A key aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant is the Promised Land. The boundaries of this land are frequently defined in the Bible, often in precise detail. The first reference to the land followed God’s promise in Genesis 12 that a great nation would come from Abram,\(^1\) which would ultimately be the nation of Israel. Abram then began a journey into the land of Canaan, and God told him:

“Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever. . . Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you” (Gen 13:14-15,17).

The extent of the Promised Land, therefore, was based on everywhere that Abraham could see as he walked during his journey. Back in chapter 11 we are told that He was originally from the city of Ur, which is in the south of modern-day Iraq. But he had relocated to Haran, which is now just over the border from Iraq into Turkey, and a short distance northeast of the Euphrates River. That is where God declared the Abrahamic Covenant to him, and it is where he began his journey, walking throughout the land of Canaan and seeing the lands that would establish the boundaries of the future Promised Land.

He also made a diversion to Egypt to escape a famine in the land of Canaan. Without that famine, it is likely that he would have stayed more centrally in the land of Canaan and wouldn’t have ventured all the way across the Negev and Sinai wilderness areas. But by going to Egypt, it meant seeing with his own eyes the western-most boundary of the land of Canaan, thus gaining entitlement to the full territory.

In Genesis 15, God finalized the covenant by declaring the specific boundaries allotted for the nation that would later arise from Abram:

On that day Adonai made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen 15:18).

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\(^1\) His name was later changed to Abraham in Genesis 17:5.
It is generally believed that the “river of Egypt” is a reference to the Wadi El Arish a river valley that separates Egypt from the land of Canaan. The northeastern border of the Promised Land is the headwaters of the Euphrates River where Abram began his journey. Then in Genesis 15:19-20, God confirmed the extent of the rest of the territory by describing all of the Canaanite tribal lands that He was giving to Israel.

As the book of Joshua begins, God made it clear that the Promised Land extended to what is now called the Mediterranean Sea:

“Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given it to you, just as I spoke to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon, even as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and as far as the Great Sea toward the setting of the sun, will be your territory”

(Jos 1:3-4).

Therefore, by taking into account where Abram walked on his journey, where the Canaanite tribes were located, and the specified water boundaries, we are given a rather complete sense of the extent of the land that God

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2 Later, in Exodus 23:31, God made it clear that the southern boundary extended all the way to the Red Sea.
3 Each of the tribal lands have been identified, with the exception of the Kenizzites who possibly lived on the border of modern-day Saudi Arabia.
promised to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

What happened next, however, was not the acquisition of the entirety of that mandate. In Numbers 34, God gave instructions regarding the extent of the Promised Land that the Israelites were to claim initially, and He gave very detailed boundaries for them to follow. Later, when they actually entered the land, the twelve tribes of Israel were assigned specific territories within those boundaries. In fact the description is so precise that seven full chapters of Joshua (nearly one-third of the book) are dedicated to those boundaries, which makes it clear that they didn’t dwell on the full Promised Land.

Under David and Solomon the kingdom of Israel was extended to all of the borders originally designated by God (1 Ki 8:65), with two exceptions. Shortly after the tribe of Judah entered the Promised Land in the south and took possession of the region of Gaza, that coastal strip was invaded by the Philistines, who came by ships, and Judah lost that territory. Afterward it was never taken back by Judah or later by the kingdom of Israel under David and Solomon. Likewise, the northern coastal region inhabited by the Phoenicians was never taken. So while David and Solomon came very close, there has never been a time when Israel possessed the entire Promised Land.

As time passed, the borders began shrinking, with the dividing of the kingdom, and
then losing territory by being conquered by Assyria and Babylon, followed by Greece and Rome. After the failed Bar Kokhba rebellion against Rome in 135 A.D., Jewish possession of the Promised Land came to a complete end. All of it had been lost.

But the promise was never forgotten. Jewish people scattered around the world maintained hope for a restoration of their homeland. That dream was expressed in a poem written by a Polish Jew, Naftali Imber, in 1877:

As long as within the heart
A Jewish soul still yearns,
And onward toward the East,
An eye still watches toward Zion.
Our hope has not yet been lost,
The two thousand year-old hope,
To be a free nation in our own homeland,
The land of Zion and Jerusalem.

71 years later, that poem would become the national anthem of Israel—Hatikvah. But when those words were first written, it was indeed just a hope. At that time, the ancient land of Israel had been part of the Ottoman Empire for nearly 400 years. However the Ottomans made a strategic error when they aligned with Germany in 1914 during the First World War.

Two years later, in 1916, anticipating a victory in the war, British and French leaders made an agreement how to administer the defeated Ottoman territory. Named after the primary negotiators of the two countries, the Sykes-Picot Agreement established official policy that called for France to control the northern part of the empire, and the British to control the south. They could establish states within their respective areas however they saw fit. They also intended for the territory of ancient Israel to have an international administration.

At that time, Arthur Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, had been a strong advocate for the Jewish people, especially those in Russia who had suffered in the physical violence of pogroms in that country. Balfour saw the need for finding a place where Jews could live in
safety, and he was friendly toward those in the Jewish Zionist movement who believed the only suitable place for that home was in the land of their forefathers. The potential demise of the Ottoman Empire in the midst of WW1 presented such an opportunity. In 1917, one year after the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Balfour issued a letter to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community, that expressed the official position of the government in what became known as the Balfour Declaration:

“His Majesty’s government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

In 1920, two years after the war ended, representatives of the victorious allied nations met in San Remo, Italy. They adopted the position of the Balfour Declaration and incorporated it into the official policy for the creation of states from the fallen Ottoman Empire. In keeping with the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, the San Remo Resolution gave France a mandate for the creation of Syria and Lebanon. And Britain received a mandate for the creation of Iraq and Palestine, with the latter being the “national home for the Jewish people” set forth in the Balfour Declaration. The borders of the Jewish state of Palestine were to encompass much of the biblical Promised Land.

But objections arose over the prospects of a Jewish state being restored on the land of their forefathers. Wanting to appease the Arab population in the region who intensely opposed a Jewish homeland, British leaders began backing off their original intentions. So when the League of Nations ratified the Palestine Mandate in 1922, instead of a Jewish state extending close to the biblical Promised Land according to the San Remo Resolution, it was partitioned into two states, a Jewish state called Palestine on the west bank of the Jordan River, and an Arab state called Transjordan on the east bank of the river.
The dividing of the land did not stop there, however. The creation of the new states of Palestine and Transjordan were put on hold for over two decades. During that time, a series of commissions—Peel, Woodhead, Morrison-Grady, UNSCOP—discussed how the remaining portion of the Palestine Mandate could be divided again, with a second Arab state being taken from the Jewish homeland.

Eventually, in 1947, the newly formed United Nations approved a plan in which Jews could have a patchwork state that only included the eastern Galilee, the Jezreel Valley, the northern Mediterranean coast, and the Negev. That meant receiving 13% of the original Jewish homeland that had been determined 25 years earlier.
Remarkably the Jewish leaders approved the plan, even though it was both a small portion of the land originally intended for a Jewish homeland, as well as a token portion of the actual Promised Land in the Bible (shown left).

Arab leaders, on the other hand, rejected the partition plan. The reality is that the Arab world at that time did not want a single inch of land to be a Jewish homeland. And in light of the words and actions that are evident today, it is not difficult to see how that position is still widely held.

In any event, when Israel received its independence in 1948 on those minimal lands, the new nation was immediately invaded by the surrounding Arab countries, who sought to take away every last plot of ground designated for Jews. But that move ended in defeat, and Israel was actually able to regain some of the land that had been taken away by the politicians who went back on their commitment years before. Those borders were ratified in a series of armistice agreements with each of the invading Arab nations the following year.

In the midst of Israel’s War for Independence, Transjordan invaded and gained control of the West Bank of the Jordan River. So in reality, that nation, which was renamed Jordan in 1949, was the one who occupied Palestine. The West Bank was never part of its legal mandate. But, as we have seen, when the territory was first designated in modern times, the West Bank was to be included in the Jewish state, which was called Palestine at that time.
The chronicle of shifting borders has continued ever since, including Israel gaining control of the West Bank when it was attacked again by Arab nations in 1967. And Israel has subsequently relinquished part of that land, with international calls for more changes yet to come. But much of the confusion evident today is that the world neglects all of the legal commitments made prior to 1948, leaving the assumption that the present conflict is entirely a matter of Israel controlling “occupied land.” It is clearly not that simple. We are able, however, to identify several biblical principles that relate to the Promised Land.

**The entitlement of the Promised Land was given permanently**

As part of the Abrahamic Covenant, the land promise shares the overall nature of the covenant, most notably, its permanence. This sense is clearly indicated in the 105th Psalm:

> He is the LORD our God; His judgments are in all the earth. He has remembered His covenant forever, the word which He commanded to a thousand generations, the covenant which He made with Abraham, and His oath to Isaac. Then He confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant, saying, “To you I will give the land of Canaan As the portion of your inheritance” (Ps 105:7-11).

This passage brings out the permanence of the covenant four ways:

- **It is an everlasting covenant.** The Hebrew term *brit olam* (ברית עולם) is a recurring phrase associated with the Abrahamic Covenant” (Gen 17:7,13,19; 1 Chr 16:17). Some people argue that although *olam* normally means “everlasting,” it can also mean “a long time,” thus implying an endpoint of the covenant and the land promise. But in passages that convey the sense of unending perpetuity, additional terms are used to expand the temporal scope. These additional terms of unending permanence are evident in each of the passages associated with the Abrahamic covenant (including the next two points from Ps 105).

- **It is remembered by God forever.** The Hebrew term *ad* (athon)—typically translated as “forever” is used elsewhere to describe the nature of God being without end (i.e. Ex 15:18). The remembrance of God is an expression of reconnection to the initial promise and reconfirmation of its terms. Thus the land promise is reconfirmed without end just as it was declared initially.

- **It endures to a thousand generations.** This phrase is undoubtedly a hyperbolic figure of speech that implies a number that exceeds one’s ability to count. In other words, it is a point that cannot be attained, thus denoting permanence. In other passages related to the Abrahamic Covenant, similar phrases are used, such as “your descendants after you” (Gen 35:12), and “throughout their generations” (Gen 17:9).

- **It is an inheritance,** which implies being passed on from one generation to the next indefinitely, and is especially given in regard to the Promised Land.

Altogether the land aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant is described in such a way in Scripture that it conveys the sense of a promise that remains intact throughout all time.
God’s granting of the Promised Land is a binding legal agreement

The terminology often associated with the Promised Land is consistent with what is found in wills. In these documents, heirs and beneficiaries are identified, and the owner of the estate is free to limit who those heirs may be. Wills describe the inheritance they specifically receive, and the estate does not have to be equally divided. In other words, God is free to bless human beings in different ways and He calls us to different purposes while dwelling on this earth. And the same is true regarding land, so that no amount of jealousy and protesting will alter God’s stated promise.

Wills also remain in effect until they are rescinded or replaced with a new one. There are a number of arguments people use to claim that God has rescinded His will regarding the land. But they can’t cite a direct statement in Scripture because none exist. In fact, the opposite is true because Paul has declared in Romans 10:1 that God has not rejected His people, referring to Israel.

Opponents typically argue there is nothing specifically said about the Promised Land in the New Testament, so that must mean that God has changed His mind. However, that is based on a sense that there are two distinct books of the Old Testament and New Testament, and if something is not mentioned in the latter book, it is no longer relevant. But when Paul writes: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16), he was referring to the Tanakh (Old Testament) because the New Testament had not been written yet, although his words would apply forward to those Scriptures as well.

The point is that in the Bible, once a principle is established by God, He doesn’t abandon it, but the underlying meaning persists throughout time, at times with enhancements made to the way it is accomplished. That is, these principles tend to be deepened without jettisoning the original intent. For example, the Torah (Law) instructed people to “love your neighbor as yourself (Lev 19:18). Later, Yeshua (Jesus) taught that you neighbor included your enemies, not just people you liked (Mat 5:44). But that doesn’t mean you weren’t obligated to stop loving the people you like as well. Enemies, according His teaching, are just added to our friends.

Such is also the case with the inheritance of God’s heirs. It is clear that God has added Gentile believers to His will, promising an eternal inheritance to all who believe in Yeshua (Eph 1:5-18). But He never annulled the provision of His will regarding the entitlement of a specific territory to specific heirs while living on this present earth. One does not preclude the other, just as it is true concerning loving your neighbor and many other biblical matters that are deepened without abandoning the underlying principle.

Our response to God’s stated will is an indicator of our acceptance of His sovereignty over our lives

That does not stop people from disregarding the will of God, however, when it comes to the Promised Land. The way that they act is described perfectly in Psalm 83, which states that the enemies of God “make shrewd plans against Your people [Israel] and conspire together” (v. 3). And they decide to “wipe them out as a nation, that the name of Israel be remembered no more” (v. 4). We are told that their plan is to “possess for ourselves the pastures of God.”

Those words are a very accurate description of what has taken place in our world historically, and will continue to occur. By taking the Promised Land of the Jewish people, indeed by attempting to wipe out the Jewish people, it is a way of doing away with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. No Promised Land and no remnant of the people means there is no
way to fulfill God’s promises to them. And that means the Lord is defeated. So the Adversary, who is the power behind false religions, is the winner. That is why this is such an important spiritual battleground.

Ultimately it comes down to the recognition of the identity of the true God of this universe. And even if you do believe in the God of the Bible, are you willing to let Him exercise His sovereign will over this earth?

The present circumstances are not an indication of the reality of the land promise of the Abrahamic Covenant

There has never been a time in history when God’s promise regarding the land has been completely fulfilled. According to the expressed will of the Creator of the Universe, Abraham was the rightful owner of the full measure of the land that he saw while he walked. But he was never recognized by the people dwelling on those lands as the holder of the deed. The same was true for Abraham’s heir, Isaac, and his heir, Jacob.

Certainly that was the case for the next four centuries while their descendants lived enslaved in Egypt. Surely the inhabitants of Canaan had no clue that the land they were living on at that time actually did not belong to them by divine declaration. And the same was true for Gaza and Phoenicia at the height of the kingdom three centuries later under David and Solomon. And it has been the case in every generation since then. The point is that you can’t look at the circumstances of the day and decide what the ultimate reality is.

We still await the day when God’s promise to Abraham and his descendants will be fulfilled completely as the Lord declared. What will it take for that to happen? Since we live today in a world in which the Bible is not the final authority for most people, the land of Israel, like all other nations, faces administration according to international standards, whether they are biased or not. In light of the present opposition to Israel on the world stage, the return of Yeshua to this earth, and the advent of His Messianic kingdom, is the most realistic and biblically consistent determining factor for the final realization of the Promised Land. The authoritative power of Yeshua is the only way that this world will allow it to happen, because He will win every argument. As a result, we have to look beyond the present circumstances to the way that God views this world and wait upon Him to accomplish His purposes.

We are called to be intercessors for Israel and the Jewish people

When we recognize this spiritual battle centered around the land of Israel, how can we not stand up and join the battle? Failure to do so would be an insult to our loyalty to the Lord, just as it would have been wrong for America to turn its back on two world wars when the innocent were being slaughtered.

But we have to engage this battle using the weapons we have been given by God, namely what is called the “full armor of God” (Eph 6:11). And that includes prayer, especially that which is intercessory in nature (v. 18). It means not praying for yourself, but for others.

That is the nature of the 62nd chapter of Isaiah. It begins with the prophet declaring: “For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not keep quiet.” Unfortunately, that resolve is not shared by many Christians today who go through the day-to-day motions, while being oblivious or indifferent to what is happening. In contrast, Isaiah describes those who are engaged in the battle in a godly way:

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4 Ezekiel 48 describes the boundaries of the millennial kingdom.
"On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have appointed watchmen; all day and all night they will never keep silent. You who remind Adonai, take no rest for yourselves; and give Him no rest until He establishes and makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth" (Isa 62:6,7).

In the Ancient Near East watchmen had the assignment of seeing threats coming upon a city, and alerting those inside to defend it. In the same way, watchmen for Jerusalem are called to identify the threats that come against the Jewish people and the land of Israel, and then calling out to their great defender—Adonai. It means not waiting until it is too late, and as the prophet declares, it is a call to give God no rest.

But it is also a calling with a goal in mind. A day is coming when the Lord will make Jerusalem a praise in the earth. That can only be a day when Yeshua has returned to this earth in glorious fashion, and with the power to rule the nations, including granting the totality of the Promised Land to those God designated as heirs long ago.

In the meantime, Isaiah makes it clear that all believers—“to the end of the earth”—are called to “say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Lo, your salvation comes’” (62:11). Our ultimate calling as watchmen is to intercede for the Jewish people to recognize Yeshua as Messiah and to receive salvation through faith in Him. It is a calling that comes with the promise that one day, “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26).

Let it be said that Adonai, the true and living God, is still a promise keeping God. He has given believers the promise of everlasting life. And Israel still is the Promised Land. Thus we are called to remind God of those promises in our prayers. May we all recognize that we can count on God to do exactly as He has promised, regardless of the apparent circumstances of this world.