

A Theology of the Land: New Testament appropriateness?

The problem stated:

In developing a theology for the land there is a numerical level of quotation from the Old Testament that far outweighs the level of quotation from the New Testament. This is primarily because the OT is concerned with land promises to a specific people, and when we come to the NT we do not centre in on an ethnic people but a faith community who have their citizenship in heaven and are dispersed throughout the whole earth. Given that Israel has a unique covenant relationship to God, and so to the land, there are genuine questions as to how OT Scriptures can be applied to those who live after the Easter Event. In the light of the marked difference a common response is 'how does land teaching line up with the NT?'. This is sometimes further expressed along the lines of: 'the NT equivalent of geography is demography', thus holding to the perspective that a trans-national body of people of faith is the only relevant factor.

The Old and New in relationship: general comments

As believers we affirm one Bible but two testaments – that the Father of our Lord Jesus is the God of Israel. We do not deny the OT canonical authority but we can only apply OT Scriptures rightly in the light of the cross.

There are two simplistic approaches to the inter-relationship of the two testaments:

- ♦ Either, that OT applies except for what the NT **repeals** (this is typical of covenant theology and also of Reconstructionism). Here the emphasis is on continuity, and a strong place is given to the continuity of Israel and the land. This approach would either lead us to say that land issues continue and are therefore applicable today, or that they were only ever applicable to Israel in the OT so have no application beyond that context today.
- ♦ Or, that none of the OT applies except what the NT **repeats** (this is typical of classic Dispensationalism). Fee and Stuart (although not Dispensationalists) take this approach: 'Only that which is explicitly renewed from the Old Testament law can be considered part of the New Testament "law of Christ".' (*How to read the Bible for all its worth*, London: Scripture Union, 1988, p. 139.) Here the emphasis is on a discontinuity between the Testaments. This approach would lead us to be fairly dismissive of land issues, although an appeal might be made to Acts 15 and the requirements placed on the NT believers there.

We must acknowledge that there is both continuity and discontinuity between the testaments, and once we step beyond the obvious categories of animal sacrifices and the food laws the challenge is of what continues and what is abrogated.

The above two (opposite) approaches have the following weaknesses:

If the former were correct (basically, all the OT applies) it would logically lead to accepting a prohibition against most modern farming practices and clothing fashions, according to Deuteronomy 22:9-12. But if the latter were correct (with an emphasis on discontinuity) this would lead to the acceptance of sorcerers, mediums and spiritists, in spite of Deuteronomy 18:9-13. In response to the above two approaches it is not surprising that John Goldingay says that he is 'unconvinced by either wing of the argument, and notes that neither is wholly consistent in working out the implications of how the OT laws do or do not apply.' (*Themelios*, 18.2, page 17.)

The problem with the above two views is that the NT does not specifically address the issues quoted in the illustrations. Yet Paul said of the (Old Testament) Scriptures that they were 'useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness' (2 Tim. 3:16).

Likewise over land issues there does not seem to be a direct addressing of the subject, yet the OT Scriptures have to be looked at to help us. In doing so we are acknowledging that the OT Scriptures are the foundational narrative that shapes the world-view of the NT writers. In this respect we note that the Hebrew world-view always had a future for the earth, or in other words, salvation always had an earthly outworking. This aspect clearly continues into the NT with such passages of eschatological hope as Romans 8 or Revelation 21. (By way of contrast the only passage that might seem to indicate a possible destruction of the earth is the *apocalyptic* one in 2 Peter 3.) So although there might be no direct addressing of land issues in the NT, we cannot, and must not, polarise the two Scriptures as if one speaks of a promised land and the other of an other-worldly heaven. Both address passionately the coming of God's glory to the whole earth. Both have earthly concerns.

Neither of the above approaches ('repeal / repeat') are therefore adequate and a more suitable response is to say that '***all of the OT applies to Christians, but none of it applies apart from its fulfilment in Christ***'. By so stating the OT is not viewed as, either, simply temporal and irrelevant, nor, as permanent and directly binding, but we are forced into a Christocentric interpretation.

(It is also worth noting that the common approach of dividing the law into three parts: ceremonial, civil and moral is not really a viable possibility. This holds that Christ fulfilled the ceremonial, the church is not a state so the civil law does not apply, thus conveniently leaving the moral law as eternally binding. This falls down on a number of grounds but particularly because neither Jews nor the

context. Stewardship means that those of another ethnic background are not excluded (that is nationalism) but that all who come to help develop a place to yield up its godly fruit are welcome.

- ♦ Contest over land for that land to yield up the specific gift deposit that is there. This gives us an explanation as to why some wells are contested over by those who are believers and those committed to occultic practices. Glastonbury is a good example, being a place of church planting and 24 hour prayer in the early centuries of the Celtic church. What is there that can be harnessed?

The church then is called to live in such a way that it does not pollute but cleanses the land, and then harnesses that land for the will of God. This is not with the belief that we can produce a utopia, nor even a Christian nation in the sense of a covenant people that is ethnically based, but so that somewhere there is an evidence of the renewal of all things already beginning to be demonstrated. It is in order that a piece of geography is, in measure, manifesting ahead of time the Christological and eschatological blessing of the ultimate new earth.

The concept of specific geographical boundaries that need to be filled up with the presence of God, I suggest, is rooted in creation, where God set the boundaries and filled them. National and geographical boundaries are within the sovereign purposes of God and that is the setting where the church finds itself planted. The death of Christ is for the ultimate redemption of the whole of creation, and the call on the church today is to manifest something of that redemption in the geographies where it is placed. Thus I suggest with the voices of creation, the cross and the eschaton all calling for this world to be touched, it seems that the church must both look for the ultimate liberation of the whole earth – and live as a transnational faith community; and live within the creation / fallen geographical boundaries and be the redemptive presence for those places in a specific way.

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apostolic church read the OT that way. The Mosaic law was always seen as a coherent unity.)

So we take the OT as part of our Christian canonical Scriptures, and will have to do some work – which will be Christocentric work – on deciding what is continuous and what is discontinuous. The OT – which is after all the early Christian Scriptures – is relevant in our discussions and we will have to decide how appropriate its teaching on land is to us who live the other side of the cross, and who have not been brought into covenant with God as part of a national people.

Two points to note here that indicate where I am headed:

- 1) *Land issues are not abrogated in the New Testament, and*
- 2) *Although the Christian's primary citizenship is certainly not national, but there is a national identity as the Christian holds dual citizenship.*

Theological issues related to continuity / discontinuity

- ♦ **There are issues that are not creational but are specific to Israel**

The above statement has a direct bearing on how we approach much of OT law. Laws related to seed sown in a field, or what clothing is permitted to be worn, or laws relating to diet are not based in creation, but in Israel's unique relationship to Yahweh. These are abrogated through the cross – although we might still want to learn from them and see an application for them, but we cannot make them binding as law on the Christian community. The examples cited are easy to bring to a conclusion, but the issues become more difficult when the instructions to Israel have a creation foundation to them. It is these two aspects – covenant and creation that make Israel unique.

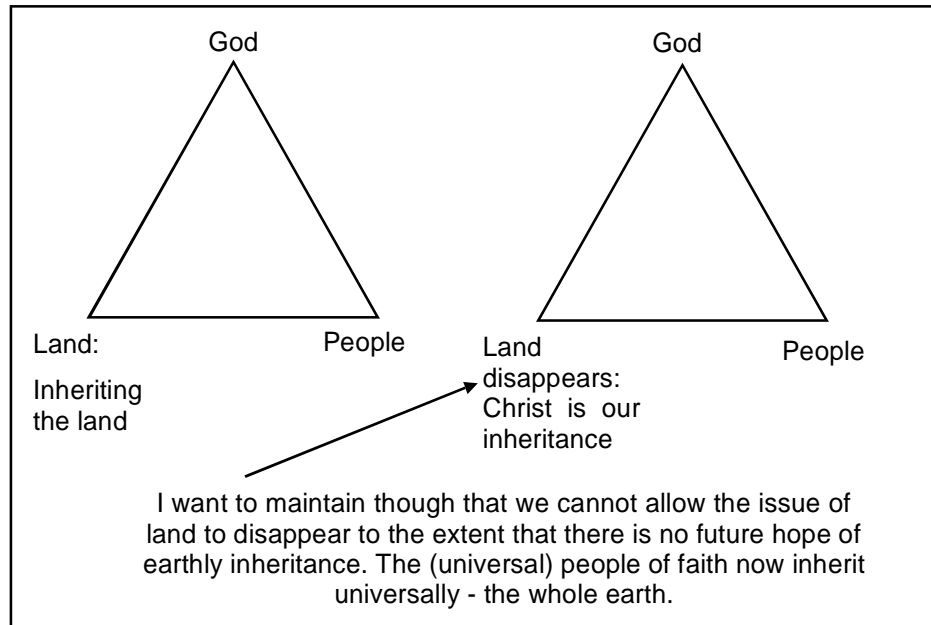
- ♦ **Israel's uniqueness: both a faith and an ethnic community**

Only Israel, as an ethnic group, has a covenant with God. No nation can claim that today. In covenant God takes the initiative so there can be no 'Christian nation' as such. However the above comment on Israel also needs to be modified for they are not simply at heart an ethnic group, but a faith community, in that, e.g., Ruth the Moabite has an inheritance in the land, among the people, and she even becomes an ancestor of the Jewish Messiah.

This then is where we find the uniqueness of Israel. They are a faith community – hence a foreshadowing of the church, but also a racial / social unit thus being normative of any national unit. Both are applicable. We can see Paul wrestling with this issue of who is really Israel. Not all (ethnic) Israel are (faith) Israel and yet they (ethnic Israel) are loved because of the Patriarchs (Rom. 9-11).

When Israel is understood to be a faith community this has led to a right emphasis on the fulfilment of the promises of God in Christ, and a corresponding

emphasis on discontinuity between Old and New Testaments. So Chris Wright has used the triangle of 'God – people – land' as a paradigm for understanding the covenant relationship between God and the people. When this paradigm is brought to bear on the New Covenant specific land disappears as it finds its fulfilment in Christ (for example in *God's People in God's Land*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1990). If however, this is taken to an extreme there is the danger of the hope for creation disappearing. In the NT there is an eschatological 'triangle' of 'God – people – whole earth'. (See the diagrams below:)



◆ **Issues relating to Israel as a model nation**

Israel therefore reflects two images. The first is that as a fore-shadow of the church, thus indicating that there only ever has been one people of God: those in covenant relationship. The Israel of fulfilment is the Israel that is found at the feet of Israel's king. This Israel is the Israel that is marked by the reception of the Spirit of God. So when we use this image of Israel as a people of hope, a people longing for the inbreaking of the kingdom, there is an emphasis on discontinuity.

However, Israel is also a nation that is to be a model for all other nations. This is Israel as rooted in creation: Israel as the answer to Adam, and Adamic humanity.

2. Then there are concepts that can be developed from a creation theology

- ◆ If God has placed keys to discovering himself and his nature throughout all of creation, then it is not at all unlikely that there are aspects of his nature that are more revealed in one place than another. So, for example, it seems likely that Adam and Eve were to discover all they could of God through tilling the garden, working the soil, and in their fellowship with God after their day's work to reflect back on what had been revealed, and that once the garden had yielded up what had been hidden that they were to move on to the next geography. In the next location they were to discover other aspects of this creator God. Through their work they were to fill up all of creation with the presence of God.
- ◆ If this is part of the creation purpose then the very geographies of our world are intended to yield different aspects of understanding of God. Perhaps different places become conducive for certain expressions of God more than others. This might mean that there are places, which once worked over, might manifest, for example, more of the power of God than other places. By this I am not meaning something as crude as the deposit to be discovered is literally in the earth, but that a certain place might be more 'shaped' to release one aspect more than another.
- ◆ This would also give meaning to the thrust to take the message to the ends of the earth. So that the tribes of the earth can hear and bring their stewardship gift with them into the new heaven and new earth. Their stewardship being both their ethnic distinctiveness, but connected to their geographical setting.
- ◆ If we followed this through we would then be able to talk of the redemptive gift of a place. This redemptive gift would not simply be tied to the people, nor just to the city, but also in some ways to the land.
- ◆ This would, in turn, raise a question about the existence of places. Did God always intend there to be, for example, a London? If so what was the London he intended: the 'new London' that he desires to come down. If so, we need to be working now for the London that God intends, the London that will come through the fire into the fullness of creation.

In conclusion the requirement of Scripture is for believers to:

- ◆ Live with a dual citizenship
- ◆ The citizenship of earth is outworked prior to the eschaton through stewardship not nationalism. Stewardship is taking responsibility to yield to God the riches that are his that are embedded within that

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices *the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.* But you shall keep my statutes and my ordinances and commit none of these abominations, either the citizen or the alien who resides among you (for *the inhabitants of the land, who were before you, committed all of these abominations, and the land became defiled*); otherwise the land will vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. For whoever commits any of these abominations shall be cut off from their people. So keep my charge not to commit any of these abominations that were done *before you*, and not to defile yourselves by them: I am the LORD your God (Lev. 18:24-30, emphases added).

As noted above this passage is a key in showing that these issues are not to be restricted to Israel. Although Israel and her relationship to the land is unique, it is not unique to the point of being so different that there is no point of comparison to that of other nations. The relationship of people to land is a general principle based upon these understandings. This comes through again in Gen. 15:12-16 when we gain an understanding that whenever sin reaches a certain level that people get dispossessed of their land. There we read that Abraham's descendants were to go to Egypt for four generations until the sin of the Amorites was 'complete'.

We can also understand Acts 17:26 along these lines where Paul informs us that the times and boundaries were set for all the peoples. People are connected to land in specific ways. That is why original inhabitants (often called first nation people) have a unique authority to cleanse land. This Acts text can be seen in operation in Deuteronomy 32:8 where Yahweh fixed the boundaries of the nations. God has lands for all people and they are required to steward those lands (thus Scripture can even speak of an 'exodus' of other peoples: Amos 9:7 speaks of Ethiopians, Philistines and Arameans being brought up to their lands).

It is for this reason that God judges other nations and not just Israel. For example, Zephaniah 2:1-10 brings judgement on the land of Moab using the same terminology used of Israel – they will experience the land producing thorns and thistles and they themselves will be overcome and lose their land.

Ah, inhabitants of the seacoast, you nation of the Cherethites! The word of the LORD is against you, O Canaan, land of the Philistines; and I will destroy you until no inhabitant is left... Moab shall become like Sodom and the Ammonites like Gomorrah, a land possessed by nettles and salt pits, and a waste forever (Zeph. 2:5,9).

This concept of Israel as 'not the exception to the rules, but rather as a demonstration of the rules' is a favourite approach, for example, for proponents of Identificational Repentance. This downplays the otherness of Israel but emphasises the calling on Israel to be a role model and the need for other nations to be judged accordingly. So Israel is then understood to be a firstfruit nation. Jeremiah 2:3 states that, '*Israel was holy to the LORD, the firstfruits of his harvest; all who devoured her were held guilty, and disaster overtook them.*'

As a nation she was to be an example for all nations of the world to witness and be shaped by.

♦ **The NT people of God**

When viewed eschatologically there is a great discontinuity when we come to the NT. The people of God are not based on ethnicity, but faith in Christ with our citizenship primarily being in heaven. (This is not to be taken to mean that we have 'a ticket to heaven', but that we live out on earth the government of heaven.) Our *first* allegiance must be to the people of God not to those who live within our geographical boundaries. Any emphasis that denies this aspect will be suspect, and a nationalism that is divisive as opposed to a stewardship that is inclusive will fall short of God's ideal.

However, post-cross and pre-eschaton we live with the tension of continuity / discontinuity or 'the already but not-yet' scenario. It is this aspect of tension that we need to address with respect to the land.

This tension is outworked in the issue of dual citizenship. How to be obedient to the call of God that transcends an allegiance to any particular national expression while at the same time being subject to the powers that be, is the critical question.

The real issue then with respect to land issues is not the aspect of the people of God and land in the ultimate eschatological sense, but what does it mean for peoples / nations to live within geographical boundaries during this time of tension.

So the redeemed community are essentially transnational (rooted in our eschatological hope) and yet also live within the context of nationhood (rooted in a creation theology). Although the latter must not obliterate the primary identity it is also true that our allegiance to heaven does not annul our earthly citizenship.

In bringing this to a conclusion I propose presenting a model for understanding.

1. In creation we have the triangle of God – Adam – Eden (and in Israel the triangle of God – Israel – Promised Land)

Through creation, humanity was to be the representative of Yahweh, thus being responsible for stewarding the land. We can only speculate about nationhood

and specific responsibility for land within a given boundary as being part of that original creation mandate. What we do know is that immediately following creation nations are spawned. Even if they were not God's original intent (and nationalism certainly was not) we do find that they have a place within God's gracious sovereignty. Paul states in Acts 17:26:

From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

What Adam failed to do, Israel was called to do **as a nation**. So there is a connection to creation for Israel, thus she was to be an example for the nations of the world – she was to be the redeeming nation.

2. In ultimate redemption we have the triangle of God – people – whole earth

This is a primary expression in the NT, but it is must be noted that this ultimate expression is only arrived at through the nations being represented: it is from every tribe and tongue that the eschatological people of God is made up. So the large triangle is made up from many smaller 'God – national identity – national territory' triangles. Racial and tribal differences are not obliterated but brought to the party. The kings of the earth are to bring their splendour to the new creation. This is well expressed by John in Revelation 21:22-27:

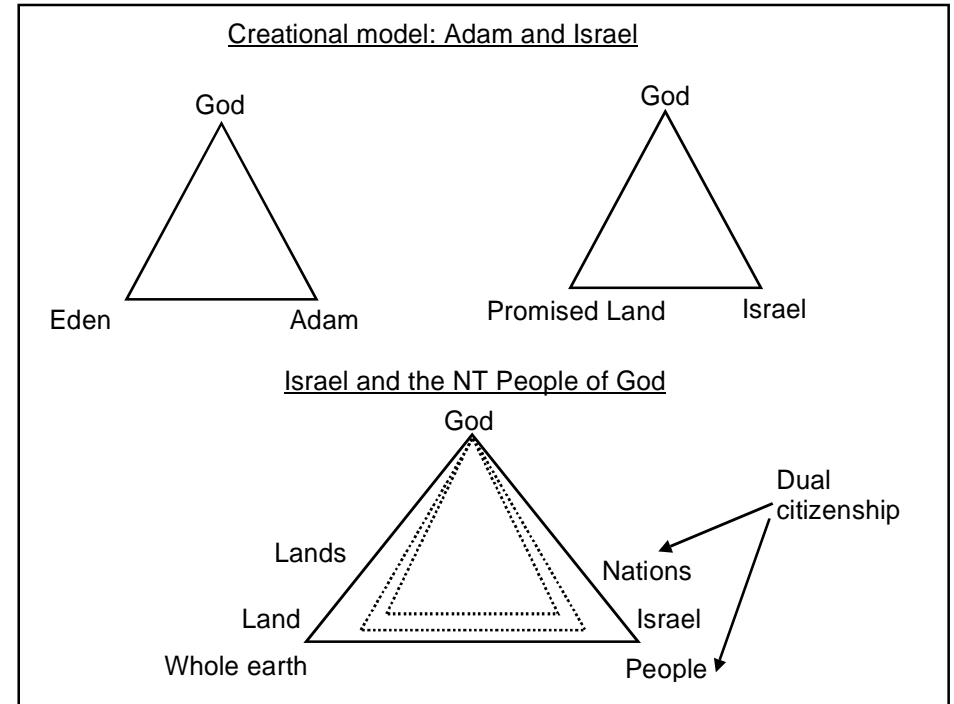
I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

3. The cross does not obliterate nationhood

Although the cross produces a trans-national people, the redeemed people have to live with dual nationality. They live both within fallen creation and are subject to God appointed boundaries, and have a primary allegiance to the throne of heaven. Indeed, it might be argued, that part of the allegiance to heaven is expressed in their earthly citizenship – or in other words, as they pray 'let your kingdom come' they are praying that for the part of earth where they are rooted. Being salt within a nation will mean that there is stewardship for the resources of that land, so that the community of faith live both transnationally

(an eschatological approach) and within a nation as responsible stewards (a creational approach).

Putting all this together diagrammatically:



So in the diagram I seek to illustrate in the final triangle that Israel is both a paradigm for the nations as they steward their land, and also a paradigm for the nation that is trans-national (the body of Christ) whose citizenship is heavenly but also expressed in the locale where they live.

Finally, there are other appeals that can be made to indicate that national and land issues continue across the testaments:

1. We note that Israel's specific responsibility over the land is based upon a responsibility over land that applies to all peoples

This can be seen in the Scripture that speaks of land pollution through immorality. Leviticus 18:24-30 makes two things very plain: first, that sexual immorality pollutes land, and second, that the effects of sin on the land is not to be limited to the people of Israel and her land. Rather the relationship of any people to their land is affected through sin.