

The Land

For this week's Sunday School lesson, I'm sharing the work of Gareth Lee Cockerill, emeritus professor of Bible and theology at Wesley Biblical Seminary (Jackson, Miss), because his insights and understanding of the Bible's meta-structure are so outstanding. Cockerill presented this material at the 2019 Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. The several comments at the end, however, are mine; so argue with me if you disagree.

The Garden of Eden was a place. A real, specific place on earth where human creatures could fellowship with and be blessed by God. But because of almost immediate disobedience, their refusal to be submitted to God's rule and authority, humanity was ejected from the Garden into a wilderness. In that wilderness, rebellion and sin became an innate characteristic of humanity. But in love, God determined to bring His creatures back to Himself so the intended creation blessing of enjoying Him, being in His presence, could yet be given. So God initiated a new program by calling Abram and making great promises to him. The promises included blessing, which is the theme of the Bible, but something else was needed: a place where the blessing would occur. Thus, in Genesis 15, God promised a Land, a very specific land area where the restored relationship and the promised blessing would be experienced. It would replace the Garden; or, to put it slightly differently, the Garden was a type that anticipated the Land.

The Pentateuch documents the history of Abraham's descendents miraculously being delivered from bondage in Egypt [Exodus] to return to the promised Land. But that first generation didn't trust God. They didn't believe Him, and so they rebelled in the wilderness on their way back to the Land [Numbers]. God punished them by denying them the privilege and blessing of entering into His promised Land. He let that 1st generation die in the wilderness. So God repeated His promises to a 2nd generation as they camped on the plains of Moab, as they were about to leave the wilderness and enter the Land [Deuteronomy].

They entered the Land [Joshua], but things degenerated quickly [Judges]. Obedience sadly was partial. Sin saturated the people. They were on the cusp of losing the Land. The problem seems to have been leadership. The people needed a king, one who would be godly and would mediate blessing to them. In time, God gave them the king they needed, David. He led the people into blessing and enjoyment of God's presence [Samuel]. But that too degenerated. Sin saturated the people. It got so bad, God again ejected them from the Land [Kings, Chronicles]. They were in Exile, thrown into a wilderness. It was a reprise of what had happened at Eden. Exile was also like dying in the wilderness.

Eventually some returned to the Land [Ezra, Nehemiah]. This return however was pathetically diminutive. Not very many returned. They didn't have political autonomy, their land area was greatly reduced, and not only was their temple just a shadow of the original one, God's presence wasn't with them. And their obedience to God was problematic; things degenerated again over the subsequent centuries. Most of the people remained in Exile. There would have to be some day in the future a real return, a great return, to the Land. A return to Eden, in a sense.

The history of the O.T. reveals a pattern that occurred again and again: great promise, then things degenerate, then total failure and ejection from God's presence. So, the O.T. ends with the question, What's going to happen now to those promises to Abraham? How, in view of all this sin and failure, will God bestow the promised blessings and restore His people to the Land and to Him? And, hey! What about all the Gentiles who dwell in the "wilderness"?

Then Jesus came. He's a new Moses, a new priest, a new David, and He put on offer a new covenant, a new Temple, a new kingdom and a new conquest. And a new people. He came to end the Exile and return His people to the promised Kingdom (by implication, to the Land, it's not explicit in the Gospels, where the emphasis is kingdom), to the place of blessing. He is God, dwelling among us. But the rejection of Jesus by His own people (failure again!) resulted in a change of plans. The Church was born.

The Epistle to the Hebrews reveals how the Church fits into the Bible's repeated pattern. Hebrews views the Church as just like that 2nd generation of Israel on the plain of Moab about to enter the Land. The Church is not now in the Land, but it will, if it perseveres in faithfulness and obedience, enter it. Hebrews is just like Deuteronomy except that it's for the Church. Hebrews, for example, reviews episodes in Israel's history that lead up to Moab, as does Deuteronomy. Hebrews has warnings against failure, as does Deuteronomy. And it has exhortations and responsibilities, as does Deuteronomy. So the Church is still on the plains of Moab, so to speak. But God has gifted the Church with the Holy Spirit, preparing us with all that's necessary to enter the Land. The Spirit sanctifies us, enables us to persevere in obedience, and gives us *now* access to God. In this way, we're better than Israel was back then.

When we're in the Land, we'll be blessed by Christ, who is for us just like the Tabernacle was for Israel at Moab. When we're in the Land, we'll experience God's promised "rest." When we're in the Land, it'll be like returning to the Garden of Eden, but it'll be a new Garden in a new Creation, to be in the very presence of God, at last to enjoy His intended creation blessing. And the promises to Abraham will then at last be fully realized. The N.T. records not the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises, but a (partial) fulfilling of them.

So the Land of Israel is the Church's promised Land too. There has to be a location, a real, specific place, where blessing can be realized. The basis of all N.T. blessing is the promise to Abraham, and that includes a Land. But even that Land is not the ultimate place of blessing. Being in the Land, in the future, anticipates something even greater yet, beyond being in the Land, and that's the New Heavens and New Earth. The future millennial reign of Christ in the Land is itself a type of something greater to come after it. That future place is the ultimate location of blessing in the presence of God.

Paul's ministry was extending the Abrahamic promise to Gentiles, so that they could also become members of God's household along with Israel. They too, by faith in the Jewish Messiah/King, could become saints and heirs of the Promise. God's vision had always been for the whole world (Rom 4:13). Christ Jesus, the seed of Abraham, took on the curse of all disobedience and rebellion, thereby making possible all that God had promised, removing all that had thwarted God from fulfilling His creational purposes. The curse on God's creation will be removed in the future.

Some church leaders err in spiritualizing the Land promise. That's sad, because it negates God's ultimate purposes through all the Bible. We are not now experiencing the Land promise, it's for us in the future. Christ is not the Land, and being in Christ is not being in the Land. There's an inheritance yet to come, for which the Holy Spirit is the earnest. That inheritance is enjoying the promised blessings in the promised Land. We in the Church will enter the promised Land through and because of Christ Jesus, but He is not the Land spiritualized. And the Land promise to Abraham has never been abrogated due to unbelief, as some wrongly argue. "God's gifts are irrevocable" Paul writes in Romans 11:29.

Now, I offer the following three comments based on the above:

(1) Because we're *in Christ*, when Christ returns to set up the millennial kingdom, we'll be with Him. And we'll then experience the blessings of being in the Land. It'll be a renewed Land, glorious in the extreme. All earth, in fact, will be renewed as God intended it to be at Creation. That's our inheritance, our hope, our reward for faithfulness to Christ in this life. And Israel will be saved and filled with the Spirit when Christ returns. They also will enjoy all that was promised to them, and they will serve God as they were supposed to do when first called. So in the presence of the exalted Christ ruling the world from Jerusalem, believers from the Church Age along with a transformed Israel will enjoy the Abrahamic blessings and promises for a thousand years. Hallelujah!

(2) In the evangelical churches of America today, patriotic fervor is extensive and related to it is a profusion of politics. We seem to love politics more than the One who was humiliated, suffered the agonies of the cross and gave His life to save us from deserved condemnation. This is sad. Our love of America is terribly misplaced. America is not the Land. Israel is. We need to have a biblical understanding of *location*. America is our mission field, it's not our promised Land. And the blessing we crave is not now or here. It's to come, in God's time. Our responsibility is to be loyal and obedient to Christ's Word, loving Him and serving Him in His will whole-heartedly. We're here in America only as "sojourners."

(3) These next thoughts are conjectural. (In other words, I may be wrong about this.) Of what specifically was the author of Hebrews warning his readers? In view of the parallels between Deuteronomy and the Epistle to Hebrews, I reach the following conclusion. Just as that 1st generation of Israelites, because of unbelief, were denied entry into the Land [recorded in Numbers], those early Jewish believers in Christ [the readers of Hebrews] were also at risk of being denied entry into the Land for refusing to go on to maturity. They evidently wanted to remain identified with their unbelieving fellow Jews, perhaps to avoid persecution. To God, that was no different from what that 1st generation of Israelites did. That 1st generation was "saved" by the Passover lamb's blood, but God disciplined them; they forfeited the blessing of being with God in the Land. They didn't lose their salvation, they lost their reward, the promised Abrahamic blessing. Likewise, those early Jewish believers, evidently saved by trust in the atoning sacrifice of Christ and having therefore received eternal life, risked God's discipline by forfeiting being in the Land during the Millennium. They don't lose their salvation, they lose their reward, the promised Abrahamic blessing. So . . . If I'm wrong about this, I'm sorry. If I'm right, be advised: we MUST press on to maturity in Christ. The experience of being in the Land with Christ Jesus is at risk. A common but dangerous conceit is to be smug about our spiritual state and ignore what God has revealed in His Word for us to do or to be. Or, worse, we know His will but don't do it or live it.