

5 The promised land

The thought of a promised land is one which has thrilled the hearts of men and women through the ages. The idea of Utopia, of a homeland, of Nirvana, a land where dreams come true, Shangri-La, paradise, heaven—who has not longed for such a place?

This was never more so than for the people of Israel. The promised land was to be the fulfilment of their dreams, a land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:8 and many other places). From bondage and slavery in Egypt, they were to know peace and prosperity in the land called, at various times, Canaan, Israel and Palestine. Even today, when Jews have celebrated the Passover away from the land, their final greeting to one another is ‘Next year in Jerusalem!’

In the Old Testament ‘the land’ is a central theme. This was the land of promise, given to Abraham and his descendants, lost at the exile, and regained at the return from exile. In particular, there are many prophecies concerning the return of Israel to the land. Some have seen the setting up of the nation of Israel in recent years, with immigrants returning to the land of Palestine, as a literal fulfilment of these prophecies. Is this a valid interpretation of the scriptures? Since so much emphasis is placed on this subject in the Bible, we might expect that it has relevance to us in this day and age, but how?

Once again we need to look at the subject in the light of the whole sweep of the Bible, making sure that we end up with the interpretation which is clearest in the New Testament.

The land provided

Abraham was told to leave his country and kin, and to ‘go to the land I will show you’ (Genesis 12:1). When he arrived, he was told, ‘All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring for ever’ (Genesis 13:15). (This is the verse which Paul in Galatians 3:16 applies to Christ.)

Though Isaac and Jacob were sojourners (aliens and temporary residents) in the land, the people did not take possession of the land until the ‘exodus’. When Israel had been several hundred years in virtual slavery in Egypt, God called Moses and told him, ‘I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey’ (Exodus 3:8).

The word ‘exodus’ is from the Greek, and means ‘departure’. Through the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and Joshua the message is of the exodus, departure from Egypt, preparation in the wilderness, and occupation of the promised land.

The exodus was a pivotal event in the history of Israel. God sent help to a people in bondage, displayed his power through the plagues on Egypt, divided the Red Sea for his people to escape, gave them the Law at Sinai, brought them into the land of promise and gave them victory over the people of the land.

This was the time when the children of Israel became not just a family but a nation— God’s nation. So the themes of the people of God and the promised land are intertwined.

Each year the people had to celebrate the exodus from Egypt by keeping the Passover. Every household had to kill and eat the Passover lamb in memory of the time when the blood of the lamb was painted around the doorway so that God, when he destroyed the firstborn of the Egyptians, would ‘pass over’ the house protected by the blood (Exodus 12:1-13).

The significance of the land

Every nation considers its homeland as the most special country in the world. This is especially so for the Jews, as God gave them this territory. To this day the most notable daily newspaper in Israel has the name ‘Ha’aretz’ (Hebrew ‘the land’).

The people of Israel had a particular reason to consider their land to be marked out above all other lands. The land of Israel was to be a place different from all others because of God’s presence. It is described as ‘his holy land’ (Psalm 78:54).

Within the land there was to be a place even more special. Whilst still in the wilderness the people were told of ‘the place the Lord your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling’ (Deuteronomy 12:5). It was there that the sacrifices had to be offered (v. 6). This place was subsequently revealed as Jerusalem. ‘I have chosen Jerusalem for my Name to be there’ (2 Chronicles 6:6).

The importance of Jerusalem was that this was to be the place where the temple would be built, which God called ‘a temple for my Name’ (2 Chronicles 6:8). It was at the temple that the menfolk had to appear before God three times a year at the important feasts (Deuteronomy 16:16). It was on the altar in that temple that their burnt offerings had to be offered (Deuteronomy 12:26-7).

Holy as the temple was, there was one part of it which was called the ‘holy of holies’ or ‘the Most Holy Place’ (2 Chronicles 3:8). Into this, only the high priest was able to venture, and that only once a year (Hebrews 9:7) on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29–34), offering a sacrifice to make atonement for himself and for the people.

So the land may be viewed like an onion, with concentric layers. The land contained Jerusalem. Jerusalem contained the temple. The temple contained the holy of holies. Each successive layer is more holy, more set apart, more truly representing the place where God himself dwells. This good land, the land of promise, the land flowing with milk and honey, only acquires its most desirable attributes because it is the place in which God is to be found.

Losing the land

We saw in the previous chapter that God would not retain among his people those who turned against him. In the same way, possession of the land by Israel was always conditional. Though God had promised them the land ‘for ever’ (Genesis 13:15), there were strings attached. If they did not keep the law a penalty would ensue: ‘You will be uprooted from the land you are entering to possess’ (Deuteronomy 28:63). This is indeed what happened. The northern kingdom of ten tribes (‘Israel’ or ‘Ephraim’) was taken from the land to Assyria (2 Kings 17:6), with no record of them ever having returned. The southern kingdom (‘Judah’) lasted longer, but was eventually exiled to Babylon (1 Chronicles 9:1).

Return prophesied

Before they even entered the land the people were told that if exile ever took place, then if they returned to the Lord with all their heart the Lord would restore them to the land once again (Deuteronomy 30:1–5).

Before they suffered exile, there were prophecies of return to the land once more. Isaiah in particular has much to say on this theme. The return is couched in terms of a new exodus, like the old exodus from Egypt in some ways, yet in other ways outstandingly different. We will examine some of these themes later in this chapter.

The Land in the New Testament

We have seen how central is the theme of the land in the Old Testament. In interpreting the Bible we have said that it is vital to see how the New Testament rounds off such a theme. The promised land was rather like an onion with concentric layers. There was the land, the city, the temple and the holy of holies. Let us see how these various layers are taken up and interpreted in the New Testament.

(a) The land

The writer to the Hebrews considers all the ‘heroes of faith’ to be seeking a land. ‘They admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth’ (Hebrews 11:13). ‘They were longing for a better country—a heavenly one’ (v. 16). The ‘kingdom of God’ for us is not to be an earthly kingdom, but the realm where God rules in human hearts. God has prepared for us a heavenly country.

In the last chapter it was shown that the New Testament reveals a merging of God’s ancient people of Israel and new believers, forming the church, Jews and Gentiles who believe in Christ. If Israel have a continuing right to the earthly land of promise, then presumably the church should also have a claim on that land. Such an earthly fulfilment of the Old Testament promises is not supported by any clear passages in the New Testament. Rather, the people of God see what God has prepared for us spiritually. The new land we enjoy, a land flowing with milk and honey, is our salvation, purchased by Christ in his sacrifice on the cross. In the words of the song,

*The Lord has given a land of good things,
I will press in and make them mine.*

(b) Jerusalem

Jesus mourned over Jerusalem, ‘You who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you’ (Matthew 23:37). He longed to gather their children ‘as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings’ but they were not willing. His conclusion is, ‘Look, your house is left to you desolate’ (v. 38), no doubt a reference to the temple.

Jerusalem was a magnet for all Jews who wanted to worship God. Jesus told the woman of Samaria, ‘A time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem’ (John 4:21). The kind of worshippers required by God are those who worship ‘in spirit and in truth’ (v. 23).

The New Testament sees a contrast between the literal geographical city of Jerusalem and its spiritual equivalent. The writer to the Hebrews tells those who believe in Christ: ‘You have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God’ (Hebrews 12:22).

Paul contrasts the Jews, in bondage to a literal Jerusalem, with a heavenly Jerusalem which brings us freedom: ‘Hagar . . . corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother’ (Galatians 4:25–6).

This is the city which John sees: ‘I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God . . . And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God”’ (Revelation 21:2–3).

Jerusalem is the place where God lives, and in the New Testament he lives with his people. This is not in the old, literal, physical city, but in the new Jerusalem, our spiritual abode.

(c) The temple

If the temple was the place where the animal sacrifices were to be offered, you might expect that such a place would not be needed after Christ offered once and for all a sacrifice for sin to end all sacrifices for sin.

The temple had another function, however. It was the place where God was to be found. What has the New Testament to say about this?

Jesus spoke of his body as a temple (John 2:19-21). He told the Jews, ‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days’ (v. 19). Similarly, the believer’s body is described as ‘the temple of the Holy Spirit’ (1 Corinthians 6:19).

In Ephesians 2:19-22 Paul speaks of the whole people of God built into ‘a holy temple in the Lord’ (v. 21), ‘built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone’ (v. 20). We are ‘being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit’ (v. 22).

As you might expect, the New Testament equivalent of the temple is not a literal one with stones and timber. After all, God ‘does not live in temples built by hands’ (Acts 17:24). God lives in his people. ‘We are his house’ (Hebrews 3:6).

(d) The holy of holies

If you have an exploded view of an engine it is no use whatsoever to drop oil on the drawing of the bearings as they appear on the diagram. What you have is simply a picture to show how the real thing functions.

The literal Most Holy Place within the temple is a picture of the place in heaven which Jesus entered to make atonement for us (Hebrews 9:12). It typifies the place closest to God. Now ‘we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus’ (Hebrews 10:19). This can hardly mean that, were a new temple to be built, we have a right to go into the holiest part of it. We would surely be lynched for blasphemy. This must have a spiritual significance. Because of Jesus’ death for us, we are able with confidence to come right into God’s presence.

It may seem that apart from this the New Testament has little to equate with the holy of holies in the temple. However, there is a clue in the shape of this room. It was a perfect cube: ‘The inner sanctuary was twenty cubits long, twenty wide, and twenty high’ (1 Kings 6:20).

The city of new Jerusalem is also described as being the same shape: ‘He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long’ (Revelation 21:16).

What value can we find in the idea of a city which is physically in the form of a cube, or perhaps a square pyramid with extremely steep sides? This seems of little help to us. On the other hand, there is deep meaning in the figurative interpretation: that God is as present throughout his new city, the new Jerusalem, as he was in the holy of holies in the temple.

Once again the pattern is for that which was literal and physical in the Old Testament to find its fulfilment in the New Testament in that which is no less real, but spiritual.

The new exodus

If you have ever thought that the Old Testament prophets make for dull reading, then you should try Isaiah from chapter 40 (though it really starts with chapter 35). Isaiah looks beyond the time of exile, when Judah is taken captive to the land of Assyria, to another exodus when the people will be brought back from Babylon across the desert to the land of Israel once more.

This new exodus is contrasted with the first exodus when ‘God made a way though the sea’ (Isaiah 43:16). But the people are told ‘Forget the former things’ (v. 18). ‘See, I am doing a new thing! . . . I am making a way in the desert’ (v. 19).

The new exodus would not involve trudging through a trackless waste of wilderness. There would be a highway, the ‘Way of Holiness’, on which the

redeemed would walk as they returned to Jerusalem (Isaiah 35:8–10). More than that, the Lord himself would be in the midst of the returning exiles, carrying the young of his flock and gently leading those who are pregnant (Isaiah 40:11). He would appear on the highway, so that watchmen on the ramparts of Jerusalem could send out the cry to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God’ (Isaiah 40:9).

The call goes out to start construction of this highway: ‘A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God” ’ (Isaiah 40:3).

You will not need me to tell you how this theme is taken up in the New Testament. All four gospel writers see this as fulfilled in John the Baptist (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4–6; John 1:23) who was the voice in the wilderness, preparing the way before Christ.

Notice the full implication of this. The gospel writers (and John himself in John 1:23) are interpreting the passage in Isaiah 40 in a symbolic way. They are indicating that the highway through the wilderness could be given a figurative interpretation, and therefore the new exodus may be interpreted figuratively also.

In the wilderness of Sinai there were water shortages. The new exodus, though heading through a dry land, would be amply provided with water. ‘Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert’ (Isaiah 35:6). ‘The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the Lord will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys’ (Isaiah 41:17–18).

Should we interpret these verses only literally, or is there a figurative meaning behind the words? Interestingly enough, Isaiah himself gives us his figurative meaning: ‘I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams’ (Isaiah 44:3–4).

So Isaiah sees the water as a picture of the Spirit of God, and the lush vegetation as a picture of the people of God.

For a New Testament interpretation of this theme, let us take Jesus’ words at the Feast of Tabernacles: ‘ “If a man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive’ (John 7:37–9). It is hard to pin down a specific scripture which Jesus is quoting here, but the subject of the Holy Spirit under the image of water is very similar to that in Isaiah.

Once again, an aspect of the new exodus is interpreted in a figurative way, and the implication is that the new exodus itself has a figurative significance. The new life and refreshment which water can bring in the wilderness is interpreted in New Testament terms as the satisfying of desires and the fulfilment of longings which the Holy Spirit brings.

As we saw in the previous chapter, these passages in Isaiah have much to say concerning ‘the servant of the Lord’. The culmination is in chapter 53, where this servant is seen as the one ‘pierced for our transgressions’ (v. 5). These references are taken up in the New Testament, and we are left in no doubt that this suffering servant is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ.

The fact we must consider is as follows. Isaiah 53, perhaps the clearest prophecy within the Old Testament concerning Jesus and his atoning death for us, is contained within those chapters of Isaiah which deal with a new exodus and return of the people to the promised land. It appears that what is in focus here is not just a literal return to a particular geographical location, but people coming to God spiritually in a new manifestation of his redeeming power. On the mount of transfiguration Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke with Christ of ‘his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem’ (Luke 9:31). To ‘bring to fulfilment’ a departure is somewhat surprising in itself, but the Greek word translated ‘departure’ here is none other than the word ‘exodus’.

Just as in the Old Testament the exodus was initiated by the sacrifice of the Passover (Exodus 12:3–7), so now our new exodus is accomplished through the death of our Passover lamb, Christ (1 Corinthians 5:7).

So we may confidently say that the return to the promised land prophesied in the Old Testament is revealed as the people of God entering into all that Christ has provided for them by his death and resurrection.

Multiple interpretations?

One single prophecy may be fulfilled several times in different ways. Take, for example, Isaiah’s prophecy about a young woman giving birth to a son (Isaiah 7:14). This was initially fulfilled in Isaiah’s own day, so that before the boy grew to the age of discretion, the two kings invading Judah would be no threat any more (v. 16). Matthew then sees a further fulfilment of the same prophecy in the virgin birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:22–3).

This is also the case with the new exodus. Isaiah spoke of a return following the exile to Babylon. There was a return after 70 years. Ezra and Nehemiah record this exodus from Assyria back to the land of Israel. However, when you read the account of dribs and drabs of fearful people and their problems in and around Jerusalem, this certainly fell far short of the glorious return described by Isaiah.

Could it be, however, that the return of the Jews to the land of Israel in our day and age is another fulfilment of these prophecies? We need to consider the implications of such an idea.

The Bible indicates that God is over all nations of the earth and that he determines ‘the times set for them and the exact places where they should live’ (Acts 17:26). Those who see a fulfilment of scripture in the return of Jews to Palestine will not be satisfied by this general statement, however. They would link this return to the promised land with God dealing once again with Israel as a nation, and usually

they have theories about what will happen to the Jews when the church is taken to be with the Lord.

It is hard to find much evidence at all to substantiate these theories from the New Testament. On the other hand, as we have seen in this chapter and the previous one, there is plenty of evidence to show that believing Jews and believing Gentiles are fused into one body which now constitutes the people of God. The promised land which is now given to God's people (Jew and Gentile) is a spiritual one.

Conclusions

We have attempted to find a method of interpreting the Bible which starts with what is clear, and considers the whole sweep of the scriptures, culminating in the New Testament view. This has led us to the conclusion that both Israel and the promised land are now to be interpreted spiritually rather than literally.

This is not in any way to downplay the truth of these themes. Quite the contrary! Rather than focusing on one family of people in one localised area, God declares his intention of adopting people from every race, tribe, kindred and tongue. The blessings he gives apply to every condition of life. If we fail to see that this is far more glorious than simply the return of one nation to one locality, then perhaps we have not yet entered much into what Christ has purchased for us.

The New Testament writers obviously saw a spiritual fulfilment of these things by the gospel. Our deliverance from the house of bondage has been accomplished by God's servant Jesus. We have been brought by him into our inheritance, our promised land. Whatever other interpretation there might be in addition, this would be insignificant in comparison. We insist that a figurative interpretation is valid because the New Testament declares this. Those who deny us this, deny us our birthright.