

Part 15: The Abrahamic Covenant and Premillennialism

by John F. Walvoord

The Abrahamic Covenant promises the possession of the land to Abraham's seed forever, and this promise is unconditional and emphasizes God's intention to give the land to Abraham and his seed forever.

Scripture: Genesis 12:1, Genesis 13:15, Isaiah 11:11, Jeremiah 16:14, Amos 9:15

Topics: "Abrahamic Covenant", "Premillennialism"

Description

John F. Walvoord preaches on the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant's promise of possession of the land to Israel. The covenant is seen as unconditional, ensuring Israel's future possession of the land, particularly in the millennial kingdom period. The promise of the land is emphasized as gracious, an inheritance of the seed, with a title given forever, to be possessed forever, and includes specific territory defined by boundaries, making it clear of its literal fulfillment. The Scriptural testimony points to Israel's final regathering from the nations of the world and reassembly in Palestine, ensuring their possession of all the land promised to Abraham's seed.

Transcript

Will Israel Possess the Promised Land?

One of the important provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant is the promise of possession of the land. From Abraham's point of view, this was undoubtedly one of its main features. In the original promise, he was told, "Get thee out...unto a land that I will shew thee" (Gen 12:1). This anticipation of possessing the land is given more content in Genesis 13:15, where Abraham is promised, "For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever." This promise of the land is subsequently enlarged and given specific boundaries, and the land is promised as an everlasting possession.

All interpreters of the Abrahamic Covenant are faced with the question of the interpretation and fulfillment of these promises. In general, amillenarians tend either to make these promises conditional, and therefore not requiring fulfillment, or to spiritualize them and point to past possessions of the land as fulfilling the promise. Premillenarians consider the promises as given unconditionally as far as ultimate fulfillment is concerned and therefore hold that Israel has a bona fide ground for future possession of the land, particularly in the millennial kingdom period. For practical purposes the problem resolves into the question of whether Israel will ever possess all the promised land.

It has been previously shown that the Abrahamic Covenant is basically unconditional, though the present enjoyment of it by an individual or a nation may have certain conditions. It has also been shown that Israel shall continue as a nation forever. If these two conclusions be sustained, it follows that Israel as such will possess the land. It also is true that all the evidence pointing to ultimate possession of the land confirms and supports the idea that the covenant is unconditional and that Israel will continue as a nation forever.

The character of the promise of the land. The promise of possession of the land by the seed of Abraham is a prominent feature of the covenant, and the way the promise is given enhances its significance. The promise as given emphasizes that (1) it is gracious in its principle; (2) the land is an inheritance of the seed; (3) its title is given forever; (4) the land is to be possessed forever; (5) the land promised includes specific territory defined by boundaries. It is difficult to imagine how God could have made it clearer that the covenant was sure of its literal fulfillment.

The promise is gracious in its principle. Unlike the Mosaic Covenant, which conditions the promises of blessing upon obedience, the Abrahamic Covenant simply pronounces God's intention to give the land to Abraham and his seed forever. Its character as an inheritance of the seed is repeated in the subsequent enlargement of the promise and is linked to the physical lineage. The emphasis upon its unending application as seen in the words "for ever" (Gen 13:15), "everlasting covenant" (Gen 17:7), and "everlasting possession" (Gen 17:8) carries with it the necessity of complete and unconditional fulfillment. The extent of the possession of the land as defined in Genesis 15:18-21, including the great area from the river of Egypt to the river Euphrates, can hardly be spiritualized without abandoning any pretense of sensible exegesis. If this covenant means what it appears to mean, the only proper interpretation is that given by the premillenarians.

The dispersions of Israel. Like the Abrahamic Covenant as a whole, the promise of the land is never conditioned upon human obedience. As has been shown, the pronouncements are unequivocal in character. God is revealing what He will fulfill. All agree, however, that prior to the ultimate fulfillment of the promise, possession and enjoyment of the land by any generation of Israelites is conditioned upon certain requirements. These are set forth in both the Mosaic Covenant and the Palestinian Covenant (cf. Deut 28:1-30:10). Israel is promised rich blessings in the land for obedience, but is promised curses for disobedience. Among the curses are plagues and disasters if they are in the land, and dispersion to various places out of the land. As early as Genesis 15:13, the dispersions of Israel are anticipated.

In general, three dispersions of Israel are prophesied in the Scripture. The first of these was the sojourn in Egypt when Jacob and his family followed Joseph in leaving the land of promise. This is foretold in Genesis 15:13, and it is promised that they would return to the land with great substance (Gen 15:14-16). The second dispersion was that of the captivities of Assyria and Babylon, when first the ten tribes and then the remaining tribes were in large measure removed from the promised land because of sin. This dispersion is a large theme of both the major and minor prophets and was prophesied by Moses (Deut 28:62-65; 30:1-3 ; Jer 25:11). There are frequent promises of restoration from this dispersion (Dan 9:2; Jer 29:10-14). Historically Israel returned to the land under Zerubbabel and Ezra. The final dispersion took place in 70 A.D. at the destruction of Jerusalem, and Israel only in recent years has taken any important steps to return to the land.

One of the phenomena of the modern world is the creation of the state of Israel and the large movement of Jews from all over the world back to their ancient land. As the three dispersions are history along with the two historic returns, the theological question hangs on the issue of whether Israel is to be regathered for

the third time and brought back to possess the land of promise. History has shown that the previous returns of Israel, while involving human contingencies, nevertheless were carried out on schedule according to the prophetic Word. The return from Egypt, while not without chronological difficulties, can be reconciled to the prophetic pattern laid out in Genesis. The return of Israel from the second dispersion is clearly linked with the chronology of the seventy weeks of the captivity, and difficulties are merely with the details and questions of actual dates. The third dispersion is nowhere dated in the Word of God but like the previous returns is certain as to its ultimate fulfillment.

From a study of the dispersions of Israel and the two regatherings which have already been fulfilled it can be seen that as a general principle divine certainty is given both the dispersions and the regatherings. Premillenarians do not deny that there are human contingencies involved. Obviously the dispersions themselves depended upon Israel's disobedience and the dispersions were a form of judgment from God. In this sense they were conditional but nevertheless certain. The regatherings are also hinged upon Israel turning back to God in a measure. It is inherent in the pronouncements of Moses that the return to the land would follow a return to God (cf. Deut 30:1-5). The point is that not only the dispersions were predicted definitely before human failure appeared, but the regatherings of Israel were clearly predicted before Israel returned to God spiritually. In other words, the human contingencies are fully recognized, but the certainty of the prophetic plan is nevertheless affirmed. It is in this sense that the promise of ultimate fulfillment is unconditional. The doctrine of the third regathering of Israel and their possession of the land depends, then, on the question whether the promises of regathering and possession of the land are already fulfilled by Israel's history or whether the Scriptures require a future fulfillment--a third regathering followed by possession of the land.

Have historic possessions of the land fulfilled the Scriptures? The amillenarian position on Israel's possession of the land is that the promise has already been fulfilled. George L. Murray[1] George L. Murray, *Millennial Studies* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1948), p. 27. cites 1 Kings 4:21, 24 as evidence that the promise was fulfilled in Solomon's day, "And Solomon reigned over all kingdoms from the river unto the land of the Philistines, and unto the border of Egypt: they brought presents, and served Solomon all the days of his life.... For he had dominion over all the region on this side of the river; and he had peace on all sides round about him." Murray[2] Ibid., p. 28. further cites Joshua 21:43, 45 to the same point, and concludes with a reference to Nehemiah 9:7-8 which to him is conclusive. He states, "Whatever political movements we may witness now or in the future by way of a restoration of Hebrew economy in the land of Palestine, these will not come by way of fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham of possession of the land, for we have conclusive evidence that these promises have been fulfilled." [3] Ibid., pp. 29-30. Oswald Allis, takes essentially the same position quoting only the Solomon reference. [4] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 58.

The amillenarian position is often distinguished for its blindness to facts which would upset its own position. The present instance is a good illustration. If the promises regarding the land were fulfilled in Joshua's time or in Solomon's, why do the Scriptures which were written later still appeal to the hope of future possession of the land? Practically every one of the major and minor prophets mention in some form the hope of future possession of the land. All of them were written after Solomon's day. This is an obvious rebuttal to the amillennial position and points to the amillennial failure to face the real issues of the millennial debate with a view to all the evidence.

The case of Nehemiah is an illustration of faulty logic. In the confession of the priests, tribute is given to God as one who had been faithful in giving to Israel the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites,

Perizzites, Jebusites, and the Gergashites. On the basis of the statement, "and hast performed thy words; for thou art righteous," Murray contends that the Abrahamic promise has been completely fulfilled.

A careful reading of all these related passages of Scripture will show that they do not prove what is claimed of them. The original promises of the land involved (1) possession of the land, (2) permanent possession, (3) and occupying the land. Even in Solomon's day at the height of his kingdom the land was not all possessed. At best it was placed under tribute as the very passage cited by the amillenarians indicates (1 Kings 4:21). It is most significant that Murray in his quotation of this Scripture omits the part of the verse referring to this tribute--presents and service which show there was no real possession of the land. Certainly all must agree that possession was not permanent. Further at no time was all the land actually occupied by Israel.

The priests in the Nehemiah reference do not claim complete fulfillment. They merely state that God had given the land to them--i.e., had done His part. The past occupancy of the land was a partial fulfillment but not a complete fulfillment of the promise. Certainly in the light of the Nehemiah context, it is reaching an unwarranted conclusion to press the words of Nehemiah, "and hast performed thy words; for thou art righteous," to mean that all the promises had already been fulfilled relating to the land of Palestine. It refers rather to the general faithfulness of God revealed in the following context (Neh 9:9-38) to include not only acts of mercy but all the righteous judgments of God for the sins of Israel. To follow Murray in his interpretation of Nehemiah would involve the spiritualization of all the prophecies about the land subsequent to Solomon as well as those before Solomon. The real issue remains whether the Scriptures after Solomon continue to anticipate a future and glorious regathering of Israel and occupancy of the promised land.

The Scriptural testimony concerning Israel's final regathering. The abundant testimony of Scripture on the subject of Israel's regathering provides material for a book on this subject alone. It is the dominant strain of both the major and minor prophets. Isaiah after dealing with the character of the kingdom reign of Christ on earth (Isa 11:1-11), goes on, "And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord will set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people, that shall remain, from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea" (Isa 11:11-12). The same theme is repeated in other words in many other passages in Isaiah (14:1-3 ; 27:12-13 ; 43:1-8 ; 49:8-16 ; 66:20-22). The promise of regathering is not only reiterated again and again but it is linked to the continuance of Israel as a nation forever: "For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, saith Jehovah, so shall your seed and your name remain" (Isa 66:20).

The prophet Jeremiah, living in the days of Israel's apostasy, writes graphically, "Therefore, behold, the days come, saith Jehovah, that it shall no more be said, As Jehovah liveth, that brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; but, As Jehovah liveth, that brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north, and from all the countries whither he had driven them. And I will bring them again into their land that I gave unto their fathers. Behold, I will send for many fishers, saith Jehovah, and they shall fish them up; and afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain, and from every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks" (Jer 16:14-16). This certainly has had no fulfillment to the present hour, but it foreshadows the complete regathering in connection with the millennial kingdom. The theme of regathering is reiterated in connection with the coming of the righteous branch of David to reign over the earth (Jer 23:3-8).

Again in Jeremiah 30:10-11, the prophet speaks: "Therefore fear thou not, O Jacob my servant, saith Jehovah; neither be dismayed, O Israel: for, lo, I will save thee from afar, and thy seed from the land of their captivity; and Jacob shall return, and shall be quiet and at ease, and none shall make him afraid. For I am with thee, saith Jehovah, to save thee...." Most of the thirty-first chapter of Jeremiah is devoted to this theme. Jehovah declares, "Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the uttermost parts of the earth" (Jer 31:8). The theme of regathering is linked in this chapter with the new covenant with the house of Israel (Jer 31:31-34) and the solemn pledge that Israel shall continue as a nation as long as the sun, moon, and stars (Jer 31:35-37).

The prophet Ezekiel adds his testimony (11:17-21 ; 20:33-38 ; 34:11-16 ; 39:25-29). Included in his testimony is the purging judgment of Israel which follows their regathering (20:33-38) and the pledge that God will leave not a single Israelite in the lands of the Gentiles after the regathering (Ezek 39:28). There has never been any fulfillment of these prophecies in the regatherings after the captivities when most of the Israelites were left behind. If these Scriptures are to have any reasonable fulfillment it demands a future regathering of Israel and the fulfillment of all the related promises.

The testimony of the Minor Prophets to the regathering of Israel is often repeated. It is sustained by many references which imply the regathering, such as the pictures of Israel in the land, or sometimes general promises of restoration. A study of these passages will fully sustain the doctrine of Israel's regathering (Hos 1:10-11; Joel 3:17-21; Amos 9:11-15; Micah 4:4-7; Zeph 3:14-20; Zech 8:4-8). Of note is the promise of Amos, "And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be plucked up out of their land which I have given them, saith Jehovah thy God" (Amos 9:15). The regathering and possession of the land here prophesied is the final regathering attended by the promise that Israel will no more be dispersed. This could apply only to a future regathering as the past regatherings all ended in further dispersion.

The united testimony of the prophets is all to the same point, that Israel will yet be regathered from the nations, of the world and reassembled in Palestine. The beginnings of this final regathering are already apparent in contemporary history with over one million Jews, or approximately one in ten of all the Jewish population of the world, now living in Palestine. Scriptures make clear that the regathering will continue until consummated after the second advent of Christ. The promises of regathering linked as they are in Scripture to the original promise of the land as an everlasting possession of Israel, coupled with the fact that no possession of the land in history has approached a complete fulfillment of these Scriptural promises, make it clear that Israel has a future, and in that future will actually possess all the land promised Abraham's seed as long as this present earth continues.

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"The future condition of the Jews is a subject which has received from various sources no small attention. The subject is worthy of attention. It is worthy of attention for its own sake. Every branch of truth and every department of the divine operations has in it something to repay investigation. The connection of this subject with other themes imparts to it a still higher interest. The right understanding of it will lead to some views of essential importance in regard to the general character of the religion of the Bible, besides which some lessons of practical duty will grow out of it. The Jews have been a people greatly distinguished. Their origin was remarkable--Abraham, the father of the faithful and the friend of God. For two thousand years they constituted God's visible congregation, while all the other peoples of the world were left without

the impressive merciful visitations with which they were favored. Through this dark period they were the depositories of the oracles and the ordinances of the true religion, for the world's benefit in subsequent time. And through them came at length the world's Deliverer, 'the light and life of men.' To these things the Apostle alludes...(Rom 3:1-2; 9:4-5). The past in respect to them is full of wonders" (Bibliotheca Sacra, May, 1847).

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