

Sabbath Land and Royal Land: Competing Social Views In the Old Testament

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Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!

Isaiah 5:8

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.

Leviticus 25:23

Introduction: Space vs. Place

We know all about land in the modern world. Ownership of the land is the source of our wealth, and sovereign ownership our natural right. We know how to subdivide it, how to develop it, how to make it productive and hence how to *value* it in terms of *money*, and we can set a precise value on any particular parcel based on its suitability to produce wealth. Mostly what we know about land is that it is essentially “empty” space to be filled with the values of development. As “space”, land means “an arena of freedom without coercion or accountability, free of pressures and void of authority.”¹

But land may have another meaning, the meaning of *place*. Brueggemann defines place as:

A space which has historical meanings, where some things have happened which are now remembered and which provide continuity across generations. Place is space in which important words

have been spoken which have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny. Place is space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made, and demands have been issued. Place is indeed a protest against the unpromising pursuit of space. It is a declaration that our humaneness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom.²

Thus for Brueggemann, land carries meaning and what is at stake is not an abstract discussion about real estate, but a discussion about rootlessness and meaninglessness. The problem of meaninglessness often comes up in the discussion of the modern condition, but in fact the real problem might be rootlessness, “for there are no meanings without roots.”³ And one of the things that roots people, that roots faith itself, is land. Even if the land is the “heavenly Jerusalem”, it is nevertheless a “place” and not just a theological space

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 5.

² Brueggemann, p. 5.

³ Brueggemann, p. 4.

and until we get there, we must deal with it through the intermediaries of real land and real places. Even if our faith cannot remain rooted to one spot, it nevertheless begins in some place, usually in a place called home.

“Land is a central, if not *the central theme* of biblical faith.”⁴ The Old Testament is largely a story of the people’s relationship to the land. At the core is “the Promised Land,” and the action of the story largely concerns a moving towards or away from this land, a land that could be called “home”. The people are either wandering aliens longing for this land, or possessors of the land scheming to maintain possession either by power or purity, or exiles from the land looking once again to return. Therefore a Biblical theology which ignores this existential category not only makes the scriptures more abstract, but has less to say to a nation that is rootless and lost in anomie. For if land is a central category of the Biblical story, then different relationships to the land must result in (or perhaps *from*) a different conception of faith. Indeed, the Bible presents different conceptions of our relationship to the land and hence different conceptions of faith. Norman Habel presents six different Biblical land ideologies.⁵ This paper will consider two of them, *Sabbath* land and *Royal* land which seem to lie at opposite ends of the spectrum and which seem to connote opposing ideas of our relationship to God.

⁴ Brueggemann, p. 3.

⁵ Norman C. Habel, *The Land is Mine; Six Biblical Land Ideologies*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995).

Sabbath Land

Leviticus 25-26 presents a picture of the land as bound by the Sabbath. That is to say, not only do the inhabitants of the land observe the Sabbath, but the land does as well; the land itself rests one day of a week of years. The overriding premise of this ideology is *covenant*, an agreement between God and man with obligations on both sides. An overview of the covenant is given in chapter 25, while chapter 26 provides a series of blessings for keeping the covenant (3-13) and a series of curses for violating it (14-39). Both the blessings and the curses relate primarily to the land, its fruitfulness and security, and only derivatively to the inhabitants.

The major obligations on the part of the Hebrews are the keeping of the land Sabbath (25:2-8), keeping the Jubilee year (13-17), a requirement that land not be sold but only leased (23), the right of the seller or his kin to redeem leased land (24-28), and prohibitions on permanent slavery of Hebrews (39-55) and on usury (35-38). For His part, the Lord promises that the land will receive rain in due season (26:4) and the threshing will overtake the vintage (5), dangerous animals will be removed (6) and the land shall be secure from attack (6-8). Chief among the blessings is the physical presence of the Lord, “And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people” (12). The curses, however, outweigh the blessings “seven-fold” (21) and include disease, famine, loss of political independence, wild beasts, and exile. But at the heart of the curses is the statement that while the people are in exile,

Then the land shall enjoy its Sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its Sabbath years. As long as it lies desolate, it shall have the rest it did not have on your Sabbaths when you were living on it. (34-35)

Thus, one way or the other, the land will have its Sabbaths, which are outlined in Leviticus 25. Every seventh year, all the land must lie fallow (25:4-8). No hardship is to result from this sabbatical, however, for Lord promises “to order my blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it will yield a crop for three years (21).”

The central premise of the covenant is that the land cannot be sold because it cannot be owned: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants (25:23).” Even this tenancy of the land does not reside so much in individuals as in the clan or tribe, and the kinsmen always retain the right of redemption of the land.⁶ Here we see most clearly the distinction between modern and Levitical notions of land ownership; while in the modern world, the individual is sovereign over his own land, in Leviticus the land cannot be alienated from the clan or tribe, and the individual himself is a mere tenant.

Even if there is no kinsmen to redeem the land, it must revert to its original “owners” in the year of jubilee, the year when “you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land...you shall

return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family (25:10).” The jubilee occurs every fiftieth year, (or forty-ninth, depending on how this is calculated), and requires not only the return of land, but the freeing of all Hebrew slaves. The jubilee is also a sabbatical year, when there will be no planting or harvesting. Thus it is truly a year of freedom: freedom from debt, freedom from work, and freedom from bondage. It is evident that the Levitical code reflects a rural society which fears, above all else, the accumulation of property, whether in land or persons, in the hands of a few, a tendency that will be denounced in the prophets, and particularly in the lament of Isaiah 5:8

For all of that, however, the law in Leviticus actually represents a tremendous retreat in social legislation from the similar laws in Exodus 23 and Deuteronomy 15. For example, in the matter of the land Sabbath, the motivation in Leviticus appears to be religious and cultic, while the motivation of similar legislation in Exodus 23:10-11 appears to be humanitarian.⁷ In Exodus, the right to harvest the fallow land belongs to the poor, while in Leviticus it remains with the owner. Thus the Law in Exodus makes the fallow land the patrimony of the poor. This also implies that the law refers to normal farming practice of keeping some fields fallow, and not to a fixed year when all land lies fallow, for the poor cannot eat but once every seven years. Further, the jubilee year itself, the year in which freedom is proclaimed, actually proclaims freedom

⁶ This applies to agricultural land only; the regulations for city land are different, and the right of redemption expires after a year, and such land is exempt from the jubilee.

⁷ R. E. Brown, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.; Prentice-Hall, 1996) Exodus, article 64.

less often than the same rule in Deuteronomy. The jubilee of Leviticus proclaims freedom in the fiftieth year, but Deuteronomy in the sabbatical (seventh) year. In Deuteronomy, the time of servitude is no more than seven years, but in Leviticus it is seven times seven. To all intents and purposes, a person enslaved within ten years following a jubilee is a slave for his entire working life. In that manner, Leviticus actually represents the removal of any practical restrictions on slavery unless the jubilee is fast approaching. Likewise, debts are retained until the jubilee, which could mean a lifetime of debt for the poor.

The laws in Exodus and Deuteronomy seem to reflect a more natural order of village life, with its cycle of sown and fallow fields, its provision of food for the poor, and its requirement for a (relatively) quick relief of debts, always a concern of the penniless. Leviticus may represent a later codification in favor of the landowners and moneyed class. Nevertheless, it retains and even extends certain key elements of the ideology of "Sabbath Land," namely the idea that land belongs to God, an idea not specifically stated in the other law codes. And even as it weakens the idea of freedom, it still retains the essential core; it may expand the bounds of ownership, but they still remain limited. Thus, whatever losses may be evident in Leviticus, it is still at heart a peasant ideology of land. But this is not the only ideology of land reflected in Scripture, for alongside it, and opposed to it, there is the royal ideology.

Royal Land

The royal ideology forms a counterpoint to the Sabbath ideology and

will form the basis for many of the condemnations issued by the prophets. The major proponents of this ideology are generally regarded to be Omri and his son Ahab,⁸ but Norman Habel places the roots of this ideology in the reign of Solomon, in which the king's management of the land is seen as the source of wealth and security.⁹ Wealth, rather than covenant, becomes the focus of the land.¹⁰ Intrinsic to this view is the divine right of the monarch to appropriate that wealth and to have dominion over the whole world as God's own representative.¹¹

The source of Solomon's wealth is the wisdom granted to him in the vision at Gibeon (1 Kings 3:4-15), a vision which "provides an ideological charter for the accumulation of wealth, status, and honor in the hands of the monarchy."¹² It is worth noting that Solomon communicates with God directly, unmediated by priest or prophet. Solomon does not ask for wealth, but only for the wisdom "to discern good and evil" that he may be able to rule the people. Because he asks for wisdom rather than wealth or long life, all of these were given him. Thus it is the royal wisdom, like modern intellectual capital, that generates wealth.¹³ After receiving his vision, Solomon returns to Jerusalem and offers sacrifice in person before the Ark of the

⁸ Archer Torrey, *Biblical Economics*, (Taebaek, Korea: Jesus Abbey, no publication date given), pp. 14-15.

⁹ Habel, pp. 17-32.

¹⁰ Habel, p. 17.

¹¹ Habel, p. 17.

¹² Habel, p. 18.

¹³ Habel, p. 19.

Covenant (1 Kings 3:15) thus becoming his own priest; further, it is Solomon, not the priests, who offers prayer before the altar of the Lord on behalf of the people (8:21-53; 9:25), and when the glory of the Lord appears in the Temple, it is Solomon, and not the priests, who blesses the people (8:11ff). It is precisely this confusion of the royal and priestly roles which got Saul into such trouble with Samuel at Michmash (1 Sam 13:8-14) and led to the downfall of his dynasty. But these same actions cause no trouble at all for this monarch. Given that he can both speak directly to God and offer sacrifice, it is no surprise that the priests are listed as among his court officials (1 Kings 4:1-6), and it is to Solomon, and not to the priests, that the Lord speaks concerning the construction of the temple (6:11). Thus the priesthood (and also God?) becomes a matter of royal administration.

The crowning achievement of Solomon's reign is the building of the temple, which gives "visible religiosity" to the entire program of the regime. The king, serving as his own priest and prophet, now becomes God's benefactor: "I have built thee an exalted house, a place for thee to dwell in for ever (1 Kings 8:13)." For Brueggemann,

Yahweh is now cornered in the temple. His business is support of the regime, to grant legitimacy to it and to effect forgiveness for it as is necessary.

The God who had given land and intended it to be handled as gift is now made patron of the king who now has the land... Religion becomes a decoration rather than a foundation. The God of the temple is subordinated to the royal regime... Solomon, not Yahweh, is

clearly in charge with only a few charitable nodes in the direction of Yahweh.¹⁴

The source of Solomon's wealth is the land, and it includes three distinct domains: The royal estate privately owned; the territory of Israel and Judah over which he has immediate administrative control; the wider empire over which he claims dominion.¹⁵ The extent of the personal estate that he inherited is described in 1 Chron. 27:25-31 in terms of treasuries, fields, orchards, stores and herds. Solomon rebuilds a range of cities, including Jerusalem, as his personal property in which he stores his personal wealth, including chariots and horses. Thus the Royal estate becomes a locus of power,¹⁶ and it is through power alone that the land will be held. The covenant, with its blessings and curses, is now secondary; it is the army, the fortifications and the chariots that will secure the land.

Solomon divides Israel and Judah, from Dan to Beersheba, into administrative districts which no longer correspond to tribal boundaries, but to the requirements of supplying the king and his company (4:7-19). They are, in effect, tax districts, a source of wealth to the King and similar to the administrative districts of other Near East Kingdoms.¹⁷ Not only can he administer this land for the needs of his palace, but also he may dispose of it at his good pleasure, as when he gives King Hiram of Tyre 20 cities in the land of Galilee (9:10-11). Giving the land to a

¹⁴ Brueggemann, pp. 86-87.

¹⁵ Habel, p. 21.

¹⁶ Habel, p. 21.

¹⁷ Habel, p. 22.

foreign king meant that the inhabitants were no longer under the safeguards of the Mosaic law; they no longer could appeal to the rights of their inheritance, for the Canaanite laws, the law of the Baals, the law which would come to dominate Israel under Omri and Ahab, were completely different from the Jewish law. The traditional tribal groups no longer had direct access to the land, but had to enter into a relationship with the monarch.¹⁸ The monarch, for his part, was free to part with the patrimony of the land to suit the royal program, as if the covenant had never been spoken.¹⁹ In addition, the people were required to give corvée labor for the building of the royal cities, palaces, and the temple (5:13). This system required an extensive bureaucracy with its own special minister.²⁰

The kingdom of Solomon seems to have fulfilled precisely all the warnings about kings given by Samuel (1 Sam 8:10-17) and transgressed precisely the bounds of kingship given in Deuteronomy 17:14-20. Yet the scripture does not present the King in a negative light. Quite the contrary, the king is promoted as “the legitimate locus of power in the land and the symbol of social order.”²¹ Further, the royal psalms convert the ideal of kingship into a universal one. “May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth (Ps 72:8)” and “May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service (11).” Thus the

monarchy becomes a universal ideal, with the king becoming God’s representative on earth. Solomon’s son will lose the empire and the unity of the nation, but for reasons that have nothing to do with the kingship itself, but rather because of Solomon’s weakness for foreign wives and their gods (cf. 1 Kings 11). But his own reign is one of unbroken peace and prosperity. He has united in himself the roles of priest, prophet and king, and advanced the idea of the king as earthly regent of God, the universal sovereign.²² It is the job of the regent to deliver God’s own justice to the people, particularly the poor and oppressed (cf. Ps 72:4, 12-14) and in this way to rule the world in righteousness and justice. However, this aspect, although present in form is absent in practice, since we never actually see the king restoring the land to the poor or disposed.

Thus the scriptures present us with two views of land, the royal and the Sabbath ideologies, but it does not actually choose between them. As Brueggemann notes,

These two views, royal/urban and covenantal/prophetic, are persistently in conflict. The Bible is never able to resolve them in an enduring way, and the issue must always be faced again.²³

Mishpat, The Laws in Practice

Since we are faced with ideas in tension, it is necessary to see how these

¹⁸ Habel, p. 29

¹⁹ Brueggemann, p. 88.

²⁰ R. E. Brown, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary, Volume I*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.; Prentice-Hall, 1996), p. 186.

²¹ Habel, p. 31.

²² Habel, p. 25.

²³ Walter Brueggemann, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament*, Patrick Miller, ed., (Minneapolis; Fortress Press, 1994), p. 278.

ideals are played out in the text of scripture, and particularly whether the ideal of “Sabbath Land” was ever more than an ideal, but never a living reality. Certainly in the case of the Jubilee year, there seems to be no evidence that it was ever in effect. There are, at best, two references to it (Ezk. 46:17 and perhaps Is. 61:1-2). However, the jubilee code itself is drawn up after the Exile and is

...probably best explained as a social blueprint, founded on the deeply religious concepts of justice and equality, which strove to apply the simple sabbatical principle to a society that had become more economically complex.²⁴

But the very fact that the sabbatical laws are reduced to a remote jubilee, held once in a generation, and included in the laws of the exiles is itself testimony that there was some memory of the sabbatical system among the exiles, some notion that there was an ideal of justice that bound the very land itself. After all, why lengthen the sabbatical year to a jubilee if no one had heard of the Sabbath? Therefore, while there is scant evidence of a “jubilee,” the more relevant question is whether the sabbatical principle itself was ever actually applied to the land.

We find the key principle of Sabbath land, that is, land not as personal possession but as *inheritance* which cannot be alienated, embedded in the story of Naboth’s Vineyard (1 Kings 21). King Ahab wishes to have Naboth’s land as a garden, and offers to buy or exchange it. Naboth refuses, not because the price is unfair, but because “The

Lord forbid that I shall give you my ancestral inheritance” (v. 3). For Naboth, “jealous retention of ancestral property in the family was the Israelite ideal, sealed by custom and protected by law; even a king could not force a man to give up or sell his family property”.²⁵ Naboth can stand his ground (literally) before the king because the land is not his to sell, but his family’s patrimony, which is the very ideal of the sabbatical and jubilee regulations (cf. Dt 19:14; Nm 27:7-11; Jer 32:6-9; Ru 4:9). Ahab’s only response is to become depressed (5). Ahab’s wife Jezebel, on the other hand, is amazed by the king’s reaction. “Do you now govern Israel?” (7), she asks. Jezebel is a Phoenician princess, the daughter of Ithbaal, King of Sidon. The idea that a family could have rights superior to the king’s was totally alien to her. Thus she probably felt justified in arranging the murder of Naboth on trumped-up charges and the seizure of his land.

This act will lead Elijah to condemn the house of Omri and prophecy their downfall. It is not just the murder, but the seizure that offends. Elijah confronts Ahab just as he comes to seize Naboth’s inheritance. “Thus says the Lord: have you killed, and also taken possession?” (19). Here we see the tension between the royal and the Sabbath ideologies of land and social values. As Brueggemann notes:

Apparently written out of primitive memory, it was used in the exile to reflect on why land is lost. The placement of the story suggests that land and property are lost and

²⁴Brown, R. E. (1996, c1968). *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Le 25:23). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

²⁵ Brown, R. E. (1996, c1968). *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1 Kings 21:3). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

death comes when the covenantal notion of property is violated and the royal/urban values are instituted that fail to respect the ways in which people inherit and depend upon inherited land and property. The royal/urban way appears in this narrative to be a threat not just to the rights of a helpless landowner, but to the entire community.²⁶

If the failure to recognize the land as inheritance leads to the fall of the house of Omri, the failure to keep the laws on freeing the slaves leads to the downfall of Judah itself, as we learn in Jeremiah 34. The king, Zedekiah, under siege by Nebuchadnezzar, is in desperate straits. Only the cities of Jerusalem, Lachish, and Azekah are left to him, and he is finally ready to listen to the Prophet Jeremiah. Zedekiah had depended on his army, on his diplomacy with Hophra, the Pharaoh, and on his promise of support. All of these things fail, and Jeremiah, ignored until now and under suspicion of treason, tells him the true way to rescue the land.

The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to make a proclamation of liberty to them, that every one should set free his Hebrew slaves, male and female, so that no one should enslave a Jew, his brother. And they obeyed, all the princes and all the people who had entered into the covenant that every one would set free his slave, male or female, so that they would not be enslaved again; they obeyed and set them free. (Jer. 34:8-10)

²⁶ Brueggemann, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament*, p. 280.

The result of this manumission, the same one dictated by Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 15, is that Hophra finally gets his army moving and the siege of Jerusalem is lifted. But the crises having passed, slavery is re-instituted (11). But Jeremiah knows the true secret of keeping the land:

For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers for ever. (Jer. 7:5-7)

The failure to proclaim liberty leads to a loss of liberty:

Therefore, thus says the LORD: You have not obeyed me by proclaiming liberty, every one to his brother and to his neighbor; behold, I proclaim to you liberty to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine, says the LORD. I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. (Jer. 34:16-17)

Indeed, this is what happens. Hophra takes one look at Nebuchadnezzar's army and thinks better of the whole project. He retires to Egypt and the siege of Jerusalem is resumed, with the result that Judah falls, the inhabitants are carried into captivity, and the land does become a horror to the nations.

We have taken two examples of the operation of the law and its relation to keeping the land or losing it, but in fact, this is the message of all of the prophets. Justice is their constant theme,

and without justice, possession of the land is impossible, for there can be no peace without justice.

Practicum

The New Testament makes clear that our relationship with God is constituted by our relationship with our neighbor; we do to Christ whatever we do, good or bad, to the very least of his brothers. The command to love God and neighbor is not two commands but one, for it is impossible to do the one without the other. Thus our relationships are simultaneously vertical and horizontal, upward to God and outward to neighbor, and form a living cross. Therefore any complete reading of the scripture must also be a *social reading*. Indeed, we have a specific mission that we share with the risen Christ, the mission of building up the kingdom of God. It is no accident that the eschaton, our goal, our end, is described by a political term, “kingdom.”

But if we read the scriptures only to find out what happened in the past, then we are mere antiquarians; and if we read it only to learn of our personal salvation, then we are mere fundamentalists. Rather, we must be willing to apply what we learn to the current moment and to seek our salvation in the salvation of the world, in the building up of the kingdom. No prophet is without his call for justice, but this is not an abstract justice that they call for, but something definable and practical. For the Israelites, that practicum was the land, the source of wealth in ancient times. The lament of the prophets always revolves around the lack of justice, around those who acquire without end, who “join house to house and field to field until you are left to dwell alone in the midst of the land” (Is.

5:8), who “sell the poor for a pair of sandals” (or perhaps a pair of Nike’s). For today we exhibit the same merger mania as in Isaiah’s day, with the same concentration of power in the hands of fewer and fewer people, and we do not have to be prophets to foresee the same end. And we must look, as Jeremiah did, for a *practicum*, a way of giving life to the scriptures. Brueggemann notes that,

The Bible is not ideological about property. It does not affirm or resist capitalist or communist schemes. It rather urges a quite alternative reading of human community that can only be described as covenantal. Property must be managed, valued, and distributed so that every person of the community is honored and so that the well-being of each is intimately tied to that of the others.²⁷

As it turns out, this covenantal view is valid from the point of view of the most rigorous economic analysis, for the size and vitality of markets is given not just by the aggregate of wealth and income available, but by the distribution of that wealth and income. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss “biblical economics”, and in a real sense there is no such thing; that is, there is no abstract theories presented but only but only requirements stated that must be converted to theory. But it is useful to know that the requirements of economics and the requirements of justice must be one and the same, so that a study of justice in the scriptures enlightens the study of justice in

²⁷ Brueggemann, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament*, p. 282.

economics. We must all be prophets;
therefore we must all be practical.

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