

## THE THEME OF LAND IN GENESIS 1-11 AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE ABRAHAM NARRATIVE. (PART II)

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### The Abraham Narrative

The pattern of punishment in relation to land in Gen 1-11 provides a link with the Abraham narratives since the pattern that emerges is virtually the reverse of that found in the primeval history. The main focus of attention on land in the primeval narrative is on its use as a means of punishing evil doers. The movement is from possession of land to expulsion as a result of alienation from God. The reverse is the case in the Abraham narrative where emphasis is on the harmonious relationship between God and the patriarch. In this context, the role of land changes; it is no longer a medium for punishment (at least not for Abraham) but a symbol of blessing and the movement of the narrative is towards possession.

The first nine references to land in the Abraham cycle are in chapter 12. God commands Abraham to leave his land and to go to another land which God will show him (12:1). Abraham sets out for the land of Canaan and arrives in that land (12:5). Abraham passes through the land (12:6). The Canaanites are in the land (12:6). Yahweh promises Abraham 'To your descendants I will give this land' (12:7). There is a famine in the land; the famine in the land is severe (12:10).

The principle laid down in 1-11, that God exercises his right as creator of the earth, to locate human beings on earth wherever he wishes and then to relocate them if necessary, is applied here again. God placed Adam in Eden and later drove him out of that place (2:8; 3:24). Now he calls Abraham out of his homeland and places him in Canaan (12:1, 5). But there are important differences; Abraham is not simply 'placed' and 'driven' like Adam. The change from 'land expelling history' to 'land anticipating history', requires a change to 'less coercive language'.<sup>1</sup>

However, there is more than just a change of language in 12:1. There is a transition from the primeval history where the focus is on all humankind and the earth as a whole to the patriarchal narratives where God deals with

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<sup>1</sup> See W. Brueggemann, *The Land*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977) 17.

an individual and his descendants in terms of a particular land<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the emphasis in chapters 1-11 is on how the tripartite relationship between God, humankind and land deteriorated but in chapters 12-50 the movement is towards harmonious relations between the family line of Abraham and God which will culminate in the possession of land.

The call of Abraham in Gen 12:1-3 does not contain an explicit promise of land. However, there is an implicit promise since Abraham is to go to a **land** where God will bless. Why, then, is the promise of land merely implicit in the programmatic promises of 12:1-3? Tsevat argues that land is not the most prominent promise because its realisation is in the future.<sup>3</sup> However, this is not an adequate explanation since the other promises also concern the future. Possibly the narrator wants to delay any guarantee of land until after Abraham responds in obedience. Whereas in the earlier chapters of Genesis (1-11) man lost land because of disobedience, Abraham receives land because of obedience. This is why the promise of land is not explicit in 12:1; it is not made explicit until after the account of Abraham's obedience. Thus, in the Abraham Cycle the narrative movement is towards land through obedience and promise.

Abraham's first act in passing through the land is followed by the poignant remark that 'At that time the Canaanites were in the land' (12:6). The negative comment about the land being inhabited by Canaanites builds up tension in the narrative and prepares the reader for the explicit promise to Abraham that follows immediately that God will give the land to Abraham's descendants (12:7):

It is interesting that the first explicit promise of land is made to Abraham's descendants and not to him personally (12:7). The narrator seems to be unfolding the promises related to land gradually. At first the promise of land is just hinted at (12:1), then it is promised to Abraham's descendants (12:7), but, later in chapter 13 the promise of land will be made explicit to Abraham personally (13:15-17). It is a promise which opens up to Abraham in accordance with his expressions of obedience and faith. Abraham responds to this promise of land for his descendants by building two altars, one at Shechem (12:7) and one between Bethel and Ai (12:8).

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<sup>2</sup> See Procksch, op. cit., 96.

<sup>3</sup> M Tsevat, 'Hagar and the Birth of Ishmael', *The Meaning of the Book of Job and Other Biblical Studies, Essays on the Literature and Religion of the Hebrew Bible*, (New York, 1980, 53)

These would serve as monuments in honour of God who has claimed the right over this land and promises to give it to Abraham's posterity.

Closely linked with the building of the altar is a reference to Abraham pitching his tent (12:8). Wenham suggests that the reason why Abraham's tent is referred to here, while there is no reference to it during the journey from Haran, is to indicate that he stays in this area a long time.<sup>4</sup> While this is feasible, this first reference to pitching a tent seems to be quite significant since it is referred to again (13:3). Perhaps, the close association of the tent and the altar (12:8; 13:18; 26:25) is important for theological reasons and is not a reference to Abraham's domestic arrangements. This is the view taken by D. J. Wiseman who commenting on 12:7, writes,

Here the first reference is made to the erection of a tent, which may indicate that this refers not so much to his mode of living as the setting up of a tent-shrine to mark his acceptance of the divine land-grant, a form of token take-over of the promised land.<sup>5</sup>

Wiseman's approach has the advantage that it explains why there is no mention of Abraham pitching his tent during the long journey from Haran to Canaan. The tent is mentioned, not as a place to live but as an acknowledgement that Abraham has been granted land by the deity.

### **The famine in Canaan and Abraham's sojourn in Egypt (12:10-20)**

The negative comment about the land in verse 6 with its reference to the Canaanites is now followed by a further negative statement indicating that there is a famine in Canaan (12:10). The repeated mention of the famine both at the beginning and end of this verse and the description of the famine as נָכַח effectively clears Abraham of any blame in his decision to leave the 'promised land'.<sup>6</sup> Indeed the question is not whether he will leave this promised land but whether he will return, since doubts are cast on both its availability and its dependability. That Abraham does eventually return to Canaan is not a further expression of faith in God's

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<sup>4</sup> Wenham, *op. cit.*, 280.

<sup>5</sup> 'Abraham Reassessed', p. 141, in A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman eds. *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, Leicester: IVP., 1980.

<sup>6</sup> So, Cassuto (*op. cit.*, 346), Skinner (*op. cit.*, 248), Wenham (*op. cit.*, 287) and A. P. Ross (*Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988 p. 275). There may even be a hint that the famine is judgement because of the sins of the Canaanites. At any rate, Abraham is not guilty at this stage.

promises but is due to the eviction order issued by Pharaoh (12:19-20). So, even though Abraham's journey to Egypt is understandable, his return to Canaan is not as honourable as his first encounter with that country; his return is precipitated by circumstances that are brought about and carefully controlled by God.

### **The Separation from Lot (13:1-18)**

Abraham's return to Canaan is marked by a second reference to the earlier worship at the altar between Bethel and Ai (13:3-4). Abraham's relationship with God is now restored as is his status as a 'sojourner' in the land of promise. At this point a new crisis arises in relation to land. The land cannot support Abraham and Lot dwelling together (13:6). The land is already inhabited by Canaanites and Perizzites (13:7). Abraham suggests that they should separate and he offers Lot his choice of land (13:9). Lot chooses the Jordan valley (13:10) but Abraham dwells in the land of Canaan (13:12). Following this separation, Yahweh promises that all the land Abraham sees will belong to him and his descendants (13:15). Abraham's descendants will be as the dust of the earth (13:16). Yahweh commands Abraham to walk through the land and he promises, 'I will give it to you' (13:17).

To avoid this inadequacy of pasture in Canaan being taken as a criticism of the land itself, the reader is reminded that the limited space is due to the presence of Canaanites and Perizzites who are also dwelling in the land (13:7).<sup>7</sup> The strife that arises in Genesis 13 is specifically ascribed to the herdsmen of Abraham and Lot. Abraham is portrayed as totally opposed to the strife especially since he and Lot are 'brothers'. He calls for amicable separation and offers Lot the opportunity to choose the part of the country he prefers. Lot makes his choice on purely economic considerations. He knows nothing of the patient resignation of Abraham to accept the land that God will give him. His choice is governed by the needs of his livestock and his large entourage and the well-watered plains seem ideal. Abraham, in contrast, seems to have specific reasons for not choosing the Jordan valley; this is evident from the text. Abraham suggests, 'If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left' (13:9). Since directions were usually given facing east, Abraham was offering to go north or south but he does not entertain the idea of going east, the direction eventually chosen by his nephew. As Wenham points out it probably lies outside the land promised by God and

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Dillmann *op. cit.*, 24.

so Abraham sees his own choices limited to the area of land received in the earlier divine land-grant.<sup>8</sup>

Abraham's reaction to this crisis establishes him as a man of faith in relation to the land. He compares favourably with Adam (3:6, 17-24), Cain (4:1-16), the tower builders (11:1-9) and, of course, with Lot. Vogels notes this contrast and argues that Abraham makes an offering of the land (l'offrande de la terre) in a similar way as he is willing to offer Isaac (22:1-18).<sup>9</sup> Abraham's, 'sacrifice' of the land, is immediately followed by assurances that God will give it to him and his seed (13:14-15). This is the first occasion that the land is promised explicitly to Abraham. Compared to 12:7, where the land is promised only to Abraham's descendants, this represents a development of the promise of land.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the words עַד עַרְלָם represent an elaboration of the promise (13:15).<sup>11</sup> Abraham is encouraged to express faith in these promises and at the same time to claim the land by walking throughout its length and breadth (13:17).

### **The Land Promised Under Oath (15:7-21).**

So far we have observed three progressive stages in the promises of land.

1. God will show Abraham the land (12:1).
2. Abraham's posterity will possess the land (12:7).
3. The land is promised to Abraham as well as to his offspring for an eternal possession (13:15).

In chapter 15 the promise of land reaches a further stage in its development as it becomes the first promise to be confirmed by an oath. There is a clear division in subject matter in this chapter with verses 1-6 dealing mainly with the promise of a son and heir, and verses 7-21 concentrating on the promise of land, which is confirmed by an oath. However, the two sections are linked together by the statement about Abraham's faith (verse 6). As we have seen already, the promises of land to Abraham seem to follow acts of obedience or faith. The expression of

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<sup>8</sup> Wenham op. cit., 297.

<sup>9</sup> W. Vogels, 'Abraham et l'Offrande de la Terre', *Sciences Religieuses*, 4 (1974) 58-65.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Procksch, op. cit., 105. Westermann, on the other hand, argues that 13:15 does not represent a development in the promise of land since, 'when one concedes to the promise of the land the independence that it has in the history of tradition, then each land-promise text is to be understood from the overall context of the motif in all its various expressions' Westermann, op. cit., 1986, 179. However, Westermann's argument does not alter the fact that from a synchronic perspective the promise of land in 13:15 does contain an additional element and can be viewed as a development of the promise of land in a literary sense.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Dillmann op. cit., 27-28.

faith in verse 6 sets the context for a further affirmation of the promise of land.

I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess (verse 7).

Abraham's response to this promise (15:8) must be understood in the light of the increasing momentum of the promise of land. In the land, Abraham has access to much of it and benefits from its resources. But the land does not belong to him and others have prior claims to it and jurisdiction over it (cf. 12:6; 13:7). In substance Abraham's question is, 'How can land that is occupied and owned by others become mine?' This is not lack of faith but a search for a deeper understanding of the promise of land rising out of Abraham's desire to believe

Abraham faces the task of driving away the birds of prey which probably 'foreshadow the difficulties involved in taking possession of the land'.<sup>12</sup> A deep sleep (15:12) leaves Abraham powerless to protect the land. Like Adam (2:21) he is removed from his duties and rendered helpless.<sup>13</sup> Deep dread and darkness fall upon him, presumably because he can now do nothing to ward off the 'birds of prey' (15:12). He is warned that the occupation of Canaan by his descendants will be preceded by a period of enslavement in a foreign land (15:13). Eventually, the nation that enslaves them will be punished (15:14), and Abraham's descendants will be released from the foreign land with great possessions (15:14). On a more personal level, Abraham is assured that he will die in peace (15:15). His descendants will return to the land of promise, which will be given to them when the sins of the Amorites has reached a certain point (15:16). Finally, the covenant of land is solemnised; the borders of the promised land are delineated, and the list of the present inhabitants is given (15:18-21).

The significance of this passage for the theme of land, lies firstly in the fact that the promise is now made by God under oath, and secondly, in the clear display of divine authority reminiscent of the creation event. The same God who brought a deep sleep (רדמה) on Adam is now at work in relation to Abraham, the land of Canaan and the present and future inhabitants of that land. As in Genesis 1-11, God allocates land to people (cf. Adam in the Garden of Eden, 2:15). He can terminate the tenancy of any person or nation when their sin reaches a certain level (cf. Adam, 3:24;

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Dillmann *op. cit.*, 62.

<sup>13</sup> The rare word רדמה is used in both stories to describe the deep sleep.

Cain, 4:12; mankind, 6:7). As Westermann writes, 'God's action in history allows both for the gift of land and expulsion from it'.<sup>14</sup>

The passage also addresses the moral questions concerning the Canaanites. In particular how could God promise land to the patriarchs on which other people are already living? (12:7-8). As Clines remarks, the promise of land is 'good news for Hebrews but bad news for Canaanites'!<sup>15</sup> According to this passage, the removal of the original inhabitants from Canaan is a consequence of their rebellion against God. It is punishment in the same terms as those already outlined in chapters 1-11 (cf. 15:16). The decision to remove the Canaanites is one taken by the creator on the same basis as his decision to expel Adam (3:24), cause Cain to wander (4:11-12), remove mankind by a flood (6:7) or scatter the tower builders (11:8). In all these cases the action taken is in response to the sinful behaviour of human beings and the implication is that the same applies to the Canaanites.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Promise of Land in the Covenant with Abraham (17:8)**

The main themes in chapter 17 are 'Descendants' and 'Blessing'. The former is developed in terms of a special line of descent (17:7, 9-19, 21) and the latter in the promise of a multitude of offspring (17:2, 5, 6, 16, 20). Although land is mentioned in one verse only (8), it is, nevertheless, highlighted as a key promissory element in the covenantal relationship. As Abraham's relationship with God deepens, the promise of land is also developed. Nothing essentially new is added to the promise of land but new terminology is introduced; Canaan is promised as an 'everlasting possession' for Abraham and his progeny. This is the first appearance of ארץ in Genesis, but it is used later in Genesis to refer to the legal possession of Machpelah (23:9, 20; 49:30; 50:13), and it also appears in connection with tenure of land in Leviticus, Numbers and Joshua (Lev 14:34; 25:23, 24, 34; 27:16, 22, 24; Num 27:4, 7; 32:5, 22, 29; 35:28; Josh 21:12, 41 [Heb 39]; 22:4, 9, 19). The description 'land of your sojourning' emphasises that Abraham has no legal claim to the land but 'everlasting possession' suggests an incontrovertible right to the land. As

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<sup>14</sup> Westermann op. cit., 1986, 262.

<sup>15</sup> Clines op. cit., 56-7.

<sup>16</sup> J. G. McConville, 'The Shadow of the Curse; a "Key" to OT Theology', *Evangel* 3 (1985)3.

G. W. Coats suggests, this represents 'a transformation of a land for strangers . . . into a permanent possession'.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Theme of Land and the Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (18:16-19:29)**

Yahweh's authority to give land or to take it away is demonstrated in this passage in the following ways. The narrative emphasises God's role as judge of the earth (18:17-19). This is a continuation of one of the main emphases in chapters 1-11. God is in control of the earth and its inhabitants are responsible to him for their behaviour on the land he has given them.<sup>18</sup> God reveals to Abraham that he intends to destroy the cities because of their wickedness (18:21-23). This is a similar situation to that faced by Noah (6:13) but here the judgement is localised. Abraham cannot question God's jurisdiction but he does tentatively question his methods. Will God destroy the righteous along with the wicked (18:25)?

The removal of Lot from Sodom (19:12-17) is effected for entirely different reasons than the expulsion of Adam from Eden (3:24), but the same principle applies to both situations; God exercises his right as creator and his role as judge to allocate people to a certain territory and to relocate them as necessary. Here Lot is removed from the cities and given the hillside (19:17). Not happy with this, he asks permission to go to Zoar. In the past he had chosen his own land (13:11), now he must acknowledge that only God can choose.

It is interesting that included in the details of the destruction of the cities, the destruction of the ground and its crops is also mentioned (19:25). This is particularly significant since the destruction of nothing else is singled out for special mention except cities and their inhabitants (19:25). This detail shows the importance of land and its produce as a gift of the creator that may be removed as a result of sin.

So, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah reiterates the message of chapters 1-11 in terms of the creator's jurisdiction over the earth. The principle that unrighteous people can expect to lose their land is established, not just to explain the destruction of ancient cities, but also to show how God can encourage Abraham's descendants to lay claim to a land that is already inhabited by others (12:6; 13:7). If God permits the

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<sup>17</sup> G. W. Coats, *Genesis, with an Introduction to Narrative Literature*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983, 134.

<sup>18</sup> See Procksch, *op. cit.*, 124.



destruction of the Canaanites, then it is because they have been unrighteous (cf. 15:16).

**The Abraham and Abimelech Narrative and the Connection with the Theme of Land (20:1-18; 21:22-34).**

In the story of Abimelech's abduction of Sarah, God appears again in his role as Judge (20:3). Abimelech is threatened with death because he has taken Abraham's wife (20:2-3). The king protests that he and his people are righteous (20:4). Abimelech's plea of innocence is upheld, and he and his people are acquitted (20:6). The interesting result of this is that he can refer to the land as 'my land' (20:15). Although this is the land promised to Abraham, it remains Abimelech's land at this stage.<sup>19</sup> Abimelech exercises his right as owner of the land and invites Abraham, not just to sojourn in his land but to dwell in it.

This is the counterpart of the Sodom and Gomorrah story. These cities were destroyed because less than 10 righteous people were found in them (8:32). Because Abimelech and his people are innocent, they do not lose their land. The principle presented here is that God is a righteous judge and he will continue to provide righteous people with land. Only the unrighteous should fear lest their land be taken from them (cf. 3:24).

A second episode concerning Abraham and Abimelech is related after the story of Isaac's birth (21:22-34). Abraham negotiates with Abimelech about territory and especially about access to water (21:25). Although Abraham is promised that he and his offspring are being given this land, he must acknowledge the rights of those who already live there. God has made a covenant to give this land to Abraham (15:18), but Abraham must also make a covenant with the present inhabitants (21:32). This point is emphasised in verse 34: 'Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines'. Thus, the right of the Philistines to own the land at this stage is acknowledged.

**Abraham and the Purchase of Land from the Hittites (23:1-20).**

A crisis regarding land arises after the death of Sarah, because, as yet, Abraham did not own any land and has nowhere to bury his wife. In spite of the fact that he has been promised the land, Abraham must negotiate with the Hittites for the possession of a burial plot. The reaction of the Hittites is to insist that Abraham does not need to own property in order to

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Ross op. cit., 367.

bury his dead since they will make their choicest sepulchres available to him (23:6). This seems a very generous offer but a number of commentators think that it is really an attempt to prevent Abraham from owning property.<sup>20</sup>

Abraham's rejoinder to the offer of the Hittites is to make a proposal that he purchase land from a specified individual. As Kidner suggests, he makes 'skilful use of the fact that while a group tends to resent an intruder the owner of an asset may welcome a customer'.<sup>21</sup> Abraham's ploy is effective and he becomes the legal owner of the property. Although the price he pays is high (23:16),<sup>22</sup> the legal possession of the land makes the price irrelevant. Westermann comments that, 'it is so important for Abraham to gain unimpeachable possession of the burial place that he will pay any amount for it'.<sup>23</sup>

The narrator undoubtedly intends us to regard this acquisition as part of the fulfilment of the promise of land<sup>24</sup> - otherwise that promise is never fulfilled personally to Abraham.<sup>25</sup>

Von Rad is emphatic on this point,

Did the patriarchs who forsook everything for the sake of the promise go unrewarded? No, answers our narrative. In death they were heirs and no longer 'strangers'. A very small part of the Promised Land - the grave - belonged to them; therefore they

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Gunkel, op. cit., 275, and Procksch, op. cit., 528.

<sup>21</sup> Kidner, op. cit., 145.

<sup>22</sup> As B. Vawter comments, 'We have no way of being sure, but we may doubtless surmise with the greatest probability that it was a noble sum indeed that Ephron exacted . . . David bought the temple site and the materials for sacrifice for fifty silver shekels (2 Sam 24:24). In any case, Abraham paid the stipulated price without protest. It undoubtedly pleased the Biblical author to record that the patriarchal tombs at Machpelah had passed from Hittite ownership into that of the Hebrews by no deed of condescension from the inhabitants of Canaan but only through a munificent gesture of Israel's great ancestor' (*On Genesis: A New reading*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1977 p. 265).

<sup>23</sup> Op. cit., 1986, 375.

<sup>24</sup> Martens describes it as, 'a down-payment so to speak, of the larger land block' (op. cit., 34).

<sup>25</sup> N. Leibowitz disagrees: 'It is difficult to regard this passage as exemplifying, even in the slightest degree, the promise of sovereignty and majesty which had been promised to Abraham in relation to the land and the inhabitants thereof' (*Studies in Bereshit*. 4th edition Jerusalem: World Zionist Organisation, 1981 pp. 208-210). Leibowitz regards the negotiations as humiliating for Abraham but he fails to recognize that the passage actually honours Abraham by calling him a 'mighty prince' (23:6) and by recording his refusal to haggle over the land (23:15-16).

McKeown, *Land in Gen 1-11*, IBS 19 July 1997  
did not have to rest in 'Hittite earth' or in the grave of a Hittite  
(cf. verse 6), which Israel would have considered a hardship  
difficult to bear.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, it seems likely that the acquisition of a burial site marks permanent possession of the land (cf. Joshua 24:32). The importance of the fact that Sarah is buried in the land of promise is underscored by the repeated description, 'Hebron in the land of Canaan' (23:2, 19).<sup>27</sup>

The purchase of this land completes the development of the theme in the Abraham narratives. The theme began as 'the land I will show you' (12:1). Then the land of Canaan is identified as the land which Abraham's seed will possess (12:7), and at a later stage it is also promised to Abraham personally (13:15). One final development before Abraham actually possesses a token part of the land, is the promise of the land under oath (15:18). In each case the development of the promise of land is preceded by an act of obedience or an indication of faith on the part of Abraham. Thus, the first explicit promise that Canaan will be the possession of Abraham's seed, is given after he arrives there in obedience to the divine command (12:4-7). Secondly, the land is promised to Abraham personally, after he has refused to fight over it and after he has given Lot the opportunity to choose (13:9). Thirdly, the promise of land on oath (15:18), follows the statement that 'Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness' (15:6). Finally the test of Abraham in relation to Isaac and his unfaltering obedience (22:1-10) are the background against which he acquires possession of the land at Machpelah (23:1-20).

### **Significance of the Theme of Land and Conclusions**

We can conclude, that 'land' is a major theme in the Abraham narrative. However, the basic concepts underlying the theme are introduced in the primeval narrative. Land is not merely a passive onlooker in the created order nor is it simply the material that God uses; it is actively involved in the process of creation. Furthermore, land has a unique relationship with

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<sup>26</sup> Von Rad regards the purchase of land as an attempt by 'P' to obviate the difficulty caused by the promise of land not being fulfilled during the life-time of the patriarchs. He writes, 'Possession of the land of Canaan was promised to the patriarchs. They themselves were already living in the land, to be sure, but were not yet in possession of it, i.e., the promise was not yet fulfilled. This strangely broken relationship to the promised saving benefit, namely, the land - this promise . . . could not remain conceptually unformulated for so precise a theologian as P (op. cit., 250).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Ross, op. cit., 409.

the human beings and even provides the raw material from which the first man is made. The possession of land with clearly defined boundaries is the symbol of security and blessing while lack of a fertile piece of land is equated with insecurity and danger. On the other hand, the human beings are given responsibility to maintain and to care for the land (1:1-2:25).

While emphasising this interdependence of land and human beings, Genesis also concentrates on the vulnerability of the relationship; the behaviour of humans can adversely affect the land and damage their relationship with it. This leads to punishment which limits, or removes, the benefits that people receive from the land; the punishment of Adam, Cain, Noah's contemporaries and the tower builders, adversely affect their relationship with the land.

The relationship between human beings and land is related to their relationship with God; land is given by God and he maintains ultimate control of it. When the divine/human relationship is harmonious, the human/land relationship is good. The breakdown of relations between human beings and God precipitates the breakdown of the interrelationship between mankind and the land. A person's relationship to land is, therefore, a reflection of their relationship with God. Harmonious relations with God is the appropriate context for blessing but alienation from God is associated with cursing which affects not just the human beings themselves but also their land.

An understanding of the relationship between human beings and the land in Genesis 1-11 is a guide to understanding the role of land in the Abraham narrative. The movement in the primeval narrative is from the ideal surroundings in Eden, where land, God and humankind have a harmonious relationship, towards ever increasing hostility until the humans are scattered over all the earth. The movement of humankind further and further from the ideal land in Eden is seen as a consequence of the progressive deterioration of their relationship with God. In the Abraham narrative, on the other hand, the relationship with God becomes progressively closer and the promises of land become more explicit. The land of Canaan is introduced as 'the land that I will show you', and the theme develops until Abraham is buried in that land on a plot of ground that he owns. In the primeval narrative mankind had moved away from God and at the same time away from secure land. The reverse happens in the Abraham narrative as in obedience he moves closer to God and closer to the possession of land.