

The Christian Hope: Life in the Land of the Promise Made To Abraham

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In one of the most solemn declarations of all time the Almighty God promised to give Abraham an entire country. On a mountain top somewhere between Bethel and Ai, in the land of Canaan, God commanded “the Father of the faithful” (Rom. 4:16) to “look from the place where you are, northward, southward, eastward and westward: For the entire land you are looking at I will give to you and to your descendants for ever” (Gen. 13:14, 15). As an additional assurance of God’s gift to him, God then instructed Abraham to “arise, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I will give it to you” (v. 17).

Abraham’s conception of the ultimate reward of faith was firmly linked to the earth. As he looked northward Abraham would have seen the hills of Judea marking the border with Samaria. Towards the south the view extended to Hebron where later the Patriarchs were to be buried in the only piece of the land ever owned by Abraham. To the east lay the mountains of Moab and to the west the Mediterranean sea. The divine oath guaranteed to Abraham perpetual ownership of a large portion of the earth. Later the promise was repeated and made the basis of a solemn covenant. “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you in their generations as an everlasting covenant...and I will give to you and your descendants after you, the land in which you now reside as a foreigner—all the land of Canaan—as an everlasting possession” (Gen. 17:7, 8).

It would not seem possible that the terms of God’s promise could be misunderstood. And yet, by a miracle of misinterpretation, “theology” has handled these innocent passages in a way which deprives Abraham

of his inheritance and makes God an unreliable witness. Traditional Christian theology has almost no interest in the land promised to Abraham, as can be seen by inspecting the indexes of standard systematic theologies, Bible dictionaries and commentaries. And yet, as Gerhard von Rad says, in the first six books of the Bible “there is probably no more important idea than that expressed in terms of the land promised and later granted by Yahweh.”¹ The promise is unique. “Among all the traditions of the world this is the only one that tells of a promise of land to a people.”² Because the land is promised on oath Davies suggests that it might more properly be called “The sworn Land.”³ So compelling was the promise of land to Abraham that it became “a living power in the life of Israel.”⁴ “The promise to Abraham becomes a ground for ultimate hope.... There is a gospel for Israel in the Abrahamic covenant.”⁵ (Cp. Paul’s statement that “the [Christian] gospel was preached in advance to Abraham,” Gal. 3:8.) W.D. Davies points out that large sections of the law make “the divine promise to Abraham the bedrock on which all the subsequent history rests.”⁶ Von Rad maintains that “the whole of the Hexateuch [Genesis to Joshua] in all its vast complexity was governed by the theme of the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham in the settlement in Canaan.”⁷ We might add that the Abrahamic covenant permeates the whole of Scripture. That the patriarchs expected to inherit a portion of this planet is obvious not only from the divine promises made to them but also from their zeal to be buried in the land of Israel (Gen. 50:5). The land-promise to Abraham and his offspring runs like a golden thread throughout the book of Genesis. The key words in the following passages are “land,” “give,” “possess,” “heir,” “covenant.” (It is interesting to note the frequency of the word “land” in Bible concordances and then to see how the same word is absent from the indexes of books claiming to explain the Bible.)

¹*The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, 1966, 79, cited in W.D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, U of C Press, 1974, 15.

²M. Buber, *Israel and Palestine*, London, 1952, 19.

³*The Gospel and the Land*, 15.

⁴*Ibid.*, 18.

⁵*Ibid.*, 21.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*, 23.

I. THE PROMISE TO ABRAHAM

“Go to the land I will show you (Gen. 12:1). All the land which you see I will give to you and your offspring forever (Gen. 13:17). A son coming from your own body will be your heir (Gen. 15:4). I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees to give you this land to take possession of it (Gen. 15:7). On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, to your descendants I give this land (Gen. 15:18). I will make nations of you and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you and I will be their God (Gen. 17:6-8). Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him... (Gen. 18:18, 19). Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies (Gen. 22:17). God promised me on oath, saying, ‘to your offspring I will give this land’ (Gen. 24:7). [Abraham] is a prophet” (Gen. 20:7).

II. ISAAC

“I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.... My covenant I will establish with Isaac (Gen. 17:19, 21). Through Isaac your offspring will be reckoned (Gen. 21:12). To you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath which I swore to your father Abraham” (Gen. 26:3).

III. JACOB

“May God give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, the land God gave to Abraham (Gen. 28:4). I will give you the land on which you are lying.... I will bring you back to this land (Gen. 28:13, 15). ...the land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you” (Gen. 35:12).

IV. THE TWELVE TRIBES

“God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land He promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (Gen. 50:24).

The promise to the nation of Israel received a primary fulfillment under Joshua’s leadership (Josh. 21:45). Long after the death of the patriarchs, both the Law and the writings of the prophets of Israel express the conviction that Israel’s settlement of the land under Joshua was only an incomplete fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham. It was clear that the patriarchs had never gained possession of the land. A further and final fulfillment was to be expected. The point is a simple one with momentous implications for New Testament Christians who become heirs to the Abrahamic covenant. Von Rad points out that “Promises which have been fulfilled in history are not thereby exhausted of their content, but remain as promises on a different level....”⁸

The tradition, however changed, continued to contain *the hope of life in the land*. Deuteronomy makes it clear that there is still a future to look forward to: the land has to achieve rest and peace.... The land looks forward to a future blessing.⁹

Thus in the Old Testament the hope of an ultimate and permanent settlement in the land, accompanied by peace, remains in view:

“My people shall live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest” (Isa. 32:18).

“...descendants from Jacob and Judah...will possess My mountains [i.e., the land]; My chosen people will inherit them and there will My servants live” (Isa. 65:9).

“Then all your people will be righteous and they will inherit the land forever” (Isa. 60:21).

“[Israel] will possess a double portion in their land; everlasting joy will be theirs” (Isa. 61:7).

“Thus they shall inherit the land *a second time*, and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads” (Isa. 61:7, LXX).

“But the man who makes Me his refuge will inherit the land and possess My holy mountain” (Isa. 57:13).

“The righteous shall never be removed: but the wicked will not inherit the land” (Prov. 10:30).

⁸*The Problem of the Hexateuch*, 92ff.

⁹*The Gospel and the Land*, 36, emphasis added.

“Dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.... The meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace.... The inheritance of the blameless will endure forever.... Those the Lord blesses will inherit the land.... Turn from evil and do good, then you will dwell in the land forever.... The righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever.... God will exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off you will see it.... [Note carefully that the righteous should not expect to inherit the land before the wicked are cut off. There is a caution for dominion and reconstructionist theologies here.] There is a future for the man of peace” (Ps. 37:3, 11, 18, 22, 27, 29, 34, 37).

“The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity and restore them to the land I gave their forefathers to possess” (Jer. 30:3).

The integrity of God’s word is at stake in this question of the future of the promised land. It was obvious to all that Abraham had never received the fulfillment of the covenant promise that he would possess the land. Moses was not allowed to enter the promised land and Israel was eventually expelled from her homeland. Based on the Abrahamic covenant, however, the faithful in Israel clung with passionate tenacity to the expectation that the land of Israel would indeed become the scene of ultimate salvation. That hope remained as the beacon light not only of the prophets but also of the original Christian faith as preached by Jesus and the Apostles —until it was extinguished by the intrusion of a non-territorial hope: “heaven when you die.” A non-biblical view of the future, divorced from the land and the earth, was promoted by Gentiles unsympathetic to the heritage of Israel, for whom the promise of the land to Abraham was the foundation of the nation’s deepest aspirations. In direct contradiction to Jesus, gentilized Christianity has substituted “heaven at death” for the biblical promise of life in the land. The message of Jesus’ famous beatitude, “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the land” (Matt. 5:5) faces constant opposition from traditional funeral sermons announcing that the dead have gone to heaven. Gentile antipathy to the covenant made with Abraham has rendered large parts of the Old Testament meaningless to churchgoers. Moreover, the New Testament is obscured, since it relies for its basic understanding of the Christian faith on the promises of God given to Israel through Abraham. All the major doctrines of the faith are adversely affected when the Abrahamic Covenant is disregarded or misinterpreted.

The “murder of the [Old Testament biblical] text”¹⁰ by critical scholarship was later equally responsible for the suppression of the biblical hope

of “life in the land” based on the promise made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, promises which according to Paul, Jesus came to “confirm” or “guarantee” (Rom. 15:7).¹¹ Fragmenting the Old Testament text in the interests of a theory of composition, scholarship lost sight of what James Dunn calls the Pauline presupposition about the authority of Scripture, “that a single mind and purpose [God’s] inspired the several writings [the Scriptures].”¹² After nearly two thousand years of uncomprehending Gentile commentary, the promise to Abraham of progeny, blessing *and land* must be reinstated as the coherent and unifying theme of New Testament faith in God and Christ and the essential core of the Christian Gospel of the Kingdom of God. The Gospel rests on the promise to Abraham that in Christ all the faithful will possess the land forever (Matt. 5:5, Rev. 5:10). Not only will they possess the land but that “future inhabited earth” will be under the authority of the Messiah and the saints (Heb. 2:5). This concept is what the writer to the Hebrews calls the “greatness” or “importance” of salvation which we ought not to neglect:

How shall we escape if we disregard so great a salvation.... For God did not put the coming society on earth under the authority of angels but the Son of Man (Heb. 2:5ff.)

The results of the inexorable process of dismantling the divine Revelation to Abraham can be seen in the comments of the *Pulpit Commentary* on Gen. 13:14, 15. The problem for the commentator (who sees no relevance in the land-promises for Christians) is to reconcile God’s declaration, “I will give the land to you [Abraham]” with the assertion made by Stephen some two thousand years later that God

did not give Abraham any inheritance [in the land of Palestine]— not even a square foot of land, but he promised to give it to him as a possession [kataschesis; cp. LXX Gen. 17:8, “everlasting possession”] and to his descendants with him.

How is the apparent contradiction to be resolved? The *Pulpit Commentary* offers two solutions. Firstly a retranslation so that the promise of

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 48. Cp. Jesus’ observation that apostate Israel had murdered the prophets (Matt. 23:31).

¹¹ “Jesus Christ was a minister to the Jews on behalf of God’s truth [the Gospel] to confirm the promises made to the Patriarchs, so that the Gentiles may glorify God for His mercy.”

¹²*Commentary on Romans*, Word Books, 1988, 202.

Gen. 13:15 reads: “To you I will give the land, that is to say, to your descendants.” In this way the failure of Abraham to receive the land personally will be explained: God promised it only to his descendants and they received it under Joshua. But this is no solution at all. Throughout God’s dealings with Abraham the promise of land to the Patriarch himself is repeatedly made. Gen. 13:17 reads: “Walk through the length and breadth of the land; to you I will give it.” Abraham would have every right to complain, if this were to mean that he personally should not expect to inherit the promised land!

The commentary offers a second way round the difficulty. It maintains that the land did in fact belong to Abraham during his lifetime. “The land was really given to Abram as a nomadic chief, in the sense that he peacefully lived for many years, grew old, and died within its borders.”¹³ However, this is to contradict the emphatic biblical assertions that Abraham definitely did not possess the land. Gen. 17:8 specifically reports that God said to Abraham:

And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you in their generations to be a God to you and your seed after you. And I will give *to you* and to your seed after you the land in which you are a stranger—all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession (Gen. 17: 7, 8).

These, then, are the biblical premises: Abraham is to possess the land forever. He lived out his life as a stranger owning none of the land (except for a small piece of property bought from the Hittites as a burial site for Sarah, Gen. 23:3-20). Abraham himself confessed to the Hittite inhabitants of Canaan: “I am an alien and a stranger among you” (Gen. 23:4). As the New Testament witnesses: “God gave Abraham no inheritance here [in Palestine], not even a foot of ground. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land” (Acts 7:5).

How then is the covenant grant of land to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to be fulfilled? The answer to the problem throws a flood of light on the Christianity of the New Testament. There is only one way in which the covenant can be realized—by the future resurrection of Abraham, enabling him to inherit the promised land for ever. To Abraham and his descendants the land belongs for ever by covenant-oath. Abraham died. Abraham must therefore rise from the dead to receive the “land of the promise,” which is Canaan, the land to which he ventured forth from

¹³*Pulpit Commentary*, Eerdmans, 1950, Vol. I, 200.

Babylon and in which he lived as a foreigner. The promise to Abraham will be fulfilled, as Jesus said, when

...many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the Kingdom of God (Matt. 8:11 and Luke 13:28, 29).

The absolute necessity for resurrection in the divine plan was the point of Jesus’ important interchange with the Sadducees, who did not believe in any resurrection and thus denied the covenant hope of life in the land for the Patriarchs and all the faithful. Jesus’ response to their inadequate understanding of eschatology and consequent failure to believe in the future resurrection of the faithful to inherit the land involved a stern rebuke that they had departed from God’s revelation:

You are in error because you do not know the Scripture or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what God said to you: “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob?” He is not the God of the dead but of the living (Matt. 22:29-32).

The logic of Jesus’ argument was simply that, since Abraham and Isaac and Jacob were then dead, they must live again through resurrection in the future so that their relationship with the living God could be restored and they could receive what the covenant had guaranteed them.

V. HEBREWS

The Book of Hebrews expounds the drama of Abraham’s faith in the great promises of God making a future resurrection the only solution to the mystery of Abraham’s failure as yet ever to own the land.

“By faith Abraham when called to go to *a place* he would later receive as *his inheritance*...” (Heb. 8:11). So the story begins. Abraham’s inheritance, we observe, is to be the “place to which he was called,” i.e., the land of Canaan. This is exactly what the Genesis account describes. That very land Abraham was destined to receive “later,” but how much later we are not yet told. The writer continues: “By faith Abraham made his home in the land of the promise like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents as did Isaac and Jacob who were heirs with him of the same promise” (Heb. 11:8, 9). Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and other heroes of faith “died in faith not having received the things promised; they only saw them and

welcomed them from a distance and admitted that they were aliens and strangers *in the land* " (v. 13). Note that the wrong idea is suggested by our versions when they translate "in the land" as "on the earth," giving the impression that the Patriarchs were expecting to go to heaven. However, the point is that people who say they are aliens in the land "show that they are looking for a country of their own" (Heb. 11:13, 14), i.e., the same land renewed under the promised government of the Messiah.

The important truth about the land-promise has been rescued by George Wesley Buchanan:

This promise-rest-inheritance was inextricably tied to the land of Canaan, which is the place where the Patriarchs wandered as sojourners (11:13). It was called the land of the promise (11:9) and the heavenly country (11:16)... This does not mean that it is not on earth any more than the sharers in the heavenly calling (3:1) who had tasted the heavenly gift (6:4) were not those who lived on earth. Indeed, it was the very land on which the patriarchs dwelt as "strangers and wanderers" (11:13). ["Heavenly"] means that it is a divine land which God himself has promised.¹⁴

VI. "HEAVEN" WILL BE ON EARTH

It is important to note the evasion by popular Christianity of the implications of Heb. 11:8, 9. In order to preserve the tradition that heaven is the reward of the faithful, it is argued that the geographical land of Canaan is a type of "heaven" to be gained at death. However, this New Testament passage specifically says that Abraham actually lived in the place designated as his future inheritance. "He made his home in the promised land" (Heb. 11:9) and this was on the earth! "Heaven," therefore, in the Bible is to be a place on this planet—our own earth renewed and restored.¹⁵ The promised land in this New Testament comment on the Old is still the geographical Canaan and it is precisely that territory which Abraham died without receiving. Resurrection in the future is the only path by which the Patriarch can achieve his goal and possess the land which he has never owned. Indeed, as Hebrews emphasizes, none of the distinguished faithful ever "received what had been promised"—the

¹⁴*Anchor Bible, Commentary to the Hebrews*, Doubleday and Co. 1972, 192, 194.

¹⁵Cp. J.A.T. Robinson's observation that "'heaven' is never in fact used in the Bible for the destination of the dying.... The reading of I Cor. 15 at funerals reinforces the impression that this chapter is about the moment of death: in fact it revolves around two points, 'the third day' and 'the last day'" (*In the End God*, Collins, 1968, 104, 105).

inheritance of the promised land (Heb. 11:13, 39). They died in faith fully expecting later to receive their promised possession of the land. This is a very far cry from the idea, which so many have accepted under the pressure of post-biblical tradition, that the Patriarchs have already gone to their reward in heaven.

VII. PAUL AND ABRAHAM

Paul treats the story of Abraham as the model of Christian faith with no hint that Abraham's inheritance is different from that of every Christian believer. In fact, the very opposite is true: Abraham is "the father of all who believe" (Rom. 4:11) Abraham demonstrated Christian faith by believing in God's plan to grant him land, progeny and blessing for ever. Abraham's faith was demonstrated in his willingness to respond to the divine initiative; to believe God's declaration of His plan to give Abraham and his descendants the land for ever. This is the essence of biblical faith. Justification includes believing like Abraham in what God has promised to do (Rom. 4:3, 13). This entails more than the acceptance of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Apostolic faith requires belief in the ongoing divine plan in history, including the divinely revealed *future*. Grasping what God is doing in world history enables a man to attune his life to God in Christ. A Christian according to Paul is one who "follows in the footsteps of the faith of our father Abraham" (Rom. 3:12). Abraham's faith "was characterized by (or based on) a hope which was determined solely by the promise of God.... Abraham's faith was firm confidence in God as the one who determines the future according to what he has promised."¹⁶ So Jesus summons us to faith, first of all, in the Gospel of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14, 15; cp. Acts 8:12; 28:23, 31) which is to be nothing less than the final fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham and his (spiritual) offspring. Paul defines the promise. It was that Abraham should be "heir of the world" (Rom. 4:13). As James Dunn says:

The idea of "inheritance" was a fundamental part of Jewish understanding of their covenant relationship with God, above all, indeed almost exclusively, in connection *with the land*—the land of Canaan theirs by right of inheritance as promised to Abraham.... [This is] one of the most emotive themes in Jewish national self-identity.... Central to Jewish self-understanding was the conviction that Israel was the Lord's inheritance.... Integral to the national faith was the conviction that God had given Israel

¹⁶Dunn, 219.

the inheritance of Palestine, the promised land. It is this axiom, which Paul evokes and *refers to the new Christian movement as a whole*, Gentiles as well as Jews. They are the heirs of God. Israel's special relationship with God has been extended to all in Christ. And the promise of the land has been transformed into the promise of the Kingdom.... That inheritance of the Kingdom, full citizenship under the rule of God alone, is something still awaited by believers.¹⁷

Paul links the Christian faith directly to the promise made to Abraham. As Dunn says:

The degree to which Paul's argument is determined by the current self-understanding of his own people is clearly indicated by his careful wording which picks up four key elements in that self-understanding: the covenant promise to Abraham and his seed, *the inheritance of the land as its central element*.... It had become almost a commonplace of Jewish teaching that the covenant promised that Abraham's seed would inherit the earth.... The promise thus interpreted was fundamental to Israel's self-consciousness as God's covenant people: It was the reason why God had chosen them in the first place from among all the nations of the earth, the justification for holding themselves distinct from other nations, and the comforting hope that made their current national humiliation endurable....¹⁸

Dunn goes on to link the Abrahamic covenant with the New Testament:

...Paul's case...reveals the strong continuity he saw between his faith and the fundamental promise of his people's Scriptures.... Paul had no doubt that the Gospel he proclaimed was a continuation and fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. But he was equally clear that the heirs of Abraham's promise were no longer to be identified in terms of the law. For Gen. 15:6 showed with sufficient clarity that the promise was given and accepted through faith, quite apart from the law in whole or in part.¹⁹

The point to be grasped is that Paul does not question the content of the promise. How could he without overthrowing the whole revelation given by the Bible? The territorial promise was clearly and repeatedly spelled out in the Genesis account and was his people's most cherished national treasure: To faithful Israel, represented first by Abraham, God had given assurance that they would inherit the land. Paul introduces a revolutionary new fact— that this grand promise is open to all who believe in the

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 213, 463, emphasis added.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 233, emphasis added.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 234, emphasis added.

Messiah as the seed of Abraham. For it was to Messiah, as Abraham's seed, that the promises were made, as well as to Abraham himself. But Gentile Christians, if they believe the promise in Christ, may claim full share in the same promised inheritance. Paul reaches a triumphant moment in his argument when he declares to his Gentile readers that "if you are a Christian then you count as Abraham's descendants and are heirs [of the world, Rom. 4:13] according to the promise [made to Abraham]" (Gal. 3:29).

The promises, however, are certain only, as Paul says, to "those who are of the faith of Abraham" (Rom. 4:16), i.e., those whose faith is of the same type as his, resting on the same promises. Hence Paul speaks of the need for Christians to be "sons of Abraham" (Gal. 3:7), "seed of Abraham" (Gal. 3:29, Rom. 4:16), and to reckon Abraham as their father (Rom. 4:11), to walk in his steps (Rom. 4:12) and consider him the model of Christian faith (Gal. 3:9), because the Gospel had been preached to him in advance (Gal. 3:8). But how much do we now hear about the Christian Gospel as defined by the promises made to Abraham? The "blessing given to Abraham" (Gal. 3:14) which is now available to both Jews and Gentiles in Christ is described by Gen. 28:4. It is to "take possession of the land, where you now live as an alien, the land God gave to Abraham." Speaking to Gentile Christians, Paul states that "the blessing given to Abraham" (exactly the phrase found in Gen. 28:4) has now come to the believers in Christ (Gal. 3:14).

It is essential that we do not add alien material to Paul's exposition of God's salvation plan. The promise to Abraham and to his offspring is that he and they are to be "heir of the world" (Rom. 4:13). Paul has not abandoned the account in Genesis from which he quotes explicitly (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6 from Gen. 15:9). Since the promised land of Canaan would be the center of the Messianic government it was obvious that inheritance of the land implied inheritance of the world. But the promise remains geographical and territorial corresponding exactly with Jesus' promise to the meek that they would "inherit the land/earth" (Mat. 5:5), His belief that Jerusalem would be the city of the Great King (Mat. 5:35), and that believers would administer a New World Order with Him (Mat. 19:28; Luke 22:28-30; Rev. 2:26; 3:21; 5:10; 20:1-6). In short the promise of the land, which is fundamental to the Christian Gospel, is now the promise of the Kingdom of God—the renewed "inhabited earth of the future" (Heb. 2:5), which is not to be subject to angels but to the Messiah and the saints, the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16) who are heirs of the covenant. Such a hope

corresponds exactly with the hope of the Hebrew prophets. J. Skinner²⁰ observes that “the main point [of Jeremiah’s hope for the future] is that in some sense a restoration of the Israelite nationality was the form in which he conceived the Kingdom of God.” Paul in Romans 11:25, 26 expected a collective conversion of the nation of Israel at the Second Coming. The Church, however, in Paul’s thinking, would be leaders in the Messianic Kingdom (I Cor. 6:2; II Tim. 2:12). In this way the Abrahamic covenant guarantees a part in the Messianic Kingdom for all who now believe the Gospel and it assures us that there will be a collective return to the Messiah on the part of a remnant of the nation of Israel (Rom. 11:25-27). This hope is seen clearly in Acts 1:6, where the Apostles (who had not had the benefit of a Calvinist training!) asked when the promised restoration of Israel might be expected. Since they were hoping to be kings in the Kingdom, and the holy spirit (v.5) was the special endowment of kings, they naturally expected an immediate advent of the Kingdom. In His mercy God has extended the period of repentance.

VIII. WORLDWIDE INHERITANCE

It was common to Jewish thinking and Paul, as well as to the whole New Testament, that the whole world was involved in the promise made to Abraham that he would inherit “the land of the promise.” This is seen from biblical and extra-biblical texts:

“I have installed my King on Zion.... Ask of Me [God] and I will make the nations your [Messiah’s] inheritance and the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery” (Ps. 2:6. See Rev. 12:5 and 2:26, 27—the latter passage includes the Christians in the same promise).

“May [God] strengthen you, and may you inherit all the earth” (Jub. 22:14).

“And there will be kings from you [Jacob]. They will rule everywhere that the tracks of mankind have been trod. And I will give your seed all the land under heaven and they will rule in all nations as they have desired”(Jub. 32:19).

“But to the elect there shall be light, joy, and peace, and they shall inherit the earth.” (I Enoch 5:7).

“If the world has indeed been created for us, why do we not possess our world as an inheritance? How long will this be so? (4 Ezra 6:59).

²⁰*Prophecy and Religion*, Cambridge, 1922, 308.

“The righteous...are confident of the world which you have promised to them with an expectation full of joy” (II Bar. 14:12, 13).

“[The righteous] will receive the world which is promised to them” (II Bar. 51:3).

Paul’s definition of the promise to Abraham that he “would be heir to the world” (Rom. 4:13) fits naturally into texts such as these and is implied by the covenant made with Abraham. Henry Alford comments on the connection between Paul’s view of the future and Jewish hopes:

The Rabbis already had seen, and Paul who had been brought up in their learning, held fast to the truth,— that much more was intended in the words “in thee, or in they seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed,” than the mere possession of Canaan. They distinctly trace the gift of the world to this promise. The inheritance of the world...is that ultimate lordship over the whole world which Abraham, as the father of the faithful in all peoples, and Christ, as the Seed of promise, shall possess....²¹

H.A.W. Meyer notes that to be “seed of Abraham” meant that one was destined to have “dominion over the world,” based on Gen. 22:17ff: “Your descendants shall gain possession of the gates [i.e., towns] of their enemies.”²² With this promise in mind, Jesus envisages the faithful assuming authority over urban populations (Luke 19:17, 19).

The *International Critical Commentary* on Rom. 4:13²³ speaks of the promise that Abraham’s seed [in Christ] should “enjoy worldwide dominion,” “the right to universal dominion which will belong to the Messiah and His people,” and “the promise made to Abraham and his descendants of worldwide Messianic rule.” Something of the fervor of Israel for the land may be seen in the 14th and 18th Benedictions repeated in the Synagogue since AD 70:

Be merciful, O Lord our God, in Thy great mercy towards Israel Thy people and towards Jerusalem, and towards Zion the abiding place of Thy glory, and towards Thy temple and Thy habitation, and towards the kingdom of the house of David, Thy righteous anointed one. Blessed art Thou, O Lord God of David, the builder of Jerusalem Thy city. Bestow Thy peace upon Israel Thy people and upon Thy city and upon Thine inheritance, and bless us, all of us together. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who makest peace.”

²¹*The Greek New Testament*, Vol. II, 350

²²*Commentary on John*, Funk and Wagnalls, 1884, 277.

²³Sanday and Headlam, *Epistle to the Romans*, T & T Clark, 1905, 109, 111.

Even where the land is not mentioned directly, the land is implied in the city and the Temple which became the quintessence of the hope for salvation.²⁴ Exactly the same hope is reflected in the New Testament:

“The Lord God will give [Jesus] the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his Kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:32)

“[God] has helped His servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as He said to our fathers” (Luke 1:55).

“[God] has raised up a horn [political dominion] in the house of His servant David...to show mercy to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant, the oath He swore to our father Abraham” (Luke 1:69, 72, 73).

“[Simeon] was waiting for the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25).

“[Anna] gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38).

“Blessed is the coming Kingdom of our father David” (Mark 11:10).

“Joseph of Arimathea [a disciple of Jesus—i.e., a Christian, Matt. 27:57], a prominent member of the Council..., was himself waiting for the Kingdom of God” (Mark 15:43).

“We [disciples of Jesus, i.e., Christians] had hoped that [Jesus] was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21).

The Apostles asked: “Is this the time that you are going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6.)

“It is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night” (Acts 26:6, 7).

The Bible does not for a moment abandon or replace these hopes based on the great covenant made with Abraham. The disciples closest to Jesus, who were the products of His careful tuition over several years and for six weeks after the resurrection (Acts 1:3), obviously look forward to the “restoration of the Kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6). It had not entered their heads to abandon the territorial hopes of the prophets. Paul insists that he is on trial “because of my hope in what *God has promised our fathers*. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night” (Acts 26:6,7). The nature of this hope is expressed in a Rabbinical saying of the third century reflecting the ancient expectation of life in the land held in common with the New Testament:

Why did the patriarchs long for burial in the land of Israel? Because the

dead of the land of Israel will be the first to be resurrected in the days of Messiah and to enjoy the years of Messiah (*Gen. Rabbah*, 96:5).

Paul’s statement in Acts 26: 6, 7 (above) expressly defines the Apostolic Christian hope as the same as the hope held by the ancient synagogue—the prospect of worldwide dominion for the faithful in the Messiah’s Kingdom. New Testament Christianity confirms this interest in the unfulfilled promises to the patriarchs with its expectation of a restoration of the Kingdom to Israel. Jesus promises the land to the meek (Matt. 5:5) and locates the Kingdom of the future “on the earth” or perhaps “in the land” (Rev. 5:10). It makes little difference whether we render “*epi tes ges*” “in the land” or “on the earth,” because the Kingdom is destined to extend to the “uttermost parts of the earth” (Ps. 2:8). The promise to Abraham is to be fulfilled in the Messiah when the latter is invited to “Ask of me [God] and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession” (Ps. 2:7, 8). All these blessings are contained in Paul’s phrase “inheritance of the world” (Rom. 4:13) which he sees as the essence of the promise made to Abraham—the promise to which Gentile believers should cling since in Christ they are equally entitled to it:

“If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29).

IX. “HEAVEN”

References in the New Testament to “heaven” are limited to contexts in which the future reward of believers is said to be preserved now as treasure with God in heaven. “Heaven” as a place removed from the earth is, however, never the destination of the believer in the Bible—neither at death nor at the resurrection. Christians must now identify with their reward, at present stored up in heaven for them, so that they may receive it when Jesus brings it to the earth at His Second Coming (Col. 1:5; I Pet. 1:4, 5). That reward was made known to the converts when the Christian Gospel of the Kingdom of God was preached to them (Mat. 1:14, 15; Luke 4:43; Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). Belief in the Gospel in Apostolic times was not confined to belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus, but included the whole invitation to prepare for a place in Messiah’s worldwide dominion to be realized on earth. The situation is very different today when little or nothing is preached about inheriting the earth with Jesus. There is an urgent need for believers to heed Paul’s warning not to

²⁴Davies, 54.

be “moved away from the hope held out in the Gospel” (Col. 1:23). The loss of the Kingdom in the Gospel is symptomatic of the loss the roots of Christianity in the Old Testament.

X. FAITH IN GOD’S WORLD PLAN

Nonsense is made of the New Testament scheme, and God’s plan in world history, when it is proposed that the Christian destiny is to be enjoyed in a location removed from the earth. This destroys at a blow the promises made to Abraham and his descendants (i.e., Christ and the faithful) that that they are to inherit the land and the world. The substitution of “heaven” at death for the reward of inheriting the earth undermines the covenant made with Abraham. That covenant is the foundation of New Testament faith. The repeated offer of “heaven” in popular preaching renders meaningless the whole hope of the prophets (based on the Abrahamic promise) that the world is going to enjoy an unparalleled era of blessing and peace under the just rule of the Messiah and the resurrected faithful—those who believe in “the Kingdom of God and the name [i.e., the Messiahship and all that this entails] of Jesus,” and who are baptized in response to that early creed in Acts 8:12:

When they believed Philip as he proclaimed the Gospel about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized both men and women.

This text remains a model for evangelism and calls the contemporary Church back to its roots in the covenant made with “the father of the faithful” which can be fulfilled only in Messiah Jesus. For the fulfillment of that plan we are to pray, “Thy Kingdom come,” and strive to conduct ourselves “worthy of God who is calling us into His Kingdom and glory” (I Thess. 2:12). The truth about our Christian destiny will be reinstated when we return to the biblical language about “entering the Kingdom,” “inheriting the earth” (Matt. 5:5), and ruling on earth (Rev. 5:10) and abandon our unbiblical language about “heaven.” The way will then be open for us to understand that Christianity is a call to kingship and that a saint is one appointed to rule on the earth in the coming Kingdom of the Messiah (Dan. 7:18, 22, 27). Henry Alford’s comment is a much needed corrective, calling us back to belief in the hope contained in the Abrahamic covenant:

The general tenor of prophecy and the analogy of the divine dealings point

unmistakably to this earth purified and renewed, and not to the heavens in any ordinary sense of the term, as the eternal habitation of the blessed.²⁵

Alford’s keen insight reinstates the unity of the Bible’s hope for the future:

May God give you the blessing of Abraham my father, to you and to your seed with you—the inheritance of the land in which you now reside as a foreigner, the land which God gave to Abraham (Jacob). The blessing of Abraham [will come] to the Gentiles in Christ (Paul).²⁶

²⁵Henry Alford, *The Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, 35, 36.

²⁶Gen. 28:4; Gal. 3:14.