

The Land and its Place in the Old Covenant

1. Introduction

Few Old Testament themes have suffered such ill deserved neglect as the theme of the land. It hardly needs to be that 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 Yet despite the importance of this theme it has enjoyed little attention in the Old Testament Theologies and even less by way of articles, monographs and books devoted to an exploration of the place of the land in the Old Covenant. Hans Eberhard von Waldow has asked why, "when it is possible to write an Old Testament theology centering in 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", he continues, "much more dominant than the covenant idea."² To my knowledge, there is yet only one major study on the land in the Old Testament and that is Walter Breuggeman's little book called quite simply *The Land*, published by Fortress Press in 1977.³

It is, perhaps, not difficult for us to understand the reasons for this neglect. As Christians, we view the Old Testament from the perspective of the New; we understand the Old Covenant from the vantage point of the New Covenant inaugurated in Christ. If the theme of the land is central to the Old Testament message, it would seem to be anything but central to the message of the New Testament. Indeed, at first glance, this would seem to be one of the fundamental differences between the two Testaments. The Old Testament makes much of earthly promises and earthly possessions whereas, in the New, these are seen to be of no spiritual value.⁴ The Christian, therefore, has often treated the promise of the land as if it had no abiding significance. It may be a useful symbol through which spiritual truths may be taught to the Christian, even a type of our heavenly inheritance, but in itself it has no place within the Christian Gospel.

We shall return to a brief consideration of some of these questions at the conclusion of this paper. In the meantime, without losing sight of these larger questions, we would like to devote ourselves to the particular question of the place of the land within the Old Covenant. As indicated above, this is a vast subject. Our consideration of it here cannot pretend to be anything more than the briefest of introductions to what is an all pervading Old Testament theme.

¹Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1977), p.3

²Hans 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) p.493

³Mention ought to be made here of W.D.Davies massive work, *The Gospel and the Land* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1974). While dealing briefly with the place of the land in the Old Covenant, this book is chiefly concerned with the way in which the New Testament writers deal with the "Jewish Territorial Doctrine" of the Old Testament.

⁴This is undoubtedly to highlight the contrast in its most extreme form. Nevertheless, this contrast has been recognised by persons from many different theological traditions: It is this contrast which forms the basis of Dr C.I.Schofield's influential little book, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (many editions), in which he seeks to make a complete separation between the earthly promises which belonged, and still do belong, to the Jewish people, and the heavenly promises which belong to the Christian. From a very different perspective, it is the same contrast which is seized upon by A.A. van Ruler in his book, *The Christian Church and the Old Testament* (trans. G.W.Bromiley, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1971), to argue for the "greater value of the Old Testament as compared with the New" (pp.88,89). The contrast is also noted by Walther Zimmerli on the first page of his book, *The Old Testament and the World* (trans. J.J.Scullion, London, SPCK, 1976).

2. The Old Testament's testimony concerning the Land

2.1 The land of promise

The covenant with Abraham is the foundation of the whole of the Old Testament redemptive history from Genesis 12 onwards (indeed, it is also the foundation of New Testament redemptive history). In Genesis 17:7-8 we read God's promise to Abraham, "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."

From this we see that the promise of the land is a vital part of the covenant with Abraham: it is through the gift of the land that God will manifest that he is indeed the God of Abraham and of his descendants. The gift of the land cannot be treated as an incidental part of the Old Testament covenant: it is part of very substance. In an article entitled "The Promised Land and Yahweh's Land in the Hexateuch", von Rad supplies us with the following illuminating statistics. Out of the 46 references to God's promise to the patriarchs found in the first seven books of the Bible, only seven omit any reference to the promise of the land while 29 are concerned solely with this promise.⁵ Of all the elements in the Abrahamic covenant, the promise of the land is the most prominent in the Scripture narrative. When Isaac blesses Jacob at the latter's departure to Padan Aram he says, "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. May he give you and your descendants the blessing of Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, the land God gave to Abraham" (Genesis 28:3,4). To the patriarchs, the blessing of Abraham *was* the promised land possessed by Abraham's seed.

Secondly, to keep us from viewing the Abrahamic covenant as earthy and unspiritual, we need to take note of the way in which the various covenant promises belong together. Possession of the land is to be living proof that God is the God of Abraham and his descendants; it is the visible manifestation of a spiritual relationship. In Genesis 15:1, after Abram has refused to take any of the spoil offered him by the king of Sodom, God speaks to him saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."⁶ Abraham's chief blessedness lies in his 'possession' of the living God.⁷ But it is this very 'possession' of God, i.e. that God is his God, that is made concrete and manifest in the possession of the land. It is in the land that God will dwell with his people, or to be more accurate, where they will dwell with him, for the land is his (Leviticus 25:23). All of the appearances of God to the patriarchs (the theophanies) occurred within the borders of the promised land.⁸ Already in the patriarchal narratives, there is the closest connection between fellowship with God and dwelling in the land.

We move on now from the patriarchal narratives of Genesis to the Exodus and wilderness narratives of the last four books of the Pentateuch. Here also the land is a land of promise.

God brings his people out of Egypt because he remembers the covenant which he made with Abraham, his promise to give Canaan to Abraham's descendants. The goal of the Exodus is therefore the possession of the promised land (Exodus 6:2-8). To the wandering Israelites, the land is portrayed as the place of promise.

In particular, the land is presented to Israel's faith as a place of almost unimaginable blessing:

⁵ G. von Rad, "The Promised Land and Yahweh's Land in the Hexateuch", *The Problem of the Hexateuch and other Essays* (Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd, 1966), pp.79,80

⁶ The Revised Standard Version and others follow the LXX in translating the Hebrew as, "I am your shield, your reward shall be very great." This is certainly a possible translation, but that of the AV and NIV is also good and arguably better.

⁷ See G. Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1948), p.85.

⁸ *Ibid.* p.70

"You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock - the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out ... Yahweh will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. Yahweh your God will bless you in the land he is giving you ... Yahweh will grant you abundant prosperity - in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your ground - in the land he swore to your forefathers to give you. Yahweh will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none." (Deuteronomy 28:3-6, 8, 11,12)

Or again,

"I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit. Your threshing will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting, and you will eat all the food you want and live in safety in your land. I will grant peace in the land, and you will lie down and none will make you afraid. I will remove savage beasts from the land, and the sword will not pass through your country. You will pursue your enemies, and they will fall by the sword before you. Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you. I will look on you with favour and make you fruitful and increase your numbers, and I will keep my covenant with you. You will still be eating last year's harvest when you will have to move it out to make room for the new. I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people. I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of Egypt so that you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians; I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high." (Leviticus 26:4-13)

The blessings are to include the inheritance of cities, lands, oliveyards and vineyards, the bounty of which Israel will enjoy though they did not labour over them (Deuteronomy 6:10,11; Joshua 24:13). It will include rest from all enemies round about and even the healing of diseases (Exodus 23:25,26; Deuteronomy 7:15). Here Israel will serve the God who has brought them out of Egypt for that very purpose (Exodus 4:22,23). The fact that the promise is not unconditional (we shall look at the conditional nature of the promise below), in no way detracts from the reality of the promise.

In this idyllic picture we are given a view of the goal or *telos* of the promise to Abraham and of the Exodus from Egypt. To inhabit such a land is what it means to be the redeemed people of God.⁹ What are we to make of this language? We cannot avoid the conclusion that in such promises concerning Canaan we have a picture of nothing less than Eden restored - a new Paradise. Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden, cast out from the presence of God. In Canaan, the redeemed of the Lord are once again to dwell with him.¹⁰ Through Adam's sin, the earth is turned into a place of barrenness, unproductive weeds and of sweatted toil. The descriptions of Canaan show us a land (the same word, *ha'arets*), of unimaginable plenty, requiring little sweatted labour.¹¹ Adam's fall into sin brings with it the sentence of sickness, pain and death; but here is a land in which diseases are healed. The original dominion of man over beast will be restored, for here there are to be no wild animals.¹² It is surely

⁹ Von Rad points out that all of these blessings are summed up in Deuteronomy by the word 'rest' (*ruach/mnuchah*). He warns us that we must not spiritualise this rest, it is a physical thing, it is this kind of life in the land. "The life of the chosen people in the 'pleasant land', at rest from all enemies round about, the people owning their love for God and God blessing his people - this is the epitome of the state of the redeemed people as *Deuteronomy* sees it." "There Remains Still a Rest for the People of God", *The Problem of the Hexateuch* p.95. We would add that this is the epitome of the state of the redeemed as the Old Testament sees it.

¹⁰ Note the parallels between "Yahweh's land" and "the garden of God"

¹¹ Remember the description of the spoils brought back by those sent to spy out the land. In Numbers 13:23 we read that one cluster of grapes was brought back tied to a pole and carried between two men!

¹² Von Rad, having summarised the picture of the land given by Deuteronomy says, "What is it then but a paradise on earth?" *Old Testament Theology* (London, SCM Press, 1975, 2 vols), Vol.1, p.224. See also, Patrick D. Millar Jr. "The Gift of God", *Interpretation* 23:4 (Oct. 1967) pp.456-457.

this same theme of Eden restored which undergirds the repeated phrase, a “land flowing with milk and honey.”¹³

In other words, the promise of the land to Abraham and his seed must be set against the backcloth of Genesis 1-11. It is all part of the one story. God’s answer to man’s sin and its consequences in the earth (Genesis 1-11) is to be found in the description of the land which he promises to his redeemed people (Genesis 12 and following).¹⁴

With Genesis 12 we get a double narrowing of the Bible story. There is a narrowing in that the focus of attention is no longer all the peoples of the earth - destroyed in the flood, scattered at Babel etc. - but is narrowed to one man and his posterity; one nation among the nations of the world. Secondly, there is a corresponding geographical narrowing. We are no longer concerned primarily with the whole surface of the inhabited earth, but with one particular patch of earth, one land.

But here we should not lose sight of the fact that the particularity of the covenant with Abraham is to serve a more universal end: “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3).¹⁵ God’s dealings with Abraham (Genesis 12 and following) are the answer to the condition of man (Genesis 1-11).¹⁶ Surely then, it is not improper to view the promised state of the redeemed in Canaan as a picture of the universal purpose of God for mankind in the earth? (see particularly the enigmatic Romans 4:13).¹⁷

This leads me to a second observation concerning the promise of the Land in the old covenant.

2.2 The ‘sacramental’ language in which the land is described

The language used of God to describe the land of Canaan is sacramental in quality. I do not intend to develop this point at length here; it will receive enough attention as we continue to examine the Old Testament witness. Nevertheless, it is a point that we need to appreciate. Unless we are fully conscious of the sacramental nature of the language used we shall, with many of the scholars, become increasingly confused by what appears to be flagrant discrepancies between the promises given and their declared fulfilment.

The language used of the land is sacramental in quality. That is to say that while, on the face of things, it might appear to be a straightforward description of the land, this is by no means the case. The

¹³ See M.Ottosson’s article on ‘erets in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, eds. G.Botterweck and H.Ringgren (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1974), vol.1, p.402. Also W.Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, (trans. J.A.Baker, London, SCM Press, 1967), vol.1, p.492

¹⁴ This point is recognised by Brueggemann who views the division between Genesis 1-11 and 12-50 primarily in terms of man’s relationship with the earth. Genesis 1-11 he sees as the history of a people “fully rooted in land, living towards expulsion and loss of land.” Genesis 12-20 “features Abraham and his family, and is about not having land but being on the way towards it and living in confident expectation of it.” *The Land* p.15.

¹⁵ “The election of Abraham, and in the further development of things of Israel, was meant as a particularistic means to a universalistic end.” Vos, *Biblical Theology*, p.77.

¹⁶ This point is made by numerous scholars. See, J.Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (New York, McGraw Hill, 1962), p.19; R.R.DeRidder, *The Dispersion of the People of God* (Kampen, J.H.Kok, 1971), p.18; G.von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol.1, p.476; Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol.1, p.476.

¹⁷ “In establishing his covenant with Abraham, God was temporarily narrowing the scope of the covenant of grace in order to prepare for an ultimate widening of the covenant ... In the matter of the inheritance of the land, we have a similar situation: a temporary narrowing of the promise is followed by a later widening.” A.A.Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1979), pp.277,278. On this theme, see particularly Patrick Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture* (New York, 1900, reprinted by Baker Book House, 1975), Book Two, Chapter 6, Section 6, “The Inheritance Destined for the Heirs of Blessing”, Vol.1, pp.329-361.

description of the promised land as given in many of the records of the promise are not constrained by the realities of the land which they purport to describe. Rather, God describes the land in terms which could only fully be applied to a restored creation. It is not simply that the land fails to live up to expectation because of the sin of the heirs of the promise; there are more fundamental reasons for the unfulfilment of the promise in Canaan. Canaan never was, nor could be, all that the promises declared.¹⁸

This does not mean that the promise was, or is, in any sense false. It is, after all, the promise of God. This is really and truly what God is promising to his faithful people - Paradise. Nevertheless, Canaan always falls short of the fullness of the promise and so the promise of the eternal covenant always points beyond its imperfect realisation in Israel.

But equally, this does not mean that the description of the land of promise is not a description of Canaan at all - any more than Christ's words at the institution of the Lord's Supper have no reference to the physical bread and wine. Indeed, it is quite evident that much of the descriptive language of promise makes detailed reference to the geography, flora and fauna of the land, as well as making reference to the nations currently dwelling in it. In this sense then, the land is part of the promise, but it never exhausts the promise.¹⁹ It is always the earnest of something else. After all, how else could the promise to Abraham concerning the land form God's answer to the plight of man described in Genesis 1-11?

This is the reason for the declaration of many fulfilments of the same promises concerning the land. We do not need to appeal to separate and mutually contradictory strands of tradition regarding the conquest of the land; one tradition recording a short sharp conquest under Joshua (Joshua 1-12), and the other a gradual conquest only finally completed under David (Joshua 13:1, compare also Genesis 15:18 and 1 Kings 4:20-25). The promise is both truly and yet only partially fulfilled under Joshua.²⁰ The same can also be said of the fulfilment under David and Solomon. We are told that, "During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree" (1 Kings 4:25). This is surely a picture of the fulfilment of the promises concerning the land. Nevertheless, the word of God is equally clear concerning the corruptions of Solomon, his sinful foreign alliances and flagrant disregard for the law of the king in Israel (Deuteronomy 17:18-20). Moreover, Solomon burdened the people with heavy taxes which must have soured their enjoyment of the land (1 Kings 12:4; 1 Kings 4 etc.).

Lastly on this point, it is important to note that the Old Testament saint was not ignorant of the sacramental nature of the language of the promise. The faith of the Old Testament saint was limited by the revelation vouchsafed to him, nevertheless, the very language of the promise demanded that the believing recipient look beyond the bare land to the reality of which the land was only the earnest or type.²¹ Speaking of the terms used to describe the land in the Old Testament, Professor M.H. Woudstra wrote, "The Old Testament idea, linked to the very heart of the covenant promise, is ... spiritual to the core. The Old Testament believer grasped the true meaning of this in his most exalted moments: cf. Ps 16:5,6, where ... terms ... pertaining to the division of the land are used to express the height of covenant fellowship between the believer and God."²²

In what follows we shall have cause to return again and again to the fundamentally sacramental character of the promise of the land.

¹⁸ Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture*, Vol.2, p.3

¹⁹ Vos speaks of the promise as being "like an ethereal garment, more precious than the promised thing [i.e. the land] over which it is thrown." *Biblical Theology*, p.86

²⁰ On this question, see the useful article by A.J. Mattill, "Representative Universalism and the Conquest of Canaan", *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 25:1 (Jan. 1974), pp.8-17

²¹ Hebrews 11:8-16 informs us that this was one of the qualities of the faith of the patriarchs - Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They never possessed the land, and were satisfied not to do so, because their faith and hope rested on a possession which was far greater.

²² M.H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua (New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1981), p.34.

2.3 Zion in the land

Much could be said about the theology of Zion in the Old Testament, but here I wish simply to make one point: With the capture of Jerusalem and its establishment as the City of the Great King, Zion becomes the focus of Israel's life in the land and of her life before God.²³

The capture of Jerusalem comes at a crucial point in the fulfilment of the promise of the land. Shortly after David has captured Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5), the Philistines, the long-standing enemies of Israel, are finally defeated (2 Samuel 6; 8:1), and the land is given rest from all enemies (2 Samuel 7:1; 1 Kings 5:4; 8:56). In Deuteronomy 12:9-11 God said that there was to be one centre of worship when Israel finally enjoyed rest in the land. This promise could now be fulfilled. Accordingly, the Ark is first brought to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6), and later the Temple itself is built there.²⁴

The establishment of Zion is therefore a mark of the fulfilment of God's promise concerning the land. Zion itself therefore becomes the focus of many of the promises concerning the land. In particular, Zion is the focus of God's dwelling with his people and of their service of him - the focus of the covenant promise. There is therefore a close link between the language Scripture uses in describing the land and that used to describe Zion.²⁵

My purpose in drawing attention to this link between the language used of Zion and that used of the land is twofold. Firstly, this prepares the way for our understanding of the prophetic hope in which the promises concerning Zion and those concerning the land are inextricably linked.

Secondly, the link enables us to say something more concerning the sacramental nature of the language of promise. It hardly needs to be pointed out that the language used of Zion and of the Davidic King is not constrained by the historical realities of the Theocracy. The language of such psalms as Psalm 2 and Psalm 110 forces the attention of the man of faith beyond the present king and the Jerusalem presently possessed to focus upon a greater hope.

This 'sacramental' language is not confined simply to the King and to the city, it characterises the language used of Israel's worship. Several of the psalms speak of the qualifications necessary for one to come before God in Zion. "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false." (Psalm 24:3,4 see also Psalm 16; 5:4-7; 1:5,6; 11:4-7; 101:6-8). Jerusalem is spoken of as the holy city where none but the righteous can come. The unrighteous would be destroyed were

²³ On this, see R.E.Clements, "Temple and Land: A Significant Aspect of Israel's Worship", *Transactions of the Glasgow University Oriental Society*, 19 (1963), pp.16-28. Clements argues that Mount Zion, and thereby the Temple, is a symbolic representation of the whole land. God dwells with his people in the land and blesses them with fertility there, and in the land the people serve God. All of this, however, is focused in Zion and in the Temple. In Zion God dwells with his people, from Zion God blesses the people with the fruit of the land, and in Zion the people serve Yahweh.

²⁴ In 2 Samuel 7, the promise of rest (v.11), the establishment of the Davidic monarchy (v.12), and the building of the Temple (v.13) are closely linked. The king has secured rest and the promise of his perpetual office ensures the continuance of that rest (v.10). The Temple is the seal upon the state of rest - the fulfilment of the promise in Deuteronomy.

²⁵ In our view, it is both unnecessary and improper to force an antithesis between 'Zion theology' and 'land theology' in the Old Testament. It is equally improper to force an antithesis between the covenant promise made with Abraham (with its focus on the land), and the covenant promise made with David (with its focus in Zion). "God's election of Jerusalem as his 'holy city' is the sequel to his choice of Israel as his 'holy land' (cf. Dt 7:6; 14:2; 1 Ki 11:32,36; Ps 78:67,68; 132:13)." J.C.De Young, *Jerusalem in the New Testament* (Kampen, J.M.Kok, 1960), p.44. From a rather different perspective, R.E.Clements in *Abraham and David* also draws attention to the unity of the promise which undergirds the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants.

they to appear before the Living God.²⁶ Clearly, this is no simple description of what actually happened when Israel came up to worship at Jerusalem. We know from the prophets that many came up to worship in a completely unworthy manner. Many whom the psalmist describes at “the wicked” came up to Zion and returned without being struck down. The language in which Zion is spoken of in the Psalms is clearly sacramental in nature. Though earthed in the historical Jerusalem and in the historical pilgrimages of Israel, the language presses far beyond the historical realities which were to be found in Israel. Such language points to a greater and far more perfect fulfilment of the promise than could ever have been accomplished in Old Testament Israel.

2.4 The land as a gift which remains at the disposal of the giver

The land which God promised to his people was land which he would give to them; it was not something which was there for the grasping, it was in God’s gift.

It is God’s presence with his people that is to be the guarantee that Israel will capture and inherit the land despite the opposition of its present inhabitants (Numbers 14:9; Deuteronomy 7:21,22). God encourages fearful Joshua, “No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to your forefathers to give them” (Joshua 1:5,6). The ark going before the people is the visible token that God is with his people and goes before them to give them the land (Joshua 3:10,11). The conquest is not simply a war between nations, it is not the attempt of a nomadic people to achieve a settled, landed existence, it is an act of God. God himself goes before his people; he is their Captain who leads them into battle (Joshua 5:13) and who gives them the land.

This point is illustrated again and again in the conquest narrative. The fall of Jericho demonstrates both to Israel and to the nations that God will *give* the land to his people. In similar fashion, the initial failure at Ai demonstrates that any attempt to take the land simply by force of arms and without dependence upon Yahweh is doomed to failure (Joshua 7). When the initial conquest of the land is complete, it is God who divides the land and gives each tribe a portion as its own inheritance (Joshua 18:3-10).

However, we should note that the land is a gift which always remains at the disposal of the giver. It is not given over absolutely, out of the hands of God and into the hands of Israel to do with what they will. In one sense the land remains Yahweh’s land and Israel is allowed to live with him in his land (Leviticus 25:23).²⁷

This has a twofold consequence. Firstly, it remains God’s prerogative to determine how the land shall be lived in, enjoyed and disposed of. The law therefore contains detailed commandments for every aspect of Israel’s life in the land. In particular, great care is to be taken concerning the disposal of land. The land is the inheritance of the Lord; it is not Israel’s possession to be disposed of at will. The land cannot be sold in perpetuity. If it is mortgaged, because of some pressing need, it must nevertheless later be handed back so that it may revert to the tribes and families to whom it belongs as an inheritance (see Leviticus 26:23 and also the incident with Naboth’s vineyard in 1 Kings 21:3). The laws of land succession were designed by God to ensure that his people would continue to enjoy their inheritance in the land (see, for example, the laws regarding a man who has daughters but no sons Numbers 27:1-11, or the laws regarding Levirate marriage Deuteronomy 25:5-10). In the same category is the law by which God prohibits the removing of a neighbour’s landmark (Deuteronomy

²⁶ This is another parallel with the promise of the land. The promise of the land is not a promise to the faithless, Numbers 14:20-24; 32:11.

²⁷ Von Rad argues that the land cannot be both God’s gift to Israel and remain God’s possession (“The Promised Land and Yahweh’s Land in the Hexateuch”). Von Rad argues that we have two different and antithetical traditions regarding the land. This is a failure to understand the nature of the land as an embodiment and manifestation of the covenant and of Israel’s redemption. Biblically speaking, redemption is *always* (both in Old Testament and in New), a gift which remains in the hands of the giver.

19:14). It is not simply a law safeguarding the right to private property, but, far more important, the protection of the inheritance of the land. In robbing a man of his land you rob him of his salvation.

The second consequence of the land remaining in the possession and at the disposal of God the giver is that the land which is given to Israel may be taken from them again. It never becomes the absolute property of Israel but always remains gift; it can never be grasped and taken. In Deuteronomy it is repeatedly stated that faithfulness towards God and obedience to his commandments is the condition for continuing life in the land (Deuteronomy 4:25ff; 6:18; 11:8ff).²⁸ If Israel should become faithless and follow the ways of the nations which they have supplanted, then they will suffer the same fate and will be destroyed from the land (Deuteronomy 8:19,20; Leviticus 18:24-28). The covenant is a double-edged sword; it means blessing in the land for a faithful people but expulsion from the land for those who are disobedient.

Israel turn out to be disobedient and, in consequence, they do lose the land. This point cannot be explored at length here but it is worth noting that one of the chief reasons for Israel's²⁹ loss of land was precisely their presumptuous attitude both towards the land and Zion. The exile was preceded by a display of unfaithfulness in which Israel treated the land as if they possessed it by right rather than gift, as if it were theirs to dispose of at will and not God's vineyard of which they remained the tenants.³⁰

In concluding this section, it is helpful to note the tension between conditional and unconditional aspects of the covenant promise of the land. God promises the land to Israel quite unconditionally, "It is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff necked people" (Deuteronomy 9:6). And yet it can only be possessed by the obedience of faith, "Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may enter and possess the land that the Lord promised on oath to your forefathers" (Deuteronomy 8:1). This tension is essential to the redemptive nature of the promise of the land. It is a gift that cannot be earned, it is freely given, yet it remains at the disposal of the giver and can only be possessed by a faithful people. This is a tension within the Old Testament promise which we have to respect rather than resolve. It is, after all, a tension which is characteristic of every redemptive work of God.³¹

The tension between the conditional and unconditional aspects of the promise of the land is creative of hope in the midst of a situation which is otherwise hopeless. Israel may have lost the land through disobedience but the unconditional promise remains; Israel may be faithless but God remains faithful. The promise of the land given by God to Abraham and his seed cannot fail. This leads us naturally to the promise of the land in prophetic vision.

2.5 The promise of the land in prophetic vision

Much could be said on this very rich theme, but here we will restrict ourselves simply to two observations.

Firstly, in the prophetic vision of Israel's future glory, the themes of Israel's spiritual renewal and of the restoration of the land (and of Zion) are inextricably interwoven. Many passages could be cited illustrating this point, but we shall here look at just two. In Ezekiel 36 we read, "I will sprinkle clean

²⁸ See P.D.Millar, "The Gift of God", p.459ff.

²⁹ For simplicity I have used the term 'Israel' throughout this article to mean the twelve tribes - the Old Testament people of God - and have not distinguished between the two halves of the divided kingdom, Israel and Judah.

³⁰ See particularly, Brueggemann, *The Land*, Chapter 6, "Because you forgot Me", pp.90-106.

³¹ In his unpublished PhD thesis, "Family, Land and Property in Ancient Israel" (Cambridge University, 1978), Christopher J.H. Wright holds these two aspects of the covenant together by appealing to the link between Covenant and Israel's sonship. Quite unconditionally, God has taken Israel as his first-born son and has given him the unconditional inheritance of the land. The demands of the covenant, however, are the demands of a father for loyalty and obedience from his son, and these are bound up with discipline upon disobedience. For a New Testament analogy, see John 15:9,10.

water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from you all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you a heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (Ezekiel 36:25-27). Yet the preceding verse sets this spiritual renewal within the context of a return to the land and the following verse reads, “You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people and I will be your God” (v.28). Moreover, this chapter is followed by detailed prophecies concerning the restoration of Israel and of Zion: the defeat of Gog and Magog, the land repossessed, reallocated and the temple rebuilt. The covenant promise is inextricably linked with the promise of the land and with spiritual renewal.

Our second example is taken from the well known prophecy in Jeremiah 31 concerning the new covenant. A brief glance at the chapter should satisfy anyone of the fact that once again we have a profoundly spiritual promise (Jeremiah 31:31-34), set within the context of prophecy concerning a return to the land (31:23-30), and the rebuilding of Jerusalem (31:38-40). This prophet speaks of the restoration of the covenant in all its spirituality, but also in all the fullness of its earthly promise. The juxtaposition of the spiritual and of the earthly promise is no new insight of the prophets, for as we have seen above, it was an essential feature of the Abrahamic covenant.³²

The prophets remind us that the promise of the land is a promise given only to a spiritual community; the promise of the land cannot be separated from the demand for regeneration. But equally, the promise of a spiritually renewed covenant people cannot be separated from the promise of the land.

We note secondly that the prophets also use sacramental language regarding the land. Ostensibly they are describing a return to Canaan and a re-establishing of the theocracy and rebuilding of Zion. But the language used to describe these events is by no means constrained by the geographical features of the land, nor by the previous history of the theocracy and its enemies. The picture of the restoration as painted by the prophets is far too colourful to be seen as satisfied in any return of the Jews to Palestine.

In particular, paradise themes abound in the prophets. In Ezekiel 34:25-31 we have an Eden-like picture of the renewed land which shall be the inheritance of God’s redeemed: rest and security, a land of plenty, and no more wild beasts. In Isaiah 55:12,13 the themes of the desert blossoming before the returning exiles is elaborated to include the rejoicing of all creation in the redemption of God’s people, and the undoing of the curse of thorns and thistles which was consequent upon man’s sin at the first. In Amos 9:11-15 it is declared that the advent of the Messiah will be followed by an unimaginable fruitfulness of the land which will be the inalienable inheritance of the people of God. A similar theme is found in Joel 3:18ff. In Ezekiel 47:1-12 the waters which gush out from the new temple renew the earth so that even the salt waters of the dead sea are made fresh - here again we have a paradise restored (see Genesis 2:10-14). In Isaiah 11:1-9 the advent of the Messiah is followed by the regeneration of the animal kingdom, the wolf living with the lamb and the leopard with the goat etc. This theme of Eden restored and creation renewed reaches its climax with the theme of the new heavens and new earth in Isaiah 65:17-25; 66:22-25.

The language of the prophetic hope will not permit us to restrict it to a hope which can be satisfied by a simple return to Canaan. While speaking in terms of Canaan and in descriptions which echo the character of the old theocracy, the prophetic hope concerning the land is no mere concern with Canaan. It is a desire to see the kingdom of God established in the earth. It is a desire which can be fulfilled by nothing less than the renewal of the entire creation and abolition not only of sin but of every one of its consequences. It will not be satisfied until “the earth is filled with the knowledge of the glory of Yahweh, as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14).³³

³² The New Covenant differs from the Old not in that the New is spiritual whereas the Old was simply a covenant of the letter. The Old Covenant was profoundly spiritual, it was the expression of a living relationship between God and his people. The fault with the Old Covenant was that its spirituality was not *perceived* and *observed* by Israel, the heirs of the covenant. This will not be so under the New Covenant.

³³ This hope is evident also in many of the Psalms. Eichrodt speaks of the “religious core of the whole salvation hope”, being “the coming of Yahweh to set up his dominion in the world” *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol.1, p.499.

This grand hope is, in reality, nothing other than a repetition of the promise of the land which was given to the patriarchs and to Israel. That promise was set against the universal effects of sin within the creation as recorded in Genesis 1-11. That promise was the answer to man's sin and to the plight of a fallen creation. As we have seen above, the language used of the promise of the land always did point beyond itself to some greater redemption. It is this same, universal redemption which is now spoken of by the prophets; it is the new creation, the regeneration of the entire created order. And it was precisely this greater redemption which was foreshadowed in Israel's life in the land, the life of the people of God in a land flowing with milk and honey.

3. Summary Concluding Propositions

Here I want to draw out three propositions which summarise and draw conclusions from the argument pursued in this article:

1. The promise of the land is a central theme of the Old Covenant and in the Old Testament promises concerning the New Covenant. It is a vital and inextricable constituent in the covenant promise.
2. From the very first, the promise of the land is spiritual to the core. It is part of the covenant promise "I will be your God and you will be my people". It can only be possessed through the obedience of faith.
3. The particularity of the promise of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants is set within the larger context of the hope of the renewal of the entire creation. It is set against the backdrop of Genesis 1-11 and continually presses towards the hope made explicit in Isaiah of new heavens and a new earth. The language used of Canaan in promise, psalms and prophets reflects this larger hope.

4. Conclusions concerning the Christian use of the promise of the land

In closing, we need to apply this study and its conclusions to the Christian use or interpretation of the promise of the land. This we shall seek to do by means of four propositions:

1. The promise of the land, being such a central feature of the Old Covenant, cannot be without implication for the Christian faith. It is a promise which may not be ignored.
2. The promise of the land cannot simply be rejected as part of the Jewish dispensation for at least the following four reasons: Firstly, this would be to ignore the wider setting of the promise of the land within the Old Testament; its backdrop in Genesis 1-11 and the way in which the language of the promise can never be comprehended by Canaan but continually points to the greater promise of the new creation. Secondly, such a relegation of the promise of the land to the realm of Jewish hope would, in many instances at least, be to ignore the profound spirituality of the promise: that it is part of the covenant promise by which God elects a people to live before him. Thirdly, such an approach to the promise of the land would shatter the prophetic connection between the new covenant and the restored land. Fourthly, to say that the promise of the land belongs to the Jew and has nothing to do with the Christian would seem to be a direct contradiction of the explicit New Testament declaration that the Christian is an heir of the promises made to Abraham (see particularly Galatians 3:16,29 and compare Romans 4:13).
3. The promise of the land cannot simply be universalised and made to speak of man's experience concerning real estate (as Breuggemann and many others). The promise of the land is not the human longing of a nomadic people but is God's promised inheritance given to his redeemed. It is not bare promise of land but God's promise of a particular land to a particular people; a promise which cannot be reduced to generalities. The promise of the land cannot be separated from the particularity of God's redeeming acts. It may not be used by 'liberation theologies' as justification for the oppressed to overthrow their oppressors and for them to seize the means of production for themselves.

4. Any adequate Christian understanding of the promise of the land must take account of these three factors: the spirituality of the promise, the eschatological nature of the promise and its partial fulfilment in the kingdom of God in Israel.

The spirituality of the promise. The thoroughgoing spirituality of the Old Testament promise of the land means that it is quite legitimate for us to 'spiritualise' the promise and to apply the promises to the Christian's inheritance in Christ. After all, this is no more than is done in Psalm 16. Such spiritualising of the promise, while not the whole story, is nevertheless quite legitimate since this was an important aspect of the promise from the first.

The eschatological nature of the promise. We cannot afford to neglect the eschatological nature of the promise. The promise of the land under the Old Covenant constantly pointed beyond itself to the renewal of the entire creation. The Christian, no less than the faithful Israelite, is an heir to this promise of new heavens and a new earth, the home of righteousness (2 Peter 2:13). The promise of the land, the narratives concerning its possession and the prophecies concerning future possession, while written in terms peculiarly suitable to ancient Canaan, nevertheless speak to us of our future hope, when creation will no longer be subject to decay (Romans 8:20), and when Christ's meek will inherit the earth.

Its partial fulfilment in the Theocracy. Finally, we need to recognise that the hope of a new creation, freed from the effects of sin, did not remain an entirely future prospect; it was realised, albeit very imperfectly, in Israel's life in the land. Israel was to have been the manifestation of the eschatological kingdom in the midst of the earth.³⁴ The church is not the same kind of entity as was Israel. It cannot have its own land, its own civil government, nor can it be a nation among the nations of the earth. Nevertheless, the church is called to be the contemporary manifestation of that very same eschatological kingdom in the midst of the earth. This being so, it can hardly be the case that Israel's life in the land is entirely without significance for the life of the Christian church, lived out before a watching world.

History

This study (in much enlarged form) began as a dissertation as part of the requirements for a Th. M. at Calvin Seminary, Grand Rapids. In its present form it was delivered at a meeting of the Biblical Theology Study Group of the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research in July 1981 and was subsequently published in *Still Reforming*, the theological bulletin of the Grace Baptist Assembly, no. 4, October 1984

³⁴ Meredith Kline speaks of Israel being an "intrusion of the kingdom", a term he also applies to the church.