

**From Land to Lands, From Eden to the Renewed Earth:
A Christ-centred Biblical Theology of the Promised Land**

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ABSTRACT

The theology of the land must start in the Garden of Eden. Eden is a sanctuary, a covenanted land, and a royal garden. Eden is proto-land, and Adam is proto-Israel. Starting in Eden underlines the universal dimension of the land promise and its conditionality. It also elevates ethical behaviour above the gift.

The theology of the land in the OT reflects these Edenic themes: holiness, covenant, and kingdom. First, the *holiness* of the land depends on the presence of God in the land, and on the holiness of its dwellers; there is no permanent holy place in the OT. Secondly, the land is a gift under treaty; the goal of the gift is establishing an ideal *covenantal* community that witnesses to other nations in other lands. Thirdly, the land is the sphere of God's *reign* on earth through his vicegerent. The vicegerent brings justice and peace to the land. God remains the ultimate king in the land. The original promise to Israel is a promise of universal dominion.

After the exile, the prophets spoke of a time in which the land would become an ideal place. This ideal land is, effectively, Eden restored. The restoration of the land ultimately points forward to the restoration of the earth. The land in the OT underlines the social dimension to redemption. Yet, importantly, Israel's faith can survive without the land.

The Jesus-event is the starting place for the theology of the land in the NT. Jesus restored Israel and fulfilled the promises of the OT, including the land. He embodied the holy presence of God on earth, kept the covenant on behalf of Israel, and brought the reign of God on earth. He inherited the land, and in him Jews and Gentile are its true heirs. This radical new fulfilment, brought about by the Jesus-event, dramatically changed the meaning of the land and nullified the old promises in their old articulation. The NT points forward to a time of consummation when the whole earth will become an ideal place or a redeemed land.

The land has thus been universalized in Christ. Universalization does not mean the 'spiritualization' or 'heavenization'. Instead, the theology of the land of Israel – modified in the Jesus-event – is a paradigm for Christian communities living in other lands. The theology of the land thus underlines the social and territorial dimensions of redemption. It also highlights the goodness of creation, and has many practical implications for the ongoing mission and practice of the Church throughout the world.