

JESUS AND THE LAND

The New Testament Challenge to “Holy Land” Theology

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Introduction: land, place, and religion

Land is potent not simply because it represents geography we may own, but because it represents a place where we are rooted and can understand who we are. While most cultures around the world understand this notion intuitively, our modern Western world often lives with a sense of displacement, a yearning to find a place where identity may be securely held. When an American tells a visitor from Europe that her ancestors are from France or perhaps Germany, she may be referring to events 150 years ago; the American is holding on to an ancestral identity that has only the remotest connection to her present life.

It is an understandable desire. Each of us wants a place that we can call home, a place we may think of as our own, where familiar things are available, where old stories may be retold, where we experience some connection with a legacy that stretches out behind us. My grandparents saved for years to make the fabled trip “home to Sweden and Germany.” And there they hoped to discover their separate roots and recover something of who they were by filling in the stories that they heard as children from their parents. When I first moved to Chicago in the 1990s, my grandparents were delighted. They grew up in Chicago as a part of the Swedish and German immigrant communities. When they visited they were eager for me to take them to Andersonville – the remnants of the Swedish community that thrived from about 1890 to 1940. They were a part of that community for decades. The church where they married still stands, virtually the way it was in 1920. When my grandmother walked down the aisle again nearly 50 years after her wedding, when she saw the murals and the altar in the church unchanged, she felt rooted, anchored in history and time.

Places have a unique power for each of us – and they can inspire us to build great things or they can lead to devastation and suffering. When *place* is tied to *religion*, suddenly the forces that these two represent become doubly potent. Suddenly I can make claim to a place because my God has given it to me.

In 1987 the Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic rallied support among the Serbs in Kosovo by giving a now-famous speech in the Polje town hall in central Kosovo. It seemed incidental at the time but it propelled Milosevic to power. Then in 1999 during the Kosovo war, it suddenly all made sense. Milosevic was no fool. He spoke to the Serbs evoking ancient memory claiming that this region, this land of Kosovo, belonged to them by divine right. At the time Kosovo was chiefly Muslim but the Christian Serbs held a grudge that was 650 years old. This had been historic Christian land and they had come to retake it.

Here is the background. On June 15, 1389, this site – known as Blackbird Field – is where 25,000 Serbian soldiers met 40,000 Ottoman troops in what would be considered the defining battle of Serbian cultural identity. The Ottoman armies won but the event crystallized Serbian resistance against Islam and continues to live even today as a symbol of land lost and land that must be reclaimed. In 1987, Milosevic was standing on that famed fourteenth-century battlefield when he said to his Christian Serb audience, “No one has the right to beat you... No one will beat you ever.” Blackbird Field was as much symbol as it was territory. To possess it helped define Serbian self-determination. He was evoking an amalgam of feelings: historical, cultural, and religious. This is where Muslims killed Christians. And it would not happen again. Over twenty years later, when Kosovo declared its independence on February 17, 2008 (with American backing) it was no surprise that Serbian crowds (with Russian backing) expressed outrage. On February 21 approximately 200,000 Serbs gathered in central Belgrade and by night’s end, the US embassy was in flames.

Human history is littered with such stories. Europe is replete with claims and counter-claims for land that has been lost and land that will be reclaimed. Land is not simply about possessing real estate; land is about security and identity, it is about cultural cohesion and purpose. Land in its most profound sense is about place, possessing a locale which is ours, which can be defended, which can give us safety from the world. And frequently, land-claims are linked to religious commitments.

This easily describes the tribal life of ancient Israel. Land boundaries were an important part of Israelite settlement in Canaan. God had granted this land to each tribe as a heritage. And that struggle to

hold this land, to protect those settlement boundaries, was acute right through the biblical period. Life in the land of promise was intimately connected to life within God's covenant. To live outside the land of promise seemed inconceivable.

But the same observations can be seen today in the same geographical regions that witnessed struggles between the Israelites and their many neighbors (see map, p. viii). Where the Moabites, Edomites, and Egyptians pressed Israel's borders, today similar land struggles no less vicious are a regular occurrence. Arabs lived in this place called "Palestine" for centuries alongside very small Jewish communities. But then in the early twentieth century a religious vision called Zionism sought to reclaim land that was a part of the old Jewish biblical heritage. Palestine was to become Israel. And in 1948 this vision became reality.

The Israeli–Arab wars of 1948, 1967, 1973, 1982, 2006, and 2009 (joined by two Palestinian uprisings) made clear, however, that these struggles were not simply about the defeat of an opponent. It was about the struggle to possess land, to create a cultural and religious place, to build something ethnic: an exclusively Jewish nation. It is no accident, for instance, that Israel carefully emptied or destroyed over 400 Arab villages in these wars and did not permit their fleeing residents to return.¹ Graffiti written by Israeli soldiers in occupied villages announced that the Arabs would be pushed "into the desert." Few better examples could be found in the twentieth century of a modern nation-state using ancient religious land claims to advance its purposes. But now look at the flip-side. Arab calls could be heard to empty Palestine of Jews, pushing them into the sea. For some, Palestine was Arab land being stolen by Jews. Israel might eradicate an old Arab cultural heritage. Jerusalem is Islam's third most holy city. And Muslims were called out to protect it. In the end, of course, Israel won this struggle and the world's largest refugee crisis resulted. Israel possessed the land, but at a high cost to many.

This religious instinct to attach oneself to land is not regressive or some remnant of ancient religion that needs to be discarded. It is quite normal throughout the world and if anything the modern West is an exception. But there is a double bind that comes with the Holy Land (or the land of Israel). If the Jewish people are the indigenous people of this land, then the Palestinians are indigenous nowhere. And if the Palestinians are indigenous there, then the Jewish people

are indigenous nowhere.² The more Jews and Palestinians appeal to their exclusive ethnic or religious claim to the Holy Land, the more each will alienate the other.

The resolution of these competing claims for land today will frequently be found in each community's religious framework. Muslim attachment to Jerusalem springs from Muhammad's famous nighttime visionary ride on his steed Al-Burak to Mount Zion (Qur'an, sura 17.1). Even the "far mosque" (today in Arabic, the Al Aqsa Mosque) is mentioned. Jews will mention divine promises to Abraham (at this point still called Abram) and his descendants (Genesis 12.1–3; 13.14–17; 15.18–20), realized when the Israelite tribes settled in Canaan.

This book asks how Christians should understand these competing land claims. Given our theological framework, what is the relationship between land and theology in the New Testament? What did Jesus and the New Testament writers think about the territorial claims of ancient Israel? Did they retain the view of the sanctity of Jerusalem and its Temple? Were they rethinking the relationship between faith and locale? Or were they confident that a sacred place was still to be held for believers?

We must admit to a complication within this theme. Land is connected to a network of theological ideas in biblical theology (such as covenant) and when we consider one category, another is inevitably affected. For instance, Jerusalem and its Temple were the focal points of Jewish life in the first century. But if the New Testament reexamines the significance of the Temple and its place, assumptions about territory and religious life will shift as well.

Perhaps for Christians this subject has an application that transcends conflicts in places such as Serbia and Israel. The struggle for land is so deeply imbedded in the human soul – it is so central to our way of viewing the world – and it has led to so many devastating wars, to rethink land and its value might well be another form of the gospel needed desperately in a modern age.

I owe many thanks to those who encouraged this study and urged me to keep at a subject that is as controversial as it is important. The book was originally suggested by Bruce Longenecker, who read the manuscript carefully and provided many helpful comments. James Ernest at Baker Academic did the same and wisely redirected my argument at many points. Rodney Clapp at Baker (USA) and Rebecca

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A problem of names

The subject of the Bible and the Holy Land is perhaps one of the most volatile issues of our day. We can find ourselves enmeshed in modern controversies simply by the language we use. In Israel, most admit that *everything* is political, from the restaurants you choose to your home address. Jewish Israelis even have the habit of referring to their neighbors as “Arabs” and not “Palestinians” lest they acknowledge that this is a people with a cultural identity or national aspirations. Scholars have a long tradition of simply referring to the land as *Palestine*, a legacy that began in AD 135 with the Roman emperor Hadrian. Hence scholars frequently refer to Palestinian Judaism to distinguish it from Jewish life outside the Holy Land.

Yet “Palestine” too is filled with political meaning for those Christian and Muslim Arabs who were dispossessed by the Israeli state and yearn for their own place. *Israel* is of course a term with a biblical legacy but it too runs aground in the controversies of modern politics. Is referring to the West Bank as Israel to deny Palestinian plans for those hills? Worse still is the name “Judea and Samaria” for the hills south and north of Jerusalem. This is the preferred title among highly politicized Jewish settlers and Christian

and Jewish Zionists. But this is to play to a militant territorial ideology I'd rather avoid.

Names such as "Land of Promise" or "Promised Land" evoke memories of God's covenant gift to Abraham and they might serve us. Christians have a long legacy of referring to this place as the *Holy Land* (Latin, *terra sancta*) and this convention seems a good one. "The land" is also useful since in biblical thought this is land *extraordinaire*. This is Holy Land inasmuch as it became the stage of God's revelation in history. In the first century, the Romans called this province *Judea*. For the period of the New Testament, this is a fully appropriate name and one which I will use. If I wish to refer to the modern state of Israel and the Palestinian territories under occupation (Gaza and the West Bank), I prefer to use the inclusive term, Israel–Palestine. At least this term acknowledges that two peoples live in this place and struggle to understand how they might share its future.

Sola Deo Gloria

1

The biblical heritage

Walter Brueggemann is correct when he suggests that *land* might be the central theme of biblical faith. “Biblical faith is the pursuit of historical belonging that includes a sense of destiny derived from such belonging.” And if this is so, he continues, *land* might be a way of “organizing biblical theology.”¹ Brueggemann invites us to think carefully about (biblical) Israel’s experience with land along three trajectories: *land promised, land possessed, and land lost*. And in each of these categories we can discover the magnificent opportunities found in God’s grace and covenant, Israel’s historical struggles to possess this land in righteousness – to become the sort of people God intends – and the judgment that falls on Israel in the exile when all is lost. The exile crisis of the sixth century BC is not simply a crisis of land loss, it is the loss of life and hope and meaning when Israel (through its sin) no longer can live in the place of promise.

The interest of the Old Testament however falls on one land, “the land,” the “promised land,” which is different from every other land. Ezekiel refers to it as the center of the earth (38.12) and Jerusalem as the center of this center (5.5). Hence in all of creation, this land is set apart, for as we shall see, God has unique purposes for it and will describe it as his own.

The Old Testament promise

In Genesis, land is a gift from God from the beginning of creation. The appearance of “dry land” (Gen. 1.9) is set in contrast to the chaotic sea (Ps. 104.5–9). In creation, land can welcome life, land can provide safety and refuge (Jonah 1.9), it represents a place where all people, and in particular the descendants of Abraham, can anchor their culture and nation. In this sense, land is already seen as a gift of creation in Genesis. It is a place God carves out of the world that holds the chaos of the seas at bay.

A variety of Hebrew terms represent the ideas of land in its more nuanced uses: there are open fields, orchards, pasture land, desert land, and dry land. A very common noun is *'adama*, which refers to the agricultural qualities of land, as soil or fields (Gen. 2.7; 3.19; Prov. 12.11). But without doubt the most common term is *'ereš*, and while a precise distinction may be uncertain, *'ereš* often represents land as geographical or political territory. This is the “land of heritage” (Gen. 11.28; Jer. 22.10). It is used for tribal territories as well as the nations who live there (e.g. “the land of Canaan”).

The original call of Abraham in Genesis 12.1–3 promises that he will be the father of a great nation, and yet no promise of land is heard until Genesis 13.14–17 when Abraham scans the country he enters for the first time. The formal promise of land is given its full shape in Genesis 15.18–21, “On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.’” The promise is repeated in Genesis 17.7–9 and then it is repeated again for his descendants Isaac (Gen. 26.2–4) and Jacob (Gen. 28.13–15). In each case four themes are clear: (a) Abraham will receive land as an everlasting possession; (b) Abraham’s posterity will become a great nation in this place; (c) this promise is directly tied to the covenant; and (d) all of the people of the earth will be blessed by this promise. This promise of land and progeny is held up in the Old Testament as a remarkable gift of grace to Abraham and his descendants.

The Promised Land is always portrayed as a good land. When Moses talks about it after Israel’s departure from Egypt he calls it a land “flowing with milk and honey” (Exod. 3.8, 17; 13.5; Lev. 20.24; Num. 13.27). Then when he nears the land from the east and tries to describe it to the Israelite tribes, he contrasts it with the land of Egypt. This will *not* be a place where irrigation (as in Nile systems) will be possible. This land will be a “land of hills and valleys, watered by the rain from the sky.” Therefore it is a land under the direct care of God. It is “a land that the LORD your God looks after. The eyes of the LORD your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year” (Deut. 11.11–12).

While it will be a good land, it will not be an easy land. This will be a land that demands faith. Far from being paradise, this is a land that will hone a people. For instance, without a central river system, agriculture must rely on God, who supplies the land with water through rainfall. Culturally the land will not be empty but will be filled with Canaanites (and others) who will tempt Israel to compromise its unique commitment to God. And politically, armies moving from Egypt to Mesopotamia will run through this land as if it were a highway and Israel will be forced to decide whether its security will be found in local treaties and alliances or in God, who promises to sustain its welfare.

The Old Testament presents two “maps” of where this land is located. Numbers 34.1–12 defines this land as “the land of Canaan” extending from the Jordan river to the Mediterranean Sea (east to west) and from the “Brook of Egypt” to Hamath. These are the geographic parameters of ancient Canaan. This view is confirmed when Joshua 5.10–12 describes Israel’s crossing of the Jordan as entry into “the land.” Hence lands east of the Jordan river are excluded.

Deuteronomy 11.24 adds a larger expanse to the promise. It extends these boundaries and includes both sides of the Jordan (excluding Moab and Ammon) as well as northern reaches all the way to the Euphrates (so Gen. 15.18–21). Hence by this account, when Israel crosses the Arnon river (in Transjordan) its struggle for “the land” begins. This second map is viewed by many scholars as a later vision for political geography that may have come from the politically expansive era of the united monarchy.

But the center of this promise is certainly the hills west of the Jordan river. The promise focuses on the regions near Jerusalem, and when extended north and south, a claim can be made for the Promised Land that runs “from Dan to Beer-sheba” (Judg. 20.1).

The covenant and the land

In each reiteration of the promise, the land is linked to the covenant. For example, Genesis 17.8 records the land promise and this is followed in 17.9 with a reminder about covenant fidelity: “God said to Abraham, ‘As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.’” In other words, the land is not a possession that may be enjoyed without reference

to God. Possessing this land is contingent on Israel's ongoing faithfulness to God and obedience to his law. The land therefore is a by-product of the covenant, a gift of the covenant. It is not a possession that can be held independently.

Both Leviticus and Deuteronomy warn Israel in stark terms about the conditional nature of this promise. Leviticus 18.24–30 warns about defilement with the culture of the Canaanites. If Israel embraces such unrighteousness, “the land will vomit you out for defiling it as it vomited out the nation that was before you.” Leviticus 20.22–26 connects this theme to ritual holiness in the same way, “You shall keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and observe them, so that the land to which I bring you to settle in may not vomit you out.” The impression given is that the land itself can suffer abuse and be defiled. As sinners were ejected from the camp of Israel, so too, Israel can be ejected from the land of God.

Before Israel enters the land under Joshua's leadership, Deuteronomy records Moses' final words of encouragement and warning to the people.

When you have had children and children's children, and become complacent in the land, if you act corruptly by making an idol in the form of anything, thus doing what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, and provoking him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to occupy; you will not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed. The LORD will scatter you among the peoples; only a few of you will be left among the nations where the LORD will lead you.

(Deut. 4.25–27)

The severity of these words is stunning. This land is not simply a gift the giver has forgotten. It is a gift that has expectations for covenant holiness and justice. God is watching this land. He has personal expectations for this land. It is a land that should evoke memories of his own holiness.

God's remarkable interest in this land can be explained by one undergirding theme. In a profound sense, Israel never “owns” the land of promise. *God owns this land.* Leviticus uses this idea to explain why the land cannot be sold permanently to others, “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, *for the land is mine*; with me you are but

aliens and tenants” (Lev. 25.23). Israel here is viewed as a tenant in this land, an alien, a renter. The recipient of a gift for use. But not a landlord. Israel must hold this land loosely, because God will determine the tenure of its occupants.

The Old Testament reinforces this notion of God’s ownership of the land in a variety of ways. The land was not to be considered “private property,” but was something distributed by God. The division of land was done by casting lots (Num. 26.55) thus making land use God’s decision. The trustees of this use were the tribes, never individuals (Num. 36.3; Josh. 17.5). This “loose ownership” can be seen in the provisions for the jubilee year in Leviticus 25. No land could be bought or sold permanently – every 50th year the land had to return to the users God had declared in the beginning. God continues to exercise divine oversight to how this land is held.

Moreover the harvests of Israel were understood in light of God’s ownership. First crops and first animals belonged to God and so were offered in sacrifice (Lev. 27.30–33; Deut. 14.22; 26.9–15). The command to “keep the Sabbath” was observed not only by Israel but by the land itself (Lev. 25.2). Here the land is personified as if it were living in a relationship with God, as if it too were living under covenant obligations.

Deuteronomy 12.9 refers to the land as a place of rest for Israel – but it is also a place of rest for God (Ps. 95.11; Isa. 66.1). “Resting place” refers to the place where God’s presence dwells. In the wilderness narratives it is the place where God pauses (Num. 10.33) or dwells (Ps. 132.8).

Each of these themes underscores the same idea. This land is rightly called *holy land* because it belongs to a holy God (see Zech. 2.16, Heb. *'admat haqqodesh*). This land is *set apart*. No other land shares this quality. Other land is “unclean land” (Amos 7.17) and yet this land is his. Numbers 35.34 makes this explicit: “You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I also dwell; for I the LORD dwell among the Israelites.”

The possession and loss of land

The seriousness of living in the land of promise can be seen following Joshua’s campaigns. He immediately takes the Israelite tribes north to the mountains of Ebal and Gerizim and requires that they recommit

themselves to the covenant (Josh. 8.30–35). Following their breath-taking successes at Jericho and Ai, Israel's first duty is to renew loyalty to the covenant where their privileges of using the land are anchored. Joshua's rededication reinforces the idea (above) that covenant and land are inseparable and if land is held while the covenant is spurned, the warning read out on that day would fall on the nation.

The contingency of life in the land can be seen clearly in Judges, where each generation must work out the depth of their commitment to the covenant. And when their commitment fails, they experience the near-loss of tribal territory through war. At the end of the book, two troubling stories bring stark case-studies of this loss. The tribe of Dan indulges in breathtaking religious corruption (Judges 17—18) by instituting their own priesthood. Benjamin indulges in remarkable moral corruption (19—21) when a Levite's concubine is sexually abused and killed. In both cases, Dan and Benjamin put in jeopardy their privileges of living in the land. In each case, the theological message is the same: land and righteousness are inextricably linked.

The Old Testament continues with an array of stories showing how land-use and covenant righteousness cannot be separated. When David wishes to acquire land for God's temple in Jerusalem, he treats with righteousness Ornan the Jebusite (who owns the threshing floor David wants). This promised land, this land in Jerusalem, was owned by an "alien" and yet it "belonged" to Israel through promise. David does not take this land by force but purchases it at a steep price (600 shekels of gold, 1 Chronicles 21).

King Ahab presents the opposite position. He covets land in the verdant Jezreel valley held by a vineyard owner named Naboth. Ahab and Jezebel conspire to kill him in order to steal his land. And their unrighteousness is uncovered and condemned by none other than Elijah: "Have you killed and also taken possession?" (1 Kings 21.19). Rather than using Torah as an inspiration to righteousness, they use Torah in their plot to covet and steal. Covenant land cannot be taken by royal strategies of consumption.

The most dramatic example of land loss however appears in the Old Testament prophets. The prophet appears precisely in order to speak to Israel about land and its use, "When you come into the land...the LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet" (Deut.

18.9–15). This is because in the land where kings will rule, where land will be seen as an object of conquest, a commodity even, royalty must be reminded that they stand in relation to the land not as property/heir, but as gift/recipient. For the prophets, land is gift-land. Land is a place where covenant-righteousness must be on display. As Brueggemann explains, Israel failed to understand that it could not be a nation like other nations. Its king could not treat the land like other lands. This lesson was “the perennial lesson” that Israel had to learn – or else it would evolve into “the perennial temptation” of its national life.

Isaiah sounds these warnings sharply: “Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!” (Isa. 5.8). As does Micah: “Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance” (Mic. 2.1–2). Virtually each of the prophets repeats the same warning given by Elijah to Ahab: murder and the misuse of land will be severely judged. This is true of Amos (4.1–2; 7.17), and Hosea (9.2–3). But perhaps this is most central to the devastating words of Jeremiah (3.19–20; 7.5–7). Voices will be heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping – Rachel is weeping for her children (Jer. 31.15). For Jeremiah the future of the nation’s history is inevitable: it will lead to loss and exile. God himself will stir the king of Babylon (“my servant”) to come against the land and devour it (25.8–9; 27.6).

Perhaps the most remarkable litany found among the prophets appears in Isaiah 5.1–7. This is Isaiah’s famous Song of the Vineyard, which outlines God’s vision for his people in the land. Israel would be like vines planted in a carefully tended vineyard. And all that the owner asks is that the vineyard yield good grapes. But alas, Isaiah announces, the owner is filled with despair: “And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?” (Isa. 5.3–4). The ultimate consequence for this unrighteousness, this covenant betrayal, was complete land loss. “I will remove its hedge and it will be devoured.”

This terror of land loss came to Judah in 586 BC in the form of Babylonian armies. Psalm 48 records the pride and over-confidence of Israel's view of land: it was a national possession guaranteeing divine privilege. Psalm 137 describes the shock and grief that swamped the nation when a Babylonian siege demolished Jerusalem's walls. The entire book of Lamentations wrestles with the confusion of the loss of promise, a loss that Israel had never imagined – that a life with Yahweh and a life in the land can come to an end (Hos. 9.17). But this is precisely the reality that the kings would not admit.

But for the prophets, land loss is also an avenue to renewal. Land loss is the necessary experience of faith within the covenant so that true obedience can be reclaimed. In a word, exiles will become new heirs. Therefore the prophets also point to a restoration of land (Amos 9.14–15; Hos. 2.14–23; 11.8–11; Jer. 16.15; Isa. 9.1–9). Following the exile a second entry to the land, almost a “second exodus,” brings Israel back to the land-promise to reforge covenant faithfulness a second time. And once again for prophets such as Ezekiel and Malachi, land inheritance, covenant, and faithfulness must run together.

This closing and opening of a new chapter in the history of the land marked by the exile is poignantly given to us by Ezekiel. And it is Ezekiel who reinforces the rhythm of biblical faith's relationship to the land: gift of land promise, the obligations of land possession, and judgment leading to land loss. The land has been a gift and yet because Israel has despoiled this land, God's judgment must come upon it. “The end has come upon the four corners of the land” (7.2)! Moreover, the land itself is no longer a land that God can dwell in. His sanctuary has been defiled and as a result Israel's sin *has driven God out* (8.6). Thus God himself becomes an exile with Israel because the ruin of his land means that he cannot enjoy it either. The result? A desolation and a waste. “And I will make the land a desolation and a waste; and her proud might shall come to an end; and the mountains of Israel shall be so desolate that no one will pass through” (33.28).

But it is in Ezekiel that we also find hope. The renewal of Israel will be paralleled by the renewal of the land. Waste places will be rebuilt; desolate places replanted (36.33). And above all, God himself will return to the land and bring his glory in his return (43.1; 44.4). In chapters 47 and 48 this is symbolized by a return to the tribal distributions in Joshua. This is indeed a new beginning. But with a

twist. The native-born aliens who live alongside Israel in the land should be treated as “citizens of Israel” (47.22). The alien will gain an inheritance alongside Israel (47.23) and the land will be shared in a way not imagined before.

After the exile

The return to the land after the exile is indeed a new beginning. Perhaps it should be viewed as a second exodus/conquest, a reclaiming of the land once more now with a clearer understanding of the obligations that accrue to those holding it. The infidelities and immoralities of the earlier period weighed on leaders like Ezra. The warnings and hope of the prophets were deeply familiar to them. They came to this era chastened and viewed this land that God had graciously given as impure, soiled by the sinfulness of another generation. “For we have disregarded your commandments!” (Ezra 9.10). Ezra goes as far as to describe the land as bearing the same impurity as that given by the Canaanites (“unclean with pollutions”) and needing restoration. Therefore a religious intensity or sectarian exclusivity evolves with the return. Retaining the land is interpreted as embracing a strictly religious life.

To hold this land is to embrace the contingency of life there. Security depends on complete and utter loyalty to God’s covenant. The land (according to Ezra) is not a re-conquest, it is a re-gifting, a new opportunity to live in a land set apart where God himself holds high standards of purity. This explains Ezra’s strict prohibition on intermarriage with residents who do not share Israel’s faith: it represents a compromise that will lead to the same land loss of earlier generations. Nehemiah likewise rails against those who were profaning the Sabbath. This too was a profound denial of covenant life, a sin that inevitably led to land loss.

The fortunes of Israel, from the fourth to the first centuries BC, only served to consolidate Judaism’s commitment to the land. The memory of land loss and exile to Babylon did not dissipate with time. The threat was reinforced with new Hellenistic conquerors beginning with Alexander and his successors in Egypt and Syria. The land of Judea was a guarantee of survival, a foothold in history, a refuge in the mountains where safety could be found. And yet the seductions of Hellenistic life and the prosperity it offered led to more and more

Jews seeking their fortunes outside the country: Alexandria and Syrian Antioch, even coastal cities around the eastern Mediterranean gave birth to new, prosperous Jewish communities.

This new cultural assimilation into the all-consuming superculture of Hellenism posed an entirely new threat. This was a threat not of conquest, but of absorption. The enticement of different land and the endorsement of new cultural opportunities called to Israel from beyond its borders. And it forced an internal debate that continued right through the New Testament era. Is the Promised Land an ideal for Jewish life? Is it only a place of veneration and memory or should it be a genuine commitment for every member of the Jewish faith? Diaspora Judaism in the Hellenistic era raised a host of new questions. And as we shall see (Chapter 4), these questions from the Diaspora brought shocking responses to the leaders of Judea both before and after the great war of AD 70.

One of the major contributions of W. D. Davies' seminal work, *The Gospel and the Land*, is his analysis of the Jewish discussion about the land throughout the Hellenistic period.² The new Jewish literature penned during this time sounded all of the same notes known in the Old Testament. The Land of Promise is holy and good (Wisd. 13.3; *Jubilees* 13.2) and deeply valued by God (Wisd. 13.4–7). The *Psalms of Solomon* summarize the work of the coming Messiah thus: "He shall gather together a holy people whom he will lead in righteousness; and he shall distribute them according to their tribes upon the land. And the alien and the foreigner will no longer live with them" (17.26–28). The eschatological privilege of Israel will be gaining land and no longer having to endure the cultural encroachments of Hellenistic life.

And while Israel's privilege of having the land is granted, it is always anchored in the covenant where the promise is confirmed (*Jubilees* 22.27). But if this is true, the contingency of this land-possession is also sounded. Davies reminds us, "In Jub 6.12–13, failure to observe the demands of Yahweh is incompatible with occupation of The Land."³ The reward of obeying the law and remaining faithful to covenant is – according to *Jubilees* 15.28 – that Israel will not be "rooted out of the land."

In Jewish end-time expectation (apocalyptic) the land plays a prominent role not as the seat of judgment but as a place of refuge. Surviving the great and devastating events of the Day of the Lord

can be assured if one lives in the land (4 Ezra 9.7–9; 13.48). In this sense, the land can come to Israel's rescue (4 Ezra 71.1) because it will work on behalf of God preserving his people.

The Dead Sea Scrolls found near Qumran represent a stark variation on Israel's territorial holdings. While Qumran validates the preciousness and goodness of the land, still, these sectarians believed that the land itself continued to be weighed down by impurity. Their removal to the desert where a "way in the wilderness" might be built is predicated on the hopelessness of the Hasmonean empire being built in Jerusalem. Their concern is that the same divine judgment that fell in the sixth century might return due to unrighteousness. Therefore calls to purity prevail (1QS 1.5) and reminders to covenant faithfulness are common so that Israel will not lose the land (1QS 8.3).

The unexpected development is that the community sees itself pursuing righteousness for the sake of the nation. They are making *atonement for the land* (1QS 8.10; 9.3). The rigors of Qumran life are compensating for the sins of Jerusalem and its compromised Temple. Qumran is a remnant, a righteous few whose fidelity to the law will contribute to God's ongoing commitment to his promises. The War Scroll reinforces this theme with preparations for a final battle where not only will the land be purged of Gentile influence, but righteous Israel will prosecute a war beyond the boundaries of the land so that the source of all impurity will cease.

To sum, the same themes sounded in the Old Testament continue into the Jewish era. The land is central to Jewish identity; the promise of the land is anchored to the covenant; and life in the land is contingent on upholding the righteousness expected by God.

The rabbis: reinforcing commitments

The volatile first century both before and after the war of AD 66–70 continues Israel's timeless conversation about land and religious identity. The tripartite formula of land, God and Israel is reinforced again and again by many of Jerusalem's rabbis. The liturgies and prayers of Judaism point regularly to the land. The Eighteen Benedictions (a late-first-century synagogue liturgy) provide a corporately recited call for blessing of the land and life in it. Benediction 18: "Bestow your peace upon Israel and upon your people and upon your city and upon your inheritance [= land]; And bless us, all of us together.

Blessed are you, O Lord, who makes peace.” This is a remarkable prayer when we consider that at its writing, Jerusalem was a ruin, the Temple had been burned and the land had been devastated by multiple Roman legions.

The Mishnah (Judaism’s oral laws, compiled in about AD 200) points to these concerns about the land and no doubt must be read as a reaction to many Jews who left the war-torn country for other more tranquil places around the Mediterranean. Should Jews farming in far-off Syria pay tithes? Is there benefit to being buried in the land in order to enjoy the resurrection to come? And how might the law be applied to a Diaspora Jew if the law was intended for application to the land? Fully 30 percent of the Mishnah prescribes guidance which can only be practiced within the land. And despite the shocking losses incurred during the first war with Rome – and even the devastating losses witnessed with Bar Kokhba in AD 135 – still, many in Judea held on to its unyielding attachment to the land. After Bar Kokhba, a rabbinic discourse belonging to Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai provided comments on Habbakuk 3.6, “He rose and measured the earth.”

R. Simeon b. Yohai opened a discourse with this: “He rose and measured the earth” [Hab. 3.6]. The Holy One, blessed by He, considered all generations and he found no generation fitted to receive the Torah other than the generation of the wilderness; the Holy One, blessed by He, considered all mountains and found no mountain on which the Torah should be given other than Sinai; the Holy One, blessed by He, considered all cities, and found no city wherein the Temple might be built, other than Jerusalem; the Holy One, blessed by He, considered all lands, and found no land suitable to be given to Israel, other than the Land of Israel. This is indicated by what is written: “He rose and measured the earth.”

*(Leviticus Rabbah 13.2)*⁴

In this and numerous other rabbinic sayings the centrality and sanctity of life in the land is unavoidable. And no doubt this is reinforced by the obligation to engage in religious sacrifice and worship in the land. The Mishnah records, “There are ten degrees of holiness. The Land of Israel is holier than any other land. Wherein lies its holiness? In that from it they may bring the *omer* [offering], the first fruits, the two loaves, which they may not bring from any other land” (*Kelim* 1.6–9).

In a commentary on Numbers 34.2, we learn about correct blessings during meals:

Of all the blessings there is none more precious than the one, “For the land and for the food.” For our rabbis have said that any one who does not mention in the grace after meals the blessing, “for the land and for the food,” has not fulfilled his duty. The Holy One, blessed be He, said, “The land of Israel is more precious to me than everything.”

(Numbers Rabbah 23.7)

But Jewish voices in this period were not necessarily uniform (see Chapter 2). Of course, Diaspora Judaism that had put down roots in places like Alexandria, Syrian Antioch and Ephesus might have vigorously disagreed with this exclusive claim on the Promised Land. The Diaspora’s culturally liberal approach to Jewish life is directly connected to the anxiety felt about the entire project of Hellenization that Judaism was experiencing. Nevertheless, despite the freedom desired by the Diaspora, the liturgies of Judaism and the history of its faith pulled Jews back to the Land of Promise. Diaspora synagogues were eager to have their festival calendars fixed by those in Jerusalem. To observe the Day of Atonement on the incorrect day would be unforgivable. Further, following AD 70 Jewish synagogues both in the land and in the Diaspora began praying in the direction of Jerusalem and its lost Temple – a practice still observed commonly today.

Another window into Diaspora attachment to the land comes from archaeology. Jewish burial in the land was desired and possible for Diaspora Jews (preferably on the Mount of Olives) until Hadrian prohibited it in AD 135. Then interest moved to Galilee, where the village of Beit She’arim became prominent. Rabbi Judah HaNasi (135–217), the great compiler of the Mishnah, not only lived there but after his death in Sepphoris, he was buried in Beit She’arim alongside countless Hellenistic Jews who believed that at least burial in the land brought blessing.⁵

Summary

These many sources trace a continuous line from the Old Testament through the Mishnah. The land had become a place of supreme religious commitment which only intensified with the cultural threat of Hellenism and the political losses under Rome. Conversation about

the land was continuous and vigorous right through the New Testament era. And therefore as we open its pages, despite its apparently muted interest in the land, we can easily suppose that this conversation was known and weighed by Jesus and his followers from the beginning.

Jewish commitment to the land never disappeared – though in the Diaspora it was debated as we shall see. Despite the heated rhetoric between Palestinians and Jews today where in some cases Arabs have tried to deny Jewish life in the land following Bar Kokhba (135), there is ample evidence that some minimal form of Jewish life continued in the land for 2,000 years – just as Arab life has continued there for the same length of time. Jewish presence in Jerusalem may have been minimal. But in Galilee at Tiberius or Sepphoris or Safed it was considerable. Until the great migrations of Jews from Europe began arriving in the late nineteenth century, Jewish life, even in its fragmented state, continued to hold to the land as a religious duty.