

STUDIES IN BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY No. 3

“The Land”

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Review

We said last time that the term *eschatology*, though it literally means the “doctrine of the last things,” properly refers to the entire biblical doctrine of the future, including those parts of what was the future when certain parts of the Bible were written, but which now lie in the past. A modern way of speaking about this phenomenon of “future now in the past” is with the phrase *inaugurated eschatology*, that is, the future that has already come to pass, the already unfolded future, that forms the foundation for what must still come to pass. So we might speak of two dimensions of eschatology in the Bible: *inaugurated or already fulfilled* on the one hand *and the yet unconsummated, unfulfilled, and still future* on the other. It is particularly important to acknowledge this because so much of the Bible’s vision of what remains to come to pass is mixed together in biblical prophecy with predictions of events that have already come to pass. In fact, such is the nature of the biblical idiom of prophetic prediction – the form of words in which the prediction of the future is cast – that, very often, as we will see, there are today among Bible-believing interpreters constant argument over whether a particular prophecy has already been fulfilled or is still yet to be fulfilled. We spoke last week of the *prophetic perspective* or *prophetic foreshortening* in which the future is often seen in the vision of a biblical author as a single moment, a unity, which only history reveals to be, in fact, a succession of events, even a succession spread over long periods of time.

Then we pointed out that the Bible’s vision of the future, both its inaugurated vision and its vision of what is yet to come to pass is presented in the form of a number of motifs or central themes. We mentioned them last time – the seed, the land, the kingdom of God, etc. – and considered one of them, the seed, in some detail. In the matter of the seed, we pointed out how characteristically this motif is developed. The promise of the seed is developed in steps and stages throughout the OT. The promise of the seed of the woman was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, but not entirely. He has done part of his work but not all of it. What is more, he is *the* seed, but we are also Abraham’s seed and there are nations still to be gathered, seed yet to be drawn into the circle of the redeemed. So we have a motif that is given very early in the Bible and carries us all along the way to the very end of history. We are going to find that other biblical motifs are woven through the Bible in the same way, binding past, present, and future together in a connected vision of the unfolding drama of salvation.

Tonight we take up another of these motifs, another given us very early in the Bible, that of *the land*.

It is introduced in Gen. 12:1-3:

“The Lord God had said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.

“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make

your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”””

The Lord will show Abram a land and it is there that he will live, and the implication is that it is there that God's promises will be fulfilled for him. There is no doubt, as we have already seen in some ways, that these are perhaps the most unifying verses in the entire Bible. The rest of the Bible and of history we are taught is the unfolding of the divine purpose and promise here stated in summary form. A nation, in those days and still today, was a people (seed), a land, a constitution (the law of Moses – a rule binding the people together), and a government (that will develop over time too, until the King is anointed). The rest of the Pentateuch develops these promises in those four ways.

In any case, from this point on, “the land” occupies a very important place in the biblical vision of the future. In fact, I have read though I have not bothered to check this, that *eretz*, the Hebrew word for land, is the fourth most commonly used noun in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament.

In the chapters immediately following God's summons to Abram to go to the new land are taken up with the question of the land. Remember, as soon as Abram reaches Canaan, God makes a still more specific promise to him: “to your offspring I will give this land” (12:7). And Abram believed that promise. He left the city of man to search for the heavenly country. He heard God's voice, saw by faith (as we read in Hebrews 11:13) the promised land – not just Canaan as real estate but the heaven of which it was the sign and seal – and left his homeland as God commanded him. He found a place in Canaan, pitched his tent and built an altar. But, then there was a famine and Abram left the land and put the seed in danger by lying to the Egyptian Pharaoh about his relationship to Sarah. It seems pretty clear to me that Abram never should have left the land. The famine was no proof that Abram was not doing God's will. Faith must surmount many obstacles. Abram, and this would not be the last time, was taking matters into his own hands instead of relying on revelation. Inevitably things went wrong when he did that.

Then there is the separation between Abram and Lot, the narrative of which occupies Gen. 13. When Abram allows Lot to choose and the nephew chooses the attractive locale of the Valley, leaving Abram with Canaan proper, the Lord renews his promise to the patriarch: “Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. ... Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.” And the result was that Abram did that and built another altar to the Lord.

And then in chapter 15 the Lord renewed his covenant with Abram and told him that his offspring would be strangers in a country not their own for 400 years, enslaved and mistreated, but after that they would return to the promised land and take possession of it. The specific promise, as we read in 15:18-19, is once again: “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates (a larger area than so far had been indicated), the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.” You get the point: the promise of the land is a major feature of the covenant God made with Abram and so comes in for emphatic repetition. From

this point onward in the Bible, the land is one of the “preeminent images of longing in the Bible.” [*Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 487] The status of the patriarchs as sojourners and pilgrims has always in view the eventual settlement in the land. And the exodus only intensifies that longing and expectation, with *eretz* occurring some 400x in the last four books of the Pentateuch. This land, of course, was a land “flowing with milk and honey,” a land of abundance, of blessing, of prosperity. It was also, in the economy of God, the land of rest after the pilgrimage and wandering of the people of God.

As we read in Joshua 1:13, “The Lord your God is providing you a place of Rest, and will give you this land.”

God’s promise was fulfilled, of course, and Israel, after some delay, was brought into the land and took possession of it. Before she did, however, God told her that the condition of her remaining in the land he had given her was her faithfulness to him and to his covenant.

Over the next long period of Israel’s history, most of the time the land functions as the sphere of God’s judgment. Enemies enter it, droughts and famines plague it, and, finally, the people of God are driven from it because of their infidelity. As Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden, so unbelieving Israel is cast out of the Promised Land. So, in a way, “the land acts as a barometer of the nation’s relationship with God, bearing blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.” [*DBI*, 487]

Then, as you well know from your reading of the OT prophets, the place that the land held in the imagination of Israel is given its full rights in the prophetic forecast of the restoration of God’s people and the inauguration of Israel’s golden age. In the restoration, the Lord “will set them in their own land” (Isa. 14:1). He “will bring them back to their own land” (Jer. 16:15). He will cause Israel “to dwell in their own land” (Ezek. 28:25) and “will plant Israel in their own land never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them” (Amos 9:15). There are many statements like those.

And the vision is not only of the people of God restored to the land but of their enjoying unprecedented prosperity there. We looked at one of those prophecies last week from Gen. 49:11-12. But there are many others. Take, for example, this passage from Isa. 65: [vv. 17-24]:

“Behold I will create *new heavens and a new earth (eretz)*. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them. Before they call I

will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,' says the Lord."

Again and again in the OT prophets, the vision of the glorious future, the vindication of God's faithful people, is cast in the image of them once again in the land and with it more full of blessing than ever before, far beyond what Israel ever enjoyed before.

Now, what is remarkable is that this preoccupation with *the land* virtually disappears when we enter the New Testament. In fact in the only three instances in which the OT sense of the land appears in the New Testament, the idea is "re-signified." Let me show you what I mean.

1. In Matt. 5:5, in the midst of the "beatitudes" that begin the Lord's *Sermon on the Mount*, we have "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." That language is taken over from Psalm 37:11 where we read: "...the meek will inherit the land." Now the Greek word used in Matt. 5 is the same word as used in the LXX of Psalm 37:11 to translate "land." So it could be argued that the Lord Jesus means that the meek will inherit the land. But in the context of the beatitudes and the New Testament in general it seems clear that there has been a shift. "The Land" has become "the earth." The idea has been generalized and no longer is the geographical area of Canaan especially in view.
2. In Romans 4:13 this becomes even clearer. There Paul says that Abraham and his seed received the promise that he and they would be the heir "of the world." Land now definitely has been generalized to the entire world. *Eretz*, land, has become *kosmos*, world. The entire inheritance of man, lost on account of sin, will be returned to Abraham and his seed.
3. You have something similar at work in Ephesians 6:2-3 where Paul tells the children of a church composed largely of Gentiles that they should honor and obey their parents as the fifth commandment requires, for it is the first commandment with a promise, he says. And that promise is "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy a long life on the earth." The promise of the land *per se* now can be made to Gentiles who do not live in Canaan. The whole earth has become the land.

This prepares the way, of course, for the teaching, already anticipated in the Old Testament, but made specific and emphatic in the New, that Canaan, the Promised Land, was a foreshadowing of heaven, of the heavenly country. That point is made explicitly in Hebrews 11 where we are taught that the OT saints themselves perfectly well understood that the promise of Canaan's real estate was more significant as a promise of heaven eventually. They knew that it was not any part of this world that God had ultimately promised them. That could be gained and would still be lost at death. And, as that author already made a point of saying in Hebrews 4, the rest that God's faithful people were seeking was not really physical peace and prosperity in Canaan, it was the eternal peace of heaven. Israel entered the promised land under Joshua, he reminds us, but still later David is talking to Israelites about the danger of not entering the rest of God. You can be in Canaan and not have God's rest. That rest is the heavenly country.

Well, once again, we have traced a theme or motif right through the Bible. There are fulfillments of the promise of the future, but much still remains unfulfilled. Israel entered the land, but none of God's people have entered *the land* in its fullness. That awaits the second coming as the

author of Hebrews is careful to say at the end of his chapter 11. We too, even we Christians, even living as we do on this side of the cross and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, we too do not have an enduring city here but are looking for the city that is to come (13:14). We Christians have the promised land to a point, for Paul can say that the meek inherit the earth and that obedient children will receive the blessings of a long life in the promised land, but we are still waiting for that everlasting land, that country that is above.

So, as with the seed, this motif connects the very beginning of the history of salvation to its very end, yet unfulfilled and unconsummated.

And, in the same way, the prophetic perspective in which many of these prophecies of restoration to the land are cast, creates the typical problem or problems. Let me mention some of them.

1. Is there a biblical promise that ethnic Israel would return to the land at some future point in history, a promise fulfilled in 1948? Many evangelicals think so and are adamant that to deny this is both to deny the plain-speaking of the Bible and to lose the advantage in speaking to others of this great and contemporary fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Others argue that by the time the NT has finished with the land prophecies, and has resigned them, we cannot say that there is anything in the Bible that can be taken to be a prediction of the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948. I would say that most of the authorities that I usually readily defer to are among the latter group, not the former. But the answer one comes to will have little to do with the exegesis of particular texts, but with one's larger view of biblical prophecy.
2. For example, what are we to do with the many prophecies in the OT prophets of a golden age in Israel's future, of a time of God's blessing in unprecedented measure usually a great blessing experienced in the land? Well, premillennialists tend to see those texts prophesying a time in human history but following the return of Christ. They point out the supernatural character of the conditions that will prevail – e.g. the wolf lying down with the lamb, people living for extraordinarily long times, etc. (just what we read in Isa. 65) – and argue that this can be neither a time in the history of our epoch nor can it be a reference to heaven itself. After all, if people die at one hundred, they still die. The postmillennialists look at the figurative language and see here a reference to a time of great spiritual advance, history's greatest revival, all taking place before the return of Christ. The amillennialists argue that one cannot press the details – the fact that Isa. 65 talks about men dying at a hundred and being thought mere youths – and that these are in fact descriptions of heaven. What conclusion you come to will not be determined by the interpretation of individual texts, so much as it will be determined by how you read the Bible as a whole and its vision of the future. And that will be the case with respect to many of our motifs. What precisely is being predicted to occur and when it will occur are questions finally answered in terms of an already chosen viewpoint.

We'll think more about this as we continue our series, but I want you to get used to the fact that all of these various motifs can be taken as proof of or as an argument against a particular eschatological interpretation. That is the nature of the problem and that is why, though the arguments pro and con for the three different pictures of the end of history have been around a

long time, there is no sign that the argument is being settled and that Christians are finally coalescing around a single interpretation.

But, as we conclude, back to our motif of the land. There is a difficulty that we urbanites have, I think, in appreciating this biblical emphasis. We are less conscious of *land*. For us, land is a small lot on which sits our house. We don't think about land as the context of our life, the sphere of our experience as did those who lived in biblical times, especially Old Testament times. I drove to Moscow, ID last Wednesday. It was my first time ever in the Palouse. And you can't help but be impressed with the land. Rolling hills brown if left fallow, bright green if in wheat, and as far as the eye can see. It swallows you up. No wonder the Lord should have made so much of the land in his Word.

There are many ways in which that motif is used in the Word of God to encourage us and lift our hearts. We have a destination toward which we are going. Our life is not aimless, the activity of life pointless. We are going somewhere. What is more, it is a place of unparalleled beauty and fullness of life. We have deep within us, by nature, a longing to live in a beautiful place. We spend thousands, millions on our homes, on our yards. We want to live among beautiful things in a beautiful place. God has made us like that. The Bible itself begins with a beautiful place and ends with a beautiful place. And so shall we who are in Christ! More beautiful than we can imagine.

It is good, from time to time, to try hard to imagine what heaven will be like, when we finally take possession of that land. We will try to do that as best we can in a later study, but ask yourself why God used this image of a beautiful land to set before us the nature and character of our future life.

What is more, it will be *our* land. It is God's first, of course, but it will be ours as well. We will have the possession of it, never to be driven from it. In my neighborhood, from time to time, we will discover a pile of furniture and other possessions piled in front of one of the rental properties on our street. Someone has been evicted. He didn't pay his rent or he abused the property and now he's out on his ear. That happened to Israel too. But it will never happen to us. When we arrive in that land, it will be our home forever.

But, there is this implication also. That land of the future is a continuation of the land in which we live today. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof and it belongs to us as a result. It is not Green Peace's or the Sierra Club's, but neither is it Dow Chemical's or the U. S. government's. It is ours much more, because we are the family of its owner. We have a responsibility for the earth, as stewards, whether we are speaking of evangelizing its people or saving its habitat or preserving its beauty or making the best use of its astonishing wealth and resources. A motif like that of the land connects our life here to our life in the world to come. It is meant to. It gives our place in this world great significance and moral purpose. We may live here as strangers and pilgrims, but it is also the place where we have been put to love and serve the Lord. And again and again in the Bible we see God's people creating little bits of heaven already in this world. When we read that heaven will be, in fact, a reconstituted earth and when we read that the glory and honor of the nations will be brought into heaven, we know that this earth, this land has its own importance, its own great value and we are to live in the active

recognition of this. Living as Christians in and for this earth is not, as it has sometimes been said, polishing brass on a sinking ship. It is being a careful steward of God's gifts and of what God has made and what he has said is important to him. He made us stewards of this earth at the very beginning of human life. He will make us eternal inhabitants of it as well as stewards when the great day comes.

I will never forget the scene, it is for some reason burned into my memory, of my father and mother driving away together from our summer place in the Colorado mountains for the last time in the summer of 1989. I was quite certain that he would never get back there. He loved our mountain valley, its beauty, its peace, its isolation. And he was leaving it for the last time. I watched the car until it was out of sight. That seemed to me a very impressive moment, his last time on our Colorado land before he died that next January, his having to leave never to return.

I have another memory of our Colorado place, that once again has stuck with me though I can't explain why. When we were little children we used to sing the gospel chorus, "I've got a mansion, just over the hilltop, in that bright land where you never grow old." For some reason, I suppose because our valley is surrounded by hills and several rugged summits, and the thought of a place just over one of those hills registered with an impressionable mind, I've always associated that song with our Colorado valley. "Just over the hilltop..." makes a special impression upon a child in a place like that.

Well, I can combine those two images. My father drives away for the last time, but then to where? Over the hilltop, to that bright land where he will never grow old." He leaves a land the Lord made wonderful for him in many ways to go to a land more wonderful by far! Is that not, in a nutshell, the story of the Christian life? It is a story of land: of land temporarily occupied and enjoyed and still more beautiful land soon to be ours forever.