

Searching For Israel (Part One): The Promises To The Faithful

by Charles Whitaker

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Nowadays, everyone from grammar school pupils to graduate students use "search criteria" to locate information quickly on the Internet. Search criteria are those "signposts" a search engine uses to locate websites. For example, if I wanted a good recipe for my favorite pie, my "search criteria" would be the words *recipe*, *rhubarb*; and *pie*. I input those words, and Google responded with 22,200 sites—and more recipes than a thousand pastry chefs could easily whip up (as well as a whole lot of other stuff I could not or would not eat!). Unless one is well-experienced in the use of search criteria, his "net" can garner far more fish than he can fry.

That is not at all how it is with the "search criteria" God provides students of His Word seeking to learn the identity of modern-day Israel. For those "who have eyes to see," the search criteria He provides will not yield junk results. Rather, they will pinpoint only one group of people—the *real* people of Israel.

Here are the search criteria. Modern-day Israelites will be

1. *Multitudes of peoples*, living in
2. *a nation and a company of nations—multitudes of nations*, whose
3. *geographic focus* lies to the north and west of Jerusalem, but whose
4. *lands spread* to all compass points. Israel's people own
5. *possessions* over rivers, across seas, in the islands and coastlands. At least some tribes of Israel will enjoy wide-spread
6. *wealth and prosperity* and will possess
7. *gates*, that is, strategic commercial and military positions, in the midst of their enemies. They are a people who have been
8. *ruled* without interruption by a monarchy whose roots lie in the tribe of Judah. That monarchy will be
9. *currently centered in Britain*. Finally, they are a people whose
10. *dominance*, politically, militarily, and economically, did not begin until about AD 1802.

Ten in all. Ten specific, easy-to-grasp identifiers—or markers, if you will—of the whereabouts of modern-day Israel. True, we are dealing with over three thousand years from the time of Abraham until today. So, it makes sense that not every criterion will be applicable to every period of history. Some criteria will have more application to Israel of yesterday; some will relate to Israel of today;

some to Israel in the Millennium or beyond. Many will have application to more than one period. Nevertheless, all will point straight to Israel!

In this series of twelve articles, we search God's Word and His history for the whereabouts of Israel today. We begin by locating these ten identifiers in God's Word, showing how each one points to Israel. Putting them together, we encounter overwhelming evidence of the whereabouts of God's people Israel—and of God's forethought, care, and purpose for those peoples.

We will find more than that. We will find that God's plan, His purpose, is so tightly linked with Israel, so much part-and-parcel with Israel's history, that when we find Israel, we will also find God. In essence, to search for Israel is to search for God; to find Israel in history is to find God there too.

The Call of Abraham

Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness, you who seek the Lord: Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the hole of the pit from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you; for I called him alone, and blessed him and increased him. (Isaiah 51:1-2)

The book of Genesis records a number of promises God made to the patriarch Abraham. These promises point directly to modern-day Israel. They become, therefore, "search criteria" which will help us identify Israel today. Here are the principal promises God issued to Abraham:

Genesis 12:1-3: God appears to Abraham while he is in Haran, calling him to Canaan:

Get out of your country, from your kindred and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Abram, as his name was at that time, was 75, and he "departed as the Lord had spoken to him" (verse 4), not knowing to what land he was going. The promise at his calling is very general. God particularizes it in a number of iterations. In these further rehearsals, God embellishes this first promise.

Genesis 12:7 records the first of these embellishments: "To your descendants I will give this land." Abraham is in Shechem at this time. The *land* is the focus of this and other restatements of the promise. Because God promises to give it to Abraham *and* his descendants, the land becomes an *inheritance*. In Romans 4:13, the apostle Paul interprets the giving of land to be a reference to the *entire world*. Prophetically, Israel's domain is the whole world.

Genesis 13:14-15 contains another important embellishment: "Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are—northward, southward, eastward, and westward; for all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever." God commits Himself to giving Abraham this land *forever*. The concept of eternity enters the picture early in God's relationship with Abraham.

Genesis 13:16 emphasizes the concept of fecundity. "I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered." God promises to multiply Abraham greatly.

Genesis 15:18-21 provides a detailed delineation of the land God gave to Abraham. The territory extends from the Nile River in Egypt to the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia.

Genesis 17:6: God here repeats His promise of fruitfulness: "I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you." Note the plural forms of the words *nation* and *king*.

Genesis 17:7 is an important iteration of God's promise in Genesis 12:2-3 that Abraham "shall be a blessing": "I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you."

God promises to establish an eternal *covenant* not only with Abraham but also with his descendants. Those descendants are going to be very precious to God. In fact, so close to God are those descendants that the prophet Zechariah refers to them as the apple of God's eye (Zechariah 2:8). Historically, God and Israel are never very far apart.

In **Genesis 17:8**, God reiterates His promise to give land to Abraham's descendants as an *everlasting* possession: "I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

There is an important addition here. The possession of the land is connected with the covenant mentioned in verse 7, where God promises to be the God of Abraham's descendants. Ultimately, those descendants will possess the land as a people worshipping the true God.

Genesis 22:16-18 records God's embellishment of the promise on the occasion of Abraham's "sacrifice" of his son Isaac:

By Myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.

God promises to multiply Abraham and to give him control of strategic military and commercial positions, "gates," in his enemies' territories. As we will see, this promise speaks of the geopolitical advantage God later gave Abraham's descendants. God bases this promise on Abraham's obedience of the command to sacrifice his son, Isaac, a sacrifice God of course stopped just before the knife fell. Note, too, that this promise has the effect of an oath, in that God swears by Himself.

Since this is the last recorded promise to Abraham, it is fitting that God should refer to His first promise, recorded in Genesis 12:1-3. God reminds Abraham of His promise that his seed would be a blessing to all nations. In Galatians 3:16, Paul makes it plain that this "Seed" is Christ. Christ, who is in the lineage of Abraham, blazed a trail by which all peoples could ultimately develop a relationship with the Father. Christ's work makes it possible for God to be our God, according to the promise of Genesis 17:7-8. Christ is indeed a blessing to all nations.

The Other Patriarchs

God restates a number of these promises to Abraham's son, Isaac, as well as to his grandson, Jacob. For example, in Genesis 26:3-5, God harkens back to Abraham when He tells Isaac:

Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and bless you; for to you and your descendants I give all these lands, and I will perform the oath which I swore to Abraham your father. And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your descendants all these lands; and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws.

Notice that God refers to "the oath" (see Genesis 22:16-18) He swore to Isaac's father.

Genesis 28:13-14 records yet another restatement of the promises. These are part of God's comments to Jacob at the occasion of his dream of a ladder reaching to heaven. Jacob is in Bethel at this time.

I am the Lord God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Notice that these promises are the same ones God earlier made to Abraham: land; a multitude of descendants spreading east, west, north, and south; and the "Seed," Jesus Christ, who would bless all nations. It is also extremely important to note that all the earth's families would be blessed "in you *and* in your seed" (emphasis added). Those blessings were to come not only as a result of Jacob's posterity, or even as a result of Christ's work, but of something Jacob *himself* was to do.

Finally, Genesis 35:11-12 restates certain promises God had earlier made to Abraham:

I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you, and kings shall come from your body. The land which I gave Abraham and Isaac I give to you; and to your descendants after you I give this land.

God here reiterates His promise to Abraham, as recorded in Genesis 17:5-6, that he would be a father of kings. God also tells Jacob that from him would descend not only a nation, but also a whole *company* of nations.

Hebrews 11:9 reports that it was "by faith [Abraham] sojourned in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise." These patriarchs of the future people of Israel received the same promises from God and lived in the same faith. Of them, and others after them as well, Hebrews 11:39 speaks eloquently: "And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise."

In God's promises to the patriarchs are a number of "search criteria" describing Israel. Israelites will be eventually organized in one great

» *nation* as well as in a

» *multitude* of other nations. The vast

- » *masses* of Israelites in these nations will enjoy plenty of
- » *land* and
- » *prosperity*. They will also come to occupy the
- » *gates* of their enemies.
- » *Kings* will descend from the patriarchs. These peoples will become a
- » *blessing* to all the nations of the planet.

Helpful as these search criteria are, questions still remain:

- » Do these factors describe Israel past, present, or future?
- » Has God already fulfilled His promises in the context of ancient Israel?
- » Is He fulfilling them today?
- » Is their fulfillment yet future?

As the comedian said, "Timing is everything!" To locate Israel today, we need more detailed search criteria, criteria that have a time-element. As we will see, God has provided time-specific search criteria.

Next month, we continue our quest for search criteria pinpointing the whereabouts of modern-day Israel. We will look at the blessings the patriarchs conferred on their progeny. These blessings, bestowed in faith, have the force of prophecy, and therefore become identifiers of Israel.