



Bible & Life

Bible Teaching Newsletter

BIBLICAL DOCTRINE & NEW TESTAMENT ASSEMBLY LIFE

Vol. 22, No. 2

March 1, 2015

Who Owns the Land?

*An Examination of "Israel, Palestine, and the Middle East"¹ by John Piper
by David Dunlap*

In 2004, Dr. John Piper preached a sermon at Bethlehem Baptist Church, in Minneapolis, MN, entitled "Israel, Palestine, and the Middle East." This message unfairly argued that the Jewish people and nation of Israel do not have a right to the land of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This sermon, now in print form has been a standard apologetic for Replacement Theology advocates for the past ten years. It has made its way onto the internet and has been used by many anti-Semitic and anti-Israel websites to argue that the Jewish people do not have a biblical right to the land of Israel. The purpose of this article is to rebut some of the viewpoints of Piper's article.

The Background of John Piper

John Piper was born in 1946 in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He has received degrees from Wheaton College (1964-1968) in philosophy and literature and a bachelor of divinity at Fuller Seminary(1970). He studied at the University of Munich (1971-1974) and received a doctorate degree in New Testament Studies. He was the pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church for 33 years, retiring in 2013 to pursue writing and a speaking ministry. He is the author of many books and a popular speaker. Although a Baptist (only in ecclesiology), he is a strong Calvinist and a Reformed theologian. He holds to a continuation view, in which the spiritual sign-gifts, visions, and prophecy are all to be sought and practiced today. He holds to "double predestination", the view that God elects some to salvation and others He elects to damnation(reprobation). Although he teaches that the church will go through the tribulation, he calls himself a "optimistic pre-millennialist." As to Israel, he holds to a super-sessionist view (replacement theology view), teaching that the church replaces Israel and that national/ethnic Israel will not inherit the land promises of the Old Testament.

Israel: The Land and the People

What does the Bible say about Israel? It clearly teaches that God chose Israel from all the peoples of the world to be His own possession. We read, "The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His treasured possession, out of all the people who are on the face of the earth" (Deut. 7:6). Concerning the land of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in a portion of which the nation of Israel resides today, we read, "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great Euphrates..."(Gen. 15:18). Then in Genesis 17:7-8, we read, "I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an *everlasting* covenant, to be God to

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you and to your offspring after you. I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojourning, all the land of Canaan, for an *everlasting* possession, and I will be their God.”

These passages establish a number of very important truths. First of all, the national and ethnic Jewish people are God’s own possession. He loves Israel, He will protect them, and sovereignly, he has given to them certain promises. Secondly, these promises are “everlasting” promises to Abraham and his offspring. “Everlasting” means forever. Without question, God is faithful and will keep His promises. Concerning these truths, John Piper writes:

“This of course, creates a huge cleavage between the Islamic view of God’s covenant and the Jewish and Christian view of this covenant. But we believe that this is God’s Word, confirmed by the Lord Jesus, and so we say, the land is destined to be Israel’s land.”

It would seem that Piper stands firmly with Israel, but very quickly he backs away from the view he just supported, saying, *“but it’s not that simple. This is not an issue that can be dealt with in soundbites.”*

Who Owns the Land of Israel?

The question many ask is, “Who owns the land of Israel?” Israel or the Palestinian people? The correct answer to this question is neither. God owns the land and Israel has been given this land in a tenant relationship. We read many times in Scripture that the land is God’s land. Just a few references should suffice: Joel 3:2, Jer. 2:7. We read in Leviticus 25:23, “...The land shall not be sold forever, for the land is *My* land.” God has given the land to Abraham and his descendants, and He has never rescinded that offer. However, there were conditions and stipulations which Israel was to obey to dwell in the land. At times, Israel did not obey these conditions, and God providentially used Assyria, Babylon, and later Rome to remove her from the land. Nevertheless, the land promises were never revoked, altered, or given to another nation.

John Piper teaches that Israel is still a disobedient nation and, therefore, has no right to the land they now occupy. He believes Israel has illegally taken the land through middle eastern wars and have no biblical right to the land. He writes:

Throughout the history of Israel, covenant breaking and disobedience and idolatry disqualified Israel from the present divine right to the land...The promises made to Abraham, including the promise of land, will be inherited as an everlasting gift only by true, spiritual Israel, not disobedient, unbelieving Israel.

Let us examine this claim by John Piper against the nation of Israel. Has disobedience disqualified Israel from God’s land promises? Yes, it is true that on three occasions Israel fell into disobedience and idolatry and was removed from the land. But Israel was also brought back into the land. Israel returned to the land under Zerubbabel (538 BC), Ezra(439BC), and Nehemiah(445BC).

The question we would like to examine is: Why did God bring them back? Was the *whole nation* faithful and believing when they were brought back? Was half of the nation faithful and believing? The answer is, of course, NO. They were in captivity and only a small remnant (minority) was faithful. Very few truly trusted and believed in God. Under Zerubbabel 49,690 Jews returned; under Ezra even a smaller amount, 1,750 Jews; under Nehemiah no number is mentioned in Scripture. Only a very small number of Jews turned back to God, yet God, being faithful to His promise, providentially brought

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them back into the land. Though few believed, the fact is, Israel did believe! When He brought them back, this land was fully and completely their land.

In the early days of Nehemiah's return to the land, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem began to mock Nehemiah when they heard that the Jews were rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah charged them, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, *you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it*" (Neh. 2:20 NIV). The land was Israel's land due to the faithfulness of God.

The Nation of Israel Today- Disobedient or Believing?

Is John Piper's rejection of Israel based on his own standard of obedience for Israel or the biblical standard? Consider the giving of the land to Israel under Joshua after forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Was the whole nation obedient? Hardly. Not even the twelve spies who went in to scope out the land were faithful. Notwithstanding, God gave Joshua the land of Canaan as Israel's inheritance. God has His own standard of faithfulness. We should be very careful about imposing our standard of obedience, our opinions of what God should and should not do, and our judgments concerning when disobedience breaks His covenant.

We raise the question: Is Israel faithful and believing today? Let us compare her to the days of Joshua, Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. According to sources, there are 125-150 Messianic congregations in Israel today. Granted, not all believers in Messianic congregations are Jewish; however, it is estimated that there are 10,000-12,000 Messianic Jews in Israel today. Matthew Wagner, writing in the *Jerusalem Post*, states that there are 12,000 Messianic Jews living in Israel and 250,000 living in the United States.² More conservative estimates put the number Jewish believers at 100,000-125,000 world-wide. The organization "Jews for Jesus" estimates that 8,000 Jews come to Christ world-wide every year.³ Admittedly, it is a difficult task to measure the number of Jewish believers in a city, country, and the world. Yet, it is widely conceded that in the last fifty years more Jews have come to Christ than at any other time in human history.

If this is true, comparing the modern-day faith of Jewish people with the faith of Jews during the days of Joshua, Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, the Jews today are far more faithful and believing. Undoubtedly, God is working in Israel today. God has brought back His people to the land of Israel as a foretaste of even greater promises. On May 14, 1948, Israel was declared a nation. No Muslim nation acknowledges the statehood of Israel. We admit Jewish evangelism is very difficult, and the percentage of Jewish believers world-wide is very small. Yet, compared to past generations, Jewish people are placing faith in the Messiah at an unprecedented rate. We would humbly reply to John Piper that God has not cast off His people;(Rom. 11:1) on the contrary, His plan for the Jewish people will finally and completely come to pass. We reject categorically the idea that the church has replaced Israel.

The Kindness of Israel in the Midst of Hostility

John Piper suggests that the nation of Israel is unmerciful and cruel to the Palestinian people. He calls on the leaders of Israel to submit to international pressure to be a kinder and gentler nation. He writes:

Therefore, the secular state of Israel today may not claim a present divine right to the Land, but they and we should seek a peaceful settlement not based on present divine rights, but on international principles of justice, mercy, and practical feasibility.

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3116 Gulfwind Dr., Land O' Lakes, FL 34639

March 2015

INFORMATION

Bible and Life is published periodically and sent out free of charge, supported entirely by the free will offerings of the Lord's people. Checks should be made out to "Bible and Life Ministries, Inc."

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Israel has made land concession after land concession. It has conceded to international pressure and has given land for peace. Israel has given back the West Bank in 1967, the Sinai Peninsula in 1979 (Egypt), the Golan Heights in 1981 (Internationally controlled), and the Gaza Strip in 1994, and yet there is no peace. In 2014, the terrorist organization Hamas blanketed Israel with 7,800 rockets. What did Israel do? She defended herself. But she did more, Israel showed mercy and kindness to her attackers.

Well over a million tons of humanitarian aid and supplies entered into Gaza from Israel in 2014, equal to nearly a ton of aid for every man, woman, and child in Gaza. The Hadassah Medical Organization in Jerusalem donates each year \$3 million in aid to treat Palestinians in Israel. According to the UN report of May 2010, 120 megawatts (over 70%) of Gaza's electricity come from the Israeli grid. A new CAT-scan machine was recently shipped to Gaza. In the midst of the Hamas-Israeli war, on August 3, 2014, 185 trucks carrying 3,270 tons of goods and supplies entered Gaza via Kerem Shalom Crossing. Among the trucks that entered were:

- 100 trucks carrying 2,129 tons of food.
- 4 trucks carrying 13 tons of medicine and medical supplies.
- 67 trucks carrying 627 tons of humanitarian supplies⁴

Conclusion

We suggest that the reasoning of John Piper in his paper "Israel, Palestine, and the Middle East" is biased, unbiblical, and ill-reasoned. It may be that he is blinded by his post-millennial and reformed views, which harbor an anti-Israel attitude. It may be simply a misplaced sympathy for the Muslim people. Whatever the case, we stand with Israel, with the unfailing promises of God, and in His love for His chosen people.

Endnotes

1. John Piper, www.desiringgod.org/sermons/israel-palestine-and-the-middle-east, March 7, 2004.
2. Wagner, Matthew (June 26, 2006). "Messianic Jews to protest 'discrimination'". [Jerusalem Post](#).
3. Tovia Singer, www.outreachjudaism.org/evangelizing-the-jews/
4. www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/Peace/Humanitarian/Pages/Israeli-humanitarian-aid-continues-10-Jul-2014.aspx