

The land metaphor and the gospel

by Douglas E. Cox

In the prophecies of the Old Testament, the promised land was a great metaphor. The land is described as “a land of milk and honey.” [Exodus 3:8]

In the New Testament, the apostle Peter speaks of “the milk of the word.” [1 Peter 2:1-2]

Here, milk is a metaphor, that represents the word, the holy scriptures. For Peter, the word meant what we call the Old Testament. Milk and honey connect the *promised land* with the *word of God*. The theme of the promised land dominates the history of Israel in the Scriptures, and the land is associated with several prophecies.

According to Gerhard von Rad (1901-1971), Professor of Old Testament, University of Heidelberg, the promise of the land is the most important idea in the first six books of the Bible, from Genesis to Joshua. He wrote: [1]

As concerns the good gifts of salvation promised by Jahweh, it does not go beyond the old one—the good gift of land was always the ultimate for Israel, which nothing could surpass and which could only be won or forfeited.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann referred to Gerhard von Rad as “the defining and preeminent interpreter of the Christian Old Testament in the twentieth century.” [2]

God’s plan in history focused upon giving the promised land to Israel. Von Rad wrote: [3]

In the “canonical” saving history, from the patriarchs down to the entry into Canaan, it was Jahweh who made the truth of the promise good in the face of all the failure of Israel; and he did not let any part of his great plan in history, least of all the final part, be taken out of his own hands.

According to von Rad, the land promise is the most prominent item in the patriarchal covenant: [4]

The most prominent item in the covenant with the patriarchs was the promise of the land, and this promise was given at the time to a small group of worshippers of the ancestral God.

Von Rad stated: “In content the covenant with Abraham . . . contains three promises: (1) Abraham to become a people; (2) a new relationship to God (“I will be your God”); and (3) the possession of the land.” [5]

Von Rad wrote: “the promise of the land is of even greater moment than the promise of becoming a nation.” [6]

The patriarchs did not possess the land in their lifetimes, but instead were strangers and pilgrims in it. Von Rad wrote: [7]

Thus, the relationship of the patriarchs to the promised land is strangely double-edged. This land had no doubt been solemnly assigned to them and to their posterity, and Abraham was commanded to go about in it, in its length and breadth, as his property by right (Gen. xiii. 14f.). But in the full meaning of the word they do not in the least possess it—they already live in the land, but those who inhabit it are Canaanites (Gen. xii. 6).

The land promise is connected with the promise of the people having a special relationship with God. Von Rad wrote: [8]

For God did not only promise land and children to the patriarchs. He promised them in addition to be their God and their children’s God, and thus gave them the prospect of a special kind of relationship to himself.

The land promise, and the history of Israel’s possession of the land is the theological idea at the heart of the Scriptures. Von Rad wrote: [9]

But now—in Gen. xii–I—because of Jahweh’s threefold, ever-reiterated promise, the era of the patriarchs as a whole is understood as the time of the promise, as an elaborate preparatory arrangement for the creation of the people of God and for its life. What is new in this view is not the use of the idea of the promise in itself—as we have seen, the promise of a land and of children already formed a part of the oldest traditions deriving from the patriarchal age. What is new is rather the theological employment of this twofold promise as a word of God which set in motion the whole of the saving history down to the conquest under Joshua.

Von Rad referred to Moses being excluded from the promised land as “an odd fact.” This event was typical of the exclusion of the sacrificial and legal system of worship under the New Covenant. Von Rad wrote: [10]

Even the death of Moses outside the land of promise—an odd fact which later ages had to explain theologically—was vicarious for Israel. It is because of Israel that Jahweh’s great wrath was directed to Moses, with the result that Jahweh refused to allow him to set foot in the land of promise (Deut. i. 37, iv. 21f.).

Israel’s possession of the land fulfilled the promises to the fathers. Von Rad wrote: [11]

And, finally, it is he who speaks of the goodness and fruitfulness of this land as if it were a paradise. In this act of possessing the land Jahweh had finally “given Israel

rest.” This term “rest” occurs several times—we are clearly meant to understand it as the Deuteronomistic formula which expresses the greatest, the ultimate gift which Jahweh bestowed upon Israel in granting the land. By this gift Jahweh had redeemed his promise in full. In this respect, Josh. xxi. 43-5 occupies a key position theologically for the rounding off of the Hexateuch generally: “And Jahweh gave the Israelites the whole land, as he swore to their fathers. They took possession of it and settled in it, and Jahweh gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their fathers: and not one of all their enemies withstood them, but Jahweh gave all their enemies into their hand. Not one of all the good words which Jahweh had spoken to the house of Israel failed: all came to pass.” . . . Jahweh’s great plan in history for Israel achieved its goal, and in this the Hexateuch is altogether summed up.

The author of Hebrews associated the “rest” spoken of in Joshua with the eternal “rest” promised to the saints. [Hebrews 4:5-11] He said, “Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.” [Vs. 11]

The following verse refers to the word of God, which is “sharper than any twoedged sword;” the association between “rest” in verse 11, and the word of God in verse 12, and the whole context in which these verses occur, suggest that entry into the rest that the land of promise involves believing the word of God.

Association of the promised land with “milk and honey” also connects land to the word of God. Jesus spoke of himself as the bread from heaven, alluding to the manna in the wilderness, and he referred to his teachings as “new wine.” The prophet Joel spoke of a time when “the mountains shall drop down new wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the rivers of Judah shall flow with waters, and a fountain shall come forth out of the house of the LORD, and shall water the valley of Shittim.” [Joel 3:18] The fountain that comes forth out of the house of the Lord must correspond to the mystical “broad rivers and streams” of Isaiah 33:21, and the healing river of Ezekiel 47:1-12, and the rivers of living waters in Zechariah 14:8. The valley of Shittim was where the Israelites camped before coming into the promised land, so the fountain flowing from the house of the Lord is a prelude to the people of God possessing the spiritual things the land represents.

The prophecies about the land are fulfilled in spiritual ways to the church, and the land represents the truth of the gospel. The Israelites in the wilderness were types of the Christian church; Paul said the things that had happened to them were for “our examples.” [1 Corinthians 10:6, 11]

The land of promise of the Old Testament is associated with God’s revelations and represents the spiritual things promised to the saints, among which is the promise Jesus gave to his disciples, that they would “know the truth.” He said to them, “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” [John 8:32]

The literal land contains mountains, hills, fertile valleys, and areas of wilderness and desert. The promised land represents the truth; mountains and hills are prominent parts of it, and they stand for the prominent revelations, and promises, and prophecies of scripture. Mountains are durable, and so are fit symbols of things that are eternal; and they are also high, and thus point to lofty or spiritual ideas, and the promise of salvation contained in the gospel.

All the teachings of Jesus were given within the boundaries of the promised land. His instructions to his disciples in Matthew 5-7, called the sermon on the mount, are associated with an unnamed

mountain, that tradition says was Mount Tabor. Although the mountain was not specified, it was one of the mountains of Israel.

Jesus also taught in the temple, in villages and cities of Judea, at the coastal city of Capernaum, in the cities around Galilee, on the lake, and at the well of Jacob in Samaria.

In the Old Testament, the blessings in the covenant were associated with Mount Gerizim, and the curses with Mount Ebal. [Deuteronomy 11:29; Joshua 8:33-34] Jesus spoke of the significance of Mount Gerizim in his conversation with the woman of Samaria, at the well near Sychar, which was formerly Shechem. He said, referring to Mount Gerizim, and Jerusalem:

John 4:21-24

Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father.

Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews.

But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him.

God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.

The literal Mount Gerizim, and the earthly Jerusalem, and the literal land, all became “shadows” and *types of spiritual realities* under the New Covenant.

Jesus revealed the spiritual things that they represent, through the apostles, and in the New Testament. This is one of the great truths of the Gospel, that makes the saints *free* .

References

1. Gerhard von Rad. *Old Testament Theology: The theology of Israel's historical traditions*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. p. 126.
2. Walter Brueggemann. Preface, in: Gerhard von Rad: *Op. Cit.* , p. ix.
3. *Ibid* . p. 126.
4. *Ibid* . p. 133.
5. *Ibid* . p. 134.
6. *Ibid* . p. 168.
7. *Ibid* . p. 169.
8. *Ibid* . p. 169.
9. *Ibid* . p. 170.
10. *Ibid* . p. 295.
11. *Ibid* . p. 304.