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## **THE LAND-PROMISE TO ABRAHAM**

Abraham had not been long in the Land of Canaan before God appeared to him. God appeared to Abraham at the great tree of Moreh near Shechem, and announced,

“To your offspring  
I will give this land.”

Genesis 12:7 NIV

God had already promised Abraham that He would make a great nation out of him, but this is the first time that we find in the Bible that the Land of Canaan was specifically promised to him. At a later date, after Lot had parted, God said to Abraham,

“Lift up your eyes from where you are  
and look north and south, east and west.  
All the land that you see  
I will give to you and your offspring forever.”

Genesis 13:14-15 NIV

Then God instructed Abraham,

“Go, walk through the length  
and breadth of the land,  
for I am giving it to you.”

Genesis 13:17 NIV

Still later, God spoke more specifically as to why He had brought Abraham out of Mesopotamia and into the Land of Canaan. God said,

“I am the LORD,

who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans  
to give you this land to take possession of it.”  
Genesis 15:7 NIV

So we see that God had brought Abraham into the Land of Canaan so that his descendants could possess it.

### THE EXTENT OF THE LAND THAT GOD PROMISED

Although Abraham was, no doubt, deeply moved by God's promise, he was still uncertain about the future. His uncertainty is understandable, for he was, after all, only a wandering Bedouin, living in tents and wandering among walled and fortified cities. So Abraham said to God, “O Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?” (Genesis 15:8) In response to Abraham's question, God told him to prepare certain animals to sacrifice, and Abraham prepared them.

As dusk fell, Abraham went into a deep sleep, and God gave him an overview in a dream of what would happen to his descendants in the future. Following that, a smoking firepot and a blazing torch appeared among the pieces of the sacrifice, and God made a covenant with Abraham. God said,

“To your descendants I give this land,  
from the river of Egypt  
to the great river, the Euphrates--”  
Genesis 15:18 NIV

It became widely known among the inhabitants of the Land of Canaan that Abraham had found favor in God's sight and that God had made great promises to him (Genesis 21:22-24).

## THE LAND-PROMISE CONFIRMED TO ISAAC

After Abraham had died, God confirmed the land-promise to Abraham's son, Isaac. Isaac was tempted to go down to Egypt in a time of famine as Abraham had done, but God told Isaac to stay in the Land of Canaan; and God reminded him that He had sworn with an oath to give the Land of Canaan to Abraham's descendents (Genesis 26:3).

## GOD CONFIRMED THE LAND-PROMISE ALSO TO JACOB

Esau was the firstborn of the twins born to Isaac's wife, Rebekah. According to custom, Esau should have inherited a greater portion of the land than Jacob, but Esau did not esteem his birthright highly. As a young man, he was more interested in hunting wild animals than in owning land. So he rashly sold his birthright to his younger brother Jacob for a meal of lentil stew (Genesis 25:33).

Jacob apparently did not feel secure in his right to the land that he had bought so cheaply, so he resorted to trickery to back up his claim to it. He deceived his father Isaac and, thereby, got also the blessing (Genesis 27:27-29) that should have gone to Esau.

When Esau heard about the trickery he was enraged and threatened to kill Jacob. Because of that Jacob fled to Haran. Underway, he stopped at a place where he dreamed that he saw a ladder stretching from earth to heaven and angels going up and down. At the top of the ladder, he saw God standing, who said to him.

“I will give you  
and your descendants  
the land on which you are laying.”

Genesis 28:13 NIV

God gave Jacob twelve sons, each of whom became the father of one of the twelve tribes. God blessed Jacob and eventually changed his name to “Israel,” which means “God strives.” When Israel was an old man, he and his descendants went down to Egypt. His descendants were in Egypt for a long time before God finally led them out under the leadership of Moses. After the children of Israel came into the Land of Canaan and conquered it with the sword, they distributed it by lots among the twelve tribes.

### THE LAND-PROMISE WAS CONDITIONAL

Many people do not realize that the land-promise to the children of Israel has always been conditional. The land remained in God’s possession all the while that He allowed Abraham’s descendants to live in it. He never gave the land to them to hold as their own. They were tenants in the land. The book of Leviticus says,

“The land must not be sold permanently,  
because the land is mine  
and you are but aliens and my tenants”

Leviticus 25:23 NIV

The children of Israel lived in the Land of Canaan at God’s discretion. Their occupancy of the land was dependent upon whether or not they kept the Law of Moses (Leviticus 26:23-33 and Deuteronomy 4:27). The prophets of the Old Testament repeatedly warned them that if they did not keep the Law of Moses, and if they worshipped foreign Gods, God would cast them out of the Land of Canaan (e.g. Jeremiah 9:11-16 and Ezekiel 20:23-24). Sadly, the children of Israel did not always keep the Law of Moses and they frequently worshipped foreign Gods, and for these things God cast them out of the Land of Canaan.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of an upcoming invasion by Assyria. He said that Assyrians would overrun both North Israel and Judah. They would come like a flood of water and would completely cover North Israel and inundate Judah up to the neck. Isaiah warned,

“Its outspread wings will cover  
the breadth of your land,  
O Immanuel!”

Isaiah 8:8 NIV

The Assyrians invaded and took many captives from the northern part of the Land of Canaan and led them away to Assyria.

Later, the Babylonians came and took captives from the southern part of the land and led them away to Babylon.

## THE REJUVENATED LAND

After Jerusalem was destroyed and the Land of Canaan laid waste, Ezekiel saw a vision of the rejuvenated Land of Canaan. Ezekiel saw water flowing from the sanctuary of the temple and becoming a great river full of fish. All kinds of animals lived along the banks of the river, and fruit trees grew on both sides of it. The leaves of the trees did not wither, and all the trees bore their fruit each month. The fruit was food for the people, and the leaves were for their healing (Ezekiel 47:1-12). The similarity between Ezekiel’s vision and the last chapter of the book of Revelation is striking.

In view of this, the reader is faced with a choice. He can either consider Ezekiel’s vision to be a description of what will someday come about on this earth, or he can consider Ezekiel’s vision to be symbolic of what will take place in heaven. The book of Revelation seems to present the latter view. See Revelation 22:1-5.

## WHO IS IMMANUEL?

We have already observed that the Land of Canaan belonged to God. Yet the verse quoted from Isaiah 8:8 implies that the land also belongs to Immanuel? Who is Immanuel? Immanuel must be someone close to God if He and God have joint ownership of the Land of Canaan. The prophet Isaiah gave a clue as to the identity of Immanuel when he said that Immanuel would be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14).

The New Testament clearly identifies Immanuel for us. He is Jesus, who was born of Mary (Matthew 1:22-23). So what we find in the Bible is a convergence of ownership of the Land of Canaan: God owns the land; He lends it to the children of Israel for their use; the ownership passes ultimately to Immanuel (God's Son), who is the heir of all things (Hebrew 1:2). Thus, it is through Immanuel that Abraham finally comes into possession of the Land of Canaan, for Immanuel is Abraham's son. This is one way in which Jesus was, as the apostle Paul said, "a servant" to the children of Israel regarding the fulfillment of the promises made to their fathers (Romans 15:8).

If Immanuel owns the Land of Canaan, He can give it to whomever He wills. It is still possible that Immanuel will give (much or most) of the Land of Canaan to the children of Israel. It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that their neighbors will not allow them to live in peace in the Land of Canaan, unless both the descendants of Isaac and the descendants of Ishmael change their way of thinking (and doing). Further, neither the descendants of Abraham through Isaac nor his descendants through Ishmael are likely to change their way of thinking (and of dealing with each other) unless they both come to recognize who Immanuel is.

## WHAT JESUS THOUGHT ABOUT OWNING PROPERTY

Jesus brought a new way of thinking about property. To Him, the whole issue of the ownership of the Land of Canaan was irrelevant. Other issues were more important.

Jesus told a story (Luke 12:16-21) about a rich farmer whose lands produced well. The man did not have enough storage space to store his grain, so he said, “This is what I will do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.” This was good business thinking, but Jesus called the man a “fool.” He said that the man acted foolishly because he had overlooked two important things. He had overlooked that he might die and that he was not rich toward God.

Jesus did not indicate that the children of Israel had more right to own the Land of Canaan than anyone else had. He did not criticize foreigners for living there. He did not advocate repulsing the Romans, who were occupying the land. Nor did He indicate that the descendants of Israel should live in the Land of Canaan, in preference to living somewhere else.

## AN EXPANDED VIEW OF THE LAND-PROMISE

People who are willing to give their all in order to occupy the Land of Canaan are settling for too little. More and greater possessions are available to them. The apostle Paul said,

“All things are yours,  
whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas  
or the world or life or death  
or the present or the future-all are yours,  
and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.”

1 Corinthians 3:21b-23 NIV

The prophet Isaiah knew that life on this earth was not all that God had in mind for the descendants of Israel (and for all of

mankind). He spoke of God creating “new heavens and a new earth.” He quoted God as saying,

“Behold, I will create new heavens  
and a new earth.  
The former things will not be remembered,  
nor will they come to mind.

Isaiah 65:17 NIV

### HIGHER EXPECTATIONS

If God is planning to make “new heavens and a new earth,” it would be unwise for people to spend all their effort in occupying the Land of Canaan (or any other place on this earth). The apostle Paul encouraged people to have higher expectations. He said,

“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ,  
set your hearts on things above,  
where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.  
Set your minds on things above,  
not on earthly things.  
For you died,  
and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.  
When Christ, who is your life, appears,  
then you also will appear with him in glory.”

Colossians 3:1-4 NIV

Actually, it does not matter where people live in this life. New York is just as near to heaven as is Jerusalem. People who have been “raised with Christ” do not rely on citizenship in one particular nation to qualify them for the afterlife with God. Every true child of Abraham is a good citizen of the land in which he happens to live. Yet he can move to Israel, if he likes, but his ultimate allegiance should not be to Israel. His ultimate allegiance



should be to the place where his true citizenship is. The apostle Paul said,

“But our citizenship is in heaven.  
And we eagerly await a Savior from there,  
the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Philippians 3:20 NIV

Everyone who recognizes that his citizenship is in heaven is following in the footsteps of Abraham. Abraham did not live 175 years on this earth without having learned a few things. He had plenty of time to mull over what God had promised him. He came to know God quite well. He may have clearly understood the implications of God’s promises. He may have known instinctively, if not by revelation, that life on this earth is not totally satisfying, no matter where one lives. Life on earth leaves a hunger for a better place and suggests a life to come. In fact, this life cries out for a life to come. The book of Hebrews says of Abraham and others that

“They were longing for a better country-  
a heavenly one.”

Hebrews 11:16a NIV

The book of Hebrews also says,

“For he [Abraham] was looking forward  
to the city with foundations,  
whose architect and builder is God.”

Hebrews 11:10 NIV

Yes, truly, Abraham knew that he had no “enduring city” on this earth (Hebrews 13:14).

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Why did God promise the Land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants? Please suggest a possible reason.
2. What do you think about Esau's having sold his birthright? See Hebrews 12:14-17.
3. What do you think about Jacob for having bought Esau's birthright so cheaply?
4. Would you like to live in the Land of Canaan? If you would like to live there, please explain why.
5. What changes will descendants of Israel have to make before there can be peace in Palestine?
6. What changes will descendants of Ishmael have to make before there can be peace in Palestine?
7. How can these changes be brought about?