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## Israel and Her Land: Some Theological Considerations

Discussion of Israel and her land puts us in a peculiar situation. On the one hand, the topic has great historical interest. Hence, the question of the occupation of the land as dealt with by Albrecht Alt and his followers and, in a different way, by John Bright and others<sup>1</sup> is at present of central concern in the study of the early history of Israel. On the other hand, to examine the topic theologically is another matter. In Old Testament study, it was never really the center of interest,<sup>2</sup> although this topic occurs throughout, from the earliest to the latest layers of the book. When it was possible to write an Old Testament theology centering in the idea of the covenant,<sup>3</sup> the question could also be raised of whether it would not be possible to make the concept of Israel and her land the main idea of an Old Testament theology. Setting aside the legitimacy of taking a single so-called proposition of faith as the central idea in a theology of the Old Testament, should one wish to make the attempt, one can well select the theme of Israel and her land. Certainly it is much more dominant than the covenant idea. To examine it thoroughly throughout all layers of the Old Testament tradition cannot of course be done in a short article. We simply draw attention to its theological importance to show how dominant it is and to suggest some ways in which it can be dealt with.

### YAHWEH THE OWNER OF THE LAND

In Lev 25: 23, we find within the context of ordinances concerning the Year of Jubilee the following passage:

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine, for you are strangers and sojourners with me.

This verse consists of a prohibition and two sermonlike extensions. The first extension gives the idea justifying the prohibition, and the second points out its meaning when it is applied to Israel.<sup>4</sup> The idea is that Yahweh owns all the land. The same idea is found in Jer 2: 7 and 16: 18, where the land is called *nah<sup>a</sup>lat yhw<sup>h</sup>* (cf 2 Sam 20: 19; 21: 3). The basic meaning of *nah<sup>a</sup>lāh* is “landed property apportioned to an individual.”<sup>5</sup> Clearly, here the term is not used in its original meaning. Nobody could apportion land to Yahweh. This does not imply, however, that the idea, “Yahweh is the owner of the land,” is late. Rather, just the opposite seems to be true. The idea is the first attempt of the Israelite tribes and clans who had invaded Palestine to relate their God, Yahweh from Sinai, to the new land they had just occupied. The idea that a god owns all the land where his worshipers live is actually an old Canaanite concept, where Baal or the Baalim are the owners of all the landed properties, fields, vineyards, orchards, together with all the springs, trees, hills, and the like. They give rain and fertility to the land, and thus make possible the living of their worshipers.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the Baalim receive worship to assure rainfall and fertility. When, however, the Israelite tribes and clans entered the Canaanite world by settling in Palestine, their religion of Yahweh from Mount Sinai or of the Gods of their Fathers<sup>7</sup> was not related to a way of life on arable land. Consequently, when the Israelites first turned the sod of Canaan, they became dependent upon the blessings of its gods. This means that the change of the culture by the newcomers in Canaan was necessarily a move toward syncretism unless a way was found to relate the new life, with its dependence on rain and fertility, to Yahweh. The simplest way to cope with this crucial problem was for them to follow the Canaanite example and to conceive of Yahweh as the owner of the land and the giver of its fertility.

That they did so is indicated by the many cultic practices related to agrarian life, which the Israelites adopted from the Canaanites and related to their God Yahweh. All these practices must be seen against the background that Yahweh is the owner of the land: the sacral fallowness every seven years, Ex 23: 10 f; Lev 25: 1 f;<sup>8</sup> the offering of the first fruits, Ex 23: 19; 34: 26; Lev 23: 10; the custom of not harvesting the fruits of newly planted trees, Lev 19: 23 ff;<sup>9</sup> the tithe, Ex 22: 28; Num 18: 21 ff; Deut 14: 22; or the practice of not gleaning the fields completely, Lev 19: 9 f; 23: 22.

Such assimilation of the Yahweh religion to the needs of a rural society through introduction of a new proposition of faith—that Yahweh is the owner of the land—could not be done overnight. It was easier to leave the traditional picture of Yahweh as it was and to worship Yahweh and Baal together. The resultant struggle is reflected in Hos 2: 4 ff. The prophet

accuses in the name of Yahweh, “She did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine and the oil . . .” (2: 8).

In the light of all this, it can be said that it was a fundamental necessity for the Israelites to relate their God Yahweh to the basic needs of daily life, which in this case meant to relate him to the land where they now lived and to their new way of making a living—that is, in an agricultural environment. A religion is doomed when it no longer answers the fundamental questions of life. So it was quite natural for the Israelites in their new home to conceive of Yahweh as the owner of the land and the giver of its yield. And it was also quite natural that it was here where the struggle between Yahweh and Baal began.

Two ideas complementary to the concept that Yahweh owns the land were developed by the Israelites. The first looks rather peculiar within Old Testament theology. It introduces a strange limitation, and therefore never played a major part in Israelite thinking. It is the idea that since Yahweh’s land is Canaan, the other countries are owned by the gods of the Gentiles. Accordingly, the Israelite who has to leave his homeland also leaves his God (1 Sam 26: 19). Furthermore, whoever wanted to worship Yahweh in a foreign country had to take with him a certain amount of Israelite soil. No fugitive like David, rather, only a rich person who traveled in a caravan, could do that (2 Kings 5: 17). The same idea could be expressed in cultic terms. Yahweh’s land is considered clean; the countries of the Gentile gods, unclean. The idea sometimes occurs in the earlier prophets (Hos 9: 3 f; Amos 7: 17).

The other complementary idea is characteristic of Israelite thinking. Once the land of Israel was called *nah<sup>a</sup>lat Yahweh*, the term *gēr* (“sojourner,” “alien”) entered the picture. Because of the realities of life, both terms are closely related to one another. Wherever there are people living within their natural family communities on their landed property allotted to them, there are also people who have come from other places, where they have left their natural communities and their inheritance. Where they are living now, they are strangers or sojourners and can lay no legal claim on protection from their host communities or on their *nah<sup>a</sup>lāh*.<sup>10</sup> So once the idea—the land where Israel lives is the *nah<sup>a</sup>lat Yahweh*—was introduced (Lev 25: 23; Ps 79: 1; Jer 2: 7), the complementary idea could be developed: Israel is the *gēr* permitted to live on Yahweh’s property. The phrase “You are strangers and sojourners with me” (Lev 25: 23) is certainly one of the latest developments of the idea that Yahweh owns the land. It reveals a deep and fine understanding of the Yahweh-Israel relationship much more sublime than the old Canaanite concept. Israel can claim nothing. Instead,

her existence, livelihood, and security depend completely on her God, the true owner of the land.

Some Israelites disapproved of the new features ascribed to Yahweh with the new idea that Yahweh owns the land. But to disapprove actually meant not to make the change of culture from a nomadic to an agricultural way of life; there was no other way to avoid the rule of the Canaanite fertility gods. Thus the Rechabites, in order to sustain the traditional Yahweh-religion, tried to continue the nomadic way of life, even after the occupation of the land (Jer 35).<sup>11</sup> Such a backward radical conservatism could hardly expect broad support; so its representatives were considered outsiders.

Another consideration is needed in this context. When Yahweh was conceived as the owner of the land and giver of the yields, something was taken away from Baal and ascribed to the God of Israel. This meant that both gods were seen as competitors more or less on the same level. In the long run, the outcome of their struggle would have been highly uncertain. But Israel was able to take the new concept of Yahweh as the owner of the land and describe it in categories unknown to the Canaanite world of thought. The God of Israel who, as the owner of the land, gives the yield of the fields is the God of history. That understanding is clearly reflected in a relatively late passage, Deut 6: 10 f, where it is stated that Yahweh brought Israel into the land which he had promised to the patriarchs, a land with

Great and goodly cities, which you did not build, and houses full of good things, which you did not fill, and cisterns hewn out, which you did not hew, and vineyards and olive trees, which you did not plant. . . .

Here the essential gifts of nature, water, wine, and oil are related to Yahweh as the Lord of history. This made Yahweh so far superior to Baal that over the centuries Baal disappeared and the God of the Old Testament became the God of two world religions.

#### THE INHERITANCE OF ISRAEL

There is a second theological concept in the Old Testament concerning Israel and her land. It is found primarily in the narrative tradition, especially in the Pentateuch, where it is one of the dominating topics. It appears in the phrase referring to Canaan as "the land which Yahweh your God gives you for an inheritance." Even though the phrase does not occur prior to Deuteronomy (Deut 4: 21, 38; 12: 9; 15: 4; 19: 10; 20: 16; 21: 23; 24: 4; 25: 19; 26: 1), it is representative of the whole concept. Again we have the term *naḥalāh* ("inheritance"), but now related to Israel. Yahweh, who owns all the lands, allots them to individual people as an inheritance, (Josh 23: 4). Canaan is Israel's inheritance.

This idea was developed within the categories of history. The older idea described above—that Yahweh owns the land, and accordingly the land is the *naḥalāh yhw*—was part of the concept that he is the lord of nature. This is Canaanite in origin, since it reflects the cultural situation of a sedentary population tilling the soil. Beliefs that a god owns the land and gives the blessing of the soil are not related to a particular country; they can be developed anywhere. So they are not confined in a special way to Palestine; they can apply to any productive land. But a specific Israelite development is that the concept of Yahweh as the Lord of nature was connected with the concept of Yahweh as the Lord of history.<sup>12</sup> History, however, takes place in areas that can be geographically localized, and deals with peoples who can be identified. Within this context of Yahweh the Lord of history, Israel could move to much more specific statements concerning her relationship to her land than within the concept of Yahweh as the Lord of nature. Speaking in historical categories, Israel could say that the land was promised and given to her by Yahweh. She could then describe how the promise was fulfilled. The land could be identified and its boundaries described, and finally she could face the problem that before she occupied the land it was not without population; rather, it was owned by other peoples.

Probably the oldest text in the Old Testament dealing with the land of Israel as a gift of God is the old creed in Deut 26: 5–9. According to Israel's way of thinking, which is to explain conditions of the present as results of happenings in the past, this text states the following: Israel is enjoying the yields of the fields of the land Canaan because Yahweh brought her "into this place" and gave her "this land" (vs 9). It is the culmination of a long history, which began with the forefather, who was a wandering Aramean (vs 5). This creed was recited with the annual dedication of the first fruits to Yahweh on the occasion of the Feast of Weeks.<sup>13</sup> What was, within the concept of Yahweh as the owner of the land, during and immediately after the period of the occupation, a gift of thanksgiving for the yields of nature is now, within historical categories which lead to the concept of Israel as the owner of the land, a gift of thanksgiving returned to Yahweh for the gift of the land. A gift of nature is returned for a gift of history. The God of nature and the God of history have become one.

The allusion to the "father" who was "a wandering Aramean" is broadly expanded in the Pentateuch. It is dominated by the two promises, to make Israel a great nation, and to give her land (Gen 12: 1–4; 24: 7; 26: 3). The promise of national greatness and the promise of a land belong together. Since there is no great nation without a land, the fulfillment of the promise of the land must precede the fulfillment of the other promise to make a great nation. Although in the schematic reconstruction of salvation history

in Deut 26: 5–9 this order is reversed, the fulfillment of the one promise remains necessary to the fulfillment of the other.

Once Israel believed that her land was promised and given to her by her God, it was essential to describe the land geographically and to define its boundaries. The land which Yahweh promised to show to Abraham (Gen 12: 1) had to be identified. In this respect, however, the Old Testament gives us no clear picture. The descriptions of boundaries reflect the situation of different periods, and include territories actually possessed or territories not possessed but claimed. To discuss all this in detail is neither possible nor necessary.<sup>14</sup> It is sufficient to point out that in various passages in the Old Testament, within the context of the idea of the promise of the land, rather general boundaries are given. The promised land stretches from the Sea of Suf (or the River of Egypt) in the south to the Euphrates (or the Gateway to Hamath) in the north; and from the sea in the west to the banks of the Jordan River in the east.<sup>15</sup> It is important to observe that Transjordan was not included. It was considered foreign soil (Gen 31: 3), and the construction of an altar east of the Jordan River was regarded as a defection from Yahweh (Josh 22: 10 ff).<sup>16</sup> This is land Yahweh does not own, and so it was considered “unclean” (vs 19). In full agreement with this, the system of Israelite tribal boundaries given in the book of Joshua includes no tribal territories east of the Jordan.<sup>17</sup> This, however, was incompatible with the facts. According to the historical evidence, at least the tribes Gad and Machir occupied territories in East Jordania<sup>18</sup> and, according to the Pentateuch, the traditional tribes of East Jordania were Reuben, Gad, and Half-Manasseh.<sup>19</sup>

The story in Num 32 shows that this was considered a problem. When the representatives of these tribes asked Moses to have East Jordania assigned to them, Moses considered it an act of noncompliance with the promise of the land. Clearly, Transjordan was originally not part of the promised land. Later, according to the story, after Reuben and Gad had promised Moses to help the majority of the tribes with the occupation of West Jordania, their request was met. Moses assigned to them Transjordan (vs 23 ff; Josh 22: 1–9). Here the original understanding is corrected. Since Israelite tribes were well established in East Jordania, that area was later included in the promised land. All this accurately reflects the historical events. The East Jordanian country was colonized only in a second move from the west by parts of Ephraim and Machir when they had difficulties in finding land in West Jordania. Gad, a later arrival from the desert, on discovering the west banks of the Jordan already occupied, settled in the east from the beginning.<sup>20</sup>

A rather late description of the boundaries of the promised land is included in Ezekiel's program of the future (Ezek 47: 13–20).<sup>21</sup> Here the original picture is restored; East Jordania is excluded—which may have been due to the fact that, with the destruction of the northern kingdom in 722/1 B.C. by the Assyrians, this area was definitely lost.<sup>22</sup>

In agreement with the belief that the land described in the boundary lists is a gift of God, the narratives concerning the occupation emphasize that the land was given to Israel—she did not take it herself. Deut 31: 3 says: “The Lord your God himself will go before you; he will destroy these nations before you, so that you shall dispossess them.”<sup>23</sup> The statement is a guideline for interpreting the stories in Josh 1–12 concerning the occupation. These begin with the story of the crossing of the Jordan River (Josh 3 and 4). The event is described in the imagery of the crossing of the Red Sea,<sup>24</sup> a fact indicating the importance attached to the occupation. As Yahweh brought Israel out of Egypt, so he brought her into the promised land. The same line is continued in the subsequent war stories. They belong to the genre of the narratives concerning the holy war,<sup>25</sup> and emphasize the idea that Yahweh was the one who gave the victory. This is strongly indicated by the stereotyped phrase “Yahweh gave Jericho in your hand” (Josh 6: 2) and the mention of a miracle in favor of the Israelites during the battle (Josh 6: 20; 10: 10–13). On the other hand, when Israel tried to occupy the land all by herself, she could not succeed (Num 14: 39 ff; Josh 7). This is enough evidence to underscore the idea that the land was given to Israel—she could not take it.<sup>26</sup>

God's gift is praised with enthusiasm. It is called “a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex 3: 8; 13: 5; Lev 20: 24; Num 13: 28; 14: 8; Deut 6: 3; 26: 9), a phrase reflecting the yearning of people living in the desert for arable land. Almost hymnlike praises of the land surpass this stereotyped phrase in Deuteronomic sermons (Deut 8: 7–10; 11: 10–12; cf Num 13: 23). In the exuberance of that praise, the land is described as even superior to Egypt, where the Israelites once enjoyed the “fleshpots” of the country (Ex 16: 3). The land gives its yield almost by itself: “The eyes of the Lord . . . are always upon it” (Deut 11: 12). In such language, the land of Israel becomes almost a kind of paradise. It did not bother the Israelites that the reality fell considerably short of that. Canaan appeared to them a paradise not because of its character as a land but because it was a gift of Yahweh. For that the Israelites expressed their gratitude by exuberantly praising the land.

There was another area where the religious language of the faithful and reality were in conflict, and this was considered a real problem. According to the promises to the patriarchs, Canaan was to be given to Israel, but the

Israelites never held it completely or alone. Before their coming, Palestine was populated by the Canaanites and representatives of various other peoples. How much attention was given to that fact is indicated by the frequent and almost stereotyped lists of the original inhabitants.<sup>27</sup> In the period of the occupation, Israel was too weak to expel them;<sup>28</sup> and later, during the period of the kingdoms, she did not intend to do so.

The gap between the theory of Israel's full ownership of the land and the political reality in the country became subject to reflections of various kinds. Rather rationalistic answers explained why Canaanites and others remained. It was "because they had chariots of iron" (Judg 1: 19; cf Josh 17: 16). It was because "the generations of the people of Israel might know war, that he might teach war to such at least as had not known it before" (Judg 3: 2). It was "lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you" (Ex 23: 29). It is clear that among a people that used to interpret historical facts in the light of their faith, such answers could hardly suffice. Hence, other answers were given on a more theological level. A relatively early passage in the Book of Covenant says:

Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you are increased and possess the land . . . . For I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them or with their gods. They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you. Ex 23: 30-33).<sup>29</sup>

Vs 30 exhibits impatience with the unsatisfactory situation in the country, and offers an explanation. Then follows a new promise—Israel will drive out the original inhabitants—and a prohibition against any kind of agreement or settlement with them.<sup>30</sup> That the promise and the prohibition could develop shows that Israel still hoped to reach a final solution with the original population in the near future.

How difficult, however, the situation was with the Canaanites still in the promised land is indicated by the offering of additional theological explanations: "They shall be a snare and a trap for you, a scourge in your sides, and thorns in your eyes" (Josh 23: 13); it is a punishment of Yahweh for Israel's attempts to come to terms with the original population (Judg 2: 1 ff); it is Yahweh's anger with Israel's idolatry (Judg 2: 11-19, 20 ff); Yahweh wanted to test Israel's loyalty (Judg 3: 4 ff). Such a variety of answers shows that none of them was completely satisfactory. There was actually no solution to the problem of the Canaanite's continuance in the promised land.

David, in his time, offered at least a political solution. He incorporated the hitherto independent Canaanite city-states into the territories of Judah and Israel.<sup>31</sup> Later his successor Solomon called on the non-Israelite population to supply forced labor for his various building activities.<sup>32</sup> This too, however, could not solve the theological aspect of the problem that the Canaanites were still there.

Thus, in the Deuteronomic tradition, the Israelites preparing for the crossing of the Jordan River were instructed: "You must utterly destroy them; you shall make no covenant with them, and show no mercy to them" (Deut 7: 2; 20: 17).<sup>33</sup> From the Deuteronomic point of view, and against the historical background of this theological movement, it is quite clear that such ordinances were used as the reason for all the problems which arose over the centuries from the cohabitation with the Canaanites, because they were not followed.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, with the collapse of the Assyrian empire, hope arose that King Josiah of Judah could reunite the two kingdoms and have full control of the promised land.<sup>35</sup> Even though that did not happen, hope continued that sometime the land would be fully possessed, as had been promised. In the description of the redistribution of the land following the return from the exile (Ezek 47: 13 ff,) land (*nahālāh*) was also to be allotted to the *gērīm*. It is certainly presupposed that those *gērīm* would now be worshipers of Yahweh.<sup>36</sup>

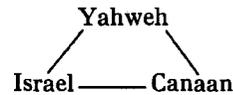
Certain theological considerations are related to the concept that the land of Canaan is the *nahlat* Israel.

It can be shown that in the Old Testament the two promises to Israel—that it would become a great nation, and that it would possess the promised land—belong inseparably together. The promise to a group of seminomadic clans and tribes that they would become a great nation makes no sense without the hope that sometime they would possess a land where they could become a great nation. And, vice versa, they would not need a promised land if they had no hope of becoming a great nation. Consequently, wherever there are Israelites who believe themselves to be the people of God, they cannot conceive of the idea of their being or becoming a great nation without the idea of their possessing a promised land; and the idea of their possessing a promised land makes no sense to them without the hope of their becoming a great nation to hold and populate it.

The idea of the promised land was developed within the belief of Yahweh as the Lord of history. Of necessity, then, the land had to be identified. The promised land is not any country. It is the land of Canaan, the borders of which could be identified, given to Israel in the thirteenth century B.C.

Accordingly, whoever thinks of Israel as the people of God must associate them with Canaan—not with another land. Israel and Canaan, the promised

land, belong together. The existence of Israel can be described only in a triangular relationship:



No point can be left out. Without Yahweh, there would be no promise of a great nation, no promise of a land, and no fulfillment. The nation Israel, without claim of being the people of God, would be without any special interest in world history. Canaan, without assignment to the people of God, would be just another area of contention in the power game of world politics.<sup>37</sup> It was certainly with a lack of theological understanding that, in the very beginning of the Zionistic movement, men like Leon Pinkser or Theodore Herzl, for reasons of suitability or expediency, discussed Argentina, Uganda, or other countries as new homelands for the Jews.<sup>38</sup> Either there is a people of God—Israel—related to Canaan; or there is just another powerful ethnic minority group trying to invade the territory of a foreign nation.

The historian might say that Canaan was invaded and taken by the Israelites, as lands were invaded and taken by other peoples at different times in different areas of the ancient Near Eastern world. But the theological reflection of the Old Testament tradition clearly indicates that Israel firmly believed this land was given her by an act of her God. It was not taken forcefully, but was bestowed by God upon his people in an act of mercy. Here two things belong together: the idea of the promised land, and the idea of its bestowal. A promised land taken by force would be self-contradictory.

In her cult, Israel confessed that the promise of the land was fulfilled (Deut 26: 9); and yet the original inhabitants were not completely exterminated or expelled. Israel was not able to do so. The result was tension between the confession of fulfillment of the promise and the reality, which constantly needed correction by a "not yet total." Even though, in her historical retrospection, Israel pointed out that everything that was promised was fulfilled, the "not yet" of the reality left open the possibility of further acts of Yahweh in the future.

Our investigation has now reached a point where another question should be introduced. Are these biblical ideas in any way applicable to the present situation in the Middle East, where today Jews have returned to the country which in the Bible is called the promised land? It seems that the greatest caution is needed here. Is contemporary Israel just a secular nation or state,

or is she more? Is she still the chosen people of God, again trying to live in the promised land? Can a direct line be drawn from Old Testament Israel, to New Testament Judaism, to all the different factions of later world Judaism, and—finally—to the Israel of our day? Only if positive answers can be given, would it be theologically justifiable to apply theological conclusions drawn from the biblical evidence to the present situation in Palestine. It would be wrong, however, to try to establish such a connection historically. Statements like "Israel is the people of God" and "Canaan is the promised land" are theological statements and propositions of faith. Hence, the question with reference to the present situation in the Middle East is: Does the Israel of today still represent the people of God? An affirmative answer would be another proposition of faith important for both the Jewish religion and Christianity.

#### ISRAEL'S RESPONSIBILITY IN THE PROMISED LAND

The promise and bestowal of the land constituted only one aspect in Israel's concept of the land. Here Israel was dealing with her past. But there was something more. When Israel received the gift of the land, a heavy responsibility was placed upon her. She was to do everything necessary to keep and maintain this gift and not to lose it.

In Lev 18: 24 f (cf 20: 22) we have a rather archaic-looking passage:

Do not defile yourselves by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am casting out before you defiled themselves; and the land became defiled, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.

The basic idea behind this quotation seems to be a very old one belonging to the world of natural religion and mythology. A natural relation exists between men and the land they live on. If they violate the order of nature, they defile both themselves and the land also—which is why the land vomits out the transgressors. The land is spoken of here as a mythological entity with its own power. Israelite thought differs. The mythological power of the land is suppressed, and Yahweh is introduced as the one who casts out the transgressors and punishes them. But the archaic phraseology that the land is acting is still sustained.

This shows that in the Code of Holiness, of which Lev 18 is a part, there is more than merely a relationship between Israel and her land in categories of theological history. The new dimension added here is that, with the bestowal of the land, a heavy responsibility was laid upon Israel. Now she has to act and to behave in the land in a way that she can keep it or stay in it.<sup>39</sup> The same idea is even more strongly developed in Deuteronomy, and

certainly under the impression of the exile in the Deuteronomistic literature. Two areas are to be briefly discussed in this context: cult, and law.

If Canaan was Yahweh's gift to Israel by which her existence as a great nation became possible, then Israel's first duty in the promised land was to worship Yahweh. Accordingly, the Yahwist relates that one of the first things Abraham did after arriving in the promised land was to build an altar (Gen 12: 7 f), as also did Isaac and Jacob after the promises were renewed to them (Gen 26: 25; 28: 18 ff; JE). The obligation of worship is again recognized when, according to Josh 4 and 5, Israel began the Yahweh cult immediately after the tribes had set foot on Canaanite soil. As soon as the people of Yahweh enter Canaan, regular worship of Yahweh shall begin. Deuteronomy emphasizes this by declaring that in the promised land is "the place which the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and to make his habitation there" (Deut 12: 5). The place is not identified, but, it is important to see, it is in the promised land (Deut 12: 1).

Again we see that Yahweh, Israel, and Canaan belong together inseparably, this time for cultic reasons. It is probably not an overstatement to say that the destiny of Canaan is to be the place where Yahweh is worshiped. There can be no worship of Yahweh by his people other than in the promised land. An altar in East Jordania is considered illegitimate (Josh 22: 10 ff); or when the exiles worship in the land of their captivity, they turn to Jerusalem to pray (1 Kings 8: 48). P adds that in order to make legitimate worship possible later in the promised land, a model of the temple and all the equipment was prepared by Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex 25 ff).

According to all this, Canaan is the land where the people of God are to worship Yahweh.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, it is decreed in Deuteronomy that Israel must destroy in Canaan all the places where the original inhabitants worshiped their Gods (12: 1 ff). Only the single place designated for the worship of Yahweh is left. No worship other than that paid to Yahweh at that particular place is permitted (Deut 4: 25; 6: 14; 12: 30). Only in this way can the promised land be what it is intended to be—the one land in the world where Yahweh receives worship from his people. To fulfill its destiny, Canaan needs Israel. Or, in other words, Israel can be the people of God only if it worships Yahweh in Canaan. Israel needs Canaan to be the people of God.

A rather archaic-looking formulation is found in Lev 25 in the introduction to the laws concerning the Sabbatical Year: "When you come into the land which I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to the Lord" (vs 2),<sup>41</sup> Strangely enough, not Israel but the land appears here as the subject of a cultic activity directed to Yahweh. This shows again that the land has a special obligation to Yahweh, and that when Israel enters the promised land she assumes the responsibility to respect that obligation.

The fact that the cultic regulations of the Old Testament are part of the Old Testament law tradition allows us to go one step further. Not only is worship to Yahweh related to the promised land, but so is the entire law. To be a great nation, Israel needs a land—there can be no great nation without land. Similarly, to be the people of Yahweh, Israel needs the law of Yahweh (Deut 4: 5 ff). There can be no people of Yahweh without his law. So Canaan is the land where the law of Yahweh is complied with. All this plays again a major role in the theology of Deuteronomy. The law is given to Israel as a rule of life for her stay in the promised land (4: 1; 5: 31; 6: 1–3). In Deut 12: 1, the Deuteronomic law code is introduced with the formula: "These are the statutes and ordinances which you shall be careful to do in the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess all the days that you live upon the earth." It is important to see that the land is not given to Israel as recompense for her compliance with the law of Yahweh. To consider it a recompense would be to misunderstand passages like Deut 11: 8: "You shall therefore keep all the commandments which I command you this day, that you may be strong, and go in and take possession of the land which you are going over to possess."<sup>42</sup> Accomplishment and recompense are not the categories to be applied. Rather, we have a theological order of thought: If Canaan is the land where Israel is to comply with the law of Yahweh, then Israel needs that law in advance so that she can enter the promised land. That is why, according to Deuteronomy, the law (Deut 12–26) was given at Mount Nebo, on the doorsteps of the promised land. Says Deut 11: 31 f: "For you are to pass over the Jordan to go in to take possession of the land which the Lord your God gives you; and when you possess it and live in it, (then) you shall be careful to do all the statutes and ordinances which I set before you this day."

The land was not given to Israel as recompense (Deut 9: 4 f; 12: 30); Israel was chosen, the patriarchs had received the promises, and the land was bestowed upon Israel without any special merit. The only reason that is given is "Yahweh loved her" (Deut 6: 8). In return, Israel is expected to show gratitude. An instruction intended for the children is devised accordingly (Deut 6: 20 ff).<sup>43</sup> The children ask, "What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances which the Lord our God has commanded you?" The fathers are to answer with a creed, referring to the acts of God beginning with the liberation from Egypt up to the occupation of the land. Here it is quite clear: gratitude for the gracious acts of God culminating in his gift of the land is the motivation behind Israel's compliance with God's law. On the other hand, without God's gift of the land, Israel would have no reason to respect his law.

As the people of Yahweh, Israel was unique among the nations of the world (Deut 4: 6), and she lived in a special country of the world. She was responsible for maintaining her special character and that of the land by living in the land according to the "testimonies and statutes and the ordinances" that Yahweh her God had "commanded her" (Deut 6: 20). Israel could easily fail and, as a matter of fact, often did. As a violation of her relationship to her God, her failure was spelled out in detail by the Old Testament prophets—for instance, in the accusations of their announcements of judgment against her.<sup>44</sup> But her failure was also an offense against the special character of the land as Yahweh's own country. Violation of the law of Yahweh in the land where the order of Yahweh is to be respected or worship of other gods in the land where Yahweh is to be worshiped would sever Israel's relationship to the land, and the logical result would be expulsion.

This brings us back to the archaic formulation in Lev 18: 25 f (cf 20: 22), which we discussed before. Because of their conduct, even though they did not know what they were doing, the original inhabitants of Canaan defiled the land, so that it "vomited them out," and the people of God entered it to fulfill its destiny. The same fate could easily befall Israel and, as a matter of fact, it did (Lev 26: 32 f). The same idea is widely expressed by both the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic literature<sup>45</sup> and the pre-exilic prophets.

In a rather peculiar way, the idea is also expressed at the end of the Code of Holiness (Lev 26: 33–35). Here the idea of expulsion is given in cultic categories. The background is the archaic idea mentioned above: the land is under obligation to "keep a Sabbath to the Lord" (Lev 25: 1). But a disobedient Israel could interfere and not allow the land to do so. In that case, Yahweh "will scatter them among the nations," and "then the land shall enjoy its Sabbaths" (Lev 26: 33 f). In this context, the expulsion of Israel seems to be a cultic necessity.

There is, however, a decisive difference between the expulsion of the original inhabitants and the expulsion of the people of Yahweh. The expulsion of the original inhabitants was definite and final, and the land was given to Israel forever.<sup>46</sup> But the expulsion of Israel does not annul the promise and bestowal of the land; it is only temporary.

Consequently, two exilic passages, which certainly reflect the influence of the message of the prophets, deal with the possibility of Israel's return to the promised land (Deut 30: 1 ff, and 1 Kings 8: 46 ff).<sup>47</sup> Israel may return if she returns to Yahweh and repents. Then Yahweh will restore her fortunes, gathering her from all the peoples where he had scattered her and bringing her back to her land. Two things are important in this development: 1) Israel's return to the promised land is possible if—and only if—Israel returns to her God and repents. This means, in turn, that there can be no return

to the promised land without repentance. 2) If Israel repents, then Yahweh promises to act. He it is who restores Israel to the promised land, giving the land to her again, as he did the first time under Joshua. Israel may not return on her own to retake the land.

Here our investigation must be concluded. Again, we observe that it was not intended to give a full picture of the Old Testament concept of Israel and her land. That is impossible within the limitations of such a short article. Instead, it was intended simply to show how important and far-reaching the idea is in the Old Testament tradition—indeed, that it has a much more important place in Israelite thinking than recent works on Old Testament theology seem to indicate.

A broader discussion of our topic should certainly put much more emphasis on the prophets. The prophets of the seventh and sixth centuries in particular made a major contribution, especially on the subject of "expulsion and return to the homeland." So, for example, Deutero-Isaiah would deserve a closer look, since it is he who announces the return of Israel to the promised land at the beginning of the eschatological age. Then God leads his people back to Jerusalem (Is 40: 9–11; 52: 7–12), in an event equal to the exodus from Egypt.<sup>48</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Albrecht Alt, "The Settlement of the Israelites in Palestine," in *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*, trans. by R. A. Wilson (1968); John Bright, *A History of Israel* (1959); George E. Mendenhall, *The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine*, BA XXV (1962), 66–87.

<sup>2</sup> Noteworthy are the following contributions: Hans Wildberger, "Israel und sein Land," *EvT* (1956), 404–22; Gerhard von Rad, "The Promised Land and Yahweh's Land in the Hexateuch," in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. by E. W. Trueman Dicken (1966), pp. 79–93; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. by D. M. G. Stalker, Vol. I (1962), pp. 296–305.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. by J. A. Baker (1691).

<sup>4</sup> Cf Henning Graf Reventlow, *Das Heiligkeitsgesetz*, WMANT 6 (1961), 133 f.

<sup>5</sup> See *KB*.

<sup>6</sup> Ulf Oldenburg, *The Conflict between El and Ba'al in Canaanite Religion* (1969), p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 176 f; Albrecht Alt, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> H. J. Kraus, *Worship in Israel*, trans. by Geoffrey Boswell (1965), pp. 70 ff.

<sup>9</sup> See Karl Elliger, *Leviticus*, HAT, 1/4 (1966), pp. 260 f.

<sup>10</sup> Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. by John McHugh (1961), pp. 74 ff.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14 f.

<sup>12</sup> See Martin Buber, *Israel und Palästina* (1950), pp. 22 f.

<sup>13</sup> See Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch*, pp. 32 ff; Martin Buber, *op. cit.*, pp. 15 ff.

<sup>14</sup> See Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Biblical Account of the Conquest of Palestine*, trans. by M. Dagut (1953), pp. 48 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Gen 15: 18; Ex 23: 31; Num 13: 21 f; 34: 2–12; Deut 1: 7; 11: 24; Josh 1: 4; cf Ezek 15–20.

<sup>16</sup> It is not likely that Josh 22: 10 ff presupposes the Deuteronomic centralization of the cult. It is probably older. Shiloh—not Jerusalem—is named here as the only legitimate sanctuary in Canaan.

<sup>17</sup> See Albrecht Alt, "The Formation of the Israelite State in Palestine," in *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*, p. 294, 141; Martin Noth, *Das Buch Josua, HAT*, 2d ed (1953), pp. 73 ff.

<sup>18</sup> Cf the term "Machir the Father of Gilead," Josh 17: 1; 1 Chron 7: 14; see Martin Noth, *The History of Israel* (1960), pp. 63 f.

<sup>19</sup> Num 32; cf Deut 3: 12 ff; Josh 13: 8 ff.

<sup>20</sup> See Martin Noth, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>21</sup> Cf Num 34: 3 ff.

<sup>22</sup> Actually already eleven years earlier; see Martin Noth, *op. cit.*, pp. 260 f.

<sup>23</sup> Cf Josh 4: 13 f and the earlier passages Ex 23: 23, 27 f; 34: 11.

<sup>24</sup> H. J. Kraus, *op. cit.*, pp. 154 ff.

<sup>25</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Der heilige Krieg im alten Israel*, 2d ed (1958).

<sup>26</sup> She cannot say: "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth" (Deut 8: 17).

<sup>27</sup> See Yehezkel Kaufmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 49 ff.

<sup>28</sup> See Götz Schmitt, *Du sollst keinen Frieden schliessen mit den Bewohnern des Landes*, *BWANT* 91 (1970), 46 ff, 76 ff.

<sup>29</sup> Cf Ex 34: 11 f; see Götz Schmitt, *op. cit.*, pp. 13 ff.

<sup>30</sup> Cf the narrative Josh 9; and Schmitt, *op. cit.*, pp. 30 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Noth, *op. cit.*, pp. 191 ff.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211; cf Judg 1: 27 ff; 1 Kings 9: 15a, 20–22.

<sup>33</sup> The question as to whether Ex 23: 20–33 was an older model cannot be discussed here; cf on this Götz Schmitt, *op. cit.*, pp. 13 ff.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 131 ff.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Noth, *op. cit.*, pp. 269 ff.

<sup>36</sup> Walter Zimmerli, *Ezechiel, BKAT*, Vol. XIII/2 (1969), pp. 1218 f. He, however, thinks only of proselytes who joined the exiles in Babylon.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Buber, in *op. cit.*, brings into the picture the third promise to the patriarchs: "Only in connection with this soil, with this land, the people can become, what they are supposed to become: 'A blessing' (Gen 12: 2)," p. 39 (my translation).

<sup>38</sup> Cf Martin Buber, *ibid.*, pp. 155 ff.

<sup>39</sup> Not so expressed in the Book of Covenant.

<sup>40</sup> Cf also the cultic harvest ordinances, which are related not to soil or to arable land in general but to the land of Canaan (Lev 19: 23 f; 23: 9) (25: 1). Concerning the Passover, see Ex 12: 25.

<sup>41</sup> See Karl Elliger, *op. cit.*, pp. 349 ff.

<sup>42</sup> Cf Deut 8: 1; 16: 20.

<sup>43</sup> See Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, trans. by Dorothea Barton (1966), p. 63.

<sup>44</sup> See Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, trans. by Hugh C. White (1967), pp. 169 ff.

<sup>45</sup> Deut 4: 27 f; 11: 17; 28: 63 ff; 29: 28.

<sup>46</sup> So already in J, Gen 13: 15; in P, Gen 48, 4. Ex 32: 13 is an addition to E.

<sup>47</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, pp. 183 ff; and Martin Noth, *Könige, BKAT* IX/1 (1968), p. 188 f.

<sup>48</sup> See H. Eberhard von Waldow, "The Message of Deutero-Isaiah," *Interp* 22 (1968), 276 f.