

# The land promise in the New Covenant

by Douglas E. Cox

The land promise God gave to Abraham, and to Isaac, and to Jacob, is the great theme of the Old Testament, but to many, it appears to be strangely absent in the New. Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, said: [1]

Land is a defining theme in Old Testament tradition. The Old Testament is preoccupied with the concrete particularity of land, thereby assuring that Israel's faith is in touch with the public, material, sociopolitical- economic aspects of living in the world. For that reason, one cannot consider the faith of the Old Testament or the God of the Old Testament without at the same time being concerned with socioeconomic analysis, for land is not just a "good idea," but actual real estate that evokes and hosts profound hope, imaginative social policy deep moral conflict, savage acts of violence, and acute communal disappointment.

The story of Israel in the Old Testament is about the promise of the land of Canaan, the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness, anticipating the land, taking possession of it, and governing the land, and after several centuries, their displacement or exile from it. Brueggemann wrote: [2]

The story of the early part of the Bible thus is the movement from land anticipation to land governance and finally to land loss, culminating in the deportation and displacement from the land, signalled as "exile." Remarkably in this tradition preoccupied with land, the exile is the defining signature event of ancient Israel. The exile, moreover, became the matrix in which the ancient promises of land were reiterated afresh. Thus the great prophetic traditions of Isaiah 40–55, Jeremiah 30-31, and Ezekiel 33-48 all assure exilic Israel that God will once again give land to Israel as it was first given to the heirs of the ancestors (see Isa. 49:19-20; 51:2-3; Jer. 31:12-14, 38-40; Ezek. 37:13-14; 47:13-14). With these utterances the gift of land is again in prospect. Again YHWH guarantees, and again Israel is to trust the promise and receive the gift.

When the Israelites returned from exile, the prophets foretold another restoration to the land, which would be greater than the first. The Zionist movement and dispensationalism in the USA in particular have endeavored to bring about fulfillment of various prophecies of a restoration to the land. The influence of dispensationalism, and material aid provided to the Jewish state by dispensationalist John Hagee was recognized in a speech by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu on March 8, 2010. Netanyahu said, "Christian Zionism preceded modern Jewish Zionism, and I think enabled it. But it received a tremendous impetus several decades ago when leading American clergymen, among them most notably, Pastor John Hagee, a dynamic pastor and leader from

Texas, began to say to their congregations and to anyone who listened, it's time to take a stand with Israel. . . .”

In an article on Christian Zionism, Stephen Sizer wrote: [3]

Christian Zionism errs most profoundly because it fails to appreciate the relationship between the Old and New Covenants and the ways in which the latter completes, fulfills and annuls the former. It is fundamental that Christians read the Scriptures with Christian eyes, and that they interpret the Old Covenant in the light of the New Covenant, not the other way round.

Sizer explained further: [4]

Under the Old Covenant, revelation from God came often in shadow, image, form and prophecy. In the New Covenant that revelation finds its consummation in reality, substance and fulfilment. The question is not whether the promises of the covenant are to be understood literally or spiritually as Dispensationalists like to stress. It is instead a question of whether they should be understood in terms of Old Covenant shadow or in terms of New Covenant reality. This is the most basic hermeneutical assumption which Christian Zionists consistently fail to acknowledge.

So, for example, in the Old Covenant animals and food are sacrificed anticipating the offering of the body of Christ. A portable tabernacle foreshadows the permanent presence of the Spirit of God indwelling his people. God provides Israel in the desert with manna from heaven, water from a rock and a serpent on a pole. All these images find their fulfilment not in more manna, or water or indeed in a higher pole but in the redemptive work of our Lord Jesus Christ of which the Old Covenant forms were but a shadow. By their very nature the Old Covenant provisions must be seen as shadowy forms rather than substantial realities. The same principle applies to the promises concerning the Land which also serve as revelational shadows, images, types, prophecies, anticipating God's future purposes, not only for one small people, the Jews, but the whole world, revealed fully and finally in Jesus Christ. Hebrews sums this up succinctly: 'In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe' (Heb 1:1-2).

W.D. Davies (1911-2001), a Welsh Congregationalist minister and Emeritus Professor at Duke University, showed that Jesus has become the focus of the Old Testament promises; he fulfills the land promise in many ways.

A notable example is when Jesus said to Nathanael that he would see angels ascending and descending on himself, identifying himself with Bethel, perhaps implying that He replaces the land, or at least, fulfills the land promise made to Jacob in Genesis 28. Davies wrote: [5]

The point of John 1:51, in part at least, is that it is no longer the place, Bethel, that is important, but the Person of the Son of Man. It is in his Person that “the house of God and the gate of heaven” are now found. Where the Son of Man is the “heaven will be opened” and the angels will ascend and descend to connect that heaven with

earth, that is, in 1:51 Jesus is not to be set over against Jacob or the ladder of his dream, but over against the sanctuary at Bethel itself, which had been a link between heaven and earth and the place of God's habitation on earth. This interpretation has the advantage over many others proposed of relying simply on the Biblical text at Gen. 28. Furthermore, it comports well with the idea of the humanity of Christ as the dwelling place of God with men and as the new temple with which we have already dealt, and especially with the concept of the Logos becoming flesh in 1:14.

Davies summarized the way Jesus 'transformed' traditional Jewish ideas about the land: [6]

In the last resort this study drives us to one point: the person of a Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, who proclaimed the acceptable year of the Lord only to die accursed on a cross and so pollute the land, and by that act and its consequences to shatter the geographic dimension of the religion of his fathers. Like everything else, the land also in the New Testament drives us to ponder the mystery of Jesus, the Christ, who by his cross and resurrection broke not only the bonds of death for early Christians but also the bonds of the land.

In his discussion of the land in John's gospel, Davies wrote: [7]

We need not here examine the question how far the concept of "life," as a symbol of salvation, remained inseverable from the land and how far the land became a secondary element, if at all, in the understanding of "life." What is noteworthy is that in the Fourth Gospel the concept of "life" or "eternal life" assumes a significant role. At no point is it connected with the land in any way. Rather it is always centered in Jesus himself, who in this sense, has become "the sphere" or "space" where life is to be found. True, there is one passage, 5:25 ff, when the life of the Age to Come is apparently conceived within the framework of the traditional eschatology of Judaism.

25 Truly, truly, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those that hear shall live,

26 For as the Father hath life in himself; so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself,

27 And has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of man.

28 Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice

29 and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life; and those who have done evil, unto the resurrection of judgment.

Here John doubtless conceives, in verse 29, of resurrection in the land: compare with Dan. 12:2 (LXX). But the main emphasis in the gospel is that expressed in 11:24 ff where the traditional doctrine is quietly laid aside in favour of a new.

Jesus said to her [Martha], "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection, and the life, he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

The point of reference for understanding life in this world, and in the world to come, is Jesus Christ. Any traditional concepts, geographical and other, governing the understanding of “life” are dwarfed by the centrality of Christ.

Davies showed that in the New Testament, a literal interpretation of the land promise has been eclipsed, but remarkably, he may have missed some of the great results and implications of his own thesis!

Some Christian scholars, following Davies, recognize that the land promise, in the literal sense of the Old Testament, has been eclipsed in the New, yet fail to notice the figurative and spiritual significance of many prophecies that refer to geographical features such as mountains, deserts, seas, rivers, and valleys, and to specific localities within the land of promise.

Colin Chapman wrote: [8]

Jesus had little or nothing to say about the land; the only clear reference is Matt 5:5 (cf Psalm 37:11). The reason for this silence is not that Jesus took traditional Jewish hopes for granted and affirmed them, but that the fulfilment of all these hopes is now to be understood in the context of the coming of the kingdom of God in and through Jesus (Mark 1:15). Jesus predicted the destruction of the Temple; but instead of speaking about its restoration, spoke about the coming of the Son of Man (Mark 13; Matt 24; Luke 21:5-36).

Restorationists and Dispensationalists argue that if Jesus said little about the land, it's because he didn't need to say anything about it and could take traditional Jewish teaching or granted. The other possible explanation, which I find much more convincing, is that Jesus could not affirm all the nationalistic expectations of the Jewish people. In his teaching about the kingdom of God there was no place for traditional Jewish ideas that the kingly rule of God revolved around the Jewish people and the Promised Land. In Mark's summary of the message of Jesus (Mark 1:15), he says in effect, 'The time that the prophets looked forward to – when they said “In that day . . .” – has at last come! The kingly rule of God is just about to come and God is about to establish his kingly rule on the earth.'

Gary M. Burge said, “Christian theology had no room for ‘holy places’ outside of the Holy One who is Christ.” Discussing Paul's sermon in Acts 13:16-41, Burge wrote: [9]

Paul begins with another recitation of Israel's history parallel in form to that of Acts 7. Paul anchors the good news of salvation in the election of Abraham (13.17) and in God's promises to him (13.26, 32-33). He cannot deny that the defeat of the Canaanites led to the gift of Canaan for Israel (13.19). But this is not theologically anchored in the speech as it ought to be. The striking thing is that Paul here can refer to the promise of Abraham and *not* refer to the Land of Promise. This is what the promise to Abraham meant! But Paul is consistent with all the speeches in the book of Acts. Paul as well as Peter can consistently ignore the central elements in Abraham's life according to Jewish teaching: land and progeny. Abraham becomes a protagonist for the Christian faith, not the basis for Jewish identity in the land. Luke gives remarkable attention to Abraham in his writings (15 times in his Gospel; 7 times in Acts) and

he might explain or paraphrase: The promises once given to Abraham have not been realized as Judaism expected: they are fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. And those who attach themselves to Christ—not the legacies of Judea—become his children.

According to Burge, “Paul as well as Peter can consistently ignore the central elements in Abraham’s life according to Jewish teaching: land and progeny.” Certainly Burge would agree, the land is not ignored by the prophets, and Peter encourages Christians to give heed to prophecy in 2 Peter 1:19. Jerusalem, in the metaphorical language of the prophets, represents *salvation*. Jeremiah said, “In those days shall Judah be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell safely: and this is the name wherewith she shall be called, The LORD our righteousness.” [Jeremiah 33:16] Jesus said, Jerusalem is “the city of the great King.” [Matthew 5:35] He quoted Psalm 48:2.

To gain entry to the heavenly Jerusalem, to enter through the gates of pearl, is to enjoy citizenship in Christ’s kingdom. And to be shut out, or *cast out* of the city, was something that Jesus warned people to avoid at all costs, even at the expense of a right eye, a right hand, or a right foot, in his teachings about the valley of Hinnom, or *Gehenna*. [Matthew 5:30]

*Gehenna* was located outside the earthly Jerusalem’s walls. But when Jesus spoke of it, he did so in connexion with the *heavenly* Jerusalem. He connected it with the “*unquenchable fire*” of God’s word.

Isaiah said that Jerusalem and the *mountain of the Lord’s house* will be exulted, and established in the tops of the mountains. [Isaiah 2:1-3] In the New Testament, Jerusalem is located in heaven, while on the other hand, the earthly city, the “Jerusalem which *now is*,” was demoted, and identified with Hagar the Egyptian bond maid, who was cast out of Abraham’s house. [Galatians 4:25]

When was Jerusalem raised up? It must have been when Jesus ascended to his Father’s throne. Peter said to the Jews, “God hath made the same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.” He was “by the right hand of God exalted” having received the promise of “the throne of David.” [Acts 2:29-36]

The fulfillment of the kingdom promised to Israel in the Old Testament went beyond what was actually said; whereas Isaiah said Jerusalem would be raised up, in the New Testament it is located far above the earth’s mountains, in heaven. Chris Wright wrote: [10]

Moreover, even in the Old Testament itself, there was an awareness that the fulfillment of prophecies that were made in terms of the concrete realities of Israel’s life and faith would actually go beyond them. The familiar dimensions of Israel’s national life are transcended in various ways. For example: the restoration of the exiles would be a reunification of ancient Judah and Israel into one renewed and repentant people, an event which never happened historically (Jer. 50:4f., 33; Ezek. 37:15ff.); the people of God would be restored to the full, perfect and eternal experience of their covenant relationship with Yahweh (Jer. 50:5, Ezek. 36, 39:25-39); the law would not only be perfectly obeyed by Israel, but also be sought out by all the nations of the earth (Jer. 31:33; 32:39-41; Isa. 2:3; 51:4f.); the new Davidic kingdom would be worldwide, and the new king would be perfect in all those respects where the historical kings had failed (Isa. 9:6f., 11:1-5, Jer. 23:1-6, Ezek. 34:1-24, 37:15-28); the new temple would be miraculously filled with the glory of God and the river of life (Ezek. 43:1-5, 47:1-12).

In other words, there seems to be an awareness that although the future has to be described in concepts drawn from Israel's historical nationhood, it will in fact ultimately transcend them.

Thus to claim that Old Testament prophecy can have a deeper spiritual meaning than its literal form is not some kind of Christian 'trick'. The dispensationalist's accusation that those who interpret prophecy in terms of a spiritual rather than a literalistic fulfilment are not taking the Old Testament seriously is false. For the Old Testament itself sometimes sees beyond the literal forms of its own eschatology.

While Jerusalem is raised up, in Isaiah's prophecy, Zechariah showed that all the surrounding land will become a plain, placing the land round about in stark contrast with the holy city. [Zechariah 14:10] The valley of Hinnom, or *Gehenna*, remains outside the city walls.

John said of those outside the heavenly Jerusalem, "For without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie." [Revelation 22:15]

Christians look for "a better country," one which is "heavenly." It is the "rest" promised to the saints. The inheritance is spiritual in nature. The heavenly city, whose builder and maker is God, endures forever. [Hebrews 11:10] Chris Wright wrote: [11]

Hebrews' affirmation of what "we have" are surprisingly comprehensive. We have the land, described as the rest into which we have entered through Christ, in a way which even Joshua did not achieve for Israel (3:12-4:11); we have a High Priest (4:14, 8:1, 10:21) and an Altar (13:10); we have a hope which in this context refers to the reality of the covenant made with Abraham (6:13-20). We enter into the Holy Place, so we have the reality of the tabernacle and the temple (10:9). We have come to Mount Zion (12:22) and we are receiving a kingdom, in line with Haggai 2:6 (12:28). Indeed according to Hebrews (13:14), the only thing we do not have is an earthly, territorial city. 'For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.' (Hebrews 13:14)

## References

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