



## Biblical Perspectives on the Land

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The thin layer of land which surrounds our earth forms a bridge between life and death, food and famine, the present and the future for the families of the world. Wherever such issues are involved, God is sure to be involved. Thus, we would expect that the Bible has much to say about the land. Until recently, however, the theme of the land in the Bible has been neglected in the disciplines of Old and New Testament theology. That neglect has been recently remedied in part by two significant and comprehensive studies. In the Old Testament field, Walter Brueggemann's *The Land* is a fresh and thorough theological study of the land in the Bible.<sup>1</sup> The other major work in this area from the New Testament side is by W. D. Davies entitled *The Gospel and the Land*.<sup>2</sup> But as Davies himself observes, the Old Testament contains far more material on the issue of the land than does the New. In fact the foundation for the biblical understanding of the land is laid already in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. In this essay we shall attempt to show that the initial promise made by God to Abraham in Genesis 12 functions as a programmatic summary of the perspectives on the land which are found throughout the Bible. We shall

<sup>1</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). Other recent but less extensive Old Testament studies on the land which may be mentioned include Hans Eberhard von Waldow, "Israel and Her Land: Some Theological Considerations," *A Light unto My Path*, ed. Howard Bream et al. (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1974) 493-508; Walther Zimmerli, "Land and Possession," *The Old Testament and the World* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976) 67-79; a study of Jeremiah and Deuteronomy by Peter Diepold, *Israels Land* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1972); and an earlier article by Gerhard von Rad, "The Promised Land and Yahweh's Land in the Hexateuch," *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 79-93, which contains a helpful discussion of the terms used in the Old Testament for the land. A very helpful Bible study on the land is by James Limburg, *A Good Land* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981).

<sup>2</sup>W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California, 1974). Davies has extended his discussion of the importance of the land for ancient and modern Judaism in a more recent monograph, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982).

also seek to integrate our discussion with issues affecting the present crisis of the land in rural America.

### I. THE LAND: GIFT, FAMILY, WORLD, AND FUTURE

Past discussions of the promise of the land within the Pentateuch have centered on distinguishing its use among the various literary layers (the Yahwist, Elohist and Priestly strands)

and its relationship in age to the other elements of the promises made to the ancestors (e.g., the promise of descendants and a divine-human relationship).<sup>3</sup> Walther Zimmerli, for example, argues that the promise of the land is crucial for the earlier layer of the Yahwist, but the land recedes into insignificance for the later Priestly writer who is more concerned with the issue of God's relationship with his people.<sup>4</sup> Other scholars have moved beyond questions of the origin or age of the promise of the land to consider its literary and theological function in the present shape of the Pentateuch. One such study by David J. A. Clines argues that the promise made to the ancestors has three elements which are separable and dominate different books of the Pentateuch: the promise of descendants dominates Genesis 12-50, the promise of a divine-human relationship dominates Exodus and Leviticus, and the promise of land dominates Numbers and Deuteronomy.<sup>5</sup>

Much in Clines' approach is insightful, but his treatment of the land as an element which is independent from the other promises to the patriarchs does not, in our judgment, reflect the intention of the biblical writers or editors. Rather, the promise of the land is intended to form an essential part of a cluster of promises which remain ultimately inseparable from one another. They belong together and are carried forward into each of the books of the Pentateuch.<sup>6</sup> A programmatic distillation of this cluster of related promises occurs in God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 which provides the primary background for the biblical perspective on the land. God calls Abraham to leave his secure homeland in Mesopotamia and to travel to a faraway land, the land of Canaan:

<sup>3</sup>Scholars such as Gerhard von Rad, Sigmund Mowinckel and Martin Noth argued extensively on the relationship of the land to each of the literary sources of the Pentateuch. The debate is summarized by A. Graeme Auld, *Joshua, Moses and the Land: Tetrataeuch-Pentateuch-Hexataeuch in a Generation since 1938* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980). Cf. also J. A. Emerton, "The Origin of the Promises to the Patriarchs in the Older Sources of the Book of Genesis," *Vetus Testamentum* 32 (1982) 14-32.

<sup>4</sup>Walther Zimmerli, *Man and His Hope in the Old Testament* (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, 1968) 66.

<sup>5</sup>David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 1978).

<sup>6</sup>In other words, the promises of the gift of the land, a son and a family, being a blessing to the world, and a hopeful future are assumed and form an integral ingredient in each of the five books of Genesis-Deuteronomy. For example, the theme of the land is important not only in Numbers and Deuteronomy as Clines argues. The land is a significant theme in Genesis, as we shall show below. Land, or the lack of it, is the primary motivation for the exodus out of Egypt in the book of Exodus. The book of Leviticus contains much material which assumes a life on the land or deals directly with land use (e.g., Leviticus 25). The land remains a prominent theme throughout the Pentateuch in its present shape.

Go from your land and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse, and by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen 12:1-3)

This text summarizes four elements of the biblical perspective on the land: (1) the land as God's gift, (2) the land and the family, (3) the land and the world, and (4) the land and the future. Before considering each of these themes in turn, we shall consider the important perspective on

the land provided by the first chapters of Genesis which lead up to God's call to Abraham.

## II. GENESIS 1-11: A PRELUDE OF LAND LOST

God's promise of a new land to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12 appears at the end of a series of stories in Genesis 1-11. These opening chapters of Genesis portray human beings who are rooted in the land but who are moving increasingly toward expulsion and loss of land. In the story of creation in Genesis 1-2, God commands the humans to "have dominion" over the creation (Gen 1:28) which connotes careful nurture and not selfish exploitation. In Genesis 2, God forms humankind "of dust from the ground"; we are created from the soil of the earth and intimately tied to it (Gen 2:7). God then appears as a farmer as he plants his seeds in the garden of Eden (2:8). He takes the earthling named Adam, slaps a hoe in his hand, and sets him to work in the garden. For the Bible, the first vocation given to a human being is farming, caring for the land from which he himself was created.

After this creation account, the narratives in Genesis 3-11 abruptly turn into an escalating series of disastrous stories of the loss of land. The members of the first farm family, Adam and Eve, are thrown out of the garden of Eden, and the ground which they till is cursed (Gen 3:17-19). Cain, a farmer of the land, is expelled from his farm and doomed to wander as a fugitive. Cain's lament to God echoes the anguish of any farmer who loses his land (Gen 4:10-14). The story of Noah's ark and the flood in Genesis 6-9 is a story of the loss of land for the whole human race: "Everything on the dry land...died" (Gen 7:22). Only Noah and his family survive. The first thing Noah does when the flood is over is to throw off his sailor's suit and don his bib overalls and seed corn cap to do a little farming again (Gen 9:20). In Genesis 11, the people of the world leave their farms in a mass migration to the city in order to build a tower high into the heavens and so make a name for themselves. It turns out that they would have fared better if they had stayed down on the farm, for God confuses their language and scatters them all over creation.

These stories in Genesis are all tied together by a series of genealogies which trace family lines from generation to generation. The stories of Genesis 1-11 are stories about families, farm families losing their land. They have forgotten that the land is a gift and a tangible sign of their relationship with God. They have forgotten that they were not created from the ground in order to make a name for themselves but in order to care for their families and for the earth which God created. However, the fact that the story of these families of the

world provides the prelude to God's new venture with Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12 reminds us that God is ultimately concerned not only with one family or nation but with all the families of the earth. God is ultimately concerned not only with one piece of land but with all the land of the earth. Israel's historical experience with her land as she moved either toward loss of land or toward a return to the land is but a microcosm of the world's experience with the earth and its land. Thus, the story of the earthlings and the earth does not end. With Abraham and Sarah, it takes a new direction. There is a future ahead and so hope remains.

The cluster of promises which is definitive for the biblical perspective on the land is already implied in these opening chapters of Genesis: the land as gift, the land and the family, the land and the world, and the land and the future. However, it is in the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12 that these themes are made explicit. They occur at a crucial turning point in the

story of God's ways with the world. A study of these four themes is our next task.

### III. THE LAND AS GIFT

In Genesis 12, God chooses Abraham and Sarah and commands them to leave their secure inheritance in Mesopotamia. God asks them to risk it all for the sake of a promised piece of real estate in some distant place called Canaan. This is a land that God would give as a free and undeserved gift. Abraham and Sarah have some difficulty in learning how to wait for a gift. As part of the package deal, God also promises them the gift of a son. They wait anxiously into their old age, but still no son is born. They take matters into their own hands and try to make the promise happen on their own terms. Abraham has a child through Hagar, Sarah's servant girl (Genesis 16). But God tells Abraham that this is not the promised child. God will give him a son through his own wife, Sarah. The promise is to be a gift from God, not something they have achieved or done. When everything seems hopeless and impossible as Abraham nears his hundredth birthday, then it is that God gives them the gift and Isaac is born (Gen 21:2).

The final test comes in Genesis 22 as God commands Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son. By now, however, Abraham had learned that Isaac was not his possession but a gift. If God wanted him back, Abraham would comply. As Abraham raises the knife to slay his son, an angel stops him. God now knows that Abraham understands what a gift from God is. Only after this test does God allow Abraham to buy a little field in the promised land (Genesis 23). Abraham learns that like his son Isaac, the promised land is a gift from God, a gift which is not to be grasped for selfish purposes but is to be held loosely and given back when God calls for it.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>According to the account in Numbers 13 and 14, when the Israelites drew near to the promised land for the first time since the exodus out of Egypt, they forgot the lesson learned by Abraham. They refused to receive the land by faith as a gift from God which led to their death (Num 14:26-35). The people's subsequent attempt to seize the land by their own power ends in failure and defeat (Num 14:40-45). Land can properly be received only as a gift, not grasped or earned.

This view of the land as gift is built into the law of the land in Leviticus 25. One who buys a piece of land does not own the land itself but only the years of potential crops produced by that land (Lev 25:16). Thus, "your land must not be sold on a permanent basis, because you do not own it; it belongs to God, and you are like foreigners who are allowed to make use of it." This same sentiment was well expressed by the late conservationist Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring*. In her last years she achieved a long-cherished goal of buying a home and a few acres of land on the coast of Maine. She was asked how she felt about owning the land. She replied, "Oh, I don't own it. It is only on loan for me to care for."<sup>8</sup> We in the United States have been given a precious gift of land—440 million acres of the richest soil in the world, all in the temperate climate zone which provides ideal conditions for growing food. The Bible reminds us that this vast natural resource is not our permanent possession. The land is an important gift which must be carefully conserved and used for the good of all.

Like those human beings in the opening chapters of Genesis, we easily forget that the land is a gift which ultimately belongs only to God. Thus, God reminds us that it is his land through something we do as a regular part of our Sunday morning worship service. It has its origins in Deuteronomy 26. At the end of a week of harvesting his olives and grapes, the Israelite

farmer dresses himself in his sabbath-best, puts the first fruits of his harvest in a basket, and brings them to the place of worship. Deuteronomy 26 then instructs the farmer, “Set the basket down in the LORD’s presence and worship there. Be grateful for the good things that the LORD your God has given you and your family; and let the Levites and the Foreigners who live among you join the celebration” (Deut 26:10-11 TEV). This is, of course, the offering. It is needed not just to pay the bills or to help the less fortunate. The offering is needed for us who give it as a reminder to ourselves that the land and all that we have really belongs to God—just like Abraham’s son Isaac, just like the promised land, just like the harvest of that Israelite farmer in Deuteronomy.

In this way the land assumes something of a sacramental quality. The land is a real and down-to-earth sign of God’s relationship to us. Through the land that relationship is defined primarily as gift-giving from the side of God and as thanksgiving from the side of his people. The land is not earned but given by God out of love (Deut 6:8-10). As the agricultural products of bread and wine which derive from the land become signs of God’s grace in the Lord’s Supper, so too the land itself becomes a concrete and tangible sign of God’s love for his people.

#### IV. THE LAND AND THE FAMILY

The first promise which God makes to Abraham in Genesis 12 is the gift of the land. But the promise of land means nothing to Abraham without the next part of the promise: “I will make of you a great nation” (12:2) and “to your descendants I will give this land” (12:7). God promises Abraham not just land but land

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Laurence Pringle, *What Shall We Do with the Land?* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1981) 142.

*and* children, not just a farm but a *family* farm. Each family is to have an adequate share of the land to care for its needs. This is illustrated already in the next chapter, Genesis 13, in which Abraham and his nephew Lot agree to divide the land so that each of their families will have enough turf on which to live (cf. also Gen 36:6-8).

This basic principle is applied again when the Israelites prepare to enter the promised land. The book of Numbers contains a biblical “Homestead Act” wherein each family and tribe is to receive a parcel of the promised land. The location of each parcel is to be decided by lot, another way of saying that God is the one who actually divides and gives the land to each family (Num 26:52-56). In order to ensure that the land stays in the family, the family farm is to be passed on from eldest son to eldest son in generations to come. However, a problem arises. A man named Zelophehad is blessed with five daughters but no sons. Zelophehad dies, and the daughters of Zelophehad urge Moses to allow them to inherit their father’s land. In this way, the farm will stay in the family, even though there are no sons. Moses consults God. God agrees with the daughters that the family farm needs to be preserved, even if some rules need to be bent or some precedents broken. Preserving the family farm is an important priority (Num 27:1-11; cf. also Num 36:1-12).<sup>9</sup>

Another provision in the Bible designed to preserve the family farm in Israel is the Jubilee year. The Jubilee was to come every 50 years. In the fiftieth year all debts were to be forgiven (Deut 15:1), and all land was to be returned to its original family (Lev 25:13-16, 23-24).

The Jubilee was designed to guarantee that in the structure of agriculture, no one family or group should acquire too great a concentration of control over the basic resources. In the course of her actual history, ancient Israel had a difficult time enforcing the Jubilee year. The Jubilee was pushed into a far distant future as an eschatological hope (Isa 61:1-2). The theme of the Jubilee is taken up again as the keynote for Jesus' inaugural address at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke (4:18-21). Jesus rekindles the hope of the new age which is marked by the reappearance of the Jubilee, "the acceptable year of the Lord."

The major threat to the family farm, according to the Bible, comes with the kings, the monarchy which is introduced later into Israel's history. Many of the kings came to believe they were above the law of God and sought to concentrate ever more power and land in their own hands. The story which best illustrates this kingly abuse of the family farm is told in 1 Kings 21. The wicked King Ahab has his eye on a little farm near his palace owned by Naboth, but Naboth refuses to sell his family farm to the king. Because of his refusal, Naboth is framed for a crime he did not commit. When Naboth is executed, King Ahab seizes Naboth's land as his own. One evening the king is out gleefully surveying his newly acquired hobby farm when along comes Elijah, prophet of God and thorn in Ahab's flesh. Elijah minces no words in condemning Ahab to a horrible death as punishment for his greed (1 Kings 21:19).

<sup>9</sup>The situation has not changed much since the days of Zelophehad's daughters. Women owning land remains a rarity in the world. Although women work two-thirds of the world's working hours, they receive only 10% of the world's income and own only 1% of the world's property.

The prophets of God often fought against the kings and corporate land grabbers in defense of the family farm. The prophet Isaiah condemns the injustice of big landowners who are buying up small farms: "You are doomed! You buy more houses and fields to add to those you already have. Soon there will be no place for anyone else to live and you alone will live in the land" (Isa 5:8 TEV). Corporate farmers tend to be poor stewards of the land, and the land will eventually refuse to produce for them. Isaiah warns, "The grapevines growing on five acres of land will yield only five gallons of wine. Ten bushels of seed will produce only one bushel of grain" (Isa 5:10). The prophet Micah was likewise no lover of corporate farmers: "When they want fields, they seize them; when they want houses, they take them. No man's family or property is safe. And so the LORD says, 'I am planning to bring disaster on you, and you will not be able to escape it'" (Mic 2:2-3 TEV). According to the biblical perspective, the land properly belongs to families. When the basic structure of the family farm is seriously threatened, then some form of judgment is likely to follow.

## V. THE LAND AND THE WORLD

God gives the gift of the land not only to care for our own individual families. God gives the land ultimately for the sake of other families around the world. God promises Abraham, "By you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen 12:3; cf. also Gen 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). The inclusion of Genesis 1-11 at the beginning of the Bible functions as a continual reminder that God cares for the people of the whole world. God gives land and a family to Abraham and Sarah not as an end in itself but as a means by which to bless the world. A case in point is the grain reserve program initiated by Joseph as Pharaoh's secretary of agriculture in

Genesis 41. Joseph's program saves the lives not only of his own family but also the families of all the earth (Gen 41:57).

Having been born and raised on a farm, I enjoyed working the soil with my father in my formative years. I remember one particular evening at the end of the season of spring planting. My father and I had been working all day, trying to finish the last of the bean planting before dark. We finished just as the sun was setting in a bank of clouds in the western sky. We stood looking out over the black fields, pregnant with the seed of life and food for hungry souls. We talked about family farming as a good way of life and as a noble calling from God. I recall my father saying, "You know, there will always be hungry people in the world. It's a privilege to know God has put us here to help him feed them." He knew that the land is given in order to be a blessing to the families of the earth.

Far too many families in our world today have not yet received the full blessing of the land. The statistics are grim: 20 million people die of hunger every year; 500 million people live on the edge of starvation; 1 billion people are malnourished. The real tragedy is that enough food is currently being produced in the world to feed every person on earth. But many go hungry because food supplies are distributed unevenly. Moreover, the distribution of land ownership in the world is a far cry from the biblical vision of justice in regard to the land. Four percent of the world's large landowners control half of the world's cropland. Small family farmers who constitute 58% of the world's land holders make

do with only eight percent of the world's tillable acreage. The promise of the land as a blessing to all the families of the earth is one which remains unfulfilled for much of the world.

## VI. THE LAND AND THE FUTURE

The promise of Gen 12:1-3 directs us to the horizon of the future. God makes the promise of this new land not for the sake of Abraham himself but for the sake of his children and all future generations (Gen 12:7). Abraham lived his long life without the promised land ever really being his. Instead, he wandered in and out of the land which was owned by other peoples (Gen 17:8). Abraham had to learn the hard task of living in hope and with patience, working with and trusting God and his promises for the future.

This future-oriented perspective is typical of the biblical posture toward the land. The Bible is concerned with the preservation and nurture of the land so that the next generation may live and prosper in it. It was for this reason that the sabbath law of rest for people was extended to include the land. God commands Moses in Leviticus 25: "You shall honor the LORD by not cultivating the land every seventh year....The seventh year is to be a year of complete rest for the land, a year dedicated to the LORD" (Lev 25:2-4). The command is followed by a promise that then "the land will produce its crops, and you will have all you want to eat and will live in safety" (Lev 25:19). The land must be allowed to replenish itself so that it will remain fertile and productive for future generations. Unless the land is carefully tended in such a way, the land itself can rise up and retaliate against abuse and bring ruin upon those who farm it (Lev 18:24-25, 28).

The land in the United States has experienced its share of abuse. The most dramatic example was the Dust Bowl days of the 1930s as prairie winds carried off millions of tons of

unprotected soil parched by drought. An estimated 100 million acres of farmland were permanently lost to wind erosion in those years; they would never again produce any significant crops.<sup>10</sup> But the erosion of our soil continues even today. One survey estimates that one-third of all U.S. cropland is suffering significant soil losses which will lead to a gradual drop in the amount of food produced per acre.<sup>11</sup> We are also losing land in other ways. Between 1945 and 1975 an area of farmland the size of Nebraska—45 million acres—was lost to urban sprawl, highways, airports, and water reservoirs.<sup>12</sup> From a global perspective, fertile soil is being lost at an alarming rate: every single day 780 square miles of the earth's land is being eaten up by the spread of towns, roads, mining, and soil erosion.<sup>13</sup>

Not only is land being lost but so are families on the land. In 1935 there were about six million farms in the United States. In 1980 there were about two million. By the year 2000, some estimate that there will be only one million farms left; one out of every two farms that now exist will be abandoned. Behind these

<sup>10</sup>Pringle, *What Shall We Do*, 7.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>13</sup>Anne Harris, Carolyn Harrison, and Peter Smithson, *The Land and Conservation* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1972) 38.

statistics are many farmers and their families who are suffering under enormous economic pressures as forces beyond their control threaten them with exile and loss of their land. The ripple effect on small businesses, banks, and rural communities is equally devastating.

One example of the pain of land loss that some families are experiencing is the family of Bud and Hazel Hirst. Bud is a 51-year-old farmer in Unionville, Missouri, who is losing his family farm this year. He reflects on his experience in these words,

It's just brutal on everybody. I think, what will I do, where will I go? What will my son do? It hurts. It hurts real bad. I don't want that boy to have to leave here. He came down here to make a new life and it's not working. So you kind of lose interest. You just go through your normal routine, but you don't have much heart left in it. It keeps you down.<sup>14</sup>

Bud's wife, Hazel, has written a book of poems entitled *Bitter Harvest*. She ends one of her poems in this way:

I'm walking for the last time along this country road.  
I can still hear the auctioneer as everything is sold.  
The farm is desolate and barren now as auction tickets wave their mocking hand.  
The naked emptiness just echoes my bitter tears that stain the land.  
We came here young, bright-eyed and eager to make our own place in the sun,  
And now we're leaving empty-handed.  
This year we both turned fifty-one.<sup>15</sup>



At the national farm crisis rally in Ames, Iowa, last winter, one of the farmers held up a sign which read, “Why us, Lord?” That is the same question that old Abraham and Sarah probably asked of God many times. They had moved from their homeland as a young and bright-eyed farm couple, eager to make their own place in the sun. Countless years were spent yearning for a child to be born. They also yearned for a land which they did not receive until Sarah died. Only then did God let Abraham buy a small field so that he could bury his wife Sarah (Genesis 23). That was the only piece of the promised land that Abraham ever owned (cf. Acts 7:5). That little piece of real estate, however, was a pledge, a promissory note that Abraham’s descendants would someday have a future in the land. Years later the prophet Jeremiah lived through a time in Israel’s history when the land was lost to the Babylonians and the people were being carted off to exile. In the midst of this time of despair and loss of land, God commands Jeremiah to buy a field from his cousin’s farm. The purchase of the field is to be a sign of hope that Israel would one day return home: “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land” (Jer 32:15).

We do not always know what the shape of God’s future with the land will take. The biblical perspective assures us, however, that God’s ultimate will for the future is not landlessness and exile. God desires land and life in abundance for his people and his world. For people of the land, that often requires walking

<sup>14</sup>From a transcript of “Down on the Farm,” an ABC News “Nightline” television program aired on January 17, 1985 (New York: American Broadcasting Companies, 1985) 2.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 3.

by faith and not by sight. It requires praying and working in hope and not caving into despair. It requires dying to self and rising to trust in God. God gave such a faith to a farmer-prophet named Habakkuk in the midst of hard times:

Though the fig tree do not blossom,  
nor fruit be on the vines,  
the produce of the olive fail  
and the fields yield no food,  
the flock be cut off from the fold  
and there be no herd in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,  
I will joy in the God of my salvation. (Hab 3:17-18)

## VII. CONCLUSION

We began our study by observing that the cluster of promises to the ancestors in the Pentateuch—the promise of the land as God’s gift, the promise of a son and a family, the promise of being a blessing to the world, and the promise of a hopeful future—formed an inseparable whole. The promises belong together in their present form, and their theological importance is best understood when interpreted together as God’s unified purpose for his people. The New Testament maintains this holistic view of the Old Testament promises insofar as it proclaims that the ancestral promises find their definitive fulfillment in one person, the person of Jesus Christ

and the community of faith which confesses him as Lord and Savior.<sup>16</sup> The New Testament also knows, however, that the ancestral promises have not been completely fulfilled. The apostle Paul speaks of creation waiting “with eager longing” to be “set free from its bondage to decay” (Rom 8:19,21). “We know,” says Paul, “that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now” (Rom 8:22). The land as an essential part of God’s creation continues to yearn for the fulfillment of those Old Testament promises made long ago to Abraham and Sarah. The land continues to yearn to be received and treated as a gift, to be justly distributed among families, to be a blessing to all the families of the earth, and to be a source of hope and life for future generations. As earthlings in Christ, we are freed from any illusions that we are anything but earth-bound creatures and servants of God. As such, we are called to yearn for and work toward the fulfillment of the Old Testament vision of the land, a land without which we cannot live and to which we will all one day return.

<sup>16</sup>The New Testament presents Jesus as the definitive fulfillment of all the ancestral promises of the land, descendants, a blessing to the world, and hope for the future. The Old Testament promise of the land, for example, came to be concentrated in the promise of Jerusalem and its Temple. Cf. W. D. Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 152-54. Mark’s passion story (Mark 14-15) portrays the person of Jesus and the community which follows after him as the new Temple and thus the fulfillment of the promise of the Temple and hence also of the land. Cf. Donald Juel, *Messiah and Temple* (SBLDS 31; Missoula: Scholars, 1976). Note also 2 Cor 6:14-7:1. The promise that Abraham would have a son which would lead to innumerable descendants likewise is fulfilled in Jesus and his followers (Rom 4:13-25). The New Testament clearly understands the promise of being a blessing to all the families of the earth as fulfilled in Christ (Acts 3:25-26; Gal 3:8-9). The promise of future hope also finds its culmination in the person of Jesus (Acts 26:6-7; Rom 4:18; 5:1-5; 15:4, 13).