



Who Owns the Land? traces the journey of the Jewish people through history and explains the events leading to the current situation in the Middle East. Readers will comprehend the current Middle East conflict in its proper historical context and learn to interpret current events in light of the Bible.

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CONTENTS

Preface	9
1. Contours of Conflict	13
2. A Family Feud Rekindled	17
3. The Jews in Worldwide Dispersion	27
4. Jewish Migrations and Expulsions	39
5. Zionism: Turning Dreams into Drama	61
6. World War II and the Holocaust	79
7. The Tattered Remnant and the New State of Israel	97
8. Israel's Defense and Expansion	119
9. Convulsions from Within: Intifada	133
10. To Whom Does the Land Really Belong?	169
11. Divine Assessment and Promised Restoration	195
Appendix: Chronology	219
Notes	223
Bibliography	239

MAPS

Map 1: British Balfour Declaration Borders, 1917	67
Map 2: Arab Nations Gaining Independence After WWI	68
Map 3: Sykes-Picot Agreement	72
Map 4: Return of Jews to Israel Since 1948	98

Map 5: United Nations Partition of Palestine, 1947	107
Map 6: Israel's Borders Following War of Independence, 1948	116
Map 7: Israel's Borders After the Six-Day War, 1967	124
Map 8: Agreements and Land Transfers (1994–99)	150

CHAPTER 1

CONTOURS OF CONFLICT

Rabbi Harold Kushner told the story of a youngster who came home from Sunday school after being taught the biblical story of Israel crossing the Red Sea. His mother asked him what he had learned, and he told her: “The Israelites got out of Egypt, but Pharaoh and his army chased after them. They got to the Red Sea and couldn’t cross it and the Egyptian army was getting closer. So Moses got on his walkie-talkie, the Israeli air force bombed the Egyptians, and the Israeli navy built a pontoon bridge so the people could cross.” The mother was shocked. “Is that the way they taught you the story?” she asked. “Well no,” the boy admitted, “but if I told you what they told us, you’d never believe it.”¹

The same might be said of the whole history of Israel. Much of it is laced with the unbelievable. Modern Israel seems to share that heritage in remarkable ways. The unbelievable has almost become commonplace—and is usually accompanied by conflict. Few nations have found themselves so continuously in that maelstrom.

To appreciate the dilemma and catch the mood of the present drama, let’s recall several significant datelines from modern times

that have raised eyebrows around the globe, fastening world attention on this small slice of land.

Dateline: London, November 2, 1917. The Balfour Declaration pledges British support for the Zionists' goal of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. This pledge becomes part of the British Mandate and is ratified by the League of Nations on September 29, 1922. Highly irritated, the World Congress of Arabs unites in Cairo to denounce and reject the document on October 11, 1938. This they do on the basis of earlier promises made to Sherif Hussein that Britain would help the Arabs establish independent states in the Middle East. The vagueness of these promises sets the stage for inevitable clashes in the following years.

Dateline: Lake Success, New York, November 29, 1947. Partitioning of Palestine receives a two-thirds majority vote by the United Nations and is to take place following the termination of Britain's Mandate over Palestine on May 15, 1948. The partitioning is designed to appease both sides, allowing both Jews and Arabs to establish independent states in the area. This decision is quickly (yet cautiously) accepted by the Jewish Agency, but is adamantly rejected by the Arab League. Arab leaders immediately prepare to take the whole land when the British haul down the Union Jack on May 15.

Dateline: Jerusalem, June 7, 1967. Jordan's attack on Israel backfires and the old city of Jerusalem falls to the Jews for the first time in modern history. The fierce battle and costly triumph bring tears and cheers from Jews worldwide, permitting them to fulfill their ancient dream of "next year in Jerusalem." Arabs are shocked and bitter, especially Jordan's King Hussein. His grandfather, Abdullah, had lost the holy cities of Mecca and Medina to the Saudi dynasty, and now his dream of remaining caretaker of Jerusalem's shrines is shattered.

Dateline: United Nations, November 22, 1967. In a unanimous vote, the United Nations Security Council adopts Resolution 242, calling for Israel's withdrawal from the territories she occupied in

the Six-Day War. But it also calls for the “termination of all claims or states of belligerency,” as well as acknowledgment of the territorial integrity of all states in the region. This is later reaffirmed in Resolution 338. Though most delegates see it as another step toward peace in the area, its promise is overshadowed by the earlier Arab Declaration at Khartoum on September 1, vowing “no peace with Israel, no negotiations with Israel, no recognition of Israel.” Egyptian President Nasser makes it clear his struggle to rid Palestine of the Jews is not subject to compromise.

Dateline: Gaza Strip, October 8, 1987. A Palestinian uprising begins in the Gaza Strip when an Israeli army patrol opens fire on rock-throwing youngsters, killing one and wounding sixteen. Quickly spreading throughout Gaza and the West Bank, this *intifada* begins a new phase of resistance to Israel’s control. Palestinian women and children vent their frustrations by hurling anything resembling a missile, including rocks and Molotov cocktails. The underdog Palestinians successfully snatch world sympathy long held by Israel’s Holocaust victims.

Dateline: Oslo, Norway, September 9, 1993. Following a series of secret negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, Yasser Arafat sends a letter to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin that recognizes Israel’s right to exist as a nation, accepts all UN Security Council resolutions, renounces terrorism, and commits to a peaceful resolution of their conflict. In response, Israel recognized the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people in all negotiations.

Dateline: Camp David, Maryland, July 25, 2000. A fifteen-day summit between Yasser Arafat, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and US President Bill Clinton ends in failure. The peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli crisis that seemed so close at hand evaporates amid charges of intransigence and veiled threats of violence.

Dateline: Jerusalem, September 28, 2000. The smoldering conflict between Israel and the Palestinians reignites when Ariel Sharon

visits the Temple Mount. The Palestinians demand sovereignty over all East Jerusalem, including *Haram al Sharif* (the Temple Mount). They see Ariel Sharon's walk as Israel's response, and they react with violent demonstrations. The second intifada, or *Al-Aqsa intifada*, begins.

Dateline: Gaza, October 7, 2023. More than 3,000 Hamas terrorists launch a surprise attack on Israel's nearby border communities, killing over 1,200 Israelis and taking more than 250 others back into Gaza as hostages. Reeling from the largest mass killing of Jewish individuals since the Holocaust, Israel begins a fierce air, sea, and ground assault to eliminate Hamas.

These datelines point to just some of the conflict and controversy that today beset Israel. Much of it is rooted in her historic relations with the ancient world, the church, and the Arabs. The following chapters highlight a series of dramas in Israel's agonizing history and are aimed at giving perspective and hope to those who long for peace in the volatile Middle East.

CHAPTER 2

A FAMILY FEUD REKINDLED

Our generation is witnessing a family feud that redefines the term. Jews and Arabs have elbowed their way back from past obscurity to grab headlines around the world. Jerusalem, called the “Holy City” and “City of Peace,” nevertheless has been witness to some of history’s bloodiest massacres. That irony has returned to plague our generation as the ancient city has again become the turbulent linchpin of world peace. No peace in the explosive Middle East can ignore the claims of its children.

Both Jews and Arabs trace their national roots to the great patriarch Abraham to whom God promised the land of Canaan. That promise has been their major bone of contention throughout history. Appealing to that promise and claiming property rights by virtue of long residency, each side makes its case on what appears to be legitimate grounds. Neither is less adamant or eloquent in suing for divine and natural rights to the land.

To whom does this little strip of hillside really belong? World opinion is sharply divided, with arbiters at a standoff. Evangelical Christians wonder if a divine movement of cosmic proportions is

shaping up. Stalking across our headlines are peoples with ancient ancestries—Jews, Arabs, Egyptians, Syrians, Lebanese, Iraqis, and now the Iranians, with the Northern and Western giants glowering in the wings . . . the eerie stuff of which end-time prophecies are made. Throw in a dashing white horse and Armageddon suddenly comes to mind.

The purpose of this book, however, is not to resolve the thorny political issues but to suggest how a community of believers should respond to the dilemma. Should we rush to the defense of Israel against those who seem to resist the “fulfillment of prophecy”? Or should our sympathies be with the displaced Palestinians and their Arab cousins who have taken up their cause? As Christians, should we favor the Israelis who openly disdain the messiahship of Jesus, or lean toward the Arabs who respect Him as a prophet but reduce Him to a size smaller than Muhammad (though about 6 percent of Palestinians worldwide identify as Christian)? Or should we simply keep our hands in our pockets and plead neutrality? Tough questions, admittedly. To arrive at legitimate answers, we must identify the major factors that should govern our sympathies.

The answers to those questions must begin with a brief review of Jewish history from ancient times to the present. Few would doubt the immense influence of this people on our society. Though they constitute a minuscule percentage of the world’s population (0.2 percent), their influence on and contributions to the areas of science, medicine, education, religion, philosophy, business, politics, economics, the media and communications, and much more have been astonishing.

Recall, for instance, Albert Einstein the physicist; Baruch Spinoza the philosopher; Rothschild the family of financiers; Chaim Weizmann the World War I chemist; Karl Marx the philosopher and developer of dialectical materialism; Arthur Rubinstein and Vladimir Horowitz the great pianists; Louis Marshall the constitutional lawyer

and jurist; popular comedians from the Marx Brothers to Jerry Seinfeld; Bernard Baruch the financier and planner of the New Deal; and Supreme Court Justices Louis Brandeis and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The field of practical psychology was almost a Jewish science until recently, dominated by such names as Sigmund Freud and the Adlers of Vienna and Prague.¹ Need we mention the many prominent names in the media and film industries today? Charles Singer has compiled a massive list of such Jewish giants in the various arts and sciences.² Few areas of life have escaped their phenomenal influence.

Still, far too often the West, including the church, has treated them horribly. From the destruction of Jerusalem in the first century to recent times, the Jews were a people without a homeland, often living in practical isolation in a Gentile jungle. What brought about their resurgence is a story of many miracles.

This review will briefly trace Jewish history from Bible times, highlighting the events that led to the fall of Jerusalem and the rise of the new state of Israel. The place of the Arabs will also be noted, especially the role of the Palestinians in modern times.

THE DIVINE COVENANTS CONCERNING THE LAND

THE COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

Two Old Testament covenants relate specifically to Israel's divine right to the land of Canaan. The first is the Abrahamic covenant in which the Lord guaranteed the patriarch that his descendants would receive the land as an everlasting possession (Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 17:8). In response to Abraham's plea to make Ishmael the covenant heir, the Lord declared that His covenant promises were nonnegotiable; Ishmael would receive great blessings, but the covenant

promises, including the land, would go to and through Isaac (Gen. 17:18–21). To emphasize this the Lord later met with both Isaac and Jacob to confirm the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 26:3; 28:13). The later prophets further appealed to this covenant to justify Israel’s right to the land as they went in to claim it (Deut. 1:8; 1 Chron. 16:15–18; Neh. 9:8; Ezek. 33:24). Though Abraham only “sojourned” in the land, his descendants were promised the land as an everlasting inheritance.

THE PALESTINIAN COVENANT WITH ISRAEL³

Some six hundred years later, the Palestinian covenant was given to Moses (Deut. 28–30). It confirmed the earlier promise to Abraham as Israel was about to cross the Jordan River into Canaan. In it the Lord itemized the conditions under which His people were to occupy the land. He emphasized that the land belonged to Him; it was His special covenant land that He was giving to His covenant people. Grounded on the Abrahamic covenant, this promise too was unconditional; it guaranteed that the land would eventually belong to Israel forever (Gen. 13:14–15; Ps. 105:9–11). But its benefits were conditional, dependent on Jewish obedience and conduct (Deut. 28:1–68). Should Israel persist in disobedience, the Lord warned He would “[uproot] them from their land in anger, fury, and in great wrath” (Deut. 29:28 NASB). As the Lord’s covenant people, they could occupy the covenant land only if they observed the covenant law. The land itself belonged to the Lord whose name was Jehovah (Yahweh, or “Covenant Lord”).

Though this Palestinian covenant promised discipline and dispersion for disobedience, it also promised restoration whenever the nation would return to the Lord. When “you return to the LORD your God and obey Him . . . then the LORD your God will restore you . . . and will gather you again from all the peoples where the

LORD your God has scattered you” (Deut. 30:2–3 *NASB*). Knowing the people’s propensity for evil and how they would fail miserably in the following centuries, the Lord yet assured them of their final return and restoration after being scattered to “the ends of the earth” (Deut. 30:4 *NASB*).

These final words of Moses to the fledgling nation constituted both a divine warning and encouragement: a warning that unbelief and rebellion would bring the Lord’s judgment through a worldwide scattering; but a promise that repentance would bring final restoration to the land forever. Thus the Abrahamic and Palestinian covenants were Israel’s divine guarantee of the land and became the basis of her later claims.

THE DIVINE EXPULSION OF ISRAEL FROM THE LAND

With such clear promises of divine favor (Deut. 7:6–8; 14:2), one might expect that this chosen people would mature under the Lord’s tutelage to bless the world by holy and righteous living. Surely with the Lord’s corrections they must have overcome their evil tendencies and triumphed in a burst of glory. Anything less would seem to thwart God’s covenant purposes. Weren’t they God’s handpicked people?

They were, but it didn’t. Such a grand finale failed to materialize—how well we know! The very opposite occurred and all their dreams lay in ashes as the pages of the Old Testament closed with scarcely a benediction. Both the Northern and Southern kingdoms had so thoroughly corrupted themselves that righteousness had all but vanished from the land. Consequently the Lord fulfilled His promise of judgment and removed His people from the land.

To evict Israel from the land, the Lord used two of the most vicious nations of ancient history—a punishment in keeping with the vile idolatry the nation had adopted. The brutal Assyrians were the executioners used to clear out the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, and the savage Babylonians purged the southern kingdom of Judah in 586 BC. In that final sweep of the South, the Lord allowed Nebuchadnezzar to demolish both Jerusalem and the sacred temple built by Solomon (Jer. 25:9; 52:12–13).

Thus began the period of Israel’s dispersion among the Gentiles, often called the “times of the Gentiles” (Dan. 2; 7; Luke 21:24). The distinguishing feature of this period is Israel’s subjection to Gentile nations. Instead of the Lord ruling the world through Israel as He had proposed (Deut. 28:13, 44), He would now rule Israel through the Gentiles. That period began with Nebuchadnezzar (605 BC) and was to continue through four projected world empires: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. It will even extend to a brief period of a Revived Roman Empire, just before the Messiah’s return to set up His everlasting kingdom (Dan. 2:44; 7:19–27). Though chosen to be the “head,” Israel became the “tail” by spurning the Lord’s leadership (Deut. 28:13, 44). Thus the nation lost its national sovereignty, and the Jews were scattered among the nations.

GOD’S PURPOSE IN ISRAEL’S DISPERSION

How could this triumph of the heathen over God’s covenant people possibly fulfill the Lord’s purposes? Why allow pagan hordes to conquer the covenant land and seemingly derail God’s grand plan to use the seed of Abraham to bless the world? How do we interpret this apparent upset of the divine appletart? Did these world empires obstruct or frustrate the Lord’s nicely laid covenant plans?

The answer, of course, is that those heathen nations inadvertently fulfilled an agenda other than their own. They unknowingly

served a vital function in the Lord's plan for Israel by culling out the ungodly and making the faithful remnant fight to preserve their faith. Each of these proud empires dutifully played its part. The first kingdom, Babylon, trudged all the way from Mesopotamia to destroy Judah and to remove the remnant to Babylon. Medo-Persia, seventy years later, returned the faithful to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the temple—right on schedule according to Jeremiah's prediction (Jer. 25:12; 29:10). Time and again the Lord proclaimed that He was the one who raised and toppled world empires, in this case to chasten and restore His people Israel (Isa. 45:1–4; 46:11).

The Greeks next conquered the world in 333 BC when Alexander the Great blazed through the Middle East, plunging all the way to India. A zealous “missionary” of Hellenism (also seeking to avenge the Persians' devastation of Greek cities in the previous century) and a student of Aristotle, Alexander spread the gospel of Hellenistic culture, humanistic philosophies, and Zeus worship. This invasion from the West severely tested the remnant of Israel, forcing them to choose between this “new age” movement with its gods of freedom, or the stringencies of their ancient faith. Backed into a corner by Syrian legates after the partitioning of Alexander's empire, the faithful of Israel defied the intruders and rose to new heights of courage and trust in God. In the face of overwhelming odds, the Maccabees assembled a ragtag army and thrust back the Syrian hordes, finally winning a further degree of independence. This inspiring reenactment of the David-versus-Goliath drama called the nation back to her faith and became a timeless inspiration to Israel, remembered even to this day in the eight-day celebration of Hanukkah.

The fourth Gentile kingdom to rule Israel was the “iron” kingdom of Rome (Dan. 2:40). This mighty empire unwittingly prepared the world for the Messiah's coming. The Caesars subdued and unified the globe, making it hostage to Rome; and Herod, the

Idumaeans, subjugated Judea under Rome's patronage. Both governments were strictly self-serving and ungodly, but the policies and programs they pursued readied the world for the Messiah.

ISRAEL'S CONDITION WHEN JESUS APPEARED

How did these Gentile powers prepare Israel for the coming of the Messiah? Their primary purpose admittedly was negative; they forced the people to recognize their need for deliverance. They were an irritant, calling for a remedy. While the Greeks forced the Jews out of their narrow, cultural cocoon and gave the world a universal language into which the Hebrew Scriptures were translated, the Romans provided a universal government with a monitored peace and road system that enabled easy travel—both important keys to the later spread of the gospel. But the greatest contribution to Israel was the energizing of her faith. These pagan empires challenged her faith, forcing her to fight for it, to appreciate it. The tattered flock of Israel—with little else than godly resolve—steeled itself to stand up to the pagan onslaughts of Hellenism.

This also stirred their dreams of a promised deliverer. The people recalled the prophecies of a mighty champion, a Son of David. As Israel watched the conquering Alexanders, Caesars, and Herods, who trounced the righteous in their way, the faithful longed for their promised hero. They dimly saw this greater David waiting in the wings, preparing to come with vengeance to smash their foes. The likes of Goliath, Haman, and Antiochus Epiphanes would fall before him (Isa. 9:7; 63:1–4; Mic. 5:4; Luke 1:71–74). These hopes fired their courage and awakened visions of supremacy over the nations. Such dreams had become national dogma.

In the coming of Jesus, however, the Jewish people failed to find the militant Messiah they had envisioned.

This man was simply not the Messiah they had in mind. Rather

than dashing to their side to slay Goliath with David's sword, Jesus came gently with healing balm to save the sick and sinners. Instead of rising up against Rome, He appeared to join with Rome against the faithful. He welcomed Roman tax collectors and religious outcasts on the basis of simple faith and repentance. He stormed through their temple like a bull in a china shop, violating their lucrative ritual system. He even "desecrated" the Sabbath by performing works of mercy. Worst of all, He forgave sins and accepted praise offered to God. Recognizing that God is One, He claimed to be One with God (Deut. 6:4, cf. John 10:30). Often He confronted them as the "Son of God" of whom the psalmist spoke (Ps. 2:7, 12). In all this He seemed to ignore their political bondage and offered little sympathy concerning their Gentile oppressors.

For this He was rejected by the religious leaders of Israel. He did not measure up to their vision of what the Messiah should be. And the astounding climax came when these religious leaders joined their political enemies to rid the land of this would-be Messiah. Mark tells us the "Pharisees went out and immediately began conspiring with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might put Him to death" (Mark 3:6 *NASB*). These sworn enemies temporarily forgot their squabbling when they judged that the fate of the nation depended on their destroying this pretender (John 11:49–50). In so doing they showed their allegiance with Rome rather than with the prophesied Messiah. At His crucifixion they accepted responsibility for His death, saying, "His blood shall be on us and on our children!" (Matt. 27:25 *NASB*). The final words of the chief priests at Jesus' trial were: "We have no king except Caesar" (John 19:15).

Not a pretty picture, especially for the chosen people. The affair seemed unreal, sordid, like a half-remembered nightmare. Could the trial and death of Jesus have been some clever Passover plot, a hoax perpetrated by this Nazarene and His followers? Might Jesus and His little band have been overzealous to "fulfill" prophecy?

Or could it have been a genuine case of mistaken identity? Could the chosen people themselves have made a mistake of cosmic proportions? A look into the following centuries provides some appalling, but revealing, clues.

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