

The land promise in Hebrews 3:6-4:11

by Douglas E. Cox

Hebrews 3:6-4:11 is a lengthy exposition of Psalm 95, especially verse 8 of the psalm, which refers to the provocation in the wilderness, and the Israelites' lack of faith.

Psalm 95 was originally written for people of Israel who were dwelling in the promised land, and yet, it admonishes readers not to "harden their hearts," as their fathers had done. This suggests that the "rest" mentioned in the last verse of the Psalm, which remained and was still available for them to enter, must be something other than physically dwelling in the land. The Hebrews passage confirms this, as it says "For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day." [Hebrews 4:8] What "rest" could that be?

When the author of Hebrews discussed the "rest" mentioned in Psalm 95, in Hebrews 3:6-4:1-11, was he saying that "rest" means possessing the land, or did he mean something else?

In a discussion of this section of Hebrews, part of a series of posts about Israel and the New Covenant, James Patrick appears to suggest that the "rest" is, in fact, possession of the land by Jews. According to him, the land is not 'spiritualised,' which implies that the 'rest' can mean nothing else but

the literal land. Patrick wrote: [1]

Hebrews 3:1-4:11 – Before considering the above three ways in which the Law had been abolished, the writer to the Hebrews first dealt with the question of the promised land. He showed that trusting in Jesus for inheriting the land is more reliable than trusting in Moses, because Moses bore witness to future things (3:5) and then died with his generation in the wilderness because of their unbelief and disobedience. However, Joshua's generation had clearly not fulfilled Moses' prophecy of a permanent 'rest' in the promised land (4:8), because David and later prophets still spoke of a future time of restoration (4:7). Furthermore, even in the present generation there was still 'work' to do throughout the world (4:10), and the future 'Sabbath rest' for Jewish believers [as for those from every nation] was a promise that would only be inherited by trusting in Jesus 'until the end' (3:14; 4:3, 11). Believers might still 'today' be disqualified from inheriting the promise through unbelief and disobedience (3:19-4:2).

Obviously the writer here is not saying that the promise of 'rest' has been withdrawn now that the Mosaic Law has been abolished, nor even that it has been 'spiritualised'. On the contrary, the entrance into the land under Joshua is treated as the most plausible possible fulfilment of that promised 'rest' so far in the history of Israel; if even Joshua's inheritance of the land was not the fulfilment, how much less could Jewish believers in the mid-first century AD think that their generation was the final fulfilment (a proposal Jesus denied / postponed in Acts 1:6). The true 'Joshua' (same name as 'Jesus' in Hebrew) was the promised One who would come at the end of the age to conquer the promised lands of all nations including Israel, and then assign to each nation their territory (Rev 2:26-27; cf. Psa 2:7-9).

The sabbath day, and the land of Canaan in Hebrews 3 and 4 both allude to the promised "rest" to which Christians are come. That is, they are discussed as types and shadows of the real rest, that Christians may enter into by faith.

Consider; the conquest and occupation of the land which occurred under Joshua is a type, but it cannot be a type of itself. That is, the story of

the conquest of the land under Joshua does *not* picture another military conquest, and occupation of the very same land.

The sabbath day is not portrayed in Hebrews as a type of occupying and possessing the land of Canaan, but of believing Christ.

The land of Canaan, then, is not something Christians or Jews need to enter, or conquer, and possess, but it represents something spiritual. Entering it represents entering a "rest" by faith, which implies that the *promised land* represents the promises of God to the saints, which must be *believed*.

Patrick rejected the idea that the promises of Israel apply to the Church. He wrote: [2]

Hebrews 8:13-10:1 – This passage is the source of the common idea that the nation of Israel, or perhaps even the whole Old Testament, is 'only a shadow' of the Church and the present Kingdom of God. Apart from being a woefully ignorant dismissal of the richness of God's promises, such an idea ignores the evident concern of this passage with the Mosaic covenant alone.

It is commonly argued that types and shadows are limited to the Mosaic law and that the land promise is not among them, as it was promised to Abraham long before the Law was given. However, circumcision was among the types and shadows, and Christians understand that there is no requirement for them to be circumcised in the flesh. Circumcision was part of the covenant with Abraham. This suggests that the land of promise, too, was a type representing "a better country—a heavenly one." [Hebrews 11:16]

R. T. France discussed the meaning of *rest* in Hebrews 3:6-4:11. He wrote: [3]

But there remains an important question for these Jewish Christians. What, for them, is the 'rest' which they are in danger of losing? The question is taken up in 4:5-11. Because the psalmist, writing centuries after the exodus events, could still appeal for response 'today', the writer infers that the rest he refers to cannot be only a lost opportunity in the distant past, but remains available to the people of God. They too have something precious to lose, and must 'make every effort to enter that rest', and not to forfeit it through disobedience to the voice of God when they hear it 'today'. The 'rest' towards which Joshua was leading the wilderness generation, and which they lost, was that

of settlement in the promised land, after the bondage in Egypt and the nomadic existence in the wilderness. To find a more permanent application for the words of the psalm, the writer of Hebrews now does a little imaginative 'concordance work', and finds in Genesis 2:2 another very significant use of the term 'rest': 'God rested on the seventh day from all his works'. Noting that in Psalm 95:11 God speaks of 'my rest', Hebrews understands this not only as the rest which God gives but also as the rest which God himself enjoys. So he recalls God's 'rest' when he had completed the work of creation (4:3-4). As God himself enjoyed rest after labour, so it is also for his people. They too have their 'sabbath', when they will 'cease from their labours' (4:9-10). It is such a 'sabbath' which lies ahead for the Christian readers of Hebrews, and which they risk losing by disobedience.

The writer does not spell out what form this sabbath rest is to take, but later in the letter he will turn their eyes to heaven as the ultimate goal (11:13-16; 12:22-23), and it seems probable that is the 'rest' he has in view here. There the people of God will share God's own rest. To stop short of that consummation would be unthinkable. In the light of that ultimate sabbath, therefore, the response made 'today' takes on eternal significance, beside which the mere possession of the land of Canaan under the first Joshua seems of quite minor importance. For the Christian readers of Hebrews the stakes are higher even than they were for the Israelites in the wilderness. For the author of Psalm 95 too the issue of the possession of Canaan was past history, but the wording of the psalm does not allow us to say just what sort of 'rest' he envisaged as now likely to be forfeited through disobedience. But the writer of Hebrews, by drawing the sabbath rest of Genesis 2 into his exposition, has made clear the ultimate significance of his people's response to the voice of God, and in so doing has invested his pastoral warning with greater urgency even than that of the psalm.

Perhaps it is not the future expectation of heaven that is meant, but experiencing the kingdom of God in the present age. Otherwise, why would he emphasize "today"?

Paul seems to refer to this when he wrote to the Ephesians that God has "made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus." [Ephesians 2:5-6]

He speaks of it as a present reality.

Paul also spoke of the saints being at war, [2 Corinthians 10:3-4] and as those who "strive for the mastery" [1 Corinthians 9:25] and seek an incorruptible crown.

He said "we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." [Ephesians 6:12]

Paul wrote to the Colossians that God has "translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son." [Colossians 1:13]

Paul said Jew and Gentile have been made one in Christ. This appears to leave no room for the inheritance of the physical land of Canaan by ethnic Jews, as Patrick thought. All of the saints inherit the promises; the land of Canaan was a mere shadow of an eternal spiritual reality.

Ephesians 2:11-14

Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us.

In the light of Paul's teaching above, how can Patrick say that Paul would tell Jews to hope for a future inheritance of the land? That idea, I think, is far removed from Paul's doctrine. Patrick wrote: [4]

If Paul were to write to a Jewish majority church, therefore, he would almost certainly have urged them to trust God for the future inheritance of the land rather than trusting the obsolete Temple system of Moses to qualify for inheritance in this age.

Paul encouraged the Colossians to seek things that are in heaven, rather than things on the earth.

Colossians 3:1-3

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are

above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.
Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.
For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.

References

1. James Patrick. The Law of Moses completely abolished
2. James Patrick. Refuting NT arguments against 'promised land'
3. R. T. France. The writer of Hebrews as a biblical expositor. Tyndale Bulletin 47.2 (Nov. 1996) 245-276. p. 271.
4. James Patrick. Promised Land in Romans, part two