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# HEILSGEOGRAPHIE GEOGRAPHY AS A THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT

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## Introduction

### *1. Geography and History in the Bible*

For many years now serious students of the Bible and Theology have been familiar with the word *Heilsgeschichte*. It is fundamental to an understanding of the Bible that it be seen as the inspired record of God's saving deeds in the history of his people, culminating in and finding their ultimate significance in the death and resurrection of Christ.

If the historical dimension of the revelation of God is seen to be so important, should we not recognise also the vital place of the geographical? God has given us a place in a universe of space and time and we need to recognise both. Every biblical event took place in a particular location as well as at a particular time. We may not be able to assign latitude and longitude to them all but then neither can we always give date and time. An event always took place at a particular place and time and our own imprecision of knowledge does not affect that at all.

I am not suggesting that this dimension of Biblical truth has ever been totally ignored. This would be very difficult to do. It is very doubtful, however, whether it has been given its due weight in a great deal of Christian thought.<sup>1</sup> In doing a crossword puzzle we need to examine both the clues across and the clues down. History and geography together are the warp and woof of the Bible.

### *2. The Particular and the General in the Bible*

The particularity of the Bible is a major and inescapable factor in it. The Christian gospel is for ever rooted in the particular. It was in a particular event (the Cross) in the life of a particular man (Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God), who belonged to a particular race (Israel), recorded in a particular book (the Bible) that God's redeeming act for mankind was accomplished. We may not like this, but we can only reject it by rejecting also God's salvation in Christ.

There is however something missing from the above paragraph. These things also took place in a particular land. J. M. Houston has well said, 'People live more comfortably with universals than with particular con-

1. See the complaint of W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, Los Angeles, 1974, pp. 3-5. This is perhaps the most important book, at least on the New Testament section on the subject.

crete realities. The geography of the Bible is relevant to biblical study because the acts of God with men are dealt with in a particular geographical setting and a specific historical context . . . Geography shares with history a concern for the particular – for places as well as events.<sup>2</sup>

### ***3. The Part and the Whole in the Bible***

In writing of the destiny of Israel and the world, the apostle Paul says, 'If the dough offered as first fruits is holy, so is the whole lump' (Rom. 11:16). This is a principle found in several different forms within the Old Testament legal system. If a sacrificial animal was not totally consumed on the altar (as in the Burnt-offering) part of it was always to be offered to God. Thus the whole offering was sanctified. Likewise the Sabbath was a kind of tithe on time. The right approach to the Decalogue was to obey it, not only outwardly, but from the heart (as our Lord made abundantly clear in the Sermon on the Mount), and so, as Paul discovered (Rom 7:7), one of the commandments related specifically to the attitude of the heart. The redemption of the firstborn applies the principle to people and the legislation about the Levites both to people and place. They were separated for God from the other tribes and (although of course provision was made for them to live somewhere) no allotment of land was made to them. They were told that the Lord was their inheritance. As we shall see later, this has great significance for our theme in this paper.

### ***4. The Physical and the Spiritual in the Bible***

The salvation God gives us in Christ is spiritual in nature, but it is related to the physical in many ways. It is typified by many acts of physical salvation within the Old Testament economy. It is rooted in a physical crucifixion and a physical resurrection. The risen body of the believer is a spiritual body but it involves the glorification of the physical body. The new creation emerges out of the cleansing of the old.

In the gospel sacraments physical elements are employed for spiritual ends. The sacramental principle is deeply embedded in the whole Old Testament economy and much of it has a geographical dimension. In the feasts of the sacred calendar the fruit of the land was employed and was the subject of much thanksgiving. Altars set up by the patriarchs would be reminders of the way God revealed himself at such places. Jerusalem and its temple were eloquent with truth about God.

In addition to all this, of course, there is the principle of analogy, in which spiritual realities are constantly described in terms of earthly things, and again some of the latter are geographical. For instance, the

2. The 'Geographical Setting of the Bible' in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. I, Grand Rapids, 1979, p. 83.

church of Christ is spoken of as God's city in the New Testament, as we shall see later.

## The Old Testament

### 1. *Literal Geography*

a. *The earth as the scene of saving history.* The Bible commences with cosmology which is itself the foundation for geography: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' The earth as humanity's God-given environment and as the scene of the whole human story is the centre of interest in much of Genesis chapter 1, and in chapter 2 there is even a section which has more local geographical interest, with its reference to rivers and lands by name. When man is brought into being, the very mode of his creation is a reminder of the nature of his environment. He was appropriately named Adam, for he was taken from the ground, the *adamah*. Thus the scene is set and the human story commences. So then the cosmological and the geographical are the preconditions of the historical.

b. *The land of Canaan as God's gift to Israel.* This is a major theme in the Old Testament. It is perhaps particularly emphasised in the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua. Yahweh promised it to them and swore to their fathers to give it to them (Deut. 1:8; Josh. 1:6). Indeed because God has it in his heart to give it, it can be said, even before the Conquest, to have been given already (Deut. 3:2; Josh. 1:13-15). Both in Joshua and in the psalms the land is said to have been given to them as an inheritance (Josh. 1:6; Ps. 105:11, 44). Just as a man, and in some circumstances a woman (Num. 36), would inherit land from parents, so Israel inherited her land from God. Moreover this is not simply analogy. Clearly there is no exact parallel, for inheritance is normally received on the death of the father, and God does not die. Nevertheless every piece of land inherited by an Israelite was to be viewed as part of that gift of God to his people as a whole at the entry into the land of Canaan. It therefore ties up with the Old Testament thought of Israel as collectively God's son (Exod. 4:22-24; Hos. 11:1ff) and of the people distributively as his children (Deut. 14:1; Is. 1:2).

Because Israel inherits the land as the promised gift of God to her, she knows blessing (Josh. 14:13) in it, for it is a good land (Deut 1:25; 3:25). There are passages in the Old Testament where the writers wax lyrical about the qualities of the land (e.g. Deut. 8:7-10; 11:9-12; Jer 2:7; Hos. 2). One of the leading blessings the people receive is rest and this word in fact occurs quite frequently from Deuteronomy onwards (e.g. Deut. 3:20; Josh. 1:12-15; Is. 63:14). S. Kistemaker says, 'It is the Book of Deuteronomy which equates the promise to rest with the inheritance of the Promised Land (cf. Deut. 3:2; 12:9; 25:19). Nothing is said

about spiritual rest in this book. The promise is *hic et nunc*. That the promise of receiving rest was fulfilled is testified in the Former Prophets and Writings.<sup>3</sup>

Rest and peace are, of course, kindred ideas, for both relate very much in the Old Testament to protection from or victory over enemies. The people are said to have peace in the land, and Jerusalem especially is celebrated as the place of peace under Divine protection (*e.g.* Ps. 122:7). G. A. F. Knight draws attention to Psalm 11:7, 'Shalom be within thy walls, O Yerush-Shalom'.<sup>4</sup>

As the people of Israel emerge from the wilderness wanderings and stand on the borders of the land of promise, God sets that land before them as a land to enter and possess. As a whole they are to go up into it, and the particular tribes are exhorted to go up and take it (Judges 1). It is then divided among them by lot, each tribe having a portion, with the exception of the Levites, who lived among the other tribes in specially designated cities. The references to the portions of land given to Joshua (Josh. 19:49, 50) and to Caleb (Josh. 14) suggest that each family had its allotted portion within the tribal allotment. This is probably assumed both in the legislation of Leviticus 25 and in the story of Naboth's vineyard in I Kings 21. The land had to be personally appropriated at the Conquest. They were to walk up and down in it and so to make it their own. Jabez apparently felt the need of more than was originally allotted to him and his request was not turned away (I Chron. 4:9, 10).

It seems to have been assumed that the people, once settled in the land would remain in it. Was Abraham wrong to go down to Egypt? Certainly Isaac was told explicitly that he was to remain in Canaan (Gen. 26:2, 3), and Jacob was given specific permission to go to Egypt (Gen. 46:3,4). Were Elimelech and Naomi right to go to Moab in time of famine? (Ruth 1:1, 2). We are not told enough to enable us to answer these questions categorically. Certainly Jacob asked to be buried in Canaan (Gen. 47:29-31), just as Sarah had been (Gen. 23) and Joseph asked the Israelites to return his bones to that land when God fulfilled his promise and took them back there (Gen. 50:24-26; *cf.* Josh. 24:32).

The book of Deuteronomy has much to say about the land of promise and it is made clear there that Israel's occupancy of the land had definite conditions attached to it. If they persisted in apostasy and disobedience they would be exiled (*e.g.* Deut. 28). There is little doubt that one of the main purposes of the books of Kings is to show that such a fate was in fact thoroughly deserved both by Israel and Judah (2 Kings 17:24). This suggests that divine blessing and occupation of the land were very much linked, although we should not over-emphasise this. We must remember

3. *Psalm Citations in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Amsterdam, 1961, p. 115.

4. *A Christian Theology of the Old Testament*, Richmond, 1959, p. 297.

that Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord leaving the temple and moving eastwards to be with his people in Babylon (Ezek. 11:23). In Acts 7, Stephen criticises the Jews of his day for their inclination to settle down with the too solid temple and not to move on with the purpose of God, which had now advanced to its point of consummation in Christ.

Removal from the land and a period of exile would be followed by restoration to the land and the gift of a spirit of penitence (e.g. Jer. 32). The land itself would experience new blessing, which would show itself in a new beauty and fruitfulness. There are suggestions of a blessing that went beyond the physical, for the Spirit of God was to be poured out (e.g. Ezek. 36), but this is to anticipate other aspects of our theme.

c. *Jerusalem/Zion in the purpose of God.* A great deal of attention has been directed in recent years to the Jerusalem theology in the Old Testament.<sup>5</sup> Although questions relating to the origin and development of this are important, they need not be taken up in this paper, for our concern is much more with the concept itself and with its influence on the New Testament.

Historically Jerusalem owes its place as the capital, both political and religious, to the enterprise of David, but the Old Testament writers see behind this the directing hand of God, who chose Zion and founded it (e.g. Ps. 87:1-3; Is. 14:32). He has made its temple his dwelling-place. Psalm 87 emphasises that God has a special love for this city even above his love for other cities in Israel's land, and Psalm 78 goes further: 'He rejected the tent of Joseph, he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim; but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion which he loves.' Many of the psalms feature Jerusalem and its temple as the centre of God's purposes.

The actual historical reality was however very different. Isaiah writes of the many evils of the city, made all the more nauseating by the excessive attention to religious ritual which characterised its people in his day (Is. 1). He declared the judgement of God on it, although when a godly king put his trust in the Lord the city was protected from the fierce Assyrians (Is. 36-37). Jeremiah knew however that by his time the city was ripe for judgement and he and Ezekiel both spoke frequently about its certain destruction along with the very temple itself (e.g. Jer. 7; Ezek. 7-9).

Alongside this emphasis on the certainty of judgement however the prophets stressed that God had a continuing purpose for Zion and that this purpose would be put into effect when he had purged it (e.g. Is. 4). Isaiah 40 ff. contains many promises addressed to devastated Zion. It would rise again from its ruins, God would again bless it with his presence, and it would be populated by those who would return from their

5. For a recent study of this, see B. C. Ollenburger, *Zion, the City of the Great King: A Theological Symbol of the Jerusalem Cult*, Sheffield, 1987.

dispersion among the nations (*e.g.* Is. 49). Ezekiel describes Jerusalem as the centre of the nations and the navel of the earth (Ezek. 5:5; 38:2). In a judged world Zion will stand as the one sure place of refuge for God's people (*e.g.* Is. 24–27). She will have new names which will express God's purpose for her and his delight in her (Is. 62:1-5). It is interesting to note that the prophetic emphasis on future blessing for the city did not end with the return from exile. Zechariah, for example, is very much concerned with God's future plans for the city.

Some features of the Jerusalem psalms and kindred prophecies appear to go beyond the purely geographical and so will be dealt with later in the paper.

d. *The wider geographical purpose of God.* Some passages in the Old Testament define the land as being 'from Dan to Beersheba' (*e.g.* Jud. 20:1), but the promises of God always speak in wider terms. The Abrahamic covenant spoke of territory 'from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates' (Gen. 15:18-21). In the story of the Old Testament there was no actual approximation to this, except during the reigns of David and Solomon. The emphasis on Judah and Jerusalem should not mislead us into thinking that the northern kingdom was no longer regarded as part of the people of God. Yahweh sent his prophets both to the south and the north, and Hezekiah invited northerners to attend the passover at Jerusalem (II Chron. 30:1ff). Obadiah's prophetic anticipation includes lands like Philistia, Phoenicia and Edom, as well as the territories of the northern kingdom to be united with Judah in the kingdom of the Lord.

The eschatological teaching of the prophets and psalmists often includes a picture of a universe at worship (*e.g.* Ps. 86:9, 10; Is 11:9; 66:23). The psalms often call the whole world to worship the Lord (Pss. 96:1; 99:1-3; 150:6). This suggests that God's final purposes were often kept in view during the worship in the temple.

It is important though to note that this universalism does not involve a repudiation of Old Testament particularism. The Gentiles are pictured as drawn to the holy land, attracted by God's revelation to Israel, and worshipping him at the temple in Jerusalem (Is. 60; Mic. 4:1-5). An apparent exception to this is the remarkable prophecy of Isaiah 19, where Egypt, Israel's former great enemy, will be united with another major foe, Assyria, in worship with Israel, and there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt.

A close examination of this chapter reveals the interesting fact that it employs much language reminiscent of Exodus, Joshua and Judges.<sup>6</sup> The Egyptians, who had known the Lord at the Exodus as their Judge, would

6. For detailed comment, see G. W. Grogan, 'Isaiah', in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. VI, Grand Rapids, 1986, *ad loc.*

now, like Israel, know him as Saviour. Not Canaan now but Egypt would be conquered for the Lord, and the Egyptians would worship him there. Clearly the implications of this chapter require further study. Athanasius saw the triumphs of the gospel within his diocese of Alexandria as a fulfilment of the chapter.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. *Symbolic Geography*

The Old Testament writers sometimes transcend the strictly geographical in making reference to particular cities. Micah moves a little in this direction when he sees symbolism in the names of the cities of Judah and draws a message for each from its name (Mic. 1:10-16). To Isaiah Sodom has a double symbolism, standing both for a city under judgement and for the evil nature of the community which made judgement necessary and inevitable (Is. 1:9-10). There are a number of passages which verge on the symbolic. For example, the references to Egypt and Assyria in Isaiah 19, while undoubtedly intended literally, perhaps also are meant to suggest that if such wicked nations can be converted to the worship and service of the true God, this will in fact be true of the whole world. Moreover, in several passages Edom's judgement is probably intended to indicate, not only the literal judgement on a traditionally antagonistic foe of Israel and of Yahweh, but also the fact that no people, no matter how apparently insignificant, will escape divine judgement (see especially Is. 34). Note also that when Hosea speaks of a return to Egypt (Hos. 11:5) he may not be speaking literally but rather indicating in this way that God's judgement will again mean that his people will become subject to a foreign power.

Jerusalem/Zion certainly seems at times to stand, not simply for the actual city itself, but for the people of Israel as God's own community. Here the strictly geographical and the symbolic run into each other, for the immediately post-exilic community extended only a short distance beyond Jerusalem itself. Some such modern term as 'Greater Jerusalem' would certainly have done justice to the historical reality at that time. Quite apart, however, from any question of its city limits, Jerusalem stands for the godly community of Israel. W. H. Schmidt is right when he says, 'Zion, once a geographical term for the hill upon which Jerusalem stands, now becomes, like the name of the city itself, a (salvation-) title for the community.'<sup>8</sup>

In some passages of the Old Testament the implications of this are developed in a way which may be thought to transcend the geographical altogether, although opinion among evangelical interpreters of prophecy is divided on this. Zechariah pictures a man with a ruler in his hand for

7. *St Athanasius on the Incarnation*, London, 1970, p. 65.

8. *The Faith of the Old Testament*, Oxford, 1983, p. 219.



measuring the city, and God tells him that he purposes a much greater city than could be so measured (Zech. 2). Ezekiel spends the closing nine chapters of his book describing the vast Jerusalem temple of the future. In some ways, Psalm 87 is even more interesting. Members of other nations, like Egypt, Babylon, Philistia, Tyre and Ethiopia will be enrolled among its citizens, and it is even said that they were born there. Derek Kidner comments, 'In its enigmatic, staccato phrases this remarkable psalm speaks of Zion as the destined metropolis of Jew and Gentile alike. Nothing is explained with any fullness, yet by the end there remains no doubt of the coming conversion of old enemies and their full incorporation in the city of God.'<sup>9</sup>

### 3. *Spiritual Geography*

Israel was in covenant relationship with Yahweh, and that relationship was largely enjoyed by the people within the land of promise. There was one tribe, however, which had no share in the apportionment of the land after the Conquest. The Levites had cities to live in, scattered among the areas allotted to the other tribes, but although their inheritance was not geographical it is never suggested that they had none at all. Sometimes what they were given was spoken of in material terms, *i.e.*, in terms of offerings and tithes from the people (Num. 18:21-26; Jos. 13:14). The most significant references, however, are to the fact that the Lord was their inheritance (Deut. 18:1ff; Josh. 13:33, Ezek. 44:28). Could anything be more wonderful than that!

The thought of an inheritance in God himself is taken a step further in a number of the psalms where the psalmist uses language familiar to us from such books as Deuteronomy and Joshua in connection with inheritance of sections of the land of promise and applies it to his relationship with God. For instance, the psalmist declares in Psalm 16:5, 6, 'The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; thou holdest my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage'. Here a man who presumably had an allotment of land which had come down to him from the Conquest asserts that he has a spiritual inheritance in God himself. It is only if we deny the Davidic authorship of a psalm like that and see it as a Levitical product that we can avoid seeing that the principle of a spiritual inheritance is now being widened beyond those to whom it is given in the Mosaic Law. Perhaps it was through his association with the Levites in the house of God that David learned to value spiritual inheritance above material.

In some ways more remarkable still is the use of this kind of language in reverse, so that God is said to have his inheritance in Israel (*e.g.* Deut. 9:26; Ps. 94:5, 14). Here is accommodation indeed, and it strik-

9. *Psalms 73-150* (Tyndale O.T. Commentary), Leicester, 1975, ad loc.

ingly anticipates the use together of these two complementary ideas in the Epistle to the Ephesians. God is the dwelling-place of his people (Ps. 90:1). He is their 'land' as well as their Lord. Here geographical categories are being employed, but their literal geographical reference has completely disappeared. The geographical has become the servant of the spiritual.

## The New Testament

### 1. *Literal Geography*

a. *References to the Old Testament in geographical terms.* There are quite a number of these but they are of comparatively little interest in terms of our theme. They do, however, demonstrate that where events took place as well as the events themselves was of real interest to the New Testament writers. The reference in John 4 to the debate between the Jews and Samaritans about the correct place for worship is of course connected with the interpretation of the Old Testament in both communities.

b. *The Life of Jesus* There are geographical references in plenty in all four gospels, for the Saviour's ministry involved extensive travelling, especially in the northern part of the country. Each of the four evangelists has his own particular interests and this is reflected in his treatment of geographical details.

Mark does not make frequent reference to place names, although there is a strong sense of constant movement in his narrative. He treats Capernaum as the home and base of Jesus during the Galilean ministry (Mk. 2:1; 3:19, *et al.*) and this possibly reflects an emphasis made by Peter in his communication of facts about that ministry.

Matthew's interest in the fulfilment of prophecy has a geographical dimension. Each of the four most significant places in his life is connected with Old Testament Scripture, Bethlehem with Micah, Nazareth with the Branch prophecies in the prophets, Capernaum with Isaiah's reference to Galilee and Jerusalem with Zechariah's declaration that Zion's king would come to her riding on an ass (Matt. 2:5, 6, 23; 4:13-16; 21:4, 5).

A distinctive feature of Luke's Gospel is the long section he devotes to the journey to Jerusalem, and his reference in this connection to Samaria and Peraea (Lk. 17:11). Until Jesus reaches the environs of the capital city, however, he makes comparatively little reference to particular places by name, although he often notes that he was passing through or ministering in cities or towns or villages. This perhaps tends to highlight even more the great stress he lays on Jerusalem, to which he refers by name about as frequently as the other three evangelists combined. Jerusalem is

the place of destiny, for the whole story is to reach its climax there. The destiny both of Jesus and of the people of Israel will be settled there.

Place name references in John are of particular interest because of the possibility of symbolic interpretation of them by the writer, and this will be discussed in a later section of this paper.

*c. The geographical spread of the gospel.* Christ's great commission for the evangelisation of the world occurs in different forms in all four gospels. The Johannine form of it is perhaps the simplest of all, with the universal nature of the commission left to be inferred from the universal factor which is so strong elsewhere in the Gospel. So Jesus simply says, 'As the Father has sent me, so send I you' (Jn. 20:21).

The longer ending of the Received Text of Mark presents Jesus as telling the disciples to 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation', while even the shorter ending says that eternal salvation was proclaimed 'from east to west'.

In the last chapter of Matthew, Jesus asserts that he has been given all authority both in heaven and on earth. It is in view of this that he sends his disciples out to make disciples of all the nations! So the most particularist of the four gospels comes to its end, like the others, with a universal commission, and, of course, this has been prepared for earlier (*e.g.* in Matt. 8:11).

It is thoroughly characteristic of Luke that he should present Jesus as saying 'that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem' (Lk. 24:47). The place of destiny was to become the base for world mission, and the other Lucan version, in Acts 1:8, spells this out with more explicit geographical reference than we find elsewhere. 'You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.'

The Day of Pentecost sees the gospel being preached to a large gathering representing a considerable geographical spread, even though all present were either Jews or proselytes. The tongues both of speech and of fire which were a feature of that day's events remind us that the good news was to be declared to people of every language. Luke's account is necessarily selective, but Acts 9:31 seems to function as a kind of marker: 'So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up'.<sup>10</sup> We are therefore assured that a significant part of Christ's commission has been fulfilled before Luke takes the story on into the wider world of the Gentiles.

The first church historian brings his account, not only to its end but to its climax at Rome. Scattered references to a Roman destination for

10. It is possible that there is an intended parallel here with the references to rest from enemies in Joshua, especially as it occurs just after the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, a former persecutor of the church.

Paul (Acts 19:21; 23:11; 26:32) and therefore for the gospel entrusted to him would certainly suggest that this was an event of some importance, even though some of the Roman Jews and proselytes converted at Pentecost may well have gone home to found a church in the capital of the empire. The epistle to the Romans also confirms the apostle's great concern to declare the gospel there (Rom. 1:8ff; 15:22ff). Presumably this was on the understanding that, like Jerusalem and Antioch earlier in the book, Rome, with its special communication advantages, was to become another major centre for the further spread of the gospel. Luke has, of course, hinted that he has simply been giving us a selective account of the gospel's progress both by recording the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, but also showing Paul, on his final journey to Jerusalem, finding Christians in a number of places not mentioned earlier in the book (Acts 21).

## 2. *Symbolic Geography*

Place name symbolism certainly has some place in the Gospel of John, for the evangelist implies that the name of the Pool of Siloam ('Sent') now has deeper significance through its association with the miracle of Jesus (Jn. 9:7). W. D. Davies says, 'The Fourth Gospel reveals a well-marked practice of ascribing two meanings or even more to certain phenomena. . . . In a Gospel where such double meanings occur it is not unnatural to ask whether spatial or geographical terms, like others, might have a double significance'.<sup>11</sup> He finds such phenomena in passages like John 2:13-22; 8:59 and in a number of other places, and he argues that we are being taught that, 'in the Fourth Gospel the Person of Jesus Christ replaces "holy places"'.<sup>12</sup> To pursue this now would be too space-consuming, but the reader is encouraged to consult Davies.

In Matthew 11:20ff, Sodom and Tyre and Sidon seem to have been chosen for comment by Jesus because of their sinful associations, while in Revelation 11:8 this is certainly true of Sodom and Egypt. In fact, the whole description of the city in this verse reads, 'the great city which is allegorically called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified'. Elsewhere in the book Babylon is called 'the great city'. Alan Johnson says,

If, as most commentators believe, John also has Rome in mind in mentioning the 'great city', then there are at least five places all seen by John as one - Babylon, Sodom, Egypt, Jerusalem, and

11. *Op. cit.*, p. 289.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 316.

Rome. . . . Wherever God is opposed and his servants harassed and killed, there is the "great city".<sup>13</sup>

In Revelation 16 also Armageddon, mentioned in close connection with the Euphrates, may symbolise martial conflict. The Euphrates, of course, suggests Babylon, and Armageddon is in the 'cockpit' of Israel, being adjacent to the valley of Esdraelon, the scene of so many conflicts because of its strategic position. Some interpreters of Revelation, while recognising perhaps the symbolic fitness of the reference to Armageddon, also contend for a literal interpretation.

Mount Sinai symbolises the Old Covenant and the Law in two passages in the New Testament (Gal. 4:24ff and Heb. 12:18ff) and in each of these it is set over against the heavenly Jerusalem. In the Galatian passage Paul equates Mount Sinai and the present Jerusalem, which itself stands for 1st Century legalistic Judaism. In both passages therefore the Jerusalem that is above indicates the true New Covenant people of God, and this theme comes to its grand climax in the picture of the New Jerusalem, associated with the new heaven and new earth, in the two closing chapters of the Book of the Revelation. We will examine this more closely later.

### 3. *Spiritual Geography*

a. *The heavenly Canaan.* For a Jew the word 'inheritance' would immediately suggest two thoughts – fatherhood and land. It is true that movable goods will always have found some place in inheritance customs and procedures in human society, but it is mostly where societies have developed a large merchant class that inheritance has come to be thought of chiefly in terms of movable goods and/or their financial equivalent.

In view of this, it is not surprising to find in the New Testament that passages which have inheritance as a leading thought also major on the Christian's sonship. This is certainly true of Ephesians 1:1-14 and it is even more the case with I Peter 1.

The Epistle to the Ephesians is a text of major importance for this whole idea. It locates the sphere of God's blessing for the church as 'in Christ . . . in the heavenly places'. Here is our heavenly Canaan, into which we have already been brought through Christ's death and exaltation. God 'blessed' his people Israel by giving them the land of Canaan. He blesses the church by bestowing Christ in all his fulness on them, and Christ is now exalted in heaven. So he is the repository of all the manifold blessings of God. Here is a concept of the standing of the church in Christ which is rooted in geographical as well as filial cate-

13. 'The Book of the Revelation' in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. XII, Grand Rapids, 1981, *ad loc.*

gories. Just as the Old Testament speaks also of Israel as God's own inheritance, so Ephesians takes this up in relation to the church (Eph. 1:18). What is true positionally is made real experientially through the Holy Spirit, who as both seal and guarantee, is the assurance of his inheritance in us and of ours in him (Eph. 1:12-14). This is the lofty and yet practical perspective from which the whole Christian life is viewed in that letter. The kindred epistle to the Colossians spells out important practical implications of this when Paul exhorts the church to seek and set her mind on the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God (Col. 3:1-4).

That which is already ours in Christ and is known in experience through the Spirit's work, is also reserved for us as our eternal inheritance, and it is this aspect of the theme which features in I Peter 1. As we take Ephesians and 1 Peter together, we find the tension between the 'now' and the 'not yet' which so much characterises New Testament eschatology and the experience of the Christian in this present evil world.

Hebrews, chapters 3 and 4 also handles our theme, but in this case by explicit comparison and contrast with the Old Testament. The story of the Exodus from Egypt under Moses and the Conquest of Canaan under Joshua furnishes an instructive type and the readers are exhorted to learn important lessons from it. In one sense, of course, they did find rest in Canaan under the leadership of Joshua, but the writer is keen to impress on them that God purposed a deeper rest, his own rest, based on nothing less than his own rest from his labours on the seventh day of creation. This rest is now ours in Christ, although paradoxically we must 'strive to enter that rest'. Donald Guthrie says, 'God's people share his rest. What he did, they do. By becoming identified with him, they enter into his experiences. There is no doubt that the writer is implying that the believer's present sabbath rest is as much a reality as God's rest. It is not some remote hope, but a hope immediately realisable. Nevertheless the writer still fears that some of his readers will miss the promised rest altogether, hence the exhortation in verse 11.'<sup>14</sup>

b. *The heavenly city.* We have already noted that Galatians and Hebrews both speak of a Jerusalem that is above, a heavenly city. The Epistle to the Hebrews has just one passage, albeit a long one, which focuses on the entry into the land, but it has a number of references to God's city. Christians have come to the city of the living God (Heb. 12:22) and in this world they have no continuing city but they seek one to come (Heb. 13:14).

What is particularly interesting and intriguing in Hebrews however is a passage in chapter 11 (verses 8-16) in the section dealing with the faith

14. *Hebrews* (Tyndale New Testament Commentary), Leicester, 1983, *ad loc.*

of the patriarchs, where the writer says that Abraham 'looked forward to the city which has foundations' and declares that God 'has prepared for them a city'. The language of the land as well as of the city is found in this passage. The country is a heavenly one, so we can assume that this is true also of the city. What does it mean? We can hardly explain this language in terms of a hope for an urban dwelling on earth instead of residence in tents, for, even if we can think of God as the ultimate builder of Jerusalem, it can hardly be thought of as heavenly. It must be the heavenly Jerusalem of which chapter 12 speaks. So the writer has great confidence in the spiritual perception of the patriarchs. To them the land appears to have been sacramental, suggesting and pledging life with God in a sphere transcending the earthly.

We should not overlook Paul's use of the city as a picture of the church (Eph. 2:19; Phil. 3:20) suggesting perhaps another feature of his realised eschatology. Already in Christ we are citizens of God's city of the future, the Jerusalem above, our mother, which, he declares, is the fulfilment of the prophet's vision in Isaiah 54:1 (Gal. 4:26,27).

As the Book of the Revelation proceeds towards its close it becomes more and more evident that every human being belongs ultimately to one or other of two cities, the great city or the beloved city, Babylon or the new Jerusalem. These are the only two societies there are. Babylon will suffer the judgment of God and all who belong to her will share that judgment, while the new Jerusalem will descend from God, its gates for ever open wide and every trace of the curse and its effects will be done away. Its nature is expounded in the context of the new cosmos, the new heavens and the new earth. So, just as the Bible opens with cosmology as the setting for geography, which then becomes itself the setting for history, it ends on a geographical and cosmological note, with God's purposes in history coming to their consummation in the new Jerusalem and the new creation.

**4. *The Relationship between the various levels of reference***  
Geographical references occur, as we have seen, at three levels. First there is straightforward literal reference, then symbolic reference arising from particular associations of the literal place, and finally spiritual reference where a spiritual entity is designated by a geographical term.

Symbolism is a familiar literary device in which, for instance, 'Sodom' may stand for 'sin' and/or 'judgment'. We need, however, to explore much more deeply the relationship between the literal and the spiritual.

*a. Israel and the church are distinguishable but not entirely distinct realities.* Israel existed in the Bible as a nation, located for much of its  
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history within the Promised Land. Most of the spiritual geography of the Bible is based on terms used literally of the nation and/or its land.

If Israel and the church were entirely distinct, we could assume that the coming of the spiritual would abolish the literal (as is certainly the case with the O.T. sacrifices). This is not the case, however, as there have always been Christian Jews within the church. In them there is continuity between the old order and the new. They are both literal and spiritual Israelites.

b. *The N.T. sometimes presents prophecies in which geographical terms appear to be used literally.* Certainly such passages are infrequent, but they exist. Luke 21:20-24 (especially v. 24) and Romans 11 (especially vv. 25,26) appear to be cases in point. Here it looks as if God still has a purpose of some special kind for geographical Jerusalem and literal Israel. The Olive Tree analogy of Romans 11 indicates that this is not a purpose disconnected with God's purpose for the church, but most intimately related to it. The conversion of Israel as a nation will be of great significance for God's purposes in his church.

c. *This suggests an eschatological pattern in which the new order implies a transfiguration, not an abolition, of the old.* The N.T. contains not only geographical but cosmic and individual language. Indeed the geographical stands midway between the cosmic and the individual, for Israel comes within the cosmos and consists of individual people.

The New Creation is not an entirely different reality from the Old, for it emerges from the cleansing of the Old. Likewise the 'spiritual body' is not independent of the physical body but its transfiguration. The risen Christ was Jesus of Nazareth restored to life but with a glorified body.

Perhaps then the ultimate order is, in its every sphere, a perfect wedding of the physical and the spiritual in such a way that the spiritual involves the glorification of the physical. God did not create the visible universe merely as the temporary scene of human life, to be abolished without trace in his ultimate order, but rather to enjoy 'the liberty of the glory of the sons of God', *i.e.* to be glorified as they will be. How the spiritual will transform the geographical is not spelled out for us in the Bible, but the analogy of the cosmic and the individual points strongly towards such such divine denouement. A premillennial understanding of Revelation 20 would suggest that a millennial reign of Christ on earth will be an important stage on the way to that ultimate order.