

WEST BANK

The region called the West Bank today is about 2,270 square miles (which is a little smaller than the state of Delaware). It encompasses much of the area that was known as Samaria and Judea in the days of Jesus. This region is sometimes referred to as the Cisjordan, that is, “on this side of the Jordan” (as opposed to the Transjordan, east of the river). It is a place of much contention.

For about four hundred years, the West Bank was under Ottoman rule and considered a part of Syria. Following World War I, the region came under British control. The British Mandate allowed for the immigration of Jews into Palestine. The goal of the League of Nations was to eventually establish a two-state solution within the territory—that is, an Israeli state and a Palestinian state.

When the British Mandate ended in 1948, the State of Israel was born. Less than a day later, Israel was attacked by five Arab nations—Egypt, Transjordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq—who were all against the idea of an Israeli state. After more than a year of fighting and the loss of over 6,000 Jewish soldiers, Israel emerged victorious and maintained their newly independent state. Nevertheless, the Gaza Strip was controlled by Egypt, and the West Bank was controlled by the nation now known as Jordan (Transjordan).

Nearly two decades later, the Arab nations attacked Israel again. As a result of the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel came to occupy the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and the West Bank. In 1988, Jordan relinquished any claims it had on the West Bank to the Palestinian Liberation Organization (P.L.O.), stripping Palestinians in the West Bank of their Jordanian citizenship.

Most residents of the West Bank today are Arabs, although many Israeli settlements have been built in the region since 1967. These settlements, which are a source of contention, were originally military outposts and agricultural communities. More than 600,000 Jews live in the West Bank, counting those in east Jerusalem. The demographics of the region can be broken down into three categories: Muslims (80-85%), Jews (12-14%), and Christians/others (1-2.5%).

In recent times, Israel has turned the government of some cities in the West Bank over to the Palestinian Authority. Due to violence there, the Israeli government has made some settlements inaccessible to Palestinians and some to Jews. At one time, there were more than 600 military checkpoints and roadblocks in the region. A barrier (fence) running throughout the region was begun in 2002. Although the center of controversy, it has served to reduce violence against Israel (especially by Palestinian suicide bombers).



Fence at Bethlehem, a Palestinian City from Which Jews Are Restricted

A popular view today—which is often held by Zionist Jews, Messianic Jews, and Evangelical Christians—is that God gave the land of Canaan to the Jews forever. They believe that the land is an unconditional gift and that God’s promise is irrevocable. Passages such as Genesis 17:7-8, which speak of God’s covenant with Abraham as “an everlasting covenant” and the land of Canaan as “an everlasting possession” are cited as proof for this position. However, there are many problems with this viewpoint.

(1) The Hebrew term for “everlasting” (*’olam*) points to an indefinite period in the distant future; some have suggested the definition “age-lasting.” The definition “eternal” or “forever” is only truly appropriate when describing God’s attributes and nature, for he is a spiritual being who has no beginning or end (Gen. 21:33). Apparently, the land was to belong to Israel throughout the duration of the old covenant.

(2) Even then, Israel’s occupation of the land was conditional upon the people’s obedience to the covenant; the curses for disobedience included being driven from the Promised Land (Deut. 28:36). This warning became a reality for God’s people. After they had continually rebelled against him, he finally drove them out of the land. The northern tribes were taken into Assyrian captivity in 722 B.C., and the southern tribes were taken into Babylonian captivity in 586 B.C. (see 1 Kings 9:3-7; 2 Kings 17:5-6; 25:1-11; Jer. 32:21-24). After a period of time,

God, who is rich in mercy, brought the Jews back from Babylonian captivity and “replanted” them in the Promised Land.

(3) When the Messiah came, however, many of the Jews rejected him. Because of this rejection, Jesus said that their “house” would be left “desolate” (Mt. 23:38; see 21:33-46). He went on to predict the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (Mt. 24:1-28, 32-35; Mk. 13:1-23, 28-31; Lk. 21:20-24). His prophecy was fulfilled in A.D. 70, when the Romans destroyed the temple and conquered the city. There is no promise in the New Testament that a Jewish temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem or that the Jewish people will prosper in Palestine.

(4) The ultimate promise that God made to Abraham—that all nations would be blessed through his seed (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18)—is fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah (Gal. 3:8, 19, 26-28). This blessed condition is a restored relationship with God through obedient faith in Jesus Christ—for Jews and Gentiles alike. God’s covenant that he made with Israel at Mount Sinai is no longer in effect; it has become “obsolete” (Gal. 3:24-25; Heb. 8:7-13). Jesus is the great high priest over God’s new covenant people, the church (Heb. 8:1-6). He is enthroned in the heavenly Jerusalem as King of kings and Lord of lords; he reigns right now over his spiritual kingdom (Acts 2:32-36; Col. 1:12-14; Heb. 12:22-24; Rev. 1:5-7). When he returns, he will not establish a physical kingdom in Israel, but rather he will judge all the earth and take his faithful people home to be with him (Jn. 5:24-30; 14:1-4; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; Heb. 9:27-28).

How does all of this bear on the modern state of Israel? One would have a difficult time proving from the Scriptures that the Jews have a *divine* right to the land today. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they have a *historic* right to the land, since they inhabited it for about 1,500 years. In the same breath, we should also realize that Palestinian families have been living there for hundreds of years. They, too, have a right to be in the land.

We should have a great admiration for the pioneer spirit of those determined Jews who resettled their homeland. In many cases (but perhaps not all), it is wrong for Palestinians to claim that the Jews have stolen their land. After immigrating to Palestine, the Jews often purchased undesirable land. They turned swamps into farmland and deserts into oases. Further, they have supported freedom and democracy for all people, upholding the rights of various ethnic and religious groups and protecting their holy sites.

The fence and military checkpoints, while cumbersome for Palestinians and Jews alike, are a necessary response to terrorist activity. If radical Muslims did not want to destroy the Jews with their suicide bombers, then the fence would probably be unnecessary. As long as this hatred lasts, there will be no peace in sight. We can only pray that people will turn to the Prince of Peace, who changes our hearts and causes us to love even our enemies.