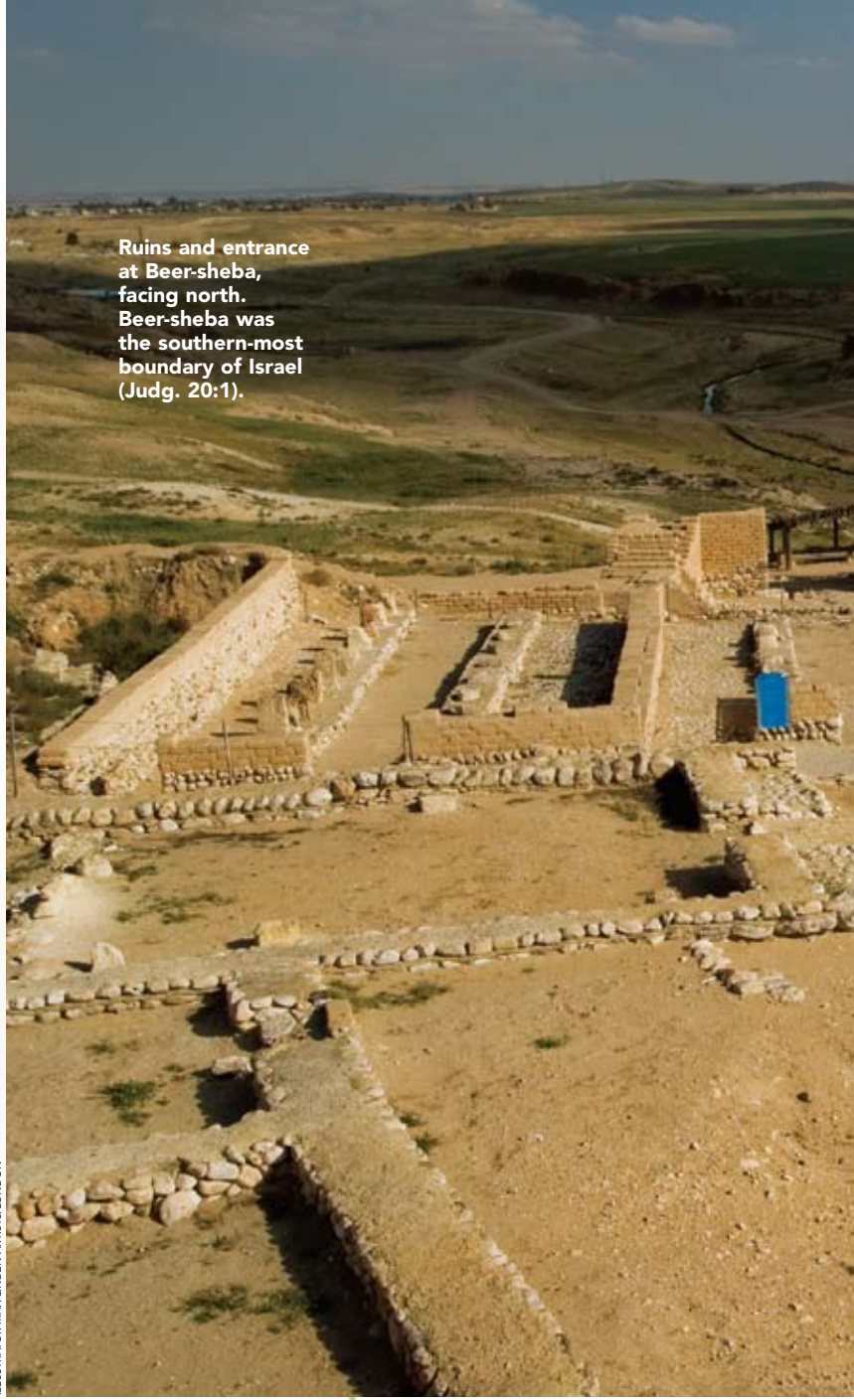




ILLUSTRATOR MAP/UNDEN ARTISTS/LONDON



Ruins and entrance at Beer-sheba, facing north. Beer-sheba was the southern-most boundary of Israel (Judg. 20:1).

Israel's Understanding of the Land



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/KRISTEN HILLER

By D. Larry Gregg, Sr.

AN EXPLORATION OF the relationship between Israel and the land must reflect a balanced understanding of the appropriate tension between two foundational biblical assertions: “All the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever” (Gen. 13:15).¹ And “That the land spew not you out also, when ye defile it, as it spewed out the nations that were before you” (Lev. 18:28). God’s original promise to Abraham must be read through the lens

of the moral and ethical accountability enshrined in the levitical “fine print” of Israel’s covenant with Yahweh. On the threshold of Canaan, Israel faced the stark truth that the privileges and the responsibilities of chosenness came wrapped together in the same package.

Israel and the Covenant

Ancient Israel’s covenant relationship with God was the stack-pole around which the people’s understanding of the land was organized. God said to Abram, “Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s

house, unto a land that I will show thee” (Gen. 12:1). God reaffirmed the promise He made to Abraham by repeating it to Abraham’s son, Isaac (26:3) and to his grandson, Jacob (46:3-4). Finally, Joseph reiterated in his deathbed speech the belief that God had promised a land to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants (50:24). When Moses encountered God in the burning bush, this promise of the ultimate possession of “a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex. 3:8) was behind his being commissioned to lead God’s people to the land that

was their heritage (6:8). This sense of divine promise reached its apex in the covenant at Sinai where God laid down the conditions of relationship and the people swore, “All that the LORD hath spoken we will do” (19:8).

A covenant is an agreement in which all parties share expectations and obligations. Covenants, as opposed to legal contracts, are ethical in nature and depend “solely upon the integrity”² of the covenant partners. Therefore, the enduring viability of such agreements rests upon the *emeth* (Hebrew for “covenant faithfulness”) of all parties. To betray the covenant could lead to suspension, temporarily or permanently, of the relationship.

God warned Israel that when they violated the covenant relationship they “defiled the land” and risked being “vomited” out of it (Lev. 18:25,28; 20:22). Israel’s classical prophets interpreted the people’s eventual expulsion from the land as the illustration *par excellance* of this truth. Ancient Israel’s greatest folly was the assumption that God was obliged to keep His side of the covenant regardless of whether or not they remained faithful. They forgot that the same God who had, in divine grace, declared them to be His people, could also declare to an idolatrous, morally and ethically bankrupt society, “ye are not my people, and I will not be your God” (Hos. 1:9).

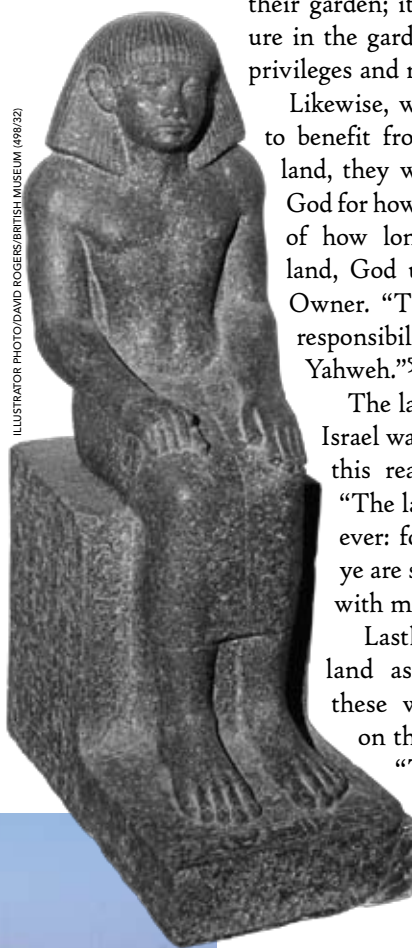
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/PHILIP J. GAFFNEY (32/2/14)

Inherit, Possess, and Rest

Three Hebrew words characterize the nature of Israel’s understanding of the land: *nahala* (inheritance), *ahuzza* (possession), and *menuha* (rest).³ Inheritance here does not simply signify the passage of property from one generation to another on the basis of biological descent. More accurately the image is that of the feudal bestowal by a sovereign lord of land and title upon a dependent vassal. “The emphasis falls on God

Right: Granite figure of Amenemhet, who ruled during Egypt’s 12th Dynasty. His titles are listed on the base of the figure. His 19th cent. B.C. reign fits the time-frame of Joseph’s family being in Egypt.

Below: Ziggurat at Ur, with ruins of tombs in the foreground. King Ur-Nammu of Sumer and his son, Shulgi, oversaw the building of the ziggurat in the 21st cent. B.C. Still standing over 100 feet tall, the ziggurat was part of the temple complex built to honor Nanna, the moon god of ancient Mesopotamia.



as the one who has authority to dispose of land belonging to him.”⁴ While the land may be passed from generation to generation through biological descent, the sovereign lord retains the right to reclaim the inheritance and bestow it upon another if the original recipient or his descendants betray the trust.

“Possession” reaches back to Genesis where God placed the man and woman in the garden and gave them responsibility of caring for it. Eden was not their garden; it was God’s. Their tenure in the garden carried with it both privileges and responsibilities.

Likewise, while the Israelites were to benefit from the blessings of the land, they were also accountable to God for how they used it. Regardless of how long Israel possessed the land, God ultimately remained its Owner. “The land [was] a sacred responsibility of *stewardship* under Yahweh.”⁵

The land God gave to ancient Israel was to be held in trust. For this reason God commanded, “The land shall not be sold for ever: for the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me” (Lev. 25:23).

Lastly, Israel understood the land as “rest.” Joshua spoke these words to the Israelites on the threshold of Canaan: “The LORD your God hath given you rest, and hath given you this land” (Josh. 1:13).

Through the wilderness journey Israel had been sustained by the hope that a day would come when their wandering would cease, their battles would be over, their liberty would be secure, and every man would sit “under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid” (Mic. 4:4). However, such rest and covenant faithfulness remained closely linked. The psalmist warned: “It is a people that



Ruins of a university and tower at Haran. The tower, which stands over 100 feet tall, was used for astrological observations.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (25/11/2)

do err in their heart, and they have not known my ways: Unto whom I swear in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest” (Ps. 95:10-11).

Covenant Faithfulness

Leviticus 18–20 makes clear that the Israelites’ right to inherit, possess, and reside in peace in the land was directly connected to their moral behavior. They were warned that they were called to a higher personal and societal morality than that which existed in Egypt from which they had been delivered, or in Canaan toward which they were traveling. The abuse of sexual relationships, not being charitable, committing human sacrifice, fraud, talebearing, necromancy, and the abuse of the land were all betrayals of trust relationships, either with others or with the environment. The deliberate betrayal of such interpersonal relations constituted a breach of the ultimate covenant with Yahewh. Thus the Lord solemnly warned that as surely as the land was about to spew out the Canaanites for their abominable behavior, the land would also spew out Israel if they refused to abide by the conditions of the covenant. The same God who chose

them and conferred the land upon them was also their Judge. Therefore, “ye shall...keep my statutes, and my judgments: which if a man do, he shall live in them: I am the LORD” (Lev. 18:5).

A Concluding Thought

Many today are scandalized at any suggestion of a connection between human social ethical behavior and the recalcitrance of the environment expressed in natural disaster, disease, climate-change, and the like. While one should always be careful in ascribing such things to God’s judgment on a sinful people, reminding ourselves that our decisions and our conduct, individually and collectively, have consequences is always appropriate. While our eternal salvation is forever secure by our faith in Christ, all that we have in this life may be lost as the consequence of destructive choices, our own or others. We are a fallen people living in a fallen environment where “the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now” (Rom. 8:22). Living in this fallen environment still carries for us, we who are covenant people, both responsibilities and privileges. We must be

careful not to assume that God’s conditional promises are guarantees of perpetual entitlement. Instead, our right to inherit, possess, and rest in the fullness of God’s blessings are contingent upon our willingness to live faithfully within the covenant relationship we have with Him. Living as covenant people should be our goal. Concerning our living on the land, we should remember 1 Peter 2:11, which reaches back to 1 Chronicles 29:15 to remind us that we also are “strangers and pilgrims” accountable to God for our how we live our lives. **B**

1. All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version (KJV).

2. Gary A. Herion, “Covenant” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. in chief David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 289.

3. Waldemar Janzen, “Land” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. in chief David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:144.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 211.

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