

What is the role of the promised land in the gospel?

by Douglas E. Cox

In an article about *The Land in the New Testament*, David Devenish wrote: "What does the New Testament teach about the land of Israel? Answer: absolutely nothing. There are no references to the importance of the land or of Jerusalem as a 'holy city'." [1]

But he then mentioned that in Hebrews, the saints are said to have come to Mount Zion, which is located within the promised land. He wrote: [2]

The Old Testament form of worship, including the whole sacrificial system in the temple, is merely a shadow and thus declared obsolete. In the same book, written to scattered Jewish Christians, the writer declared triumphantly, 'You have come to mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God' (Heb. 12:22) without any hint that they should also await an earthly Zion.

Similarly, N.T. Wright has suggested that the land promise of the Old Testament is discounted in the New Testament. He wrote of the authors of New Testament books: [3]

Nor did they adhere to the symbols of the Jewish worldview. Their initially ambiguous attitude to the Temple, which we mentioned earlier, gave birth to a use of Temple-language as a rich source of metaphor through which they lent depth to their beliefs both about Jesus and about the church itself. Similar metaphorical transformation took place in the language of worship and sacrifice. Likewise, the Torah was reinterpreted in such a way that it no longer functioned as a code marking out Israel as a separate nation. All had been fulfilled in Christ, even if (as in the Epistle of Barnabas) it sometimes took a good deal of exegetical ingenuity to demonstrate the point. . . . So, too, the Land no longer functioned as the key symbol of the geographical identity of the people of God, and that for an obvious reason: if the new community consisted of Jew, Greek,

barbarian alike, there was no sense in which one piece of territory could possess more significance than another. At no point in this early period do we find Christians eager to define or defend a "holy land."

Let's examine whether the importance of the land promise, so prominent in the Old Testament, is discounted in the New Testament, or whether the land promise may have been *reinterpreted*, rather than discounted, or abolished.

The promise

Possession of the land was promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A similar promise is found in the New Testament. Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth." [Matthew 5:5] The word for "earth" can also be translated "land."

Jesus promised his disciples: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." It is suggested that possessing the land, in the Old Testament, is reinterpreted in the New. It corresponds to understanding the truth of the gospel, and receiving the promised inheritance of the saints, which is spiritual in nature.

N.T. Wright pointed out that in Judaism, the temple, land and Torah came to be viewed as fused together as a single symbol. He wrote: "In later Judaism, the ideologies proper to Temple and Land were fused together into a central symbol of Torah." [4] Wright also stated: [5]

The alternatives to developing some system of oral Torah (without capital letters) was to abandon the Torah itself. Case law was a way of preserving the Torah as a symbol. It could not be abandoned without giving up one major part of the worldview. Torah was interwoven with covenant, promises, Land and hope.

In the New Testament, the promised land is referred to as a "rest," associated with the sabbath day. It is the "rest" that the saints are encouraged to labor to enter. [Hebrews 4:9] According to the promise of Jesus, the Spirit will guide the saints into *the truth*, just as the Israelites of old had the promise of the land.

The hope

Although Abraham was promised the land of Canaan, he actually possessed none of it in his lifetime. He took this as assurance that he would be raised up from the grave. In the New Testament, Abraham not receiving the promise is used to prove the resurrection. [Acts 7:5; Hebrews 11:13]

Spiritual blessings

In Genesis 49, when Jacob blessed his son Joseph, he said, "The blessings of thy father have prevailed above the blessings of my progenitors unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills." This suggests the blessings and promises he had received were high, and lofty, or spiritual in nature, and sure, and eternal. In the New Testament, the promise of the gospel is about obtaining immortality, secured for us by Christ. [Romans 2:7]

The Exodus from Egypt

The Israelites suffered bondage in Egypt, which became a type of worldly society, and bondage. The pattern of Israel's exodus from Egypt was retraced in the life of Jesus, who was taken to Egypt by his parents, [Matthew 2:15] and later returned from there to reside in Nazareth. [Matthew 2:22-23]

Peter said Christians have escaped from the corruption that is in the world. [2 Peter 1:4] In the prophecy of Revelation 11:8, Egypt and Sodom, both places from which God's people escaped, represent the world. Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem. R.E. Nixon wrote, "we may be right in seeing the Church at the moment in the process of her Exodus, her baptism of suffering, or in the midst of her trials in the wilderness, before she enters the full enjoyment of her heavenly inheritance." [6]

In the wilderness

For the Israelites, the wilderness experience was a period of testing and trial. Those who had no faith were denied entry into the land. In Revelation 12:6, and 14, the church is represented by a woman who flees to the wilderness. Paul said the things that happened to the Israelites in the wilderness occurred for our examples.

1 Corinthians 10:11-12

Now all these things happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.

Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.

The wilderness seems to represent the state of not yet dwelling in the land of promise, but as *en route* to the land, the promised inheritance. Prophetic revelations are only partly understood; entering the "rest" that the saints are promised requires labour.

Giants occupy the land

The Israelite spies saw themselves as grasshoppers, in comparison to the people in the land. They were unwilling to trust God. The prophet Joel described a great army in the day of the Lord under the figure of a devastating locust plague. [Joel 2:1-11]

In Hebrews, the saints are encouraged to labor to enter into "rest," which does not refer to getting to heaven, but believing and understanding the word of God. "Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." [Hebrews 4:11-12]

Taking possession of the land

Under Joshua, the Israelites took possession of the land. The Lord fought on their behalf. The seven trumpets in Revelation allude to the trumpets blown at Jericho. Paul said, "we wrestle not with flesh and blood." [Ephesians 6:12] There is spiritual warfare in heaven, and eventually the saints are victorious, and Satan is cast out. [Revelation 12:11]

Dwelling in the land

The nation of Israel occupied the land and they lived their lives in it, working the land, planting and harvesting, building cities, performing their duties in the temple service, defending against attacks by enemies etc. Jesus taught that those who do the things he taught are wise, and are like the person who built his house on a rock, which identifies his teachings with the *bedrock* of the land. The person who does not do those things he compared to the man who built his house upon *sand*. [Matthew 7:24-29]

In the 4th chapter of Hebrews, belief in the gospel is referred to as *rest*. The land corresponds to that which must be believed.

Hebrews 4:1-3 NIV

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,

So I declared on oath in my anger,
'They shall never enter my rest.'

And yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world.

Invasion

In Judges 6 and 7, the Moabites invaded the land, "as grasshoppers for multitude." "Both they and their camels were without number: and they entered into the land to destroy it."

In the New Testament, the apostle Peter said that false teachers would come in, who would "bring in damnable heresies." He said because of them, "the way of truth shall be evil spoken of." They would "make merchandise" of the saints. [2 Peter 2:1-3] The Church was indeed invaded by false teachers in the early centuries; invasion by false teachers was foretold in 2 Peter 2, and is the subject of the prophecies of Ezekiel 38-39, and Zechariah 12-14, and Revelation 20:8-9.

The kingdom

The kingdom of Israel was established under David. The idea of a kingdom implies a territory, or a land, having specific boundaries.

Jesus reigns in the heavenly Jerusalem, and he possesses the "key of David." [Revelation 3:7] The "land" or territory in which he reigns is spiritual, as he opens the minds of people to the truth. "A man can receive nothing except it be given to him from Heaven." [John 3:27] Those who are "beheaded" for the testimony of Jesus "reign with Christ." [Revelation 20:4]

Exile in Babylon

The Jews were taken into captivity in Babylon, and Jerusalem was destroyed. The Christian church likewise has been taken captive in spiritual Babylon. In Daniel 7, the saints are dominated by a "little horn." The church has become desolate, and eventually the desolator will be judged. [Daniel 9:27]

Rebuilding the city and the temple

After 70 years, the Jews returned to Jerusalem, and rebuilt the walls and the temple. The church is the temple that Jesus builds in the present age. The prophets and apostles are its foundation. [Ephesians 2:20] In Revelation 21:22, John says, "And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it."

Jerusalem made desolate

The city of Jerusalem and the temple were made desolate under Antiochus IV, which is the subject of some of the prophecies of Daniel. A flood from the mouth of the serpent threatens the woman who represents the church, in Revelation 12:15.

A future restoration

The prophets foretold a future return from captivity. Israel's restoration to the land will be forever. [Ezekiel 37:25-28]

N. T. Wright wrote: [7]

The prophets who look ahead to the restoration of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple see in this event the refounding of the Garden of Eden; Ezekiel envisages rivers flowing out to water and heal the rest of the world, Zephaniah imagines the nations looking on in admiration as YHWH restores the fortunes of his people, and Zechariah (who imitates Ezekiel's idea of the rivers) sees the restoration of Jerusalem as the signal for YHWH to become king over all the world, so that the nations will come to Jerusalem to keep the Jewish festivals. Thus, in the literature which urged the exiled people to look forward to the coming age when all would be restored, the future glory of the land is described in terms borrowed from paradise-imagery; Israel after restoration will be like a new creation, with the people once again being fruitful and multiplying in her own land. The picture is the same: Israel is to be the true people of the one God, whose fortunes are the key to those of the whole world.

In the New Testament the prophets are said to minister "unto us," that is, the church. [1 Peter 1:9-12] *The saints*, not ethnic Jews, are "the true people of the one God, whose fortunes are the key to those of the whole world," and the *Israel of God* to whom the promises apply.

The apostle Peter spoke of "the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began," in Acts 3:21. In Revelation 12:15, the land swallows up the flood from the mouth of the serpent. The flood is a flood of false teaching, and flawed interpretations of scripture, and the earth or "land" that swallows up the flood represents the truth of the gospel.

The new Jerusalem has the character of Eden, and the tree of life is there, and "and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." [Revelation 22:1-2]

References

1. David Devenish. *The Land in the New Testament*
2. *Ibid* .
3. N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1. Augsburg Fortress Publishers; 1992. p. 365-366.
4. *Ibid*. p. 228.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
6. R.E. Nixon. *The Exodus in the New Testament*. The Tyndale New Testament Lecture, 1962. p. 31.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 264.