

The Theological Importance of the Promised Land

Land may seem to be fairly insignificant, but not when it involves the biblical narratives. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the land was a vital symbol to the people. One of the components of the promise to Abram was that his descendants would be given the land (Gen. 12:7). In following the narratives of the Pentateuch, it is clear that the land was a driving motivation for the people. Not only would God make Abram's descendants a great nation, but they would also be delivered out of bondage to be brought "to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exod. 3:8).

The land symbolized the covenant relationship that the Israelites maintained with Yahweh. If the people turned away from following God, then they themselves would be taken out of the land (Deut. 28:15ff). If they remained faithful, they would be blessed and fruitful in the land (vv. 1-14). The ceremony that took place on Mts. Ebal and Gerizim reminded the people of the covenant blessings and curses (Deut. 27; Josh. 8). There would be no excuse if they found themselves separated from this land. Such a separation would be in fulfillment of the curses due to their rebellion against God.

The Israelites were warned not to enter into any of the sins of the inhabitants of the land. Because of the abominations of the pagan nations, "the land has spewed out its inhabitants" (Lev. 18:24-25). The warning was that if God's people followed suit, they too would forfeit their claim to the land. More importantly, it would indicate their separation from God.

Sadly, the children of Israel did indeed lose their blessings in the land due to their unfaithfulness to God. The northern kingdom of Israel was cut off from the land by the Assyrians in the 8th century B.C. The southern kingdom of Judah lasted a while longer, but due to the practices of King Manasseh, they were taken out of the land into captivity (2 Kgs. 21:10-18). Their being removed from the land symbolized their being removed from God's sight (2 Kgs. 24:3). The period of time they were in exile (@ 70 yrs) corresponded to the sabbatical rest for the land (2 Chron. 36:21).

Today, those in covenant relationship with God are not awaiting that same physical land anymore. The physical Promised Land fulfilled its purpose in the plan of God. As promised, God made Abram's descendants into a great nation and brought them into the land. Through them He carried out His ultimate plan for redeeming mankind from sin through the blood of Jesus Christ (the seed promise, Acts 3:25-26). We can enjoy the full blessings of being in a right relationship with God (cf. Eph. 1:3). God still requires that His people maintain holiness (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). That land promise typologically points to the greater promise we have of our inheritance in heaven (1 Pet. 1:3-5). As God is with us, we can confidently cross the river of death into our inheritance of life with Him.

See *Theological Significance of the Land*, pp. 41-42:

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