

# The Holy Land and Christian Theology

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## *Abstract*

*Amid the present international reassessment of economic and political support toward the State of Israel Christian Zionism remains the entrenched default setting in large quarters of evangelicalism for understanding Middle East events. One of the reasons for such ideological tenacity is found in the belief that the Jews have a divine-right to that eastern portion of Mediterranean real-estate. The legitimacy of this entitlement is, according to evangelical Zionism, found in the Old Testament Scriptures. In such an ideological climate it is imperative for Christians to rethink the legitimacy of such territorial claims. This paper argues that such contemporary re-thinking should be done by the Church in a self-consciously Christian manner as opposed to secular-politics or Jewish thinking on the issue. If this is not done it is unlikely there will be significant changes in evangelical thinking about the land at both an academic and popular level, and the polarities over the issue will not be healed. After a descriptive presentation of two major narratives on the land issues, the monograph provides guidance as to which story is deemed a distinctly Christian story. It concludes with the proposal that an understanding of the nature of Christian theology necessitates a distinctly Christian approach to biblical claims of territorial right and land occupancy.*

## **1. Introduction**

Since 1948 the Christian Church has had to reassess her ‘theology of the land’ in an unprecedented manner<sup>1</sup>. Jewish appropriation of their ancestral land on a national level has polarised populations, determined global policies and supercharged end-time speculations for many Bible-believing communities. Within Christian communities diverse ways of reading Scripture have emerged, resulting in the present polarities of ‘Zionistic’, ‘Dispensational’ and ‘Covenantal’ readings. Yet at the heart of these post-1948 hermeneutical challenges lies an understanding either explicit or implicit of a Christian theology of the land. My proposal is that the degree to which land-issues are taken up in a distinctly *Christian* manner, i.e., bringing any theology of the land into the light of the revelation of God through Christ, will have enormous consequences for understanding and guiding others in and around the complex issues going on today. Amidst all that is on offer for our consideration today on this topic, it is the way people integrate the revelation that came through Jesus Christ when responding to matters relative to the ancestral land of Israel that will be determinative for their holy-land theology.

Two ways of reading both the Bible *vis-à-vis* the current Jewish territorial activities have come to particular definition and focus in the church since 1948: one reading is primarily drawn from the *Hebrew Canon* whilst the other is drawn primarily from the *Christian Canon*<sup>2</sup>. The former reading defines land issues in terms of its genesis in the Abrahamic land promises, the conquest under Joshua and its historic manifestation in the period of the glorious Solomonic kingdom (971-931BCE), whilst the latter reading picks up the storyline as it is modified by Jesus’ proclamation and interpretation of the coming of the kingdom of God to Israel. Though some Christians have tried to blend these two readings these two ways of reading the Bible remain alternatives, and as I hope to demonstrate, are mutually exclusive *ab initio*.

## **2. The Story of the Land in the Hebrew Scriptures**

Within the divine drama that plays out from Abraham to Chronicles the land provides both setting and plotline for the story. Not only does YHWH call a people to himself within the context of the

'land flowing with milk and honey', the land itself is integral to the content of the covenant he established with Israel. Israel obedient to God is Israel in the land but an Israel disobedient to YHWH is an Israel without a land; Israel without the land is not truly Israel, There is a clear and irreducible triadic balancing of YHWH, People and Land in the *Tanakh* which is impossible to reduce or marginalize<sup>3</sup>. Geography is integral to the faith of the *Tanakh*, and any subsequent canonical books that claim to be breathed-out by this God of Israel would need to likewise uphold and continue its geographical dimension of faith. No docetic or land-less faith can ever be born from the womb of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Two important horizons for contemplating this Hebrew land narrative are those of Solomon and Ezekiel, providing for us a view of its historical manifestation and eschatological horizon.

## 2.1 Solomon

In so many ways the golden era of Solomon (c.a. 970-930 BCE) provided an historical realization of most of what Israel was promised by God in the *Tanakh*. Under Solomon Israel was in fruition with (1) a righteous Davidic king on the throne, (2) a newly built temple in Zion with a new Zadokite priesthood, (3) a politically united tribal confederacy, (4) an extensive land occupancy, (5) a flourishing economy (for some), (6) a subjugation of surrounding countries, and (7) an Israelite kingdom of international reputation – a profile flowing from the gift of the land. So much of the description of the historians of Kings and Chronicles serves to highlight this fulfilment of Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic promises: 'Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea' (1 Ki 4:20) and 'Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, all the days of Solomon' (2:25). This was a high watermark in Israel's pilgrimage and set the benchmark for time to come, providing a key imaginative motif in Israel's land narrative. Exile meant its loss and Return meant its restoration.

## 2.2 Ezekiel

No pre-exilic or post-exilic prophet provided Israel with a vision of restoration comparable to the exilic prophet Ezekiel. The content of the scroll he left us is structured around a prologue-epilogue *inclusio* of richly imaginative visions: it opens with a pre-destruction vision of God's withdrawal from an impure Israel (Chaps 1-12) and concludes with a post-construction vision of God returning to a purified Israel (40-48). Land plays a characteristically central role: the consequences of God's judgment and withdrawal is exile from the land in the prologue, and the description of God's return to his people in his epilogue is their return to the land. Further, the centrality of the landed-temple in both the prologue and epilogue visions frames the scroll, alluding to one of Ezekiel's primary motifs: the Presence of YHWH. In his final vision (40-48) the plans for the new temple and tribal inheritance is revealed in meticulous detail. Ezekiel is commanded to disclose the vision to the exiles to both humble them and show them what God had for them in the future (43:10-12). Some of the main contours of his final vision are (1) a fully functioning new temple with the full range of sacrifices restored, (2) an exclusively Zadokite priesthood assisted by the Levitical families, (3) the return of God's Presence to inhabit the temple forever, (4) specific worship regulations for the future prince of Israel, (5) a desert-transforming river flowing from the temple toward the East Sea, (6) a uniformly schematized tribal territorial allotment on the land of their ancestors, and (7) regulations for a new capital city just south of the temple. It is a spectacular portrait of the Presence of God with his people living in the land within fulfilled Mosaic regulations. This prophetic vision painted for Israel the consummate picture of the temple and land promises throughout the Torah. Yet even after the Return under Cyrus the experience of the nation continually fell short of the vision cast by Ezekiel. The *Tanakh* provided the people of God with the expansive promises yet it

closed in a note of anticipation that YHWH was still to act to bridge the gap between Israel's experience and these divinely given promises.

Like most stories, the Hebrew Scriptures are suffused with proper nouns - Moses, Solomon, Ezekiel, Jerusalem, Canaan, Beersheba, Goliath etc. – that expresses the personal and local nature of YHWH's covenant with Israel. Such Scriptural detail and colour is the consequence of the narrative of *ha'erets*. This canon begins in a local distinct place, Eden and then moves forward to another distinct and locatable land, Canaan. For this reason Ezekiel's horizon for Israel terminates with the nation back in the patriarchal land with familiar geographical names (47:13-48:29). The faith of the Hebrews, found in their canon, is a geographical and 'land-locked' faith, and in the glimpses the prophets gave to them of their future it was clear that Israel would finally be restored and once again live in the familiar and native land of their ancestors.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. The Story of the Land in the Christian Scriptures

What is the role of the land of Canaan in the 27 Christian canonical books? What first strikes any reader when tracking through these newer books after an immersion in the Hebrew canon is the comparable absence of explicit land terminology. Although the story begins within the land of Israel there is a clear movement away from the land of Israel toward the 'ends of the earth'. There are however a few, and thus important, direct references to the promise of holy geography that provide enough light to give us a window into the Christian theology of the land. We will very briefly look at four frames of that window in Jesus, Paul, the writer of Hebrews and John the Seer, and then offer some proposals in response to this contrast.

#### 3.1 Jesus

Jesus of Nazareth taught only marginally on the pressing territorial issues of his day. This in itself is a startling fact. At a time when 'land' and 'Messiah' were ideologically coupled and when the people of the land were chafing under the iron yolk of Roman Occupation, for any popular preacher or Messianic contender to decentralize and almost ignore the most pressing need of the day was a striking historical disjunction. This prophet was obviously not reading the Bible the same way his contemporaries were. As usual, Jesus was anomalous.

Yet in one of his early open-air teaching sessions Jesus did echo the refrain of Psalm 37 that 'the meek shall inherit the land' (Mt 5:5). Given the ambiguity of the Greek word  $\gamma\epsilon$  we must ask: does the context favour the more local gloss of 'land' or the more global 'earth'? Some commentators favour the local sense of the term (*land*) finding it more consistent with the inheritance contexts of Psalm 37 and of Jesus' audience (Burge 2010:34). Others such as France (2007:166) believe that in Jesus' preaching on the kingdom of heaven he took up the word and re-contextualized it in a more universal and less territorial direction, thus resulting in the more theologically weighted definition of *earth*. Given the immediate kingdom context of all eight beatitudes and the wider kingdom-of-God theology of this Gospel (*viz.* 13:35-43; 19:28-30; 21:43; 25:14-21; 25:34), it is likely the latter option is more faithful to the direction of Jesus' thought. However, even if the more local 'land' is the gloss preferred, it should still be interpreted within the wider Christological categories and 'kingdom-context' of Matthew's Gospel.

Gary Burge (2010:33-40) argues that the motif of the land is implicit within many aspects of Jesus' teaching, such as the episode of the request to divide inheritance (Lk 12:13-21), the Lukan parable of the unfruitful fig tree (Lk 13:6-9), the cursing of the fig tree (Mk 11:12-14), and in his words on a future 'regeneration' (Mt 19:28). Jesus' explosive story during his last Passover about the paedocide of a vineyard owner's son and the consequent transferal of the vineyard to others (Mk 12:1-12), is all highly suggestive of the function of the land within Israel and the transferal of that

function to another group. Yet as we search for Jesus' own 'holy-land' theology his remarkable marginalization of an issue so central to his own bible and the socio-political struggles of his day should surely alert us to the fact that the Christian faith was going to do something different and stamp its own interpretation on the 'land'. His preferred term *malkuth shamayim* (kingdom of heaven) rather than the more popular *ha'erets Israel* (the land of Israel) clearly tells us that Jesus is responding to traditional Jewish aspirations and priorities in radically different manner.

### 3.2 Paul

Paul the missionary-apostle to the Gentiles shares with his Lord a conspicuous discontinuity with the 'holy-land' theology of his day. Similarly there are only one or two places where he explicitly touches on the issues of the land. One of them is Romans 4:13. Here (again like Jesus), we have a striking universalizing of the local Hebrew land promise. Paul states that the divine promise to the uncircumcised Abram and his seed referred to the *κοσμος* (world) and not the (land). The horizon of God's words to Abraham seemed patently restricted to the Jordan-Dan-Beersheba track of land, yet Paul understands the land promise in terms of the entire world. This globalizing tendency in Pauline theology must have been genetically related to his conviction that the seed of Abraham referred firstly to the Christ and then secondly to all, Jew and Gentile alike, who participated in Christ through sharing in Abraham's faith. The corollary to the fact that believing Gentiles were legitimately Abraham's descendants was surely that they were thus also heirs of the promise to Abraham *which then demanded an inheritance-land no longer defined in terms of the ethnic real estate of his ancestors*. The land motif pops up again unexpectedly in Paul's Ephesian household code. In 6:2 he applies the fifth commandment ('honour your father and mother') to his Gentile churches. Such contextual application of the *Torah* to Gentiles is far from strange in Paul's thought world. But when we see that he also applies its promise of 'live long in the land' to obedient Gentile children in 6:3, we are rather taken aback. Though the concrete meaning of 'obedient children are promised longevity' is possible (thus Hoehner 2002:793), it creates more problems than it solves. Thielman may be closer to the mark: "In light of Paul's frequent use of the 'new creation' theme throughout the letter (2:15; 3:9; 4:13, 24) ... it is possible that the idea of a new creation may also stand behind his thinking here. Paul may be saying that children whose obedience to their parents arises from their commitment to 'the Lord' (6:1) will live eternally not on a particular land with national boundaries such as ancient Israel but rather on an earth without boundaries, as God created it to be" (2007:830). We may conclude and say that when Paul does take up the issues of the land he does so in a new way: he universalizes and internationalizes the Abrahamic land promises.

### 3.3 Hebrews

This sermon-like letter is a very important document for understanding the theological relationship between the Hebrew and the Christian canons. The anonymous author's method of weaning his<sup>5</sup> readers off from an appetite for older forms of worship (whether Jewish or pagan) is to rhetorically demonstrate the infinitely superior realities that have been inaugurated by Christ. Even though he does not tackle the land issue head-on, he does present to us the most sustained and significant investigation of issues related to the land in the Christian canon.

The sermon presents its listeners with a dominant pilgrimage motif (Lane 1991: cxlviii) where Abraham and the wilderness generation act as types for the antitypical Christian pilgrims. The entire book is an exhortation to latter-day pilgrims to press on toward the eschatological rest in the eschatological city (which is, by implication, in the eschatological land). The great Pioneer of their salvation Jesus the eternal Son of God has already been enthroned in this eschatological Zion, the

new pilgrim-city of the heavenly Jerusalem (1:5,13; 13:14, 22). Consequentially *since Zion and Jerusalem were inextricably tied to the Dan-Beersheba land narrative of the Tanakh and were even synecdochic symbols of Israelite inheritance it is clear that for this writer a dramatic reconfiguration has taken place*. Earthly Jerusalem (and by implication earthly Palestine) is no longer the destination for the end-time pilgrims, for something better has been revealed in the Messiah.

Given that the author's view of salvation is both Adamic and cosmic according to chapter two of his book, it is fitting to describe his land hopes as *universal* and *eschatological*. As is often pointed out in this regard, the author surprisingly (like Paul) states that Abraham himself eyed out this eschatological land in his pilgrimage rather than the more local territory of his tent-pegs (11:10,16). For the inspired author this better land was not only the hope of pre-conquest patriarchs but was also the goal toward which *all* faith-full Israelites were heading, thus he says: 'all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised' (11:39). If the promise was the territory over which David and Solomon reigned then the author is not correct. Yet if he is speaking of a different kind of Promised Land, he is not contradicting the biblical narrative. For this author the older order served as an analogy for the greater realities of an eternal city and land that 'cannot be touched' (12:18) nor 'shaken' (12:27). This is clearly the author's true land of rest which the greater Joshua conquered for all those who obey him.

### 3.4 John the Seer

The last witness for our window into the apostolic theology of land is from The Revelation of John. His vision is fittingly called 'the climax of prophecy' (Bauckham 1993) being the divinely revealed epilogue to the entire inspired canon. What does the Seer reveal about the land? Burge's comments are relevant: "John's vision concerns God's resolution for the entire world and never Judea. The term 'land' occurs in the book a remarkable 82 times (a third of all New Testament occurrences) and in each case it points to the earth and never the Holy Land" (2012:105). God's judgments on the world and the war against God's international holy people all witness to a transposition of the local land horizon of the *Tanakh* into the more global horizons of the Christian Scriptures. The context of this final canonical vision is no longer the Jewish traditional land but is rather the Empire, the world and ultimately the new heavens and the earth.

If we take the muster of the twelve tribes in chapter seven as the new covenant equivalent to the Joshua-generation muster (Bauckham 1995:77) then we have another evocation of a new Promised Land that will be inherited by a new sort of conquering. The geographical content of the inheritance for the victorious international church is now to 'reign on the earth ( $\gamma\epsilon$ )' as God's priest-kings (5:10; compare with 1:5-6 and 2:26-27; 20:4), things which can only be done in a new land. This 'land' is finally and climactically pictured in connection with the descent of the New Jerusalem (20:9; which symbolizes the church, the Lamb's bride). This City is Eden-regained, and the people of God diffuse his rule and light over the new creation in eschatological fulfilment of all that God had his eye on from the beginning. Yet John not only provides foresight into this final and eternal Land but his vision fittingly recapitulates for us the eschatological substance of what Christian land hopes were within the entire Christian canon. This canon reveals a double eschatological perspective: Christ brings about the fulfilment of all that was foreshadowed and hoped for in the preceding history of Israel as well as being himself the first-fruits of the final destination of all human history. This temporal-theological shift that has come in Christ has introduced an eschatological 'janus' into the biblical story line, and can thus adequately account for the transformation of the land issues in the Christian canon.

In closing this story of the land in the Christian canon and preparing for the next section we need to point out that in this canon there is a surprising and almost universal disinterest in the Dan-Beersheba tract of land. Jesus and his apostles marginalized what was central to their Jewish contemporaries. They appeared to be surprisingly unconcerned about Roman-occupied Palestine. How has the Church historically responded to canonical discontinuity? What follows are the two proposals for this anomaly.

#### 4. Two Solutions: Dispensationalism or Progressive Revelation

As Christians have listened to the Scripture's unfolding saga of the land and noted the apparent inconsistencies between the *Tanakh* and the Christian canon, two solutions to their surprising twists and turns have been proposed. These common Christian solutions are motivated by a tenacious belief in the essential unity of the two canons, desiring to listen to each volume on its own terms and yet also to harmonize the contents of each between the covers of *one* inspired book. Yet with regard to the land promises these two solutions attempt to unify the stories of the land by tracking two contrasting paths. To these proposals we now turn.

##### 4.1 Dispensationalism

Firstly, Dispensationalism<sup>6</sup> offers us a consistent and straight-forward option: *all the land promises of the Tanakh story are presently on hold and wait to be fulfilled in the future within a distinctly territorial and Jewish horizon.* This approach claims to take the Prophets seriously 'at face value' and champions the grammatical-historical hermeneutic. Dispensationalists believe that Ezekiel's final vision will be fulfilled as it stands in the sacred text: the Jewish tribes will return to rebuild that temple according to its divinely revealed architectural details, including its altar for blood sacrifices and its designated tribal allocation of the land. This school flies the flag of a 'literal hermeneutic' and advocates understanding all the land promises in such terms. Thus when YHWH himself promised Abraham 'I will give to you and your offspring after you the land of your sojourning, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God' (Gn 17:8) the clear sense of the oracle and its entailment is the Dan-Beersheba geography<sup>7</sup>. However before this period of a literal fulfilment arrives another distinct Gentile dispensation must intervene, 'the times of the Gentiles' (Lk 23:24). During this period the distinctly Jewish issues of the land are peripheral and 'preserved in ice', not being relevant to the more Gentile and universal nature of the period; a factor that accounts for the marginalization of the land issues in the Christian canon. This parenthetical 'church age' has no direct relationship to any of the land promises in the *Tanakh* since its focus is on matters more subsidiary to the main plot line in that canon. However when the Gentile dispensation is ended by the secret rapture of the church and the Parousia of Christ has interrupted the antichrist's Jewish pogrom, then the ice over the land promises will melt away. T that time the land of Israel will experience her dénouement, her long dormant seeds springing to life as her exiled prodigals make their final pilgrimage back home. Until that happens, the land promises are temporally suspended<sup>8</sup>.

The appeal of Dispensationalism is its claim to be more faithful to the revelation of God in the *Tanakh*, particularly in its historical, geographical and local aspect. Its commitment to the stubbornly historical realities of Israel gives Dispensationalism its popular appeal. People can be taken on guided tours to visit the actual places spoken of in Scripture (the *Harmagedon* Valley spoken of by John, the Mount of Olives spoken of by Zechariah *etc.*), making this narrative of the land easily comprehensible (especially for tour-guides!). Attempts to understand any of these geographical specifics in terms of more global, international and cosmic realities is seen as going

against the grain of the historical integrity of the text. Only something distinctly regional and territorial will do justice to the integrity of the detail in the promises.

## 4.2 Progressive Revelation

The path of Progressive Revelation is the other proposed solution to the problem. Since a picture can paint a thousand words, let me give you Christopher Wright's helpful analogy which captures the essence of this approach: "Imagine a father who, in the days before mechanized transport, promises his son, aged 5, that when he is 21 he will give him a horse for himself. Meanwhile the motor car is invented. So on his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday the son awakes to find a motor car outside, 'with love from Dad'. It would be a strange son who would accuse his father of breaking his promise just because there was no horse. And even stranger if, in spite of having received the far superior motor car, the son insisted that the promise would only be fulfilled if a horse *also* materialized, since that was the literal promise" (1992:71). This illustration articulates the positive and negative aspects of the Progressive Revelation school: positively, *the story of the land found in the Christian canon is the crown and fulfilment of the Hebrew canon*, and negatively, that *the Christian story of the land by virtue of being an escalated fulfilment of those Jewish land hopes has now antiquated the Jewish phase of that story and made it obsolete*. For Progressive Revelation advocates the Jewish story of the land has now passed into its fulfilment phase in Christ, as the seed comes to fruition in the tree.

Progressive Revelation is the child of biblical theology and the parent of typology. It articulates a pattern of God's work in salvation-history whereby he unfolds and reveals his purposes progressively, exponentially and irreversibly. This philosophy of understanding the temporal significance of God's acts is already found within the *Tanakh* itself and is not a specifically Christian hermeneutic. Here are a few of the instances where newer revelation fulfilled and thus terminated older vehicles of operation:

- Bethel as a holy place was replaced by the latter Jerusalem temple site (Gen 28:16ff, 22).
- the presence of God moves from mount Sinai into the Mosaic tabernacle (Ex 40:34-38).
- the Aaronic priesthood replaced all other priesthood in Israel (see Ex 19:24).
- the monarchy replaced earlier patriarchal and tribal leadership.
- a distinct *Davidic* line in Judah out-dated and nullified any other pre-1 Samuel 16 claims to royalty, including all Saulides in Benjamin.
- Solomon's temple furniture replaced the Mosaic Tabernacle.
- the ark was to be replaced by the Presence of YHWH in Jerusalem (Jr 3:16).
- patriarchs and cities are given new names (Gn 17:5; 32:28; Ezk 48:35).

This approach to Scripture notes that temporally successive people, names, institutions or places in the *economia* of God often surpass and superannuate their preceding equivalents. So extending this idea over both canons we can see, for example, that the altar piece of the Mosaic has been fulfilled in the Cross of Christ. Earlier historical realities (the altar) had a divinely ordained position in God's redemptive history as pointers, foreshadows and, in sum, promises to a latter fulfilment (the cross). These later realities are not significant simply by virtue of their temporal sequence but are significant due to the *greater theological revelation that they inaugurate*: some new operation of God is introduced into the salvation-historical line which surpasses his prior acts not by merely *replacing* prior revelation but by taking up and *recapitulating* that earlier revelation in the greater revelation. This is the key idea within Progressive Revelation.

Keeping in line with such progressive advances of God in salvation-history, we see that with the

coming of Jesus Christ an exponentially advanced stage in the revelation of God's purposes arrived. The superlative epoch that dawned in Christ entails that prior revelation (1) must be understood and applied in terms of the greater and later revelation, (2) that it has reached its intended goal and fulfilment in Christ, and (3) it has ceased to retain its earlier historical function in God's purposes. This is why in the Christian canon Jesus said that something *greater* than the temple, than Jonah, and Solomon was present in himself (Mt 12:6; 12:41, 42). For this reason the author of Hebrews can say that with Christ's Melchizedekian priesthood in operation the Aaronic-Levitical priesthood is now obsolete (9:1-28; 8:13). Christ has ushered in the final dispensation with its new temple, new priesthood and new sacrifices, thus eclipsing and antiquating all the preceding ones. This obsolescence of the *Tanakh's* vehicles of revelation accounts for the discontinuity between it and the Christian Scriptures, whilst its fulfilment in the new accounts for the continuity. With regards to the land, Progressive Revelation advocates believe that Christ also inaugurated *a new and greater land* and that for this reason his ministry and teaching marginalised the older forms of the land promises. Preoccupations with the traditional territory of Israel was therefore now longer important as it was eclipsed by something greater, and to turn back to it was to go against the grain of salvation-history and move away from what God himself was doing. With the new creation kingdom having been launched for an international God-indwelled people, a preference for a Jewish-only-Canaan and an Aaronic-only-priesthood serving in a masonry temple is not only anachronistic but is moreover a rejection of the later and greater reality. Just as a candle's purpose is fulfilled by the rising sun and so made obsolete, so the greater light in Christ has dawned and the older light is now no longer necessary.

As an example of how this 'progressive revelation' works exegetically let us take **Ezekiel 37:24-28**. Here the 'historical-grammatical' Dispensational hermeneutic will demand that a future is in view which has a restored and united Jewish nation living under the rule of a *redivivus* David upon exactly the same land of their forefathers with YHWH dwelling in their presence, a nation holy and separated from the nations, all of which will last *forever*. The 'progressive revelation' hermeneutic will require that this narrative is taken up in the new covenant in a fuller and fulfilled manner: David's son Jesus Christ (not David himself as the text says) will dwell in the ultimate land (which was ultimately promised to Jacob), with the Holy Spirit dwelling amongst a united and international people *forever*. We can see that these two ways of reading the Hebrew land prophecies are primarily a *singular canonical reading* and a *dual canonical reading*, where the final horizon opened up in the latter revelation transforms the way we read the earlier revelation.

The genius of this path is that it upholds the theological and historical unity between both Scriptures whilst also providing a valid justification for their surprising discontinuity.

## 5. A Proposal for the choice: Christian Theology

Which of these attempts to harmonize the two land narratives should we follow? My recommendation is that a distinctly *Christian* choice should be made and that if such a choice is taken the Progressive Revelation hermeneutic should be preferred. A distinct Christian theology of the land arising out of an understanding of how Christ fulfilled the ancient promises is proposed as the answer to *intra-Christian* divisions over the land issues and the best *extra-Christian* vantage point to assess and help heal the on-going divisions within the Middle East.

### 5.1 Christian Theology as Christology

Karl Barth insisted that all theology should be an exposition of Christology. In commenting on Article II of the Apostles' Creed he stated: "Christology is the touchstone of all knowledge of God in the Christian sense, the touchstone of all theology...the point at which the ways diverge...the



point at which everything becomes clear or unclear, bright or dark. For here we are standing at the centre.” (1960:66). If this is true, and I believe it is, then the only satisfactory answer to our questions about the land must be given in terms of what God has said in Jesus Christ (Heb1:1-4). All our thinking should be done in submission to Christ (2 Cor 10:5-6) and all our theological formulation should have the stamp of Christ upon it. Likewise every traditional theological *loci* should be transformed by the revelation that has come through Christ. This is not asserted to ensure that we represent what Christians believe on these matters but because all Christian theology claims to be a human expression of what *God* believes, and endeavours to be transparent to the Word that he spoke in Jesus Christ.

From the beginning the followers of Jesus had to rethink so much of what they had been taught. The Gospels evinces their perpetual misunderstanding of exactly what the Messiah had come to do. Yet it is clear that all their earlier misunderstanding gave way to profound comprehension after Pentecost. Their writings show that the apostolic church must have experienced what Richard Hays has called ‘a conversion of the imagination’ (2005). Their understanding of the identity of God was decisively defined through the Christ of the cross and the Pentecostal gift. Their conception of the identity of the people of God was likewise radically redefined to be inclusive of all nationalities. Beliefs about divine worship also underwent a *Christological transformation* with the realities of temple, sacrifices, holy places etc. all being radically changed. The result was what we can rightly call *Christian theology*. Not everyone however embraced this *comprehensive re-reframing* and many Jews deemed the new revelation a perversion of the *Tanakh*. This ‘new’ theology in Israel divided families and caused blood to be spilt, until the ways eventually parted (Dunn 2006) with some going with Paul and other missionaries to the ends of the earth and others staying in Jerusalem concluding that ‘the old wine was good enough’.

How then was the land narrative ‘Christified’<sup>9</sup>? The answer to this question must surely lie in understanding the interplay between *Christology*, *Creation*, and *Eschatology*<sup>10</sup>, and in that order. We need to note how doctrines of creation and eschatology dynamically inform Jesus’ preaching of the Kingdom of God. What Jesus was announcing in his ‘kingdom of God’ proclamation had to do primarily with God’s great story that began in creation and concluded in the eschatological new creation. He came to launch the fulfilment of this ‘grand metanarrative’ rather than, as expected, coming to enhance Jewish particularities. Most of his contemporaries had forgotten that the Israel-story was embedded in a larger narrative and was itself a divinely appointed means for a universal ends. N T Wright has, I believe, convincingly demonstrated that the Good News Jesus announced to Israel was the good news that in his life and ministry the God of Israel was bringing Israel to fruition and that *therefore* he was bringing about universal salvation (Wright 1992). This reality thus accounts for the universal DNA that was present *ab initio* in the proclamation of Jesus (Mt 13). Yet it was through the Cross and Resurrection that these seeds sown by Jesus entered a new stage of growth. The self-sacrifice of the sinless eternal Son of God on the Cross outside the holy temple and city of Jerusalem radicalized thinking about salvation, the temple, the nations, ethics, the purposes of God and everything else. In the subsequent resurrection the divine and eschatological reversal of the human verdict upon Jesus thoroughly ‘eschatologized’ the thought of the early Christians: the final judgment is somehow past and the end of the world has irrupted into the present order bringing with it realities which infinitely surpassed all Jewish particularities and territories. The Messianic son of David was also now enthroned, but in a new Jerusalem, and by clear implication, over a new land. It was not Palestine that this greater Davidic son inherited. He was made ruler of all things including the world to come! (Ac 2:29-36; Eph 1:22; Heb 2:5-9). Christ came to fulfil all the land promises in his person by being the new inheritance for the people of God and the new place where all nations could meet God. He effectively fulfilled in himself the land of Canaan’s *raison d’etre*. For the first Christians (who were all Jews) it slowly began to come into clearer focus that the land

in which they were born and over which the Romans now ruled was but a metaphor for a far larger Land, the new creation which Jesus' bodily resurrection had inaugurated (2 Cor 5:17; Gl 6:15). The centre of gravity had now decisively shifted to Christ himself and the new world which he had opened up became the riveting focus of all its pilgrims. In this way, the land was 'Christified'.

## 5.2 Christian theology as both Continuous and Discontinuous with the Hebrew Land Narrative

Christian theology has a dialectical relationship to the Hebrew Scriptures. When looking at the two canons separately we cannot but note areas of similarity and dissimilarity. Differences amongst Christian interpreters as to where to draw this line continue to account for the different conclusions they come to. John Bright (1967) has provided us with a very helpful summary of how we can understand the differences between the Hebrew and Christian canons. His words are worth quoting in full: "The continuity lies in the fact that the theological structure of the two Testaments is fundamentally the same, with the major themes of the theology of the Old carried over and resumed in the New; the discontinuity lies in the fact that these themes receive radical reinterpretation in the New in the light of what Christ has done. Above all, continuity lies in the New Testament's affirmation that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah), who has fulfilled the law and the prophets... The New Testament, while unbreakably linked with the Old, announces the intrusion of something New and, therewith, the end of the Old" (:201). Many would concur that the fulfilment in Christ has resulted in both radical continuity and radical discontinuity.

For the reasons of discontinuity in Christian Theology the Christian cannot believe that the *Tanakh* story can be fulfilled as concretely as described by Ezekiel in his concluding vision. The new revelation in Christ has made bronze altars, blood sacrifices, stone temples, Levitical priests, Jewish-only tribal territory and the like all *passé*. Since such old covenant structures were all inextricably related to the land promises, it is a very short step to conclude that the Jewish land identity is itself *passé* since something greater has dawned in Christ. The new covenant has terminated the divine *economia* of Jewish particularism. This is demonstrated by God's rending of the holy curtain of the old temple from top to bottom (Mt 27:51) and is explicitly declared in the Christian writings (Eph 2:11-22; Col 3:11; Heb 7-8; *et al.*). It would be going contrary to the grain of redemptive history to expect their reinstatement in a future dispensation. The 'upgrade' that came in Christ changed this forever. The Church of Jesus Christ is the destination of every Jew and Gentile, for this is where God has now set his seal. This is why the Dispensational option for the land does not only fall short of a New Testament 'textual' muster, more importantly, it falls short Christologically. Jesus does not fulfil the land promises by reinstating them in their original form but rather by renewing them in himself<sup>11</sup>. This is the 'no' of Christian Theology's discontinuity.

Yet there is a glorious and appealing 'yes' in her continuity. God has never simply discarded, marginalized or rejected what he was doing in the older order. Israel continues in the church and the promised land in the new creation in the same way as engagement continues in marriage, not by terminating it but by fulfilling it. Christian theology likewise is the confession that in Christ God has completed what he began in the Hebrew Scriptures. In terms of the illustration of Wright quotes above, the father has fulfilled his promise to his son but in ways 'immeasurably more than all he could ask or imagine'. Their Messiah did come, a new Joshua, calling Israel out of their Exile and leading into a new land where all their dreams would come true. Yet sadly not all believed in him or followed him, not seeing the continuity in the discontinuity. They continued to read their Scriptures in the old light. Others however turned to the new Joshua, and began to read the same old book in a new light - the glorious dawn light of the new creation.

## 6. Conclusion

One of consequences of accepting the Progressive Revelation approach to the land issues is the conclusion that Christian Zionism<sup>12</sup> is out of step with the purpose of God. At its worst it is a denial of Christ's new covenant, and at its best is simply an off-centred distraction. Christian Theology calls us to abandon such a cause. Yet the implications of Christian Theology for land issues are vitally significant, especially for Christian engagement in the on-going Middle East ferment. Most important is its call to view all the parties involved from a new Christological perspective. This new mind-set will produce distinctive Christian ideas of equality, property rights and international engagement etc., where neither Judaic nor Islamic identities are privileged or prejudiced. Christ will be seen as the new common ground of God, the place where all nationalities can find fulfilment and reconciliation. It is hoped that other writers in the Journal will be able to pick up on some of these implications and help all Christians to respond to issues of land from out of a distinctly Christian script.

Near where I live the N2 highway takes a course closely parallel to the older road it was made to replace. The newer N2 highway is an improvement in every way compared to the older road. Yet the older road is still operational, and for various reasons, some still prefer to use it. I prefer the newer highway finding that it more than adequately achieves all that the original road was intended for. When any visitors come this way and ask me which road to choose, I always recommend they take this newer highway. It is superior in every way. I would advise the same choice in the two stories of the land we have reviewed in this paper.

## 7. Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper unqualified references the 'land' or 'holy land' will refer to the geographical territory presently occupied by Palestinian and Israeli communities.

<sup>2</sup> I will also use the acronym *Tanakh* as shorthand for the Hebrew Scriptures, the 39 books of the Christian 'Old Testament' (*Torah, Nevi'im, Ketuvim*; Law, Prophets, Writings). The *Christian Canon* is a term referring to the 27 books of the Christian 'New Testament'. Any choice of words to describe the two-fold division within the Christian Bible is theologically loaded. To avoid such *a priori* factors I have chosen these two designations for they serve to underscore the *historical* and *theological* distinction of their contents. Of the two designations *Christian Canon* is the most unfortunate, for Christians accept the Hebrew Scriptures as canonical. Yet I retained this phrase for it highlights the new revelation that came through Christ's historic work.

<sup>3</sup> For a helpful diagram see Wright 1990:175.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Waltke provides the student with a thorough canonical reflection on the place of the land in the Bible in his *An Old Testament Theology* 2007:512-587.

<sup>5</sup> My reason for using the masculine third person pronoun is because the masculine singular form of the participle used in 11:32 suggests a masculine author.

<sup>6</sup> I am aware of the various mutations within Dispensationalism (Classic, Progressive and 'Leaky'). However each of these species maintains that a separate dispensation is yet to come which will usher in a glorious and full rehabilitation of the Solomonic glory elevating ethnic Jews as rulers over the world. This ethnic and territorial focus is the abiding genius of Dispensationalism.

<sup>7</sup> For a recent detailed defence of this way of understanding the land promises see Horner (2007).

<sup>8</sup> There are different positions taken within the various schools of Dispensationalism. Some believe that the land promises begun to be fulfilled in 1948 whilst others believe the promises will only be fulfilled after a national Jewish acceptance of Jesus Christ as Messiah. I have narrated a more classic dispensational story

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which is somewhere in between.

<sup>9</sup> A term proposed and developed by Waltke 2007:576-579.

<sup>10</sup> Explication of their genetic interrelationship has been done by many, especially Konig (1989) and Beale (2001).

<sup>11</sup> Bible readers should remember that though the forecasts of the prophets were cast in the symbols and categories of their own cultural experience the realities they pointed to most often outstripped the original dimensions of those symbols (thus Ezk 47:1-12 actually translates into Jn 7:37-39 and Rv 22:1-5).

<sup>12</sup> Christian Zionism is a predominantly evangelical movement which seeks to foster support for the modern State of Israel based upon a concrete and literal reading of the Hebrew Scriptures.

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