

**PROMISES TO KEEP**  
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**Reading: Genesis 25: 19-34 (NEB)**

**This is the table of the descendants of Abraham's son Isaac. Isaac's father was Abraham. When Isaac was forty years old he married Rebecca, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramaean from Paddan-aram and the sister of Laban the Aramaean. Isaac appealed to the Lord on behalf of his wife because she barren; the Lord yielded to his entreaty, and Rebecca conceived. The children pressed hard on each other in her womb, and she said, "If this is how it is with me, what does it mean?" So she went to seek guidance of the Lord. The Lord said to her:**

**"Two nations in your womb,  
Two peoples, going their own ways from birth!  
One shall be stronger than the other;  
The older shall be servant to the younger"**

**When her time had come, there were indeed twins in her womb. The first came out red, hairy all over like a hair-cloak, and they named him Esau. Immediately afterwards his brother was born with his hand grasping Esau's heel, and they called him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born. The boys grew up; and Esau became skilful in hunting, a man of the open plains, but Jacob led a settled life and stayed among the tents. Isaac favoured Jacob. One day Jacob prepared a broth and when Esau came in from the country, exhausted, he said to Jacob, "I am exhausted; let me swallow some of that red broth": this is why he was called Edom. Jacob said, "Not till you sell me your rights as the first born." Esau replied, "I am at death's door; what use is my birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Not till you swear!"; so he swore an oath and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and the lentil broth, and he ate and drank and went away without more ado. Thus Esau showed how little he valued his birthright.**

I do not think that anyone can take up the study or practice of religion and not discover the essential role that promise plays in faith. Promise signifies hope and human beings cannot live without the hope of promise. We have to be able to see beyond the current conflict or crises to endure its costs and suffering. We have to believe in the promise that there is some freedom on the other side of despair if we are to endure its indignity.

That assumes, of course, that the promise is reliable. We have to believe that it holds authority and is something that we can count on. Will the promise maker be the promise keeper? This is essential in every human relationship that I know of and it is the essence of faith. Will spouses keep their wedding vows? Will my company honor my contract? Will we pay the credit card bill that we promised to do when we applied for the line of credit? As far as faith is concerned, is God's word God's bond?

That is the question that rages across the pages of Jewish and Christian scripture. And if we are really honest with ourselves we wonder and question God's veracity, at least once a week on Sunday mornings.

God made a promise to Abram, "Leave your own country, your kinsmen and your father's house, and go to a country that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you and make your name so great it shall be used in blessings." (Gen. 12:1-2) This foundational promise is turned and nuanced in different ways but the troth God offers is this, "I will be your God, you will be my people, you will my chosen people, you will be a light unto the nations, and I will lead you into the promised land – a land overflowing with milk and honey." The promise is made repeatedly to fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all of their kin. The question for them and for us is, can you believe that? Can you trust it? Those three guys were not so sure. You can understand why, because by the time you get to the end of Genesis the Hebrew people are slaves in the land of Egypt.

Now there are several odd things about this promising God. Yahweh is the only deity in the ancient near east who made long-term promises, the kind of promises that would take generations to fulfill. The promises are fluid, and as I have suggested,

constantly amended and nuanced. These promises never see completion and they are endlessly at risk.<sup>1</sup> It is called the Promised Land because God keeps promising its occupation to the Hebrew people.

The other thing to keep in mind is that the promise of Yahweh is very material. It is concrete. We are talking about a Promised Land of red clay and black dirt, meadows and pastures, woodlots and prairies, streams and ponds. The Promised Land is a safe and secure place where families can farm, garden, raise livestock. In other words, the promised land of Yahweh is that place where human beings can work the earth to sustain their families. The Promised Land is about corn, wheat, rice, barley, okra, green beans, squash, chickens, goats, sheep, and cattle. The Promised Land is the soil of grapes, figs, dates, blackberries, strawberries, blueberries, apples, peaches, and mangoes. The Promised Land is the home of artisans, craftsmen, mechanics, architects, teachers, physicians, attorneys, miners, millers, haberdashers, poets, any and every one who seeks honest wages for sustainable economies.

The Promised Land is not just about fertile soil. It requires genuine safety for all of the people. The Promise Land is a sheltered land where families can labor without fear, children can walk to school with the least caution, and women are secure in their dignity.

I cannot over emphasize or exaggerate the raw material of this promise. I say that because the Christian faith too easily and quickly spiritualizes the promises of God. We too hastily jump to allegory and images about heaven or the “everlasting

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), Vol. 4, p. 617.

arms.” We forget that when Jesus prayed, “Give us this day our daily bread,” he meant the bread that comes from the hearth and is set before the family.

He meant tacos, pita, flat bread, corn bread, baguettes, yeasted breads and rolls.

Croissants, chapati and challah, broa, brioche, bing, black bread, and biscuits touch only a few of the daily breads that people eat around the globe. Suman Mahmood wrote:

Could someone put some food on my plate?  
 Make me something; it doesn't have to be great  
 Something from mothers hands  
 It doesn't have to be anything grand  
 With a pinch of giving  
 And a dash of caring  
 Add some spices for flavor  
 It'll be something I savor  
 Set up the table for dinner  
 Whatever you cooked, I bet it's a winner  
 All that's left to do is eat  
 So we all get together, and take a seat  
 This meal's full of family  
 Because there are some things others don't see  
 It's that every meal is meant to be shared  
 Because when mom made it, she cared.<sup>2</sup>

This is the fundamental promise of God's “Holy Land.” It is God's sacred promise that human beings are given the basic means of life. Hear very carefully that this promise is the promise of Yahweh. To my knowledge there is no other god in the Ancient Near East who makes such a promise, who makes this the will and purpose of God. This is the promise that the Sacred One makes for the future of every child on the earth. And it seems to me that if we reduce or replace that promise the house of faith crumbles into sanctimonious foolishness.

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<sup>2</sup> Suman Mahmood, “Food Poem,” found on PoemHunter.com at <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/thunder-27/>, downloaded July 8, 2011.

What makes this claim even more radical is the fact that the promise is given to a loose confederation of tribes who became the tiny nation of Israel. And in the story that I read to you the promise winds up in the hands of Jacob, a conniving, lying, and deceitful man. His moral veracity by no means qualifies him as the keeper of God's promise. In Jacob's culture Esau had every right as the oldest son to carry the promise. But the struggle within Rebecca's womb between these two brothers follows their entire lifetimes. And if I am reading Genesis correctly it appears that Yahweh intended to shake up every religious and cultural assumption of the time. The youngest son stood no chance of assuming the father's inheritance. At the instigation of his mother, Rebecca, Jacob conspires to usurp the estate of Isaac. Walter Brueggemann remarks on the paradox of gift and conflict that runs the course of Jacob's life.<sup>3</sup> Thus the two weakest members of this household are given the gift of God's promise for the future of a relatively insignificant nation. The promise remains the promise of Israel and, I dare say, the promise of the Jewish rabbi called Jesus of Nazareth. However small, undeserving, and unlikely it may seem to us, the promise of God is a gift delivered into the hands of the seemingly powerless and unconvincing characters.

Consider this story offered by Booker T. Washington in his book, *Up From Slavery*. You recall that Washington was born into slavery, his mother a slave and his father a white plantation owner. He would become renowned as an orator, educator, proponent of the education and political rights of former slaves. Washington wrote:

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis* (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1982), p. 214.

I have said that there are few instances of a member of my race betraying a specific trust. One of the best illustrations of this which I know of is the case of an ex-slave from Virginia whom I met not long ago in a little town in the state of Ohio. I found that this man had made a contract with his master, two or three years previous to the Emancipation Proclamation, to the effect that the slave was to be permitted to buy himself, by paying so much per year for his body; and while he was paying for himself, he was to be permitted to labour where and for whom he pleased. Finding that he could secure better wages in Ohio, he went there. When freedom came, he was still in debt to his master some three hundred dollars. Notwithstanding that the Emancipation Proclamation freed him from any obligation to his master, this black man walked the greater portion of the distance back to where his old master lived in Virginia, and placed the last dollar, with interest, in his hands. In talking to me about this, the man told me that he knew that he did not have to pay the debt, but that he had given his word to his master, and his word he had never broken. He felt that he could not enjoy his freedom till he had fulfilled his promise.<sup>4</sup>

Can you imagine such fidelity to a promise as that black man's? Like the Promised Land of God, that former slave had made a pledge to pay a debt to a man who had once denied him basic human rights. The debt was a material debt, just as solid as his word, just as corporeal as his freedom. The former slave delivered on a promise, however long it took him to work for and save that kind of money, however far he had to walk. Such is the Promised Land of God.

The Promised Land is as vitally important today as it was thousands of years ago. If you do not think so, ask immigrants, legal or not. What are they looking for? Do they not risk dangers, toils, and even death to find that homeland where they can provide for their families? Some trek from Honduras through Guatemala and Mexico to get to the United States to put food on the table. They want the promise of work and security. When I talk with people who stand in line at our Head to Toe Hygiene

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<sup>4</sup> Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), p. 13.

Pantry I ask them what they want most of all. Every one of them has told me, “A job.” Behind every human desire to live a decent life and care for loved ones is the echo of this ancient promise of Yahweh.

If we do not understand this promise it will be difficult for us to ever come to terms with the modern state of Israel and its conflict with Palestinians. Yes, it is about borders, resources, and security. And for the Jews it is profoundly sacrosanct. I too am disturbed with the poverty of Palestinians and the degrading conditions of Palestinian refugee camps. I also know the passion that resides in the hearts of Israelis with regards to this Holy Land, this promised gift of God. I know the many miles they have traveled over three millennia and the lives that have been lost on the journey. In their minds the Holy Land is a Promised Land bathed in the blood of millions and millions of Jews.

With that in mind I close with this Jewish prayer, Psalm 113 (NEB):

Praise the Lord, you that are his servants, praise the name of the Lord.  
 Blessed be the name of the Lord, now and evermore.  
 From the rising of the sun to its setting may the Lord's name be praised.  
 High is the Lord above all nations, his glory above the heavens.  
 There is none like the Lord our God in heaven or on earth,  
 Who sets his throne so high but deigns to look down so low;  
 Who lifts the weak out of the dust and raises the poor from the dunghill,  
 Giving them a place among princes, among the princes of his people;  
 Who makes the woman in a childless house a happy mother of children.

Now that's a promise!

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