

Missouri Synod Lutheran: "Whose Land Is It?"



by Reed Lessing, reposted from [LCMS Blog](#), 2006 (emphasis added)

As a parent who survived the toddler years with three children, I still clearly recall the “Toddler Property Laws”: If I like it, it’s mine. If it’s in my hand, it’s mine. If I can take it from you, it’s mine. If I had it a little while ago, it’s mine. It must never appear to be yours in any way; it’s always and forevermore mine!

Over the millennia, numerous rulers, governments, and nations have looked at the land of Israel and said, “Forevermore, mine!” The land once belonged to the Amorites, as we learn in Genesis 15. Then it was possessed by the Israelites. The Assyrians (2 Kings 17:6), Babylonians (2 Kings 25:22), Persians (2 Chron. 36:23), Greeks (Dan. 11:1–5), and Romans (Luke 3:1) all claimed ownership at times during Old Testament history. And since the end of the New Testament period, the Byzantine, Ottoman, and British empires have looked at this land and said “Mine!”

So whose land is it?

Politically or theologically?

Generally speaking, the question of who owned Palestine was answered politically from 70 A.D., when the Roman army crushed the Jewish rebellion and dismantled Jerusalem, until the 1840s. Whoever had the military might and diplomatic ability owned the land.

In the 1840s, John Nelson Darby, a Plymouth Brethren minister from England, began teaching that the question of Palestine’s ownership needed to be answered theologically. By introducing the method of biblical interpretation called Premillennial-Dispensationalism, Darby heralded the idea that biblical history is divided into seven “dispensations” or periods of time. The end of the sixth dispensation, he stated, would be triggered by Israel’s return to the land.

Picking up where Darby left off, Cyrus Scofield propagated Premillennial-Dispensationalism in his influential Scofield Reference Bible, first published in 1909. The Scofield Reference Bible is the single most important document espousing the teaching that God permanently gave the land of Palestine to the Jews.

Prior to these teachings of Darby and Scofield, most Christians (including Lutherans) understood the ownership of Palestine to be a political issue, not a theological issue.

All of that has changed.

It is estimated that 40 million Christians in the United States now embrace the idea that the present-day state of Israel created by the United Nations in 1948 is by divine decree and is a sign that we live in “the last days.”



The Left Behind effect

Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye have taken Scofield's ideas and disseminated them via their "Left Behind" series of novels. The authors believe the fuse that ignited "the last days" was ethnic Israel's return to the land of Palestine in 1948. They call this "the super sign of biblical prophecy" because they believe this event will trigger the rapture of the Church, which could occur at any moment.

The rapture will be followed by seven years of suffering and destruction, called the tribulation. After this, Christ will visibly return as Judge and usher in the seventh dispensation, His 1,000-year reign on earth. During this time, unbelievers will increase in numbers. Christ will return (again) and bring all evil to an end. He will usher in the new heavens and new earth.

The key to the unfolding of these events, they believe, is that the land of Palestine forever belongs to the Jews.

What does the Bible say?

The Old Testament declares that the land of Canaan (approximately present-day Israel and Palestine, plus adjoining coastal lands and parts of Lebanon and Syria) belongs to the Lord (cf. Ps. 24:1); He is the one who gave it to Israel (Deut. 6:10–11), and He is the One who can take it away (Lev. 26:33). Land could not be permanently bought or sold (cf. 1 Kings 21:1–16); it could not be given away, let alone stolen or confiscated.

The land in the Old Testament was always a means for a greater end, the coming of Jesus Christ in the fullness of time (Gen. 17:1–7; Gal. 3:14, 29; 4:4). **To a large extent, however, it was Israel's belief that it—not the Lord—owned the land that led to the Northern Kingdom's exile of 721 B.C. to Assyria and the Southern Kingdom's exile of 587 B.C. to Babylon.**

When Jesus speaks about the land in Luke 19:41–44, He makes no reference to it ever being restored to the Jews. Rather, He taught His disciples to look forward— not to a Jewish return to the land—but to the coming of the Son of Man in His glory on the Last Day (Matt. 24:30–31; Luke 21:25–28; Dan. 7:13–14).

Jesus makes only several explicit references to the land in the Gospels. The strongest is in the Beatitudes. **In Matt. 5:5, the Savior quotes from Ps. 37:11, where the blessing of the meek is the inheritance of the land. Yet, it is not the land of Israel, but the entire earth that the meek will inherit** (cf. Rom. 4:13). And, in light of the strong eschatological dimensions of the Sermon on the Mount, this earth is the "new heaven and the new earth the home of righteousness" (2 Peter 3:13).

Until the Day of Pentecost, the disciples shared the same nationalistic understanding of the land as the other Jews of the first century (cf. Luke 24:21; Acts 1:6). But after the coming of the Holy Spirit, they began to use Old Testament language concerning the land in new ways.

One example comes from Peter, who speaks of our inheritance that, unlike the land of Palestine, “can never perish, spoil, or fade” (1 Peter 1:4). The book of Hebrews is filled with examples of how the New Testament reinterprets “the land.” Christians have the land, described as the rest into which they have entered through Christ (Heb. 4:1–11). In Heb. 11:13–16, the central Gospel motif is the land.

The pilgrimage of faith is set in three scenes: a land from which they set out in faith, the present context of wandering, and the hoped-for homeland that is a “better,” indeed a “heavenly” city.



The Dome of the Rock is a major Muslim shrine built around 690. It sits on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem where Solomon’s Temple and the second Temple from Christ’s lifetime stood. According to some Christians it is also the site of the third and final Temple to be built before Christ’s Second Coming.

Shadows or reality?

Premillennial-Dispensationalists believe that Israel’s resettlement of the land in 1948 is the key to a correct understanding of the end times. They contend that Old Testament prophecies regarding not only the land, but also such promises as the rebuilding of the Temple and the reinstatement of its sacrifices, must be literally fulfilled.

It is clear from Scripture, however, that these Old Testament promises are to be read in light of the New Testament. The Old Testament revelation of God’s acts in the history of Israel consists of shadows, images, forms, and prophecies. The New Testament announces the reality, substance, and final fulfillment of these promises in the person and work of Jesus Christ (John 5:39; Luke 24:44).

The question, then, is not whether the land-promises of the Old Testament are to be understood literally or spiritually. Rather, it’s a question of whether they should be understood in terms of Old Testament shadows or in terms of New Testament realities.

When the New Testament is allowed to interpret the Old Testament, it follows that the 1948 state of Israel is not a prophetic realization of the Messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ. His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36).

Furthermore, a day should not be anticipated in which Christ’s kingdom will manifest Jewish distinctives, whether by its location in the land of Palestine, its capital in Jerusalem, its constituency, or its ceremonial institutions and practices.

The Old Testament needs to be viewed in light of Jesus Christ. The land-promises that God gave to Abraham were made effective through Christ, Abraham's true Seed (Gal. 3:16). All spiritual benefits are derived from Jesus, and apart from Him there is no participation in the promises made to Abraham (Gal. 3:26–29). These promises are not directed toward any particular ethnic group. The Church—not Jews or the Israelis—is the true Israel of God, and the baptized are the children of Abraham.

When Premillennial-Dispensationalists point to the modern state of Israel as a concrete manifestation of God's presence, they overlook the fact that God has left visible and tangible signs indicating that He is with His people. First John 5:7–8 states: "For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement." God testifies to being present with His Church right now by means of the Spirit-inspired and Christ-centered Old and New Testament Scriptures, the water of Baptism, and the true body and blood of Jesus in Holy Communion.

The assurance of God working in the world is therefore not based on the return of the Jews to their ancestral land, but rather on the sure Word of promise of forgiveness of sins imparted in the means of grace, the Gospel and the Sacraments.

There is no suggestion that Jesus or the apostles believed the Jewish people still have a divine right to the land, or that the Jewish possession of the land would be an important—let alone central— aspect of God's plan for the world. The land was promised to Abraham, taken possession of under Joshua, lost in the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles, regained by Judah upon Cyrus' decree in 538 B.C., and reinterpreted by Jesus, Paul, and others as a new heaven and new earth.

The hope of the baptized, therefore, is not placed on current events in the Middle East. Rather, we are called to fix our eyes on Jesus as we long and pray for His Second and Final Advent. On that day, He will raise us from the dead and usher us into the new heavens and the new earth. Then Jesus will lovingly gaze upon all the baptized and say, "I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are always and forevermore mine!" (cf. Is. 43:1).

Some important definitions:

Amillennialism: This is the historic teaching of the Church that there will not be a literal, 1,000-year earthly kingdom of Jesus. This view is better termed "realized millennialism" because it embraces the idea that Christ is reigning now. The "thousand years" of Rev. 20:1–10 is intended to be understood figuratively as a reference to the time of Christ's reign as King from the day of His Ascension until the Last Day. Hence, the millennium is a present reality (Christ's heavenly reign), not a future hope (Christ's rule on earth after His return).

Dispensationalism: This is a system of biblical interpretation that distinguishes seven distinct periods or "dispensations" in biblical history: 1. Innocence (before the Fall); 2. Conscience (from the Fall to Noah); 3. Human Government (from Noah to Abraham); 4. Promise (from Abraham to Moses); 5. Law (from Moses to Christ); 6. Grace (the church age); 7. the Kingdom (the millennium). Dispensationalists believe that God's redemptive plan focuses on national Israel.

Last Days: The phrase "the last days" appears 27 times in the New Testament. Premillennial-Dispensationalists teach that with the creation of the 1948 state of Israel, the world has entered the last days. However, in most biblical instances, it is used of the eschatological epoch, which began with the coming of Jesus Christ.

Millennium: Derived from the Latin for 1,000 years. PremillennialDispensationalists understand the 1,000 years of Revelation 20 as literal. But the Bible teaches that Christ is reigning now, and that His gracious rule that began on the day of His Ascension will continue until the Last Day, when He will hand "over the kingdom to God the Father after He has destroyed all dominion, authority and power" (1 Cor. 15:24).

Premillennialism: The belief that the Second Advent will occur before the millennium. This view holds that Scripture is to be interpreted in a "literalistic" manner; the Church and Israel are two distinct groups for whom God has a divine plan; the Church is a mystery, unrevealed in the Old Testament; and the "age of the Church" must be completed before God can resume His main program.

Rapture: This refers to the event described in 1 Thes. 4:14–17, when believers will be “raptured” or “caught up” (Latin: *rapiemur*) in the clouds to meet Christ in the air at His Second Coming. When used by PremillennialDispensationalists the term refers to Christ’s secret coming, when all believers and all children who have not reached the age of accountability are suddenly removed from the earth before the seven-year tribulation.

Premillennial-Dispensationalists understand these four terms to be synonymous: Israelite, Hebrew, Jew, and Israeli. In this way, they are able to apply God’s land-promises to the Israelites of the Old Testament to modern-day Jews, and especially with the 1948 state of Israel. But these four terms have different definitions:

Israelite: An Old Testament believer in Yahweh (the Lord), the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Hebrew: Used by Israelites in the Old Testament to identify themselves to non-Israelites.

Jew: This term means either an ethnicity or an adherent to “Judaism,” which is not the Christ-centered faith of the Old Testament.

Israeli: A citizen of the 1948 state of Israel, which is not the same Israel of the Old Testament. Israelis are sometimes called “secular Jews.” — R.R

A Quick History of the Holy Land (before Christ)

Some scholars use Bible lineages to date Abraham around this time. Commanded by God, he leaves Ur, a wealthy, corrupt city in today’s southern Iraq, and later, leaves Haran in today’s southern Turkey. He receives God’s word to “give you this land.”

1450: Egypt’s pharaohs subjugate the Canaanites, including Abraham’s descendants.

1250–1200: A probable period when the Isaelites enter the Holy Land after their Exodus from Egypt and reclaim the land from diverse Canaanites.

980 to 935: Kings David and Solomon build a rich Israel empire. Solomon’s Temple is built.

930: Shortly after Solomon’s death, the Kingdom is divided between North (Israel) and South (Judah).

722–721: The Assyrians conquer the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The 10 tribes are deported and disappear from history.

606–581: King Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylonian army conquers Judah, destroys Jerusalem, including the Temple. Judeans are taken to Babylon.

539: The Medes and Persians (from modern-day Iran) capture Babylon. God induces King Cyrus to allow the Jews to return to their land. They rebuild the Temple.

332: Alexander the Great’s Greek army sweeps across the Holy Land.

323: After Alexander’s death, his generals, Ptolemy in Egypt and Seleucid in Syria battle for the land.

63: Roman armies under Pompey overrun the land and begin a 600-year rule. Herod the Great becomes ruler of Judea.

(After Christ)

4 B.C. to A.D. 27: Christ’s life and ministry in Israel.

A.D.30–300: The new faith reaches out vigorously to gentiles, answering Christ’s call to “teach all nations, baptizing them.”

330: The Christian Byzantine Empire begins when Emperor Constantine is converted to Christianity.

By 640: Muslim armies drive Byzantine Christians from the Holy Land; they rule for a while from Baghdad. Jerusalem is recognized as a holy city in Islam and the Temple Mount as the place where Muhammad ascended to heaven.

1099 to 1291: European crusaders establish the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem.

1516: Ottoman Turks overwhelm the Holy Land. It remains in Muslim control until World War II.

1920: Britain installs monarchies in Iraq and Transjordan. The latter governs Palestine. Fleeing Europe and Russia, Jews flood into Palestine from 1920 on.

1947: The United Nations divides Palestine into two states, one Jewish, one Arab. Jerusalem to be administered by the UN to avoid conflict.

1948: Israel, populated by Jewish refugees from Europe, Africa, and Asia, proclaims itself a nation. Open warfare between the new Israel and its Arab neighbors makes refugees of Palestinians.

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Basic New Testament Premise:

THE HOLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH IS NOW THE “NEW ISRAEL”

Thus the words in the Old Testament in the Psalms about “Zion” and “Israel” now apply to the whole Christian Church on earth and in heaven, made up of Jewish and Gentile believers through all of time.

See these Biblical references:

Acts chapter 2

Romans chapters 9-11

Galatians 6:15-18

Ephesians 2:12-14

Revelation chapter 7

A sad reality, and why we must witness to our Jewish and Muslim friends:

The Jews reject Jesus as their Messiah and the whole New Testament. They want to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

The Muslims reject the Trinity and the Deity of Jesus and follow Mohammed, the false prophet and his book the Koran.

Both of them consider the land of Palestine to belong to them, the Jews because it was the land promised to the descendants of Abraham, the Muslims because they believe Mohammed ascended into heaven from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

In 70 A.D. the Romans tore down the Jewish temple. In 691 A.D. the Muslim built the Dome of the Rock which is a mosque dedicated to the worship of Allah. Both the Jews and the Muslims lay claim to the Temple Mount.

Since neither group acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah and Savior of the whole world, they will continue to fight over the land of Israel until our Lord Jesus returns.

Thus we pray for them to come to faith in Jesus as the Christ, and turn away from their spiritual delusions.

The LCMS actively witnesses to both groups of people.

JEWISH EVANGELISM - “Apple of His Eye Mission Society” <https://www.appleofhiseye.org/>

(Our former Vicar, Pastor Jordan Peiser works with this outreach in addition to serving as Pastor in New Jersey.)

<https://www.appleofhiseye.org/connect/blog/60-jordan-peiser/400-2023-11-01>

MUSLIM EVANGELISM – “People of the Book Lutheran Outreach to Muslims” (POBLO) <https://www.poblo.org/>

(We had their director Pastor Khan conduct a seminar on Muslim Evangelism for our district at our church about 10 years ago. My Master’s Thesis at Concordia Theological Seminary Ft. Wayne was written in 1982 and is entitled:

“How to Communicate the Muslim University Students.”)

The True Israel

We hear news stories pretty regularly about the middle East and in particular the nation of Israel. Not only does their long-standing conflict with the Palestinians continue, but Iran proclaims openly that they'd like to wipe Israel entirely off the map—a pleasant thought as I prepare for my Holy Land tour next April. But it raises the question: is what happens in Israel today something that relates to our Christian faith at all? Israel and the Israelites are obviously central to the Biblical account of salvation. But what should our theological attitude be toward what's going on with Israel in the Middle East today?

There are some supposedly Christian preachers and authors who want to make a big deal out of current events. They see happenings in the Middle East as the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. They view the nation of Israel as a key player in the end times. They believe that before Christ can return, a whole series of geopolitical events must play themselves out, including the rebuilding of the temple. But all who preach and believe such things are mistaken and in error. For they are failing to see that all prophecy centers on Christ and is fulfilled in His life and death and resurrection. All prophecy that is not centered in Christ and fulfilled in Him and His church is false prophecy. This is especially true when it comes to the prophecies pertaining to Israel.



The people of Israel were indeed the chosen people of God. They are the descendants of Abraham, to whom God gave the promise that all peoples on earth would be blessed through him. But that promise came to life in the birth of the Israelite Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah. Through Christ the blessing of the forgiveness of sins comes to all the nations. All that God gave to Israel, from the tabernacle to the sacrifices to the Sabbath all pointed forward to a culmination in Jesus. Even the prophecies pertaining to the land of Israel, that geographic territory, were all given so that there might be a particular place where the promises of God might come to pass in Christ. What makes the holy land holy is not that the ground itself is sacred, but rather that God Himself walked that ground in the person of Jesus and there accomplished our salvation by His holy cross.

And so today in this New Testament age, the true Israel is no longer a reference to a nation or a territory. It is rather a reference to the church, to those who are the people of God in Christ. Romans 9 says that not all who are Israelites according to the flesh are the true Israel, but rather “the children of the promise are counted as the seed,” as the children of Israel. In other words, those who are believers in the promised Messiah are the true Jews, the real Israel. Jesus is the whole people of Israel embodied in one man. And so when we believe and are baptized into Him, we ourselves become Israelites, God’s chosen people, children of God in Him who is the Son of God.

Therefore, when we pray the Psalms and refer to Israel, we are not referring to a nation but to the church, to the faithful of the Lord. And when we refer to Jerusalem, as we will be doing in today’s closing hymn, we are referring not to a temporal, passing city, but the holy city above, the heavenly Jerusalem, the eternal dwelling place of God’s redeemed believers.

So to get back to where we started, when it comes to events in Israel and the Middle East today, we have no theological stake in what the political outcome is. It doesn’t affect our Christian faith one way or the other. Our country may have a strategic or political stake in the matter, but that’s an entirely different story. The only thing the turmoil in Israel and the Middle East and throughout the world should remind us of as Christians is that in this world we will find no lasting peace. That is to be found only in Christ. Wars and rumors of wars, the persecution and killing of Christians—all of that is meant to alert us to the fact that Christ will come again soon, and that we should be praying daily for His return to bring our salvation to its completion.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus mourns what will become of Israel and of Jerusalem in particular. The name Jerusalem literally means “city of peace.” But when He, the Prince of Peace had come to her, she refused Him. Like a rejected groom, He weeps for her and her fate. In the year 70 A.D., just forty years after this Gospel, Jesus’ prophetic words will be fulfilled. Jerusalem will be attacked and laid siege by the Romans. Thousands upon thousands will be killed in horrific fashion. Above all, the temple will be utterly destroyed and laid waste. All that is left of the temple still today is one portion of an outer wall, the wailing wall, which still calls to mind Jesus’ weeping.

This was the judgment of God. The Romans were His instrument in executing the sentence. For Israel had spurned the Messiah. They did not know the time of their visitation, when God Himself visited them and walked among them. It was their day, and they missed it. The things that made for their peace with God were hidden from their eyes by their own unbelief.

It’s not as if they weren’t religious. St. Paul says in the Epistle that they were passionate for God, but they tried to get right with Him on the basis of their own keeping of God’s Law. They foolishly trusted in their own obedience rather than humbly and penitently relying on the grace of God revealed to them in Christ and receiving His righteousness as a free and undeserved gift. And so they ended up rejecting the very one their Law prophesied. All their religious passion was for nothing. They wanted something flashier and more glorious than this lowly Jesus. In fact it offended them to think that’s how God would visit them. They stumbled at this stumbling stone of the Gospel, and so the stones of the temple and the city were demolished around them. The weeping of God eventually becomes the judgment of God for those who will not repent.

This is a clear and sobering call to repentance for you still today. For the Jews had it all, everything they needed to recognize and receive the Messiah when He came. Don’t we also? Indeed, we have even more! Let us not, then, take these things for granted and stumble as they did. What happened to Jerusalem in the 1st century is a miniature picture of what will happen to all the unbelieving world on judgment day. Consider, then, how things stand with you. Are you relying on the fact that you’re a good person to get you into heaven rather than Christ alone? Then your religion is like the false religion of the Jews, and you must repent. Do you look for God primarily in mysterious signs or supernatural occurrences instead of in His humble but sure Word? Is divine service something you can do without for weeks at a time? Then you are like the Israelites who did not know the time of their visitation, and you must repent. Are you one who wants to use religion as a way of gaining earthly blessings? Then you are like those who bought and sold in the temple, and you must repent.

Turn away from all that, and turn to Him whose heart still weeps out of love for His people. Trust in Him who continues to cry out, “If you would know, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace!” Christ Himself is your Peace, who visits you humbly, just as He did with Israel—in water and words, bread and wine. He is the One who brings reconciliation between you and God, the One who gives the peace that passes all understanding. This is your day, right now, the day of your visitation, as it is written, “Behold, now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation.” This is the moment in which Christ is coming to you in His Gospel sounding in your ears. Believe in Him; trust in what He has done; seek His righteousness.

For our Lord has cleansed the temple. When Jesus drove out the moneychangers in righteous anger and purified the temple as a house of prayer, that was a sign of what He was about to do at Calvary. For there on the cross Jesus Himself experienced the righteous anger of God against the world’s sin and drove it out in the temple of His body. Jesus made Himself unclean in your place. He took all of the greed and the self-righteousness and the callousness and every other sin and made it His own dirty mess. And by His holy suffering and death He cast it out and away from you forever. He buried it all permanently in the grave.

Jesus had said of His body, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” Though the temple in Jerusalem remains destroyed, Jesus could not remain in the grave. He is now bodily raised in everlasting glory and honor, the new and eternal dwelling place of God for you. Jesus is your temple. The risen body of Christ is full of holiness and righteousness and cleansing. Baptized into Him, those things are all yours. The Church is the body of Christ. And therefore you are the temple of Christ’s Spirit, who dwells in you through your baptismal faith. You are safe from divine judgment. For you are in Him who took the judgment for you.

“If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace!” Brothers and sisters in Christ, O Israel of God, this is your day; this is the time of your visitation. Don’t miss out because you’re looking for the wrong thing, or because you’ve got more important things to do. Here are the things that make for your peace, the body and blood of Christ, offered up for you for the forgiveness of your sins, for your peace, for your rest, for your restoration to the Father. God grant you to be like that faithful remnant in the Gospel that was very attentive to hear Jesus, that by His grace you may be brought to dwell eternally in the new Jerusalem above.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ✠

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