

Does the promise still hold? Israel and the land: A reply

by [Gary A. Anderson](#) in the [January 13, 2009](#) issue

I am disappointed with Marlin Jeschke's response. Like many Christians, he is so concerned to highlight the universal dimensions of the Abrahamic promise that he neglects the specific promises of God to a single people. For him, the doctrine of election remains a scandal.

Donald E. Wagner is better on this point, but he misreads Uriel Simon's seminal thesis. Simon does not argue that Israel's claim to the land is limited in moral constraints. Abraham, he claims, is deeded the land as an eternal possession by dint of an act of extraordinary generosity (Gen. 13:5-13). Though the grant remains eternal, the way Israel appropriates its terms will depend on embodying this sort of moral ethos. It might be worth noting that Simon is a religious Zionist who is identified with the Israeli left. The goal of his essay (which unfortunately exists only in modern Hebrew) was to show how the claims of religious Zionism can actually serve the interests of peacemaking.

I am grateful for Walter Brueggemann's response, for he has grasped the nettle of God's promises to the Jews and appreciates the force of Simon's proposal. I am puzzled, however, by his emphasis on the loss of the land in 587 BC. First of all, the Old Testament is quite clear that this loss was not eternal and that God has promised to restore Israel to its land and that all the nations of the world will stream to Jerusalem to praise him for it (see Isaiah 2:2-4 and 60:1-7 for classic expressions of this). Indeed, it is precisely the loss of the land that drives the "conditionality" of Simon's thesis. Israel has been deeded the land for all eternity (Gen. 13:15), but that does not mean that Israel is destined to dwell on it forever (so, 587). Its return to and continued inhabitation of that land will depend, in theological terms, on God's grace and Israel's fidelity to the Torah.

God did not countenance a unilateral land-grab in biblical times; nor should we expect him to do so in the present or future. God's gracious gift to Israel does not

cancel out his commitment to rule the world justly (on this, see Genesis 15:16—to live in this land requires a fidelity to the moral law). In terms of realpolitik, Israel's persistence in this land will depend on both a just settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute and a strong military presence. The latter is needed to keep at bay the unmeasurable (and sometimes demonic) hatred many in the Arab and Muslim world have felt toward Israel ever since its founding (Iran president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is not unique)—a hatred, we should remember, that was just as heated before the expropriation of the West Bank in 1967.

[Gary A. Anderson's essay](#)

[Walter Brueggemann's response](#)

[Marlin Jeschke's response](#)

[Donald E. Wagner's response](#)