

# *To Whom Does the Land Belong?*

## *2 Samuel 3:12*

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The pragmatic question concerning creation is not evolution or “intelligent design.” It is who owns, governs, and guarantees the earth; the question is made concrete and urgent when we remember that the biblical word “earth” (*’eres*) is most often translated “land.” Thus the creation question is “*Who has a right to the land?*”

### I.

I begin with three biblical texts that ponder that issue: The most familiar verse to us is in the doxological beginning of Psalm 24: The earth is the Lord’s and all that is therein. YHWH *ha’eres*. I offer the Hebrew so that we may see that the earth-land is *’eres*, and the owner is YHWH, indicated by a possessive preposition. The land belongs to YHWH! What follows in the Psalm concerning this “king of glory” is an ethic that is congruent with the “owner” (vv. 3-6). The Psalm concerns a ritual entry by YHWH into the temple to enact and dramatize YHWH’s proprietorship of the land.

The same claim is made for YHWH in Hosea 9 wherein the prophet anticipates that disobedient Israel will be expelled from “the land of YHWH” and placed under control of hostile superpowers:

They shall not remain in the land of the Lord;  
but Ephraim shall return to Egypt,  
and in Assyria they shall eat unclean food. (Hos 9:3)

The Hebrew is *’eres* YHWH. It is assumed that the land belongs to YHWH and must therefore be organized and governed according to YHWH’s will and character. Israel has violated that will and therefore cannot remain as YHWH’s beloved people.

The question is put differently in 2 Samuel 3:12, wherein Abner puts a defiant chiding rhetorical question to David: To whom does the land belong? (*Imi-’eres*). Again the land is *’eres* and again the possessive pronoun is the same as in Psalm 24:1. Only here the issue from Abner to David is whether the land (the territory of north Israel) should be controlled by David or left to the remnant of Saul’s enterprise. As the strongest of Saul’s party, Abner is proposing to cede the land over to David—for a price. Thus Abner’s question is a cynical one that appeals to David’s rough and tumble notion of political advancement.

What strikes one most is that Abner (or the narrator) has completely forgotten the doxological liturgies of Israel that regularly acknowledge that the land belongs to YHWH, the Creator. Abner reckons only that the land *belongs to David* or the land *belongs to Saul*. When the question is posed in that cynical way—as it most often is posed in “the real world”—the claim of YHWH and the derivative claim of proper governance are readily and easily driven from the horizon. The calculating challenge of Abner to David is of interest and importance because the question of Abner—rather than a liturgical theology of creation—most often dictates political, economic, and

military policy, and a self-serving sense of entitlement in the world. Thus I propose to consider *creation faith* around the urgent questions of ownership, control, and governance of the land and its embedded natural resources.<sup>1</sup>

## II.

When the Creator God is eliminated from the question of land-creation, then the land question is characteristically resolved—as Abner assumed—on the basis of *power*, without any question about *legitimacy*. Thus in large scope it is fair to say that the story of ownership, control, and governance of the land is a narrative of *strength* against *vulnerability*:

The strong characteristically claim land and resources that belong to the weak;

The whites, since the fifteenth century, have claimed what belongs to other “races”;

Males have characteristically claimed what otherwise belongs to females;

Western nations, in the name of missionaries-cum-colonialism have claimed what has belonged to the non-west—or the non-north;

The developed powers with enormous technological advantage have claimed what “underdeveloped” powers cannot defend for themselves.

The story of the land is the story of power, confiscation, and usurpation that is rooted in a crass sense of entitlement. Wherever those who are able to enjoy the outcomes of shameless power, the claim is most often cast in well-sounding cadences of legitimacy.

## III.

Amid that enactment of *shameless power* with *cadences of legitimacy*, biblical faith asserts YHWH as Creator, a claim that makes all human claims to the land to be penultimate. The church’s confession of “YHWH as Creator” (readily expressed in Trinitarian formulation so that all persons of the Trinity constitute the agency of creation) stands first in the Bible and first in the creeds. The church, in its confession of “God as Creator,” asserts that the earth (land) is not an autonomous commodity, a freestanding entitlement; it is not, moreover, an available commodity to be taken in a crapshoot or to be divided by lots as was “his seamless garment” (Ps 22:18). It is rather a creature of YHWH, well beloved and cared for by the Creator, blessed (Gen 1:22), looked over (Deut 11:12), and regularly renewed in generativity and fruitfulness.

Human utilization and human enjoyment of the land—the use of its resources—comes under the rubric of “love of God.” Indeed the command to love God “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut 6:5) is designed precisely for entry into the land:

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so

that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you. (Deut 6:1-3)

Love of God correlates with occupation of land; consequently, *love of God* means to *order the land* in ways that are congruent with YHWH's character; this character, we know everywhere in Scripture, is marked by mercy, graciousness, steadfast love, compassion, fidelity, generosity, and forgiveness.

And of course if we characterize the proper ordering of land in such covenantal ways, it follows that the way we may "love God" in land-as-creation is to love neighbor, for finally we have no other way to love God (1 John 4:20-21). Thus our love of God is to order the land for the sake of the common good. We may then articulate dramatic lines of the land ethic in Scripture:

The land belongs to YHWH;  
The mandate is to love God in the land;  
We may love God in the land by loving neighbor.

The land, its potential for power, and its resources are to be devoted to the *common good*, that *all the neighbors* are to enjoy the fruitfulness and well-being of land as God's creation.

#### IV.

That remarkable and central biblical claim about creation-land is the primary point of proclamation in the church that is rooted squarely in the creed. It is a most elemental claim of faith that now needs insistent voicing. But the church, in recent times, has largely forfeited its capacity for such proclamation. That forfeiture is on the one hand due to the church's endless and disproportionate preoccupation with "sin and salvation" of a privatistic kind; among the more sophisticated among us, on the other hand, the forfeiture is due to a commitment to "God's mighty deeds in history," as though God were known in dramatic events to the exclusion of the slow, steady, steadfast ordering of lived reality.<sup>2</sup>

The church's forfeiture of this crucial dimension of faith on both counts has left the issue of land outside the horizon of preaching, and has left our understanding of land in the categories of modern Enlightenment possessiveness.<sup>3</sup> For a time, we were all smitten with the famous article of Lynn White that claimed that the Genesis text on "dominion" was the root of land domination and exploitation in the world (Gen 1:28).<sup>4</sup> That connection, offered of course in "scientific" garb, has now been discredited and shown to be a careless and massive over-reading of the text. It is now clear that it is not the Bible but modern Enlightenment philosophy—rooted in Bacon, Descartes, and Locke—that in fact offered the modern Western world a notion of land as *absolute possession and property*.<sup>5</sup> Without the claim of a vigorous God articulated in political idiom, the land has been readily handed over to human possession and exploitation, whether under divine kings in the seventeenth century, nation states in the eighteenth century, military superpowers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, or simply enormous "McMansions" in gated communities in the twenty-first century. Once the

claim of the Creator God has been sidelined, the sense of human entitlement may stretch in the contemporary world all the way from private consumer desires to aggressive imperial pursuit of oil as “our oil.” The inevitable outcome is a loss of the common good, and a refusal to finance through taxes an infrastructure that will keep life livable, because taxes take away from private self-aggrandizing.

The preacher, so I suggest, is placed as a witness and advocate for *land as creation* in a society that is ideologically committed to *land as possession*. The preacher is summoned to a contestation that is enormously difficult, precisely because both private entitlement and national-corporate aggression are rooted in an ideology that remains unexposed and unrecognized, even though diametrically opposed to the church’s creed concerning the Creator God and God’s Christ in whom “all things hold together” (Col 1:17). Indeed this alien ideology holds that all things fall apart in the service of private good, and there is no category in that ideology for any common good, the very “good” that is the intent of the Creator.

## V.

This ideology of private possession in denial of the Creator and at the expense of the neighbor has been given its classic expression in Enlightenment thought wherein the European intelligentsia managed to purge the claims of the biblical God from its horizon.<sup>6</sup> But the ideology itself is much, much older, even as it has reached virulent form in the contemporary world. Thus the ideology of private possession permeates the thinking of liberals and conservatives who have never heard of Bacon or Locke, relying rather on the declarations of Margaret Thatcher and the vigorous “innocence” of Ronald Reagan, imitated in haphazard and uncritical modes by George W. Bush. That ideology is pervasive, enhanced by the consumerism of the relentless liturgies of television.

As a consequence, when the preacher begins to talk about creation as God’s ownership, control, and governance of the land, the preacher heads directly into a most deeply held and largely unrecognized and uncriticized alternative. The task of preaching, for that reason, is as urgent as it is risky. In what follows I will list four examples of that ideology and then cite three modest concrete signs of alternative around which the preacher may stake a claim. Here are four clear examples of the ideology of private possession against which creation faith makes its testimony, four ways in which to disturb creation and vex the Creator to whom the land belongs:

1. The *exercise of eminent domain* whereby the powerful, with smart lawyers, seize the “inheritance” of the vulnerable. The narrative of 1 Kings 21 is a case study in such socioeconomic disruption. King Ahab wants the property of Naboth for a vegetable garden and promises Naboth appropriate compensation (v. 3). The narrative turns on the voiced vocabulary of Ahab and Nathan, terms that bespeak rival theories of economics and competing notions of land as creation. Ahab regards the land as a “possession,” a commodity for buying and selling and trading—one piece of land is as good as another (v. 15). Naboth by contrast, speaks of “ancestral inheritance” to which he is intrinsically and inalienably attached (v. 3).<sup>7</sup> In this contest, the powerful, as usual, will prevail. In the land theory of Naboth, an old peasant presupposition, not only is ancestral land inviolate, but in fact pertains to the very ordering of creation.<sup>8</sup> It need hardly be added that the king’s promise to compensation to Naboth was not forthcoming, even as a promised compensation for the exercise of eminent domain in

the Atlanta Olympics in 1996 was not forthcoming. Those who regard land as a tradable commodity tend to have amnesia about long-term neighborly loyalty.

2. *Confiscation.* The narrative case I cite is in 2 Kings 8:1-6. A woman, the one whose son had died who was raised to new life by Elisha (1 Kgs 4:8-37), had fled the land in the face of an acute famine. But of course the practice of confiscating economics did not cease in her absence. When she returned, she discovered she had lost “her house and her field” (v. 3). There is no suggestion that the loss was illegal or immoral, just the normal working of the economy.

In her loss she “appealed” to the king. The verb is to “cry out,” the desperate strategy of the vulnerable who announce in loud ways the suffering inflicted by the working of the powerful (see Luke 18:1-8). The woman addresses her appeal to the king who has the capacity to redress such confiscation and to return to her what is hers. We do not know why the king honored her appeal, as kings often do not. Perhaps this king, son of Ahab, had learned something by a study of the narrative of Naboth’s vineyard; or perhaps he was under the influence of Elisha, in whose presence he receives the appeal. Either way, the king acts to *restore* what is rightly hers. The narrative attests that what the powerful are capable of taking is not in any case legitimate. This odd narrative attests that under the pressure of prophetic tradition, the ruling class can on occasion curb and redress confiscation, and so return land management to its proper shape.

3. *Usurpation.* The prophetic oracle of Micah 2:1-5 is an important marker in Old Testament teaching about the land that belongs to YHWH. The oracle begins with “woe” (NRSV, “alas”) which means “big trouble coming,” big trouble coming in the normal workings of the order of creation. The indictment voiced by the prophet concerns sharp land dealings whereby the strong usurp the property of the weak. Micah, an agrarian protestor, has great suspicion about big-time urban operators who connive “at night” on their beds, phone their brokers at daybreak, and by noon have seized property. This action is apparently fully legal, but it violates the neighborhood and upsets the ordering of the land economy.<sup>9</sup>

The operational word in the prophetic oracle is “covet,” which here does not refer to petty envy but to policies and practices of economic acquisitiveness that are, in a commodity-driven society, uncurbed. The target of such acquisitiveness is “houses and fields,” the same word pair used to describe the loss of the woman in 1 Kings 8:3. Micah the poet, moreover, refers to “house and field” as “inheritance,” the tribal domain that is inalienable, but now usurped by acquisitive policy and practice that no longer honor old neighborly notions of the land. It is no wonder that the oracle of Micah continues with a harsh “therefore” of judgment in verse 3, anticipating a time to come when those who rapaciously seize the land of vulnerable neighbors are themselves vexed when YHWH “alters the inheritance of my people” (v. 4). Now the shift in “inheritance” concerns not just a few rural neighbors, but the whole of the land economy by foreign intervention. The oracle concludes in verse 5 with anticipation of a new “casting of lines” for land distribution, an assembly at the courthouse in which the “coveters” will not be permitted to participate. They will be excluded from the new land management!

4. *Arrogant Autonomy.* The three cases I have cited all refer to small local transactions wherein the urban commodity economy displaces the old tribal economy of inheritance, a displacement that characteristically goes under the rubric of “devel-

opment.” In citing Ezekiel 29: 3-7, I move from conventional tribal conflict to the heady world of uncurbed superpowers. In the Old Testament, “Egypt” (along with Babylon) is a cipher for superpower pretension and posturing that assumes no theocentric limit to power. The upshot of the oracle of Ezekiel is that when Judah turns to Egypt for help against Babylon, Judah will find Egypt to be totally unreliable, a mere “staff of reed” with a broken body, i.e., strength that in fact is nothing more than unreliable weakness (vv. 6-7).

Our interest, however, is in the indictment of Egypt in verse 3 wherein the arrogant empire is condemned for saying, via its policies,

My Nile is my own,  
I made it for myself.

Everyone knows that the Nile was there before Egypt, that the river is God’s accomplishment, and that its reliability made Egyptian culture and power possible. But superpower arrogance has caused Pharaoh to misconstrue, and to invert the truth of creation. Rather than acknowledge that the Lord *made* the Nile that in turn *made* Egypt, Pharaoh can imagine he *made* the Nile. (The verb is a usual one for creation, ‘*asah*’). Given that misconstrual, Egypt of course is not answerable to anyone, and so can use, abuse, exploit, distort, consume, and eventually destroy creation because the river is the crown’s personal property.

But the indictment of the prophetic oracle that follows rejects the imperial claim of autonomy. Readers and preachers of this text amid U.S. superpower pretension will have little trouble transposing this oracle to “the last superpower” that imagines it can evoke “a new world order” to its own liking. Superpowers regularly refuse to learn about tenacious hold on the land that “colonies” continue to have, precisely because the land for them is never *possession* but always *inheritance*. It is for good reason that the prophets anticipate divine judgment on the superpower, a failed carcass to be fed to other creatures: “beasts of the land, birds of the air” (Ezek 29:5). In the end, Egypt will learn that “I am the Lord,” and that superpower status is fragile and penultimate (Ezek 29:6).

These conventional ways of acquisitiveness—eminent domain, confiscation, usurpation, and arrogant autonomy—violate the land that belongs to YHWH and *not* to the king (1 Kgs 21), *not* to the commodity traders (2 Kgs 8:1-6; Mic 2:1-5), and *not* to rapacious superpower (Ezek 29:3).

## VI.

Alongside these harsh denunciations of uncurbed acquisitiveness, I finish by citing three affirmations about the earth as guaranteed by the Creator:

1. “The meek shall inherit the earth.” This familiar teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:5) is a quote from Psalm 37:11 that is a sapiential meditation on the future of the land. Five times the Psalm speaks of “inheriting the land,” and alongside the “meek” in verse 11 refers to “those who wait for the Lord” (v. 9), “the blessed by the Lord” (v. 22), “the righteous” (v. 39), and those who “keep to his way” (v. 34) as the ones who will inherit the land. These various phrases all refer to Torah obedience, to those who conduct their life according to the well-being of the neighborhood as willed by the Creator who owns the land. The negative counterpoint is in each case “the

wicked,” those who advance themselves at the expense of the neighbor. This Psalm, characteristic of wisdom teaching, attests that there are inviolate “givens” ordained in creation that cannot be safely transgressed. Among them is the maintenance of land through the practice of neighborliness.

2. The decalogue, as is well known, concludes, “Thou shalt not covet” (Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21), a commandment that refers in these two verses to house, wife, field, or “anything that belongs to your neighbor.” It cannot be unimportant that this command that curbs acquisitiveness concludes the decalogue and stands in the position of final accent. The verb “covet” is the same one used in the indictment of Micah 2:2 (and rendered in Gen 3:6 as “desired”). The command and the prophetic indictment, as well as the creation narrative, understand that uncurbed desire will distort creation.<sup>10</sup> The commandment makes clear that, in the context of land management, all that is possible is not permissible.

3. In both Torah instruction and wisdom saying, the land inheritance of the vulnerable is inviolate:

You must not move your neighbor’s boundary marker, set up by former generations, on the property that will be allotted to you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to possess. (Deut 19:14)

Do not remove an ancient landmark  
or encroach on the fields of orphans,  
for their redeemer is strong;  
he will plead their cause against you. (Prov 23:10-11; see Prov 22:28)

The teachers in Israel can imagine that life is ordered by the Creator so that the strong and the weak may live together peaceably and justly. A violation of the entitlement of the vulnerable, by any violent practice, legal or military, violates creation and brings death.

Creation faith in the Old Testament links together the will of the awesome Creator and the well-being of the most vulnerable. Creation faith makes a claim that mocks our will to control and possess penultimate. That is no doubt why love of God the Creator regularly evolves into love of neighbor. Or, as the wisdom teacher has it,

Those who mock the poor insult their Maker;  
those who are glad at calamity will not go unpunished. (Prov 17:5)

Such a connection may give us pause as citizens of an aggressive superpower. Such connection makes honest preaching hazardous against the ideology of possessive autonomy, but for all that reason no less urgent. The question from Abner lingers: “To whom does the land belong?” Unlike Abner, we may entertain a reference point beyond the immediate conflict of “ours” and “theirs.” Beyond any romanticism in Psalm 24:1, there is a starchy insistence upon another landowner!

## Notes

1. J. Paul Getty once cynically remarked, "The meek shall inherit the earth, but that does not say anything about mineral rights under the earth."
2. It was Claus Westermann, *What Does the Old Testament Say About God?* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979) who first summoned Old Testament studies back to these issues by observing that the God who "saves" is the God who "blesses."
3. See a classic statement by C. B. McPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).
4. Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967), 1203-1207.
5. See Cameron Wybrow, *The Bible, Baconism, and Mastery over Nature: The Old Testament and Its Modern Misreading* (American University Studies series 7, vol. 112; New York: Peter Lang, 1991). Wybrow has effectively answered the charges of White.
6. See the discussions of the theological crisis of the Enlightenment by Paul Hazard, *The European Mind: The Critical Years 1680-1715* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), and Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: The Free Press, 1990).
7. Behind the notion of ancestral inheritance, as voiced by Naboth, is the large vision of the Jubilee. That provision makes no sense unless there is a commitment to protect ancestral property.
8. Reference may also be made to the narrative concerning Jeremiah's ancestral rootage in Jeremiah 32. That narrative in Jeremiah betokens the inalienable right of the exilic community to the land of Israel.
9. Reference to this process is the center of the many writings of Wendell Berry, as for example, *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981). Berry's most recent novel, *Jayber Crow: A Novel* (Washington: Counterpoint, 2000) is an account of the loss of ancestral land in the face of aggressive acquisitiveness.
10. Most remarkably the catalogue of sins in Colossians 3:5 concludes "covetousness which is idolatry." In this phrasing the writer gathers together the first commandment and the tenth, and indicates that it is in economic transactions that false gods are embraced and practiced.