

CREATION SPIRITUALITY NETWORK

After our first meeting in September, we've had a bit of a break as other things have kept us all busy. Now it is time for our second gathering and that will happen this Thursday November 19. In line with what we foreshadowed at our last meeting, the theme will be Indigenous Spirituality and Land Management. We have been very fortunate to secure the assistance of Mr Lennie Yarran, an indigenous educator and leader to lead us in this exploration. The gathering will be at the St Martin's Forreestfield Uniting Church in Hale Road at 7 pm. Hope to see you there. In the meantime, I've discovered the work of Charles Massy and can highly recommend his 2020 publication: *Call of the Reed Warbler: A New Agriculture a New Earth*, (University of Queensland Press) which is all about regenerative agriculture in Australia, and is an informative and inspiring read. Highly recommended for all farmers, ex-farmers and interested land managers!

Please see flyer below and an article on [LAND IN THE BIBLE](#)

INDIGENOUS SPIRITUALITY & LAND MANAGEMENT

Thursday, 19 November 2020

7:00 PM

St Martin's Foothills Uniting Church
57-59 Hale Road, FORRESTFIELD

Andrew Ritchie/Perth Now

A CONVERSATION
WITH

LEN
YARRAN

CREATION SPIRITUALITY NETWORK

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LAND IN THE BIBLE

Why the Bible?

Tonight we link two things, bible and land. Let's think about the first one. Why the bible? As educated and socially aware Christians in the twenty first century, we come to the bible as the foundation document of our faith. We do not come naively, expecting that from this book we will be able to read off answers to modern questions; we do not expect to find a set of straight-forward instructions to guide us through the complex issues of our day, as if the bible were some sort of text book for Christian faith. While we believe that the Word of God comes to us through the Bible, we do not expect that God's Word will simply spell it out for us, word for word. Rather we know that we are called upon to listen and to interpret the words to discern through the living Spirit the living Word of God.

In this foundation document we do expect to find wisdom about the God who called Israel and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We know we will find stories and teachings about how an ancient people found their way in a confusing world, and we believe that in these stories we will find paradigms and analogies to face our world. As people concerned about the environment and our human impact upon it, we expect that in the bible we might find wisdom about how the ancient peoples regarded and lived within their environment, and we might find clues as to how the God of the universe guided ancient peoples in their land practices.

Again, we do not expect a blueprint for our issues, but rather we seek direction, indications, orienting stories, images, symbols, ideologies and above all an insight into the character of our God, whom we confess to be the creator and sustainer of the earth. We come to the Bible to discern what the Word of God might be for these times in which we live.

Why the Land?

Land is a huge issue right now in Australia and throughout the world. Why is that? Several reasons. First, land is a finite resource, and in Australia we are very conscious of the limits of our land to support life. Water and fertility are fragile commodities in this land. As populations increase, there is the problem with feeding this population without depleting the soils capacity to produce. As more and more of our arable land is lost through urbanization, soil erosion, salination, and depleting of fertility, we are already bumping up against the limits to our land's capacity.

Second, as we move into a time of reconciliation with Indigenous people, the whole question of rights to land emerges as a central issue. How are we to understand and redress the errors of our past, and who actually has rights to land? In Australia we have a history of settlement, and we need to be honest about that history. If we are truthful, we find that this was a history of violent and unjust dispossession of an indigenous people, without thought about their rights as residents and our proper place as an immigrant people. There will be past issues which call for redress and new resolutions if we are to move forward.

Third, our increasing power to modify and even destroy land poses for us the vital issue of care of the earth,, and how to preserve and sustain our natural environment. Whilst at one end of the spectrum stands nuclear destruction by unleashing the power of the atom—man's greatest discovery—at the other end stand our ways of drawing the benefits and riches of the earth, from mining to farming to the diversion of rivers into irrigation plants and dams. With the power we have

gathered unto ourselves, we now have great power to bring about these modifications, none of which necessarily contribute to the health and balance of the natural world.

As result of our settlement in Australia we see one of the highest rates of land degradations and species extinction in the world. The costs of our survival in this country are mounting exponentially, and most of us are continuing on as if this is “business as usual”. Our patterns is by no means “business as usual” for the natural systems of our land. There is a price to be born, and the question becomes who will bear it?

These are pressing issues for our day, and require that we focus upon the land in ways that wouldn't necessarily have occurred to earlier generations.

Land in the Bible

Does the bible have anything to say about the land? Is there a theology of land in the bible?

According to Walter Brueggemann, “Land is a central, if not *the central theme* of biblical faith.” (*The Land: Place as Promise, Gift and Challenge in Biblical Faith*). When I first encountered this claim some decades ago, it brought me up with a real jolt! My experience then as a young Christian was that environment was a very marginal or peripheral issue in my faith. Like most Christians I was schooled in entering a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, with living out my faith among my peers in a way which honoured God and brought glory to Jesus Christ. Paul was my great guide in the pattern of Christian living and witness.

Of course my faith, like that of a good many Christians, was based largely on the New Testament, and paid only passing reference to the Hebrew Scriptures. We have rarely known how to utilize the Old Testament in our Christian preaching and practice, but most of us agree it is desirable that we do so. Brueggemann's startling claim is drawn upon his work in the Hebrew Scriptures. Let us examine it for a moment.

1. Land as the central theme in biblical faith.

Despite our tendency to ignore the centrality of the land, Brueggemann argues that Hebrew faith cannot be understood apart from the gift of the land. He perceives the entire sweep of biblical history in terms of three land related movements. The first is the history **to the land**. Forged in times of dispossession, in Egypt and in the wilderness, the Hebrew faith looked forward to the time when God would give the people a land of their own. The voluntary and forced migrations which form the prehistory of this people, were migrations in search of the land of promise.

The second is the history **in the land**. Life in the land turned out to be not at all the comfortable affair some had hoped for. God's people learned that their safety and prosperity depended upon their faithfulness to the law of God and the stipulations of God's covenant. In the period of the kings the role of the prophet was accentuated; in these times the temptations of greedy accumulation of property and proud assertion of personal invincibility were often too much for the people or the kings to resist. Time and again prophets arose to remind kings and people of the covenant and the responsibilities to God under the covenant.

The third is the history **from exile to land**. The time of dispossession became one of the most creative moments in Jewish history. New understandings were drawn from old texts, and a new language, that of apocalyptic, emerged to speak of new experiences and new hopes. But it is still hope for the land, the expectation of original restoration, that serves as a guiding principle of this period.

2. Land and Covenant

3. Diversity within the Theme: Land Ideologies

Hard on the heels of Brueggemann's study comes that of Australian biblical scholar, Norman Habel. In his 1995 publication, *The Land is Mine: Six Biblical Ideologies*, Habel discerns six quite distinct land ideologies in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Now what is an ideology and how does it relate to our inquiry? Habel defines it this way:

"A complex and contested set of ideas, values, symbols, and aspirations" (being promoted with social and political force in a given literary complex to persuade the implied audience with that text of the truth of a given ideology.) (11).

An ideology reflects the interests of a particular group within society, and is used to back up their actions and their aspirations and claims. For example, when a group of settlers arrive in a new country, such as Australia in 1770, what ideas and values do they bring to the new place? What aspirations do they cherish. If we take the example of Australia in the 18th century, clearly the new settlers were guided by ideas of the British empire, by their desire to settle a new place, and to make this new place an economically viable centre of settlement. They had imperial and economic aspirations.

But an ideology goes deeper than mere interests. It also reflects values which underpin their right to the particular enterprise they are engaged in. By what right did the settlers move into a territory occupied by another people and lay claim to it? An ideology of empire would suggest that the land was actually owned by another monarch or belonged to another empire which had precedence or authority over the existing occupants.

In the bible there is a well developed "royal ideology" whereby the people of Israel claimed the right of their monarch to possess territory. In the biblical tradition, the royal ideology came comparatively late on the scene. If we go back to the earlier tradition of Deuteronomy, we find an ideology based on the notion that the LORD (YHWH) is the legal owner of the land, and that the people of Israel occupied the land in fulfilment of a promise of God. Their right to clear out the natural inhabitants of the land of Canaan came directly from the LORD and in his name they were to take possession, as God's chosen people.

To what extent did early settlers in Australia believe that as representatives of an "advanced race" they had a god-given right to drive the Indigenous folk off the land? After all, we often hear from Europeans of the Aborigines that "they did nothing with it". They built no cities, erected no last buildings, their mode of agriculture did not involve large-scale change of the environment. For generations European regarded them as "hunter-gatherers" who did not fully utilize the land. To the extent that early settlers harboured these attitudes, they were living out of an ideology of divine right to land.

Many folk regard this "theocratic ideology" as the basic teaching of the bible about land and land possession. But if we go even farther back in the scriptures, we find evidence of another ideology altogether. Norman Habel calls this an Immigrant ideology, as associates it with the name of Abraham, the true father and founder of the nation.

Look at the practice of Abraham in the patriarchal narratives. He comes as an immigrant seeking a place, but not as an invader who has a right to the lands of another people. It is noteworthy that Abraham comes as bearer of the promise of God for the land, but he comes in peace and seeks to

live in harmony with the settled Canaanites, recognizing their entitlement of the people to their respective territories.

The LORD speaks directly to Abram, first issuing a call (Gen. 12.1ff) to leave Haran, making covenant with Abram to make of his seed a mighty nation and promising to give to his descendants the land of Canaan. Look at 17. 1-8:

When Abram was 99 the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty (El Shaddai): walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make a covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." Then Abram fell on his face and God said to him. "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name will be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations...8. And I will give you, and to all 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.

God (EL) identifies himself as El Shaddai, the god worshipped by the indigenous people, but the narrator identifies the divine speaker as the LORD (YHWH) the name that is revealed later to Moses. So although the narrator tells us that it is the LORD who speaks directly to Abram, God identifies himself to Abram as El Shaddai the god of the indigenous!

When Lot is captured by an alliance of local kings (or warlords), Abram rescues him and then enters into treaty with the kings of Sodom and Salem (Melchizedek) and the latter says:

Blessed be Abram by God Most High (El Elyon), maker of heaven and earth,

And blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand. (Gen. 14, 19,20)

In other words, Abram enters into treaty relationship with the rulers of the land and demonstrates to them that the God who is with him is able to deliver and bring him victory. His method of gaining possession of the land is by practicing the Lord's justice and respecting the local leaders. Furthermore, he accepts the blessing of the local gods, here El Elyon, who is later identified with YHWH. This pattern is repeated.

Not that Abram is blameless. While residing as an alien in Gerar Abram seeks to appease King of Gerar Abimelech that Sarah was his sister, in effect offering her to the king for his pleasure (20.1-18). But this Canaanite king is a man of integrity and discovers in a dream that Sarah is actually Abraham's wife, he returns her in consternation and anger. Abraham confesses his error, even saying, "I did it because I thought, there is no fear of God in this place, and to protect myself. IN fact, he find there is fear of God here and as result enters a "covenant" with Abimelech sealed with the exchange of gifts.

When Sarah dies, Abraham approaches the Hittites in peace and seeks from them the purchase of a field for her burial (23). Abraham does not assume that he can simply take possession of the land for this purpose and the result is an agreement with the Hittites. Ephron the Hittite offers to give the land to Abraham, but Abraham insists on buying it a price of 400 silver shekels is agreed upon and exchanged, the property changes hands and good will is maintained.

If we turn now to Exod 6.2 we find that the Lord reveals himself to Moses and says:

I am the LORD (YHWH). I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as God Almighty (El Shaddai) but by my name, the Lord (YHWH) I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they resided as aliens.”

It is clear from his of behaviour that Abraham sees himself as an immigrant. He does not claim that the promise of God gives him rights over the land but respects the rights of the inhabitants of the land, and negotiates with them in good faith. This pattern of behaviour, involving respect of the inhabitants of the land and of the gods of the land, reflects a set of values, and in Habel’s terms amount to an ideology. It is a set of ideas, values, symbols and aspirations, and together they guide Abraham’s behaviour as an immigrant in the land of promise. In God’s good time the land passes to the people of Abraham. This is identified as an “Immigrant Ideology”.

Perhaps this ideology is not as prominent in the Old Testament as the Royal Ideology or even the ideology of Joshua (Ancestral Household) or of Deuteronomy (Theocratic), but it gives a wholly different picture of the possession of the promised land. We can only ask ourselves, What might have happened in Australia’s settlement by Europeans if the Abrahamic ideology had been shaping the actions of the earliest settlers and explorers?

Summary Findings

It is time to draw the threads together. What can we say in summary conclusion about the theology of land in the Hebrew Bible?

1. The God of the Bible gives His people a secure place in which to live. God is concerned with the physical setting for the good life of His people. In contrast to some popular ideas, this God is not primarily concerned with the “spiritual” life of His people, but is very much involved in the conditions of their bodily or physical lives. God calls them to live with justice and integrity in their earthly lives.
2. The gift of the land is part of the promises of God, and is the foundation of the covenant which God enters with His people. The covenant is not about their “spiritual” lives, but about how they live out their lives in the land, in their bodies. Breaking of the covenant on the side of the people and their rulers, leads to the loss of the land and the experience of exile.
3. Covenant sets out how to behave in the land.
4. Breaking of the covenant and resultant exile does not lead to the annulment of the promise, but it’s re-interpretation and projection forward into history. God remains faithful.
5. There is not a single ideology of the possession of the land or of appropriate behaviour of an immigrant people entering a new land.. Here the bible offers multiple visions, ranging from the “royal Ideology “ to the “Immigrant Ideology” of Abraham.
6. Discerning the wisdom of God involves discernment between the ideologies on offer and should be discerned both from first theological principles and contextually.

Conclusion

Let us finally turn to this task of discernment and interpretation and ask ourselves how we might interpret these biblical ideologies for today.

Turning first to the Royal Ideology, we may take note of the contextual reality that monarchy is no longer the preferred or predominant model of the ordering and government of society. In these democratic times, it would seem that such an ideology would have limited relevance. Considered theology, moreover, we need to reflect on the relevance of the Christ event on our thinking. Jesus Christ is hailed by Christians as the Royal Man and celebrated as Christ the King. Looking more closely at this theme, we find that the model of kingship that Jesus of Nazareth modelled was one of service rather than of might. In the light of the cross we have to reckon with a king who willingly faces death upon the cross in order to live out his royal role. The model of the Davidic kingship, which gives rise to messianic expectation, undergoes radical refashioning in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. The various elements of the Royal Ideology would need to be discounted in any theological appropriation of this model.

What might we say about the Theocratic and Ancestral Ideologies? From a contextual perspective, these ideologies which see the land as an exclusive gift to the people of Israel run up against the newer perspectives of the universality of human rights to life and liberty. In our post colonial times, nation states which dispossessed indigenous peoples are seeing the error of their ways and returning land to formerly colonized peoples. If we approach the same issues from a theological point of view, we would have to say that the Christian Gospel came as a message of universal salvation. No race or people is exclusively blessed.

Furthermore in the work of St Paul the mission to the Gentiles occupies centre stage, so that what initially was a message of the approach of the Kingdom to the people of Israel, became good news for people of every race and colour. Finally, when we turn to the Abrahamic tradition we find that the promise to Abraham was that in his seed all the nations of the earth would find blessing. In the light of this promise and in the revolutionary transition that occurred in early Christianity, ideologies which privilege one race over another cannot be given much credence.

We could go in to detail the implications for our reflection on the contextual and theological perspectives, but suffice to say that the only ideology which seems to stand firm in the light of our investigations is that Immigrant Ideology based on the Abraham tradition. In its universality, its respect of the Other, and its willingness to use the power of example and persuasion in place of the coercive power of the sword, it alone matches the situation in which we find ourselves.

In conclusion, let us ask what might it mean if we applied the Abrahamic ideology in contemporary Australia.

7. What might this mean in our contemporary Australian context?