



The Story Of Salvation
NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010
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In the Promised Land

Introduction

The image of land was to the Old Testament mind and heart of prime importance, not only in reference to the Promised Land but also in the apocalyptic visions of the coming age. Next to God himself, the longing for land seems to eclipse all others.¹ In the Torah the land is at the forefront from the beginning to the end.² The book of Deuteronomy has a fully developed theology of the land in which the entire future of the nation has been concentrated.³

The land is the place where the covenantal relationship of God's people with their Creator is lived out. The crossing of the Jordan is therefore the most momentous experience that could happen to Israel. The Jordan crossing represents the moment of the most radical transformation of any historical person or group. There are going to be some drastic changes. They had learned to live precariously in the wilderness for 40 years, but how are they to live as settled farmers or city dwellers? The entry into the Promised Land requires Israel that it ceases to be what it had been in the wilderness and become what it has never been before. They knew how to live as the slaves of a dictator in Egypt, but how to live as freed people of their new Lord? In the wilderness they lived as helpless children but how to live as mature inheritors? God intended his people to be known as a wise and discerning people with a just constitution. By observing the law they will be a blessing to the nations (Deut 4:6; 28:10). So it was of the utmost importance that Israel would listen to "the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan...just as the LORD had commanded him to speak to them" (Deut 1:1-3). Then upon entering the Land God instructed Joshua to be "careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go" (Josh 1:7). The words that Moses and Joshua spoke will define the shape and character of Israel; they are words of life with Yahweh in the land and for the land and over the land.⁴

The Land is Promised.

When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it (Deut 26:1).

It is a land which God had given them for an *inheritance*. They are to move in and *disinherit* the present inhabitants, who had forfeited through their wickedness their right to live in the

¹ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery. An encyclopedic exploration of the images, symbols, motifs, metaphors, figures of speech and literary patterns of the Bible.* General Editors: Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III., (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 487.

² In the Torah the word "land" occurs 568 Times.

³ Dempster, Stephen G., *Dominion and dynasty. A theology of the Hebrew Bible*, NSBT, (Apollos, Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 118.

⁴ Brueggemann, Walter, *The Land. Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, Second Edition, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2002), pp. 43-44.

land of Canaan. Israel recognised God's divine Lordship over all creation. Canaan was now Israel's inheritance and thus the gift of Yahweh who is the owner of all lands (Deut 32:8). By giving the land God's promise to the patriarchs is being fulfilled. God is a faithful God.⁵

In the book of Deuteronomy one of the major theological covenant themes was to unite the Sinai and Abrahamic covenants; to marry nation and land. The description of the geographical boundaries of the land are substantially those which had been promised to Abraham (Deut 1:7; Gen 15:18–20). One of the patriarchal preconditions for Israel to occupy the land was to become a great multitude and that had now been met (Num 22:4; Deut 1:10; 10:22; cf. Gen 15:5–6 & 22:17).

The Land is a Gift

See, the LORD your God has given the land to you; go up, take possession, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you; do not fear or be dismayed (Deut 1:21).

All Israel's blessings flow from the gift of land. It is God's extravagant gift to Israel and not deserved. Once settled in the land a grateful worshipper would come before Yahweh with a basket full of produce as a thank offering in return for the gift of land from the hand of his God, who "brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Deut 26:1–11). It is purely and simply a gift of love from a gracious God. There is no hint of achievement or merit or planning. Joshua proclaimed,

...And you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one thing has failed of all the good things that the LORD your God promised concerning you; all have come to pass for you, not one of them has failed (Josh 23:14; cf. 21:45).

Israel will receive many other gifts besides the land: fine large cities, houses filled with all sorts of goods, wells, vineyards, olive groves, herds and everything else (Deut 6:10–11; 12:21; 20:14). What Moses is telling God's people is that Israel cannot and does not need to secure its existence for itself. The Giver who gave manna, quail and water in the wilderness will do it for them. Only now the gifts will be long-term and not so precarious.

Descriptions of the Land – Eden Recaptured.

When Joshua and Caleb came back from intelligence work in Canaan they said, "The land that we went through as spies is an exceedingly good land" (Num 14:7; cf. Deut 1:25). It is "flowing with milk and honey".⁶ There is absolutely nothing lacking in it of what may be fervently desired. There are detailed descriptions of the land in Deuteronomy 8:7–10; 11:10–12, 14. These verses mention flowing streams, springs, underground waters, timely rains, and an abundance of food, minerals, and "where you will lack nothing". Israel will have a secure future; they will live without a care in the world.

But like in Eden their existence in the land is dependent upon full obedience to God's commandments. Deuteronomy 28:1–14 insists that all the blessings associated with the land are all linked to Israel's obedience to Yahweh. It comes therefore as no surprise that God speaks to Joshua the same words and promises as He had given to Moses (Josh 1:1–9). Just before he died Joshua told Israel to serve the Lord "in sincerity and in faithfulness" and wholeheartedly,

I (Yahweh) gave you a land on which you had not laboured, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant.

⁵ Genesis 12:7; 15:7, 17; Numbers 32:11; Deuteronomy 1:8; 6:10; 30:20 and many more.

⁶ This phrase is mentioned 15 times in the Torah.

“Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord (Josh 24:13–14).

Israel will be on mission when in the land.

The LORD our God be with us, as he was with our ancestors; may he not leave us or abandon us, but incline our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, ...so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; there is no other (1 Kings 8:57–60).

Israel’s true vocation was to live in such a way that the nations will marvel and come to know the only true God. Deuteronomy 4:5–8 is explicit. By keeping God’s commandments the nations will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!” and that passage then continues, “For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?” Just as the land is an extravagant gift, so the law of God is a gracious gift to Israel. The Lord just longs for his people to live as his holy image to the nations, and to that end he has given them his law”.⁷

By observing the law they will not only live, but Israel will have a reputation of being wise, close to God and righteous. The nations “look on in amazement at Yahweh’s love for Israel. They are the audience before whom the drama of election and redemption is played out”. These important verses show that the life of God’s people is an open book to the world and that even the voices of the nations are added to encourage Israel to live God’s way in the world.⁸

Brueggemann writes:

Israel’s radical and intentional choice of obedience takes place in broad daylight before the eyes of all the watching nations...Israel should be “bragged upon” by the other nations who will be dazzled by what they see lived out in Israel’s existence.

Israel is to be a “contrast society” quite unlike any other nation.⁹ At Sinai God had declared to the Israelites,

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine (Ex 19:4–6).

Israel is God’s special possession, His crown jewels, a priestly nation among all the nations.

The watching nations will watch the love and loyalty of God’s people toward Yahweh as they obey his commandments. They will notice Israel resting on the Sabbath, when even donkeys can sleep in! As radical as that is there is more: Sabbath is for freeing slaves, for resting land and for cancelling debts.¹⁰ They will observe Israel at worship. They will see that the poor, the widows, orphans and aliens and domestic animals are loved and cared for and not oppressed and exploited. The nearness of God and the love for neighbour go hand in hand. The book of Deuteronomy is at pains to stress that God’s holy presence and the love of neighbour together will grip the attention of the nations, for either alone is inadequate. The entire Torah with its promise of God’s nearness and its guarantee of neighbourly justice makes Israel unlike all other peoples.¹¹ By observing the statutes and ordinances of Yahweh

⁷ Bingham, Geoffrey C., *The Law of Eternal Delight*, (Blackwood: New Creation Publication Inc., 2001), p. 34.

⁸ Millar, J. Gary, *Now Choose Life*, NSBT #6, (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), p.149.

⁹ Brueggemann, Walter, *Deuteronomy*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), p. 52.

¹⁰ Exodus 21:1–11; Deuteronomy 15:1–18; Leviticus 25.

¹¹ Brueggemann, 2001, p. 53.

Israel is participating in God's holiness. In this way the name of the LORD is being broadcast to the nations. Israel is a people on mission! There always is a huge contrast between the Kingdom of God at work in the people of God and the kingdom of the evil one at work in the nations. So the nations will see that Israel is close to Yahweh and that He is definitely and decisively with Israel. The surrounding nations will be able to see clearly that the land will be "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". Yahweh will give rain, grass, grain, wine and oil. The watching nations will see that Israel will prosper (Deut 11:11–15). They will see that Yahweh loves His people. The revelation that God is love is unique to the God of the Bible alone. This is one of the most profound differences between God and the gods.¹²

Yahweh's Holy War

Yahweh's Holy War *par excellence* started with the defeat of the superpower Egypt at the Red (Reed) Sea and soon after in the wilderness with the war against the Amalekites (Ex 17:8–15). Further battles include the war with the Canaanite king of Arad (Num 21:1–3), the victorious battles against the Amorite kingdoms of Sihon and Og (Deut 1:4; 2:24–3:11; 4:46; 29:6; Num 21:21–35), and the war against Midian (Num 31:1–54). These wars were all under the leadership of Moses. After his death, Joshua led Israel across the Jordan River to the second phase of Yahweh's Holy battles against the kings of Jericho and Ai, the five Amorite kings and their kingdoms in the south of Canaan and then a further 24 kings and Canaanite inhabitants of the Promised Land. In short, Yahweh's Holy War is the epic journey of Israel from slavery to freedom. It is the fulfilment of promises which Yahweh made to the Patriarchs.

Just before the imminent crossing of the river Jordan Joshua had said to Israel,

"Draw near and hear the words of the LORD your God." Joshua said, "By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites (Josh 3:9–10).

These words of the Lord had been spoken to Moses to conquer the seven nations mightier and more numerous than them and shows Joshua's faith in God's promises. But Israel was afraid, but were told to have no dread of them because "The LORD your God...clears away many nations before you", and "gives them over to you", just as He did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt. This great and awesome God, who is present with you will clear away these nations before you little by little".¹³ These promises were fulfilled to the letter in the conquering of Jericho when all they had to do was march and shout (Josh 6:2, 16) and the conquering of Ai when they laid an ambush against the city (Josh 8:1–3). The conquering of the south of Canaan was completely done by the Lord on their behalf. Firstly Joshua was told, "Do not fear them, for I have handed them over to you; not one of them shall stand before you" (Josh 10:8). Then Joshua marched all night from Gilgal and came upon them suddenly and "the LORD threw them into a panic before Israel, who inflicted a great slaughter on them at Gibeon, chased them...As they fled before Israel...the LORD threw down huge stones from heaven on them as far as Azekah, and they died; there were more who died because of the hailstones than the Israelites killed with the sword (Josh 10:9–11). On that day the sun stood still and did not hurry to set for about a whole day so that Israel would have a complete victory. The chapter ends by stating, "There has been no day like it before or since, when the LORD heeded a human voice; for the LORD fought for Israel (Josh 10:14).

¹² König, Adrio, *Here I am*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 36.

¹³ Deuteronomy 7:1–2, 16, 21–24.

The call to the people of God is to go in and wage war against the nations who are larger and mightier than them but they are promised victory (Deut 9:1–3). They were commanded to go in and occupy (NRSV) or possess (NIV) the land. The occupation was not due to divine activity alone; Israelite soldiers took part in Yahweh's war to bring it about. Because of God's gift they can do it. Against insurmountable odds Israel would enter the land. They will always remember that the battle was the Lord's and that Yahweh their God won the victories. The conquering of Canaan is Yahweh's holy war. But Israel's part was that they must utterly destroy the Canaanites, make no treaties with them and show no mercy. They were not allowed to intermarry. They had to break down their pagan altars, smash their idolatrous pillar, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire. They had to observe diligently the commandments of Yahweh. Furthermore they were to devour all the peoples that Yahweh was giving over to them, showing no pity. They must not serve Canaan's gods. They had to blot out the names of the conquered kings and destroy them. The images of the Canaanite gods had to be burned with fire and they were not to covet the silver or the gold that is on them to take it for themselves. They were not to bring an abhorrent thing into their homes. All these drastic actions were to prevent God's people to be drawn into idolatry and the worship of Canaanite gods.¹⁴ There would still be enough temptation into false worship by "the gods of the peoples who are all around you" (Deut 6:14).

The Israelites are the agents of God's judgments on the Canaanites. The same condemnation and punishment was earlier pronounced upon Sodom and Gomorrah for their appalling sins, perversions, and idolatry. The depraved religion of the Amorites and Canaanites is described both in the Old Testament and in other sources. Such as doing abhorrent things for their gods (Deut 20:18), sacred prostitution (Deut 23:17–18) and child sacrifice (Deut 18:9–10), the practices of all kinds of witchcraft and other evil customs of the kingdom of darkness (Deut 18:9–14), and political power structures and economic excesses (Deut 17:14–17). Leviticus 18 reveals various practices of incest and a variety of perversions. To see the need for its extermination does not finally rest on our assessment of such evidence but on our faith that the Judge of all the earth does what is just (Gen 18:25). God gave them time to repent from idolatry and inhumane practices but told Abraham then that the "iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (NRSV) or as the NIV says, "the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure" (Gen 15:16). These Amorite and Canaanite sins were so offensive and abominable to God that the only cure was for the land to vomit out its inhabitants (Lev 18:24–27). Like a surgeon ruthlessly cuts out a cancer, so God used Israel as the agent of His judgment. But God also warned Israel that they will be vomited out by the land if they would defile the land by these pagan practices. "But you shall keep my statutes and my ordinances" (Lev 18:24–30).

Rahab

When the two spies were discovered in Jericho and pursued they were hidden by Rahab in her home. She was a prostitute. She told the men that the inhabitants of Jericho were terrified and how they knew how Israel's God had dried up the water of the Red Sea and how Israel had defeated two powerful Amorite armies. She confessed to the spies, "The LORD your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below (Josh 2). Her faith saved her (Heb 11:31) and her immediate family. She is mentioned again in the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah in Matthew 1:5.

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 7:2, 3, 5, 11, 16, 24–26.

Some final remarks

The image of Yahweh as warrior poses a problem. The violence described in our study does not sit well with 21st century people. The concept of Holy War suggests the barbarism of the crusades of the Middle Ages, or the *jihad* of Islamic fundamentalism who given half a chance would “drive the nation of Israel into the sea”. War is inherently evil and there is no real way to make it palatable to the minds and hearts of contemporary readers and believers. One thing we cannot and will not do is defend or justify God’s actions as Warrior-King. God is sovereign. “The violence undertaken by Yahweh as warrior is not characteristically a blind or unbridled violence. It is rather an act of force that aims to defend and give life to the powerless against demonic power that aims to give life to none”. Moses and the Israelites sang, “The LORD is a warrior” (Ex 15:3). Yahweh acted and will act in fierce and violent ways on behalf of Israel. In this song of the riders thrown into the sea they sing of Yahweh’s defeat of pharaoh and subsequent defeat of the kings of Transjordan and Canaan which are indeed acts of power. The work of Yahweh who engages in violent battle is first of all to create a future for Israel outside every sphere of oppression, and then to secure for Israel room for life—that is, the land promised in Genesis.¹⁵

For some helpful reading on this topic of Holy War, see Raymond Brown’s commentary. He helps us to understand the topic. He discusses six issues:¹⁶

- a. What happened then was for a particular time and place, once and for all, in Israel’s early history and it does not provide *carte blanche* authority for the future.
- b. The occupation of the land was a divine right. From Abraham’s time it had been God’s intention to have His people in Canaan (Gen 12:1, 7; 13:14–17).
- c. The Israelites are the agents of God’s judgments on the Amorites and Canaanites.
- d. What happened was also an explicit warning to Israel not to commit the same abominations.
- e. The possession of the land in that radical way was a theological necessity. There is always the great danger of syncretism and the contamination and corruption of worship. All of the idolatry with associated perversions, worship of Baal and other gods and idols are to be totally eradicated so that the worship of the God of Israel would not be corrupted.
- f. It was also a protective measure. God wanted a holy people to worship and serve Him.
- g. This topic also raises a correct biblical interpretation (hermeneutics). We need the whole of Scripture if we are to discern a balanced and reliable portrait of God’s nature.

¹⁵ Brueggemann, Walter, *Theology of the Old Testament. Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 242, 244.

¹⁶ Brown, Raymond, *The Message of Deuteronomy, The Bible Speaks Today*, (Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), pp. 49–53.