

**YAHWEH, ISRAEL AND THE  
NEIGHBOURING NATIONS: AN  
ANALYSIS OF LAND  
REDISTRIBUTION**

EMMANUEL TWUMASI ANKRAH<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT**

*The centrality of 'the promised land' was and remains the most crucial in the history of Israel. Throughout the Torah, the land that Israel occupies was divinely given to them by Yahweh, the landowner. This theological idea of the land of Canaan instigated the spilling of blood in and around Palestine by the forces of possession and dispossession. Israel's continuance occupancy on the 'land' poses ethical, moral and xenophobic problem on the people living around and on Yahweh himself. This paper analyzed the issue from the moral point of view and has suggested that a rethinking, re-interpretation, reconstruction of the texts containing the issue of land be done. We are of the view that hermeneutics of 'live and let me live' on the part of Israel, may go a long way to solving the antagonism going on around Palestine.*

---

<sup>1</sup> EMMANUEL TWUMASI ANKRAH is a PhD candidate at the Department of Religious Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi-Ghana and a lecturer at CSUC, Kumasi.

## **Introduction**

The fashion with which the people of Israel went and settled in the land of Canaan is a matter of great academic interest and of vast relevance in both historical and current phenomena in the Middle East. It has implications for our understanding of God, and His relations to the people of Israel in particular, and to the people of the rest of the world.

There is no distinct, lucid view of ‘the land’ in the Bible, but rather a variety of perspectives from periods when ‘the land’ was assessed in various ways. A unified, ample dealing of the theme is quite daunting. The focus of this paper is on some highlights of

‘the land’ in the Old Testament (OT). It examines the various biblical texts on the land and their implications to the instabilities in and around Palestine. This paper approaches the issue of land redistribution in Canaan from the moral and sociological point of view.

The Primeval history (Genesis 1-11) presents its perspective on the origin of the universe, while Genesis 11:27-50:26 presents us with the historical antecedents of the people of Israel, through its ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, down to the death of Jacob and Joseph in Egypt. The focus of many of the texts in the Torah is to present Yahweh as the landowner and land-giver. This idea features prominently, the place of ‘the land’ in Yahweh-Israel relationship and the rippling effects on Israel’s neighbours.

## **The Land of Canaan, the Core of the Covenant**

It is instructive to note that ‘the land’ was so vital in the covenant between Yahweh and Israel that “Out of the 46 references to the promise in the whole sweep of text from Genesis to Judges, only 7 do not mention the land, while 29 refer solely to it (Gen. 28:4);

‘the blessing of Abraham means simply possession of the land’.<sup>2</sup> The land thus becomes one of the most prominent features of the entire sequel of the (OT). We agree with David J.A. Clines who sees the land promise as the third of the three major elements of the Abrahamic promise: posterity, blessing and land ...but the land promise and possession is never quite reached within the Pentateuch itself.<sup>3</sup>

There is much support in the Hebrew Scriptures for the belief that the land of Canaan was promised by God to Abraham and his descendants, and that their possession of it was in conformity with His will. Moses, the author of Genesis records: "Abram passed through the land to a place at Shechem to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then Yahweh appeared to Abram, and said, ‘To your descendants I will give this land’".<sup>4</sup>

Here, it is presented to us that for the first time, the issue of land is introduced by God in His relationship with Abraham, the ancestor of the people of Israel. The OT idea of God, the landowner and land-giver, is clearly initiated here. But is it not striking to note that the land God gives, originally, ‘belongs’ to the Canaanites? A similar incident is recorded in Genesis 15:1-21 where God put ‘the land’ on the table as His part of the promise to solidify the covenant. The land He gave (promised) was inhabited by some people already.

Abram left the land because of a famine and sojourned in Egypt. After he and his wife were deported (Gen 12:20), they returned to the region of Bethel. Since the land could not support Abram and Lot, tension arose (Gen. 13:5-6). The writer adds, “At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites dwelt in the land”.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 78.

<sup>3</sup> David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), in Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 70.

<sup>4</sup> Gen 12:6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Gen.13:7.

Notwithstanding, Abram and Lot divided the land between them, Lot choosing all the Jordan Valley, and Abram choosing to dwell in the land of Canaan. After this 'land pact' settlement, Yahweh said to Abram:

Raise your eyes now and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring can also be counted. Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you' (Gen. 13:14-17)

And so, with divine approval, Abram moved his tent and came to dwell by the oak of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar for ahweh (Gen. 13:18). Yahweh made a covenant with Abram/Abraham, saying:

To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites' (Gen. 15:18-21)... 'No longer shall your name be Abram but shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude and of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your offspring after you. And I will give you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God' (Gen.17:5-8).

Subsequently, the promise is also made to Isaac (Gen. 26:3-4), and to guarantee the inheritance, Isaac prayed that the promise to Abraham will be fulfilled in Jacob (Gen.28:4). While Jacob was asleep near Haran, he heard a similar promise (Gen.28:13-15). When God appeared to Jacob a second time, He changed his name to Israel. And promised the land again (Gen.35:12). In the final verses of the book, Joseph said to his brother, "I am about to die; but God will surely come to you and bring you up out of this land and to the land that He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob'" (Gen. 50:24).

The contents of the book of Genesis have had a vital influence on later Biblical writers, and the significance of the story has been critical in both Jewish and Christian circles. It symbolizes the community of Yahweh, rescued by Him from servitude in an alien land and led to the land of promise.

Moses is to assure the people that Yahweh would free them from the burdens of the Egyptians, take them as his people, be their God and bring them into the land that he swore to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exod. 6:6-8). In their dealings with Pharaoh, Moses and Aaron stressed the 'Let my people go' petition, without any reference to where they were to go, except to 'sacrifice to, or serve Yahweh' (Exod.7:14; 8:20'; 9:13; 10:3). Probably, it was because the Promised Land was not something new to the people; Moses needed not to belabour on it. The land of promise appears again in the instructions of the memorial of the Passover (Exod. 12:24-25).

Having been in Egypt for 430 years the Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about 600,000 men on foot, besides children (Exod.12:37-40). The instructions on celebrating the Passover later included reference to being settled in the land (Exod.12:8):

When Yahweh brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Havites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your ancestors

to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this observance in this month. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival to Yahweh' (Exod.13.56).

The gift of the land is reiterated (Exod. 13:11-12). The journey begins. Moses' Song of Victory after the crossing of the Red Sea included reference to the trepidation that the destruction of the Egyptians brought on the inhabitants of Philistia, the chiefs of Edom, the leader of Moab and all the inhabitants of Canaan (Exod.15:1-16). Already the Israelites are virtually settled (Exod.15.17-19). While wandering in the wilderness they ate manna for 40 years until they came to the border of the land of Canaan (16.35). But first there was trouble with Amalek, whom Joshua and his people defeated with the sword at Rephidim (Exod. 17:8-16). Yahweh promised at Sinai that if they obeyed his commandments, the people would be his treasured possession (Exod.19:3-8).<sup>6</sup>

Exodus 20 deals with the words Yahweh spoke to Moses and chapters 21-23 details the ordinance, including those befitting a settled people, including:

When my angels come in front of you, and bring you the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And I blot them out, you shall not bow down to their gods, or worship them, or follow their practices, but we shall utterly demolish them and break their pillars in pieces' (Exod.23.23-24).

---

<sup>6</sup>Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism, A Moral Critique*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 20.

In Exodus 23:27-33, the warrior God continues to assure His people:

I will send my terror in front of you...and make all your enemies turn their backs to you. And I will send the pestilence in front of you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites and the Hittites from before you. I will not drive them out from before you in one year...Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land. I will set your borders from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines and from the wilderness to the Euphrates; for I will hand over to you the inhabitants of the land, and you shall drive them out before you. You shall make no covenants with them and their gods. They shall not live in your land, or they will make you sin against me; For if you worship their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.

Nevertheless, despite the widespread slaughter of the indigenes, we find the command not to oppress a resident (Exod. 22:21; 23:9). Was Yahweh, the landowner not being partial and selective in His dealings with the inhabitants of Canaan? Yahweh said to Moses, “Go, leave this place you and the people you have brought out of the land of Egypt, and go to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, “To your descendants I will give it”...Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey...”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Exod.34:24.

Yahweh promised to perform marvels for the people, and demanded uncompromising loyalty and separation:

See, I will drive out before you the Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and the Jebusites. Take care not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you are going or it will become a snare among you. You shall tear down their altars, break their pillars, and cut down their sacred poles...You shall not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land..." (Exod.34:11-15)

The Israelites are warned against behaving the same way as the inhabitants of Canaan –not to take foreign wives and make cast idols. They were enjoined to keep the festivals (Exod. 34:26-23). The divine benevolence is reiterated: 'For I will cast out nations before you, and enlarge your borders; no one shall covet your land.'

In Leviticus, the gift of the land of Canaan is recapped (Levi.14:34), and Yahweh presses for the observance of his statutes, rather than of those required to ensure habitation in the land (Levi.18). Sacrifices to gods, sexual relations with animals and homosexuality were prohibited (vv. 21-23). For such abuses, the inhabitants of Canaan would be vomited out. The Israelites would be vomited out also should they commit such abominations (Levi.18:24-30).

The conditions for continuing to reside on the land and the separateness of the people are reiterated (Lev. 20:22-27). After the legislation for the festivals, the entry into the land is brought to the fore: the sabbatical year of rest for the land and the jubilee year are to be observed (Levi. 25:2-3). Chapter 26 of Leviticus outlines the blessings which will befall the people if they carry out what Yahweh requires: fertility of the soil, peace, victory over enemies, abundant offspring and the assurance of Yahweh's presence (26:3-13). Disobedience will be rewarded by sevenfold punishment (Levi. 26:11-39).



However, if the people confess their iniquity and that of the ancestors, "then will I remember my covenant with Jacob.....and I will remember the land" (Lev.26:40-42). But even in the land of exile, Yahweh will not spurn them nor break his covenant (Lev.26:44-46). This is what is called the prophetic level, where eminent judgment of God is pronounced along with the provision of deliverance and restoration, should the people of God repent and return to Him. Both the Former and the Later Prophets employed this concept in their prophecies.

The Book of Numbers is organized around three phases of the wandering in the wilderness: the organization of the community before its departure from Sinai; the march through the desert and the preparation for entry from Sinai to the plains of Moab (Num.10:11-35). The preparation for entry into the Promised Land from Moab (Num. 22:1-36), no less than 603,550 males from 20 years old and upward (Num.1:45-46) and 8,580 Levites would set out (Num.4.48). They marched through the desert in stages as in liturgical procession from Sinai to the desert of Paran (Num.10:11-12), to the threshold of the Promised Land called the Fertile Crescent<sup>8</sup> (Num.13:1-15.41). The scouts who were sent out reported that the people who lived in the land were strong, and the towns were fortified and very large (Num.13:27-29). As Michael Prior puts it:

After complaints from the congregation, and proposals to reverse the exodus, Joshua and Caleb besought the people not to rebel against Yahweh. After much entreaty and threat, the people set out (Num.14:25). At Meribah, by striking the rock twice in search of water, Moses was deprived of leading the people into the Promised Land (Num.20:12). Aaron's faith for his lack of trust was more severe and issued in his

---

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Kwaku Asante, *Topics in Old Testament Studies* (Ghana: SonLife Printing Press and Services, 2005), 65-66.

death (Num.20:22-29). Then things took a more violent turn, with the king of Arad capturing some of the Israelites<sup>9</sup>

After king Sihon of the Amorites refused free passage, Yahweh, was invoked to lead in the annihilation of the inhabitants. Israel killed his troops and took his land (Num.21:21-24). King Og of Bashan met a similar fate (Num.21.34-35). Fearing the people of Israel, the king of Moab summoned Balaam to curse the Israelites, but instead he blessed them (Num.22:24). However, the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab, and to yoke themselves to the Baal of Peor. Yahweh's anger was kindled against Israel (Num.25:1-3), but Phinehas assuaged it by killing two idolaters, an Israelite man and a Midianite woman, for which he was rewarded with Yahweh's 'covenant of peace' (Num.25:12). Yahweh commanded Moses to harass the Midianites and defeat them (Num.25:16-17). Moses was to be given another gaze at the land he would never enter and Yahweh appointed Joshua to succeed him<sup>10</sup>.

Chapter 32 recounts how Reubenites and the Gadites wished to occupy Transjordan rather than cross the Jordan, but Moses petitioned them to take up arms and cross the Jordan before Yahweh, until he has driven out his enemies from before him and the land is subdued. Then they could cross back and occupy Transjordan (Num.32:6-23).

All of this is to investigate the claim that embedded in the Yahweh-Israel's covenant is the land around the Fertile Crescent promised to them. This claim is confirmed by von Rad that, "the land is interpreted as the nation's 'patrimony' or 'inheritance' (Hebrew *nah<sup>a</sup>lah*) which stood in the forefront of God's gift to his

---

<sup>9</sup>Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism, A Moral Critique*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 24.

<sup>10</sup>Number 27:1ff

people”<sup>11</sup>. As a result, Israel was commanded to attack and mercilessly wipe out the inhabitants of the land and take possession of it. The questions some people have asked are that, “Is it true Yahweh told them to embark on such an inhumane act?” “Were the people on the land not created by Yahweh?” “What would the situation have been if any other group had gone there to do a similar thing against the Jews under the instructions of their so called God?” “Where is the promised land now?” “How can the Christian Jews use the OT as the word of God to evangelize the Palestinians?”

### **Land Allotment and Redistribution in Israel**

Numbers Chapters 34-35 deal with the apportioning of the land, and the provision for the Levites. According to Lohfink as quoted by Prior, “The Book of Deuteronomy is primarily a law book. One of its distinctive emphases is the connection between people and land (Deut.1:3-4). Although it is hailed as the most theological book of the Old Testament, and advocates utopian society in which the disadvantaged are dealt with justly, its treatment of the land and its indigenous inhabitants poses a moral problematic.”<sup>12</sup> The Book of Deuteronomy continues the subject of the promise of the land to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob and their descendants. Speaking in Moab, Moses reminded the people of Yahweh’s instructions at Horeb, “go to the hill country of the Amorites, Arabah, Negeb and the land of the Canaanites as far as the river Euphrates” (Deut.1:6-8).

After Sihon, Amorite king of Heshbon, refused passage to the Israelites, Yahweh gave him over to them. Joshua was not to fear the battles ahead, for Yahweh fights for him (Deut.3:22). Moses would have to be satisfied with a mere view of the land

---

<sup>11</sup>Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, (Eng. Tr. D.M.G), (Edinburg: Oliver and Boyd, 1965), 93.

<sup>12</sup>Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism*, 26.

across the Jordan, which Joshua would occupy (Deut.3:27-29). Entry into the land was conditional upon keeping the statutes and ordinances of the Lord (Deut.4.1-8). Should the new settlers abandon them, they would be scattered among the nations (Deut.4:24-27). Moses repeated the Decalogue of Yahweh (Deut.5:6-21). The centrality of observing the law is again emphasized.

Indeed, this throws some light on why Yahweh would declare the Canaanites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Hivites etc. on the land as *persona non-galatas*.<sup>13</sup> That is, they were not keeping the statutes and ordinances of God, the landlord. Hence, their ejection was justifiable. God the landowner and the land-giver allotted the land to those nations, so He had the right to re-allot to a different nation. This explains why Moses had to give more instructions. He reminds the people of the apostasy at Horeb and invites them to keep the entire commandment so that they may have the strength to occupy the land and live long in it (Deut.11:8-9; cf.11, 31-32). If they do so, Yahweh will drive out all the nations, whom they will dispossess (Deut.11:24). The territory shall extend from the wilderness to Lebanon, and from the Euphrates. The two ways are put clearly before the people: if they obey the commandments of Yahweh, they shall thrive in the land; if not, they shall not live long in the land (Deut.30:15-20).

Joshua was divinely chosen and destined to complete the work of Moses by leading the people into the land, wherein they will observe the commands as a condition of remaining there. The first major part of the book of Joshua (2:1-12.24) describes in epic style the conquest of the land, concentrating on the capture of a few key cities and their treatment in accordance with the law of the holy war. Then we have the division of the land (13:1-21.45). The spies Joshua sent to Jericho reported back that all the inhabitants of the land melted in fear before them (Jos.1:24). The crossing of the Jordan is described in (Jos.3:1-5), followed by the ceremonies at Gilgal (5.2-12) and the destruction of Jericho (5:12-16.27). After the 7<sup>th</sup> procession of the Ark around the walls of the

---

<sup>13</sup>Unwanted, hated to the core to the extent that they did not fit to live.

city on the seventh day, the wall fell down flat at the sound of the trumpets and the great shout (Jos. 6:20). The city and all that was in it, with the exception of Rahab and her household would be devoted to Yahweh for destruction (herem) (Jos. 6:17). Joshua pronounced a curse on anyone who tries to rebuild Jericho (6:21-27).

In the first show of Israelite infidelity, Achan took some of the devoted things. The first attack on Ai was repulsed, because of Israel's (Achan's) sin (7:11). The marauding party moved on to Ai at Yahweh's command to do it what was done to Jericho: No one of the 12,000 inhabitants survived or escaped, and Joshua burnt it and made it forever a heap of ruins, as it is to this day (8:2, 19-29). The ravaging troops of Joshua and Israel were to be met with a concerted defense of the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Hivites (9:1-2). But the inhabitants of Gibeon due to their cunning and deceit were in virtue of a treaty, to be spared the conditions of the ban. They were destined to become hewers of wood and drawers of water for the entire congregation (9:21ff). The elders complained at this lapse in infidelity to the mandate to destroy all the inhabitants of the land (9:24).<sup>14</sup>

Joshua took all that land, utterly destroying their inhabitants (Josh 11:16-23). Chapter 12 gives a full list of the kings defeated and the lands conquered, first under Moses on the East side of the Jordan (12:1-6), and then on the West (12:7-24). Chapters 12 to 21 give an Account of the division of the land, which although allegedly all conquered in the account of chapters 1-12, gives most attention to the territory of the later kingdom of Judah. The incompleteness of the conquest is reflected in the opening verses: "Now Joshua was old and advanced in years; and Yahweh said to him 'You are old and advanced in years and very much of the land still remains to be possessed. This is the land that still remains'" (13:1). The whole achievement is summed up in

---

<sup>14</sup>Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism, A Moral Critique*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 30.

that Yahweh gave to Israel all the land that he swore to their ancestors that he would give them (Jos. 21:43-45).

In the book of Joshua, one identifies that the land was distributed mainly by lot (Nb. 33:50-55, Jos 14:2; 15:1, 16:1, 18:5-6, 11-20, 19:1-51. However, in the case of Caleb and his family, he received his portion based on merit - his commitment and loyalty, Moses promised to give him a portion (14:6ff). Caleb received this land when he was eighty-five years old. Yet Caleb and his family had to fight to secure Hebron as the inherited portion. Half the tribe of Manasseh, the Reubenites and the Gadites received their portions in the East of Jordan from Moses, before he died (Jos. 13:8ff). This implies that while majority received their portion of the land by casting of lots, others had it on merit and goodwill.

Strangely enough, we find out that the tribe of Dan was searching for a place to dwell because they had not received an inheritance among the people (Jud. 18:1ff). Doak observes that if one looks only to the Biblical materials, then it is difficult to determine why it is that the tribe of Dan does not have a land holding like the other tribes. At first glance, Dan would seem to fall regularly into Israel's history with its own normally allotted place in the lists of tribes.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the most interesting and most pertinent of our problem is the material in Joshua 19. When lots are cast to determine tribal landholdings in Joshua 18-19, Dan receives the seventh lot in 19:40. Inexplicably, however, Joshua 19:47 ironically reports that the territory of Dan went out.<sup>16</sup> The narrator simply explains that the Danites had difficulty in taking the land so they marched to Lashem, took it, put it to the sword and settled there and named it Dan after their forefather.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>Brian R. Doak, "Some Worthless and Reckless Fellows: Landlessness and Parasocial Leadership in Judges", <http://collectionscanada.ca/collection/003008-200-e.html>, [Accessed, March 14, 2016], 11.

<sup>16</sup>Doak, "Some Worthless", 12.

<sup>17</sup>Joshua 19:47.

It hardly seems plausible that the Danites would find themselves without land twice, and be forced to exterminate the inhabitants of two different cities. In fact, in Judges 1:34 a hint is given that the Danites were forced by the Amorites to retreat back into the hill country. Probably, the Danites did not like the place allotted to them; they preferred a different location altogether. Other than that Yahweh as it were was going to march ahead of them, knocking down all the Amorites in order to give the land to His people, the Danites. To the Israelites, as Trent C. Butler puts it:

Land as a gift was at the same time land to be taken. Occupying nations did not want to give up the land. They knew and feared God's promises. Still they strategized and connived to defend and retain land. This meant land possessed by Israel was land dispossessed from other nations. Dispossessing was God's way of fulfilling promises to the patriarchs. Gift of land was a call to battle, call to dispose the land. Such call to battle was unconventional. Israelites soldiers fought, but God did the dispossessing, the driving out of the enemy.<sup>18</sup>

### **Exploitation and Abuse of the Land**

Conversely, the land that Yahweh gave to his people has been woefully exploited. David Pawson quoting Schurer, says:

The Bible enjoys unique authority within both Synagogue and the church. 'The Torah emanates from heaven. Since it contains the demands which God made on his people, a punctilious observance of its laws is the supreme religious duty. Israelite piety was primarily directed towards zealously

---

<sup>18</sup>Trent C. Butler, "The Theology of Joshua", – *Review and Expositor*, 95. No. 2, (1998), 211.

and lovingly obeying the Torah in all its details. The Bible enjoys a corresponding authority in the church as the word of God. However, the Bible poses a fundamental moral problem for anyone who takes it at face value.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, considering the ramifications concerning the occupancy of the land which was integral in the covenant between Yahweh and Israel, one would say that Israel has desecrated the land just as the Canaanites were accused of doing; therefore, has no right remaining alive, left alone occupying the land. They fell into syncretism and apostasy as soon as they entered the land. The very things that Yahweh accused the Canaanites of and against which He warned Israel, they fell culprits. Even though one would quickly counter with the fact that Israel was punished by Yahweh with exiles to Babylonia, Assyria, Syria etc. and with diseases, famine and so on, the moral question remains, why are they still on the land? Why were the Canaanites too not spared or sent into exile as their punishment but to be totally destroyed?

Well, the Torah explains that Israel was punished with exiles because they defiled the land. The Prophet Amos for instance, declared “the Lord would eject His people from the land, hurling them and their king into exile” (Amos 5 1 -6; 6:7, 7:10 – 17). They had desecrated the land, oppressed the poor; injustices and unrighteousness were the order of the day. It is quite telling to read Jeremiah’s words on the issue “I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruits and rich produce. But you came and defiled my land and made my inheritance detestable.”<sup>20</sup>

In the words of Wright, “the land becomes the focus of constant struggle between the forces of dispossession, greed, exploitation and land-grabbing on the one hand, and the protest of the prophets on the other”.<sup>21</sup> On many occasions God used Moses

---

<sup>19</sup>David Pawson, *Unlocking the Bible: A Unique Overview of the Whole Bible*, (Great Britain: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 181.

<sup>20</sup>Jeremiah 2:7.

<sup>21</sup>Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 81.



to warn the people to desist from the abuse of the land of God. He says: "Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it. Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I, the Lord, dwell among the Israelites."<sup>22</sup>

It is clear from the text that the people of Israel were committing murder. A crime of murder is not only an offense against the sanctity of life but also a pollutant to the Lord's sacred land. It is also revealing to note that God, the landowner, constantly lived with Israel, the tenant, on the land. So to defile the land was a gross disaffection and disregard for the authority of God.

Apart from bloodshed, insanitary activities also abuse the land of God. Through Moses, the Lord warned the people at saying "Designate a place outside the camp where you can go to relieve yourselves. As part of your equipment, have something to dig with, and when you relieve yourselves, dig a hole and cover up your excrement. For the Lord your God moves about in your camp to protect you and to deliver your enemies to you. Your camp must be holy, so that He will not see among you anything indecent and turn away from you" (Deut. 23:12-14).

All of this is to say that Israel having received the land had an obligation. Their continuance living on the land peacefully and their relationship with the landowner (God) largely depended on how they handled the land. Any time they handled the land with reverence, the nation experienced both spiritual and material blessings but when they abused the land, they experienced the wrath of God.

### **Rethinking of the Texts on the 'Promised Land'**

In the biblical narrative the Hebrew slaves who left Egypt invaded a land already occupied. The occupation of another people's land

---

<sup>22</sup>Numbers 35:33-34.

invariably involves systematic pillage and killing. What distinguishes the biblical accounts of this activity, whether through the blitzkrieg mode represented in the book of Joshua or through the more gradual one reflected in the book of Judges, is that it is presented as having not only divine approval but as being mandated by the divinity. This presentation of God as requiring the destruction of others poses problems for anyone who presumes that the conduct of an ethical God will not fall lower than decent, secular behaviour. 'The destruction commandment is seen in a new light when one recalls how such texts were used in support of colonialism in several regions and periods. 'Prima facie', judged by the standards of ethics and human rights to which our society has become accustomed, the first six books of the Hebrew Bible reflect some ethnocentric, racist and xenophobic sentiments that appear to receive the highest possible legitimacy in the form of divine approval. On moral grounds, one is forced to question whether the Torah continues to provide divine legitimacy for the occupation of other people's land and the virtual destruction of the indigenes.<sup>23</sup>

It is an undisputable fact that, the wars, the massacre, suicide bombings and the lootings occurring in the regions of Palestine especially between the Israelites and the Palestinians is occurring because of the issue of the land. Whiles the Israelites claim that the land was given to them by Yahweh, the Palestinians claim that the land belongs to them legitimately since the Israelites went and met them on the land.

If the Torah is so much revered by the people of Israel; as it were if the promise of Yahweh in it was what they solely relied on in invading Canaan, then it is imperative for the Torah believers to relook at the various texts. They claim the Torah encouraged them to possess the land, very well! How about those texts in the Torah that frown at all forms of land abuse and mishandling of our fellow men? From the moral point of view, the land-grabbing,

---

<sup>23</sup>Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism, A Moral Critique*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 34.

lootings, genocide and the bloodshed that went on and are still going on in and around Palestine, undermine the very nature of Yahweh and mankind. This calls for a rethinking of the texts.

## **Conclusion**

The issue of 'the promised land' was and remains the most crucial in the history of Israel. From the Torah, the land that Israel occupies was divinely given to them by Yahweh as can be seen throughout the Torah of Hebrew scriptures. That notwithstanding, if one considers the issue from the moral point of view, their continuance on the 'land' poses ethical, moral and xenophobic problem on the people living around and on Yahweh himself. In this case, one would suggest that a rethinking, reinterpretation, reconstruction of the texts containing the issue of land be done. Hermeneutics of 'live and let me live' may go a long way to solving the antagonism going on around Palestine.

## **Bibliography**

- Asabere, K. Paul. "Public Policy and the Emergent of African Land Tenure System: The Case of Ghana". *Journal of Black Studies*, 24, No. 3 (1994), 281-289.
- Asante, Emmanuel Kwaku. "He Who Possesses the Land Possesses Divinity, Spirituality and the Land from Biblical and African Perspective", *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology* Vol. XI, No. 1&2, (2001), 16-27.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Topics in Old Testament Studies*. Ghana: SonLife Printing Press and Service, 2005.

- Butler, C. Trent. "The Theology of Joshua", *Review and Expositor*, 95. No. 2, (1998), 203-225.
- Clines, David J.A. *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997. Quoted in Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*. Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2004.
- Cotula, Lorenzo, Camilla Toulmin and Ced Hesse. "Land Tenure and Administration in Africa: Lessons of Experience and Emerging Issues", *International Institute for Environment and Development*, (2004), 1-44.
- Doak, R. Brian. "Some Worthless and Reckless Fellows: Landlessness and Parasocial Leadership in Judges", <http://collectionscanada.ca/collection/003008-200-e.html>, [Accessed, March 14, 2016], 11.
- Drane, John. *Introducing the Old Testament*. West Oxford, England: Lion Publishing Plc, 1987.
- Notes from the NIV version of the Bible 2010 edition.
- Pawson, David. *Unlocking the Bible: A Unique Overview of the Whole Bible*. Great Britain: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003.
- Peterson, Paul. "Naming a Theology of Land." *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology*, IV No. 2 (1994/95), 20-24.
- Prior, Michael. *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique on the Appropriation of the Land Traditions*. Sheffield: Sheffield Press, 1997.
- Rad, von Gerhard. *Old Testament Theology*. Edinburg: Oliver and Boyd, 1965.
- Resane, K. T. "Naboth's Vineyard: Theological Lessons for the South African Land Issue". *Acta Theologica*, 35, No. 1, (2015), 174-188.
- Rossiter, D.G. "A Theoretical Framework for Land Evaluation (with discussion)." *Geoderma* 72 (1996), 165-202.
- Stott, R.W. John. *Understanding the Bible: The Purpose and the Place*. USA: Regal Books Division, GL Publications, 1978.
- Turner, A. Lawrence. "Announcements of Plot in Genesis". PhD.

Thesis, University of Sheffield, 1988.

Wright, J.A. Christopher. *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004.

———. *God's People in God's Land: Family Land and Property in the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.M.B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990.