendants geopolitically. Both ends of Muslim-Judaism Arab-Israeli conflict claim Abraham as father of their faith, but until both come to truly know the Lord Abraham knew, the land of the Middle East will not know peace. But when physical children of Abraham become spiritual children of Abraham by putting their faith in the same Messiah he trusted, when Christian Gentile Arabs trust Christ with Christian Jews, they can say scripturally "This land is your land, this land is my land."

Not only is there a sense that both can say that, whether they were descended from Abraham by Isaac or Ishmael, but there's a sense in which Christians in America can also say "this land was made *for you and me*." I hope to explain that a little bit later tonight.

In Leviticus 25:23, the Lord says to Abram's descendants Israel: *'The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me.'*

Who owns the land ultimately? The Lord does. Israel is not the ultimate owner of it, but was a sojourner on it. The Lord allowed them to live in parts of the Promised Land for parts of the OT. But as we study this chapter we need to look beyond Abram and Ariel Sharon or Arab leaders or Americans to Almighty God who has divine right to "My land" but says "this land is your land."

Gen 15:7 *And He said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it.”*<sup>8</sup> *He said, “O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?”*<sup>9</sup> *So He said to him, “Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”*<sup>10</sup> *Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds.*<sup>11</sup> *The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.*<sup>12</sup> *Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him.*<sup>13</sup> *God said to Abram, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.*<sup>14</sup> *“But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions.*<sup>15</sup> *“As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age.*<sup>16</sup> *“Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete.”*<sup>17</sup> *It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces.*<sup>18</sup> ***On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates:***<sup>19</sup> *the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite*<sup>20</sup> *and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim*<sup>21</sup> *and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite.”*

Gen 15 is one of the most important chapters in all the Bible. It is quoted repeatedly in the NT by Paul and James as the defining text on what saving faith looks like for those who believe in the Lord as Abram did and receive the same imputed righteousness (v. 6). It's God's covenant with Abram, but also has to do with Christ and us. One theologian writes: 'it is not an overstatement to declare these verses ... as the most important verses in the Bible.'<sup>1</sup> So let's see:

- this text in its original context, and also in redemptive history
- application to Abraham and his physical descendants (Israel)
- application within the promised line to the Promised Land and promised Man, the Messiah, Abraham's ultimate descendant
- application to spiritual descendants of Abraham (us Christians)

Gen 15 has 3 truths for all in covenant relationship with the Lord:

1. **He protects His covenant people**
2. **He provides for covenant people** (both v. 1-6 last week)
3. **He personally fulfills and keeps His covenant** (v. 7-21)

To review, God protects His covenant people. First v. 1 says God is a *shield* to Abram. The same language is applied to descendants of Abram in Dt 33:29: *“Blessed are you, O Israel; Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD, Who is the shield of your help...”*

Dt 32:10 says God found Israel in the wilderness, *“He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye.”* (NIV)

The language of Gen. 15:13 goes back to before those wilderness wanderings. Gen 15:13: *God said to Abram, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.*<sup>14</sup> *“But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions.*

Just like the birds of prey in v. 11, that Abram fights away, that's a visual object lesson of in the future Promised Land for Abram's descendants. Other nations will want to make the nation of Israel their prey. And the darkness that falls on Abram in v. 12 seems to be tied in the context of the next verse to Israel's experience in Egypt, darkness of judgment on the firstborn descendants of the land of Egypt as God in the Exodus brings Abram's descendants out from what the end of v. 13 describes as 400 years of oppression (other places say Israel was in Egypt 430 years, but I think Jacob and family are there 30 years, then enslaved, oppressed for 400?)

Abram earlier had exited Egypt himself, after a family member is taken into Pharaoh's house (Sarai). His life was in danger but God *shielded* and protected him, brought him out of Egypt despite his sin, rescued him from Egypt with many possessions (12:10ff). The nation will repeat the pattern of father Abraham. His descendants will also go in and out of Egypt, a family member of Israel also taken into Pharaoh's house (Moses), his life also in danger, and all of the male descendants of Abraham with him, but God shields and protects him/them, brings Israel out despite their sin, rescuing from Egypt with many possessions also, to the promised land of 15:18.

1. God protects His covenant people
2. **God provides for His covenant people (Gen 15:6)**

There were some temporal blessings Jewish descendants of Abram enjoyed that God provided them. Rom. 2, Rom. 9 describe some of those even for unbelieving Jews, but eternal blessings were only for spiritual Israel (Rom 9:6). Not mere physical preservation, God provides salvation for all within Israel who trust the same God as Abram, Gen 15:6, who don't trust their own righteousness at all but trust the Lord totally and receive a righteousness that is totally outside them and that they are totally unable to do anything to gain but that is reckoned/credited to their account as a totally free gift. As we saw last week in Rom 4, we're all saved the exact same way

In v. 9-11 the blood of the sacrificial slain animals hints at how the provision of the covenant would later take place. Genesis 22 later pictures this idea further where Abram offers his only begotten son through Sarah (Isaac) on the altar, and the key line of that story is "*The LORD will provide for Himself the sacrifice*" (a substitute!) The Lord would provide a sacrifice and a substitute through His only begotten Son, the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of *the world*, not just people of one nation, people from *all nations*!

1. The Lord protects His covenant people
2. The Lord provides His for covenant people
3. **The Lord personally fulfills and keeps His covenant**

Abram asks in v. 8 how to know he will receive the promised land of v. 7. What's fascinating is He doesn't tell him, He shows Abram using several animals in v. 9 that would later be part of the sacrificial system in the Mosaic covenant are used. In v. 10 Abram brings all of them to God and cuts them in two, '*each half opposite the other.*' Jeremiah 34:18-20 explains that when men would *cut* a covenant (part of the root Heb. idea), both parties walk through the animals cut in half in essence saying "if I break my half of the covenant, if I fail to keep my part of this contract, may I be torn apart like these animals here. If I don't fulfill my side of this agreement, may this bloody fate be mine and may birds devour my carcass, too" (15:11)

But in v. 17 Abram doesn't walk through the pieces. It's only God, in some form of fire who passes through the pieces. Abram sees it but is passive. This is unilateral or 1-sided. God alone covenants and commits to it, it's not dependent on Abram, but on God alone. The human sign and side will later be circumcision for males in the covenant community, but the actual cutting of the covenant is done by the Lord who will personally fulfill and keep this covenant, no matter how many circumcised Israelites forfeit blessing by their sin, God will one day fulfill this.

God promises the land in v. 7 and in v. 8, Abram wants to know how he can be sure of what God promised, and God doesn't just tell Abram, he shows him graphically and visually, basically "it'll be over my dead body before this covenant fails." God will sooner be torn apart into pieces and eaten by birds than break this promise.

O. Palmer Robertson explains: "These actions established an oath of self-malediction ... [i.e., "may my own body"] be torn in pieces just as the animals had been divided ceremonially. Extra-biblical parallels have confirmed the significance of this self-maledictory action involved in the covenant-making ceremony ... a "bond in blood" is established ... In the case of the Abrahamic covenant, God the Creator binds himself to man the creature by a solemn blood-oath. The Almighty chooses to commit himself to the fulfillment of promises spoken to Abraham. By this divine commitment, Abraham's doubts are to be expelled. God has solemnly promised, and has sealed that promise with a self-maledictory oath. The realization of the divine word is assured."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates..."*

Before we ask "whose land is it" we should ask "what land is it?" The modern dispute over the land of Israel isn't the promised land – that little strip of Palestine is like the entry way to a bigger house. Canaan was only a fraction of what was promised from the Euphrates river to the river of Egypt (Nile or Wadi El Arish?) and down to Red Sea (Exodus 23:31). The Promised Land includes parts of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, etc. During the conquest under Joshua a portion of the land West of the Jordan was possessed by Israel, and more (but not all) of the Canaan portion of the Promised Land was controlled at the height of its power under Solomon. Other lands paid tribute but were not the possession of Israel then, only temporary tributaries briefly (certainly not the "everlasting possession" of Genesis 17:9). Even in Canaan in Solomon's day, Israel didn't possess all the promised land (ex: Gaza still possessed by Philistines, and other promised land to the coast not Israel's in their greatest kingdom expansion under king Solomon. "One greater than Solomon" was needed (Matt 12:42) to fulfill the promise

Jesus was needed for physical descendants of Abraham to become spiritual descendants of Abraham and full heirs of all the promises. Jesus came and fulfilled many prophecies literally, and Jesus will come again and fulfill more prophecies just as literally, like here. I stand in the Reformed Puritan tradition with those who see a future for Israel in the land and a mass conversion of them to the Messiah.

Jonathan Edwards, America's greatest theologian, wrote on Gen 15: '... it is the more evident, that the Jews will return to their own land again, because they never have yet possessed one quarter of that land, which was so often promised them ... to the river Euphrates (Gen. 15:18...)

Indeed, it was partly fulfilled in Solomon's time ... for a short time; but ... that was not a fulfillment of the promise, because they did not possess it...they made the nations of it tributary ... Without doubt, they will return to their own land; because when their unbelief ceases, their dispersion, the dreadful and signal punishment of their unbelief, will cease too ... after their conversion will they still be a distinct nation ...yet, we are not to imagine that the old walls of separation will be set up again.<sup>3</sup>

Edwards wasn't dispensational or premillennial, but was seeking to be biblical and consistent with the text, not one strand of tradition. Unless God has been torn in pieces and eaten by birds, the land promise of the covenant God cuts in Genesis 15 must be fulfilled.

Some theologians would say this is only a type and it's carnal for us to think God will literally fulfill what He promised here, we're to see this not as Israel, but as the church spiritually or as heaven. Another Reformed tradition represented by O. Palmer Robertson says 'these prophecies are more properly interpreted as finding consummate fulfillment at the "restoration of all things" that will accompany the resurrection of believers at the return of Christ'<sup>4</sup>

It seems to me Edwards is right in saying there will be a national conversion of Israel in the land before the end. And I think theologians are right who say that resurrected believers at the return of Christ *will join them*. And I think premillennial theologians are right: Jesus will return and reign on the earth over a greater kingdom than Solomon, commencing a new earth forever. I think that's the best way to see the fulfillment of Gen 15 and 13:14 which promises all the land they can see *forever* (not just some of it briefly).

How the final earth, New Jerusalem works out I'll leave to smarter men. I think amillennial writers like Hoekema are right at least in seeing land promises as fulfilled beyond Christ's return.<sup>5</sup> It may not be either/or, but both/and. We may not all agree how things play out after Christ returns, but I'm thankful that a growing consensus from a variety of millennial views are moving away from dismissing OT promises as mere typology or allegory or spiritualizing the promises to Abraham away from earth to heaven or to the church only, with nothing left for Israel. Other amillennial writers like Vern Poythress, Sam Storms, and others have taken the promises seriously, not just spiritually but to be literally fulfilled.

Poythress, for example writes to his own camp: 'amillennialists should find no problem in affirming that all faithful Jews will join with Abraham in inheriting the land of promise ... Amillennialism should not be understood as disinheriting Jews ... The question is not whether Jews will come into possession of the wealth of privileges of OT promises (they will) [but he adds so will we] ...'<sup>6</sup>

Sam Storms writes in the same tradition: 'the promised inheritance was neither forfeited nor fulfilled [so] what options are left? ... figurative or "heavenly/spiritual" fulfillment [he writes are] an impoverishment of the OT covenant promise ... The land promise will yet be fulfilled, literally, earthly; but the question is "When"? ... The promise of God's earthly rule over His people has not changed, nor have believing Israelites been disinherited or displaced by the Church...[but he adds believing Gentiles *join in*]'<sup>7</sup>

I can say Amen to that and I don't have to run to the NT to argue that. It is in the very first books of the Bible. In Genesis 15:19-21, we see nations who are part of the promise of Genesis 12:3 "in Abram all nations of the earth will be blessed." The very nations at the end of Gen. 15 will have some part of covenant blessings with Abram's physical descendants, including spiritual blessings. These people groups were not all to be annihilated but could be assimilated with Israel, and God's covenant grace does so in the Bible's first books.

Verse 19 mentions first "Kenites." Kenites according to Judges 1:16 became part of the family of faith by Moses' marriage. And other Kenites were married into the family of faith. Judges 5:24 celebrates "*Most blessed of women is Jael, The wife of Heber the **Kenite**; Most blessed is she of women ...*" (The song of Deborah)

Next people in v. 19 is the "Kenizzites." Remember Joshua and Caleb, faithful men when Israel first entered the land? Joshua 14:14 says the land of "*Hebron became the inheritance of Caleb the son of Jephunneh the **Kenizzite** until this day, because he followed the LORD God of Israel fully.*" Caleb is from a Kenizzite Gentile home, yet he follows the Lord and inherits promised land

"Kadmonites" in v. 19 aren't mentioned elsewhere by that name, but the term literally is rendered "men of the east," and we read in the same timeframe as Abraham of the greatest of the men of the east who is a true believer in the same God of Abraham, Job 1:3.

Next are "Hittites" in v. 20. Do we know any Hittites who were part of the family of the faithful later in Israel's history? Uriah. When it mentions "Canaanites" in v. 21, can we think of any who later enter the family of faith and the Promised Land with Israel? Rahab.

The "Jebusites" were in Salem, home of Melchizedek the believer. Even the very nations God would later conquer for their sin, are recipients of God's grace first, and become part of His covenant community. From the beginning of the Bible, God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants was never limited to biological descendants. Scholars debate if Ezekiel 47 is the millennium or final new earth, but what is clear is the land then is not only an inheritance of ethnic Israel.

47:21 "*So you shall divide this land among yourselves according to the tribes of Israel.*"<sup>22</sup> "*You shall divide it by lot for an inheritance among yourselves **and among the aliens who stay in your midst, ... they shall be to you as the native-born among the sons of Israel; they shall be allotted an inheritance with you among the tribes of Israel.***"<sup>23</sup> "*And in the tribe with which the alien stays, there you shall give him his inheritance,*" declares the Lord ...

Ezekiel 47 also describes the full borders of the Promised Land finally from Genesis 15:18, down to the Arabah in the East and the river of Egypt in the West and up the coast of the Mediterranean. And the language of trees bearing fruit every month and never withering sounds like the final kingdom at the end of Revelation (whether chapter 20 or 21-22 we can debate) but what seems undebatably clear is that believing Gentiles will be heirs with Israel and will be treated equally like native-born descendants of Abram and will inherit the land together!

Paul must know his OT. He says in Eph 3:6 *through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus* (NIV)

In Galatians 3:9 Paul writes of Gentile Christians: *So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.*

...<sup>14</sup> *in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise ...*

...<sup>28</sup> *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*<sup>29</sup> *And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.*

Even though we're not natural-born sons or descendants, we can be adopted and therefore have the inheritance of natural-born sons. That's exactly what the end of Galatians 4: 5 says Christ did for us "... so that we might receive the adoption as sons" (and in Bible times, the adopted son received the full inheritance, the same as a biological son of Abraham, we are *heirs according to the promise*). And end of v. 7 says "*and if a son, then an heir through God.*"

Turn to Romans 8. We looked last week at Romans 4, which says in v. 16: "... *the promise will be guaranteed to all...who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,*<sup>17</sup> *as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU" ...*

Rom 8:15b says we are adopted as sons, and v. 17 says if adopted sons, we're heirs, not just with Abram, "*fellow heirs with Christ*"

...<sup>32</sup> ... *how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?*

Who owns the land? Jews? Gentile Arabs? Jesus? The answer is yes. Not every Jewish descendant of Abram, though, can claim a divine right to the land in unbelief, because the land wasn't even in Bible times continually theirs when they were continually in sin. It will belong to Abram's descendants someday, but not by asserting it is theirs. And keep in mind Abram's descendants include Gentile Arabs who believe in Jesus as well as Jews who believe in Jesus.

And keep in mind, ultimately Jesus owns the land. The Lord in the OT repeatedly calls the land "My land" but the Lord says to Jews who have the faith of Abram, "This land is your land." And there's a sense in which any Gentile Arab or American or African or Asian or even Australian who has the same faith as Abram, can also say in the kingdom to come "this land is my land." The final kingdom will be given from the Father to the Son, but the amazing truth here is that not only are believers co-heirs with Abraham, we are co-heirs with Jesus. We're not only sons of Abraham, we are sons with the One who said *before Abraham was born, "I Am"*! And this Jesus can say to us "This land was made for you and me." He says to us: *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth ...theirs is the kingdom ... they shall be called sons of God* (Mt. 5)

And as sons of God we are heirs, Romans says, and God will give us freely with His Son all things. And the greatest part of the new earth and the New Jerusalem, is not the land, it's the Lord who is there forever with us. Romans 8:17 says we are "*heirs of God...*"

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<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1998), 513.

<sup>2</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, p. 130-31.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Works, Apocalyptic Writings*, Vol. 8, pp. 133-35.

<sup>4</sup> O. Palmer Robertson. *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2000), 194.

<sup>5</sup> Hoekema writes of land promises to Israel: 'I believe, however, that prophecies of this sort refer neither primarily to the church of this age nor to heaven ... All too often, unfortunately, amillennial exegetes fail to keep biblical teaching on the new earth in mind when interpreting Old Testament prophecy. It is an impoverishment of the meaning of these passages to make them apply only to the church or to heaven ... They must be understood as inspired descriptions of the glorious new earth God is preparing for his people' (*The Bible and The Future*, p. 205-206).

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.frame-poythress.org/poythress\\_articles/2000Currents.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/poythress_articles/2000Currents.htm)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/article/the-kingdom-of-god-already-but-not-yet-part-i/>