

The Land: A Forgotten Element in Biblical Hope

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Some Introductory Remarks

Few Old Testament themes have suffered such ill deserved neglect as the theme of the land. It hardly needs to be argued that the land, promised, possessed, lost, longed for and regained is one of the central elements in the Old Testament story. Indeed, Walter Brueggemann has gone so far as to argue that, 'Land is a central, if not *the central theme* of biblical faith.'¹ Hans Eberhard von Waldow has asked why, 'when it is possible to write an Old Testament theology centering on the idea of the covenant,' no one has made 'the concept of Israel and her land the main idea of an Old Testament theology? ... It is more dominant than the covenant idea.'²

It is the purpose of this article to examine the place of the land in the Old Testament, and to demonstrate that the promise of the land is not without significance for the Christian.

The Land and the Patriarchs

Elmer A. Martens, speaking of the Abrahamic covenant, says that of all the elements of the covenant, the promise of the land is, 'the most easily discernible in the narrative.'³ This emerges in the initial promise of God to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3, and 12:6f), and is a repeated emphasis in the succeeding narrative (Genesis 13:14, 15:7,18f; see also 15:18). Moreover, the same promise comes to the fore in the reiteration of the covenant to Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 26:3f; 35:12; 45:21; 50:24). It might almost be said that the land occupies the central place in the promise of the covenant inasmuch as all the other blessings are to be mediated by it and experienced in it (Genesis 12:1-3).

The confidence that Canaan shall be their land shines through the lives of the patriarchs and remains their confidence in the face of death. On the death of Sarah, Abraham is determined that she shall be buried in Canaan, and in a piece of land of his own possession (see Genesis 23, especially verse 19, and compare 12:5). When Abraham seeks a family for Isaac it must be from his own family back in Mesopotamia, but under no circumstances is Isaac to be allowed to return to his ancestral home; Isaac must stay in Canaan, the land of promise (Genesis 24:1-9). Likewise, when Isaac dismissed Jacob to go to look for a wife it is in the hope that he too will return to the land of promise (Genesis 28:1-4). Joseph, dying in Egypt, yet has his hope set on Canaan and instructs that his bones be at last laid to rest there (Genesis 50:24-25). In the patriarchal narratives the promised land is supremely (though not exclusively) the place of revelation and fellowship with God, almost as though there is some sense in which it is God's land.⁴ Is it too much to suggest that this insistence upon burial in the land reflects an expectation that such fellowship with God in the land does not end with death but is to be renewed in a resurrection life?⁵

The Land and the Exodus

For the Israelites emerging from Egypt it was not the redemptive paschal release that was the climax of their experience, nor was it the giving of the law at Sinai, the consummation of the covenant remained a future prospect set before them in the promise of the land. That this is the goal of the exodus is evident from the covenant promise given to Moses in Exodus 6:2-8:

Stephen Dray explores a key issue in Biblical Theology which has often been neglected. Dr. McConville (page 18) is a related theme.



I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they lived as aliens. Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant. Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the LORD and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them and will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD.'

The land is described to the Israelites as a land 'flowing with milk and honey' (Numbers 13:27; Deuteronomy 6:3; 11:9; 26:9, 15; 27:3). In the Ancient Near East this phrase has a mythical and paradisaical significance, and both of these elements are important for our understanding of the significance of the promise to Israel.

In the Old Testament the mythological element is 'historicised' and is given a thoroughly this-worldly emphasis. That is to say that the 'land flowing with milk and honey' is not some far removed land of gods but is the land of Canaan, a real land with a place on the map. It is this real land which is God's land, the place where he dwells with his people (see Numbers 35:34, Deuteronomy 32:13f and Hosea 9:3). In contrast with other ancient near eastern texts, the Old Testament has few references to life after death and the removal of the dead to a better world. Old Testament hope is profoundly this-worldly.

Canaan, as God's land and the place of his presence with his people, is described in terms reminiscent of Eden (see Deuteronomy 8:7-10). It is like the Garden of God. In Exodus 3:8 the land is described as a 'good and spacious land', speaking of the freedom and prosperity which God's people will enjoy there. In the language of promise at least, the land is set before the people as a place where the curse of barrenness is not known (Genesis 3:17-19): *it is paradise regained.*

The remarkable description of the land set before us in the words of promise has an unmistakably eschatological flavour. From the beginning, it is described in terms which transcend the present reality and which point beyond it to some dimly perceived future fulfilment. G.A.F. Knight, noting the way in which 'this desiccated plateau, this semi-arid ridge of hills, was

known as a "land flowing with milk and honey", as "the most glorious of all lands" (Ezekiel 20:6, ARSV), or even as a "heritage most beautiful of all nations" (Jeremiah 3:19, ARSV)' comments, 'The eschatological significance of the land of Canaan is thus highly apparent.'⁶

The land is the gift of God's grace to the people whom he has redeemed (Exodus 12, Deuteronomy 1:36). It is the place of experienced salvation and is 'paradise regained'. It is also a land for an obedient people, for the law was given for life in the land and obedience to the law is necessary for a continuing enjoyment of life in the land (Deuteronomy 4:5, 14; 5:31; 6:1; 11:31f etc.). The land, then, is realized salvation and yet it is eschatological; the present fulfilment does not exhaust the scope of the covenant promise to Abraham.

The Land and the Failure of the Old Covenant

The period of the monarchy is a significant one for the further examination of our subject. All the preceding narrative looks forward to the golden age of David and Solomon; with them it might appear (and might have appeared) that the Abrahamic covenant had now been fulfilled (see especially Genesis 15:18 and 2 Samuel 8). With David and Solomon the central place of worship is established, signifying the settled presence of God with his people (compare Deuteronomy 12, especially vv. 4-7, with 1 Kings 7f).

Significantly, at the very point when the promise seems near fulfilment, apostasy and decline soon cause the Davidic age to be seen as part of a long lost golden age — this is especially so when viewed from the perspective of the exile. The reign of Solomon, marking the high point of Israel's possession of the land (see 1 Kings 4:25), also marked the beginning of the apostasy which was to undermine Israel's security (1 Kings 11:1-6).

This brings to light the inbuilt inadequacy or imperfection of the Old Covenant. If, on the one hand, the land is a re-creation of the pre-fall environment yet, on the other, it was never more than a pale shadow of that lost paradise (the sabbath was only one day in seven). The root cause of the fall, man's disobedience and apostasy, had not yet been cured. The peaceful enjoyment of the land and its fruits proved to be a highly volatile blessing.

The Land and the Prophets

One of the remarkable features of the Old Covenant is the way in which such apparently failed hopes as we have reviewed above led not to despair but to the growth of still greater expectation regarding the fulfilment of the Covenant. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament.

The prophets grasped more clearly than ever before that the 'failure' of the promises was a necessary consequence of the weakness of the old Covenant and its provisional or typical nature. But the prophets never lost sight of the fact that the promises of the covenant were God's promises, and as such could not fail — they would yet be fulfilled.

In addition to this, the prophets realized that the lordship of Yahweh over all creation, professed so often in the psalms (e.g. Psalm 24:1; 47:2; 97:5 etc. (meant that the ultimate fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise would not be confined within the narrow borders of the land of Canaan but would encompass the whole world. What God had done in the past with Israel and with Canaan was but a type of what he purposed at last to do with the whole earth. (For a similar conviction expressed by

the apostle Paul in the New Testament, note carefully Romans 4:13). This understanding of the typical relationship between Canaan and the world is reflected in the descriptive language of prophecy. The prophetic hope is expressed in language full of contemporary references — to nations, lands and cities etc. Progressively, however, these were used as symbols of a far greater reality, of which present and earlier events and structures (such as the theocracy) were seen as types. This fact, which is fundamental to the understanding of Old Testament Prophecy, is often overlooked.

These various elements of prophetic awareness lead to the characteristic features of the prophetic message:

i) The covenant promise, once linked to the *land* of Canaan, is now envisaged as involving the whole earth. This feature is facilitated by the fact that the Hebrew noun 'erets can mean either 'land' (as in 'the land of Canaan'), or 'earth' (as in 'the heavens and the earth'). For examples of such geographical expansion in prophetic hope, see Isaiah 65:17ff and Habakkuk 2:14.

ii) Eden is depicted as restored or even exceeded. Amos 9:13 pictures a time when the earth will bring forth a superabundant harvest — the curse of barrenness is known no more. Ezekiel 47:7-12 gives an Edenic picture of life-giving water flowing from Jerusalem (as the rivers flowed from Eden to water the earth?) bringing new life to a blighted landscape and a fruitful and life-giving harvest. (See also Joel 3:18).

iii) Moral and spiritual renewal is predicted. Note how much the moral and spiritual renewal spoken of in Jeremiah 31:33-34 is immediately followed by promises of restoration and a renewal of the land.

iv) The moral renewal is accomplished by an act of forgiveness which, increasingly is seen as the work of the coming Messianic figure (compare Isaiah 40:1 with 52:13ff).

Of central significance in all this is that the prophetic expectation, howsoever spiritual, remains stubbornly 'this-worldly' even if it necessitates a dramatic event of cosmic renewal to accomplish it (see Isaiah 65:17; 66:22). The earth remains the final and enduring place of experienced salvation.

The Land and the New Testament

There is relatively little change in the New Testament's understanding of the Abrahamic promise of the land or of the salvation associated with it. The major development is the emphasis upon the fact that Jesus is the Messiah and that in him the kingdom of God has arrived (Mark 1:15 and parallels).

The New Testament insists that the kingdom of God has arrived in the person of Jesus. This is demonstrated clearly by his miracles (compare Isaiah 35:5 with Matthew 11:5; 15:30; John 5:8, 9 etc.). In one sense, then, the kingdom of God is located not in a geographical area but in a person. Like Abraham therefore, the Christian lives as a stranger and alien in the world (Hebrews 11:13-16 and 1 Peter 1:1).

Does this mean, then, that the New Testament no longer has a place for an earthly hope? Not at all. Like Abraham, the Christian, at present a stranger and alien in the world, looks forward to the day when that will no longer be the case. Jesus himself declares that the earth is the rightful inheritance of his people (Matthew 5:5). And Peter, though he speaks of the day when this earth will be destroyed in fire, looks forward to a new creation which will be the inheritance of the people of God (2 Peter 3:10-13).

Ultimately therefore, the New Testament looks not for release from cursed earth but the release of the earth from curse (Romans 8:18ff especially verse 21.) Similarly, it looks not for our removal from the earth to dwell with God but for God's return consequent upon the earth's renewal (Revelation 21:2f). It is, at last, in this earth — that is, this earth renewed — that God's presence and dwelling with his people is to be supremely expressed (Revelation 21:3f; 21:1-5).

"In this connection it is interesting to note the words with which Edward Thurneysen described his understanding of what the new earth would be like: "The world into which we shall enter at the Parousia of Jesus Christ is therefore not another world; it is this world, this heaven, this earth; both, however, passed away and renewed. It is these forests, these fields, these cities, these streets, these people, that will be the scene of redemption. At present they are battlefields, full of the strife and sorrow of the not yet accomplished consummation; then they will be fields of victory, fields of harvest, where out of seed that was sown with tears the everlasting sheaves will be reaped and brought home." Emil Brunner criticized this statement, thinking it to be far too crass and materialistic, and saying that we have no right to expect that the future earth will be just like the present one. G.C. Berkouwer, however, expressed appreciation for the concreteness of Thurneysen's hope, preferring this way of stating what the future will be like to ethereal or spiritualized concepts of the future, which fail to do justice to the Biblical promise of a new earth.⁷

Conclusion

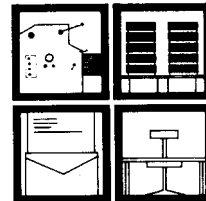
Our study of the promise of the land has convinced us that this promise is the foundation of a vital element of biblical hope. The promise of the land is not an insignificant part of the Old Testament economy which is discarded with the advent of the New Testament. On the contrary, it is of central significance to a proper understanding of the Christian hope. The promise of the land may not therefore be discarded as having significance only for the Jewish race, neither may it be regarded as hope which has application only to some future but limited dispensation, such as the 'millennium'. The promise of the land points to the fact that this earth remains the focus of Christian hope and that, in a very real sense, the very creation itself shares in the hope of the Christian:

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 9:19-23).

Notes

1. Walter Brueggeman, *The Land* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1974), page 3.
2. Hans Eberhard von Waldow, 'Israel and her Land, Some Theological Considerations', *A Light Unto My Path* ed. H.N. Bream et al. (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1974), page 493.

3. Elmer A. Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1981), page 33.
4. On this, see Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1975 ed.), page 70.
5. See particularly, Patrick Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture* (New York, 1900 + numerous reprints), pages 329ff.
6. G.A.F. Knight, *A Christian Theology of the Old Testament* (London, S.C.M., 1959), page 310.
7. A.A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1979), page 281. The whole of chapter 20 of this book is devoted to the theme of 'The New Earth' and well deserves study.



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