

“The Land Promise: Exegetical Evidence for a Postmillennial Reading”

Gregg Strawbridge, Ph.D.

All Saints Presbyterian Church (CREC), Lancaster, PA
www.WordMp3.com * gs@wordmp3.com * 717-682-7052

Turf Wars

In the 2005 national ETS and SBL meetings there were several seminars devoted to “replacement theology” and specifically on the place of Israel and the politics of “land.” In both cases I personally engaged several of the respondents, such as Timothy Weber¹, Walter Kaiser, Bruce Longenecker, Claudia Setzer, and a few others – on the question of Paul’s use of “land” typology in such passages as Romans 4:13 (“heir of the world”). To my surprise none of the respondents had a clear view of such “promise land” texts. Particularly in the SBL session, it seemed a noticeable oversight that while discussing Paul and Palestine, the texts which address the “land” in Paul were not considered.

The “land promise” is not a scholastic trivial pursuit nor a hermeneutical game of solitaire without consequences in the geo-political events of our day. Any broadcast of CNN will show the relevance of this motif of Scripture.² Any channel surfer is bound to see passionate pleas designed to fund getting Jews to the Israel.³

The theme of the promised land is one which the Bible exegete, theologian, or minister cannot avoid, not merely because he or she watches too much television. The Hebrew term (אֶרֶץ) *'erets* is the fourth most utilized term of the Hebrew Scriptures, used 2504 times in almost 10% of all OT verses. The LXX/NT term (γη) *ge* is used 3422 in the whole of the Greek version of the Scriptures.⁴ The structure of the unfolding redemptive promise to Abram centrally included the land promise. Vern Poythress observes what is hardly debatable. “One of the main aspects of the promise made to Abraham is the promise that he and his offspring will inherit the land (Genesis 12:1, 7; 13:14-17; 15:18-21; 17:8).”⁵

Prophetic Surf and Turf : Eschatological Options

Dealing with the *land* as a theme of prophetic fulfillment turns out to be quite an interesting hermeneutical and eschatological test case. When and how shall the surf and turf promises be fulfilled? “For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of Jehovah, as the waters cover the sea” (Is. 11:9; Hab. 2:14).

Walter Brueggemann sees that land fulfillment in purely Christological terms. “The resurrection of Jesus is the amazing restoration of power and turf when they had surely been lost (on this see the clear claim of restoration in

¹*On The Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend*, Timothy P. Weber (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004). No less a reviewer than Yaakov Ariel, professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, says Weber's “evaluations are fair, his analysis splendid, and his style lucid and convincing. I highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested, in evangelical Christianity and messianic ideas, and in the way they shape popular opinions and policies. On the Road to Armageddon is an excellent book, and its author deserves every praise and possible prize for his achievement,” *The Christian Century*, July 26, 2005.

²As recently as January 5, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's stroke was called divine punishment for “dividing God's land” by prophet of the cable, Pat Robertson. “Dividing the land” — being in this case, moving a quarter of a million Israeli West Bank settlers to provide for 2.4 million Palestinians. As reported by CNN - <http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/01/05/robertson.sharon>

³What is overlooked by the fund-o-mercials is that such actions cause the homelessness of Christians in the land, as well as Muslims. Bernard Sabella of Bethlehem University, Palestine, points out that “Palestinian Christians have deep roots in the land.” There are about 50,000 Christians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and 125,000 or 14 percent of all Arabs in Israel are Christians.” But a majority of Palestinian Christians are found outside of their country because of the seizure of the land by the Israelis. The violence, the Palestinian suicide bombings, can be traced to the conflict created by this displacement. See <http://www.al-bushra.org/holyland/sabella.htm>

⁴The statistic of “fourth most used” was given by Bruce Waltke (March 14, 2006) in “The Promissory Land Covenant in the New Testament,” delivered at Westminster Theological Seminary. The detailed statistics are from BibleWorks (ver. 6).

⁵*Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*, Vern S. Poythress (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995), 69.

Matt. 28:19-20).” Thus, “suffering = crucifixion = landlessness and glory = resurrection = landedness.”⁶ His eschatological vision drifts toward Marxism. “Thus Marxism and Christianity share the vision of a new land commonly and rightly held.”⁷

Famously, dispensational interpreters insist that the physical descendants of Abraham shall yet receive this Palestinian real estate. And there shall be (any day now) quite a *turf war* over this in popular renditions. Some classic dispensationalists maintained that Israel and the Church would occupy different turf in eternity. However, even progressive dispensationalists see that “many aspects of the [Abrahamic] promise remain to be fulfilled, especially those dealing with the 'great nation' seed and the 'land...’”⁸

Avoiding the label dispensational, Walter Kaiser still musters a persuasive case for Israel's future possession of Palestine. Such was his presentation at the discussion at ETS in 2005. Elsewhere he concludes, “For Paul, no one of the previous promises has changed—not even the promise of the land.”⁹ Like other premillennials, he urges that Israel's return to the land and enjoyment of it will happen in the millennium.

Amillennialists, of covenant theology persuasion, have argued for the replacement of the *terrestrial with the celestial*. Bruce Waltke left Dallas Theological Seminary because he could no longer “without reservation” affirm the premillennial outlook on the land. He argues now that the NT teaching is that *land* is spiritualized (referring to Christ), transcendentalized (and points to the heavenly Jerusalem), and eschatologized (points to the new heavens and earth).¹⁰ Urging that the land promise is completely fulfilled in this NT reading, he argues that all truth was given to the apostles regarding the kingdom and the apostles do not affirm a premillennial land grant to ethnic Jews, thus the premillennial view is not true. Likewise, Vern Poythress sees a heavenly fulfillment. He does not suggest that there is any actual physical land which is received as a new inheritance in the current era.¹¹ Palmer Robertson sees the promise of the land in the old covenant as shadowy and typological. The patriarchs were looking beyond it to a deeper, spiritual reality, like the “Jerusalem above.”¹²

While many premillennialists see the millennium as the time of land covenant fulfillment and amillennialists point to the heavenly, spiritual, and eternal-state fulfillments — postmillennialists often see the land promise as being realizable in the inter-advent.¹³ This is not to deny a full consummation of the kingdom in the fully renewed earth

⁶Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002). 165, 167 respectively.

⁷Brueggemann, 205. He continues, “But it is clear that a need in Marxism for some recognition of transcendence is essential. It may be that Christianity can contribute to the conversation.” To this, I say whatever form of Christianity that can only “contribute” is in vital need of an exegesis of Psalm 2.

⁸Robert Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Zondervan, 1993), 58.

⁹Kaiser, Walter C. 1981. “The Promised Land: A Biblical-Historical View.” *Bibliotheca Sacra*. 138 (Oct-Dec): 302-312.

¹⁰“The Promissory Land Covenant in the New Testament,” delivered at Westminster Theological Seminary, available in recorded form.

¹¹*Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*, Vern S. Poythress (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995).

¹² *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2000), see for example pp. 30-1. Though Robertson does not develop it he anticipates the argument below. “Now the patriarch’s promise is understood to imply that he is the heir of *the cosmos*, not merely the land of the Bible (Rom. 4:13). Because God is the Lord of the whole universe, he will fulfill his covenant promise of redemption by reconstitution the cosmos” (10).

¹³By Postmillennial, I mean that the time of Christ's Second Coming is “after” His mediatorial rule (Psalm 110:1) and the nature of His reign from heaven will change the earth in terms of a large-scale transformation before His final consummation in which even death will be overcome by the resurrection. I have argued this more extensively elsewhere, *Millennial Views Debate* (U-Turn magazine <http://www.u-turn.net/10-1/>) and “An Exegetical Defense of Postmillennialism from I Corinthians 15:24-26: The Eschatology of the *Dixit Dominus*,” presented at the 1999 Evangelical Theological Society, Boston.

(after the “second coming”). I believe that there is exegetical evidence for this in the NT use of *land texts*, especially in St. Paul.

Surf's Up Now: Exegetical Evidence for an Interadvental Realization of Inheritance

The NT often refers to the land, to inheritance, and to many terms which served in the OT as synecdoches for the land (e.g., Jerusalem, temple, throne). But statements which explain how the land promise shall be fulfilled are sparse, at best. This has led some to conclude the NT does not ever address the land promise, thus leaving eschatologists to their own devices without the aid of exegetical light.

On the contrary, there are several passages which provide evidence at the intersect of surf and turf and covenant fulfillment. One passage, particularly, provides an exegetical rink for discussion. Romans 4:13 says, “It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.”¹⁴ I would suggest the following (“loaded”) translation: *For not through the torah would come the covenant promise to Abraham (or to his seed) of his inheritance of the earth, but [it came] through the covenant participation of faith.*

In the section Paul mounts a sustained and developed argument that Abraham is the foundation of Gentile inclusion into the people of God. In showing that torah cannot be the final boundary for defining God’s people. He dives deeper than Moses. He plunges through the surf and reaches the ocean floor. He points to the sand of the sea heirs of father Abraham. It is certainly true that “Father Abraham had many sons,” [I am one of them and so are you...]. He is “father of many nations” (v. 16). He argues similarly in Gal. 3:17-18 of the promise being foundational to *torah-nomos*, not the other way around. The conclusion is the very strongest endorsement of Gentile participation, since “the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all” (Rom. 4:16). Catching the popular objection by the **בְּאֵלֵינוּ** – this Gentile participation is not cast as *replacement*, but *inclusion* (also Eph. 2).

The universality of covenant fulfillment finds a voice, not only in Paul, but in many strands of Second Temple Judaism. Numerous examples of the worldwide expansion of Israel’s land could be cited.¹⁵ Sirach indicates the promise to Abraham meant God's covenant faithfulness to “exalt his offspring like the stars, and give them an inheritance from sea to sea and from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth” [NRSV 44:21-22]. The Book of Enoch says, “But for the elect there shall be light and joy and peace, And they shall inherit the earth” (5:7).¹⁶ But there is an important nuance in Paul. Second Temple texts have Israel rule. In Paul, the True Israelite, Messiah Jesus, rules. By His restorative rule, He brings all nations equally into kingdom life (Rom. 9:5; 10:13).¹⁷

For our purposes, the key phrase is τὸ κληρονόμον αὐτὸν εἶναι κόσμου, - “heir of the world.” Does this mean nothing more than Abraham is the progenitor of the believing Gentiles or does this have specific reference to “the land”?¹⁸

(www.wordmp3.com/gs). Also see, Keith A Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1999).

¹⁴**Romans 4:13** - Οὐ γὰρ διὰ νόμου ἡ ἐπαγγελία τῷ Ἀβραάμ ἢ τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ, τὸ κληρονόμον αὐτὸν εἶναι κόσμου, ἀλλὰ διὰ δικαιοσύνης πίστεως.

¹⁵See also, *Jubilees* 17:3 22:14; 32:19; Philo, *De Somniis* 1:175, *De Vita Mosis* 1:155.

¹⁶*The Book of Enoch: The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* [Vol. II Pseudepigrapha], R.H. Charles, ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1913), 163-277.

¹⁷Romans, *NIB*, 496.

¹⁸Sandy and Headlam take this inclusively since “the whole series of promises goes together and it is implied (i) that Abraham should have a son; (ii) that this son should have numerous descendants; (iii) that in One of those descendants the whole world should be blessed; (iv) that through Him Abrahams seed should enjoy world-wide dominion.” *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* in the International Critical Commentary series (T. & T. Clark Publishers, Ltd), 111.

Dispensationalists have not been quick to see this as a “land” text. For example, John Witmer says this “probably refers to ‘all peoples on earth’...”¹⁹ Even progressive dispensationalists urge that the New Testament “does not permit a spiritual absorption of the literal promises to Israel by the church.”²⁰ Greg Herrick in “His Study and Exposition of Romans 4:13-22” associated with the NET Bible admits this is inclusive of the land, while hastening to point out the millennial fulfillment. “The establishment of the millennial kingdom at Christ’s second advent is the final great fulfillment of this covenant in human history. At that time (and indeed on into the eternal state), one will be able to say that our father Abraham has become the heir of the world.”²¹

However, Paul does not *sell futures* on this as a “millennial” hope. It is the interadvental basis of Gentile inclusion in the present (for Paul). Contextually, to argue that Abraham will be heir of the world only in a future alleged millennium after the Second Advent, “Don’t make no sense!” (to quote Pete, *O Brother Where Art Thou*). Indeed, in other texts Paul marks out the interadvental period as *just the time* of kingdom rule through Christ. Jesus’ current reign is to put His enemies under His feet in fulfillment of Psalm 110.²²

Other interpreters, such as Cranfield, see the larger connection of the Edenic biblical theme. He connects this with 1 Cor. 3:21 ff (“all things are yours”), saying: “It is a promise of the ultimate restoration to Abraham and his spiritual seed of man’s inheritance (Compare Gen 1.27-28) which was lost through sin.”²³ Likewise, Dunn says “the blessing promised to Abraham and his seed (including ‘the nations’) is the restoration of God’s created order, of man to his Adamic status as steward of the rest of God’s creation; over against a more nationalistic understanding of the promise, Paul’s ‘interpretation of the promise is a-territorial,’ fulfilled ‘in Christ.’”²⁴

It appears that dispensational and premillennial views, while acknowledging the earthliness of the land (not spiritualizing it away), nevertheless fail to connect the dots of Christ’s fulfillment to the original purpose of God in creation. God’s gift for man was that he exercise dominion over all the world (Gen. 1:26-27). The fall created a dominion-vacuum. God’s call and covenant to Abram was to *undo the fall*. While Israel failed, True Israel, Jesus, fulfilled Israel’s role. Jesus, thus, is the new Adam or last Adam, shaping a new humanity made after His image. The universal dominion of Christ now ensures that Christ is the true landlord, the True Man “appointed heir (κληρονόμος) of all things” (Heb. 1:2). It will not do to put off His dominion until the Second Advent (Matt. 28:19-20). That is precisely what Paul asserts is happening now as the family of Abraham (renewed image-bearers) expand to be “many nations” (Rom. 4:17). N.T. Wright says, “The covenant is fulfilled in the creation of a worldwide family marked out by Abraham-like faith.”²⁵

The amillennial vision of a mere heavenly inheritance (or only in the eternal state) also falls short of Paul’s emphasis that in the present, the land promise is fulfilled as Christ (and his body) have gospel dominion and fill the whole world. The original creation mandates retold to Abraham are fulfilled in the interadvental, world-wide family of Christ in the earth. Christ’s rule is on earth, as well as in heaven. If this is so, we might expect Paul to apply a

¹⁹Romans, [Dallas Seminary] Bible Knowledge Commentary, 454.

²⁰Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 93.

²¹http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=2342

²²I have argued this more extensively elsewhere, “An Exegetical Defense of Postmillennialism from I Corinthians 15:24-26: The Eschatology of the *Dixit Dominus*,” presented at the 1999 Evangelical Theological Society, Boston. (www.wordmp3.com/gs).

²³CEB Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985), 90.

²⁴James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* (WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 213. Here he cites W.D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land. Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 179.

²⁵Romans, *New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, 496.

practical component of the land promise to Gentile believers outside the “land” (of Palestine).

Holy Turf: In Ephesus?

Lo and behold - we find that Paul urges the same fullness of Gentile participation in covenant promises (including the land) elsewhere. In Ephesians 2, while not speaking explicitly of the land, it does refer to full participation. Gentiles were excluded from “the commonwealth of Israel,” “the covenants of promise” and there was a “wall of separation.” Now in Christ there is “access” and you are “no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” and part of the “the whole building,” growing into a “holy temple in the Lord,” “a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” These key concepts overflow with land connections. The term “commonwealth” (πολιτεία) refers to “citizenship” elsewhere (Acts 22:28). Fourth Macc. uses the term of “their commonwealth” (4 Macc. 3:20, NRSV) and “the ancestral tradition of your *national life*” (4 Macc. 8:7). Fourth Macc. 17:9 is especially interesting, “the violence of the tyrant who wished to destroy the way of life of the Hebrews” (NRSV) (τὴν Εβραίων πολιτείαν).

Gentile believers also have a share in the “covenants of promise” (Eph. 2:12) (διαθηκῶν τῆς ἐπαγγελίας). In Galatians, Paul speaks singularly of the Abrahamic covenant, “And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29). But in Ephesians (2:12) he implies the full participation in the covenant life of Israel which unfolded in covenants (plural, διαθηκῶν) of “the promise” (singular, τῆς ἐπαγγελίας). This is exactly the point of the argument in Romans 4 and Galatians 3, also. This is not *replacement theology*, but *inclusion theology*.

That Christ's body of believers are a Temple or Dwelling of God is emphasized by virtually all NT authors.²⁶ In 1 Peter 2:4-6, Gentile aliens and strangers who were dispossessed of a land with a temple, yet they are “being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”²⁷ However, to speak of the “temple” is to speak of Jerusalem and thus the *land*. Poythress observes that the meaning of tabernacle, which is God dwelling with His people, is itself a “land” type. God dwells in a place with His people.²⁸

Thus, all three aspects (commonwealth, covenant, temple) of the Gentile-included new people of God overlap with the covenant land promise. Even more, however, at the end of Ephesians, the “land” is explicitly referenced. It provides confirmation of the expansion motif even in pastoral and familial categories. An original promise regarding “the land” is expanded to outside the land – to the “earth.” Paul writes,

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother,” which is the first commandment with promise: “that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth [γῆ]. (Eph. 6:1-3)

The term “earth [γῆ]” certainly could be translated “land” (as in Palestine). Is this what Paul meant? Though Dr. Kaiser actually disputed me on this last year, Paul could hardly be telling Ephesian Christian children that obeying their parents will bring them blessings of long life in Palestine! Or is Paul simply spiritualizing the land promise? But he has assured us that “For Paul, no one of the previous promises has changed—not even the promise of the land.”²⁹ It is strange that Paul would quote the promise component of this, rather than just the moral command (cf. Col 3:20).

²⁶In the Synoptics and John, this is how I would see texts like Matt. 27:40, “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days” (ibid) and in Paul (1Cor. 3:16, Eph. 2, etc), in Peter (above) and in John's Revelation (ch. 21ff).

²⁷It is instructive to note that Peter's “the cornerstone” references were first used by Christ after a prophetic “destroying of the temple” in the “cleansing of the temple” events of Matthew 21:42f. “Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD's doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes’? Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.” Hence there is an explicit connection between the covenant breaking of that Cornerstone-[Christ]-rejecting generation and the new building of the people of God.

²⁸Poythress, *Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*, 12.

²⁹Kaiser, “The Promised Land: A Biblical-Historical View.”

Given the sustained argument of covenantal inclusion in Eph. 2, it is warranted to take γῆ here as “the earth,” since Ephesus is outside the “holy land.” The KJV, ASV, NAS, NIV, NKJ, RSV, NRS versions agree. Thus, “the land” has become for the new people of God, “the earth.” This was the original purpose for Abraham’s promise, after all. Our Lord taught that “the meek inherit the earth,” (κληρονομήσουσιν τὴν γῆν) (Matt. 5:5). God has called his new covenant people to be ruled from heavenly Jerusalem, but to be a temple in all the earth.

Surf and Turf Now: Conclusion

Thus, I have argued that there is exegetical evidence in Paul (Rom. 4:13, Eph. 2:12ff, 6:1-4) that supports a postmillennial reading of the land promise. Such a reading affirms against our *DaVinci Code*, gnostic foes that God's redemption is a redemption of the creational world of incarnate persons. In the fullest consummation of this, bodies shall be raised from the grave. Jesus resurrection was the first fruits of that harvest. Thus, the new life of resurrection is present (John 5:24ff, 2 Tim. 1:10). The gospel proclamation of covenant fulfillment in Christ is not anti-creational. It is not a “pie in the sky” spirituality.

Over against, amillennial views, the land promise is not fulfilled in an unlandly land, or an unearthly earth. While we agree with the fullest renovation in the so called “eternal-state” - the renewed earth in the consummation shall bears the same identity as the “third rock from the Sun.” In the same way that our bodies have an identity with our resurrected bodies, so this creation, now growing, shall be renewed (Rom. 8:22ff). The new creation gospel brings life and peace into creation, now. It restores humanity, now. We are to live on the earth, in covenant fulfillment, now. And it provides hope of a future creational glory.

Over against premillennial views, the specific restoration of Israel to the land was a preparation for new covenant fulfillment in the work of Jesus. True Israel was raised and all united to Him in faith have such life. Now all ethnic peoples, including Jews and Arabs, have access to the rule from Mt. Zion above, but only through Jesus (Heb. 12:22ff). From which we take our marching orders for life in the current cosmos of inheritance.³⁰

Abraham's promise aimed to get back to Adam's original mandate: dominion in the earth. Paul's use of the “land” is grounded in creation (Adamic dominion), fulfilled in the new creation (Last Adam). God's purposes were to bless all the nations. So in the preceding covenant era, the location of Palestine was ideal. It was a narrow land bridge connecting the continents of Africa, Europe, and Asia. It ideally situated for the extension of God's covenant blessing to the entire world. It was “at the center of the earth” (Ezek. 38:21; 5:5). Changing the world started at this center. Now we must paint it into the corners. We must go further up and deeper in. And when the new covenant consummation is visible by sight (and not just faith), perhaps we will exclaim as Lucy did in the *Last Battle*, “It's England.”³¹

³⁰The meaning of “heaven” in the NT is not an ethereal space, it is about the “rule from heaven” — “on earth as it is in heaven.” NT Wright observes, As any reader of the book of Daniel could have told you (and Daniel was very popular in the first century AD), the one who dwells in heaven is the one who rules on the earth. As any watcher of the Roman Imperial cult could have told you (and the Imperial cult was the fastest-growing religion in the first-century Mediterranean world), the one who is seen being taken up into heaven is the one who is thereby revealed as divine, as the ruler of the present cosmos...The point is that from heaven he is ruling the world, ruling it through the faithful lives, the suffering and the witness of his Spirit-driven apostolic followers, calling it to account, demonstrating that there is a new way of living, a way which upstages all Caesar’s pretensions to have saved the world, or united it, or brought it genuine justice, freedom and peace.” “Shipwreck and Kingdom: Acts and the Anglican Communion” (The closing address to the meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council, see, <http://titusonine.classicalanglican.net/?p=7544>).

³¹The last book of the famed, *Narnia Chronicles*, C.S. Lewis.