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Did God Fulfill Every Good Promise? Toward a Biblical Understanding of Joshua 21:43–45<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction, Purpose, and Format of This Article

In a recent article on Replacement Theology, Mike Vlach summarizes what many who study Scripture know to be the case:

Few theological issues are as hotly debated as the Israel/church issue. It is a constant topic of debate between covenant theologians and dispensationalists . . . At issue is whether the New Testament church replaces, fulfills, and/or displaces national Israel as the people of God. And if so, to what extent does this affect national Israel?<sup>2</sup>

Narrowing down the primary divisive issue between the two theological camps ultimately comes down to one key issue:

The land-promise aspect of God's promise to Abraham, a promise repeated frequently throughout the OT, is the crux of the issue for both critics: to whom does the land of Israel belong? Covenant theologians, in line with their view that the church has replaced Israel in the ongoing program of God, deny that the land-promise to Israel is still valid.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is the condensed from Gregory H. Harris, "Did God Fulfill Every Good Promise?: Toward a Biblical Understanding of Joshua 21:43–45" *The Master's Seminary Journal* 23/1 (Spring 2012), 55–83.

<sup>2</sup> Michael J. Vlach, "Various Forms of Replacement Theology" *The Master's Seminary Journal* 20/1 (Spring 2009), 57. Vlach presents three divisions of replacement theology: (1) "punitive supersessionism," where God punished Israel for rejecting Jesus as Messiah; (2) "economic supersessionism," where it was God's intention all along to replace the promises made to Israel with the church; and (3) "structural supersessionism," which in varying degrees minimizes the Old Testament scriptures (57–69).

<sup>3</sup> Robert L. Thomas, "Dispensationalism's Role in the Public Square" *The Master's Seminary Journal* 20/1 (Spring 2009), 19. Jeffrey L. Townsend, "Fulfillment of the Land Promise in the Old Testament" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142 (October-December 1985), 320, argues that "the nature of the fulfillment of the land promise made to Abraham and his descendants is an eschatological watershed."

The interpretational significance of this land debate must be dealt with carefully, if for no other reason, based on the high frequency of the land passages that occurs in Scripture. Kaiser observes:

In the Old Testament few issues are as important as that of the promise of the land to the patriarchs and the nation of Israel. In fact, אֶרֶץ, “land” is the fourth most frequent substantive in the Hebrew Bible. Were it not for the larger and more comprehensive theme of the total promise with all its multifaceted provisions, the theme of Israel and her land could well serve as the central idea or the organizing rubric for the entire canon.<sup>4</sup>

In a sense this is a by-product of the core question of what hermeneutic should be employed in reference to these promises given by God and will be examined in this paper. However, who owns the land and whether it has any eschatological significance is much more than some “coffee table debate” among theologians because of its far-reaching effects even in national and worldwide political policy.<sup>5</sup>

Many readers of the Bible who hold the fulfillment of the land promises position consider Joshua 21:43–45 to be their proof text clearly showing that God has already fulfilled the land promises given the Jewish people in the Abrahamic Covenant, and consequently one should expect no future fulfillment for either the land or the nation of Israel:

So the LORD gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they possessed it and lived in it. And the LORD gave them rest on every side,

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<sup>4</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Promised Land: A Biblical-Historical View” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (Oct-Dec 1981), 302.

<sup>5</sup> See Timothy P. Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel’s Best Friend* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) for one interpretation of how Dispensationalism affected American foreign policy in the latter part of the twentieth century. For a more hostile attitude to Dispensationalism and broadened to include both the United States and Great Britain, see Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road to Armageddon?* (Leicester Lei 7GP, England: Inter-Varsity, 2004). In response to Sizer’s assessment of Christian Zionism being one of the most powerful and destructive forces in America, see Phil Baty, “Zionism Thesis Stirs Up a Storm,” August 6, 2004 <[timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=1990483&sectioncode=26](http://timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=1990483&sectioncode=26)> and Thomas Ice, “Christian Palestinianism,” July 3, 2009 <[bible-prophecy.toda.blogspot.com/2009/07/christian.palestinianism.html](http://bible-prophecy.toda.blogspot.com/2009/07/christian.palestinianism.html)>. For a less politically motivated approach to this politically hot issue, see Stanley A. Ellisen, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict: Who Owns the Land?* (Portland: Multnomah, 1991).

according to all that He had sworn to their fathers, and no one of all their enemies stood before them; the LORD gave all their enemies into their hand. Not one of the good of the good promises which the LORD had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass.<sup>6</sup>

While at first glance these verses do indeed seem to give credence to such a conclusion that God has already fulfilled all the land promises to Israel, such an interpretation seems to be surprisingly relatively new and growing in popularity, often appearing in Internet chatrooms<sup>7</sup> or blogs and in some rather recently published books.<sup>8</sup>

While by no means limited to them, one of the most vocal groups claiming that God fulfilled the Abrahamic Covenant land promises is New Covenant Theology which “is a relatively new system which, though not yet well defined, attempts to combine strengths of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology and to eliminate the weak points between the two.”<sup>9</sup> With their understanding that the land promises have been fulfilled by the time of Joshua, it would not be surprising that Joshua 21:43–45 would play a vital role in their taking this

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<sup>6</sup> All Scripture references used are from the NASB 1971 edition unless otherwise stipulated.

<sup>7</sup> An example of a posted website referring Joshua and the land promises is Michael D. Marlowe, editor, The Bible Researcher web site. The first part of affirmation #9 of their doctrinal statements says this: “The entitlement of any one ethnic or religious group to territory in the Middle East called the ‘Holy Land’ cannot be supported by Scripture. In fact, the land promises specific to Israel in the Old Testament were fulfilled under Joshua” (<http://www.bible-researcher.com/openletter.html>. A list of signatories for this open letter is at the bottom of the page).

<sup>8</sup> While this will be developed throughout this paper and reasons given why it has not been a common interpretation, just a sampling of those of amillennial and/or covenantal persuasion who do not hold this teaching from Joshua 21:43–45 are John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Joshua*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 247–48; Keil of Carl Friedrich Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel*, Commentary on the Old Testament. 10 vols. (reprint; Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001) 2:156–57; Martin H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981) 314–15; Dale Ralph Davis, *No Falling Words: Expositions of the Book of Joshua* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 157–58; J. Alberto Soggin, *Joshua: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972) 201–206; Robert G. Boling, *Joshua*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982) 498–500; and C. J. Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, Bible Student’s Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 152–53.

<sup>9</sup> Dennis M. Swanson, “Introduction to New Covenant Theology,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 18/1 (Fall 2007) 149. The entire journal evaluates various claims and doctrines of New Covenant Theology. Of particular relevance to this article is William B. Barrick, “New Covenant Theology and the Old Testament Covenants,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 19/1 (Fall 2007) 165–80.

position.<sup>10</sup> Thus it is concluded by New Covenant theologians that Joshua 21:43–45 is their irrefutable “trump card” concerning God’s total fulfillment of Abrahamic Covenant obligations, at least as far the land is concerned. Lehrer writes as a representative of New Covenant

Theology:

The book of Joshua tells us that when the Israelites had finally taken most of the land, all of the promises given to Abraham had been fulfilled (Joshua 21:43-45). Nothing else needed to happen for God to make good on His word to Abraham. His promises of rest and possession of the land had been fulfilled, just like his promises of many descendants and a special relationship with God. It was all fulfilled by the time of the conquest of the Land of Canaan under Joshua.<sup>11</sup>

Adams argues along the same lines: “So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there . . . *Not one of the LORD’s good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled. Joshua 21:43-45.*”<sup>12</sup>

However, it should be noted that seeing a fulfillment of the land promises is by no means limited to New Covenant Theology. Cox presents the same conclusion written decades earlier:

Did God keep the promise to Joshua? The futurist cannot allow it . . . We could summarize these promises concerning the land of Canaan being inherited by Israel as follows: The land was promised through Abraham; the promise was renewed to Isaac, Jacob and Moses. It was fulfilled literally through Joshua . . . How sad it is then that some theologians are still arguing that they are yet future! Much of the futurist belief rests on the assumption that God has never given Israel all the land promised through Abraham.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Thomas, “Dispensationalism’s Role in the Public Square.” 26–29, and Barrick’s “New Covenant Theology and the Old Testament Covenants,” 171–75 for a critique of how New Covenant Theology proponents understand the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant having been fulfilled.

<sup>11</sup> Steven Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered* (By the author, 2006), 32. Lehrer’s reasoning “when the Israelites had finally taken *most* of the land, *all* of the promises given to Abraham had been fulfilled” (emphasis mine) is contradictory in and of itself, but this will be developed in more detail elsewhere in this article. See also Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 178.

<sup>12</sup> Michael W. Adams, “In Defense of the New Covenant: A Theology Response to Richard Barcellos’ Book, *In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology*” ([http://www.ncbfnet/PDF/Defense/pdf, 8](http://www.ncbfnet/PDF/Defense/pdf,8), accessed 1/10/10) [italics in the original].

<sup>13</sup> William Cox, *The New Covenant Israel* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963) 19–20.

Mathison summarizes the fulfillment view and sites the importance Joshua 21:43–45 plays in proving this: “There are numerous other passages in the Old Testament that tell us that God has already fulfilled the land promises given to Israel (Josh. 11:23; 21:21-45; Neh. 9:25). Joshua 21:43-45 explicitly declares that *all* the land promised Israel was given to them.”<sup>14</sup> DeMar shows how interpreting Joshua 21:43-45 as being already fulfilled affects the interpretation of other important prophetic passages. As part of the support that there is no time gap between Daniel’s sixty-ninth and seventieth-weeks, DeMar presents his second point of argumentation as a known and unarguable fact: “In addition, the text [Dan. 9:26] says nothing about the restoration of Israel to her land as a fulfillment of some covenant obligation. All the land promises that God made to Israel were fulfilled (Joshua 21:43–45).”<sup>15</sup> Obviously the importance of this is noteworthy: if Joshua 21:43–45 can be shown to have already been fulfilled, then the point supporting the fulfillment of Daniel 9 is valid; however, if it can be shown that these promises have not been fulfilled, then his second point of his support for interpreting Daniel 9:26 has no basis in one’s eschatological interpretation elsewhere.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the validity of the claims that Joshua 21:43–45 inarguably proves that all the land promises given by God to Israel have already been fulfilled and consequently have no future eschatological significance. This will be done by (1) a brief overview of the covenants of God up to Joshua 21, (2) an examination of the original geographic boundaries of the Abrahamic Covenant, with special note of the importance of the Euphrates River, (3) a survey of the eschatological significance of Leviticus 26:40–45, (4) examining

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<sup>14</sup> Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), 27 [emphasis in the original].

<sup>15</sup> Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness* (Atlanta: American Vision, 1999), 332.

strategic passages from the Book of Joshua, and finally (5), a proposed interpretation.

### An Overview of the Covenants of God Pertaining to Joshua 21

Although Joshua 21 is often the beginning place of the study for many who cite these verses as proof that God has already fulfilled the land promises of the Abrahamic Covenant, this is not an appropriate place to begin; there are other many other crucial matters to consider. For instance, the Abrahamic Covenant, to which they refer, is the second covenant recorded in Scripture. The first covenant in Scripture, the Noahic Covenant, is important since although often not the case in a consistent manner, the hermeneutic in how one approaches a covenant of God should be noted.<sup>16</sup> Before summarizing the six covenants of God found in the Bible (the Noahic, the Abrahamic, the Priestly, the Mosaic, the Davidic, and the New Covenant) Busenitz rightly reasons: “Let no one underestimate the importance and significance of a correct understanding of the divine covenants. It is much more than an intellectual pursuit. They provide a most foundational theological anchor for understanding God’s working in human history.”<sup>17</sup> Further, “Understanding these six covenants will shape a person’s understanding of Scripture. It will reflect a hermeneutical course *which will determine the one’s eschatological sales*.”<sup>18</sup> This is important: while most people do not realize it, how one interprets the covenants of God—beginning with the Noahic Covenant—will ultimately and immensely factors in to one’s eschatology; there is no way to avoid this.

### The Noahic Covenant

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<sup>16</sup> For an excellent article depicting the component parts of the covenants of God, see Irvin A. Busenitz, “Introduction to the Biblical Covenants; the Noahic and the Priestly Covenant” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10/2 (Fall 1999), 173–189.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* [emphasis added].

While we are not able to go into detail of the covenants of God within this paper, it is necessary to at least examine the component parts of the covenants under which Joshua would be familiar since they affect the interpretation of Joshua 21:41–43.<sup>19</sup> God’s promises in the Noachic Covenant are plainly seen in Scripture. In fact, it is within the framework of the Noachic Covenant in Genesis 6:18 that the word “covenant” first occurs in Scripture where, before sending the flood, God promises, “I will establish My covenant with you . . .”<sup>20</sup> It is significant that God refers to it as His covenant because He alone makes it; it is unilateral, not a bilateral covenant. From the text one would expect (1) that the enduring seasons are an aspect of this covenant (Gen. 8:22); (2) God’s own emphatic self-identification that “Now behold, I Myself do establish My covenant with you” (Gen. 9:9); (3) His solemn promise that never again will all flesh be destroyed by means of the flood (9:11); (4) the rainbow will be the sign for the covenant as long as the covenant is valid (9:12–17), and (5) significantly, the covenant is presented as an “everlasting covenant” between God and all flesh that is on the earth (9:16).<sup>21</sup> The Noachic Covenant is the broadest of God’s covenant promises because it includes not only all of humanity from that point forward, but it also includes “every living creature” (9:15).

Also, for those who accept the Scripture as the true Word of God, the Noachic Covenant should factor understanding other portions of the Bible since the Noachic Covenant is not an isolated covenant with some special hermeneutic employed to understand it, when compared to other covenants—especially the unilateral ones—that God would make. Nothing within the text

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<sup>19</sup> This paper does not include the Priestly Covenant since it does not directly relate to the argumentation of Joshua 21:43–45. However, see Busenitz, *ibid.*, 186–89 for matters related to this, especially its eschatological significance beyond the Book of Joshua.

<sup>20</sup> See *ibid.*, 175–76 for the OT etymology of the word “covenant.”

<sup>21</sup> For matters related to the use of עולם (*olam*) (“everlasting”) see Allan A. MacRae, עולם *olam Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament [TWOT]*, edited by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr. and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 1:379–80.

nor in the literal fulfillment of God’s subsequent judgment on the earth would give any indication that God intended some allegorical method of interpretation in both what He accomplished in Genesis 6–9 nor for what He promised for the future. Busenitz properly warns:

When God enters into a unilateral covenant guaranteed only by His own faithfulness; when God enters into a covenant void of any human requirements to keep it in force; when God establishes a covenant that will continue as long as there is day and night and summer and then, *then* great care must be taken not to erect any man-made limitations that would bankrupt the heart and soul of these covenants and annul the glorious full realization of all that He promised through them. Their significance cannot be over-estimated.<sup>22</sup>

Or stated differently, nothing inherently exists within the text indicates that Yahweh had no intention of fulfilling His covenant in a literal way. Nothing within the text gives the reader any indication that at some time in the future (such as Joshua 21), God would consider destroying His earth again by means of worldwide flood, reasoning that since He had *already* fulfilled every good promise contained within the Noahic Covenant by Joshua 21:43–45—especially by having not destroyed His world—and consequently He was now free to do so again at any time in the future if He so desired. If one consistently follows this line of reasoning, no one should expect Yahweh to keep His Word about anything, for if one applied this same interpretation to the Noahic Covenant as many do for Joshua 21:45, there would be no way of knowing whether *any* of the good covenantal promises of God still existed or at what point He ended them. People who hold the Bible to be true would ridicule this approach to Scripture (and rightly so) because it would so weaken God’s promises within the Noahic Covenant, but even more so, it would cast disparaging insults at the person and faithfulness of God because He cannot be trusted to keep His Word. However, it is foundational to note that how one interprets the Noahic Covenant

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<sup>22</sup> Busenitz, “Introduction to the Biblical Covenants,” 182–83 [emphasis in the original].

establishes hermeneutical grounds for how the other of God’s covenants should be interpreted unless sufficient grounds for changing the hermeneutic can be established.

### The Abrahamic Covenant

As before, though not the nature of this paper to argue all the theological elements and proponents of different views related to the Abrahamic Covenant certain crucial elements of the Abrahamic covenant should be at least noted to see if they do in fact show that they have been fulfilled by the time of Joshua 21:43–45 as some claim.<sup>23</sup> At least a brief survey of what God promised in this eternally important covenant is warranted.

In Genesis 12:1–3 Yahweh instructed and promised Abram (1) to go forth from his country and relatives to the land Yahweh would show him (Gen. 12:1); (2) that God would make him a great name (Gen. 12:2); (3) that Yahweh would bless the ones who blessed him and cursed the ones who cursed him (Gen. 12:3a); and (4) “in you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3b). Genesis 12:7 adds, “And the LORD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I will give this land.’ So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him.” In that He did not ratify the covenant at that time, Yahweh spoke of what He would accomplish in the future.

The next reference to what would eventually become the Abrahamic Covenant occurs in Genesis 13:14–17: “And the LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from 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. And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if anyone can number the dust

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<sup>23</sup> For a detailed analysis of the Abrahamic Covenant and various related issues, see Keith H. Essex, “The Abrahamic Covenant” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10/2 (Fall 1999), 191–212, and Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. “The Covenant with Abraham and its Historical Setting” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 127 (July-September 1970), 241–57. See also Robert Saucy, “The Crucial Issue Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Systems” *Criswell Theological Review* 1/1 (Fall 1986), 149–165 for a survey of key interpretational issues between these two groups.

of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered. Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you.” It should be noted that Genesis 13:15 the land promises are given forever (עֹלָם *olam*), the first reference to everlasting since the everlasting Noahic Covenant and the exact word used in Genesis 9:12 and 9:16. While this in and of itself does not prove the eternality of the covenant,<sup>24</sup> at least the same consideration should be given to this usage as in Genesis 9, which is often not the case. At the very least one should expect that “everlasting” should go beyond the not too distant future of Joshua 21. Yet even beyond this, Kaiser argues against those who want to reduce or remove the eternal significance of what God has promised in the Abrahamic Covenant by dividing it into separate parts:

There is an important point that is to be made in the fact that all three parts of the covenant (i.e., the seed, the land, and the gospel [blessing]) were bound together as *one* promise with a promise that this one promise was *eternal*. Most Christians will grant that the seed and gospel aspects of this promise are eternal, but somehow they think it is possible to dissect the eternal promise of the land from the other two eternal aspects! But to use a theological scalpel to cut out one part is to expose the rest of this same covenant to diminution and a time limitation.<sup>25</sup>

Subsequently, the ratification of the Abrahamic Covenant that occurred in Genesis 15 has perpetual consequences that God has placed squarely upon Himself and no else for its fulfillment:

So solemn was this covenant with its gift of the land that Genesis 15:7–21 depicted God alone moving between the halves of the sacrificial animals after sunset as “a smoking furnace and a flaming torch” (v. 17) . . . Thus, He obligated Himself and only Himself to fulfill the terms of this oath. Abraham was not asked or required likewise to obligate himself. The total burden for the delivery of the gift of the land fell on the divine Provider but not on the devotion of the patriarch.

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<sup>24</sup> For support that the term “eternal” should not automatically be diminished in importance, see Townsend, “Fulfillment of the Land Promise in the Old Testament,” 323–24.

<sup>25</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. “The Land of Israel and the Future Return (Zechariah 10:6–12)” in *Israel the Land and the People: An Evangelical Affirmation of God’s Promises*, ed. H. Wayne House (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 211 [emphasis in the original].

As if to underscore the permanence of this arrangement, Genesis 17:7, 13, 19 stress that this was to be a לְבְרִית עוֹלָם, “an everlasting covenant.”<sup>26</sup>

One essential point should be noted: Genesis 15:8 states specific land boundaries of the Abrahamic Covenant: “On that day the LORD 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.’”<sup>27</sup> It is crucial to note that no future tense occurs at this point as Yahweh previously employed. On the day He alone ratified His covenant, Yahweh declared, “I have given this land.” Hailing from Ur of the Chaldeans, Abram would be quite familiar with the Euphrates River. There is no indication that one who grew up close to this enormously long river would hold any mystical or allegorical interpretation as to what Yahweh promised:

How was Abram to understand God’s words? They were plain enough. Historically, the geographical location was quite specific in this and later wordings of the land promise. Dispensationalism interprets the words as God intended them and as Abram understood them. No typology. No spiritualizing. No symbolism. No preunderstanding of how the words must fit into a system of theology. No reading back into the words a later special revelation. To take the words in a sense other than what God intended and Abram understood is a distortion. Though Abram’s environment was no longer sinless [as when God first communicated with Adam and Eve], God was still perfectly capable to communicating clearly. He cannot lie and must be taken at His word. Abram understood God correctly, and so Israel became a nation chosen by God in possession of a particular plot of land on the present earth’s surface.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Kaiser, “The Promised Land: A Biblical-Historical View,” 303. Although other Scripture passages are important for a fuller study of the Abrahamic Covenant, this paper will limit itself to this point. For additional matters such as Genesis 22 and how the New Testament relates to the Abrahamic Covenant, see Essex, “The Abrahamic Covenant,” 205–12.

<sup>27</sup> For a study of these specific boundaries given in Scripture as well as argumentation for where the Euphrates serves as a northern border, see Kaiser, “The Promised Land: A Biblical-Historical View,” 303–305. See also Townsend, “Fulfillment of the Land Promise in the Old Testament” 324–28 for an examination of the specific land boundaries given and a proposed map of all the land thus mentioned.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas, “Dispensationalism’s Role in the Public Square,” 36.

It is likewise essential to observe that the territory described is quite large with a landmass of approximately “300,000 square miles or twelve and one-half times the size of Great Britain and Ireland.”<sup>29</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the surprisingly small traditional borders that include a territory that extends only “about 150 miles north to south (going from Dan to Beersheba) and an average of thirty miles east to west from the Mediterranean to the Jordon River Valley)” and stands in sharp contrast with only a landmass of about 10,000 square miles.<sup>30</sup> The significance of this specific landmass will later be explored in this article and must factor into interpreting the land promises given by God referred to in Joshua 21:43–45, but it should suffice for the time being that the difference between the land promised by God and that actually gained by the Jewish people comes to approximately only one-thirtieth of the designated landmass.

As previously noted with Noahic Covenant, nothing within the text offers any reason that to believe that Yahweh would disregard His promises within the Abrahamic Covenant at some future date. For those who quote from the Noahic Covenant and use the literal-historical grammatical hermeneutic in doing so would have to explain why they would switch hermeneutics within the same book by the same author recording words spoken by the same God. How would one know that God did not intend the same allegorical interpretation of the promises within the Noahic Covenant? Furthermore, Thomas’ point is worthy of consideration:

One wonders whether those who think the land promises to Abraham will go unfulfilled because of Israel’s faithlessness would say the same thing about God’s promise of making Abraham a blessing to all nations. Genesis 12:3c records, “And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” Would they say that this promise

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<sup>29</sup> Charles L. Feinberg, *Israel: At the Center of History and Revelation*, 3d ed. (Portland: Ore: Multnomah, 1980), 168.

<sup>30</sup> Ronald B. Allen, “The Land of Israel,” in *Israel the Land the People: An Evangelical Affirmation of God’s Promises*, ed. H. Wayne House (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 17–18, 24. For a more precise and expanded study of the description and dimensions of the biblical land, see Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography*, rev. and enlarged ed., trans. by A. F. Rainey (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 3–15.

has also been abrogated by Israel’s lack of faithfulness? This promise of spiritual blessing to Abraham of being a special blessing to all the nations is still in effect and will be fulfilled to the letter just like another aspect of the Abrahamic covenant, the land promise.<sup>31</sup>

Along this same lines of reasoning, it would have to be answered by those who would decide what parts of the covenant could be forfeited, and on what grounds hermeneutically would it be done.

### The Mosaic Covenant

The Mosaic Covenant was ratified in Joshua’s lifetime (Exod. 24:1–8), and he and the Jewish nation lived under its mandates. As before, time does not permit a full treatment of all the elements of this next covenant of Yahweh.<sup>32</sup> However, among other things, one tremendously relevant point of particular importance to our study should be marked, namely, that on three different occasions within the Mosaic Covenant Yahweh once more referred to the Euphrates River as part of the land boundaries for the Abrahamic Covenant after He ratified it in Genesis 15:18: (1) Exodus 23:31: “And I will fix your boundary from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the River Euphrates; for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you will drive them out before you”; (2) to the nation Joshua would soon lead into the Promised Land, Yahweh instructed in Deuteronomy 1:7, “Turn and set your journey, and go to the hill country of the Amorites, and to all their neighbors in the Arabah, in the hill country and in the lowland and in the Negev and by the seacoast, the land of the Canaanites, and Lebanon, as far as the great river, the river Euphrates;” and (3) Deuteronomy 11:24: “Every place on which the sole of your foot shall tread shall be yours; your border shall

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas, “Dispensationalism’s Role,” 26.

<sup>32</sup> See William D. Barrick, “The Mosaic Covenant” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10/2 (Fall 1999), 213–32 for this and particularly how the ratification of the Mosaic Covenant does not annul any of the previous covenant promises of Yahweh. Also see John H. Sailhamer, “The Mosaic Law and the Theology of the Pentateuch” *WTJ* 53 (1991), 241–61.

be from the wilderness to Lebanon, and from the river, the river Euphrates, as far as the western sea.” This is significant because the book of Joshua opens with Yahweh once more instructing the new leader that the land He had given them was “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” (Josh. 1:4). More about this will be seen later in this paper, but suffice it to say that if Yahweh intended some other meaning than the physical Euphrates River, then the burden of proof is on those to determine what indeed Yahweh intended to mean by specifically and repeatedly naming this river if He did not mean this. And even beyond this, it must further be explained how Joshua would understand God’s intended meaning in attempting to be obedient to Yahweh’s commands and instructions.

#### The Eschatological Significance of Leviticus 26

Another pertinent feature of the Mosaic Covenant that must factor in to interpreting Joshua 21:43–45 is Leviticus 26. In this section of the Mosaic Covenant, Yahweh promised His blessings on the nation of Israel if they obeyed Him (Lev. 26:1–13), followed by certain judgments on the Jewish people if they lived in covenant violation against Him (Lev. 26:14–39). “While the blessings were relevant to the Abrahamic Covenant’s promises regarding land and blessing, the cursings represented a five-stage process of Mosaic Covenant vengeance.”<sup>33</sup> As repeatedly seen throughout this section, all the curses inflicted by Yahweh were intended to bring the Jewish nation back into covenant obedience to Him (e.g. Lev.26:18, 21 etc.). Included in the penalties for blatant and on-going covenant violation, Yahweh pronounced the following judgment regarding the promised land of Israel in Leviticus 26:31–35:

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<sup>33</sup> William D. Barrick, “Inter-covenantal Truth and Relevance: Leviticus 26 and the Biblical Covenants” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 21/1 (Spring 2010), 82. The five stages are (1) debilitation and defeat (Lev. 26:16–17), (2) drought (vv. 18–20), (3) devastation by wild beasts (vv. 21–22), (4) deprivation by siege (vv. 23–26) and (5) deportation (vv. 27–38) [Ibid. n. 2].

“I will lay waste your cities as well, and will make your sanctuaries desolate; and I will not smell your soothing aromas. And I will make the land desolate so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled over it. You, however, I will scatter among the nations and will draw out a sword after you, as your land becomes desolate and your cities become waste.

“Then the land will enjoy its sabbaths all the days of the desolation, while you are in your enemies’ land; then the land will rest and enjoy its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it will observe the rest which it did not observe on your sabbaths, while you were living on it.”

Significantly, Leviticus 26 is given to the nation while they are still at Mount Sinai (Lev. 26:45) and before even the spies had been sent out to scout the land (Num. 13–14). So decades before nation entered the land that Yahweh had promised them, their existence in the land—or lack thereof—had already been decreed by Yahweh based on either their covenant obedience or disobedience to Him, or as Kaiser writes, “The ownership of the land (as a gift from God) is certain and eternal, but the occupation of it by any given generation is conditioned on obedience.”<sup>34</sup> It should be noted in the previous chapter how Yahweh viewed the land: He claimed it is as His own: “The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, *for the land is Mine*; for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me” (Lev. 25:23; italics added). For those who think too much emphasis is made about the land promises in the Bible, this verse should not be taken lightly: to this day the land remains Yahweh’s.

However, in spite of the covenant violations and even when the promised exile would eventually occur, Leviticus 26 concludes this section of divinely promised blessed and cursing of the nation of Israel as Yahweh revealed His future intention regarding both His land and His people:

“If they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their forefathers, in their unfaithfulness which they committed against Me, and also in their acting with hostility against Me—I also was acting with hostility against them, to bring them into the land of their enemies—or if their uncircumcised heart becomes humbled so

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<sup>34</sup> Kaiser, Jr., “The Promised Land: A Biblical-Historical View,” 307.

that they then make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and My covenant with Abraham as well, and I will remember the land. For the land shall be abandoned by them, and shall make up for its sabbaths while it is made desolate without them. They, meanwhile, shall be making amends for their iniquity, because they rejected My ordinances and their soul abhorred My statutes.

“Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, nor will I so abhor them as to destroy them, breaking My covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God. But I will remember for them the covenant with their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God. I am the LORD” (Lev. 26:40–45).

Leviticus 26:40–45 is a tremendously important portion of Scripture in understanding God’s future intention regarding both the Jewish people and the land He had promised them in the Abrahamic Covenant, although this is far from the case with many theologians since “Leviticus is not normally the first source students of Scripture consult when discussing eschatology.”<sup>35</sup> Barrick rightly summarizes the importance of Leviticus 26 in understanding in that the “failure of theologians and expositors to give as much attention to Leviticus 26 as they have given to Deuteronomy 27–28 has impoverished the church’s doctrinal corpus.”<sup>36</sup> Nor is this “19<sup>th</sup> century Darbyism” that concludes, “The theory of futurism concerning Israel is a recent teaching, having originated about 1830.”<sup>37</sup> This is the inspired Word of God the moment Yahweh first issued it. To claim the promises of Leviticus 26:40–45 as a 19<sup>th</sup> century teaching would make “the just shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17), or “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1) restricted to the “relatively new” teaching originating at the Protestant Reformation rather than the first century when Paul wrote this.

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<sup>35</sup> William D. Barrick, “The Eschatological Significance of Leviticus 26” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 16/1 (Spring 2005), 95.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>37</sup> *Contra Cox, The New-Covenant Israel*, 73.

Again, whether one includes or dismisses Leviticus 26 in one's eschatology has extremely far-reaching interpretational implications in later biblical passages. Barrick summarizes the eschatological significance of Leviticus 26:

Leviticus 26 contains revelation referring to Israel's future repentance and restoration, which are confirmed by both OT and NT. Since their repentance and restoration have not yet occurred, their fulfillment is eschatological. Leviticus 26's relationship to the Abrahamic Covenant ties fulfillment to the land God promised to give to the descendants of Abraham. The fulfillment of the land promises awaits Israel's repentance. When Israel turns to God and confesses her sins, God will restore her to the promised land. *Chronologically, Leviticus 26 is the first detailed description of Israel's eschatological repentance and restoration.* It provides significant evidence that disobedience to the Mosaic Covenant results in the removal of the blessings promised in the Abrahamic Covenant. The chapter is at the heart of the OT prophets' announcements concerning the future messianic kingdom. A proper understanding of the prophetic program of the OT fully integrates the revelation of Leviticus 26.<sup>38</sup>

As was done previously in this article with other promises to which Yahweh bound Himself, one should take the same approach to what He promised in Leviticus 26:40-45, and in this case, how it relates to Joshua 21:43–45. In order for the promise Yahweh made in Leviticus 26:40–45 to have been fulfilled by the time Joshua 21:45 occurred, the following elements must have transpired historically and must be shown that they did indeed occur: (1) a national confession of the nation's sin and the iniquity of their forefathers (26:40), (2) Yahweh acted with hostility to exile the Jewish nation into the land of their enemies (26:41), (3) after the national confession of their sin in the exile, Yahweh would remember His covenant with Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham (26:42), (4) the land must be abandoned until all its sabbaths be made up (26:43a), (5) the Jewish nation must have made amends for iniquity once in exile (26:43b), (6) Yahweh must

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 125–26 [italics added]. For other eschatological promises within the Pentateuch, such as the four uses of “the latter days” in the Pentateuch (Gen. 49:1, Num. 24:14–24; Duet. 4:30 and 31:29) and their importance, see John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis*, Expositor's Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:132. For the Messianic implications of Gen. 49:1 and “the last days,” see John H. Sailhamer, “The Messiah of the Hebrew Bible” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44:1 (March 2001), 12–22.

not abhor them nor break His covenant even when the people are in the land of their enemies (26:44), and (7) He must remember His covenant He made with the nation (26:45). These are just as much “the good promises of Yahweh” as is anything else promised elsewhere by Yahweh from Genesis 3:15 onward. Even more fitting is that these good promises of Yahweh follow the context of Leviticus 26 which contains multiple references to the land promises.

Leviticus 26 depicts the promised land as the setting for the fulfillment of both blessings (vv. 4–12) and curses (vv. 14–38). It is noteworthy that Ps. 72:16–17 describes the worldwide extension of the Davidic kingdom in terms reminiscent of the blessings in Leviticus 26. That is one of the indications of the eschatological significance of this chapter.<sup>39</sup>

By no stretch of imagine can any of these elements have transpired historically, especially since the people were in the land in Joshua 21 and had not yet been exiled. Consequently, the burden of proof is on those who make sweeping claims that Yahweh had indeed fulfilled “all His good promises.” Also, one would have to determine what Yahweh in fact did mean by these if He did not mean to exile and to regather the Jewish nation.

Just before the transition in leadership from Moses to Joshua, God warned that the nation of Israel was already leaning away from God toward rebellion. After “The Song of Moses” (Deut. 32), which was to be “witness against” God and His people (31:19), Moses concluded this section stressing the utter necessity of obedience to Yahweh, particularly how it related to the longevity of the people dwelling in the land that the LORD was giving them. Deuteronomy 32:44–47 states:

Then Moses came and spoke all the words of this song in the hearing of the people, he, with Joshua the son of Nun. When Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel, he said to them, “Take to your heart all the words with which I am warning you today, which you shall command your sons to observe carefully, even all the words of this law. For it is not an idle word for you; indeed it is your life. And by

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<sup>39</sup> Barrick, “The Eschatological Significance of Leviticus 26,” 117.

this word you shall prolong your days in the land, which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess.”

Based on the biblical text Essex concisely summarizes matters related to the nation of Israel in both the near and distant future of what to expect:

The Torah closes with an anticipation of a fulfillment of this promise to Abraham in the conquest of the land under Joshua in the near future (Deut. 31:1–8). However, the Torah predicts that Israel would forfeit the land because of disobedience and be scattered among the nations (Deut. 29:22–28). In the distant future, after the scattering (Deut. 4:30–31), the LORD will return repentant Israel to the land in accordance with His covenant with Abraham (Lev. 26:40–45).<sup>40</sup>

In regard to which Jewish generations would enjoy the promise of Yahweh to live in the land versus the utter veracity of the eternal covenant God bound Himself to, Kaiser observes: “The conditionality was not attached to the promise but only to the participants who would benefit from these abiding promises . . . The promise remained permanent, but the participation in the blessings depended on the individual’s spiritual condition.”<sup>41</sup>

A fuller summary from the promises stated passages within this article one would expect: (1) for Yahweh to go before the nation as He lead them to bring them into the land (Deut. 31:3), (2) but in spite of Yahweh’s faithfulness, Israel would fall away and serve other gods (Deut. 31:16) because (3) even when Moses was alive the intents of their hearts were already away from God (Deut. 31:21b). Because of this (4) Yahweh would ultimately disperse the disobedient people into the nations (Deut. 30:1), (5) the land would enjoy its sabbaths (Lev. 26:43), but He would not reject or abhor His people (Lev. 26:44–45). Eventually, (6) after the blessing and the curse had come upon the people in all the nations where Yahweh had dispersed them (Deut.

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<sup>40</sup> Essex, “The Abrahamic Covenant,” 206–7.

<sup>41</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 90–91. See also an extended discussion by Bruce K. Waltke, “The Phenomenon of Conditionality within Unconditional Covenants,” in *Israel’s Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*, ed. Avraham Gileadi (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 123–39.

30:1), (7) the nation collectively would repent and return to the LORD (Deut. 30:2). Then (8) Yahweh would regather them into the land from their captivity (Deut. 30:3–5). Yet even beyond these blessings, (9) Yahweh Himself will one day circumcise their hearts and the hearts of their descendants “to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live” (Deut. 30:6). Furthermore (10) God Himself would inflict strong judgments on the nations who afflicted Israel (Deut. 30: 8), because, after all, in being utterly true to His word, Yahweh had previously promised, (11) “I will bless those who blesses you and the one who curses you I will curse” (Gen. 12:3), which is most assuredly “a good promise of the Lord.” Finally, after Yahweh has brought every bit of these elements about, (12) the nation will *again* obey Him, living in total covenant obedience (Deut. 30:8) and receiving once more God’s covenant blessings on them (30:9–10). These verses require God’s strong judgment for disobedience on the Jewish nation yet contain His promise for the same people whom He judged to again obey Him after they have once been disobedient and thus afflicted by Him, including even exile into pagan nations. If anyone claimed such blessings for the New Testament church, according to context of Deuteronomy 30, they can only come about after “the blessing and the curse” has come upon them and they are banished to all the different nations where God had banished them (Deut. 30:1).

#### Significant Factors from the Book of Joshua

Three pertinent items within the Book of Joshua help to gain the proper interpretation of Joshua 21:43–45 namely, (1) God’s opening charge to Joshua in 1:1–4, (2) that Joshua 13–21 is one unit within the book that presents the dividing the land among the Jewish people, and (3) the opening summary statement God made in Joshua 13:1–7.

God's opening charge to Joshua in Joshua 1:1–4 began with specific boundaries markers that would have been quite familiar to Joshua:

Now it came about after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD that the LORD spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' servant, saying, "Moses My servant is dead; now therefore arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel. 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.

The mention of the Euphrates River in Joshua 1:4 is extremely significant in that, first, as already shown, God had times previously included as part of the boundaries of the land promise four times, beginning with the ratification of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 15:18), occurring at Sinai in the chapter before the ratification of the Mosaic Covenant (Ex. 23:41), and twice in Deuteronomy (Deut. 1:7; 11:24). Second, Joshua 1:4 is the only time the Euphrates River occurs in the entire Book of Joshua; not one reference exists that shows that even any exploratory excursion was ever made to the Euphrates, such as decades earlier when Joshua had been a part of the spies sent out to survey the land in Numbers 13, let alone any verses that show it was portioned out as part of the land divisions in the book and gained it as its rightful promised land possession. It should also be noted that Joshua would have been quite familiar with the promises and warning of the recently given Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28-30, as well as the ultimate future hope for both the land and the Jewish nation revealed in Leviticus 26:40–45.<sup>42</sup>

Another important item that is often neglected by those who quote Joshua 21:43–45 as a proof text that God has already fulfilled the land promises of the Abrahamic Covenant is the division of the land given in Joshua 13–21. Joshua 13–21 is one segment within the book, and

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<sup>42</sup> Barrick, "Eschatological Significance of Leviticus 26," 117, notes, "Interestingly, the land itself is treated as a separate participant in the covenant. It can be the recipient of the restitution of the sabbaths that it had been denied (vv. 33–34, 43)."

individual chapters must be viewed within this context. Actually, Joshua 21:43–45 are the last three verses in this section and offer “a glorious summary” of the land division.<sup>43</sup> The opening verse of the this section, Joshua 13:1, is extremely important in that *God Himself* evaluated what He had accomplished thus far as well as what remained yet to be accomplished: “Now Joshua was old and advanced in years when the LORD said to him, ‘You are old and advanced in years, *and very much of the land remains to be possessed*’” [italics added]. Yahweh then delineates groups within the land that were part of the “very much of the land that remains to be possessed” in Joshua 13:2–7:

“This is the land that remains: all the regions of the Philistines and all those of the Geshurites; from the Shihor which is east of Egypt, even as far as the border of Ekron to the north (it is counted as Canaanite); the five lords of the Philistines: the Gazite, the Ashdodite, the Ashkelonite, the Gittite, the Ekronite; and the Avvite to the south, all the land of the Canaanite, and Mearah that belongs to the Sidonians, as far as Aphek, to the border of the Amorite; and the land of the Gebalite, and all of Lebanon, toward the east, from Baal-gad below Mount Hermon as far as Lebo-hamath. All the inhabitants of the hill country from Lebanon as far as Misrephoth-maim, all the Sidonians, I will drive them out from before the sons of Israel; only allot it to Israel for an inheritance as I have commanded you. Now therefore, apportion this land for an inheritance to the nine tribes, and the half-tribe of Manasseh.”

Because of Joshua 13:1–7 which deals with particulars related to the land of Canaan, let alone the added reference in Joshua 1:4 to the territory associated with the Euphrates that exists outside of the land that they currently occupied, it is beyond argument that Israel never possessed the land as stipulated in the Abrahamic Covenant during the days of Joshua. This obvious lack of gaining all the land that God promised is a significant point marked by both non-dispensational and dispensational camps. Regarding the land promises given to Israel, several acknowledge the clear teaching that “the Israelites never came into undisputed possession of the whole promised land, to the full extent of the boundaries laid down in Num. 34:1–12, never conquering Tyre and

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<sup>43</sup> David M. Howard, Jr. *Joshua* in *The New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 397.

Sidon, for example . . .”<sup>44</sup> Bright writes that the promise only “began to find fulfillment—though never a complete fulfillment—in the giving of the Promised Land.”<sup>45</sup> Noting the contrast between God’s faithfulness and Israel’s incomplete obedience, Hess adds, “Thus the tendency has been to understand here a process of dispossession. Israel had begun it under God but the nation’s failure to complete it was a failure in its obedience to complete the process.”<sup>46</sup> Mabie offers this fuller explanation of how incomplete the conquest of the land of Canaan was during Joshua’s life:

Although it is commonly it is commonly misconstrued that only the book of Judges reflects the incomplete aspects of the conquest, both Joshua and Judges reflect the reality of unconquered peoples, cities and territories. Indeed, the chapter following the list of defeated kings [Josh. 12] articulates a daunting list of unconquered areas spanning from the far south to the far north, particularly on the Coastal Plain and in the Jezreel and Beth Shean Valleys (Josh 13:1–6, 13). Similarly, during the dividing of the land, other unconquered areas are noted (cf. Josh 15:63; 16:10; 17:11–16). Likewise, at the tent of meeting in Shiloh the Israelites are rebuked for “neglecting to possess” the land, since there are still seven tribes that have not received their inheritance (Josh 18:1–3).<sup>47</sup>

Davis adds a good summary statement of what Joshua 13:1 teaches: “All this land was, in one sense, on the edges of Israel’s land. If such was the land that remained, it implies that Israel had achieved a significant measure of the dominance in the main part of Canaan. Not that such dominance was total, but it was substantial.”<sup>48</sup>

Joshua 21:43–45, which concludes the land division chapters (Josh. 13–21), plays a

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<sup>44</sup> Keil and Delitzsch, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel*, 157.

<sup>45</sup> John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3d. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 96–97.

<sup>46</sup> Richard S. Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary*, in Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 285.

<sup>47</sup> F. J. Mabie, “Geographical Extent of Israel,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*. Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson eds. (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 318.

<sup>48</sup> Davis, *No Falling Words*, 110–11.

strategic role in understanding the entire book:

The passage is a theological conclusion of the entire book up to this point . . . The editor emphasizes here the completeness of God’s action . . . No matter what the political situation of Israel in a later generation, be it the division of the kingdom, the fall of the northern kingdom, or the destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile, Israel could not blame God. God had faithfully done for Israel what he promised. Blame belonged on Israel’s shoulders, not God’s.<sup>49</sup>

After noting the failure of Israel to take full possession of the land, Davis eloquently adds the following and laments the neglect by some the true importance of Joshua 21:43–45:

Lastly, we must look at the grand testimony of Yahweh’s fidelity. This passage is the theological heart of the Book of Joshua; it deliberately echoes the concerns of 1:1–9 (cf. especially 1:2–3, 5–6) and structurally draws a line across everything that has preceded. Here is the jugular vein of the book. Yet two major commentaries published within the last twenty years allot nine and five lines respectively to this section: an inexcusable blunder.<sup>50</sup>

However, several who study the Book of Joshua over the centuries have wrestled with how to harmonize the statement of incomplete conquest in Joshua 13:1 with the statement of what seems to be total conquest in Joshua 21:43–45, John Calvin being among them:

In order to remove this appearance of contradiction, it is necessary to distinguish between the certain, clear and steadfast faithfulness of God in keeping his promises, and between the effeminacy and sluggishness of the people, in consequence of which the benefit of the divine goodness in a manner slipped through their hands . . . Wherefore, although they did not rout them all so as to make their possession clear, yet the truth of God came visibly forth, and was realized, inasmuch as they might have obtained what was remaining without any difficulty, had they been pleased to avail themselves of the victories offered to them.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Joshua* in *Word Biblical Commentary*, David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, gen eds. (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983), 234–35.

<sup>50</sup> Davis, *No Failing Words*, 157.

<sup>51</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Joshua* 248. Donald H. Madvig’s, *Joshua*, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 1992), 353, wording is a little confusing: “The statement ‘the LORD gave Israel’ emphasizes God’s sovereign action . . . The land was God’s to give Israel. All of Canaan was not yet in Israel’s possession, nor were all the enemies destroyed. Nevertheless Israel was in control of ‘all the land.’” Then, “Yet God’s oath to Abraham had now been fulfilled” (ibid). If the land was not in Israel’s possession, then it does not reason that God’s oath to Abraham had been fulfilled.

Davis acknowledges the apparent conflict between the two texts, and offers this assessment:

. . . namely, that there remained much land to be possessed (13:1) and there were enemies that Israel was not driving out (e.g. 16:10; 17:12–13). But we must remember that the biblical writer . . . knew of these other factors, and, if he had thought them to be directly contradictory to 21:43–45, he would surely have noticed it (and, presumably addressed the matter). Apparently the biblical writer felt no unbearable rub here . . . Yahweh had given Israel all the land (v. 43a)—witness the fact that they possessed and lived in it (v. 43b). The fact that they might possess still more of it (cf. Exod. 23:30) does not negate this.<sup>52</sup>

Mabie further emphasizes “the parallel realities” of Joshua 13:1 and 21:43–45 just as God had specifically promised in “the blessing and the curse” of Leviticus 26/Deuteronomy 28:

In addition, Joshua stresses that Yahweh will continue to drive out these remaining nations in line with Israel’s faith and obedience (Josh 23:6), but that unfaithfulness and disobedience will put this in jeopardy” (Josh 23:12–13, 15–16). In short, this speech helps to clarify the theological nuances surrounding the parallel realities of *completely given land* and *incomplete conquest* (cf. Num. 33:53; Deut. 8:1, 11:22–23).<sup>53</sup>

Others understand Joshua 21:43–45 as highlighting different aspects of God’s character.

Woudstra thus writes on God’s faithfulness as seen in this passage:

This passage constitutes one of the key sections of the entire book, for one may learn from it the revelational purpose that the Holy Spirit had in inspiring the human author to compose the book. This purpose is to let the full light of revelation fall upon the faithfulness of the covenant God who keeps his word once given to the forefathers. As such, this passage summarizes the first part of the book and points out its basic message. Verse 43 refers primarily to the distribution of the land described in chs. 13–21; v. 44 reflects the actual stories of the Conquest as told in

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<sup>52</sup> Davis, *No Failing Words*, 158. While in agreement to what is written above, this author differs changing the “might possess still more land” to “will possess still more land,” since the land boundaries of the Abrahamic Covenant had not remotely come close to being possessed by Israel as an everlasting possession plus the eschatological promises of Leviticus 26:40–45. Mabie offers his harmonization of the apparent contradiction between Joshua 13:1 and 21:43–45: Despite the reality of unconquered areas, the *entire* land is divided among the tribes by lot at the command of Yahweh (Josh 13:6); thus all the land is given as Yahweh promised (cf. Josh 21:43–45). This interplay between given and unconquered land is nicely reflected in Joshua’s exhortation to the leadership of Israel in Joshua 23, which is situated “a long time after Yahweh had given rest to Israel from all their surrounding enemies.” While this speech notes Israel’s victories in the land and stresses that everything Yahweh promised had “come to pass,” it also clarifies that some allotted land is still inhabited by unconquered nations (Josh. 23:4, 9–10, 14) (Mabie, “Geographical Extent of Israel,” 318, [emphasis in the original]).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. [emphasis in the original].

chs. 1–12; and v. 45 places the entire book under the perspective of God’s faithfulness.

The book of Joshua views the conquest of Canaan as both complete and incomplete. In 23:4–5 these two lines run side by side, an indication that the author means them to be equally valid, although the emphasis on the completeness of the Conquest is predominant.<sup>54</sup>

Further commenting on Joshua 21:45, Woudstra reasons that God’s faithfulness should result in thanksgiving: “No wonder, then, that the final word of this passage is one of thankful recognition to the faithfulness of God. Instead of failing to come to pass (Heb. “fall to the ground”), *the good words* of the Lord, spoken to the house of Israel (viewing the people as a unity, another leading motif) have all come out (cf. 23:14). This note of thanksgiving reverberates in the NT as well (cf. Rev. 11:16–18).<sup>55</sup>

### Conclusion and Significance

At first glance Joshua 21:45 does seem all encompassing: “Not one of the good promises which the LORD had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass.” But as has been shown, these verses do not sit isolated away from the previous revelation from God. Those who cite Joshua 21:43–45 as having fulfilled God’s promises for the land promises of the Abrahamic Covenant<sup>56</sup> is not so much taking verses out of context, (such as John 8:32 “you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” without including the first provisional part of John 8:31: “Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine,’ followed by the connective ‘and you shall know the truth . . .’”),

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<sup>54</sup> Woudstra, *Joshua*, 314. So also Ziese: “An understanding of 21:43–45 begins with the observation previously offered, namely, that this is an assessment specifically directed toward Yahweh. Here is an affirmation of the belief that the *leadership of Yahweh* has not flagged or failed” (Mark Ziese, *Joshua* in The College Press NIV Commentary, Terry Briley and Paul Kissling eds. (Joplin: Missouri: College Press Publishing Co. 2008), 351 [emphasis in the original]).

<sup>55</sup> Woudstra, *Joshua*, 315 [emphasis in the original].

<sup>56</sup> E.g. Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code*, 178; DeMar, *Last Day’s Madness*, 332.

since Joshua 21 does indeed refer to portions of the land promised Israel by God. Those who cite Joshua 21:43-45 as proof texts are verses taken *in isolation and exclusion* from previous revelation given by God regarding the specific land boundaries, eschatological promises from the Pentateuch, and even passages within the Book of Joshua from which they make their claim, namely Joshua 1:1-4 and 13:1. Simply put, those cite Joshua 21:43–45 as God having fulfilled all His land promises to Israel do so excluded and isolated from some very significant problem passages for this position. It is no wonder that Calvin and many others avoided the claim that all of God’s land promises had been fulfilled by God by the time of Joshua 21:43–45; this interpretation is inherently weak and laden with massive—and ultimately unexplainable—theological problems for those who accept the Bible as God’s divine revelation, if for no other reason, how God Himself appraised the land situation in Joshua 13:1–7.

It seems better to understand Joshua 21:43–45 in a much more restricted manner: Yahweh did indeed fulfill all His good promises up to that time, but Joshua 21:45 is just a historical marker in God’s faithfulness and not the pinnacle nor completion of His covenant faithfulness:

These verses emphasize the totality of Israel’s success, the overarching picture of complete victory, and the all-encompassing nature of God’s faithfulness to his promises and his people. It is of a piece with similar passages, such as 10:40–42; 11:16–23; and 23:1. It does not echo the passages that stand in tension with it, which speaks of unfinished business, of land that remained to be captured. Yet on its own terms, *it does present an accurate picture of the prevailing situation at the time.*<sup>57</sup>

Such an understanding is found elsewhere in Scripture. For instance, Paul’s benediction in Romans 16:25–27 makes a far-reaching statement regarding how far the Gospel had gone forth by the time of its composition:

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<sup>57</sup> Howard, *Joshua*, 397–98 [emphasis added].

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.

Likewise in Colossians 1:23 Paul wrote regarding that Gospel that “and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven.”

One would be hard pressed to argue that the LORD intended that the Gospel had indeed “has been made to *all* the nations” (Rom. 16:26) or Colossians 1:23 “proclaimed *in all creation* under heaven” had been fulfilled by the time Paul wrote these verses, or even almost two thousand years later at the time of this writing that no unreached people groups remain. One day all nations under heaven will be reached, as Jesus Himself declared, “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come” (Matt. 24:14), as God will one day fulfill every good promise He has made down to the last jot and title, culminating with the Messiah, whose first advent had not arrived by Joshua 21 and whose Second Advent we earnestly long for.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> For verses dealing with the same argument past Joshua 21, see Gregory H. Harris, “Did God Fulfill Every Good Promise?: Toward a Biblical Understanding of Joshua 21:43–45” (Part 2), *The Master’s Seminary* 23/1 (Spring 2013), 69–96.