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The Story of God Bible Commentary

GENESIS

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CHAPTER 10

Genesis 12:10–20



LISTEN to the Story

^{12:10}Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. ¹¹As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, “I know what a beautiful woman you are. ¹²When the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me but will let you live. ¹³Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you.”

¹⁴When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that Sarai was a very beautiful woman. ¹⁵And when Pharaoh’s officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. ¹⁶He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels.

¹⁷But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram’s wife Sarai. ¹⁸So Pharaoh summoned Abram. “What have you done to me?” he said. “Why didn’t you tell me she was your wife? ¹⁹Why did you say, ‘She is my sister,’ so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!” ²⁰Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.

Listening to the Text in the Story: Biblical Texts: Genesis 12:1–3; Genesis 37–Exodus 15; Ancient Near Eastern Text: Papyrus Anastasi VI

We have already remarked (see The Journey of Faith in Live the Story after 11:27–12:9) that the divine promises to Abram found in 12:1–3 propel the plot of the Abraham narrative. How does Abram respond to threats and problems to the fulfillment of the promises? Here the threat is famine, a common problem of the day. We see that Abram addresses the problem of famine by seeking refuge and provision in Egypt. Ancient sources such as the Egyptian

Genesis

Papyrus Anastasi VI and tomb painting BC show us that it was not unusual to go to Egypt.¹ The result is a story, as with the later Exodus from Egypt (Gen 37–

EXPLAIN the

“Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. ¹¹As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, ‘I know what a beautiful woman you are. ¹²When the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me but will let you live. ¹³Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you.”

The answer comes quickly in the next chapter, and instructs her to lie about her relationship with him, his sister, not his wife. While true, he asks her to suppress the most important part of the story, her marriage, for one and only one purpose: to save only that, but he plans to use her beauty. She is beautiful and he expects that to be the reason of Egypt. As her “brother,” he will not accept her proposal since that was the role of Isaac and Simeon in Gen 34).

And, indeed, events unfolded as they arrive, the Egyptians were struck by her beauty. Pharaoh about her and he took her into his palace. Her brother, so Pharaoh enriches Abram and his servants. Among the latter was likely to become his concubine and give birth to a son.

By making Sarai act this way, he uses her like he is her pimp, hoping to further, he puts the promise of descent to him. Pharaoh, then that would compromise the promise.

In this way, Abram demonstrates his confidence in God’s ability to take care of him. The famine as God’s inability or unwillingness to fulfill the promise.

1. Walton, “Genesis,” 74.

Papyrus Anastasi VI and tomb paintings from as early as the nineteenth century BC show us that it was not untypical for Semitic people to seek such help in Egypt.¹ The result is a story, as we will see, that has the basic outline of the later Exodus from Egypt (Gen 37–Exod 15).

EXPLAIN the Story

“Now there was a famine in the land” (v. 10); thus, Abram faces the first obstacle to the fulfillment of the promise given to him in Genesis 12:2 that he would become a “great nation.” He had left his comfortable home to come to this land, which God had promised would be his and his descendants. But now that land could not even sustain his and Sarai’s life, so they decided to move down to Egypt to weather the crisis. As Abram moves from the promised land to Egypt, what is the state of his faith? Does he respond with faith or with fear?

The answer comes quickly in the story as Abram turns to his wife Sarai and instructs her to lie about her relationship with him by saying that she is his sister, not his wife. While true that Sarai was his half-sister (20:12), he asks her to suppress the most important part of his relationship with her, their marriage, for one and only one purpose, namely to save his own life. And not only that, but he plans to use her beauty in order to be “treated well” (v. 13). She is beautiful and he expects that she will be desired by the powerful men of Egypt. As her “brother,” he will be in a position to negotiate her marriage proposal since that was the role of brothers in the ancient Near East (see Levi and Simeon in Gen 34).

And, indeed, events unfolded as Abram expected that they might. When they arrive, the Egyptians were struck by her beauty. They informed the Pharaoh about her and he took him into his palace. He thinks Abram is her brother, so Pharaoh enriches Abram, including giving him male and female servants. Among the latter was likely Hagar, the woman who would later become his concubine and give birth to Ishmael (see Gen 16–17).

By making Sarai act this way, he treats his wife like property; indeed, he uses her like he is her pimp, hoping to benefit from her sexual favors. Even further, he puts the promise of descendants at risk. If she has a child with Pharaoh, then that would compromise her status as the matriarch.

In this way, Abram demonstrates that he is acting out of fear, lacking confidence in God’s ability to take care of him and protect him. He interprets the famine as God’s inability or unwillingness to take care of him.

1. Walton, “Genesis,” 74.

Story

and, and Abram went down to the famine was severe. ¹¹As he was Sarai, “I know what a beautiful you, they will say, ‘This is let you live. ¹³Say you are my ar sake and my life will be spared

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But God does protect him and the promise even in the midst of his doubt. God sends "serious diseases" (v. 17) on Pharaoh and his household. Interestingly, the passage does not make it clear whether or not Sarai had had sexual intercourse with Pharaoh. Later, when Abram again lies about the status of Sarai to a foreign king, the narrator makes it very clear, not that they did not have sex, but that she did not conceive. After all, the second story occurs on the eve of the birth of Isaac and there can be no doubt as to who the father is, thus God made it impossible for the women of the royal court of Philistia to conceive.

Once Pharaoh found out that Abram had deceived him and that the serious diseases were due to his adding Sarai to his harem, he called Abram into his presence demanding to know why. Why would Abram do such a thing? The passage does not report Abram's response to the question, so Pharaoh simply orders him to take Sarai and leave. He allows him to take all the possessions he gained while in Egypt, perhaps fearing Abram's God who had sent the devastating diseases on his royal court.



LIVE the Story

Trusting God In Spite of Appearances

God made promises to Abram, but there is a time lag between the promise and its fulfillment. God calls on Abram to trust him, even when experiences of life suggest that these promises will never be fulfilled. God, in a word, is asking Abram to live a life of faith. Hebrews 11:1 describes faith as "confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." Abram clearly lacks this confidence in God as he heads down to Egypt in the midst of the famine.

God has made promises to those who follow him today as well. He promises that we will be his children and he will watch over us. He promises that eventually we will live in his presence forever.

Like Abram, Christians have life experiences that raise questions about God's ability or willingness to take care of us. We wonder whether he will eventually bring us into his presence forever as he promises:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going. (John 14:1-4).

While it is true that God never do come into our life, we still oftment of the promises. And how does in this story or with faith? manipulate events for our own a him, to have confidence in him.

God Delivers His People

Biblical history is never written : authors are not interested in the got it right when they said abo "The Israelites who shaped this s has a long track record of deliv Israelite—from a foreign land."

As we noted in the Introduc exactly when the book was writ discrete moment or was the rest written at the time of Moses (as Babylonian exile or the return fro nated with contemporary events his people, even his sinful people for the time of Moses, the time including today.

First, we should observe ho of his later descendants as descr Joseph and Moses. At the time to Egypt to weather a severe fa eventually becoming enslaved to against Egypt until he let the l enriched them with silver, gold,

But, second, we should also r the Babylonian captivity could Egypt. After all, the biblical pr Israel from Egypt and the future today commonly call this strand Ezekiel, and Hosea the second e the eighth-century prophet, wh God's judgment on his sinful pe

2. P. Enns and J. Byas, *Genesis for N stood, and Abused Book of the Bible* (Engle

however, we read an oracle of salvation or restoration that describes a return of God's sinful people from the wilderness. This return is likened to the earlier sojourn from Egypt through the wilderness back into the promised land:

Therefore I am now going to allure her;
I will lead her into the wilderness
and speak tenderly to her.
There I will give her back her vineyards,
and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
There she will respond as in the days of her youth,
as in the day she came up out of Egypt. (Hos 2:14–15)

This second exodus expectation has an initial fulfillment at the time of return from exile under the leaders Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel. When Cyrus issues the decree that allows for their return to the land, he also encourages people to give them precious metals and other valuables (Ezra 1:2–4). When we read of this, we are reminded not only of the time when the Egyptians gave the Israelites gold and silver when they left Egypt (Exod 12:33–36), but also of the Egyptian wealth which Abram and Sarai brought back with them after their sojourn in Egypt.

The return of God's people from Babylonian captivity is indeed a fulfillment of the second exodus expectation of the prophets, but not its full expression. Indeed, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah make it clear that the return was not all that it was expected to be. We should particularly take note of the final chapter, Nehemiah 13, which shows that there were still significant problems among the people of God, not to speak of the few Jews who decided to return.

The message of the New Testament is that the ultimate fulfillment of the second exodus expectation, plus the most powerful expression of the fact that God rescues his people, takes place in the work of Jesus Christ who saves his people from sin, guilt, and death. That Jesus' life and ministry follows the pattern of the exodus story is signaled by the opening of the Gospel of Mark, quoting Isaiah and Malachi's oracles that looked forward to a second exodus: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way—a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him'" (Mark 1:2–3).

Those who have a good knowledge of the exodus tradition will see the multiple connections, often highlighted by the Gospel writers, particularly Matthew. Due to Herod's persecution, Joseph and Mary take Jesus to Egypt when he is a youth. When Herod died, Jesus returned and the Gospel writer cites Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

John the Baptist baptizes Jesus (Matt 3:13–17) and then spends his time in the wilderness. The baptism is his Re(e)d Sea crossing is called a baptism), and in the three temptations that Israel confronted (hunger, testing God, worshipping the temptations in the wilderness, Jesus the temptations and citing Deuteronomy, against the devil's seductions).

Many other connections between the two are highlighted by scholars, but that the exodus is highlighted but including Gen 12:1–10) points to the death on the eve of the Jewish Passover from Egypt. Jesus is indeed the firstborn of the Lamb (2 Cor 5:7–8).

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John the Baptist baptizes Jesus at the beginning of his earthly ministry (Matt 3:13–17) and then spends forty days and forty nights in the wilderness. The baptism is his Re(e)d Sea crossing (see 1 Cor 10:1–6 where the sea crossing is called a baptism), and in the wilderness Jesus experienced the same three temptations that Israel confronted in the forty years in the wilderness (hunger, testing God, worshiping a false God). While Israel succumbed to the temptations in the wilderness, Jesus showed himself to be faithful by resisting the temptations and citing Deuteronomy, Moses' final sermon in the wilderness, against the devil's seductions (Matt 4:1–11).

Many other connections between Jesus' life and ministry have been highlighted by scholars, but that the exodus stories (particularly Gen 37–Exod 15, but including Gen 12:1–10) point ultimately to Jesus and culminate with his death on the eve of the Jewish Passover, the ritual celebration of the exodus from Egypt. Jesus is indeed the fulfillment of the exodus; he is the Passover Lamb (2 Cor 5:7–8).

CHAPTER 11

Genesis 13



LISTEN to the Story

^{13:1}So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him. ²Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.

³From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier ⁴and where he had first built an altar. There Abram called on the name of the LORD.

⁵Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. ⁶But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together. ⁷And quarreling arose between Abram's herders and Lot's. The Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at that time.

⁸So Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are close relatives. ⁹Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left."

¹⁰Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan toward Zoar was well watered, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.)

¹¹So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. The two men parted company: ¹²Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom. ¹³Now the people of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the LORD.

¹⁴The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west.

¹⁵All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. ¹⁶I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. ¹⁷Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you."

¹⁸So Abram went to live near the Negev, where he pitched his tents. The

Listening to the Text in the Story

In Genesis 12:1–3 God promises Abram that he will become so rich that they have to leave the land, which would entail both descending into Egypt and then returning to the land. Abram possesses none of the land, though the land was his and not Lot's. This is the background to the story of Genesis 13, where Abram becomes so rich that they have to leave the land.



EXPLAIN the Text

After returning from Egypt, Abram went to the Negev in the most southern part of the land, which he had descended into Egypt. He had grown in wealth as measured by his possessions (silver and gold). After all, his time spent in Egypt (see Genesis 12:1–3) was the first time that Abram had become so rich that they have to leave the land.

From the Negev, Abram went to the place between Bethel and Ai, where he had first built an altar (v. 4). This relocation was the first time that Abram's land was problematic since according to the NIV translation is open to interpretation. Thus, the NRSV rendering is better: "at the first," in other words at his first time there. That Abram did not have to build a new altar from his earlier time there.

There is no indication that Lot was the one who had weathered the famine, though the text may have just been referring to whether he had weathered the famine. Lot had possessions, so many that, taking into account the inhabitants of the land (the Canaanites and the Perizzites) and water resources to sustain

¹⁸So Abram went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he pitched his tents. There he built an altar to the LORD.

Listening to the Text in the Story: Biblical Text: Genesis 12:1–3

Story

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had parted from him, "Look and south, to the east and west. ou and your offspring forever. ¹⁶I the earth, so that if anyone could be counted. ¹⁷Go, walk through um giving it to you."

In Genesis 12:1–3 God promised that Abram would become a great nation, which would entail both descendants as well as land. Up to this point, Abram possesses none of the land, though the promise would give him a sense that the land was his and not Lot's. This understanding provides an important background to the story of Genesis 13 in which Abraham and Lot have become so rich that they have to settle in separate parts of the land.

EXPLAIN the Story

After returning from Egypt, Abram, accompanied by Sarai and Lot, returned to Negev in the most southern part of the promised land, the place from which he had descended into Egypt. Verse 2 reminds us that Abram has grown in wealth as measured by number of livestock as well as precious metals (silver and gold). After all, his wealth had grown tremendously because of the time he spent in Egypt (see Gen 12:10–20).

From the Negev, Abram then retraced his steps (by stages) to the area between Bethel and Ai, where he had previously encamped and built an altar. The NIV translation is open to misunderstanding when it says "where he had first built an altar" (v. 4). This rendering makes it sound as if this earlier occasion was the first time that Abram built an altar in the promised land, which is problematic since according to 12:6–7 he had earlier built one in Shechem. Thus, the NRSV rendering is better when it says "where he had made an altar at the first," in other words at his first encampment there. Thus, the point is that Abram did not have to build another altar since one was already present from his earlier time there.

There is no indication that Lot had gone to Egypt with Abram and Sarai, though the text may have just been silent about his presence. In any case, whether he had weathered the famine in Canaan or gone with Abram, Lot too had possessions, so many that, taking into account the presence of the native inhabitants of the land (the Canaanites and Perizzites), there were too few land and water resources to sustain the large numbers of flocks and herds. The

abundance of flocks and herds, not to speak of people, led to fights between Abram's herders and Lot's. They had to split.

This situation provided yet another test of Abram's faith, though of a different sort than that described in 12:10–20. In the earlier story, a negative situation (famine) made Abram question God's goodness and ability to take care of him. On his return, he worships God in the land again (v. 4), presumably having seen his protective hand even when Abram himself expressed no confidence in him.

The present situation requires that he separate from Lot due to his abundant wealth, a more positive test of faith than the previous one. Even so, it provides an occasion to test Abram's faith. He, after all, was Lot's uncle; he could simply tell Lot to fend for himself or relegate to Lot an inferior part of the land promised to Abram. Abram could further cite the divine promises that God would make him, not Lot, into a "great nation" (12:2). What does Abram do?

He takes a very reasonable approach to Lot as he seeks a solution to the problem. He wants to avoid conflict on the basis of the fact that they are "close relatives" (v. 8). He then allows Lot to choose whatever part of the land he wants for himself. Abram will then take something from what is left over.

The significance of Abram's approach to this issue is that he is not grasping for the fulfillment of the promise. He is not showing any sign of self-protection or manipulation. We are to see in Abram's speech and actions a response of faith. He does not feel like he has to do the work to gain the promises, but can trust God to fulfill them. We will see that this moment is rare compared to the times that Abram feels like he has to manipulate the situation for his benefit rather than waiting for God to act.

Lot then chooses the land that looked the best, at least on the surface of things. He chose the "whole plain of Jordan toward Zoar" (v. 10) that is near the "cities of the plain" including the one city here named Sodom (v. 12). After all, this area was the most lush available, even being compared to Egypt and to Eden ("the garden of the LORD," v. 10). Egypt was well watered by the annual flooding of the Nile and extensive irrigation. And of course Eden is described as having four rivers flowing out of it (Gen 2:10–14).

Of course, a reader at the time when the book of Genesis was written would have a different picture of this area in their mind. For that reason, the author anticipates the events of Genesis 18–19 by adding as a kind of parenthetical expression, "This is before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah" (10). The readers of this story would know this region as a salt plain incapable of growing vegetation, not as a well-watered area that would sustain life. The judgment that will come on the area Lot chose is also anticipated by verse 13,

"Now the people of Sodom were v LORD." We will pick up this story

God is pleased with Abram and promise of land to him. He has hi that he and his descendants will co second component of the promise spring will be as numerous as the " Abram does not officially possess a out the land and, as he does, to real

At the end of the chapter the location, Hebron (today identifi and slightly east of Jerusalem in near Hebron (approximately two el-Khalil. In particular, the text r because the narrator goes on to built an altar in this new locatio cific significance of the juxtaposi at 12:4–9. Later in the Abra(ha) actually purchase and thus own vicinity (Gen 23:17–20).



LIVE the Story

Seeing Versus Believing

How do we relate to God when t Abram is very successful. He is e nomadic chief. Lot, his nephew, flocks and herds, but due to thei ger sustain both their interests, s

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Above, we also analyzed the 1 they derived from his trust in G the narrator reports that "Lot lo the Jordan toward Zoar was well land of Egypt" (13:10). The refi memory of Eden and the story of with the progression of their sin,

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"Now the people of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the LORD." We will pick up this story when we come to Genesis 18–19.

God is pleased with Abram and his decision. After Lot leaves, God renews his promise of land to him. He has him look in every direction and then reaffirms that he and his descendants will come to possess the land. He also reaffirms the second component of the promise to be a great nation by saying that his offspring will be as numerous as the "dust of the earth" (v. 16). Though at present Abram does not officially possess any land, God urges him to journey throughout the land and, as he does, to realize that the land is coming into his possession.

At the end of the chapter the narrator reports that Abram goes to a new location, Hebron (today identified with Tel al-Khalil, eighteen miles south and slightly east of Jerusalem in the Judean highlands). Mamre is a location near Hebron (approximately two miles north) identified with Haram Ramet el-Khalil. In particular, the text mentions the great trees of Mamre, perhaps because the narrator goes on to inform the reader that Abram once again built an altar in this new location. We have already commented on the specific significance of the juxtaposition of trees and altars in the commentary at 12:4–9. Later in the Abra(ha)m story we will learn that the patriarch will actually purchase and thus own the first part of the promised land in this vicinity (Gen 23:17–20).



LIVE the Story

Seeing Versus Believing

How do we relate to God when things are going well? At this point in his life, Abram is very successful. He is extremely wealthy and powerful as a pastoral nomadic chief. Lot, his nephew, is also thriving. They both have abundant flocks and herds, but due to their plenty, the land that they share can no longer sustain both their interests, so they must split up.

Above, we discussed how Abram's approach to the problem revealed his heart toward God. He does not manipulate and grasp for the fulfillment of the divine promise, but actually lets Lot choose what land to take.

Above, we also analyzed the nature of Abram's actions and concluded that they derived from his trust in God. What about Lot? Much is revealed when the narrator reports that "Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan toward Zoar was well watered, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt" (13:10). The reference to the garden of the LORD evokes the memory of Eden and the story of Adam and Eve. As we do, we can see a parallel with the progression of their sin, which began when the woman "saw that the

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's presence. This was an act of grace
salm celebrates, God's abandonment
to restore his relationship with God.
h God, we can say along with Paul,
he circumstances. I know what it is

to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret
of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry,
whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives
me strength." (Phil 4:11–13)

Seeking Peace

Abram seeks peace in the midst of conflict with his nephew Lot. He is willing
to give up what he might have seen as his rights to all the land in order to
reconcile with him. Abram is a peacemaker and they are those who are blessed
"for they will be called children of God" (Matt 5:9).

Peace results from harmony between humans and God. Such harmony
leads to peace between human beings. Such peace was the natural condi-
tion of Eden, but due to sin, which puts the self at the center, conflict is
the norm. Jesus came to work reconciliation between God and humans and
among humanity. According to Paul, Jesus "is our peace, who has made the
two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostil-
ity. . . . His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two,
thus making peace" (Eph 2:14–15). For that reason, the author of Hebrews
exhorts his Christian audience to "make every effort to live in peace with
everyone" (12:14).

Jesus and the Land

God implicitly promised land to Abraham's descendants when he told him
that they would become a "great nation" (12:2), but it is in 13:14–17 that the
promise of land becomes explicit and more specific. Burge rightly understands
the significance of land for Abraham's descendants when he says that "land
is not simply about possessing real estate; land is about security and identity,
it is about cultural cohesion and purpose. Land in its most profound sense is
about place, possessing a locale which is ours, which can be defended, which
can give us safety from the world."¹

As we continue through Genesis, we will see that the primary focus of
the narrative is on the promise of descendants, also originally implicit in the
promise that Abraham's descendants will be a "great nation." Even so, the
land promise will be repeated to Abraham (15:18–21; 17:7–9) and then
passed on to Isaac (26:2–4) and to Jacob (28:13–15). Just as with the birth
of the first descendant of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, so the land is not easily
acquired. At the end of Abraham's life, the most he will own will be a small
burial ground near the city of Hebron (see Gen 23) and that will be the extent

1. G. Burge, *Jesus and the Land: The New Testament Challenge to "Holy Land" Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 33.

of it for generations. Indeed, at the end of the book of Genesis, the chosen family is not even living in the land, but rather is living in Egypt.

It is not until the time of Joshua, many centuries later, that the promised land comes into the possession of the people of God, and even at that time, it is only the beginning. The account of the distribution of the land to the tribes in Joshua 13–24, as well as the events following the death of Joshua as recorded in Judges 1, makes it clear that only a portion of the promised land is actually controlled by Israel. It is not until the time of David, who subdues the last of the internal enemies of Israel, that Israel truly possesses the land. While it is God who owns the land (Lev 25:23), he had gifted it to his people.

Sadly, beginning with the end of the reign of Solomon, the history of Israel particularly as recounted by the book of Kings is the story of disobedience and even apostasy. As Burge points out, the promise of the land is deeply embedded in covenant theology and “life in the land is contingent on upholding the righteousness expected by God.”² To support Burge’s point, we need only look at the curses that follow covenant disobedience in Deuteronomy 27–28, a number of which concern dispossession of the land. And, not surprisingly considering Israel and Judah’s behavior, they lost the land first to the Assyrians and then to the Babylonians.

Thus, at the time of the New Testament, the Romans, who had replaced the Seleucid Greek Empire who had replaced the Persians who had replaced the Babylonians, were controlling the land. There were those who expected God to send a Davidic king, a messiah, to win back the land for the Jewish people. Indeed, there were those who followed Jesus who expected that of him. We can see this in the disappointment of the two disciples after the death of Jesus, when on the way to Emmaus they said that they “had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). We can also detect this misunderstanding when, at the time of his ascension, the disciples ask him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6).

While Jesus doesn’t directly respond to their question with a “Yes” or “No,” his answer changes the nature of their expectation, when he says “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In other words, Jesus here changes focus. He is not interested in possession of real estate, but rather he is interested in reaching the whole earth with the gospel. As Burge summarizes Paul’s important teaching,

he says that “Paul universalizes faith. Paul universalizes the promises to all.”

In the Old Testament, only certain people received the special presence of God. Certain cities were chosen for extension. Jerusalem and also the land around it were holy space. We can meet with God in certain places. In the New Testament, we see that the sanctuary, Jerusalem, is no longer the place of something far, far greater. The Christian is not interested in the land, but rather to the new heavens and new earth. Paul puts it, “here we do not have an end, but that which is to come” (13:14). Even more so, we think of the same author’s teaching that the patriarchs “did not receive the land, but they were welcomed from a distance as strangers on the earth. People who seek a country of their own. If they had waited, they would have had opportunity for a better country—a heavenly one.”

Here is where contemporary Christians often go wrong. They do not follow the biblical teaching that the promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled in the New Testament. They do not see the restoration of the land after the exile (Isaiah 40:1–5; Hos 2:14–23; 11:8–11) and don’t see the returns recorded in the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah. They see Jesus, whom the New Testament proclaims as the exodus, not by leading a specific people out of Egypt, but by rescuing people from the ultimate enemy into an eternal relationship with him.

2. Ibid., 11.

3. Ibid., 92.

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Paul universalizes the promises to Abraham in order to include all lands."³

In the Old Testament, only certain locales are holy, that is, permeated with
the special presence of God. Certainly the sanctuary is such a place and by
extension Jerusalem and also the land of Israel. With the coming of Christ all
space is holy. We can meet with God anywhere. In the light of the New Testa-
ment, we see that the sanctuary, Jerusalem, and the land of Israel were antici-
pations of something far, far greater—living in the presence of God eternally.
The Christian is not interested in the restoration of real estate to God's people,
but rather to the new heavens and the new earth. As the author of Hebrews
puts it, "here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city
that is to come" (13:14). Even more to the point of the Abraham promise of
land, we think of the same author's reflections on that subject. He points out
that the patriarchs "did not receive the things promised; they only saw them
and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and
strangers on the earth. People who say such things show that they are looking
for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had
left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing
for a better country—a heavenly one" (Heb 11:13–16).

Here is where contemporary Christian Zionism (the view that the land
promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled in the modern state of Israel) goes
wrong. They do not follow the biblical theology of the land as it moves from
the Old Testament to the New Testament. They cite the promise of the resto-
ration of the land after the exile found in the prophets (Jer 16:15; Isa 9:1–9;
Hos 2:14–23; 11:8–11) and don't see that they found initial fulfillment in
the returns recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, but ultimately in
Jesus, whom the New Testament presents as the ultimate fulfillment of the
exodus, not by leading a specific people back to a specific land but rather by
rescuing people from the ultimate enemy of sin and death and bringing them
into an eternal relationship with him.

3. Ibid., 92.