

By John Piper

Israel, Palestine, and the Middle East

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Romans 11:25-32

Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. 26 And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob"; 27 "and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins." 28 As regards the gospel, they are enemies of God for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. 29 For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. 30 Just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. 32 For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.

Today I would like to address the issue of Israel's relation to the "Promised Land" in the Middle East. This is not primarily an expository message from Romans 11, but an effort to draw out implications of Romans 11 and the rest of Scripture for a very vexing problem in the world today. The existence of Israel in the Middle East and the extent of her borders and her sovereignty are perhaps the most explosive factors in world terrorism and the most volatile factors in Arab-Western relations.

The Arab roots and the Jewish roots in this land go back for thousands of years. Both lay claim to the land not merely because of historical presence, but also because of divine right. I won't try to lay out a detailed peace plan. But I will try to lay out some biblical truths that could guide all of us in thinking about peace and justice in that part of the world. What we think about this, and what we say, does matter, since politicians are influenced by their constituents in these religiously super-charged situations. And we need to know how to pray. And we need to know how to talk to others in a way that honors the truth. So for all those reasons, and for the reason that God is very much involved in this situation, we should talk about it in the context of Romans 11.

What we've seen in Romans 11 is that Israel as a whole—that is, as an ethnic, corporate people enduring from generation to generation—has a root in the covenant promises made to Abraham and his descendants. Verse 16b: "If the root is holy so are the branches." We interpreted that picture in the light of verse 28: "As regards the gospel, they [Israel] are enemies of God for your [Gentile] sake. But as regards election, they

are beloved for the sake of their forefathers." The "forefathers" here correspond to the root in verse 16. So the promises to the forefathers imply that some day the whole tree, with all its branches, will be saved.

Some day. Because verse 28 says, for now "they are enemies." Verse 28a: "As regards the gospel, they [Israel] are enemies of God for your sake." In other words, they are rejecting their Messiah and thus putting themselves against God. This is what Jesus said to Israel in John 8:42: "If God were your father you would love me." Jesus is the litmus test whether anybody's religion is worship of the true God. But Israel does not love Jesus as God's son and her Messiah. So they are, for now, "enemies of God."

So when verse 16 says, "If the root is holy so are the branches," we take it to mean: "If God chose the forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, for himself, and set them apart and made to them covenant promises, then someday (after this present time of enmity and hardening are over) their descendants are going to return to God through Jesus Christ, and become God's set-apart, holy people. Unbelief and ungodliness will be banished from Jacob forever (v. 26).

So now we ask, is the so-called "Promised Land" part of the inheritance and salvation that "all Israel" (v. 26) will receive? And if so, what does that say about the rights of Israel today to the Land?

In developing the answer to this question I would like to maintain seven truths which are based on Scripture.

1. God chose Israel from all the peoples of the world to be his own possession.

Deuteronomy 7:6, "The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth."

2. The Land was part of the inheritance he promised to Abraham and his descendants forever.

Genesis 15:18, "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.'"

Then in Genesis 17:7-8 God says to Abraham, "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 you and to your offspring after you. 8 And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."

Then God confirmed the promise to Jacob, Abraham's grandson, in Genesis 28:13, "And behold, the Lord . . . said, 'I am the Lord , the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring.'" And when Jacob was dying he called Joseph to him and said (in Genesis 48:3), "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, 4 and said to me, 'Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you and . . . will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession.'"

This, of course, creates a huge cleavage between the Islamic view of God's covenant and the Jewish and Christian view of God's 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.

But it's not that simple. This is not an issue that can be dealt with in soundbites.

3. The promises made to Abraham, including the promise of the Land, will be inherited as an everlasting gift only by true, spiritual Israel, not disobedient, unbelieving Israel.

This was the point of Romans 9. When Paul grieved over the lostness of so many Jews who were rejecting Jesus and were perishing, he said in verses 6-7, "It is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, 7 and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring." In other words, the promises cannot be demanded by anyone just because he is Jewish. Jewish ethnicity has a place in God's plan, but it is not enough to secure anything. It does not in itself qualify a person to be an heir of the promise to Abraham and his offspring. Romans 9:8 says it clearly: "It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring." Being born Jewish does not make one an heir of the promise—neither the promise of the Land nor any other promise.

This was plain in the Old Testament, and it was plain the teachings of Jesus (which we will see under truth #4). For example, in the terrible list of curses that God promised to bring on the people if they broke his covenant and forsook him was this: " And as the Lord took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so the Lord will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you. And you shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to take possession of it" (Deuteronomy 28:63). Throughout the history of Israel, covenant breaking and disobedience and idolatry disqualified Israel from the present divine right to the Land. (See also Daniel 9:4-7; Psalm 78:54-61.)

Be careful not to infer from this that Gentile nations (like Arabs) have the right to molest Israel. God's judgments on Israel do not sanction human sin against Israel. Israel still has *human* rights among nations even when she forfeits her present *divine* right to the Land.

Remember that nations which gloated over her divine discipline were punished by God (Isaiah 10:5-13; Joel 3:2).

So the promise to Abraham that his descendants will inherit the Land does not mean that all Jews inherit that promise. It will come finally to the true Israel, the Israel that keeps covenant and obeys her God.

4. Jesus Christ has come into the world as the Jewish Messiah, and his own people rejected him and broke covenant with their God.

When Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ [that is, the Jewish Messiah], the Son of the living God." And Jesus responded to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 16:16-17). And when the high priest asked Jesus, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" Jesus answered, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:61-62).

But even though Jesus was the Messiah and did many mighty works and taught with great authority and fulfilled Old Testament promises, nevertheless the people of Israel as a whole rejected him. This was the most serious covenant-breaking disobedience that Israel had ever committed in all her history.

This is why Jesus told the parable of the tenants who killed the Landlord's son when he came for his harvest, and ended that parable with these words to Israel in Matthew 21:43, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits." And it's why he said in Matthew 8:11-12, after seeing the faith of a Gentile centurion and the unbelief of Israel, "Many [Gentiles] will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, 12 while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Israel has broken covenant with her God and is living today in disobedience and unbelief in his Son and her Messiah. That is why Paul says in Romans 11:28, "As regards the gospel [the good news of the Messiah] they are enemies of God."

5. 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.

This follows from all we have said so far, and the implication it has for those of us who believe the Bible and trust Christ as our Savior and as the Lord of history, is that we should not give blanket approval to Jewish or to Palestinian actions. We should approve or denounce according to Biblical standards of justice and mercy among peoples. We should encourage our representatives to seek a just settlement that takes the historical and social claims of both peoples into account. Neither should be allowed to sway the judgments of justice by a present divine claim to the land. If you believe this, it would be helpful for your representatives to know it.

We are not whitewashing terrorism and we are not whitewashing Jewish force. Nor is there any attempt on my part to assess measures of blame or moral equivalence. That's not my aim. My aim is to put the debate on a balanced footing in this sense: neither side should preempt the claims of international justice by the claim of present divine rights. Working out what that justice will look like is still a huge and daunting task. I have not solved that problem. But I think we will make better progress if we do not yield to the claim of either side to be ethnically or nationally sanctioned by God in their present conflict.

6. By faith in Jesus Christ, the Jewish Messiah, Gentiles become heirs of the promise of Abraham, including the promise of the Land.

In the words of Romans 11:17, "You [Gentile], although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree"—that is, they become part of the redeemed covenant people who share the faith of Abraham. The reason, as Paul put in Romans 4:13, is that "the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith." So all who are united to Christ, Abraham's Offspring, by faith are part of the covenant made with him and his offspring.

Here's the most sweeping statement of this truth— Ephesians 2:12, "Remember that you [Gentiles] were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. . . . So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."

Therefore Jewish believers in Jesus and Gentile believers will inherit the Land. And the easiest way to see this is to see that we will inherit the world which includes the Land. Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians will not quibble over the real estate of the Promised Land because the entire new heavens and the new earth will be ours. 1 Corinthians 3:21-23, "All things are yours, 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the *world* or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, 23 and you are Christ's,

and Christ is God's." All followers of Christ, and only followers of Christ, will inherit the earth, including the Land.

7. Finally, this inheritance of Christ's people will happen at the second coming of Christ to establish his kingdom, not before; and till then, we Christians must not take up arms to claim our inheritance; but rather lay down our lives to share our inheritance with as many as we can.

You recall that all-important word that Jesus spoke to Pilate in John 18:36: "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." Christians do not take up the sword to advance the kingdom of Christ. We wait for a king from heaven who will deliver us by his mighty power. And in that great day Jew and Gentile who have treasured Christ will receive what was promised. There will be a great reversal: the last will be first, and the meek—in fellowship with the Lamb of God—will inherit the Land.

Therefore, come to the meek and lowly Christ while there is time, and receive forgiveness of sins, and the hope of glory.

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