

Focus on the Kingdom

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Anthony Buzzard, editor

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Who Owns the Land?

We received the following report from a correspondent in Israel today (Aug 11th, 1999).

Arab terrorist runs down soldiers, injures twelve

Arab terrorists struck this morning at the Nachshon Junction, between Beit Shemesh and Latrun. At approximately 8 AM this morning, an Arab driver from Palestinian Authority territory rammed into a group of IDF soldiers waiting for rides to their bases. A very few minutes later, the terrorist returned to the same location — minus one passenger in his car, who apparently had had enough — and attempted to drive his car into the crowd that had gathered, including those administering first-aid to the injured.

First to be hit was a female soldier who lay injured on the road from the first attack. Police and civilians fired at the Arab, whose car collided with a cement truck. The terrorist was killed.

The female soldier was reported to be in moderate condition, while eleven other soldiers were injured lightly in the two attacks. They were taken to Kaplan Hospital in Rehovot and Assaf HaRofeh Hospital in Tzrifin. Eight were released by early afternoon.

The father of the dead terrorist came early this morning to the Beit Shemesh police station to report on his son's recent "strange behavior."

While in the midst of talking to the police officers, the report on the attack was received.

Prime Minister Barak called the attempted murders "the act of a cowardly criminal extremist," adding that the incident strengthens "our resolve to fight against terrorism, and also to tighten our cooperation with the Palestinian

security services." Barak made the comments after meeting with the former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich.

Michael Kleiner (National Union) said, "The really unfortunate aspect of this is that Israelis look at such incidents and are blinded from seeing the reality for what it is. The Arabs want to take over the Land of Israel, and are utilizing a combination of military and political tactics to attain their goal."

The story above serves to remind us of the ongoing struggle between Jew and Arab over the "Land of the Promise." "The Land of the Promise" is the biblical name for the Middle Eastern territory promised to Abraham and his seed for ever. There is a sense in which the Land and its future is the principal subject of the whole of Scripture — a truth sadly obscured by the very pagan concern expressed for centuries by churches, the concern for the departure of the soul to heaven. After all, who really cares about the Land, if the Christian destiny and destination is a supercelestial dwelling, in disembodied form, far removed from the burdens of time and space?

It was the Land of the Promise which provided the Patriarch and proto-Christian Abraham with his temporary dwelling as an alien and stranger — a kind of spiritual tourist. But it was that *same* Land of the Promise which he expected to occupy one day forever. At that future time Abraham would not only live in the Land. He would possess it forever. The land was

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his reward and his divinely-guaranteed inheritance. The terms of God's covenant with Abraham are utterly clear and totally relevant to New Testament faith. In Hebrews we read as follows: "By faith [true believing] Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a *place* which he was to receive as an inheritance, and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he resided as an alien [a resident alien, "green-card" person] in the Land of the Promise as in a foreign country, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob who were fellow heirs of the same Promise. He was looking forward to the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God...These all died without receiving the Promises, but having seen them from a distance and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles in the Land" (Heb. 11:8-10, 13). "We are looking for the city which is to *come*" (Heb. 13:14).

We caution our readers against defacing this matchless account by imposing on it a hope of "heaven" as a place removed from this planet. We suggest wiping the mind clean of the false ecclesiastical tradition which has made intelligent Bible study highly problematic — when it comes to understanding biblical Hope. What Scripture tells us above is that Abraham actually lived in the Promised Land, the Land which God had promised to him as his inheritance. But he lived there as a foreigner, since he obtained no ownership of his inheritance during his lifetime. He died, as did the other patriarchs, in full faith and hope that he and they would be resurrected to take complete possession of their rightful inheritance, the Land of the Promise, in which he had lived temporarily.

So to whom belongs the Land? The Promised Land of Israel is without a shadow of a doubt the reward and inheritance of the faithful, of whom Abraham is the model and prototype. Hebrews is written, as were Romans and Galatians, to believers in Jesus as the Messiah and to no others. These books were not addressed to the *unconverted* Jew, though the latter would have claimed and still claims

Abraham as his spiritual father. Abraham is reckoned as one who believed the Christian Gospel (Gal. 3:8). Jews in general have not accepted Jesus as their Messiah.

Grasping the teaching of the Bible on the vital issue of the Land is one of several essential unifying factors urgently needed both in divided Christendom and also amongst the divided Jews and Arabs. God is the owner of all land. God is the one who disposes of the Land of the Promise as He wishes. God has already promised the Land to the seed of Abraham by an inviolable covenant (Gen. 12:1, 7; 13:14, 15; 15:1-7, 18-21; 17:7, 8).

But who today, according to Scripture, qualify as the "seed of Abraham"?

It is at this point that some popular belief systems cause a radical confusion. Armed with a verse in Genesis — "I will bless those who bless you [Abraham] and the one who curses you I will curse" — it is loudly proclaimed that Christians today must be careful to bless the national Jew. The Jews of modern Israel, it is argued, are the seed of Abraham and to oppose them would be contrary to the divine instruction in Genesis 12:3. Some even believe that Jews are almost incapable of political mistake when it comes to possession of the land of Israel.

This point of view misses a fundamental premise of New Testament Christianity. Jesus preached long and hard to Jews in an effort to convince them that, apart from loyal acceptance of, and obedience to, *himself as the Promised Messiah*, they had no hope of success before God. The New Testament is a document dedicated to that very point. And the Old Testament is to be read in the light of the New. There is really no excuse for not understanding the biblical definition of the "seed of Abraham." "If you are a Christian," writes Paul, "then you are Abraham's seed and heirs [of the Land/Kingdom] according to the terms of the Promise" (Gal. 3:29). And the promise was never anything other than the Land — the possession of the Land forever. Jesus was no less clear than Paul. "Blessed are the meek," he says to his Christian disciples, "they are the ones who will

possess and inherit the Land” (Matt. 5:5; citing Psalm 37:11).

The Land belongs to God and to His Messiah Jesus, and Jesus will share his inheritance with the faithful — with the Father of the faithful, Abraham (Rom. 4:11, 12, 16) and with all true believers who now constitute the legal and spiritual seed of Abraham.

A number of most unfortunate developments in the early centuries of Christian history conspired to make our subject difficult. Firstly, post-biblical, Greek philosophically influenced “church fathers” abandoned the biblical reward of the Land renewed. They made the Promise of the Land meaningless by introducing the pagan idea of “heaven” at death for “departed souls” as the reward of the faithful. This development was in collision with the plain words of Jesus in Matthew 5:5 and Revelation 5:10 that the Christian objective is to possess the Land with Jesus and reign in it..

The denial of the Abrahamic Land Promise to Christians divided Abraham from his spiritual children and deprived Jesus of his status as *the* heir to the promise of the Land. Jesus was the “one to whom the Promise [of the Land] had been made” (Gal. 3:19). Abraham was also the recipient of “the Promise that he would be heir to the world” (Rom. 4:13). It makes no difference whether one speaks of inheriting the Land, the earth, the world or the Kingdom of God, the location of the Christian destiny is the same — this planet renewed and restored by the presence of the Messiah, who is going to come back to the earth to resurrect the faithful dead of all the ages (I Cor. 15:23) and take up his position as controller of the Land.

The unconverted Jew remains, tragically, outside the pale of God’s covenant. If Paul is taken as our standard, it is clear that he saw no hope for his fellow countrymen apart from their acceptance of Jesus as their and the world’s Messiah. It is to make nonsense of the biblical

revelation to maintain, on the basis of the Bible, that Jews who have not accepted the Messiah are now entitled to the blessing of the Promised Land. Surely it is clear that expulsion and exile from the land was the penalty for disobedience which struck the Jews with such terrible power. The penalty was enacted by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC and again by Titus in AD 70.

But there is something else to be said. According to the prophetic vision of the prophets and to Paul (notably in Rom. 11) there is to be a successful *future* for national Israel, when a

remnant of the people, collectively, turn to Jesus for salvation when he comes to rescue them from the Great Tribulation. To that *future* remnant of repentant, ethnic Jews (not *every* Jew just by virtue of being Jewish) the

Land will also one day belong. It will belong to them because God has promised it to them upon repentance and obedience to the Lord Messiah (who, they should be encouraged to learn, is the Lord *Messiah* — not the Lord God Himself, but His agent — Ps. 110:1).

But today, outside Christ, the Jew has no divine right to the Land. The prophet Hosea lamented the fact that God had dismissed Israel from His favor: “And the Lord said, ‘Name him Lo-Ammi [‘not My People’], for you are *not* My People and I am *not* Your God” (Hos. 1:9). This tragic rejection for unfaithfulness was to continue until the happy day when it will be said: “You are the Sons of the Living God” (Hos. 1:10).

From the moment of rejection of the natural seed of Abraham, because of disobedience, the way was opened for the *spiritual seed* of Abraham to arise (Gal. 3:29). Jesus was the principal recipient of the Abrahamic Blessings and Promises (Gal. 3:19). As the “Seed to whom the Promises had been made” Jesus, with his Gospel of the Kingdom, invited first Jews then Gentiles to join the ranks of the true seed of Abraham. Individual Jews may of course repent and join the Messianic community of believers at

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any time. The Gospel is for everyone irrespective of national origin. Prophecy holds out the hope that a collective national repentance of Jews will occur just before the arrival of Jesus, and under the terrible pressure of a final “holocaust” referred to by Jesus and Daniel as the Great Tribulation (Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:21).

To argue *from the Bible* that the Land now belongs, as of divine right, to Jews currently residing in Israel is to argue in vain. No text grants the land blessing of Abraham to Jews who remain in violation of the New Covenant introduced by the death of Jesus. To argue contemporary politics from the Bible is equally wrong. Neither Arab nor Jew can make a special claim to the Land *now*, based on the Bible. A Jew outside the covenant can expect no special favor from God. Why should national Israel expect to dwell happily in the Land when the disobedience which originally caused their exile persists? It is true, of course, that Jews have returned to the land in some numbers, but it is a return in unbelief. The Bible speaks extensively of their ultimate return in a condition of belief in and acceptance of the Messiah. This has not yet happened. There will be no permanent settlement of affairs in the Land while unbelief persists.

An Arab *Christian* or a Jewish *Christian* can rejoice that he has a right to the land (when Jesus returns, not before) as his Christian inheritance in Messiah. All true Christians are presently heirs with Jesus of the Land of the Promise, the Land of Israel renewed under the Kingdom of David, to be restored when the Messiah comes back (Acts 1:6; 3:21). For that day Christians are to pray “Thy Kingdom come” and expect to “reign as Kings upon the Land” (Rev. 5:10). Truly, as Paul said, we are to rejoice in the Hope of the glory of God. Glory is a well-established New Testament synonym for the coming Kingdom (cp. Matt. 20:21 and Mark 10:37, where glory and Kingdom interchange).

Hatred or prejudice in favor of one national entity over another is decried by the Bible. A recent insane “wake-up call for America to kill Jews” shows how desperately impoverished is

our educational system when it comes to the matter of sound-minded appreciation of the good in every nation. Certainly Paul said that Jews were honored in a special way by God who had granted them “the oracles of God.” With that high privilege comes responsibility. Similarly those who have become followers of Jesus as the Messiah are the ones “to whom much is given and of whom much is expected.” Paul cautioned us Gentile Christians not to be arrogant. We are to understand that by the grace of God we have been grafted into the rich Olive Tree of Israel in order to become recipients of the promise of the Land given to Abraham and us in Christ. God has in fact created a new man. In the new Christian society matters of national origin are unimportant. Collectively the church can rejoice in the honorable title conferred upon it — the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16), the true circumcision, i.e. the real Jew (Phil. 3:3).

Jesus was *the Jew*, the Messiah promised to Israel and the King-Savior of the world. He offers all who accept his Gospel of the Kingdom a share in his coming Kingdom. The Kingdom inheritance is simply the same as the Land-Inheritance granted to Abraham forever. Thus Jesus alternates the Kingdom and the Land: “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs [by Promise] is the Kingdom of Heaven...Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the Land” (Matt. 5:3, 5).

The pervasive element of paganism which entered the faith in post-biblical times substituted “heaven” for Kingdom of Heaven, dropping the critically important theme of all New Testament Gospel preaching — the coming Kingdom.

If students of the Bible desire to read “the Book” with clarity, they will drop the notion of “heaven for souls” entirely. They should complain persistently (and kindly) when others speak of “going to heaven,” “going home to heaven to be with the Lord,” etc. A revolution is necessary. The clocks must be put back. Protestants particularly should be interested to know that they are following Roman Catholicism blindly when they subscribe to the pagan notion of the “departed soul.” Christians can come into the

presence of Jesus only by means of the future resurrection of the dead, or by surviving until the day of the Second Coming. At present there is no “heaven” for the departed soul and no torturing hell for the wicked. The Christian dead are asleep in the grave awaiting the arrival of Jesus to rouse them from death and bring them into the promised Kingdom on earth. The implications of this teaching are far-reaching. All prayer to Mary in heaven is a dangerous paganism without a word of authorization from the Bible. All assurances of the faithful dead having survived as “souls” in heaven at the point of death are false — a mere relic of paganism beloved of Gentiles, but foreign to the religion of Jesus. Faith means believing the words of Jesus and these are plain enough: “The meek are going to have the [renewed] earth as their inheritance” (Matt. 5:5).

First Lady Hillary Clinton declared recently that “Jerusalem is the eternal and indivisible capital of Israel” (in a letter to *Ha’Aretz*). Her sentiment is excellent as a presentation of the biblical promise of the Kingdom of God when the Messiah comes back. As a statement about the rights of Jews outside the Christian covenant *now* it is most problematic and might even inflame false political hopes in both Arabs and Jews.

Jesus knew best: “Blessed are the meek for they will have the Land as their inheritance” — but not yet. ✧

Who Is Jesus?

...according to a number of significant biblical scholars and reference works

Our purpose below is to alert the Christian public to a serious problem of definition. It concerns the very identity of Jesus himself. It is patently false (though often alleged) that only a Jehovah’s Witness or a Mormon is unwilling to say “Jesus is God.” The facts are that biblical scholars, ancient and modern, and of all denominations, do not agree at all that the statement “*Jesus is God*” represents the Bible accurately.

One may continue to believe that only the ignorant “cultist” who has been brain-washed into believing “heresy” objects to the proposition “Jesus is God.” The quotations gathered below demonstrate to the fair-minded that the “Deity of Jesus” needs much more careful examination than it is presently given. After all, Jesus was a Jew who affirmed the creed of Israel (Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:28ff.) It would be unwise for those who claim to follow Jesus to depart from his teaching in the fundamental issue of who God and Jesus are. Did Jesus, the Jew, and the instigator of New Testament faith, really claim to be God while at the same time assuring the Jews that he believed with them that God is a single Person?

Americans particularly should be challenged by the words of former President Jefferson. He was neither a Mormon nor a Jehovah’s Witness.

The quotations below contain statements by some who claimed to believe in the Trinity. Their admissions about the identity of Jesus are all the more telling.

We start with an individual whom many in the USA admire for his impressive contribution as the author of one of the greatest political documents, the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson was a recognized historian of the history of Christian ideas. Here is an excerpt from a letter that he wrote to James Smith on December 8, 1822:

“Hear, O Israel, YHWH our God is one LORD” (Deut. 6:4), the Shema, the creed of Israel.

“No historical fact is better established, than that the doctrine of one God, pure and uncompounded, was that of the early ages of Christianity...Nor was the unity of the Supreme Being ousted from the Christian creed by the force of reason, but by the sword of civil government, wielded at the will of the fanatic Athanasius. The hocus-pocus phantasm of a God like Cerberus, with one body and three heads, had its birth and growth in the blood of thousands of martyrs...The Athanasian paradox that one is three, and three but one, is so incomprehensible to the human mind, that no candid man can say that he has any idea of it, and how can he believe what presents no idea? He who thinks he does, only deceives himself. He proves, also, that man, once surrendering his reason, has no remaining guard against absurdities the most monstrous, and like a ship without rudder, is the sport of every wind. With such person, gullibility which they call faith, takes the helm from the hand of reason, and the mind becomes a wreck.”

In the 1670s, Sir Isaac Newton devoted much attention to the question of the Trinity. He concluded that the doctrine was foisted on the church by Athanasius in order to swell numbers and fill coffers. He believed that the Bible had prophesied the rise of Trinitarianism (“this strange religion of the West,” the cult of three equal gods) as the abomination of desolation (*The Rise of Science and Decline of Orthodox Christianity: A Study of Kepler, Descartes and Newton*).

After Newton, others such as Matthew Tindal, John Toland, Gottfried Arnold, Goerg Walch, Giovanni But, Henry Noris and Hermann Reimarus argued that Jesus is presented as the Son of God, not God. They did much to free their readers from the vise-like grip of unexamined dogma.

Theologian Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889) saw the doctrine of the Trinity as flagrantly Hellenistic. He wrote that “it had corrupted the Christian message by introducing an alien layer of metaphysical concepts derived from the natural philosophy of the Greeks, and it had nothing to do with early Christianity.”

“Jesus Christ never mentioned such a phenomenon, and nowhere in the New Testament does the word ‘Trinity’ appear. The idea was only adopted by the church three hundred years after the

death of our Lord” (historian Arthur Weigall, *The Paganism in Our Christianity*).

“Anyone who can worship a Trinity and insist that his religion is monotheistic can believe anything” (Robert A. Heinlein).

“The New Testament writers...give us no formal or formulated doctrine of the Trinity, no explicit teaching that in one God there are three co-equal divine persons...Nowhere do we find any Trinitarian doctrine of three distinct subjects of divine life and activity in the same Godhead” (Jesuit scholar, Fortman).

Protestant theologian Karl Barth said: “The Bible lacks the express declaration that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are of equal essence.”

Yale University professor E. Washburn Hopkins: “To Jesus and Paul the doctrine of the Trinity was apparently unknown...they say nothing about it” (*Origin and Evolution of Religion*).

Christian scholar Tom Harpur in *For Christ's Sake*: “As early as the 8th century, the theologian St. John of Damascus frankly admitted **what every modern critical scholar of the New Testament now realizes**; that neither the doctrine of the Trinity nor that of the two natures of Jesus Christ is explicitly set out in Scripture. In fact, if you take the record as it is and avoid reading back into it the dogmatic definitions of a latter age, you cannot find what is traditionally regarded as orthodox Christianity in the Bible at all.”

“You simply cannot find the doctrine of the Trinity set out anywhere in the Bible. St. Paul has the highest view of Jesus’ role and person, but nowhere does he call him God. Nor does Jesus himself explicitly claim to be the second person of the Trinity, wholly equal to his heavenly Father” (*For Christ's Sake*, Tom Harpur).

A German professor of biblical languages, J.D. Michaelis, stated: “It cannot be proved, out of the whole number of passages in the Old Testament in which the Holy Spirit is mentioned, that it is a distinct person in the Godhead.”

Colin Brown, Systematic Theologian of the conservative Fuller Seminary in California, wrote: “To be called Son of God in the Bible means that you are not God” (*Ex Auditu*, 7, 1991).

“Jesus is not God but God’s representative, and, as such, so completely and totally acts on God’s behalf that he stands in God’s stead before the world...The gospel [of John] clearly states that God and Jesus are not to be understood as identical

persons, as in 14:28, 'the Father is greater than I'" (Professor Jacob Jervell, *Jesus in the Gospel of John*, 1984, p. 21).

"Apparently Paul did not call Jesus God" (Sydney Cave, D.D., *Doctrine of the Person of Christ*).

"Paul habitually differentiates Christ from God" (C.J. Cadoux, *A Pilgrim's Further Progress*).

"Paul never equates Jesus with God" (W.R. Matthews, *The Problem of Christ in the 20th Century*, Maurice Lecture)

"Paul never gives to Christ the name or description of 'God'" (*Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*).

"When the New Testament writers speak of Jesus Christ, they do not speak of Him nor do they think of Him as God" (J.M. Creed, *The Divinity of Jesus Christ*).

Karl Rahner (a leading Roman Catholic spokesman) points out with so much emphasis "that the Son in the New Testament is never described as 'ho theos' [God]" (A.T. Hanson, *Grace and Truth*, p. 66).

"The clear evidence of John is that Jesus refuses the claim to be God...Jesus vigorously denied the blasphemy of being God or His substitute" (J.A.T. Robinson, *Twelve More New Testament Studies*)

"In his post-resurrection heavenly life, Jesus is portrayed as retaining a personal individuality every bit as distinct and separate from the person of God as was his in his life on earth as the terrestrial Jesus. Alongside God and compared with God, he appears, indeed, as yet another heavenly being in God's heavenly court, just as the angels were; though as God's Son, he stands in a different category, and ranks far above them" (G.A. Boobyer, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*)

"What, however, is said of his life and functions as the celestial Christ neither means nor implies that in divine status he stands on a par with God Himself and is fully God. On the contrary, in the New Testament picture of his heavenly person and ministry we behold a figure both separate from and subordinate to God" (*Ibid.*).

"The fact has to be faced that New Testament research over, say, the last thirty or forty years has been leading an increasing number of reputable New Testament scholars to the conclusion that Jesus...certainly never believed himself to be God" (*Ibid.*).

"When [first-century Christians] assigned Jesus such honorific titles as Christ, Son of Man, Son of God and Lord, these were ways of saying not that he was God but that he did God's work" (*Ibid.*).

"The ancients made a wrong use of [John 10:30 —'I and the Father are one'] to prove that Christ is...of the same essence with the Father. For Christ does not argue about the unity of substance, but about the agreement that he has with the Father" (John Calvin, *Commentary on John*).

The above quotations should dispel forever the popular notion that the objection to Jesus being "God," without further explanation, derives from ignorance or failure to examine the Bible with care and skill. The fact of a divided Christendom points to a radical disunity of belief. A giant step could be taken in a return to the faith of Jesus when we accept him by accepting his definition of God. Jesus and Paul both believed that God was a single Person (John 17:3; 5:44; Mark 12:28ff.; I Cor 8:4-6). ✧

Comments

"Our recent Bible study topic for at least two of the small groups in our church has been the Kingdom of God. In studying the Kingdom, numerous conclusions become clear very quickly...The Kingdom of God was a major facet of Jesus' teachings and Jesus did not correct the understanding of John and James that positions of honor will be granted to the faithful in the coming Kingdom" (Texas).

The book which provided the basis for these studies was our The Coming Kingdom of the Messiah: A Solution to the Riddle of the New Testament. We are about to publish a much longer study on the biblical doctrine of the Kingdom and its central place in the Gospel. It is entitled, Our Fathers who Aren't in Heaven: The Forgotten Christianity of Jesus the Jew.

Atlanta Bible College will provide a forum for the discussion of the identity of Jesus, God and the Gospel at our annual **Theological Conference** to be held at Atlanta Bible College, Morrow, GA (800-347-4261) from February 11-13, 2000. Atlanta Bible College is conveniently located to Hartsfield Airport and transportation to the college will be provided. The conference provides a unique opportunity to meet other Truth-seeking believers.