

The promised land: shadow vs. substance

by Douglas E. Cox

Anglican minister Stephen Sizer, well known for his books opposing Zionism and dispensationalism, believes the promised land represents the heavenly inheritance of the saints. In his article on "Where is the Promised Land?" he wrote: [1]

The inheritance of the saints was ultimately never an 'everlasting' share of territory in Palestine but an eternal place in heaven. Hebrews shows that even Abraham, the Patriarchs and later Hebrew saints looked beyond Canaan to 'another' country where the covenant promises of God would be fulfilled.

Sizer referred to Hebrews 11:16, which says of the faithful saints, "they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one." He wrote: "In the New Testament, the Land, like an old wineskin, has served its purpose. It was and remains irrelevant to God's ongoing redemptive purposes for the world." Sizer concludes by saying:

Summary Points

1. The covenant promises made to the Patriarchs concerning the Land were understood as having been fulfilled in the Old Testament.
2. The Land, like the earth itself, belongs to God and his people were at best aliens and tenants with temporary residence.
3. Residence in the Land was always conditional and inclusive.
4. Jesus repudiated a narrow nationalistic kingdom.
5. His kingdom is spiritual, heavenly and eternal.
6. This is the inheritance of all who trust in Jesus Christ.

So where then is the Promised Land? It is being prepared for you in heaven!

Hebrews 11:16 indicates the promised land for Christians is a "better country," and is heavenly or spiritual, but is it something that is only available after death? Must one die, to enter into *rest*, or is *rest* available to the saints now in this present life?

Paul G. Apple described interpreting Canaan as representing entry into heaven through death as a *trap*. Apple compiled a series of quotes from several scholars about the significance of the book of Joshua for Christians. He wrote: [2]

Trap #2 – Confusion about Identification of Canaan - Thinking that crossing the Jordan represents a transition from this life through death into the joys of heaven; But Canaan was a place of conflict and conquest! God's people must take responsibility to be strong and courageous and fight the good fight of faith; Don't settle for victory one day in heaven; God wants us to experience victory right now in the midst of our enemies; surrounded on every side by challenges; yet obeying Him and experiencing His grace in giving us the victory.

For some . . . a crisis experience putting them on a different level of intimacy with the Lord . . . for others . . . more of repeated experiences of crossing the Jordan River . . . but in both cases: God has greater levels of spiritual victory that He would like to give us in His grace.

British evangelist and author Alan Redpath (1907-1989) was one of the scholars cited by Apple. Redpath claimed that the land of Canaan pictures "the spiritual rest and victory which may be enjoyed here on earth by every believer." [3] Redpath wrote:

I would suggest that the clue to the interpretation of this Old Testament book is found in the epistle to the Ephesians and in the epistle to the Hebrews. For example, in the third and fourth chapters of Hebrews we find that the land of Canaan is a picture of the spiritual rest and victory which may be enjoyed here on earth by every believer, a rest of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Again, the Ephesian letter speaks of life "in the heavenly places" – not in heaven, but in the experience of oneness with our Risen Lord in His victory here and now, the place of the fullness of God's blessing. I believe that we shall understand the real significance of the book of Joshua only if we recognize that what it is in the Old Testament the epistle to the Ephesians is in the New. This suggestion, of course, has to be substantiated from the Word of God itself.

Ray Stedman, pastor of Peninsula Bible Church, Mountain View, CA., stated: [4]

The land of Canaan is a picture, as we have mentioned, of the Spirit-filled life—the life that God intended for every Christian to live. There are no exceptions to this. The Spirit filled life is not just for certain advanced saints, but is provided by God for every one of his people.

F. B. Meyer (1847–1929), minister of Christ Church in London, is said to have brought about the closing of hundreds of saloons and brothels through his evangelism. [5] Meyer asked, in a discussion of Hebrews 4:9, "what is meant by God resting?" [6] It seems a paradox that entering into rest requires us to work, but that is what Hebrews 4:11 shows. One reason, I think, is because the words of scripture often have a hidden meaning.

As well, dozens of interpretations are presented to us. Selecting from among them in an intelligent way requires study, which is work. Thinking is work for the mind. We enter into God's "rest" by believing and understanding his word. Misunderstanding, doubt, and delusion are not "rest."

Meyer was the author of *Joshua and the Land of Promise*, in which he argued that the conquest of the Canaanites in the book of Joshua must have some spiritual meaning. Occupying the promised land was not the promised rest. Meyer wrote: [7]

The clue to this inner meaning is given by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the third and fourth chapters of which are all-important in determining the drift of our interpretation . . . If the river Jordan stands for physical death, and Canaan for Heaven, there seems to be no satisfactory interpretation for many items which are narrated with significant minuteness, ere we come to the conquest and partition of the land; and on this line of interpretation there would be some anomaly in associating fighting with the calm restfulness of the New Jerusalem.

A careful study of the chapters referred to shows us that though Canaan was not the rest of God because he spoke of rest through an unknown temple singer, four hundred years after Canaan was occupied yet it was a vivid type of that blessed Sabbath-keeping into which we may enter here and now. We are to earnestly heed lest we "should let them slip" of the rest, even as they whose carcasses fell in the wilderness came short of the Land of Promise. "We which have believed do enter into rest."

In Ephesians 1:2, Paul said that Christians are blessed "with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." He said we are "raised up together," and "sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus." [Ephesians 2:6]

In Ephesians 3:10 he says the "principalities and powers in heavenly places" will learn the wisdom of God, which is made known to them by the church. And in Ephesians 6:12 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."

Meyer said of the "heavenly places" that Paul referred to:

Of course it does not stand for Heaven; but for that spiritual experience of oneness with the risen Saviour in his resurrection and exaltation which is the privilege of all the saints, to which, indeed, they have been called, and which is theirs in him.

Meyer noted the following parallels between the land of Canaan and the heavenly "rest" of the book of Ephesians: [8]

- I. Each was the destined goal to which God's purpose led His people
- II. Each was impossible by the means of Law
- III. Each was entrusted to a representative
- IV. Each was missed by many
- V. Each was infested by many adversaries

While Meyer had embraced a spiritual interpretation of the land of promise in his books, in 1917 he endorsed a statement saying that Israel will be "restored to its own land in unbelief, and be afterwards converted by the Appearance of Christ." This was the fourth of seven statements of the *Advent Testimony Manifesto*, agreed to by 10 notable clergymen, Meyer included, from Baptist, Anglican, Congregational, Methodist, and Independent churches, and released to the press on November 8th, 1917. [9] This was one week after the release of the Balfour Declaration.

Since then, Meyer's interpretation of the land as "a vivid type of that blessed Sabbath-keeping into which we may enter here and now," that he supported in his books on Joshua and Hebrews

has been largely overshadowed by the notion that the promised land is really the literal, earthly territory of Canaan. The latter idea was implied by the fourth item of the *Advent Testimony Manifesto* that Meyer approved in 1917. It was widely adopted by the churches, and the settlement of Jews in Palestine was endorsed by the British Government in the Balfour Declaration, by the Zionist movement, and by dispensationalism. Adolf Hitler promoted and co-operated with Zionist emigration of Jews, especially to Palestine.

Since Meyer knew the land of Canaan was merely a "type," why would he endorse a statement saying that Israel will be "restored to its own land in unbelief"? The message of Hebrews is that entering into the "rest" that the promised land represents requires faith. "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." [Hebrews 11:6]

Stephen Sizer has clearly pointed out that the issue is about whether the promised land is to be understood "in terms of Old Covenant shadow or in terms of New Covenant reality." He wrote: [10]

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, fulfils 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. In Colossians, for example, Paul uses a typological hermeneutic to interpret the Old Covenant: Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. (Col 2:16-17)

Similarly, the writer to the Hebrews stresses:

The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man. Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer. If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already men who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: 'See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.' But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises. (Heb 8:1-6)

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming-not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. (Heb 10:1)

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).

Paul said, the saints are delivered from darkness, and have been translated into Christ's kingdom; it is what we have already. [Colossians 1:12-14] The things that are said in prophecy about the promised land, are about the *reality* that is foreshadowed by the land. I suggest that the promised land itself represents *the truth*, into which Jesus said the Spirit will guide the church. Saying the prophecies about Israel's return to the land apply to unbelieving Jews, is confusing *shadow* with *reality*!

References

1. Stephen Sizer. *Where is the Promised Land?*
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5. F.B. Meyer: Wikipedia
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7. F. B. Meyer. *Joshua and the Land of Promise* . Fleming H. Revell Company. 1893.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Paul Wilkinson. *You Shall Be My Witnesses: The Transatlantic History of the Prophetic Witness Movement*.
10. Stephen Sizer. *An Alternative Theology of the Holy Land: A Critique of Christian Zionism* . Churchman. 113/2. 1999.