

THE LAND IN TANAKH
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The paper is divided into four parts: the promise and the gift of the land; life upon the land; the threat of the land's loss; and the land in God's promises. I recognize that what is said concerning the land has a history in later literature and interpretation, in the Jewish and Christian communities, and that the place the land occupies in Tanakh may not be finally determinative for these two religious communities. Even so, Tanakh's view of the land is certainly of great weight. It also is a many-sided and subtle picture that emerges from the several parts of the tradition, and (in my judgement) it offers much guidance for a religious understanding of the land of Israel, for Christians as well as for Jews.

I. THE PROMISE AND THE GIFT OF THE LAND

We begin with the remarkable opening of the story of Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, a passage assigned to early tradition by most interpreters. Abraham's call from God involves no theophany, includes no warrant for a call to Abraham rather than to some other ancestor of Shem. Legend will tell of Abraham's discernment in Ur of the folly of idolatry, the trouble that causes to his father Terah, and the need for Terah to move with his family to Haran. But Genesis records no sign of such intellectual or religious precocity on Abraham's part. In fact, Abraham does not speak a word. Ironically, Abraham's first word in the story is his counsel to Sarah to lie to the Egyptians, identifying herself as his sister, so that Abraham's life will not be forfeit (Gen. 12:11-13).

These opening verses of Genesis 12 are a careful, weighty assertion about God's promise of progeny, land, and blessing to Abraham and his descendants. The promise is let to arise out of God's mysterious love and concern for Abraham, as will be made clear later on in Deuteronomy. The promise of peoplehood, land, and blessing is unmistakably an act of divine grace. But it also carries with it a demand. Abraham is required to be a blessing (weheyeh berakhah, v. 2, an imperative) at the moment he is promised blessing. And he is reminded that just as God will make of him a great nation (goy), so are the families of earth -- all of them -- to receive blessing in association with him.

When in Genesis 13:2-18 we have the first clear identification of what land it is that Abraham is promised, the identification comes in connection with a great act of generosity and openheartedness by Abraham. As Abraham and Lot and their families came up from Egypt with much new wealth, they found that the land seemed not to be able to support the possessions of both of them. Abraham gave Lot permission to choose any part of the land he desired. Lot chose the well-watered Jordan valley and pitched his tent in the direction of Sodom. Abraham then is told by God to look over the land, from north to south and from east to west, as he stands in conversation with God, (apparently in the region of Bethel). The whole of that land is to be Abraham's and will

be passed along to his descendants. He is told to walk through the land, to let his feet touch all parts of it, so that the claim to all of it is registered long before there is any conquest by force of arms. As it turns out, the only land that Abraham has legally in possession is the burial-cave of machpelah.

We can see in this first biblical story of how the land of Canaan came into possession of Israel that a number of points are being underscored: 1. The land is God's land, given out of the mystery of divine love and grace to Abraham and to his descendants. 2. The gift of the land is connected with the gifts of peoplehood and divine blessing. 3. The gift also carries with it commandment: Abraham has something to say and do in order that the blessing, the land and peoplehood -- God's gifts, to be sure -- flourish. 4. The gift and the demand fall upon Abraham and his descendants; but the gift is also to benefit the remainder of humankind. It is not for Abraham and his descendants alone.

This promise to Abraham is reaffirmed repeatedly, to Abraham (Gen. 15:1-21; Gen. 17:1-21; 18:1-21), to Isaac (Gen. 26:1-5, 23-25), and to Jacob (Gen. 28:4-10-17; 35:9-15). Jacob includes the sons of Joseph in the promise shortly before his death, repeating the divine promise that came on an earlier occasion to him (Gen. 48:1-22). In these texts, different emphases appear. Chapter 15 first stresses the promise of progeny, but then it underscored the promise of land (15:17-20), giving the extent of the land most broadly: from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates, and placing the promise under an oath ceremony in which God apparently pledges, passing between the pieces of the sacrificed animals, that this promise will be kept, the penalty being deicide! Genesis 17 connects the covenant between god and people with the promise of progeny and land, and circumcision seals the bond between God and people. The land is called "the land of your {Abraham's} sojournings" (17:8), said to include the whole land of Canaan. Some other passages stress the promise of blessing and progeny (Gen. 22:17-18). The land may be afflicted with famine (Gen. 12:10; 26:1; 42:1-2), but it remains the land upon which God's promises and blessings will find their realization.

In Exodus, a new feature appears in connection with the promise of the land. It is to be "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exod. 3:8). The contrast between the fertile Nile river valley and the actual land of Canaan would surely have been known to the narrators of this biblical motif, but the land God is providing is no ordinary land. It has qualities that make it stand out, not just for desert folk who would naturally think of the settled land as special, but to those who long for the realization of god's promise of land, a home for them. This Exodus motif has remained prominent throughout the history of liberation thought: the oppressed slaves are on their way home, through the fiery desert that separates them from the Promised Land, but with a glorious heritage awaiting. Deuteronomy 8 portrays the land in even more grandiose terms: it is "a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley. of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of

olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper" (Deut. 8:7-9). Psalm 104 portrays the earth God has created in terms that go far beyond the actual conditions of life in the land of Israel, but it is clearly the land of Israel that the poet has in view. We see gushing streams, bountifully rich harvests, beauty and harmony all around. God's land is akin to the garden of Eden; in it, only the human community introduces violence and disharmony.

Further along in Exodus, the gift of the land is connected with fidelity to God's covenant made at Sinai (Exod. 20:12, an addition to the commandment to honor one's {aged} parents; 23:20-33, a promise that God's protecting and guiding angel will assure the entrance into the land and the defeat of its present inhabitants). The people are solemnly warned also to avoid the practice of worshiping any gods other than the LORD as they enter upon the land God is giving them (Exod. 34:11-16). God's gift is an outright gift, for it is God who will dispossess the Canaanites and other peoples in favor of Israel. But it is a gift that is to be claimed, and as it is claimed, it is claimed upon God's own terms.

The terms seem harsh indeed, at least harsh to the then inhabitants. The Hebrew Bible repeatedly names the persons to be dispossessed, and it indicated the ideal extent of the territory to be cleared -- that which we know represented the land over which David seems to have had some form of authority -- from Egypt to the Euphrates. The traditions vary with regard to what God will do to the inhabitants, with Israel's cooperation. Some passages in the Torah and Joshua call for the utter annihilation of all the peoples there, lest they lead Israel into apostasy. Other texts explicitly list the cities that Joshua in fact did not take. And yet other texts explain, in different ways why the taking of the land was a long, slow process. The actual extent of the territory given to Israel is put in quite different ways in the several traditions. It is not, therefore, a matter of some very precise set of boundaries that is important; it is unmistakably the land of Canaan, that land Abraham saw from Bethel as he looked to the north and the south, to the east and the west, that is God's gift to Israel. Transjordanian holdings are usually included, but sometimes are not. Beersheba is the farthest extent according to some traditions, while Kadesh-barnea is included in others. The allotments to particular tribes are a fixed part of the tradition, although there is not exact agreement even there on which portions of the land belong to whom.

It is also evident that the gift of the land does not include the Levites; they have God as their portion, their inheritance. Levitical cities are given, apparently, for the purpose (in David's and Solomon's days) of helping to regulate legal and cultic practices. The Levites do not have farmlands in the tribes where their cities are located; they have residences and places for the grazing of their flocks and herds, it seems. One tribe, then, can live without land, though it can do so only because the other tribes occupy the land given by God.

While the territory remains the LORD'S land, being given to Israel, it is clearly Israel's land to possess and to enjoy. Joshua 21 records that the promise of land that God had made to the forebears was finally, and fully, brought to realization, one the tribes has received their respective allotments (Josh. 21:43-45).

II. LIFE UPON THE LAND

All of the Israelite traditions make it clear that Israel's life upon the land was marked by great temptation. There was the temptation to join with the remaining inhabitants of the land in the religious and cultic rites by means of which the land's fertility was not only secured but reveled in. It is clear that many yeilded to this temptation, a perfectly understandable thing, since the demands of Israelite faith must have seemed folly to many. But the special allegiance demanded of Israel's deity ruled out the mystical and orgiastic practices connected with the renewal of life on earth. The sexual and fertility dimensions of the religion of Canaan were adopted into Israelite life, but with the transformations evident in the book of Hosea, and somewhat less clear in the Elijah narratives.

It appears that technological changes at the beginning of the Iron Age contributed markedly to the spread of towns and villages, to a different social organization in the land, and thus to a considerable improvement in the land's productivity. The Israelites benefited from such changes, and the hierarchical form of social organization in Canaan began to yield more "democratic" practices and forms. At the same time, control of the land fell more and more into the hands of the economic elite, those who were tempted to "join house to house and field to field" until they found themselves alone in the land (Isaiah 5:8). More and more guidance was necessary, especially from Israel's Levite and prophetic teachers, as they lived on and dealt with the land. The book of Deuteronomy is a rich source of information. It contains an old confessional statement used on the occasion of the annual festivals of the grain, tying the gift of the first fruits of the soil to the historical deliverence of the people from slavery in Egypt. Just as Passover and the accompanying barley harvest was connected with the whole story of the religion of the forebears, including the mysterious choice of Jacob to be the ancestor of all Israel (Deut. 26:5-11).

The land was to be held by the family members who had received it in the dim past, as part of the allotment to the tribes (Josh. 13-18). If it were sold or entailed, it has to return to the family from which it has slipped away, at the time of the Jubilee. Even kings were not to press their claim to landholdings that owners insisted upon holding for their family (1 Kings 21), for one's own plot of ground, apparently, was understood to reflect God's own particular gift to the family, and thus the family's own personal stake in the promise God gave to the forebears. Land stood in close connection with progeny and blessing; to forfeit the land might mean to endanger all.

The productivity of the land was also tied directly to the fulfillment of the demands of god's law. Life would flourish on the land God was to give to the descendants of those who received the Ten Commandments, but on condition that they show honor to aged parents. The Sabbath was to be observed, providing rest to animals and to the community, to the resident aliens, and to the slaves, for while labor was essential to care for the land, rest from labor was also essential in order that life on the land flourish. Taking delight in the goods of earth was a part of honoring the gifts of land, family, and blessing.

If the community did its part in caring for the land, the promises of God stood secure. When blight or mildew or famine or drought struck, or when armies invaded, the prophets often, but not always, saw signs of some breach of covenant as the cause. Natural catastrophes could cause the land to fail, but so also could the loss of faithfulness, justice, knowledge of god (Hosea 4:1-10). God's choice of Israel as a particular people in the world of the nations carried with it weighty responsibility, as is clear over and over again from the texts of Tanakh. God's gift of the land also carried such consequences. The land that God was giving was a land to be cared for in order that blessing flourish; its care was to issue in productivity that would suffice for all. Those who gouged, who ground under foot the poor and the weak, who used the courts and the markets and the governmental channels to enrich and secure their lives at the expense of those in need were warned that God heard the outcry of the weak and the oppressed, and would not for ever delay in coming to their aid.

III. THE THREAT OF THE LAND'S LOSS

That introduces our third theme: the threat of the loss of the land. Prophets in the eighth and seventh centuries offer the most searing indictment of the failings of a whole people that has been preserved from antiquity. The people's failings were certainly less than their neighbors, as is evident from much literature and many artifacts on the basis of which some part of these various civilizations can be reconstructed. But it is for the prophets not enough that Israel compare favorably with others. Israel is a people through whom blessing is to extend outward to the peoples of earth; Israel must "be a blessing." We know how much such a notion of divine election has cost the people of Israel, as it has been misunderstood and resented and used against the descendants of biblical Israel. But there is no escaping this dominant theme in Tanakh; it must, however, be rightly seen. Amos shows the divine love for Israel as placing upon the people the responsibility and the burden of fidelity. God's visitation upon sinful Israel is in the proportion of the divine love (Amos 3:2). Israel's misuse of the land, like the people's failings in other aspects of their personal and social existence, threatens their continuation upon the land. "An adversary shall surround the land, and bring down your defenses from you..." (Amos 3:11). Isaiah's counsel to Ahaz on the occasion of the Syro-Ephraimite war (Isaiah 7:1-9) is to the effect that the planned invasion of Judah by North Israel and Syria will not succeed if the community and the king will place their trust

in the God of the covenant rather than in their own power. Political and social reform that Isaiah has laid out in the early years of his work as a prophet. It was no call to quietism but to a defense of the land in the proper and the effective way: through a life of just dealings and active practice of righteousness.

Similarly, Jeremiah warns against efforts to resist the Babylonians, either through direct acts of rebellion or by means of help from Egypt. Israel can live even under the hegemony of Babylonia, if it comes to that. Israel must live upon the land faithfully, doing right by one's neighbors, living in association with God's just demands and loving presence.

When, however, the Babylonian invasion had run its course and the land was left decimated and its people hauled away into exile, the same prophets who had spoken of the sure judgement of God upon a faithless land began to speak of a day soon to dawn, when God would restore the fortunes of the people (shubh shebuth), bring them back, and start afresh with them. The land's loss was temporary, for God has not finished with this people. That brings us to our fourth point.

IV. THE LAND IN GOD'S PROMISES

The promises centered upon the restoration of the fortunes of Israel all include or imply a return to this land, the land of Canaan, and in particular Zion. We need to treat briefly the varied hopes that find expression in the prophetic eschatological texts, for they are at the very heart of Israel's understanding of the land.

Prophetic eschatology has to do not with a mere restoration of things as they were. We do not even have any references clearly promising a return to the Garden of Eden. All of the pictures of God's consummation of the divine work on earth call for some plus, some addition to how things were, some new elements. The images that stand out are a new royal figure, a new Zion, a new Exodus and re-entrance into the land, a new heart and spirit, a new covenant, and a new heaven and earth. There also are particular references to a new Day of Tabernacles (Zechariah 14) and to a new concord among the world of powers (Isaiah 19:23-25).

The passages dealing with a new royal figure are very familiar ones (Isaiah 9:2-7, Heb. 9:1-6; 11:1-9; Micah 5:1-5a; Heb. 4:14-5:4a; and Zech. 9:1-12, which includes a reference to Zion). This royal figure will come in the midst of conflict and darkness and will transform the situation of Israel among the nations into one of peace with righteousness. The promise God made to David stands firm (see 2 Sam. 7), but one raised up is the definitive descendant of David, not just some "next" king. The consummation envisaged affects the world powers and has in view blessing upon earth. But this blessing is centered in the land of Israel, in the city of Jerusalem, and works first upon God's people Israel.

The new Exodus theme is a bit less prominent, but it is very

important for Hosea, Jeremiah, and the author of Isaiah 40-55. The people will undergo scattering and suffering among the nations, but God will gather them up, lead them back to the land of the promise, and usher them in. The Valley of Achor will become a Door of Hope (Hosea 2:15, Heb. 2:17), and the whole land will become the scene of a new relationship of love and fruitfulness. Jeremiah and Second Isaiah speak with equal eloquence of the glories of this new Entrance into the land. God's promise of the land and of blessing to find realization through it is reaffirmed and expanded.

The new Zion shows up in numerous texts, among which the most prominent are Isaiah 2:1-5; Micah 4:1-5; Zech. 9:9-12, which combines kingship and Zion; Zech. 14:16-21, which also has the Tabernacles theme mentioned above; and virtually the whole of Second Isaiah and some texts in Isaiah 56-66, plus the Psalms texts that are also portraying Zion in eschatological terms. Zion's future is portrayed with the aid of many cultic and mythological texts and images from the ancient Near Eastern world. Zion is the center of the earth, the meeting place of earth and heaven, the residence of the Great King -- items with their counterpart in West Semitic mythology. Zion is also the righteous city, the faithful city, the place where peace and blessing are focused, and from which they flow out to the ends of the earth. Zion is also a magnet that draws the nations and peoples of earth to the deity, to the way of peace with justice. God's promise made to the people is lavished also upon this place. Zion is clearly the city of Jerusalem, but Jerusalem as it is loved and cared for in the divine purpose, whose beauty is beyond imagining, whose treasures incalculable, whose love for her sons and daughters beyond measure.

The other images center more upon the people in their promised land and less upon the land as such. God will remove the heart of stone and replace it with a heart of real flesh (Ezek. 36:26). God will quicken the dry bones of Israel so that they may live upon their land (Ezek. 37). God will make a new covenant with both Israel and Judah, with the Torah written on the hearts, no longer requiring that it be learned, for all will know Torah, from the least to the greatest, and God will forgive Israel's sins, remembering them no more (Jer. 31:31-34). A new relation will obtain among the world powers, as all are beneficiaries of the divine blessing, and all become God's people, God's creation, God's heritage. But it is Israel who is the special heritage of God even there, in this remarkable text found at the end of chapter 19 of Isaiah (verses 23-25), and the highway connecting Assyria and Egypt goes through the land of the promise, a clear implication that this world harmony has a firm connection with the land of Israel, and probably with Jerusalem, the City of Peace.

The connection with Jerusalem that we have in Zechariah 14:16-21 is explicit. The new thing is the connection of the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles by the foreign powers (it seems impossible to understand the text to mean the exiles in Egypt and in other lands who are compelled to come to Jerusalem) with a new recognition of the sanctity of Jerusalem. It is a strange text, one requiring more study than it has had. I believe that it is pointing to an eschatological

breakthrough when the cultic realities in Jerusalem are transformed to such an extent that all the peoples of the earth can have a stake in Jerusalem's cult. On that day, we read, even the horses' bridles will have "Holy to the LORD" inscribed upon them, and every pot to be found in the entire city will be suitable for use in the offering of gifts to God. Thus, there will no longer be any need for sellers of offerings and paraphernalia of cultic worship in Jerusalem; people may just use what is at hand, what they have.

This consummation too is in Jerusalem, and it may reflect some of the sectarian concern about Jerusalem's current purity, or lack thereof, that we find at Qumran. The Temple Scroll from Cave 11 of Qumran offers another eschatological vision, and this one rests upon a remarkable text in Ezekiel 46-48 that requires attention.

The sacred precincts are described in this vision of God's restoration of land and people, with a strip of ground reserved for the Prince, for priest and levites, and for the temple. Around this sacred strip of land, to north and south, the tribes are allotted equal portions of land, allotments that have no recognizable connection with what has been the traditions tribal allotments. It is as though in the new day, all of the old, "natural" tribal connections must be foregone, and even the notion of the Davidic king of the last days must be transformed. The prince's task is largely economic and administrative. All attention focuses upon the blessing over the entire land. We do not have here any clear reference to the other part of the divine promise: the spillover of blessing upon the other peoples of earth. But the book closes with the sublime name of Zion: Adonay Shammah -- the LORD is there!

One set of references to fulfillment portray nothing less than a new heaven and a new earth, show the fertility of the land to be so overwhelming as to constitute the land as indeed flowing with milk and honey. Natural calamities will cease, and harmony between the natural and the human world will endure (Isaiah 65:17-25; Isaiah 66:22-23). Zion will receive the treasures of the nations, and all will benefit from this transfiguration of Zion.

When we look back at this varied imagery of consummation of life upon the land, we are struck by its earthiness, its focus upon the actual needs of human life upon the earth. Later religious tradition, especially the Christian and the Muslim, will make this material into something otherworldly, centered in life beyond physical existence and beyond this earth. But this prophetic eschatology is earth-centered, concerned with human need and longing, making in a variety of ways the point that God does not let the divine promise fail of realization. Israel was promised descendants, prosperity, and a special land. These treasures born of love will also redound to the benefit of non-Israelites. They will demand fidelity to the divine will, a fidelity that is intensely pressed upon the people by its prophets, knowing as they do what is at stake. The people no doubt will keep failing adequately to respond with fidelity in the care of the land, in the sharing of its goods and treasures, in their requirement to keep

hope and confidence alive in the world. But their failure can go only so far toward damaging the divine promise of consummation and newness of life on earth. For God will not finally be undone in the failings even of the elect people of God.

CONCLUSION

This sketch from Tanakh can be of aid, I believe, in our efforts to assess how to view the land of Israel today. The establishment of the state of Israel need not be understood as the actual, literal fulfillment of these and other Christian promises of the consummation of God's work on earth. We know that many understandings of eschatological fulfillment are apocalyptic, not prophetic (as the above texts are), and that they are really talking about a divine housecleaning which sweeps away before it all sin and all sinners, which includes most of God's creation. Such rash and hate-filled pictures of consummation do violence to biblical faith and to any reasonable picture of the meaning of human life on earth.

But can the establishment of the state of Israel be entirely separated from these promises of consummation? I believe not. First, we need to bear in mind that such promises held in faith have their immediate and enduring power and effect in the community that holds to them. Eschatology is always to some extent realized eschatology. Secondly, the existence of the state of Israel has to be traced to these texts as a partial source of the visions of the Zionists who in the 19th and 20th century labored and suffered for the establishment of a homeland for the Jewish people. And these same visions were behind the readiness of non-Jews to see and respond positively to the import of these struggles. Thus, we can say, the state of Israel is not to be confused with the messianic community promised by biblical prophecy, but it also is not just a secular state.

That of course introduces many problems and temptations. If we demand of Israel, viewed as a secular state, a quality of life and accomplishment as a state that we do not apply to neighboring secular states, or to the world's states in general, we do an act of violence against Israel, making it impossible for Israel to measure up in comparison with other states, because we employ a double standard. That may not always be intentional hatred of Jews, but it is anti-Jewish nonetheless.

But if we do not take into account this mysterious and religious dimension of the land and of Zion, if we do not keep in mind what Zion and the land mean to secular as well as religious Jews, we will not only be unfaithful to the actualities in Israel; we will dishonor this heritage we have been discussing. The land is God's gift to an Israel loved by God. It requires fidelity in Israel's care of it, in the way life is lived upon the land. Though its loss may be threatened, God keeps bringing Israel back to this place, for here is to be the scene of a new and glorious transfiguration of life on earth, with the holy land and Zion at the center of the transfiguration.

THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AND THE HOLY LAND

Can Christians understand the land as of secondary import, given the universal dimensions of Christian faith and given the spread of Christianity throughout the world? Are the cosmic dimensions of Christian faith of sufficient character as to relativize the import of the land and of Zion?

I do not see how any thoughtful Christian interpreter could say so. See what this attachment to a particular land does for the Christian community:

1. It underscores the need to see all the treasures of earth as gifts of God, gifts that bring with them the same urgent demand that we see in Israel.
2. It makes it harder for Christians to generalize about how one is to live on the land, seeking its justice, struggling for blessing, seeing to the needs of all on the concrete land where we live.
3. It helps to introduce something of the archetypal beauty of life, of the places where revelation occurs, of the central import of the representations of Zion on earth, and thus of the earthly Zion in Israel.
4. It shows us how eschatology provides the spur and the impetus to labor in the direction of God's coming consummation. Remove this understanding of land and of Zion, and biblical ethics loses one of its most insistent impulses. We must be marching to Zion, not the heavenly one, but the one being fashioned on earth by the power of the transcendent and mysterious God of Israel and of nations.
5. It helps us to construct a picture of the modern state of Israel which stresses the central import of a land of Israel over which Jews can exercise some control, as an element in the heritage of land promised to Israel. As we do so we can rightly stress the obligation entailed by that gift of God, an obligation that does not, however, become heroic and unrealistic, for it is an obligation to a merciful and loving deity to whom all peoples and individuals turn for mercy and forgiveness. The land of Israel partakes of consummation. So also does the Christian community that recognizes that this is the case and associates itself with the people and with the land.

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