HOPE FOR THE COUNTRYSIDE: A THEOLOGY OF THE LAND

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Within the next five years it is forecast that for the first time in our world's history more people will live in the town than in the country.[1] This phenomenal growth in global urbanisation presents a challenge to contemporary Christian reflection. In the past Christian writers have tended to a negative view of the city. William Cowper (1731-1800) in his poem 'The Task' (1785) characterises enlarging London as the epitome of vice. He concludes, 'God made the country, and man made the town.'

IS THE FUTURE URBAN?

Today many people would take issue with Cowper's conclusion. Confident in the benign hand of global market forces, many believe that the movement from the land, entailing the concentration of food production in fewer hands, is both inevitable and good. The only problem is finding new uses for the surplus rural population. Indeed many city dwellers believe that we would be doing farmers a favour by releasing them from their struggle with the land and relocating them in the towns. Urbanisation is equated with progress.

The same argument can be made from a theological perspective. Some writers in the Reformed tradition have recently argued that urbanisation is a trend which should be celebrated rather than lamented and that it is in line with God's purposes for his world. For example Meredith Kline argues,

> The city is not to be regarded as an evil invention of ungodly fallen man.... The ultimate goal set before humanity at the very beginning was that human culture should take city form... there should be an urban structuring of human historical existence. The cultural mandate given at creation was a mandate to build the city. Now, after the Fall the city is still a benefit, serving humanity as a refuge from the howling wilderness condition into which the fallen human race, exiled from paradise has been driven.... The

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[1] D. Hinrichsen, http://www.peopleandplanet.net/doc.php?id=1054&section=5

> common grace city has remedial benefits even in a fallen world. It becomes the drawing together of resources, strength and talent no longer just for mutual complementation in the task of developing the resources of the created world, but now a pooling of power for defence against attack, and as an administrative community of welfare for the relief of those destitute by reason of the cursing of the ground.[2]

Tim Keller, pastor to the Presbyterian Church in America's Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, New York, is a keen apologist for urban life, arguing that if we are to evangelise our civilisation effectively we must love the city and view it in positive terms rather than negative ones. He too sees the city as part of God's design and sees the progress of redemption as leading to the realisation of an urban ideal.

> God's future redeemed world and universe is depicted as a 'city'. Abraham sought the city whose 'builder and maker is God' (Hebrews 11:10). Revelation 21 describes and depicts the apex of God's redemption as a city! His redemption is building us a city – the New Jerusalem.
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> ...We began in a garden but will end in a city; God's purpose for humanity is urban! Why? The city is God's invention and design, not just a sociological phenomenon or invention of humankind.[3]

It is possible, however, to trace a very different line of development in the Bible from creation through fall, redemption and restoration in which man's relationship with the land is a central concern. Eden sees man in harmony with the land as its ruler and guardian, the Fall involves alienation between man and the land, redemption brings substantial healing of man's attitude towards his environment and the restoration at the consummation is a renewal of Eden.

ORIENTATION

There is always the danger of Christian reflection being anthropocentric. We begin by considering some crisis facing man (such as the social and environmental degradation of the countryside) and we look for proof texts to justify our activism. In the biblical theology of land that follows I will seek to make the starting point a consideration of God as Creator, his

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2 M. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (South Hamilton, MA, 1981).

3 T. Keller, 'A Biblical Theology of the City', *Evangelicals Now* (July 2002), pp. 14-15.

creation of all things as good and his purpose in Christ to reverse the effects of the Fall. As all true biblical theology should be Christological, God's act in Christ must be the interpretive centre of the land motif. As all true biblical theology should be doxological, our reflection on God's eternal purpose for the land should issue in praise to him.

IN THE BEGINNING: CREATION

Our relationship to the earth is imaged on God's

The Bible testifies to the fact that we have been made in the image of God. The *imago dei* is a subject that has engaged generations of theologians in debate. But it is true at least to say that man has been made in such a way that he reflects in a creaturely way the nature of God. Thus if we want to get under the surface and ask questions of our design we need to begin not with the character of man but with the character of God. As Calvin wrote 'it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face'.[4]

In the Bible God's relation with the world is represented as both transcendent and immanent.

God is transcendent. The Genesis account of creation makes that abundantly clear. Before there was anything else, there is God. God calls the creation into being by the power of his word. He does not depend on the creation. The creation depends on him.

But God is also immanent. That is to say he does not remain aloof from creation. Psalm 104, for example, portrays a God who is met through his creation. Creation is charged with his presence. 'He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind. He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants.'

We would expect therefore that if man reflects God in a creaturely way (images God) that he would bear a relation to creation which is both transcendent and immanent and that is indeed what we find.

Transcendence

The Genesis narrative exegetes image first of all in terms of transcendence. 'Let us make man in our own image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground' (Gen. 1:26). This rule is later dramatised by the naming ritual that takes place in

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[4] J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (J. T. McNeill, ed., Philadelphia, 1960), I.i.2.

chapter 2. This notion of man ruling and dominating creation has come in for a lot of criticism in recent decades but for the moment it is enough to note that it is merely one pole of the relationship between man and the land. This biblical understanding of man's relationship to his environment distinguishes the Christian position from, for example, the extreme animal rights position of Princeton philosopher Peter Singer[5] who characterises human transcendence as 'speciesism', as well as from the pantheistic environmentalism of the New Age movement.

Immanence

On the other hand man's relation to the earth is immanent. God's act of creation was both immediate, the creation of the universe without pre-existent matter, and mediate, the creation of animals and man from material God had already created. Thus Genesis 1:24: 'And God said *let the land* produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground and wild animals, each according to its kind' (italics added). When it comes to the creation of man his creation is likewise mediate but this mediate creation is described in different terms from that of the animal kingdom. 'Now the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living creature' (Gen. 2:8). Not only do we thus share a connection with the land itself in the most ultimate sense but also with the animal kingdom that was also formed out of the ground (Gen. 2:19).

This mediate creation has a parallel in the creation of Eve from the body of Adam. Once again it would have been no problem for God to create Eve independently but his manner of creation stresses the deep unity between man and woman. It is reasonable for us to infer that Genesis also wishes to teach that built in to man is the need to enjoy a relationship with the earth and with the livestock. Modern scientific thinking is beginning to reflect this biblical insight. Eco-theologian Sally McFague writes,

> One of the most important revelations from post-modern science is the continuum between matter and energy (or, more precisely, the unified matter/energy field) which overturns traditional hierarchical dualisms such as living/nonliving, flesh/spirit, nature/human being.[6]

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[5] P. Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York, 1975).

[6] S. McFague, *The Body of God* (Minneapolis, MN, 1993), p. 16.

The creation as a work of the Trinity also argues for the deep interconnectedness (*perichoresis)* of the Trinity to be reflected in relations between the animate and inanimate creation also.[7]

Significantly man is described as having humble origins, from the dust of the earth, but his life comes directly from God who breathes life into him. Man's connection with the dust/soil is something that will be determinative of his future existence. His life will be 'anchored' in the soil. He will find fulfilment in the tilling of the soil. Even after the Fall he will continue to live out his life in relation to the soil (Gen. 3:18) although now with frustration built in to his labours. Clearly something of the deep instinct that rural people have for the land, that visceral attachment which goes beyond any sense of vocation or material reward, derives from the manner of our creation.

LIFE ON THE FARM

The command to till the ground is interesting. Eden was full of amazingly productive trees, both ornamental and food producing, but man was set there not as a spectator but as a worker. He was to 'work it and take care of it'. Several points are worth making in relation to this instruction.

The sanctity of labour

Calvin comments, 'Moses now adds that the earth was given to man, with this condition, that he should occupy himself in its cultivation. Whence it follows that men were created to employ themselves in some work and not to lie down in inactivity and idleness. This labour, truly, was pleasant, full of delight, entirely exempt from all trouble and weariness; since, however, God ordained that man should be exercised in the culture of the ground, he condemned in his person, all indolent repose.'[8]

But the text would seem to go beyond the idea that work is simply good in itself. Our labour can also be presented to God as part of our worship (Rom. 12:1, 2). The specific instruction to Adam in relation to his duties in the garden of Eden is 'to work it and take care of it'. The words used here: serve/till and keep/guard have a religious significance. Serve/till is commonly used in a religious sense of serving God (e.g. Deut. 4:19). It is used, for example, of the tabernacle duties of the Levites (Num. 3:7-8) *etc.* To guard/keep, as well as having the secular sense of guarding,

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[7] D. T. Williams, 'Trinitarian Ecology', *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 18 (2000), p. 150.

[8] J. Calvin, *Commentary upon the Book of Genesis* (London, 1965), p. 125.

is also used in contexts where it means to observe God's commands and carry out duties God has given. An example would be the command given to the Levites to 'guard' the tabernacle from intruders.[9]

In contrast to Mesopotamian myths, which spoke of man being created to work in order to relieve the gods, there is no question of God unburdening himself of labour. Labour is given to man as an opportunity to render it up as part of his worship of God.

The elemental nature of agriculture

But, secondly, it must surely be significant that this labour of love given to man is specifically the working of the land. Some of the most obvious features of Genesis are most easily overlooked. When God created Adam and Eve he set them to work as cultivators. They were not set in a builder's yard, a cottage factory or even a theological seminary, but in an 'enclosed area for cultivation'.[10] This priority does not suggest that agriculture is more worshipful than the other callings and trades which develop from Genesis 4 onwards (as though God were more pleased with a well-managed farm than the work of a Christian office worker, film maker or refuse collector). It does however suggest, along with other considerations already noted, a certain elemental, fundamental nature to agriculture.[11] God is the divine workman who is always at work (John 5:17) and our need to work derives from our being made in his image. At the very core of this created instinct is a sense of our need to fulfil our destiny in relation to the land. Cultivating the earth is so emblematic of God's purpose for us that it cannot be considered as simply another activity. A society may not be traumatised if there are no opportunities to

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[9] G. Wenham, 'Genesis 1-15', *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, 1987), p. 67.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

[11] Benjamin Franklin, from a rather different perspective wrote: 'There seem to be but three ways for a nation to acquire wealth: the first is by war, as the Romans did, in plundering their conquered neighbors – this is robbery; the second by commerce, which is generally cheating; the third by agriculture, the only honest way, wherein man received a real increase of the seed thrown into the ground, in a kind of continual miracle, wrought by the hand of God in his favor, as a reward for his innocent life and his virtuous industry.' (Benjamin Franklin, 'Positions to be Examined Concerning National Health', April 4, 1769.)

work with metal. But sever completely a community's ties with the land and something fundamental is lost.

The harmony of husbandry and conservation

Thirdly, the activity on the land that is prescribed by God includes both the working of the land and its conservation.

In the first place there is a specific mandate to harness the fruitfulness of the earth by exerting effort. In a paradise in which food might have been thought to spring spontaneously from the earth, man is nevertheless commanded to work the ground. Land is to be harnessed by man. In an environment in which labour, worship and pleasure were all interconnected, the tilling of the earth was a central activity.

In exerting mastery over the land and the creatures man is imaging God as king over creation. But the same *imago dei* that calls upon man to rule on God's behalf also qualifies the nature of that rule. To rule (*radah*, Gen. 1:26, 28) is to rule as Yahweh rules. Yahweh's rule is not exploitative, aggressive or thoughtless. It is a rule which is directed towards his own glory but in which the one ruled finds blessing. Thus, for example, in Ezekiel 34:4 the priests of the day who were in a position of responsibility and leadership were condemned because their rule (*radah*) did not reflect God, but rather was harsh and brutal. Thus the cultural mandate to rule/have dominion is not a license to abuse the earth. (*Contra*, for example, Lynn Whyte's accusation that Christianity drives a wedge between God and nature and so legitimises the exploitation of the latter.[12]) By contrast we might say that when man is functioning as God's vice regent the land should experience the kind of blessing in its encounter with man which man experiences in encounter with God, his regent. Thus in Genesis 2:15 man's vice regency of the land is expressed as 'to work it and take care of it'. Here we find not only a mirror of God's rule of man but of the loving headship of Christ for the church and the husband for the wife (Eph. 5:25-28).

Thus Adam is called to be a farmer/conservationist. In his subduing of the earth he fulfils his calling to reflect God. At the same time he is expected to be a conservationist who guards the land rather than exploits it. There are limits even in Eden to the ways in which Adam may benefit from the soil. His farming activities are circumscribed by the need to consider the well-being of the land itself. In contrast to modern compartmentalised ways of thinking in which planners zone certain

[12] L. White Jr, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis', *Science* 155 (1967), p. 1205.

districts for National Parkland, wilderness areas *etc.* whilst other areas are exposed to the full blast of modern agribusiness, God's 'development plan' for Eden involved the hand-in-hand partnership of cultivation and conservation.

Man's involvement in Eden challenges the idea that nature is only truly encountered before man has had an involvement in it. The original goodness of nature is located for us by the Bible at any rate, not in its virgin condition but in encounter with man the cultivator.

People of the land

These opening chapters of Genesis are full of information about the way God has constituted us as humans and positioned us in relation to our natural environment. Made in the image of God we share both his transcendence and his immanence. In our transcendence as rulers of the land we are to harness the earth's bounty for our good. That explains the urge in man not only to tame the wilderness, to reclaim and plough, but also to explore, to hunt, to manufacture and to engage in scientific endeavour. It explains the satisfaction the gardener finds in surveying his newly dug allotment as much as the pride the farmer has in his productive acres. These reactions are not the result of social conditioning. They reflect the way that God has 'wired' us.

In our immanence as creatures of the dust we *belong* to the earth in a deep sense. We are made for a relationship with the land arising from our derivation from it. Our rule of the earth must be tempered by the fact that we are *of the earth*. We do not stand over and against the earth, outside of any relationship with it. This would appear to be a part of our fundamental orientation as creatures, and economic and social forces that would break that relationship must be questioned.

FALL

Adam and Eve are given dominion over the garden but they are not given absolute dominion. They are to be mindful of their creatureliness and so God sets a limit on the scope of their activities. They are not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Even in a condition of sinlessness mankind has had to live with limits.

Hubris

Adam's sin was an act of rebellion against God, a grasping for spiritual and moral autonomy. This rebellion rooted in unbelief is at the heart of many of the ills of today's countryside. When we consider the drive towards

globalisation, the ascendancy of agribusiness over agriculture, the dilemmas posed by bioengineering, the desertification caused by extending cultivation beyond reasonable limits, and many other problems, we see Adam's hubris at work in his children. The call of God on humanity to work within creaturely limits must be articulated by the church as she addresses the complex issues facing agriculture today.

Alienation

Following the Fall the land becomes a focus of the fallout arising from the alienation between man and God. As a result of a broken relationship between man and his maker, Adam and his progeny will find that their relationship with the soil is also affected. 'Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field by the sweat of your brow.' Clearly it is not the work involved in farming which is itself the curse but the hardship and frustration that attends the work that constitutes the curse. The land is now encumbered with factors that disrupt man's enjoyment of working it. To the thorns and thistles mentioned in Genesis we could add soil erosion, desertification, pollution, collapsing markets, corporate domination, BSE and Foot and Mouth Disease to name but a few of modern agriculture's ills. 'The man's [punishment] strikes at the innermost nerve of his life: his work, his activity , and provision for sustenance.'[13]

Noah and covenanted hope for the land

The account of Noah in Genesis 7 is instructive. In visiting judgement upon the earth God is careful to preserve the non-rational creatures. Noah becomes the first conservationist. The covenant with Noah and his descendants is also made with the creation: 'I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you – the birds, the livestock and all those that came out of the ark with you – every living creature on earth' (Gen. 9:9, 10). The covenant embraces the promise made earlier, which makes particular mention of man's agricultural activities: 'As long as the earth endures seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease' (Gen. 8:22). God promises that the seasonal rhythms of nature on which farming depends will be maintained by his providential care. The earth is still under the curse. Indeed the disruption of man's relationship with the creatures which was expressed in 3:15 is amplified here: 'the fear

[13] G. von Rad, *Genesis* (London, 1972), p. 94.

and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth', indicates an enmity between man and the animal kingdom which was lacking in the original mandate 'have dominion over them' (9:2; *cf.* 1:26).[14] But here is the first note of hope for the earth. God covenants to bless man's stewardship of the earth. Agriculture is not going to be overcome by the results of the Fall. The curse that has resulted in man's alienation from the land must be read within the context of the creation and God's covenant with Noah. The prophets of doom do not present the full picture. God has not abandoned his earth to terminal decline. Noah's first act on quitting the ark is to worship God. His second act flows from his belief in the covenant promise of God. 'Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard' (Gen. 9:20).

Urban hubris

In terms of God's purpose post-Eden, it is made clear from the start that his desire was that the whole earth should be settled. Genesis 1:28: 'God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." A settled countryside ensured that wilderness, which post-Eden would always encroach, would be kept at bay. In the countryside, continually reminded of the limitations of his labours, man would be encouraged to depend on God.

Against this background the building of the city and tower of Babel is an act of outright rebellion against God. The city builders have three objectives. Firstly they wish to build a tower that will reach to the heavens. This tower is the first skyscraper but it represents more than an ambitious building project. Genesis views the act as sacrilege suggesting that the aim is to reach God's dwelling in another human effort to become like God. Secondly they wish to 'make a name for ourselves' (10:4). In the Scripture it is God alone who makes a name for himself (Isa. 63:12). Here mankind's overvaulting ambition surfaces yet again in an effort to take to themselves a prerogative of God's. Thirdly the people wish to congregate in order that they might 'not be scattered over the face of the whole earth'. This is clearly in direct opposition to God's wish that they should spread out and settle the earth/countryside.

The city is not, of course, seen in an exclusively negative light in the Bible. Jerusalem becomes a symbol of God's presence on earth. Nevertheless we see in Babel how the city can become a powerful opposition to God's purposes. The city with its concentration of human

[14] Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 207.

energies breeds more than any place else a sense of autonomy. The skyscrapers of today's cities are potent reminders of the hubris that was judged at Babel. The impulse to concentrate and centralise power in cities remains a threat to the divine decree that the earth should be well settled:

> The fact of the city is at the center of the land crisis. It was so in ancient Israel and it is so in our farm crisis because the city is not simply a place, the city is a way of thinking about social reality. The city is a place of monopoly where everything important and valued is gathered and stored and administered and owned. The city exists by the concentration of what is valued in the hands of a few. Indeed, the city exists for the sake of concentration.
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> The concentration of wealth and value is the cause of the city and the city is the result of that concentration. When the city is healthy it exists in a respectful coming and going with the country. But when the city arrives at a pathological self-importance and an imagined self-sufficiency, it fails to respect the country. When there is no coming and going, no giving and taking, but only taking, there comes death.[15]

Promised land

With Abraham the theme of land comes again into prominence. Now an earlier feature reappears – the notion of bounded territory where God will be present with a people and where blessing will be found. The Promised Land will be a return to Eden and once more priestly service and the godly use of the land will be required.

Abram is called out of Ur to leave his home and travel as a sojourner in Canaan. In this he might be seen as a rootless wanderer. However in Genesis 12:1-9 he is pictured as obeying God's call and traversing the land of promise, taking possession of it by symbolically lingering in holy places where he calls on the name of the Lord. Abraham receives the promises to God's people of a land where they will be rooted. When Abraham buys a field from Ephron the Hittite in Machpelah near Mamre it is an act of hope. Canaan will provide for Abraham's descendents a sense of identity and it will orientate them even when they are away from the land in exile in Egypt and later in Babylon. Abraham's response to the covenant promise of land includes a willingness to dwell in the land. Lot

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[15] Walter Brueggemann, speaking to a U.S. National Council of Churches conference on the urban/rural land connection in November, 1986.

on the other hand drifts into the city with serious consequences for the spiritual and physical well-being of himself and his family.

Settling the land – blessing through dependence

When Israel finally takes possession of the Promised Land under Joshua she is promised a land which is agriculturally productive, 'a land flowing with milk and honey'. However, Israel's tenure of the land must go hand in hand with her worship of God. The land is contrasted with Egypt where there was an ample provision of water for irrigation from the Nile. Here they must live as agriculturalists in dependence on God. 'The land you are entering to take over is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you planted your seed and irrigated it by foot as in a vegetable garden. But the land you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of is a land that drinks rain from heaven. It is land the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end. So if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today – to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and soul – then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and oil. I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle and you will eat and be satisfied.' The gift of land to Israel was to function for them in a sacramental way, ministering grace to them through the discipline of their dependence upon God. Thus in observing God's commands they would receive 'rest' in the land (Deut. 3:20, 12:9).

Canaan's farmers would be heavily dependent on God sending rain. The summer drought lasted for six months and was broken first by the 'early rains'. As soon as the sun-baked earth could be tilled (late November or December) the seed was usually broadcast and then ploughed under. Occasionally ploughing preceded sowing. The heavy winter rains permitted germination and early growth but the 'latter rains' of March and April were needed to fill the grain.

In addition to lack of rain limiting cropping, many hill slopes are naturally stony and stone clearance was a preliminary to planting vineyards. 'My friend had a vineyard on a fertile hill. He dug the soil, cleared it of stones and planted choice vines in it' (Isa. 5:1-2). The heavy summer dews and the water in the subsoil permitted the growing of grapes, cucumbers and melons. These were often invaluable crops because they acted as stores of water at a time when no rain fell and many streams dried up.

Divorced from this dependence on God the land itself could become a source of temptation for the people. In good years with bumper harvests

there would be the temptation to a spirit of self-sufficiency. 'When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God.'

The earth is the Lord's

Deuteronomy underlines again and again the sovereignty of God over land. Land is a gift from Yahweh, Israel's king (Deut. 1:8, 35). Technically the land is conferred by way of a conditional land grant.[16] The Mount Ebal ceremonies in Deuteronomy 27 reflect the elements of a land grant ceremony which would take place within the wider structure of a treaty. The stones, the land gift, the witnesses and the curses are all typical of the grants that give legal title to the new occupants of land. Retaining these grants is conditional on keeping the law of the land written on the stones marking the grant. Land itself is secondary to allegiance. Allegiance to Yahweh is primary. A key word in the Deuteronomic passages concerning the gift of land is the word *nahalah*. It is usually translated as inheritance. But Jon Dybdahl[17] has shown that inheritance is a misleading translation. The word does not usually carry the idea of land being handed down from one generation to the next. The idea is of an entitlement to the land by a recognised social custom or (as in the case of Israel) by divine charter. Words such as portion, entitlement, and allocation more nearly express the idea. Leviticus 25 spells out clearly the relationship between God, people and land: 'the land must not be sold permanently, because *the land is mine* and you are but aliens and my tenants' (Lev. 25:23, italics added). The close connection between land and worship is highlighted again in the Sabbath provisions. The main focus in the Leviticus 25 legislation for a Sabbath year is the Lord and not the tenants. It is not ultimately for the sake of the poor or dispossessed although they are beneficiaries. It is for the Lord. The place of the Levites who are not given land but whose *nahalah* is the Lord also shows that there is a higher concern in Deuteronomy than land.

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[16] Andrew Hill, 'The Ebal ceremony as Hebrew Land Grant' *JETS* 31 (1988), pp. 399-406.

[17] J. Dybdahl, *Israelite Village Land Tenure: Settlement to Exile*, PhD dissertation (Fuller Theological Seminary, 1981).

The pattern of land tenure that was adopted at the conquest was laid down in the Deuteronomic law code. By farming according to God's law the people would engage in worship and the land would be blessed. The law laid down stipulations regarding the care of threshing oxen, dangerous oxen and fallow years. There was provision made for meeting the needs of those who were landless. The book of Ruth gives a valuable insight into how such laws worked for the benefit of the alien. Fields were not to be reaped to the edges in order that there might be a form of poor aid.

At the conquest the land was divided with equity. 'To the large in number you are to give a large area of land, to the small in number a small area... the dividing of the land is however to be done by lot' (Num. 26:54-55). In the years to follow there was provision made against the concentration of land ownership. Every forty-nine years there was a Jubilee at which time purchased land was to revert to the original owning family; land purchase, in effect, bought its use for a given number of years. In the meantime a relative of the seller had the right to redeem it or buy it back into the family (Lev. 25:23-28).

Failure in the land – the prophetic era

Israel was thus called to model Eden to the world – a bounded territory peopled by 'working priests' in which the earth would be settled and worked and guarded in a spirit of creaturely dependence and done as part of the worship of God. The land would serve as a model farm, showing to the world principles of justice, compassion and perspective.

But in a fallen, sin cursed world, the law serves to point up the need for redemption (Rom. 5:20). The prophets inveigh against the abuse of God's land. Elijah condemns King Ahab for the violation of Naboth's rights as a smallholder (1 Kgs 21). Isaiah cried out against those who accumulated land in defiance of jubilee principles, 'Woe to those who add house to house and join field to field until everywhere belongs to them and they are the sole inhabitants of the land' (Isa. 5:8). Amos denounced the robber barons of his day,

> Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, 'When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?' – skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals (Amos 8:4-6).

The sin of the people was said to have a result – the land was polluted by their idolatry until the time came when God removed them and they went

into exile. Then the land was said to enjoy its Sabbath rests (2 Chron. 36:21).

REDEMPTION

Is the land a continuing concern in the new covenant?

The coming of Christ and particularly his death and resurrection is the hinge of salvation history, the great event that interprets Old Testament teaching on such subjects as the land. At first sight it appears that the Old Testament interest in the land is lost or is spiritualised in the new covenant. Christopher Wright[18] has argued for three levels of application of Old Testament teachings under the new covenant: typological, eschatological and paradigmatic. Typologically interpreted, the land of Palestine no longer has the theological significance it once had. The coming of Christ fulfils the promises of land. His coming is fulfilment in the sense of fulfilling so as to bring to completeness and so to do away. Christ fulfils the promise of bounded land. He is the antitype of Israel. He is the 'gift' of rest (Matt. 11:28, 29) and life. Just as his coming does away with Israel's role as the exclusive people of God and brings in the fullness of the Gentiles so also his coming does away with the uniqueness of Israel as bounded territory. Jesus and not the land of Israel is the axis between earth and heaven (John 1:51, *cf.* Gen. 28:11-15). 'Life in Christ replaces life "in the land" as the highest blessing so that the traditional Jewish doctrine of the unseverability of land, people and God is not upheld.'[19] But, as Wright has argued, the fulfilment of the Old Testament teaching on land by Christ does not empty it of its contemporary application. The Old Testament socio-economic teaching on land may not be lifted wholesale and applied in a literal manner today but it nevertheless serves as a model for contemporary application of gospel ethics.

> What God did with Israel in their land functions for us as a model or paradigm from which we draw principles and objectives for our socio-ethical endeavour in secular society. The fact that Israel was a redeemed community and their land a gift that betokened that status does not invalidate this approach. For the purpose of redemption is the ultimate

[18] C. J. H. Wright, *Living as the People of God* (Leicester, 1983).

[19] W. D. Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism* (London, 1982), p. 132.

> restoration of God's ideals and plans in creation, ideals which have been polluted and frustrated by the fall.[20]

The cosmic Christ

Jesus comes to bring in a salvation that has repercussions for the whole created order. He comes to bring in the reconciliation of all that is alienated from God (Col. 1:20). A key text is Romans 8:18-22 where Paul writes,

> The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.[21]

'Frustration' or 'vanity' is interpreted by John Murray as 'the lack of vitality which inhibits the order of nature and the frustration which the forces of nature meet with in achieving their proper ends.'[22] Murray continues,[23]

> The creation is to share, therefore, in the glory that will be bestowed upon the children of God. It can only participate in that glory, however, in a way that is compatible with its nature as non-rational. Yet the glory of God is one that comprises the creation also and must not be conceived of apart

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[20] C. J. H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land* (Carlisle, 1997), p. 176.

[21] Certain scholars have denied a connection between Paul's description of a creation travailing in frustration and the Fall. C. H. Dodd for example claims that the frustration is traced not 'as in some *contemporary* theories to the sin of Adam for whose sake the earth was believed to have been cursed, but vaguely to the will of God, i.e. it is in the nature of things as they are, though not of necessity permanent' (C. H. Dodd, *The Meaning of Paul for Today*, London, 1958, p. 61, italics added). Such a reinterpretation, however, chooses to ignore the movement from fall to redemption to future glory that lies on the surface of the text in Romans 8 and elsewhere (e.g. Romans 5). The concept of nature being caught up in the Fall stresses the close organic connection between the rational and non-rational creation and entails that the latter also shares in the hope of glory. It is hardly 'arrogantly anthropocentric' (*cf.* I. Brady, *God is Green*, London, 1990, p. 62).

[22] J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, 1968), p. 303.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 304.

> from the cosmic regeneration – the glory of the people of God will be in the context of the restitution of all things (*cf.* Acts 3:21).

Indications of this 'cosmic regeneration' are given early on in the Gospel records. Christ's nativity in a stable with the sheep and oxen looking on has been understood by generations of children as indicative of a special relationship between the Son of God and nature.

Jesus' parables were full of illustrative material drawn from rural and agricultural life. From the sower going out to sow to the shepherd and his concern for his sheep to the field of wheat growing with weeds mixed amongst it. It is often pointed out that these parables were masterful ways of conveying truth to a population that was overwhelmingly rural. But the fact remains that the preacher of the Word continues to proclaim divine truth through the images of harvest and flock even to city dwellers. And the reason lies in the fact that these land based images work not simply because they connect with people for whom they are familiar but they represent a deep affinity with a spiritual order. Jonathan Edwards claimed that in the workings of nature we see 'shadows of the divine'. The natural world is beautiful because it reflects the grace and beauty of God.

> How much a resemblance is there of every grace in the fields covered with plants and flowers, when the sun shines serenely and undisturbedly upon them. How a resemblance, I say, of every grace and beautiful disposition of mind; of an inferior towards a superior cause, preserver, benevolent benefactor, and a fountain of happiness.[24]

As the drama of atonement draws to its climax we are once again drawn into a garden. In the garden of Gethsemane Christ wrestles with temptation and emerges victorious. The Lord of glory will now submit himself to death in order to reconcile the world to God. The emblems of Eden are everywhere. Once more a tree is at the centre of the drama. This time it is the means of reconciliation. The second Adam goes into death crowned with thorns, the symbol of a cursed earth (Gen. 3:18), and he is laid in the dust of death (Gen. 3:19). Christ will rise, the first of a new generation, in a garden.

> In the place where Jesus was crucified there was a garden and in the garden a new tomb. From that tomb the new Man rose lifting from its bondage the whole body of things as well as of men. True Nature was re-established.

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[24] J. Edwards, 'The Beauty of the World', *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (New Haven, 1995), p. 14.

> Man in Christ is made the heir once more of a new earth. No wonder Mary, on the Resurrection morning thought he was the gardener for indeed he was – the new Adam and the New Man; the restored co-operation.[25]

The land and redemption

Redemption therefore has implications for creation and this is not confined to the future. Redemption is a process as Murray himself indicates. 'The groaning is complemented by the expectation of that which will bring the *process of redemption* to its completion.'[26] It is in this 'already-not yet' redemption that the creation finds itself caught up. The coming of Christ has already made a difference to the creation. The presence of the kingdom of God on earth should and does have an impact on the well-being of the created order. That is why Isaac Watt's Christmas hymn, 'Joy to the world' is so perceptive. He wrote (in a verse that is often omitted from our hymn books), 'No more may sin and sorrow roam or thorns infest the ground. He comes to make His blessings known, Where'er the curse is found.'

Francis Schaeffer has shown us that because the kingdom is present partially but not fully we are to expect substantial healing of the ravages of sin in all areas of life.[27] The caveat of substantial warns us not to have utopian expectations but also encourages us to make an impact on our culture now. The land and her people, today groaning through abuses caused by human greed, the abuse of technology and economic hubris, will only be fully renewed when Jesus comes again. Yet already we look for discernible healing brought through the presence of the kingdom now.[28] In the Old Testament especially we are given working models to guide us in our aspirations for the land.

The healing of the land – two illustrations

The institution of the Jubilee serves as an example of how the substantial healing of the earth is to be sought by Christians.

An empty countryside?

The Jubilee law guarded against the concentration of land in the hands of the few and underlined the importance of families maintaining their connection with the land. It thus serves as a moral paradigm that

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[25] G. F. MacLeod, *Only One Way Left* (Glasgow, 1956), p. 31.

[26] J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Roman*, p. 307 (italics added).

[27] F. Schaeffer, *True Spirituality* (Carol Stream, Ill., 1971), p. 134.

[28] On this view of the nature of the presence of the kingdom see, for example, H. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia, 1962), pp. 36-60.

challenges the evacuation of the countryside by industrialised agribusiness. A Christian land ethic must maintain that it is God's will for the ownership and management of the land to be as widely and equitably spread as possible. In the nineteenth-century Scottish Highlands the displacement of people from the land and the concentration of ownership was opposed by the Highland Land League whose membership card quoted Ecclesiastes 5:9 'The profit of the earth is for all.'[29] In the nineteenth century the 'Clearances' were also described as 'Improvements'. Today the process of concentrating ownership is euphemistically described as 'restructuring'.

Roots?

The Jubilee laws served to commit Israel's families to the original allocation of land at the conquest. Whilst families might be forced by economic circumstances to remove themselves from this particular location their connection to place and the certainty of return was enshrined by law. Using the Jubilee once more as an ethical paradigm we see how the Bible challenges the hypermobility of modern society, demonstrating that roots in place are important for individual, family and social relationships.[30]

RESTORATION

Why care for a throwaway earth?

In keeping with this line of Pauline teaching about the redemption of creation there is strong evidence in the Bible pointing to a very physical future for our environment. Both 2 Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21:1 speak of a new heaven and a new earth. The authors have the choice of two Greek words: one, *neos*, meaning new in time or origin and the other, *kainos*, meaning new in nature or quality. In both instances the authors choose the latter word. The implication is that the new heaven and earth (signifying the new cosmos) will not be totally disconnected from this one (a new beginning after the annihilation of the former heaven and earth) but a renewal of the present environment and one that is in continuity with it. Scholars[31] have pointed out the parallel with the resurrection in which the

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[29] D. Meek, 'The Land Question Answered from the Bible: The Land Issue and the Development of a Highland Theology of Liberation', *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 103:2 (1987), pp. 84-9.

[30] M. Schluter, 'Roots: Biblical Norm or Cultural Anachronism?' (Cambridge, 1995).

[31] E.g. A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, 1979), pp. 251, 252, 280.

resurrection body has continuity with our present bodily existence (as the seed has to the wheat plant in Paul's analogy in 1 Corinthians 15).

Thus Hendrikus Berkhof points to the many biblical images which point to a continuity between this present world and the one to come.

> The Bible presents the relationship now and later as that of sowing and reaping, ripening and harvest, kernel and ear. Paul states that a man can build upon Christ, the foundation with gold or silver, so that his work will remain in the consummation and he will receive reward (1 Cor. 3:14). The book of Revelation mentions the works which will follow the believers in the consummation (14:13), and twice it is said in the description of the new Jerusalem that the glory of the kings of the earth (21:24) and of the nations (21:26) will be brought into it. For us who must choose and labour in history it is of great importance to try to understand more clearly the meaning of this figurative language which speaks so plainly about a continuity between present and future.[32]

One writer who has written boldly on this subject is Edward Thurneysen:

> The world into which we shall enter in the Parousia of Jesus Christ is therefore not another world; it is this world, this heaven, this earth; both, however passed away and renewed. It is these forests, these fields, these cities, these streets, these people, that will be the scene of redemption. At present they are battlefields, full of the strife and sorrow of the not yet accomplished consummation; then they will be fields of victory, fields of harvest, where out of seed that was sown with tears, the everlasting sheaves will be reaped and brought home[33]

The Book of Revelation seems to indicate that the new earth will be a kind of restored Eden. Eden was situated on a mountain (the heads of four rivers flowed downwards from it). Likewise the new environment will be a holy mountain. And once more we encounter the tree of life and we are told that men will serve God there. The shalom that was lost in Eden will at last be restored in the new Eden.

The knowledge that our future environment will not be completely non-physical and will have some connection with what we now experience ought to make a great deal of difference to our attitude to issues such as the well-being of the countryside. As we seek to follow Christ, the growth of his kingdom in our lives, individually and collectively, will have benefit

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[32] H. Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History* (Grand Rapids, 1979), p. 189.

[33] E. Thurneysen, *Eternal Hope*, translated by Harold Knight (London, 1954), p. 204.

for this world and also for the world to come. That applies to our vision for a renewed countryside.

CONCLUSION

Recent years have seen evangelicals articulating a biblical environmentalism.[34] They have rightly spoken out against what might be termed an urban model in which man's needs are dominant and there is little concern for the creation. There is, however, danger in espousing a wilderness model in which 'nature's needs predominate and people are excluded in the search for the holy grail of a 'natural' environment. The more biblical model, which could be termed a Jubilee model, would give greater stress to the need to maintain the human component of the countryside.

The Jubilee model would be one in which man dwells in a stable, protective relationship with the land, ruling it in a way that reflects God's rule of man. It is not to be imagined that true nature is present only where human activity has been absent. Furthermore, proper earth care is only feasible when the land is well settled by families who have an intimate knowledge of their environment. The assumption that agriculture must inevitably progress by involving fewer families should be challenged, and alternative models that stress the interconnectedness of land, food and social relationships should be developed.

Ultimately the call to be concerned for the land and its people is based on the fact that God is concerned for the land and its people. A renewed countryside is part of that eternal purpose of God in which Eden will be restored in the new earth. Christians renewed by grace are privileged to be involved in that plan.

[34] See, for example, *The Care of Creation*, ed. R. J. Berry (Leicester, 2000).