



## Have to Do With the Gospel?

**F**or decades she put world leaders on the spot, skewering them with blunt, penetrating questions. But it was an outspoken answer she gave which forced 89-year-old Helen Thomas to retire as dean of the White House press corps.

This past May, Thomas, a Lebanese-American who grew up in Detroit was interviewed by Rabbi David F. Nesenoff, a Long Island-based filmmaker. Thomas already had a history, describing Israel as a nation that “oppresses a helpless people with its military power and daily humiliation.”

Responding to questions posed by Nesenoff, Thomas said that Is-

rael should “get the hell out of Palestine.” Her comments and perspective were based on her beliefs regarding the rightful owners of the land. “Remember, these people are occupied and it’s their land. It’s not German, it’s not Poland’s.” When asked where she felt the Jews in Israel should go, she replied “Go home.”

Few issues polarize individuals as much as the tiny sliver of land, barely big enough on most maps, to write the word “Israel.” The issue goes to the heart of religious prejudice and animosity—and at its foundation the argument swirls around ownership of *the land*.

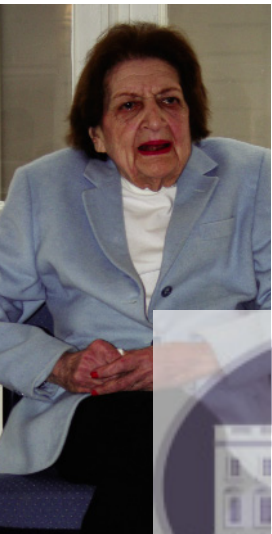
Land use, occupancy and ownership of real estate is an issue de-

cided by national sovereignty (popularly known as “squatter’s rights”); purchase (such as the Louisiana Purchase); statesmanship and diplomacy (Israel was given part of Palestine by the United Nations); and more often than not, the brutality of military force and warfare.

The dilemma of rightful ownership of the real estate known as the nation of Israel is not my focus here. All Christians, to the degree their earthly governments allow them, are free to have opinions about such issues. But we are not free in Christ to categorically claim

PHOTO BELOW BY RACHAEL VOORHEES

**White House Press Corps member and Arab-American Helen Thomas retired abruptly on June 7, 2010, following negative reaction to comments she made about Israel.**



**Thomas and President Gerald Ford, 1976**

**President Barack Obama presenting Thomas cupcakes on her 89th birthday**



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that the gospel of Jesus Christ supports the temporal, political position we choose. There is no biblical justification to dogmatically insist that God has deeded *the land* of Israel—or any piece of real estate anywhere on earth—to any one nation or race.

## The Exodus Story

On January 1, 2011, it will be 51 years since a movie named *Exodus* was released. This fictional but fact-based movie told the story of the emergence of modern-day Israel as a nation on a piece of real estate that many believe the Bible requires to be owned by Jews.

The original soundtrack of *Exodus* was later performed by many different instrumental artists and then Pat Boone composed lyrics to the initial soundtrack:

*This land is mine. God gave this land to me—this brave and ancient land to me.*

*Though I am just a man, when you are by my side, with the help of God, I know I can be strong to make this land our home.*

*If I must fight, I'll fight to make this land our own. Until I die, this land is mine.*

I first saw *Exodus* when I was 13 years old. My understanding of the movie's message was formed by the biblical interpretation I had been taught, or maybe better stated, to which I had been subjected.

I was just like any other young person then or now. Attitudes and opinions are formed by the culture to which young people are exposed. I had been assured that the piece of real estate that was carved out as the sovereign state of Israel in May 1948 was the right of every Jew because the Bible said so. That's what I thought the Bible said because that's what those whom I trusted told me it said.

Turns out, like so many other

things I was told about the Bible and religion, what I was taught was wrong. Many people today continue to believe a false, erroneous biblical interpretation about who God wants to own *the land* in the Middle East.

Again, please understand that I am not addressing your right to have an informed political opinion about the complex issues that are embedded within the topics normally seen as part of 1) the Holy Land, 2) Israel or 3) Palestine.

As a Christian, I believe you should have passionate convictions about this critically important part of the world. However, we should avoid those who would twist and distort the Bible so that it appears to be in alignment with a particular geo-political worldview.

## Dispensationalism and the Land

The presupposition that originally caused me to have unquestioned, nar-

row and exclusive beliefs about the Middle East, and beyond that biblical prophecy in general, was a methodology, an interpretive method called "dispensationalism."

One of the byproducts of dispensationalism is that Christians who accept its perspectives find themselves giving virtually unconditional support to any and all policies of the modern-day State of Israel. Dispensationalism teaches that the Jews are God's chosen people. According to dispensational interpretation of the Bible, God

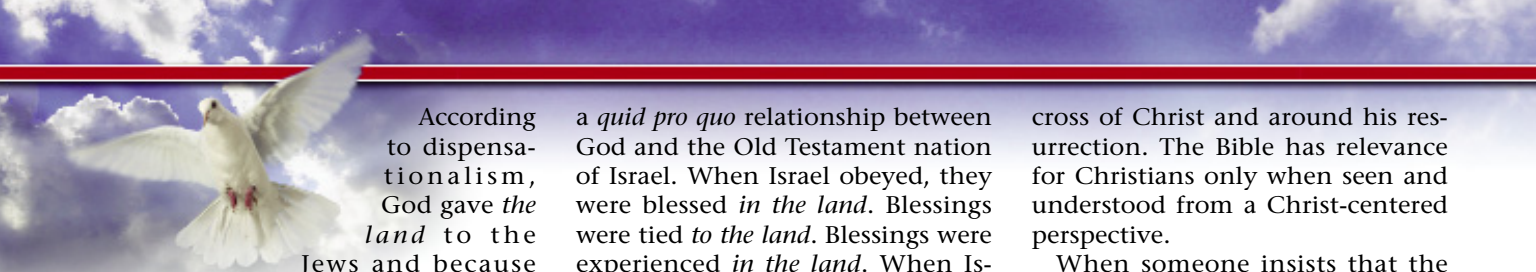
gave the land to the Jews way back in Genesis 15, and God finally gave it back to the Jews in 1948 (depicted by the movie *Exodus*).

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Dispensationalism believes that the founding of the nation of Israel in 1948 was the beginning of the "end times." Ever since May 1948 we've lived in the end times, they say. Based on an obviously flawed interpretation of Mathew 24, dispensationalists said back in the 50's and 60's that the Second



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According to dispensationalism, God gave *the land* to the

Jews and because Christians obey and worship God, we then must support the modern-day nation of Israel without question. According to dispensationalism, the modern-day state of Israel is God's chosen nation. Dispensationalism leads its followers to conclude they must watch the Middle East carefully because that's the way they will know whether the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is near.

Many dispensationalists also believe that "true believers" will be raptured, whisked away to safety so their necks (or other parts of their anatomy) will not be in any way bothered by the tribulation which will come upon this earth.

### The Land—Old Covenant Promise

In Genesis 15 God gives a covenant to Abram, later re-named Abraham. The promise in this particular covenant is that Abram and his descendants would be given *the land* from the River of Egypt to the Euphrates. Of course, both of these rivers still exist today.

In spite of the incredible watershed revolution that Jesus and his cross brought to our relationship with God, those who follow the teachings of dispensationalism believe that this covenant of Genesis 15 is still in force today. They believe that Abram's rightful descendants, whomever they may be, own *that land*. One of the primary components of all of the covenants of the Old Testament and certainly of the Old Covenant itself was *the land*. *The promised land*.

The Old Covenant was based on

a *quid pro quo* relationship between God and the Old Testament nation of Israel. When Israel obeyed, they were blessed *in the land*. Blessings were tied to *the land*. Blessings were experienced *in the land*. When Israel disobeyed their punishment was defined by the degree to which they occupied and enjoyed *the land*. *The land* was the foundation

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of the covenant. Blessings from God which they were given in return for their obedience centered *in and around the land*.

When the nation of Israel obeyed God, then God would give them peace *in the land*. No foreign military powers would occupy *the land*. If they obeyed, *the land* would yield good harvests. The Old Covenant was all about the physical nation of Israel and their obedience. The Old Covenant was all about *the land* God had provided for them.

### A Christ-Centered Focus

When we read and understand the Bible as Christians, we do so from a Christ-centered focus. The Bible revolves around Jesus, around the

cross of Christ and around his resurrection. The Bible has relevance for Christians only when seen and understood from a Christ-centered perspective.

When someone insists that the Bible requires a religious behavior or practice which is outside of our life in Christ, we have to question that teaching. If someone says that Christians have to obey some of the Old Covenant (such as dietary prohibitions, necessity of observing a seventh-day Sabbath, etc.) Christians say "wait a minute."

When someone says that the Bible requires that a particular race owns any specific part of earthly real estate (in the Middle East or anyplace else) Christians must ask "What does the land have to do with the gospel?" The answer is, "nothing at all." When we read the Old Testament as Christians we understand another spiritually deeper layer which God inspired within its pages. We see a Christ-centered focus of all that happened within the Old

Testament.

The covenants of the Old Testament are all about God's plan to save one specific racial group and bring them and their families and children that followed them into a land, *the promised land*. This physical covenant ended at the cross of Christ when the new covenant, in and through the blood of our Lord and Savior by God's grace, was offered to all mankind.

When the Old Testament nation of Israel took over the Promised Land, they had temporary physical rest from their physical enemies. It was all a picture. It was all symbolic of something greater than what they were experiencing physically at that particular time. God had a greater spiritual reality in mind.

Physical rest, which they did experience, and which was for that matter required of them, is not the gospel! *Spiritual rest in Christ is the gospel.*

Sadly many people lose sight of the spiritual reality that we can have in Christ, the risen Lord who will live his life in us if we surrender our own performance-based religion to his amazing grace.

## It's All About Jesus

Under the Old Covenant, if the nation of Israel disobeyed God, then they were punished and the punishments were directly related to *the land* God had promised to them. If they disobeyed *the land* wouldn't yield its harvest, they would have no rain, they would suffer the scourge of warfare and even captivity by a foreign military power.

The absolutely crowning punishment in the Old Testament was exile from *the land* so that they were taken away from *the land* God had promised them to a land far away, *the land* of another nation where they served as captives. *The covenant was all about the land.*

If you read your Bible closely, and certainly if you read it as an authentic Christ-follower, you will know that something earthshaking happened when Jesus came to this earth.

In Galatians, Paul talked about the impact of the New Covenant—the lifegiving, refreshing New Covenant. He talked about how Christians of all nations and all races were now related to their father in the faith, Abraham. “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There's neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:29).

If you live by God's grace, then it doesn't matter what genetic or racial background you might have or what the color of your skin is—it's irrelevant to your relationship

with God. The gospel does not drive us to take political sides in such a way that we see the world as composed of those who agree with us and those who do not.

*It's God's grace that makes us a child of God, not our race.* Where we live and what we look like are irrelevant to God.

*What does the land have to do with the Gospel?* What does real estate have to do with the Gospel? In Philippians 3:20, Paul tells us that our citizenship as children of God (as his newborn, new spiritually born children) is in heaven.

Paul also tells us in Colossians 3:1-2 that since we have been raised with Christ, we should set our hearts on things above—not on land, not on real estate, but on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. So *what does the land have to do with the gospel?* What does any land, what does any real estate or any real property have to do with the gospel?

Our relationship with God is all about Jesus—not a piece of real estate to which we believe we or someone else is entitled. The promises of Abraham are now given to those who are in Christ, irrespective of their religious background or their racial history.

## Heirs of Divine Promises Given to Abraham

Because of the New Covenant, because of the act of love demonstrated towards us and given to us through the cross of Christ, Christians inherit all the promises made to Abraham. The New Covenant is a covenant of the heart and soul,

not of physical externals. The New Covenant is given to the spiritual heirs of Abraham, the New Testament people of God.

*What happens in any nation on any piece of real estate on this earth is completely irrelevant to what God is doing in his kingdom of heaven on earth today.* The New Covenant is a spiritual covenant, a spiritual relationship, all about Jesus, not about human beings, not about land, not about anything physical.

The Old Covenant was physical, transitory and it resulted in death. There was no eternal significance offered by the Old Covenant. It was all about what Israel did or did not do. It was all about *the land.*

As Hebrews 11:8-16 tells us, we

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look for a better country. Our hope is not in our land, our real estate, our bank account or our car (if we have one). Our hope is not in our health. Our hope is not in our possessions. Our hope is in a heavenly city and a heavenly country whose architect and builder is God (Hebrews 11:10). □