

Theology of the Land: From a Land of Strife to a Land of Reconciliation

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“Christ at the Checkpoint” Conference
March 12-17, 2010
Bethlehem, Palestine

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Land is given in covenant. Israel's central task is to keep it so, never to perceive its land in a social or historical vacuum. In a vacuum all kinds of coercive deeds are possible and even legitimate. But they speak no words, give no gifts, keep no promises.

- Walter Brueggemann

When considering Theology of the Land, four important principles are worth keeping in mind.¹ First, God is the creator of the land, and all creation is sustained solely by Him. Second, the land is a gift. Since God is the creator, the land is His to give as a gift, and not ours to take or selfishly hold. Third, as God has given us the gift of land, this gift is given through a covenant. Therefore we have the responsibilities as the receivers of this gift of land, for our moral and ethical choices and actions affect the land, and there are consequences for our sins. Finally, the land is a gift that has been promised to all people, it is God's blessing to all who are created in His image.

Most conversations dealing with Theology of the Land begin with Genesis 12:1-3.² In this passage God promises to make Abraham "into a great nation," through whom "all the people on earth will be blessed" if he will only "Go to the land I will show you." Because of eschatological concerns, and the way these promises relate to our current political situation, these passages have become very controversial and divisive. In our eagerness to "prove" who is right or wrong, and who has the most justified claim to the land, we often ignore the most fundamental and basic principles concerning the land found in the biblical narrative. In fact, the original covenant concerning the land between God and humanity occurs much earlier in Genesis 1-3, when Adam and Eve are given, and subsequently driven from the Garden of Eden by God. In the creation narrative we see that God is the creator and keeper of all creation. He has given creation to humanity as a gift, for us to enjoy and to be blessed by, but it is a gift that comes with responsibility. We have to acknowledge Him as the creator, and our only provider and sustainer.

We are called to recognize that God is the true and only "owner" of the land, and we must realize that all of creation belongs to Him. The land is a gift from God, given through a covenant and "given by the giver of good gifts and the speaker of faithful words." As God brought the children of Israel into the Promised Land after their wilderness wanderings, the message was clear: in no way have you earned this gift, for "you did not build; you did not fill; you did not hew; you did not plant."³ The land is a gift, for "the people who are to possess it did not create it."⁴

However, we often forget that the land is a gift, and begin thinking that we somehow deserve what we did not create. This is because, unlike the years spent wandering in the wilderness, where God was clearly the sustainer and provider, the Promised Land is a land of plenty, and life is easier. "Guaranteed security dulls the memory" and we forget the years of

¹ For a more detailed analysis of these four principles, see *Hosea Book*, chapter 8

² Manfred Kohl gives a good survey of the available literature on Theology of the Land and how it relates to the New Testament in *Towards a Theology of Land, A Christian Answer to the Hebrew-Arab Conflict*.

³ Brueggemann, Walter, *The Land, Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith Second Edition*, (Fortress Press, 2002) pg. 46

⁴ Berry, Wendell, "The Gift of Good Land" from *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, (Counterpoint, 2003) pg. 295

want and dependence. We become arrogant and selfish, unwilling to share the land with others, imagining that we somehow created paradise by our own efforts. Like the children of Israel, we begin “imagining it was always so” and that we made it so. We are “no longer recipient of land but controller, no longer creature of grace but manager of achievement.”⁵ In the final analysis, the land is not ours, it is His. This is clearly seen when God tells the Israelites not to sell the land permanently, “because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers.” (Leviticus 25:23).

If the land is a gift from God, we must also remember that this gift comes wrapped in responsibility, and that our actions have an enormous impact on the land. The “Promised Land is not a permanent gift. It is ‘given,’ but only for a time, and only for so long as it is properly used.”⁶ The disobedience of mankind led to severe consequences, and expulsion from the garden. In this first exile, we see that the relationship between man and God was forever altered. Additionally and significantly, the relationship between man and the land was also changed. As a result of mankind’s sin, the ground was cursed, and turned from a fruitful garden to a barren land, which “will produce thorns and thistles,” and only provide food “by the sweat of your brow” (Genesis 3:17-19). From the very beginning, humanity’s moral and ethical choices have been inextricably intertwined with the health of the land.

When the land is given, a covenant is made with God. As with any covenant, there are expectations on the part of both parties involved. Obedience was required from Abraham, which he demonstrated time and again, from leaving the land of his fathers (Genesis 12:4), to willingly offering up his only son Isaac to God as a sacrifice (Genesis 22:16). Eugene Korn writes, “The covenant is a holy contract, and as in every contract, each party acquires benefits in return for assuming responsibilities.”⁷ God’s promise of the Land to the Israelites is often seen as an unconditional promise, but adopting this attitude is dangerous as well as unbiblical. If the promise is unconditional, any means of claiming and keeping it are acceptable, a disastrous and frightening thought, especially when the Old Testament conquest of the land of Canaan is remembered and seen as an example. “The process of taking possession of the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, required that it flow also with the blood of its indigenous population.” The “divinely-mandated shedding of the blood of the natives would be redemptive” and through “this ‘ethnic’ massacre the land would be cleansed of the defilement with which the native population had polluted it.”⁸

This sentiment has found expression in the European colonial and imperial discourse, from the Manifest Destiny of the American westward expansion to the White Man’s Burden and *La Mission Civilisatrice*. This perspective has also informed the worldview of some supporters of the modern state of Israel, based on the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. This distortion of the imagery of cleansing the land is interesting, especially in light of the fact that the scriptures explicitly state that the land is defiled by sin, and is cleansed by righteousness, i.e. the proper treatment of others.

⁵ Brueggemann, *The Land, Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, pg. 51-53

⁶ Berry, “The Gift of Good Land” pg. 296

⁷ Eugene Korn, *Land and Covenant: The Religious Significance of the State of Israel*, Revised text of an address given at the International Conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews, Chicago, July 26, 2005, taken from <http://www.jcrelations.net/en/index.php?item=2691>.

⁸ Michael Prior, “Violence and the Biblical Land Traditions”, taken from *Challenging Christian Zionism, Theology, Politics and the Israel-Palestine Conflict*, edited by Naim Ateek, Cedar Duaybis and Maurine Tobin, (2005, Crowell Press) pg. 129

The biblical account is clear that the task given to the children of Israel as they left Egypt and entered the Promised Land was to uphold and observe the Torah. From the outset, their presence in the land was contingent on their relationship to God and to the Torah. Walter Brueggemann lists three foundational guidelines to upholding the Torah given to the children of Israel: they were supposed to keep away from any images; they were to observe the Sabbath; and they were supposed to care for others.

God warns Israel against images and idol worship because He knows that Israel will forget the great works and miracles He performed on her behalf, leading her out of Egypt, and through the wilderness.⁹ “Rather, she has preferred to attribute the land’s fertility to the Baalim, to pagan gods whose appeasement and worship she thinks will guarantee its bounty. She no longer considers – has indeed forgotten – her true Provider.”¹⁰ God speaks through Hosea, saying “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more they were called, the more they went away from me. They sacrificed to the Baals, and they burned incense to images.” (Hosea 11:1-3). God very much wants us to remember that it is He who blesses the land, and sustains us through it.

This sentiment is also echoed in God’s commandment to keep the Sabbath. The children of Israel were given a weekly reminder of the creation narrative, where God is the author of creation, and the whole world is His. It is also found in God’s commandment of the Jubilee year, when land was returned to its original owners, “as if to free it of the taint of trade and the conceit of human ownership. But beyond their agricultural and social intent, these sabbaths ritualize an observance of the limits of ‘my power and the might of mine hand’ – the limits of human control.”¹¹

The third clause in God’s covenant with the Israelites is supremely important in that it relates to the treatment of the poor, the oppressed, and minorities. They are called “brother and sister,” but are also “variously characterized: the poor (Exod 23:6; Deut 15:7-11), the stranger (Exod 21:21-24; 23:9), the sojourner (Deut 14:27), the widow and orphan (Deut 24:19-22),” and those “with no standing ground in the community.” Significantly, “all these landless poor are redefined as brother and sister, that is, as full participants in the promises of covenant (Lev 25:25-55; Deut 15:11, 12-18; 22:1-4).” Just as they had been strangers in Egypt, God wanted Israel to remember the strangers among them, for “Land is for sharing with all the heirs of the covenant, even those who have no power to claim it.”¹² God called His people to live in peace with the strangers in their midst, and said, “Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land.” (Isaiah 5:8). These “social virtues” also have “ecological and agricultural implications” that are a result of living in close proximity to others and cannot be ignored.¹³

This last condition is indicative of the nature of God’s gift. It is not exclusive, but is a gift intended to be a blessing for all humanity. As shown in Deut. 2:5, 9, and 19, God gave the gift of land, not only to the children of Israel, but to others as well, such as the Edomites, and the

⁹ Brueggemann is clear that images are “something other than ‘other gods,’” and refer instead to “making controllable representations of our best loyalties and visions. They are efforts to reduce to manageable and predictable form the sources of value and power in our lives.” pg. 58 However, there is an obvious connection between the forbidden “images,” and our discussion of land and God as the source of all physical blessings.

¹⁰ Munayer, Salim J., *Hosea, Asia Bible Commentary Series*, (Asia Theological Association, 2009)

¹¹ Berry, pg. 296

¹² Brueggemann, pg. 58-62

¹³ Berry, pg. 297

Moabites. As we have already seen, when it comes to the strangers dwelling among Israel, God gave very specific instructions on how they were to be treated. They were to have religious, social, and legal privileges, and were privy to all the blessings God bestowed upon Israel.¹⁴ Religiously they were permitted to enjoy the Sabbath rest (Exodus 23:12), to make sacrifices at the altar (Numbers 15:14), to participate in the Jewish festivals in Jerusalem (Numbers 9:14), and even granted presence at Israel's holy ceremonies (Joshua 8:33). Socially, they were protected from permanent slavery through indebtedness (Leviticus 25:47-50), received help if it was needed from the tithes that were collected, something like welfare (Deut. 14:29; 26:12), and were allowed to take what was left over from the harvest (Leviticus 19:10; 23:27; Deut. 24:19-21). Legally, Israelite and foreigner, were both under the same legal system, and the same law (Leviticus 24:22; Numbers 19:14; 15:16, 27-28). The court system was available to everyone (Deut. 1:16; 24:17), and aliens were to be protected from persecution (Leviticus 19:33-34). Additionally, aliens were to receive fair wages (Deut. 24:14), with unrestricted access to the cities of refuge (Numbers 35:15; Joshua 20:9). It is evident that they were to be treated well, and partake freely in the gift of land.¹⁵ It is a mistake to interpret the term 'strangers' used in this context as either the Palestinians or the Israelis. Our purpose here is to discuss how we are commanded to treat others, not to determine who qualifies as a stranger in the land.

This is also evidenced in the story of Naaman's healing by the prophet Elisha in 2 Kings 5. Naaman, who was an enemy of the Israelites, was still extended grace by God, who healed him with the waters of the Jordan River. It was a gift that was tied to the land, for the Abanah and Pharpar rivers of Syria would not have had the same effect. Here we see a kidnapped girl, enslaved by the enemy, who was still willing to extend help to her master. Through her act of obedience, the name of God was glorified, and the enemy received healing in the Land.

When defining the laws God laid down for the children of Israel, it is important to remember that in their scriptural descriptions "all manifestations of holiness are in a social context." God knew that His people would not be isolated from others, and never intended it that way. Treating your own people well does not require holiness; the true measure is how you treat those who are different or less fortunate than you. "The ideal holy society is not a monolithically Jewish community, but a society where gentiles are welcomed, where compassion for the 'Other' flows freely and where all respect and protect the dignity of the disadvantaged in their midst."¹⁶

The Borders of Promise

Much of the modern Israeli-Palestinian conflict revolves around the question of borders, and when concerned with questions pertaining to Theology of the Land, the issue of biblical borders cannot be ignored. For many, when the topic of borders is broached within this context, the physical, territorial borders of the Promised Land based on God's promises to Abraham are

¹⁴ This analysis is deeply indebted to Gary Burge, who in his *Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians are not being told about Israel and the Palestinians*, convincingly argues that any who claim to inherit God's gift and promise are responsible to live by the rigid guidelines which accompany it.

¹⁵ While these biblical principles are universally applicable, this 'settled vs. stranger' dichotomy is not automatically transferable to the political situation facing the Israelis and Palestinians today, even though both sides often engage in the dangerous game of dismissing the other side as 'foreigners,' and ignoring or denying their historical narrative.

¹⁶ Eugene Korn, *Land and Covenant*

considered to the exclusion of almost everything else. However, recent scholarship has taken great strides toward giving us a fuller, more comprehensive picture by reexamining some basic assumptions, contextualizing the evidence, and offering a more universal reading of the scriptures that deal with the Promised Land's borders.

Drawing from the work of Nili Wazana of Hebrew University, we are able to distinguish a distinction between the actual territorial borders of the Promised Land, and the other, more symbolic references to the Land. Wazana approaches the scriptures from the perspective of Biblical Geography, and proposes that we take the images of the Promised Land in the Bible as "literary descriptions," in which case we must view them through the lens of literary analysis.¹⁷ She identifies two qualitatively different ways in which the Promised Land and its borders are described in the Bible.

The first kind of description is dealing with a clearly identifiable and detailed entity. For example, when Abraham is promised the Land by God, in Genesis 12:1-3, the borders are not specifically given: it is referred to simply as the Land. A geographical description was not needed because it was understood that God was referencing a "conventional, well-known geographical unit," the Land of Canaan.¹⁸ There are only a few instances in the Bible where God provides a specific map outlining the borders of the Promised Land, and they appear much later, for example in Numbers 34:1-12. This description is marked by its methodological listing of about twenty geographical landmarks, explicitly making clear what the borders were, what they included and what they did not. Interestingly, the wording of this description matches contemporaneous Hittite political-legal documents that were used to denote borders.¹⁹ However, the Numbers 34 description, and the few others like it, are the exception, not the rule, and have to be understood within the specific context of the Israelites entering the Land from their years of wandering.

Wazana's second category of descriptions is different. Though they do include fixed, geographical borders, she suggests that they belong to a more symbolic, literary kind of description, common in the ancient world, and do not represent actual or literal borders. The first of these descriptions of the Promised Land, found in Genesis 15, is significant in that it is the only patriarchal narrative that speaks of specific borders. In Genesis 15:18-22, we see that God tells Abraham that his descendants will be given the land, "from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates." This "from...to" phrase, a spatial merism, is common to all the descriptions of the Promised Land in this second category. They also all have borders that are delineated by either the Sea, the Wilderness, or the Mountains. Altogether there are four additional descriptions of the Promised Land that fall into this category (Exodus 23:31, Deut. 1:7, Deut. 11:24, Josh. 1:3-4), the Genesis 15 description receives added treatment by Wazana because it is unique, and significant for a number of reasons.

This description describes a huge amount of territory, spanning from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia. Aside from being the "foundational text of the concept of Greater Israel,"²⁰ it is also a somewhat problematic set of Promised Land borders, because it moves a number of Old Testament narratives that clearly took place outside the Promised Land

¹⁷ Wazana, Nili, *From Dan to Beer-Sheba and from the Wilderness to the Sea: Literal and Literary Images of the Promised Land in the Bible*, taken from *Experiences of Place*, Edited by Mary MacDonald, (Center for the Study of World Religions, 2003) pg. 45

¹⁸ Wazana, *From Dan to Beer-Sheba and from the Wilderness to the Sea*, pg. 50

¹⁹ Wazana, pg. 51

²⁰ *Ibid*, pg. 52-53

within the Promised Land. For example, in Joshua 3-4, the Israelites cross over the Jordan River, and *into* the Promised Land. If the eastern border of the Promised Land is marked by the Euphrates River, the Israelites would have already been in the Promised Land before they crossed the Jordan. The same problem arises when the Exodus narrative is considered. God punished the children of Israel because of their disobedience, by condemning them to wander in the Wilderness of Zin for 40 years. Aside from the hardships of living a restless and nomadic life in the harsh environment of the desert, this punishment carried particular sting because God had forbidden them from entering into the Promised Land until the generation of disobedience had died off (Num. 14:30). If the Nile River in Egypt marked the southern border of the Promised Land, God's punishment and prohibition makes no sense.

A number of scholars, (such as Jeffrey Townsend, Moshe Weinfeld, and Zecharia Kallai)²¹ have identified the difference between these two categories of descriptions of the Promised Land. On one hand, there is the straightforward border descriptions, typified by the Numbers 34 description but also found elsewhere, such as in Joshua 15:1-12 and Ezekiel 47:15-20. These descriptions clearly reference the actual Land. On the other hand are the other descriptions, which are described by Waldemar Janzen as having "originated in the expansive era of the Davidic-Solomonic empire," and were "formulated in grand utopian ancient Near Eastern royal terminology (river to river, sea to sea, etc.), and received their final crystallization by 'the so-called Deuteronomistic author or school' in the Josianic era." However, in Wazana's estimation, calling these descriptions from the second categories "boundary descriptions," which depict any sort of actual, physical boundaries, is a misinterpretation and a mistake.²²

Instead, "These expressions must be studied as literary-ideological phrases, akin to other merism phrases found in the Bible and in ancient Near Eastern literature."²³ This opinion is echoed by many others, including David Holwerda who writes, "Various descriptions [of the borders] were given at various times and under varying historical circumstances. Perhaps one may conclude that the land is not only a territory but an idea as well."²⁴

While there are other differences that separate the two categories of descriptions, the most significant is perhaps the use of the merism phrases. Easily mistaken for representing border descriptions, merism phrases actually serve a much broader literary purpose. "Merism expressions utilize the prepositions 'from' and 'to' to denote generalizations, presenting a whole (usually abstract) concept, rather than its components." Merisms are meant to indicate the size, scale, and quality of what they are making reference to, and not the literal boundaries or borders. "These merism expressions are not intended to define the extremities of the structure, but to denote its entire magnitude, its extremities determining the whole and characterizing it."²⁵ There are numerous examples of merism phrases that do not refer to any kind of borders at all, such as the biblical phrases, "from Dan to Beer Sheba," which, as Zecharia Kallai points out, "is not to be taken as an indication of the boundaries of Israel's territories. Dan and Beer-sheba are

²¹ See Jeffery L. Townsend, "Fulfillment of the Land Promise in the Old Testament," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142 (1985): 320-337, Moshe Weinfeld. *The Promise of the Land: The Inheritance of Canaan by the Israelis* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), 52-75, and Zecharia Kallai, "The Patriarchal Boundaries, Canaan and the Land of Israel: Patterns and Application in Biblical Historiography," *Israel Exploration Journal* 47 (1997): 70.

²² Wazana, pg. 55-56

²³ *Ibid*, pg. 55-56

²⁴ Holwerda, David, *Jesus and Israel, One Covenant or Two?*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995) pg. 89-90

²⁵ Wazana, pg. 56

sacred centers in the north and south of the country, respectively, and the borders are, of course, beyond them.”²⁶

It is also important to note that spatial merisms, while making reference to specific physical and geographical locations, are not intended to demarcate borders. If the phrase “from Dan to Beer Sheba” was meant to literally represent the borders of the Promised Land, it would be nonsensical, as it would call for a straight line between the two locations. Obviously it is not meant to be taken literally. Instead, “spatial merisms express a whole territorial area. They do not refer to a line connecting two places, but designate a whole territorial *concept*, which the representing sites signify”²⁷ (emphasis mine). As we shall see, in the ancient Near Eastern context, when the spatial merisms include sites such as the Sea, or the Wilderness, the territorial concept being portrayed is universal in scope

In order to understand the significance of the difference between these two categories of descriptions, it is important to place both categories within their proper context. Whereas the “full border description” given in Numbers 34 is “connected to settlement and inheritance,” and is clearly referencing a real place, the other form, with the spatial merisms, is “found in the context of war and conquest, tied up with promises of victories over enemies.”²⁸ Within this context, they are meant to indicate not only the Promised Land, but the whole world. It is a universal claim that stretches across the whole earth. This is seen because of the use of the Sea, the Wilderness, and the Mountains as delineating the “cosmic” borders. For “in ancient Near Eastern traditions these are the areas depicting the very ends of the earth.”²⁹

Wazana demonstrates how these three areas, the Sea, the Wilderness, and the Mountains carried with them connotations of chaotic evil and lawlessness in the literature of the ancient Near East. This is evident in Babylonian, Ugaritic, and Hebrew scriptures. While true that in the biblical account these themes are dealt with in a different way, their influence is still felt even in some of the most well known biblical narratives, such as the story of Jonah, the Israelite’s desert wanderings, and the episode atop Mount Sinai. The tumultuous relationship between the ancient Hebrews and these elements of the greater ancient Near Eastern culture does not question the divinely-inspired nature of the scriptures they produced, but shows that the writers could not escape the cultural context they dwelt in, and it is reflected in their writings.

It seems safe to assume, with Wazana, that when these spatial merisms are used to describe the Promised Land, they were not intended to indicate the literal boundaries of the Land of Canaan. Instead, they were the boundaries of another Promised Land: the whole world. They were used to show the vast magnitude of God’s blessings and promise, which was to stretch to the ends of the earth. Spatial merisms are also related to the idea of military domination, and are similar in many ways to the type of terminology that was typical of Neo-Assyrian imperial propaganda. Thus, “The promise reflected in spatial merisms is not to be understood literally, nor should it be translated and transformed into border lines on maps. It is a promise of world dominion.”³⁰

Did this mean that God was pledging to Abraham that his descendants would conquer the entire world and rule over them by some imperialistic divine right, based on ethnicity? According to Yohanna Katanacho this is not the case. He explains that the ancient Near Eastern mentality of

²⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 57

²⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 56

²⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 63

²⁹ *Ibid*, pg. 64

³⁰ *Ibid*, pg. 71

empires or global kingdoms was “by nature multiethnic and not tribal or parochial.”³¹ He draws on the work of Kenton Sparks, who claims that “For Egyptians and Assyrians, identity was political and cultural, not ethnic, and linked with kingship, the king’s relationship to the deity, and the deity’s role in extending the national borders and the native empire to the ‘ends of the earth.’”³² God’s Kingdom, in the context of the promise, is one of justice, peace, and wholeness for the entire world.

From Jerusalem to the Ends of the Earth: The Universal Promise of the Kingdom of God

God’s true vision becomes clear when He speaks of the inhabitants of the Promised Land. Katanacho says they will be “as numerous as the sand of the sea or the stars of heaven, for God’s intentions were not to formulate fixed borders but to unite the ends of the world under the Abrahamic banner.” We see evidence for this in Psalms 2:8, which claims, “I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession”. Unquestionably, “God did not intend to isolate Abraham or his descendants from the rest of the world. On the contrary, he wanted a theocratic kingdom filled with Abraham’s children.”³³

Aside from pointing out the differences between the two types of descriptions of the Promised Land, the highly detailed description in Numbers 34, and the spatial merism descriptions that are largely symbolic, Wazana’s research also hints at the universal aspects of the spatial merism promises. When considering Theology of the Land, and bringing New Testament concerns into the picture, the catholic implications of God’s promise to Abraham become clear. Katanacho says that “The New Testament demonstrates that Christ is the Abrahamic seed in which and through which all the promises are fulfilled. Through Him Haaretz (Abrahamic) grows into Haaretz (Global).” He quotes Kenneth Bailey who, when commenting on Romans 4:13; says that “even though Paul knew the Septuagint well, he felt free to replace the word ‘ge,’ the Greek equivalent of Haaretz, with ‘cosmos’ or the whole world, in order to highlight the cosmic dimensions of the Abrahamic promises; Paul is clearly expanding the promises of land mentioned in Genesis 12:7 and 17:8.”³⁴

We see in Romans 4:13 the promise that Abraham and his seed will become the “heir of the world,” not through “the law, but through the righteousness of faith.” If this promise was to be fulfilled only through the law, then faith would be void and the promise invalid. In verse 16 we see that this promise is not only to those “who are of the law” but also “to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all.” Holwerda states, “For Paul, the promise to Abraham had a cosmic sweep, including not just the territory of Canaan but the entire inhabited world.”³⁵

Given the context of the rest of Romans 4, where Paul is writing about Abraham’s faith and about the covenant of circumcision, it is perhaps wise to rethink our traditional interpretation

³¹ Katanacho, Yohanna, “Christ is the Owner of Haaretz”, *Christian Scholar’s Review* Vol. XXXIV (Number 4) Summer 2005, pg. 438

³² Sparks, Kenton L., *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel: Prolegomena to the Study of Ethnic Sentiments and Their Expression in the Hebrew Bible* (Eisenbrauns, 1998) pg. 91

³³ Katanacho, Yohanna, “Christ is the Owner of Haaretz”, pg. 437

³⁴ Katanacho, pg. 440, quoting from Bailey, Kenneth E., “St. Paul’s Understanding of the Territorial Promise of God to Abraham,” *Theological Review: Near East School of Theology XV/1* (1994) pg. 60

³⁵ Holwerda, David, *Jesus and Israel*, pg. 103

of the promises God made to Abraham, to incorporate all who share the same faith as Abraham. I would like to suggest that in this instance Paul is not bringing anything radically new, but merely giving these promises their proper exegesis. Aside from the few instances of border descriptions, including the Numbers 34 description, which is set in the context of settlement, where God is giving specifically designated land to a specific people at a specific time, the rest of these passages, which are commonly taken to be border descriptions of the Promised Land, are actually promises to all the children of Abraham, the “father of us all.” For, according to Galatians 3:29, “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

The arrival of Jesus made this promise available to all. We see it from the very beginning of the New Testament, where Matthew gives the parentage of Jesus and surprisingly includes four women. Not just any women, and not “the four matriarchs of Judaism – Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah – but four women who are foreigners and not especially “holy”: Tamar and Rahab the Canaanites, Ruth the Moabite, and Bathsheba, the wife of a Hittite.” While Jesus was fulfilling the prophecy concerning His birth, and did come through the Jewish people in a Jewish context, it is clear that “As the people of God, Israel was always intended to be and to become a universal people, not limited by racial purity.”³⁶

The universal implications of God’s promise, evident from the start, are often ignored by those who choose to see in the promise any exclusive reading based on ethnicity or religion. However, “The Biblical data demonstrates that the concept of the borders of Haaretz was fluid since its inception and that God wanted to reach to the ends of the earth. This vision is only possible through Christ, for He alone is the legitimate owner of Haaretz, a place that is not made up of mere dirt but is a locale where righteousness and justice should prevail.”³⁷ Indeed, “The issue for the Bible, therefore, is not about borders, whether the dust of the Land of Israel is holy, or whether the Land has unique metaphysical properties.” The rabbinical tradition in Judaism understands, according to the biblical ideal, “the ascription of holiness to dust and walls as dangerous idolatries.”³⁸ What matters is the way God’s people act, not where they act.

According to T. Desmond Alexander, God’s plan for the earth from the beginning was to establish a dwelling place, where He could commune with His people. Because of mankind’s fall, through Adam and Eve, this became impossible. Because of our sin, His method had to change, but His plan remained the same. This is why we see a “fascinating and coherent progression from Eden to tabernacle to Jerusalem temple to church to New Jerusalem” in the biblical narrative.³⁹ These were all God’s means for attaining the end of being with His people, and from the outset He intended for this dwelling place to be universal and extend over the whole earth. For this reason, the tabernacle, God’s literal dwelling place on earth, was “Linked to both Eden and the cosmos,” and “as a model, conveys the idea that the whole earth is to become God’s dwelling place.”⁴⁰ Although Alexander’s approach is completely different than Wazana’s investigation of the Hebrew scriptures, they both reach the same conclusion: God’s purpose has always been to bless mankind, a blessing which has been expressed by the gift of land – the earth – to all of its inhabitants.

³⁶ Holwerda, pg. 35

³⁷ Katanacho, pg. 440

³⁸ Eugene Korn, *Land and Covenant*

³⁹ Alexander, T. Desmond, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, (Inter-Varsity Press, 2008) pg. 73

⁴⁰ Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, pg. 41-42

Based on this interpretation of the land promises in the Bible, it is tempting to strip the land of all importance. According to Manfred Kohl, the land is as important in the New Testament as in the Old, but in a radically different way. Because of the universalization of the promises to Abraham, the whole earth is now under promise. Therefore, when the phrase “the Kingdom of God” or “the Kingdom of Heaven” is used in the New Testament, it is referring to the whole earth, the land of new promise. “Since his father owned all the land in the first place,” Kohl writes, “Jesus went far beyond any narrow nationalistic local land concept.” Instead he focused on matters of the heart: forgiveness, love, and reaching out to your enemies in a transformative way. The Promised Land recedes in importance, for “In God’s kingdom nationalism, race, and gender do not matter, as demonstrated numerous times in Christ’s ministry, and the local land, as property – even the holy city of Jerusalem as place – becomes secondary.”⁴¹

God’s promise has been fulfilled through Jesus, and our understanding of it has shifted from the narrowly defined land of Canaan to the whole world. We find evidence of the universalization of the promises in Acts 1:8, where Jesus tells his disciples that they are to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” It is significant that this phrase echoes the spatial merisms used in the Old Testament to demark the contours of the Promised Land which, as we have already seen, were also universal in scope.

This shift is the fulfillment of the promise to bless the whole world found in Genesis 22:17-18, when God says to Abraham, “I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.” This was Paul’s mission, to take the message of God’s salvation throughout the world. He demonstrated this in Acts 17:22-32, when he spoke about God creating “from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth,” and the need for “all men everywhere to repent.” Paul goes on to indicate that all men are equal, Jew and Gentile, and all will have to account for their relationship with God through His son Jesus. Significantly, he spoke these words in the literal marketplace of ideas, the Areopagus of Athens.

Because the promise has been universalized to include all the children of God, the responsibilities that accompany it have also become the responsibilities of all who claim God as their father. Paul made this point in Ephesians 6:1-3, when he said, “Honor your father and mother which is the first commandment with promise: that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.” This verse makes reference to, and contrasts with, the fifth commandment given in Exodus 20:12, which commands the children of Israel to honor their fathers and mothers, “that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you.” For Paul to quote from this commandment, but to comment on the whole earth, is highly indicative of his theological position concerning the Land. Just as the whole earth, including the Promised Land, was part of God’s promise, so to is the promise meant for all of God’s children.

Many scholars have argued for a renewed reading of the Abrahamic promises, in which the land has importance only insofar as it is important historically, as “the patriarchs, the prophets, and the first Christians – even Christ, the Son of God – walked on it.” However, since the promises made to Abraham by God have now been extended to include the whole world, and

⁴¹ Kohl, Manfred Waldemar, “Towards a Theology of Land, A Christian Answer to the Hebrew-Arab Conflict.” *Phronesis, A Journal of Asian Theological Seminary and Alliance Graduate School*. Vol. 9.2 (2002) pp. 6-7

all believers in Christ the Messiah, continued focus on “obsolete territorial land covenant ignores to a large extent Christ’s new covenant of God’s Kingdom that through his spirit encompasses all believers everywhere.” Thus, it is understandable that Kohl would conclude, “From a biblical perspective (considering both Old and New Testaments), since the Christ event the promise of the territorial land no longer has any significance.”⁴²

It is true that the promises have been extended. However it is possible that in saying the actual, physical Promised Land has no more significance, we are overstating the case. Rather than completely spiritualizing the process of salvation away from the land, we find the centrality of the land has merely shifted in God’s redemptive work. Up until this point, anyone who wanted to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had to come to Jerusalem, to the temple. However, as Jesus made clear through his talk with the Samaritan women in John 4:20-24, his coming rendered the physical act of coming specifically to the temple irrelevant. However, this does not lessen the importance of the land. It simply means that *all* land on the whole earth is important, for it all contains the promise of redemptive potential.

It is important to remember that the Samaritans and the Jews considered each other enemies, and disagreed over the location of God’s true temple. When the Samaritan woman told Jesus “Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem,” she was expressing the old conception of the land, ownership, and right and wrong. However, Jesus told her “a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.” He makes it clear that “a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.”

The message is clear: God does not care who you are, or from where you worship Him, as long as you worship Him in spirit and in truth. This means that we are freed from the obligations of worshipping in Jerusalem at the temple. But we are still bound to this earth, this land, and our worship necessarily reaches God from our terrestrial position.

The trauma of exile from the land was real and its pain is felt in the prose of the prophets. However this was not the end of the story, for the Promised Land was never the final destination for the seed of Abraham. The covenant in Genesis 12 and in subsequent promise passages, occurs in a context, within the project to restore humanity back to the garden. We are given a picture of what this will entail in Rev. 22:1-3, where the New Jerusalem is described as having a river flowing with the water of life, which feeds into the Tree of life, which bears fruit all year long and has leaves that bring “healing for the nations.” In Hebrews 11, Abraham’s faith is contextualized, and he is lauded in verses 9-10, for dwelling in tents in the land of promise, and “waiting for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”

This same redemptive future is seen in Micah 4:1-5, when the end of days is described. Micah speaks of peace between all the nations in verse 3, when “They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears in to pruning hooks.” And in verse 5, “All the nations may walk in the name of their gods.” This is a “startling claim of theological pluralism,” for we see that the Kingdom of God “is a place of social and religious diversity, not a monolithic Jewish society where everyone calls God by the same name. Jerusalem is a place where Jews and Gentiles coexist in harmony with each other, respecting each other, and worshipping alongside each other in faithfulness to their respective spiritual traditions.”⁴³

⁴² Kohl, “Towards a Theology of Land,” pg. 11

⁴³ Korn, *Land and Covenant*

This wonderful vision is directed towards the future, but there is a very actual and applicable aspect of restoring the Kingdom of God, which is connected with the land. For the Kingdom of Heaven is not only concerned with the salvation of souls (though that is a part of it). There is also a very grounded, earthly social dimension, which is connected with humanity's first rebellion. As soon as Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden, we see the first murder take place when Cain killed his brother Abel. The process of making our way back to the garden, to the Kingdom of God, entails reconciliation, living in peace with our neighbors, reaching out to the poor, to the widows and orphans, and even to our enemies. God intended to bless mankind with the gift of land, but when we are unable or unwilling to share it with each other, it becomes a source of strife.

Land still matters! Many believe that the land is no longer a part of our relationship with God, since the promise to Abraham casts a wider net and includes all believers. This is not true. The blessing of the Promised Land has been stretched over the whole earth, stretched far but not thin. The whole earth is filled with promise, and it matters how we handle the gift we have been given. The land itself "waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed," when it will be "liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." (Romans 8:19-21). In fact, when the scriptures are considered, the land holds much agency, is hardly objectified, and often takes on anthropomorphic characteristics. The land groans from birth-pains, (Romans 8:22), waits eagerly (Romans 8:23), needs rest (Leviticus 25:5), and vomits out sinners who defile it (Leviticus 18:25-28). Far from being merely the location upon which humans act, the land is a dynamic entity that responds to our actions and behavior. It is, in fact, a character in the biblical narrative.

We must reverse the trend among certain interpretations of Christianity towards spiritualization "in which we focus on the transcendent Promiser without taking responsibility for the gift given."⁴⁴ The moral and ethical behavior of the children of Israel had a great impact on the land, and this is no less true for us. If we are willing to repent and humble ourselves, God said "I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sins and heal their land." (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Even though God's original promise has been extended to include the whole earth, the Holy Land and the holy city of Jerusalem remain important. They are a part of the promise just as is every other spot on the earth, no more important, but also no less important. The Holy Land and the Holy city of Jerusalem remain a highly suggestive and emblematic symbol for the rest of the earth and for all of humanity. For if we are called to reconcile with our enemies, to love God and love truth, to live in peace and in joy of our deliverance in order to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven, we can judge how far we are from reaching these goals by observing the Holy Land. That this particular spot of land should be so filled with hatred, violence, and rebellion against God is a telling sign of how far we still have to go, and how vested the forces of evil are in preventing mankind's return to the garden.

From Exile to the Garden: The Land of Milk and Honey

References to the Promised Land in the Bible are many, and while, as we have seen, some quantitatively describe the borders, others are more concerned with describing the land qualitatively. It is for this reason that we often see the land promised by God described as a land

⁴⁴ Brueggemann, pg. 204-205

flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:8, 17, 13:5; Leviticus 20:24-26, 22:4; Numbers 13:27, 14:8; Deut. 6:3, 11:8-12, 26:8-9, 27:2-3, 31:20; Joshua 5:6; Jeremiah 11:5, 32:22; Ezekiel 20:5-6, 15). Typically, this phrase is taken to be a description of the land of Canaan, the phrase “milk and honey” as a “metaphor meaning all good things – God’s blessings.” While some try and draw a literal connection between the land of Canaan and flowing milk and honey, most understand it “to be hyperbolically descriptive of the land’s richness.”⁴⁵

Throughout the ancient Near East, both milk and honey were symbolic elements, representing fertility in a sensual, erotic way. This is seen in the Song of Solomon, “where the fertility figure of milk and honey suggests the paradise of a woman’s body. By extension, a land flowing with milk and honey becomes metaphoric of a divine female figure.” Astarte, the Babylonian goddess of sexuality, fertility, maternity, love and war was often seen as the source of these fertile blessings, and her cult of worship seems to have provided the backdrop to the Biblical imagery of milk and honey.⁴⁶

More than simply indicating fertile soil, in the context of the biblical world, milk and honey were also used to describe the otherworldly richness of paradise. Indeed, in many ancient Near Eastern traditions, “the image of an ideal place flowing with milk and honey has long been associated with paradise.” Even in Islam we find traces of this association, for example the paradise described by Allah in the Koran, which is depicted as “the eternal garden of joy... possesses not only rivers of pure water and wine, but ‘rivers of fresh milk’ and ‘rivers of pure honey.’”⁴⁷

Given the context from which it arose, and what we have learned about merism phrases, there is reason to doubt that mention of a land flowing with milk and honey is making reference to an earthly place at all. The land of Canaan already had certain very specific and known elements associated with it, the famous *Seven Species* seen in Deuteronomy 8:8, where Canaan is described as “a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig tree, pomegranates, olive oil and honey.”

In fact, in Numbers 16:13-14, we find convincing evidence that “flowing with milk and honey” was merely a figure of speech, when the children of Israel rebelled against Moses in the wilderness. Korah spoke out and said “Isn’t it enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness? And now you also want to lord it over us! Moreover, you haven’t brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Do you want to treat these men like slaves? No, we will not come!” Significantly, the phrase “flowing with milk and honey” is used to describe both Egypt *and* the Promised Land. Even Egypt, where they had been slaves, seemed like a Promised Land to them from the perspective of the wilderness.

It makes more sense to think of this phrase as a literary, poetic description of an idyllic paradise, rather than a specific location on earth. There are radical implications to this interpretation when applied to all the many places in the scriptures where we find this phrase. However, when we remember the universalization of God’s promise, it is clear: the land flowing with milk and honey is not Canaan, or Egypt, or any other terrestrial place; it is a future return to the garden as the fulfillment of God’s promises.

The land that was promised is not only flowing with milk and honey, but it is also unlike “the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you planted your seed and irrigated it by

⁴⁵ Jonathan Cohen, *Why Milk and Honey*, <http://www.uhme.sunysb.edu/surgery/m&h.html> (accessed 29/6/2009).

⁴⁶ Cohen, *Why Milk and Honey*

⁴⁷ Cohen

foot as in a vegetable garden.” (Deuteronomy 11:10). It is reminiscent of the original paradise, the Garden of Eden, before man’s relationship with the land was changed by sin, and labor was required for the land to be fertile and produce.⁴⁸ Although the Promised Land represented a symbolic return to the garden, it was not the final fulfillment of God’s plan. For “although the land of Canaan offers the possibility of a return to Edenic fruitfulness (cf. Gen. 13:10), it continues as an imperfect environment. At best it is a foretaste of something better still to come.”⁴⁹ The true return to the garden only becomes possible with the establishment of the New Jerusalem.

The Land as the Location of Reconciliation

To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want.

- Wendell Berry

The land, the physical earth, has to become a location for reconciliation to take place. This reconciliation is two-fold, as it needs to occur between man and God, and between man and his neighbor. This reconciliation must take place on the land, because this is the precise location where sin came into the world. Land is the scene of the crime, the crime of man’s rebellion against God. The land must be transformed into a place where atonement and reconciliation can happen. If man and God are to be reconciled, the land is where this reconciliation must take place. The restoration of this relationship will also have an effect on the land itself. In 2 Chronicles 7:14 God says, “if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” It is our duty to submit to God, and to confess to him. This is the only way for true healing to come to the land.

We are also called to reconcile with our fellow man. The example of the prophets is clear: when Amos calls for justice to “roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:24), he is commenting on how we treat each other. As we have already seen, mistreating each other, and engaging in unjust and unrighteous actions, have severe consequences for the land. For example, because King Saul tried to annihilate the Gibeonites, even after the Israelites had sworn to spare them, God punished the children of Israel with three years of famine. God’s punishment was intended for the Israelites, but the land suffered as well, for it became dry and barren. Only when King David restored the relationship with the Gibeonites, and gave them justice, was the punishment lifted and the land healed. (2 Samuel 21:1-6)

⁴⁸ Unfortunately a full treatment of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that this interpretation has been commented on by others as well, from theologians of the early church until today. See for example Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, III, Lactanius, *Divine Institutes*, VII, Gregory of Nyssa, *On Baptism*, PG, XLVI, Richard A. Freud, *The Land Which Bled Forth it’s Bounty: An Exilic Image of the Land of Israel*, Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament, Vol 13, Issue 2 (1999) 284-297, Terence E. Fretheim, *The Reclamation of Creation: Redemption and Law in Exodus*, Interpretation Union Theological Seminary, Vol 45 (1991) 354-365, and to a lesser extent Christian Cryder, *A Biblical-Theological Context for the Song of Songs: As Seen Through the Lenses of Creation, the Fall, and Redemption*, Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Vol 41 (1973) 30-48.

⁴⁹ Alexander, pg. 42

By his life, Jesus made reconciliation possible for mankind. The act of incarnation brought man back into relationship with God and with his fellow man. This act is inseparable from the land, because God became a man, and man comes from the earth. Through Jesus we regain all that we lost through our original sin. Adam, the name of the first man, is closely connected to the Hebrew word for land, "מְהָאָד". Our sin is rooted in the land, but so is our salvation. For Jesus came as the second Adam, and “just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous,” (Romans 5:19). While our sin brought death to man and to the earth, Jesus brings life. Mankind becomes a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17), and the land is recast as the “new heaven and new earth” (Revelations 21:1).

The land has felt the consequences of our sin over and over, especially in our mistreatment of each other. We see this in the first murder, when Cain killed his brother Abel. God heard Abel’s blood “crying to me from the earth” (Genesis 4:10). However, just as the land has seen man shed so much blood through injustice, it was also the place where Christ shed his blood on our behalf. And just as the earth has been the location of so much sin, conflict, hatred, greed, jealousy, and murder, it is also the location of reconciliation. God’s vision for us includes the stages of reconciliation, confession, repentance, restoration, and justice, and it takes place within the context of the land. For “Surely his salvation is nigh them that fear him; that glory may dwell in our land. Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven” (Psalms 85:9-11). Land is the paradoxical location where reconciliation grows in the same ground as conflict.

Of course the ultimate reconciliation is only to be found in the incarnation of Jesus. He is the Truth and through Him all things are possible. He has redeemed mankind, and the earth, through His death, but more importantly, through His life. “For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (Romans 5:10-11).

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the need for reconciliation is urgent. Hatred and violence have only grown more intense over the past 60 years of strife. In a significant way, this conflict sums up well the destructive result our sin has on each other and on the land. Indeed, the conflict is essentially about who will control the land, and what will be done with the ‘others.’

Looking forward to reconciliation, one of the most important aspects is repentance/confession. Without first acknowledging our own faults, and taking responsibility for them, no progress can be made. Willingly admitting your part in the conflict, taking ownership of the wrong you have done and the pain you have caused, allows the other side to feel that their pain has been acknowledged. They can then offer forgiveness. Chaim Gans puts it well: “only an understanding of the justice of Zionism that includes a recognition of the right of the Palestinian objection, and only Palestinian recognition of the justice of their opposition to Zionism that also includes recognition of its justified elements, can lead to a stable resolution of the conflict.” For, “An insistence by either party on only its own right, out of a total unwillingness to also see the justice of the other side, will perpetuate the conflict or cause its resolution to be an imposed and

unstable one.”⁵⁰ In this conflict, there is much wrong that has been done on both sides. The time has come to openly and frankly discuss it, and take responsibility for it.

In order to fully understand the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, an understanding of its origins must first be attained. The Jewish people believe they have a justified claim for establishing their own state, which the Zionist movement based on “the right of every nation to self-determination, on the Jews' historical connection to the land of Israel and, as the tipping point, the persecution of the Jews in the 19th and 20th centuries.” The problem is that this expression of national self-determination came at the expense of the Palestinian people. The suffering of the Jewish people was primarily located in Europe, and “since we are speaking of a right that is justified in being realized in the Land of Israel because of the persecution of the Jews in Europe, then the relevant European nations should have incurred the lion's share of its price. The United Nations Partition Plan did not give expression to this.”⁵¹ Instead, the Palestinians were forced to pay the full price for a debt they had not incurred.

Although it began earlier, we can take 1948, the year the State of Israel gained independence, as a starting point of the conflict. The most painful and long-lasting “sin” committed by the Israelis was the expulsion of Palestinians from their homes. Although there has been much debate as to the exact circumstances under which Palestinians came to leave their villages and homes during the war, it is clear that “the refugee problem was caused by attacks by Jewish forces on Arab villages and towns and by the inhabitants’ fear of such attacks, compounded by expulsions, atrocities, and rumors of atrocities – and by the crucial Israeli Cabinet decision in June 1948 to bar a refugee return.”⁵² This first action, based on the premise that Israel must be a Jewish state, has led to other abuses, and “obsessive, excessive, measures about terrorism, the endless fencing in, the interrogations, the legal justification of torture...the discriminations against Israeli Palestinians, the fear and contempt, the bellicosity,” all aimed at the Palestinians, in Israel and in other countries, who challenge this vision by their very existence.⁵³

The list of “sins” is long for the other side as well. The Arab nations have been guilty of perpetuating the conflict in a number of ways, and for using it as an excuse for their own mismanagement. For example, they reasoned that “given the perpetual state of emergency caused by Israel, such matters [education, freedom of speech, unpoliticized civil society], which could only be the result of long-range planning and reflection, were luxuries that were ill-afforded.”⁵⁴ There is also their “wholesale persecution of communities, preeminently but not exclusively the Jewish ones,” whose age-old presence was “suddenly thought to be dangerous.” This led to a deluge of Jewish refugees, many of whom ended up in Israel. We must also not forget their “scandalously poor treatment of the [Palestinian] refugees,” where they have suffered much persecution and neglect, and have “remained confined in hideous quarantine for almost two generations.”⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Gans, Chaim, *Palestinians were made to pay an unfair price*, taken from Haaretz website, June 27, 2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1094908.html>.

⁵¹ Gans, Chaim, *The Palestinians were made to pay an unfair price*

⁵² Morris, Benny, *Revisiting the Palestinian exodus of 1948*, taken from *The War for Palestine, Rewriting the History of 1948*, Edited by Eugene L. Rogan and Avi Shlaim, Afterward by Edward W. Said, (Cambridge University Press, 2001) pg. 38

⁵³ Said, Edward W., *Afterward: the consequences of 1948*, taken from *The War for Palestine*, pg. 213

⁵⁴ Said, Edward W., *Afterward: the consequences of 1948*, pg. 208

⁵⁵ Said, pg. 209

Even though they have been the victim of tragedy and criminally unfair treatment, the Palestinian people's conduct in the conflict has been far from guilt-free. In addition to accepting the murder of innocent civilians as a legitimate form of self-defense, they have also been guilty of self-pity, victimization, and demonization of the Israeli people. Palestinians have also failed to recognize the very real historical and spiritual attachment the Jewish people have to the Land, and they need to find a way to acknowledge the history of Jewish suffering. This issue has usually been completely avoided by Palestinians because they feel as though they have been wrongly victimized by Jews as a result of the Holocaust that had nothing to do with them. If Palestinians are to find real reconciliation with Israelis, they have to develop understanding and empathy for the trauma the Jewish people have suffered throughout history. Palestinians also need to realize that just as the traumatic events of the *Nakba* have affected them, the trauma of the Holocaust continues to have a very strong and lasting effect on the collective psyche of the Jewish people.

Unfortunately there are many instances where both sides have failed to live up to the biblical standards of how to treat the "other" living among you, one of the qualifications for residing on the land. Leviticus 24:22 is explicit; "You are to have the same law for the foreigner and the native-born. I am the Lord your God." Israelis and Palestinians have both fallen short of this standard, and the Christian minority has often suffered persecution at the hands of the two majorities, Jewish and Muslim. As we have seen in the Tanach, there are explicit guidelines detailing the way foreigners should be treated. In the Qur'an we also find suras commanding that foreigners be treated fairly and with respect, (see 2:62; 3:64; 3:84; 5:48; 4:36-37; 76:8-9). The Qur'an, which places hospitality as a very important value, also respects the knowledge of the People of the Book, saying of Jews and Christians, "If thou wert in doubt as to what We have revealed unto thee, then ask those who have been reading the Book from before thee (Sura 10:94).

However, in both Rabbinical Judaism and in Islam, the holy scriptures are actually less important than oral traditions and interpretations of the law, for all practical purposes, because the scriptures are seen and understood through the lenses of these interpretive texts. Thus the *Talmud*, the guidelines of *Halacha*, the *Hadith* and *Shari'ah* law, are often referred to more than the Tanach and the Qur'an. This is not intended as a critique of these faith systems, there is much that is good about them, for indeed, "The Orthodox Jew embracing the 'yoke of the law' as being in itself a liberating and fulfilling experience is matched by the Muslim regard for the *Shari'ah*."⁵⁶ However when it comes to treatment of the "other," these guidelines ignore the tolerance and equality found in both the Tanach and the Qur'an, and in some cases encourage discrimination..

For Muslims, the "Holy Land" is important primarily because Jerusalem is Islam's third most sacred city.⁵⁷ Once it was conquered, the land became part of the *waqf*—holy Muslim territory. Islam has a specific perspective towards both the *waqf* and non-Muslims. While the latter may live in Muslim countries, they are not considered to be equals and must submit to Islamic authority as *dhimmi*.⁵⁸ Non-Muslims contaminate Muslim sovereignty, and under *Shari'a* law, they are subject to a different court system than Muslims. This was true for Christians and Jews who lived under Ottoman authority, and is also written into the Palestinian

⁵⁶ Brown, L. Carl, *Religion and State, The Muslim Approach to Politics*, (Columbia University Press, 2000) pg. 25

⁵⁷ Hasson, I., "Muslim Literature in Praise of Jerusalem: Fada'il Bayt al-Maqdis," *Jerusalem Cathedral*, Jerusalem, 1981, 168–84.

⁵⁸ Ye'or, B., *Islam and Dhimmitude*, (Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002).

National Authority's constitution, or Basic Law, which states in articles IV, "Islam is the official religion in Palestine. Respect for the sanctity of all other divine religions shall be maintained. The principles of Islamic *Shari'a* shall be a principal source of legislation."⁵⁹ There is tension in these two statements, for while respect for other religions is found in the Qur'an, is not found in *Shari'a* law. These two opposing principles must be reconciled, and Palestinian Christians watch the development of this issue with great interest.

Because of the ethno-national character of the Zionist movement, it has also actively pursued a policy of excluding non-Jews from the national, social, and political life in Israel, a clear violation of the biblical command to treat foreigners with respect. Significantly, this exclusion has taken place through the medium of land. In order to preserve the Jewish character of Israel, the state has placed "severe barriers...on Arab acquisition of land." This has been done primarily through "the Jewish National Fund (the JNF is an agency of the World Zionist Organization) [which] established formal standards officially forbidding the leasing of its lands to non-Jews. Because most lands were actually owned by the JNF, it, in effect, acted as a subcontractor of the state – the Israel Land Authority – for land allocations and leasing."⁶⁰ This was only part of the broader Zionist push to legally give "precedence to Jewish immigrants, even Jews who were only potential immigrants, over indigenous Palestinian citizens in almost every sphere." The "apartheid-style system of land transactions" was part of the system of laws which "defined most of the land for sale in Israel as the exclusive and perpetual property of the Jewish people."

This exclusivist land policy is especially problematic when it is remembered that nearly all of the land was confiscated from the Palestinians. Almost "all Palestinian-owned land was taken by the government and turned into state land, to be sold or leased only to Jews. By the end of the confiscation frenzy and the formulation of the policy legalizing it, 92 per cent of the country's land had fallen into Jewish hands." The amount of land confiscated was staggering: the Palestinian owned land within what was to become the State of Israel was around 4.6 million dunams immediately before the 1948 war and by 1950 this amount was reduced to half a million dunams.⁶¹

In spite of the many instances of injustice perpetrated by both sides, as well as issues separating us, the central question now is not who is right and who is wrong. We cannot ignore history, or its consequences, they must be dealt with. We are, however, called to deal with the situation as it is now, and to make peace. "Genuine reconciliation requires facing historic truths, taking responsibility for past injustices, and framing future relations in terms of justice rather than power."⁶² As John Paul Lederach states, reconciliation has to be the place where the four

⁵⁹ 2003 Amended Basic Law, Title One, Article 4, points 1 and 2, taken from <http://www.palestinianbasiclaw.org/> (accessed 18/12/2009).

⁶⁰ Kimmerling, Baruch & Migdal, Joel S., *The Palestinian People, A History*, (Harvard University Press, 2003) pg. 194

⁶¹ Pappé, Ilan, *A History of Modern Palestine, One Land, Two Peoples*, (Cambridge University Press, 2004) pg. 160-161

⁶² Rouhana, Nadim N., "Zionism's Encounter with the Palestinians, The Dynamics of Force, Fear, and Extremism" from *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict, History's Double Helix*, Edited by Robert I. Rotberg (Indiana University Press, 2006) pg. 127. Rouhana goes on to discuss the asymmetry of the balance of power between the Israelis and Palestinians, which complicates efforts at reconciliation. This is not the appropriate setting to deal with this issue extensively, but it is important to mention, for the imbalance of power also comes into play during the discussion on Theology of the Land, for "the more powerful party does not usually have sufficient incentives to engage in a genuine reconciliation process that would entail painful concessions and painful self-discovery." pg. 127

elements from Psalms 85:10 meet, “Truth and mercy have met together, peace and justice have kissed.”

First, in an overall sense, reconciliation promotes an encounter between the open expression of the painful past, on the one hand, and the search for the articulation of a long-term, interdependent future, on the other hand. Second, reconciliation provides a place for truth and mercy to meet, where concerns for exposing what has happened *and* for letting go in favor of renewed relationship are validated and embraced. Third, reconciliation recognizes the need to give time and place to both justice and peace, where redressing the wrong is held together with the envisioning of a common, connected future.⁶³

This is only possible through Christ, for “He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation” (Ephesians 2:14). This wall of separation is both the wall of sin that separates us from God, and the walls we build through our sin, which separate us from each other. Christ has destroyed that dichotomy and He came to “reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity” (Ephesians 2:16). Through Jesus, we are all brothers and sisters, and we are important parts of the same body. “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:19-20).⁶⁴ In this way, the path of reconciliation, we can reverse our original disobedience, and begin a process of true reconciliation in the land, allowing the earth to “once more become a dwelling place shared by God and humanity.”⁶⁵

Having peace and reconciliation here in the Promised Land is important in a symbolic sense, for if it is possible here, it is possible for the whole earth, “As the dwelling place of God on earth, the temple-city of Jerusalem is in miniature what God intends for the whole world.”⁶⁶ We are called to be His witnesses, and proclaim His peace “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). No matter what your view or interpretation of God’s covenant, whether you believe that it refers to one group of people, or to all believers in the God of Abraham, there is no way around the moral and ethical guidelines that accompany God’s incredible promise. We are instructed to pray to God, asking that His will would be done, “on earth, as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). With heaven as our model, we have to strive towards an earth that is a manifestation of the Kingdom of God, where all partake in the blessings and promise of God’s gifts to mankind.

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⁶³ Lederach, John Paul, *Building Peace, Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, (United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997) pg. 31

⁶⁴ Robert H. Suh makes a number of very important and interesting observations on the similarities between Ezekiel 37 and Ephesians 2 in this article “The Use of Ezekiel 37 in Ephesians 2”, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Dec. 2007, 50, 4, Proquest Religion. He claims that Paul “may have constructed his argument [in Ephesians 2], based on Ezekiel 37 in that he not only borrowed the material that is found in Ezekiel 37 but that he also applied it to the new community of Christ.” Suh, pg 716. This connection gains significance for our conversation here when it is remembered that the famous passage in Ezekiel 37 concerning the dry bones is frequently used in Christian and secular Zionist circles in connection with the restoration of the Jewish people to the Land.

⁶⁵ Alexander, pg. 14

⁶⁶ Alexander, pg. 45

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