

People, Power, and Place: Ecclesiology and the Ethics of Land

Michael Spalione
University of Aberdeen

Abstract

This essay attends to the Christian ethics of land in light of the pilgrim identity of the people of God. A survey of some of the most pressing concerns of social ethics such as the Syrian refugee crisis, America's treatment of migrants, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and ecological crises demonstrates that land is a focal point of power accompanied by numerous moral issues. The essay examines the ethics of place through the lens of ecclesiology by attending to the apostolic vision of the church as a new exodus assembly of sojourners and addressing the effects of that vision on the ethics of land.

Introduction

All of life is spatial.¹ Human existence does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it is rooted in place. Place offers a sense of traditioned unity and continuity with previous generations. It also divides societies, forming insiders and outsiders, aristocrats and scapegoats. Furthermore, humans exert sovereignty upon land itself—the flora and fauna of nature—so that *terra firma* is a source of not only vitality and survival but also wealth and capital. As Gerald O'Hara tells his daughter in the iconic American film *Gone with the Wind*, “land is the only thing in the world worth workin’ for, worth fightin’ for, worth dyin’ for, because it’s the only thing that lasts.”²

A brief survey of some of the most pressing concerns of social ethics today—the Syrian refugee crisis, the United States’ treatment of migrants, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, loss of biodiversity, the environmental impact of war, and global hunger—demonstrates that the way people entwine power with place requires sustained reflection on the theopolitical significance of land. Multiple theological

1 I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for the journal whose thoughtful comments helped me sharpen the argument of this essay considerably.

2 *Gone with the Wind*, film, directed by Victor Fleming (United States: Warner Brothers, 1939).

avenues are available to the Christian ethicist in order to reflect on the moral importance of human interaction with creation. Dogmatically, one could begin with first article theology, the Father as the “Maker of heaven and earth”; or with Jesus Christ, the second article of the creed “by whom all things were made”; or with the third article, “the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life.”³ Thematically, one could attend to various concepts such as *shalom*, *imago dei*, or reconciliation. With regard to methodology, one may proceed exegetically, examining key biblical texts such as Gen 1–2, or historically, highlighting useful figures such as Francis of Assisi.

This essay will offer a constructive proposal for addressing the moral significance of human interaction with land by taking its point of departure with the fourth article of the Nicene Creed—“[We believe] in one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.” Thematically, the pilgrim identity of the people of God is emphasized, and methodologically, I highlight the hermeneutical importance of the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants found within the scriptures in order to yield an ecclesiological self-understanding. Finally, I point to how this study is suggestive for ecological and social ethics regarding human interaction with place.

Israel, Church, and World

In taking our dogmatic starting point with ecclesiology, we are immediately met with a problem—what in the world is the church? As Avery Dulles has shown, visions of the church have abounded throughout the two thousand years of its existence.⁴ Furthermore, while the notion of the church as the pilgrim people of God has gained prominence in ecclesiology since Vatican II’s influential document *Lumen Gentium*,⁵ for all intents and purposes, pilgrimage appears to be simply one metaphor among many that says something about what the church is *like* rather than naming a defining mark of the church.⁶ My contention, and the thesis of this essay, is that pilgrimage defines the church’s life in the world, which in turn clarifies the Christian ecological and social ethics of land.

3 Karl Barth gestured towards this way of dividing dogmatics in his essay “Nachwort, or Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher,” in *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 278.

4 For an overview of metaphors for the church, see Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, expanded ed. (New York: Image, 2002).

5 For example, see Joseph Ratzinger’s evaluation and explication of the concept of the church as a pilgrim people in *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics: New Endeavors in Ecclesiology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2008), 13–35.

6 A welcome exception to this pattern is George Lindbeck’s sketch of an Israel-like ecclesiology, “The Church,” in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. James Buckley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 145–68.

Supersessionism: A False Foundation

If pilgrimage truly names something essential about the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, what ideology threatens such an understanding of the church as the sojourning people of God? I will argue that supersessionism names such an ideology. Supersessionism is the notion that the church has replaced Israel in God's heart and purposes for the world. However, throughout its long existence, supersessionism has not taken just one form. R. Kendall Soulen offers a typology of two different models of supersessionism—standard and structural—saying,

[The standard model designates an] explicit doctrinal perspective, i.e., that carnal Israel's history is providentially ordered from the outset to be taken up into the spiritual church (economic supersessionism), and that God has rejected carnal Israel on account of its failure to join the church (punitive supersessionism). Structural supersessionism, in contrast, refers not to an explicit doctrinal perspective but rather to a formal feature of the standard canonical narrative as a whole. Structural supersessionism refers to the narrative logic of the standard model whereby it renders the Hebrew Scriptures largely indecisive for shaping Christian convictions about how God's works as Consummator and Redeemer engage humankind in universal and enduring ways.⁷

To these two forms of supersessionism Scott Bader-Saye identifies a third: national supersessionism. Noting the rise of political liberalism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with figures such as Thomas Hobbes and Baruch Spinoza, Bader-Saye demonstrates the deep logic of supersessionism in the formation of the modern nation-state, "which took over the language of covenant and election."⁸ Out of the rubble of the Holy Roman Empire, supersessionism split

7 R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 181 n 6. Punitive supersessionism is significantly less common in the context of contemporary Christian theology than economic supersessionism. For an example of economic supersessionism without a punitive dimension, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III.2 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 584. Alternatively, Soulen argues that the structural model is fundamentally a way of reading the Hebrew Bible as mere background to the New Testament so that "God's way with Israel necessarily receives a *qualitatively* small amount of exegetical and theological attention" (32). See also Brent Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

8 Scott Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel After Christendom: The Politics of Election* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 60. Recently, Yoram Hazony has contested this kind of critique of nationalism in *The Virtue of Nationalism* (New York: Basic, 2018). However, there are numerous and fundamental flaws in Hazony's work. Two examples will suffice. The first is that he seeks to distinguish nationalism from imperialism. While presenting his commendation of nationalism as pragmatic and empirical, he treats imperialism as an accidental and irregular occurrence that does not share an organic connection to nationalism. His commendation of nationalism is thus constructed on a distinction without meaningful difference. Secondly, while anchoring his endorsement of nationalism on his earlier work *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), he fails to draw any connection between the Hebrew Bible's

politics and religion in liberalism so that the state superseded Israel politically and the church was understood to have superseded it religiously.⁹ Such a vision saw Israel as abandoned by God due to disobedience, and now their political covenant may be “taken over *not by the church* but by another sovereign nation.”¹⁰

Such a conception of the politics of covenant construes the church as an apolitical entity so that the church serves what is understood to be the truly political: the state. With Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber, one may differentiate between a church and a sect and decorate them with a variety of different flairs and fashions—conservative or liberal, upper or lower class, voluntary or cultural, quietist or activist, egocentric or esoteric—but however national supersessionism may dress the church, a church uprooted from the politics of the covenant exists in service not of the world but of its own native nation.¹¹ Moreover, national supersessionism depoliticizes Christ so that faith in Christ is seen as a private matter separable from the politics of the public square.¹² Bader-Saye notes this “became a way of claiming divine sanction for, and thus legitimizing, the oppression and domination of others” so that “by the early twentieth century, many Western nations exhibited this unstable alliance of biblical election, racial superiority, and empire building.”¹³

Thus, supersessionism names the ideology that threatens an understanding of the church as the sojourning people of God. It does so by offering an alternative to water baptism’s incorporation into pilgrimage. Instead, supersessionism, particularly of the national variety, naturalizes fidelity to Jesus as Lord into baptism of soil wherein Christ’s sovereignty is subordinated by the competing claims of allegiance to one’s nation. As such, despite the rise in “pilgrim” language in

persistent warning against idolatry and the possibility that allegiance to one’s nation may be precisely that—idolatry.

- 9 Here “liberalism” is not about left- and right-wing politics or a theological spectrum; rather, it is the philosophy that lies at the core of the modern nation-state in which the establishment and protection of individual liberties (from the Latin *liber*) is the central concern of law and society.
- 10 Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel After Christendom*, 60, italics mine.
- 11 Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon, 2 vols. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1931), esp. vol. 1, 331–81 and vol. 2, 993–1013. Troeltsch’s distinction between a church and sect was based on Max Weber’s work in *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Stephen Kalberg, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). For an elaboration on Troeltsch’s and Weber’s typology, see David Moberg, *The Church as a Social Institution: The Sociology of American Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1984).
- 12 He ties this impulse back to Spinoza and Hobbes. For Spinoza, Jesus is a teacher of universal and spiritual morals, and for Hobbes, Jesus’s kingdom is not of this world, which meant for Hobbes that it is not in this world and will not be until the final resurrection. Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel After Christendom*, 60–65.
- 13 Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel After Christendom*, 64–65. On the racist heritage of supersessionism, see Willie Jennings and J. Kameron Carter who lay the guilt of modern racial practice and discourse at the door of supersessionism. Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

modern ecclesiologies, the baptism of soil often proves to be thicker than the baptism of water.

Supersessionism has dominated ecclesiology in one form or another for nearly the whole of the church's history, yet there are flaws in its logic. Not only does it fail to account for the obvious: "Jesus was a Jew, the apostles were Jews, the New Testament is a patently Jewish book, and the early messianic congregation saw the unity of Jew and Gentile within its halls as the paramount sign of God's having reconciled the world to himself (Ephesians 2:11–22)"¹⁴; it also cannot adequately account for Israel as those for whom the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable (Rom 11:29);¹⁵ nor can supersessionism properly name the sojourning nature of the church. Thus, in order to understand the centrality of pilgrimage for the church, we will now turn to a more-firm foundation—covenant.

Covenant: A Firm Foundation

In discerning the significance of ecclesiology for Christian ecological and social ethics of land, I will argue that the Noahic and the Abrahamic covenants can hold that weight.¹⁶ Covenants establish relationships of authority. Regardless of whether the covenant type is suzerainty (in which the vassal swears fealty to the suzerain), parity (in which both parties swear mutual allegiance), or grant (in which the suzerain swears faithfulness to the vassal), every covenant institutionalizes social responsibilities and devotion, legitimizes power, and recognizes a region of sovereignty.¹⁷

Covenant, creation, and enthronement (Gen 1:1–2:3). Insofar as we see authority being established in the creation account of Genesis, we can argue that there is at least some version of a proto-covenant or covenant-like relationship being founded there.¹⁸ For our purposes, what is significant to note is that God's

14 Mark Kinzer, *Israel's Messiah and the People of God: A Vision for Messianic Jewish Covenant Fidelity*, ed. Jennifer Rosner (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 11.

15 Literally "unrepentable" (ἀμεταμέλητα).

16 I will interact with the historical claims of Christian scripture—particularly for my purposes in the significance of the covenants—as substantially grounded in history, which means that something happened. There was a historical event. However, the details and extent of those events are not the concern of the scriptures because Scripture is interpreting those events, not dictating them. For instance, I am not concerned with whether the flood event was global or local. However, that there was a real event which lies behind the Scripture's interpretation, and that the event recorded in Scripture is not mere myth is important. This is because unlike the God of Deism, the triune God is concerned with and interactive within time. This approach has, without serious debate, been named the redemptive historical approach to Scripture. On the nature and history of the debate, see Yung Hoon Hyun, *Redemptive-Historical Hermeneutics and Homiletics: Debates in Holland, America, and Korea from 1930 to 2012* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012).

17 By synthesizing the earlier and later work of George Mendenhall, Hal Harless comes to the conclusion that there are three kinds of covenant: suzerainty, parity, and grant. See *How Firm a Foundation: The Dispensations in the Light of the Divine Covenants* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 12–13.

18 Whether creation is in fact a covenant is a point of scholarly debate. Compare the oft-cited essays

authority as the great king is being established in the formation of three realms in the first set of three days of creation (days 1–3): the heavens, sea, and land. In the second set of three days (days 4–6), God sets up pairs of rulers over each respective realm: the sun and moon, sea serpents and winged birds, and the male and female image of God.¹⁹ Lastly, on the seventh day of creation God is enthroned and rests as the great king or suzerain over the three vassal kingdoms comprised of the three realms of the heavens, sea, and land and their respective pairs of rulers.²⁰

Covenant, Eden, and election (Gen 2:4–4:26). While the first creation account (Gen 1:1–2:3) portrays God’s universal reign over all creation and the establishment of his authority over the three kingdoms of creation, the second account (Gen 2:4–4:26) depicts God’s interaction with the elect kingdom.²¹ For our purposes, it is significant to note that God gives a desirable and defined land, a place, to a man and woman.²² Furthermore, God gives them a commandment to keep. Lastly, breaking the commandment does not erase their relationship to God, who continues to be their God and that of their descendants. Even after Cain kills his brother, God does not abandon him. As with Adam and Eve, God’s judgment on Cain is exile (Gen 4:12), but in mercy God puts a sign on him. Though it is difficult to determine what the sign of Cain is, a reading of the text that attends to Gen 2:4–4:26 within the logic of covenants of grant would identify the sign as the city that Cain goes on to build and that his son inherits after him.²³

Noah and the birth of nations. The Edenic narrative is significant when interpreting the Noahic covenant. Noah is portrayed as a second Adam who like Adam walks with God (Gen 3:8; 6:9) and receives a commandment from God

by John Stek, “Covenant Overload in Reformed Theology,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (1994): 12–41; and Craig Bartholomew, “Covenant and Creation: Covenant Overload or Covenantal Deconstruction,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995): 11–33.

19 This way of reading Genesis 1 is often called the framework hypothesis. See Bruce Waltke and Cathi Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 55–78.

20 On the seventh day of creation as God’s enthronement, see Moshe Weinfeld, “Sabbath, Temple and the Enthronement of the Lord: The Problem of the *Sitz im Leben* of Genesis 1:1–2:3,” in *Mélanges bibliques et orientaux en l’honneur de M. Henri Cazelles*, ed. Henri Cazelles et al. (Kevelaer, Germany: Butzon & Bercker, 1981), 501–12.

21 Genesis is internally organized into ten units with genealogies (תולדה) functioning as section headings. Genesis 2:4–4:26 is one of these sections, falling between the תולדה in 2:4 and the one in 5:1. See Matthew A. Thomas, *These are the Generations: Identity, Covenant, and the toledot Formula* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

22 On the kingship imagery in Genesis 2, see Walter Brueggemann, “From Dust to Kingship,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 84 (1972): 1–18.

23 On the mark of Cain as a city, see Oliver O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment: The Bampton Lectures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 66. See also John Sailhamer, who argues that Cain’s city is a city of refuge, in *Genesis–Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 102–103. The inheritability of royal land grants may be seen in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants—the other two royal grant covenants in the Hebrew Bible. The covenant benefits are promised not just to Abraham and David but also to their descendants. Other examples of grant covenants in the ancient Near East may be found in Gary Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts* (Grand Rapids: Scholars, 1996), 30–32.

(Gen 2:16; 6:22). Like Eden, the ark is a space surrounded by water (2:10–14; 7:6–24) and filled with animals and food (Gen 2:16–20; 6:14–21).²⁴ Both Noah and Adam are farmers (2:15; 9:20), and both were naked and ashamed when they took and consumed fruit (Gen 3:7; 9:20–21). However, when we come directly to the covenantal formula in the Noahic narrative, we find significant overlap with the creation account of Gen 1:1–2:3. As with the three kingdoms of creation, God’s authority is established with Noah and his three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Furthermore, God’s creational blessing and commission are reiterated with Noah, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen 1:28; 9:1).²⁵ The image of God language from Gen 1:27 is repeated for the last time in the Hebrew Bible in Gen 9:6.²⁶ Lastly, the meaning of Noah’s very name—“rest”—calls to mind God’s enthronement on the seventh day of creation.

This is significant because just as the first creation account tells the story of the founding of God’s reign over the three realms and rulers of creation (Gen 1:1–2:4), so in the Noahic covenant (Gen 9:1–17) God establishes his authority not only with Noah but also with Noah’s three sons (Gen 9:8–9) as well as the kingdoms that proceed from them (Gen 10). Most significant for our purposes is that the Noahic covenant is an “everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth” (Gen 9:16) and that the covenant functions in Scripture as a redemptive-historical marker of God’s authority over the nations, which is seen in the following passage (Gen 10)—the genealogy of the kingdoms that proceed from Noah’s three sons.²⁷

Abraham and the holy nation. As Hannah Arendt argues, authority may only be recognized fully when it is called into question.²⁸ Human violence disputed God’s authority, and God destroyed the life he had authored. However, as the tower of Babel narrative shows, God’s authority continues to be contested by the nations (Gen 11:1–9). This crisis of authority occasions God’s election of Abraham, as Walter Brueggemann argues: “The call of Israel is juxtaposed to the crisis of the world, a crisis that arises because the nations have not accepted their role in a

24 On the temple imagery of both Eden and the ark, see S. W. Holloway, “What Ship Goes There: The Flood Narratives in the Gilgamesh Epic and Genesis Considered in Light of Ancient Near Eastern Temple Ideology,” in *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 103 (1991): 328–54.

25 William Dumbrell explores the connection between the Noahic covenant and creation. See *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenant Theology* (London: Paternoster, 2013), 1–19.

26 On the significance of the *imago dei* in creation and in the Noahide narrative, see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 185–233.

27 See Jeremiah Unterman’s excellent comparison of the Genesis flood account with other ancient Near Eastern flood stories in which he notes significant ideological and ethical differences: *Justice for All: How the Jewish Bible Revolutionized Ethics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 9–14.

28 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 199–207.

world where Yahweh is sovereign. . . . Israel's life is for the well-being of the world."²⁹

Like the first creation account of Gen 1:1–2:3, which tells of God's cosmic rule, the Noahic covenant is universal in scope since it was made with the whole earth and every nation of the earth. Within this diverse and worldwide setting, God elects a single man and makes a promise to him:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen 12:1–3)

Michael Wyschogrod notes that "it is not Abraham who moves towards God but God who turns to Abraham with an election that is not explained because it is an act of love that requires no explanation."³⁰ Moreover, in making this covenant promise to this one man, a whole series of covenants proceeded forth from it. Thus, while we can differentiate the Sinai covenant (Exod 19–24) from the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7; 1 Chr 17:11–14; 2 Chr 6:16) and the Levitical covenant (Num 25:13; cf. Neh 13:29; Mal 2:1–9) from what I will refer to as the Deuteronomic covenant (Deut 29:1ff; 30:6; 32:43; Jer 31:31–33; Ezek 37:26),³¹ we cannot and must not separate these covenants from God's covenant with Abraham, for it is the source without which all further covenants are rendered meaningless.

Deuteronomic assembly. In his *Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutiérrez rightly argues that God's deliverance of the children of Israel culminates in the Sinai covenant as a recapitulation of creation through salvation.³² Indeed, the sign of the covenant is nothing other than the Sabbath. In keeping the Sabbath day holy Israel acknowledges God's enthronement over the whole of creation. Thus, Israel is a sign set up in the midst of the nations who dispute God's reign and "a people who dwell alone, not counted among the nations" (Num 23:9) to show that YHWH alone is Lord.

Here in the exodus sojourning we meet the church, or as Stephen called it, "the assembly in the wilderness" (τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ) (Acts 7:38). In the

29 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 431–32.

30 Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), 64.

31 I use the title "Deuteronomic covenant" rather than "new covenant" in order to intentionally combat the apocalyptic idealization in new covenant terminology in which something "new" invades and replaces what is now "old."

32 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, rev. ed. (New York: Orbis, 1988), 83–104.

Septuagint's translation of the Hebrew Bible (LXX), ἐκκλησία is almost always used to translate לָהָק and refers to an assembled group.³³ The majority of the occurrences of ἐκκλησία in the LXX are clustered in Deuteronomy. As a Deuteronomic nomenclature, ἐκκλησία carries two notions: first is the strong language of pilgrimage and the anticipation of a land; next is the pervasive concept of renewal, a second giving of the law after Mt. Sinai on the plains of Moab (Deut 5:2; 29:1).³⁴

Furthermore, the expectation of the Deuteronomic covenant—in which Israel is renewed after all the blessings *and* curses promised in the Sinai covenant have been enjoyed and enacted (Deut 29:27; 30:1)—will be accompanied with pilgrimage akin to the sojourning of the exodus from Egypt (Deut 29:28; 30:15). Isaiah anticipates this new exodus as one in which Israel and the nations will both participate (Isa 2:2–4; 25:6–10; 40:3–5; 55:12–13; cf. Mic 4:1–4; Zech 8:20–23). And the Christ-event is portrayed as that new exodus in which Jews as Jews and Gentiles as Gentiles are made co-members of “the commonwealth of Israel” (Eph 2:12),³⁵ united by their allegiance to Jesus as King and their shared reception of the Spirit.³⁶

By choosing ἐκκλησία as their self-designation, first century Christ-followers were actively naming themselves as the people of this Deuteronomic covenant and thus new exodus sojourners, strangers, and exiles awaiting a land. These observations lead to my definition of the church: *the church is an exodus people sojourning towards the land of their inheritance*. Therefore, pilgrimage is *not* another of many metaphors to be applied to the church. Pilgrimage is a *defining* mark of the church, without which she cannot be understood.³⁷

33 K. L. Schmidt argues that in almost every case of ἐκκλησία in the LXX, “the context makes it plain that the ἐκκλησία is the community of God. In any case, the addition του Θεού is either explicit or implicit.” “ἐκκλησία,” in Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 527.

34 These two themes, pilgrimage and renewal, are seen in the other LXX books where ἐκκλησία is heavily used: Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of Israel's return from exile to her land of inheritance while 1 and 2 Chronicles, like Deuteronomy, are renewal books as second reiterations of Israel's history following 1 and 2 Kings with different points of emphasis.

35 For various examinations of the new exodus theme in the New Testament, see Rikki Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); David Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016); Carla Swafford Works, *The Church in the Wilderness: Paul's Use of Exodus Traditions in 1 Corinthians* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

36 On the kingship of Jesus, see Joshua Jipp, *Christ Is King: Paul's Royal Ideology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 43–76. On the shared participation in the Spirit as the source of unity, see Julien Smith, *Christ the Ideal King: Cultural Context, Rhetorical Strategy, and the Power of Divine Monarchy in Ephesians* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 226–33.

37 A notable exception to the all too common neglect of the exodus for understanding the church may be found in the work of Gerhard Lohfink who argues, “Ultimately, *ekklesia* points to the people of God gathered at Sinai.” *Does God Need the Church?: Toward a Theology of the People of God*, trans. Linda M. Maroney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999), 219.

Summary

This section has sought to demonstrate two points: first, I have argued that supersessionism is a rotten foundation upon which a theology of the fourth article may not be built; second, I have briefly sketched an alternative proposal founded on covenant that can hold the weight of the church and demonstrate the centrality of pilgrimage as a defining mark of this exodus assembly. This results in the following conclusion: under the Noahic covenant, the nations have been given a land to steward as tenants, but in the Deuteronomic covenant the Jews and Gentiles that comprise the assembly of the church possess no land, only the promise of a place to be inherited. In what follows, I will examine the potency of this ecclesial vision for clarifying the interconnection of people, power, and place before examining the ecological and social ethics of human interaction with land.

People, Power, And Place

Politics is a complex and nuanced topic with numerous moving parts; however, three elements are constant: a human community governed by a régime, the ability to enforce obedience and punish defiance, and a differentiated space wherein culture and tradition may flourish—people, power, and place.³⁸

People: Baptizing Them in the Name

God is the covenant Lord whose authority all the nations including Israel are under. The Noahic covenant provides a redemptive historical account of God's authority over the nations. What we discover in the Abrahamic covenant is God's election of a people. Furthermore, attention to the oneness of the covenants that proceed from Abraham yields an understanding of the Deuteronomic covenant: it is simultaneously a covenant of renewal with the members of the Abrahamic covenant and one of novelty with the members of the Noahic covenant, such that the two—Jews and Gentiles—are united in one Lord, one faith, and one baptism (Eph 4:5). This unifying baptism does not annihilate Jewish and Gentile ethnicities to form a “third race” of humanity.³⁹ Rather, as Caroline Johnson Hodge argues,

38 Oliver O'Donovan examines a version of these three themes with slightly different emphases in his Bampton Lectures; however, he names them salvation, possession, and judgment. See *The Ways of Judgment*.

39 This “third race” view, common in Christian writings prior to the legalization of Christianity in the Roman Empire through the Edict of Milan (313 CE), was one in which identity as a Christian was understood to make one a separate—third—*ethnos* from Jews or Romans. See Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). Endre von Ivánka traces the way in which, after the Edict of Milan, Eusebius of Caesarea understood the Roman Empire to be part of God's saving plan for the world. He thus collapsed being Christian with being Roman and construed Christians as a third people into which the other two—Jews and Gentiles—are dissolved. See Endre von Ivánka, *Rhömäerreich und Gottesvolk* (Freiburg, Germany: Alber, 1968), 51–57.

Paul gives baptism ritual significance to create kinship bonds which “rely upon the logic of ‘shared blood,’ even as they serve as alternatives to ‘blood’ relationships.”⁴⁰

Furthermore, trinitarian baptism understands Jesus as the one on whom “all authority in heaven and on earth” has been bestowed (Matt 28:28) and is thus baptism into a life of obedience to Christ,⁴¹ the living law of his people.⁴² Therefore, this ἐκκλησία is a political society consisting of a *people* under the *power* of Christ.⁴³ However, in contrast to other political societies, this people of the Deuteronomic covenant are a society without a possessed *place*.

Thus, a covenantal hermeneutic yields what supersessionism cannot. Namely, an understanding of the church as a new exodus people in which the major feature of novelty—the “newness” of the Deuteronomic covenant—is twofold. First is the presence of those who were once far off without God in the world, separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, without hope, and without God in the world;⁴⁴ these have been brought near—wild branches grafted into the olive tree (Eph 2:12–13; Rom 11:17).⁴⁵ Second is the pilgrim identity of that people. Unlike the nations and

40 Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 77. Where Johnson Hodge’s study focuses on Paul’s construal of baptism as an adoption ritual whereby Gentiles are made sons of Abraham, Christopher Zoccali helpfully attends to Jewish identity in the Christ community. He argues that “Paul construes Israelite/Jewish identity on two different levels.” On one level, Paul understands Israel to be a multiethnic community, united by faith in Christ and reception of the Spirit. On another level, Paul never abandons an understanding of Israel defined by traditional ethnic markers. See Christopher Zoccali, *Whom God Has Called: The Relationship of Church and Israel in Pauline Interpretation, 1920 to the Present* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 132. See also Christopher Zoccali, *Reading Philippians After Supersessionism: Jews, Gentiles, and Covenant Identity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017); also J. Brian Tucker, *Remain in Your Calling: Paul and the Continuation of Social Identities in 1 Corinthians* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

41 On the trinitarian identity of the divine name in baptism, see R. Kendall Soulen, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity, Volume One: Distinguishing the Voices* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 182–85.

42 On Christ as the living law, see Jipp, *Christ Is King*, 43–76.

43 Michael Gorman has a helpful examination of the church as a politic; see *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 349–67.

44 None of this is to say that the inclusion of non-Israelites into the people of God is a novelty exclusive to the Deuteronomic covenant. Incorporation of the outsider into Israel’s covenant life is a pattern that we see throughout the Hebrew Bible. See, for instance, David Firth, *Including the Stranger: Foreigners in the Former Prophets* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019). However, it is to say that Deuteronomy is significant in the recognition, development, and reception of this theme. See Mark Glanville, *Adopting the Stranger as Kindred in Deuteronomy* (Atlanta: SBL, 2018).

45 This newness is further seen in Paul’s use of justification language. As Garwood Anderson argues, in different epistles Paul uses justification either to name the necessity of Jewish believers to recognize Gentile believers as members in Abraham’s family (Galatians), or conversely for Gentile believers to recognize their dependence on Israel in order to share in Abraham’s household (Romans). Either way, justification is about the essential familial life of Jews and Gentiles under Israel’s enthroned Messiah. See Garwood Anderson, *Paul’s New Perspective: Charting a Soteriological Journey* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 287–96.

ancient Israel who are tenants and stewards of a given territory, the church owns no land, only the promise of a future inheritance.

Power: I Will Hear Their Cry

Walter Brueggemann argues in his benchmark volume that land is both a gift from God and a source of temptation.⁴⁶ This theme of land as gift and temptation is explicitly examined throughout the Hebrew Bible, especially regarding the land of Canaan in the history of the kingdom of Israel. However, what is also explored within the Hebrew Bible is God's sovereignty over all lands—"all the earth is mine" (Exod 19:5). In such a vision, Ton Veerkamp is able to contend that Lev 25:23 is the most important verse in all of Scripture: "the land is mine; with me you are all but aliens and tenants."⁴⁷

Israel's status as a tenant of the land is conditioned on the way they respond to strangers, refugees, the fatherless, and widows:

You shall not wrong a foreigner or oppress them, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt. You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless. (Exod 22:21–24)

While offensive to modern sensibilities, such passages remind us that God loves "the least of these" and that, as James Cone argues, "a God without wrath does not plan to do too much liberating."⁴⁸

But God's power to govern and judge is not unique to Israel. As seen in the Noahic covenant, God is Lord over all the nations. As the Lord of all lands of whom all the nations are mere tenants, God dispossesses stewards of their granted place when they fail to uphold justice. Furthermore, such justice is not sentimental or generic but has concrete criterion. At the heart of Deuteronomy when Israel is preparing to take possession of the land of Canaan, there is a brief covenantal summary and short history of Israel's relationship to YHWH (Deut 10:12–22). Accompanying the command to fear the LORD and keep his statutes, there is a single imperative: "Love the foreigner" (v. 19).

46 Brueggemann goes so far as to say, "Land is a central, if not *the central theme* of biblical faith. Biblical faith is a pursuit of historical belonging that includes a sense of destiny derived from such belonging." *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 3; emphasis original.

47 Ton Veerkamp, *Autonomie und Egalität: Ökonomie, Politik und Ideologie in der Schrift* (Berlin: Alektor, 1993), 98.

48 James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 69.

Place: All the Earth is Mine

At least since Albert Schweitzer, much attention has been devoted to time in New Testament studies,⁴⁹ and George Eldon Ladd is well remembered for his articulation of “the already and not yet” of eschatology.⁵⁰ However, space has not received equal attention. Instead, as Oliver O’Donovan argues,

Two broad lines of mistaken assumption about place can be traced through Western culture, and have a certain philosophical affinity with each other. One is the attempt to abolish or escape from it into placelessness, the characteristic Platonist temptation; the other is the attempt to make it comprehensible as property.⁵¹

I argue for a third ecclesiological understanding of place. As we saw in the previous section, the creation account and the Noahic covenant both articulate a vision of God’s reign over every realm of creation—heavens, seas, and lands—and his sovereignty over every ruler, be they impersonal such as the sun and moon or personal such as the kingdoms listed in the table of nations. Thus, God declares Godself to be the cosmic landlord; “all the earth is mine” (Exod 19:5; Deut. 10:14). Importantly, Israel’s Abrahamic election is politically ratified while still a landless people at Mt. Sinai when she is declared to be a “kingdom of priests and holy nation” (Exod 19:6).⁵² What is unique about Israel’s covenant is that her peoplehood, rather than her territory, is that which constitutes her election; “thus God’s presence with them as well as God’s jurisdiction over them extends beyond any boundaries.”⁵³

The nations are those to whom God leases land, and as such, they are tenants who are removed when they fail to uphold justice (Deut 2–3).⁵⁴ In the ebb and flow of possession and dispossession of place, the prophets continually challenge the pride of Israel by reminding her that she is not alone as a people given a land and not exempt from divine punishment: “Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir? Behold the

49 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. W. Montgomery (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005).

50 George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

51 O’Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 256.

52 For an examination of Israel’s political identity established at Sinai, see Munther Isaac, *From Land to Lands, from Eden to the Renewed Earth: A Christ-Centred Biblical Theology of the Promised Land* (Cumbria, UK: Langham, 2015), 99–102.

53 Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel After Christendom*, 35.

54 The question that naturally arises is: what is justice? While a full orb ed theory of justice is beyond the scope of this essay, I have highlighted one theme found throughout Scripture regarding God’s evaluation of a nation’s justice or injustice, righteousness or unrighteousness, based on the concrete criterion of how the poor, the migrant, the orphan, and the widow are treated within that nation.

eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground” (Amos 9:7–8; cf. Ezek 16:44–52).

By attending to the theme of pilgrimage and the hermeneutics of covenant, we are able to discern the importance of land in the Abrahamic covenants. In the Sinai covenant, Israel is first founded as a nation before proceeding to sojourn towards the land of inheritance. Isaiah picks up the theme of a coming new exodus, and the Christ-event is portrayed as that new exodus. Therefore, in the wake of the ascension, Jews and Gentiles are made co-members in Israel’s commonwealth by faith in Israel’s messiah and shared reception of the Spirit. Like the Sinai assembly, this church is neither placeless in the Platonic sense nor is it a civil religion—baptized in soil. The church is a pilgrim people, a political society without a possessed place. Sojourners to whom God has not (yet) entrusted a land. Wayfarers journeying across time *and space* towards the land that they will inherit when the Christ who once ascended descends again—a new heavens and a new earth wherein righteousness dwells (2 Pet 3:13).⁵⁵

Only by neglecting the themes of exodus, sojourning, and inheritance is it possible to articulate the view that “the Old Testament is full of the sense of place, but the New Testament is indifferent to it.”⁵⁶ However, like the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament is quite concerned with land albeit in the form of promise. And as a pilgrim people, the church must resist the temptation of an over-realized eschatology—a baptism of soil that identifies the church with a place—the so-called “Christian” nation. While it is not necessary (or desirable) to flatten the worldview of the New Testament authors into a single perspective, they do appear to share a common view of the people of God in the world as they describe them as wanderers (1 Cor 10:6), sojourners (1 Pet 2:11), strangers and exiles (Heb 11:13)—people called thus because they make it clear that they are seeking a homeland (Heb 11:14).

Christian Ethics of Land

The God of Abraham is the Lord of every land, and in their realms, the nations are all but aliens and tenants. Unlike the nations, as a new exodus assembly baptized into kingdom citizenship and fidelity, the church is a pilgrim people possessing no

55 Admittedly, the character of such a new heavens and new earth is difficult to discern; however, Jesus’s resurrected existence provides the best clue into the corporeal nature of the eschaton. As N. T. Wright has helpfully argued, Jesus’s resurrection body is “transphysical,” a label he chooses in order to demonstrate the “fact that the early Christians envisaged a body which was still robustly physical but also significantly different from the present one.” N. T. Wright, *Resurrection and the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 477–78. See also J. Richard Middleton’s important work on the physical nature of Christian eschatology, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

56 Oliver O’Donovan and Joan Lockwood O’Donovan, *Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 307.

place. This baptism encroaches upon and relativizes all other loyalties, subjecting them to profound reorientation. In this section, we will briefly examine the implications of the church's pilgrim identity on the ecological and social ethics of land.

Ecological Ethics

In his famous and oft-cited essay, Lynn White argues that “Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt” for the disastrous ecological effects caused by science and technology on the world.⁵⁷ Christianity's culpability as “the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen”⁵⁸ has tainted science and technology because “modern science is an extrapolation of natural theology” and “modern technology is at least partly to be explained as an Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, White argues that the solution is not more science and technology, saying, “[these] are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one.”⁶⁰

While environmental proposals have increased beyond number, White's criticism remains just as potent today as when he first penned the words over half a century ago. Perhaps we should despair that Christianity simply cannot yield the *right* moral stances on the ethics of land.⁶¹ Personally, I take White's accusation of anthropocentrism as a matter of pride. I can do so because I do not think that anthropocentrism lies at the heart of the problem of human exploitation of the earth. That error lies in neglecting humanity's status as a co-creature caring for creation, a point that must be maintained if God's ultimate authority is to be confessed and upheld. In such a vision, use and profit from the land's resources must be done as a steward and tenant. Wendell Berry puts it this way,

The task of healing is to respect oneself as a creature, no more and no less. A creature is not a creator, and cannot be. There is only one Creation, and we are its members. To be creative is only to have health: to keep oneself fully alive in the Creation, to keep the Creation fully alive in oneself, to see the Creation anew, to welcome one's part in it anew.⁶²

57 Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967): 1206.

58 White, “Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” 1205.

59 White, “Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” 1206.

60 White, “Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” 1206.

61 David Horrell raises this concern regarding ecological ethics in *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014), 117–18.

62 Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?: Essays*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 9. See also Waldemar Janzen, *Still in the Image: Essays in Biblical Theology and Anthropology* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life, 1982), 158–69.

Social Ethics

Current global trends indicate that nationalism is on the rise, a phenomenon always accompanied by a struggle for definitions.⁶³ Who constitutes “us”; who constitutes “them”; what is entailed in patriotism; and how far does a nation’s sovereignty extend—these are questions being asked in one form or another not only in my own country of the United States but also in many nations across the globe. What this study shows is that despite their contention to the contrary, human governments are not the final arbiters of power. The nations do not own the land they sit on. They pay rent to another and higher Lord, and the currency of their tribute is benevolent treatment of the “least of these.”

When Jesus claims the totality of power announcing, “all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me” (Matt 28:18), there is no differentiation of realms in which Jesus gets all the *spiritual* stuff and Caesar gets all the *actual* stuff. Every principality and power, be it in the form of law, government, or politician is an authority under authority; and as the prophetic tradition warns, “If a nation is to continue possessing its land, it cannot practice injustice toward migrants.”⁶⁴ Furthermore, those who protest that migration must be done within the constraints of the rule of law in a host nation must remember humans do not exist to serve laws. Laws exist in service of humanity. Where unjust migration laws abuse “the least of these,” Christians—especially Christians who are citizens of those nations with unjust migration laws—are to speak and act as ambassadors of reconciliation and do the hard work of persuasion in order to change those laws.

To give a specific example, in April of 2018 President Trump issued a “zero-tolerance” border policy that separated families (children from parents) who had crossed the southern U.S. border, be it illegally or as asylum seekers. In June of the same year, President Trump signed an executive order ending that family separation policy. However, despite this executive order, in July of 2019 the ACLU submitted evidence that the practice of separating families had continued in over 900 instances.⁶⁵ In the context of the United States’ migrant family separation practices, it must be emphatically argued that an “objective reason to believe the parent is unfit or a danger” must be provided before separating child from parent

63 Zsuzsa Csörgő, “Ethno-nationalism and the Subversion of Liberal Democracy,” *Ethnopolitics* 17 (2018): 541–45.

64 Robert Heimburger, *God and the Illegal Alien: United States Immigration Law and a Theology of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 121. See also Tisha Rajendra, *Migrants and Citizens: Justice and Responsibility in the Ethics of Immigration* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 93–113.

65 Lee Gelernt et al., “Memorandum in Support of Motion to Enforce Preliminary Injunction,” CDN. CNN.com <http://cdn.cnn.com/cnn/2019/images/07/30/ms.l.pdf> (accessed August 9, 2019).

at a border or otherwise.⁶⁶ Breaking up families migrating to preserve or better their lives most certainly does not constitute *an objective reason*. Therefore, the separation of migrant child from parent is an unjust application of law that oppresses the most vulnerable.

Furthermore, the baptism of the pilgrim church is thicker than the soil of the nations in which they sojourn. Economics is a powerful thing, and as brothers and sisters in the family of Abraham, Christians are comembers of a commonwealth (Phil 3:20; Eph 2:12–14) not defined by a place but by peoplehood. Thus, Christians need not rely on voting as a zero-sum game for changing political systems of injustice.

For instance, in the polarized environment of the United States with its belligerent dialogue over the place of migrants in America, what could it mean for Christians north of the U.S. border to put their money where their mouth is, open their check books, and partner with Christians south of the border as co-members of the new exodus commonwealth in order to meet the concrete needs of all who lack, especially those who are of the household of faith (Gal 6:10)? Such a witness would not only be a judgment against the arrogance of American politics—as the pilgrim people who are defined not by a place but by a common allegiance to Jesus—it also would be an enactment of the ministry of reconciliation.

Conclusion

This essay has been a constructive proposal that has examined the significance of the pilgrim identity of the church for understanding the ecological and social ethics of land. Through an examination of the hermeneutical significance of the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants, I have argued that God alone is Lord of the land before whom all nations are mere tenants. Additionally, I have argued that the church is the Deuteronomic community of the new exodus who do not possess a place, only the promise of a coming inheritance—a new heavens and a new earth wherein righteousness dwells. My argument has, admittedly, focused on the divine command aspect of Christian ethics. It is doubtful that I will have convinced anyone who is not already persuaded that Jesus Christ is Lord that Jesus is in fact, as Peter announced on the day of Pentecost, “both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). However, just as “an affirmation of natural law is required in order for the normative claim of revealed law to be intelligible,”⁶⁷ so also divine command is necessary in order

66 Lee Gelernt et al., “Memorandum in Support of Motion to Enforce Preliminary Injunction,” 32. An “objective reason” is precisely what the ACLU argues to be lacking in the overwhelming majority of the more than 900 instances of family separations that occurred from June 2018 through July 2019 at the southern U.S. border.

67 David Novak, “Natural Law and Judaism,” in Anver Emon, Matthew Levering, and David Novak, *Natural Law: A Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Trialogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 19.

for natural law to be authoritative. Moreover, divine command arguments ought to be made even when, and perhaps especially when, no one cares to hear them because this is when their polemical force is most acutely felt.

Consumerism does not want to hear the shrill voice of stewardship, especially not one that humbles the human station to that of a creature who answers to another sovereign. Similarly, the glory of nations does not wish to be told that her life in her realm is contingent and conditional upon benevolent treatment of the poor, the migrant, the orphan, and the widow. But this is the message of a long line of sojourners, strangers, and exiles—a people not counted among the nations—who in their pilgrimage make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. “Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city” (Heb 11:16).