

What the promised land means

by Douglas E. Cox

John the Baptist preached his message in the wilderness, about preparing the way of the Lord, and he identified Jesus as the one spoken of by the prophets. Isaiah's prophecy that mountains will be made low, and valleys filled, was part of John's message.

Isaiah 40:3-5

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

When we think about what Isaiah's prophecy might mean, it is clearly not about literal changes in the earth; the highway in the desert is figurative. No literal highway was constructed, or even begun, as a result of John's preaching. The mountains and valleys of the prophecy are not literal; the

land had a spiritual meaning for the prophets. John's dwelling and preaching in the wilderness was symbolic; it implied rejection of the established worship of the Jews.

David said, "Thy righteousness is like the great mountains; thy judgments are a great deep." Here, mountains represent God's righteousness, while a "great deep," or a valley, represents God's judgments.

When Jacob blessed his son Joseph, he said his blessings extended "unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills." [Genesis 49:26] This alludes to the height and durability of mountains, suggesting his blessings were spiritual, and eternal. Mountains are high, and endure for long periods of time; thus they suggest high and lofty ideas, and revelations of God, who says that his thoughts are higher than those of man. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." [Isaiah 55:9]

Mountains also represent prophecies, and covenants. The mountain where Jesus gave his Sermon on the Mount, and the Mount of Olives, and Sinai are examples. Mountains that are displaced from their positions in Revelation 6:14 represent flawed interpretations of the prophecies of scripture. Hills may represent revelations of a less lofty nature.

As David suggested, valleys represent God's judgments. Valleys of the promised land include Meddigo, and the valley of Jehoshaphat, and Gehenna. The figurative valley through the Mount of Olives, when it is cleaved in the midst [Zechariah 14:4], represents the place to which Zechariah said we should flee. I suggest the Mount of Olives in Zechariah's prophecy represents the Olivet Discourse that Jesus gave to his disciples, and the two halves of the mountain displaced from their positions when it is cleaved in the midst depict the two opposite, flawed interpretations that have been applied to the Olivet Discourse, along with other prophecies: dispensationalism, and preterism. Preterism says that Jesus' Olivet Discourse was entirely fulfilled in 70 A.D. when the earthly Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed. Dispensationalism, on the other hand, applies the Olivet Discourse to the Jews in a future seven-year tribulation. The two halves of the mountain that are displaced from their positions represent these false interpretations. The valley formed when the the two parts of the mount of Olives separate represents applying the Olivet Discourse to the Church, in the present age. The valley formed when mountain is cleaved in the midst, and the two sections move apart in opposite directions, is symbolic of the whole age of the Church. Zechariah say the saints should flee to that figu-

rative valley, called "the valley of the mountains," that represents the present age, and apply the Olivet Discourse to the Church. This means we need to abandon the theories of preterism and dispensationalism.

The valley of Hinnom, Gehenna, represents a judgment of those who are rejected from the kingdom of God. It represents the threat of being considered unfit for God's kingdom. This threat applies to Christians, and those who have heard the message of the gospel, not to unbelievers. Jerusalem represents Christ's kingdom, and one must be *in* Jerusalem to be *cast out* of it.

Since valleys are areas where the earth has been removed by erosion or by tectonics, they may represent things not yet revealed. Every valley being filled in Isaiah's prophecy may mean that missing revelations about the gospel will be provided. Jesus filled many valleys, as did the apostles, in the New Testament. Every valley being filled means that missing revelations will be given to the church, and that the gospel message will be made clear.

In Isaiah's prophecy, rough places which are made plain suggest that scriptures that are difficult to understand will be explained. Crooked places that are made straight, means errors in doctrine will be set right. All of this implies that the land represents the truth, and the knowledge of God, the "promised land" of the saints.

Both real and imaginary rivers are the subject of prophecy. The Jordan River [Psalm 114:3], the Euphrates [Revelation 9:14; 16:12], and the Nile [Genesis 15:18] are all real rivers, though some of them are referred to symbolically in scripture. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah and Joel said rivers will flow from Jerusalem and from the temple, that must be figurative. David said, "There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High." [Psalm 46:4]

Joel said the mountains will drop wine, and the hills will flow with milk. [Joel 3:18] Clearly the mountains and hills he referred to are not literal ones, but I suggest they represent promises in the scriptures that apply to the church, one of which is the promise of Jesus, that his Spirit will guide the saints into *all truth*.

Streams of living water flow from Jerusalem in Zechariah 14:8, and similarly a river flows out from the temple in Ezekiel 47:7-9, and in Joel 3:18. Christians have traditionally understood this to represent the Spirit of God and the Gospel going forth from the Church.

Ezekiel said the Dead Sea will be healed by the river that flows from the temple. [Ezekiel 47:8] Joel said that the fountain from the house of the Lord will water the valley of Shittim. This valley is east of the Jordan valley; for a river from Jerusalem to reach that area, it must somehow flow across the Dead Sea!

What merit is there in saying that the prophecies about the promised land must be taken as literal? The scripture itself shows that land has a spiritual meaning, and is metaphorical, and the saints are encouraged to "flee to the mountains," which are symbolic of the *promises of God*.

Isaiah 59:19

When the enemy comes in like a flood, The Spirit of the LORD
will lift up a standard against him.