

“To your offspring I will give this land” (Genesis 12,7). The theme of the Promised Land in the biblical tradition

“Aos teus descendentes, darei esta terra” (Gênesis 12,7). O tema da terra prometida na tradição bíblica

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1. Preliminary Remarks

Within Old Testament literature, the concept of the possession of ‘the land Israel’ takes a prominent position². Nevertheless, as it is the case for most themes in biblical literature, the Bible does not provide a univocal view on the land. On the contrary, within the Old Testament, various theological and ideological nuances with regard to the concept should be discerned.

Even if the theme of the land seems to be related to the tangible reality of soil, one should make a distinction between the historical reality of the land ‘Israel’ on the one hand, and the theological and ideological messages the texts aim to proclaim on the other one. Particularly since the birth and rise of historical-critical scholarship from the 17th century on, it has become clear that the biblical authors are trying to testify about their faith in God, to convince themselves and their contemporaries that their God – YHWH – is a God of life, a God of liberation, a God of justice. All biblical texts, moreover, are written from the

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² According to Accordance Bible Software, the two most important terms that are used to refer to the notion of ‘land’ – *‘erets* and *‘adamah* – are respectively used 2505 and 231 times within the Hebrew Bible.

perspective of the Israelites. In particular within the context of texts dealing with violence – the biblical motif of the taking into possession of the ‘Promised Land’ is closely related to stories in which divine and human violence are manifestly present –, it is extremely important to be aware of the fact that the biblical texts are meant to be read by people suffering under foreign occupation, hoping and trusting that God would be at their side, and will do everything in order to guarantee that the Israelites have a safe place to live.

Moreover, it should be accentuated that the Bible as we know it actually is the result of a long-lasting process of writing and editing. Even if, in general, one can accept that the Old Testament has been composed between the 8th and the 3rd century BCE, it remains extremely difficult to date exactly its different books, texts, layers and redactions. Although the fact that the biblical texts have been written and re-written by different (unknown) authors makes it plausible that ideas or theological convictions evolved in the course of the time, it is not impossible that several contradictory approaches of one and the same theme can have existed side by side. As such, one should be very careful in reconstructing a linear history of an idea on the basis of the Bible.

In what follows, several topics related to the theme of the Promised Land will be dealt with. After some concise remarks regarding the terminology ‘Promised Land’ (2), the following topics will be dealt with: (3) the addressees of God’s promise of the land; (4) the myth of the empty land; (5) the fate of the autochthonous possessors of the land, (6) the characterisation of the land as being “of milk and honey”; (7) God as the ultimate owner of the land; (8) Israel’s taking possession of the ‘Promised Land’; (9) and finally the question of the extent of the ‘Promised Land’.

2. The Promised Land: The Terminology

Already at the beginning of the Old Testament, immediately after the so-called Primeval History in Genesis 1–11 – dealing with universal themes as creation, human hubris and God’s punishment by a flood –, in Genesis 12:1-7, the account of Israel’s ‘history’ starts with a divine, unconditional promise of the land to its ancestor Abram:

¹ Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ² 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. [...] ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.”

These verses – once more, it should be accentuated that this text is a theological one, and does not aim at reporting historical facts – clearly indicate that Israel’s relationship to and its claim on the land are considered to be based on a divine ‘promise’: God ‘promises’ Abraham that he will be the ancestor of a great nation, and that his offspring will possess the land which, ‘in Abram’s days’, was inhabited by the Canaanites.

Although, in this context, one generally speaks about God's 'Promised Land', it should be mentioned that this expression as such does not occur within the Old Testament in its Hebrew form. The commonly used expression 'Promised Land' seems to be dependent on (modern) translations of the Old Testament, since there is simply no Hebrew equivalent to the English verb 'to promise' (Janzen, 1992, p. 144).

Within the original Hebrew version of texts that – in translation – speak about the 'Promised Land', *dâbar* is the most commonly used term. Although this verb literally means 'to speak' or 'to say', most modern translations render it as 'to promise'. Genesis 28:15, for example, is translated in the NRSV as: "I will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have *promised* (*dibbartî*) you". Besides *dâbar*, and having the same meaning in Hebrew, the verb *âmar* is frequently used within the context of a divine promise of the land. For example in Exodus 32:13, God says: "This land that I have *promised* (*ÂMARTÎ*) I will give to your descendants". Finally, the verb *shâba* is used in texts dealing with God's promise of the land. This verb, that literally means 'to swear', and in modern translations as the NRSV mostly has been rendered as 'to promise on oath', can be found, e.g., in Numbers 11:12: "The land that you *promised on oath* (*nishba'tâ*) to their ancestors".

Within the Septuagint (LXX), the oldest Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible reaching back to the 3rd century bce, the Hebrew verbs *dâbar*, *âmar*, and *shâba* have been rendered by the equivalents *λαλέω*, *λέγω* and *ὄμνυμι*. Contrary to the Hebrew, Greek language indeed has a term for '(to) promise', i.e. the verb *ἐπαγγέλλω* or the noun *ἐπαγγελία*. However, within the LXX, these terms have not been used within the context of the promise of the land. Only in the New Testament, the term *ἐπαγγέλλομαι* is used in the context of Gods promise to Abraham to inherit the land, as it is the case in Acts 7:5 and Hebrews 11:9³.

3. The Addressees of God's Promise of the Land

In the already mentioned pericope of Genesis 12:1-7, God's unconditional promise of the possession of the land by the Israelites was addressed to Israel's ancestor, Abraham. However, even if this divine promise to Abraham is repeated several times in the book of Genesis (Gen 13:15; 15:7, 18; 17:8; 22:17), after Abraham's death – which is narrated in Genesis 25 –, the same promise is repeated to his son Isaac (e.g. in Gen 26:3). Later, some texts also speak about the promise of the land to Isaac's son, Jacob (e.g. Gen 28:13; 35:12; 48:4).

From Genesis 50:24 on – at that stage in the narrative, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are deceased – one encounters the stereotypical formula "the land that God swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob". This tradition of a 'patriarchal promise' is often repeated within the exodus and conquest traditions. For example in

³ It is remarkable that in classical Greek, the term *ἐπαγγέλλομαι* is almost always used in order to speak about *human* promises to God, and only by exception in the sense of *ἐπαγγελία* θεοῦ. See Schniewind & Friedrich, 1935, p. 576.

Exod 6:8, God recalls Moses the promise he made to the patriarchs: “I will bring you into the land that I swore (literally: “the land on which I lifted my hand” – *hâ’ârêts ’âshèr nâsâtî èt yâdî*) to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”. Similarly in Exod 32:13, within the context of the narrative of the Israelites worshipping the golden calf, in order to placate God, Moses remembers him to the ‘promise’ he has done to their patriarchs: “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore (*nishba’tâ*) to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised (*’âmartî*) I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever”.

In the passages mentioned until now, God’s promise of the land (1) is made to the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and/or Jacob) and (2) is an unconditional one: God gives the land by mere grace. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the fact that the unconditional divine promise to Israel’s ancestors takes an important place within the Old Testament presentation of the ‘Promised Land’, not all Old Testament texts share this view. In particular within so-called prophetic literature, a different presentation of the ‘Promised Land’ can be found.

In Ezekiel 20:5-6, the prophet addresses the Israelites in the context of the Babylonian exile (6th century BCE) about Israel’s ancestors. In these verses, it is clearly stated that God made the solemn oath of the land to the patriarchs of the exodus, Israel’s forefathers who were in the land of Egypt, and who experienced the exodus from Egypt. So, in short, not Israel’s patriarchs are the addressees of God’s promise, but Israel’s ancestors who experienced the exodus out of Egypt⁴:

⁵ Thus says the Lord God: On the day when I chose Israel, I swore to the offspring of the house of Jacob – making myself known to them in the land of Egypt – I swore (*’èssâ’ yâdî* – I lifted up my hand) to them, saying, I am the LORD your God.

⁶ On that day I swore (*nâsâ’tî yâdî*) to them that I would bring them out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands.

This promise is repeated in Ezek 20:15-17:

¹⁵ Moreover I swore (*nâsâ’tî yâdî*) to them in the wilderness *that I would not bring them into the land* that I had given them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands, ¹⁶ because they rejected my ordinances and did not observe my statutes, and profaned my sabbaths; for their heart went after their idols. ¹⁷ Nevertheless my eye spared them, and I did not destroy them or make an end of them in the wilderness⁵.

⁴ On this topic, and the possible implications for the historical-critical analysis of the Old Testament, see in particular J. Van Seters, *Confessional Reformulation*, pp. 448-459.

⁵ Also Ezekiel 20,28 (“For when I had brought them into the land that I swore to give them, then wherever they saw any high hill or any leafy tree, there they offered their sacrifices and presented the provocation of their offering; there they sent up their pleasing odors, and there they poured out their drink offerings”) suggests that the promise of the land was addressed to the fathers of the exodus.

In these verses, it is again clear that the promise of the gift of the land is addressed to Israel's forefathers who experienced the event of the exodus out of Egypt. Moreover, – contrary to God's promise to Abraham, Isaac or Jacob –, the promise is formulated in a conditional way here: taking possession of the land is dependent on the obedience to God's law. If this condition of obedience and loyalty to God's instructions is broken, Israel can no further claim upon the land and can expect expulsion⁶.

This presentation of the promise of the land as a conditional one undoubtedly has to be situated against a historical context of the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE, when Israel did no longer possess the land. The authors of these texts were looking for the reason why Israel was deprived of the land. In their view, the Israelites' loss of the land was caused by the fact that they have not obeyed to God's law.

Even if, within prophetic literature, Israel's unfaithfulness and rebellion are presented as the reason for the loss of the land, the idea of the 'Promised Land' as such has not been harmed: in a new Exodus, Israel will be rescued out of exile, and be led to a 'Promised land'.

And even after the Israelites' return to their 'Promised Land' in the context of Cyrus' edict, which allowed them to leave Babylonia and to rebuild Jerusalem, the reality of the 'Promised Land' that they re-entered was not at all rosy. The reality of the return into a land which they had to leave decades ago and which was possessed by those who did not go into exile, sobered them up. Against this background, in particular in Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 40-55) – the exilic part of Isaiah, written in an era when the Israelites were confronted to the reality that the 'Promised Land' that has been announced by the prophets will perhaps not be that ideal as hoped for – the idea of a 'Promised Land' was transferred into an eschatological future. Thus, in Isaiah 49:8-10, it is announced that Israel will find eschatological rest in the land in God's presence:

⁸ Thus says the LORD: In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; saying to the prisoners, "Come out," to those who are in darkness, "Show yourselves." They shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights shall be their pasture; they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them."

⁶ Also in Numbers 32:9-11, Moses refers to Israel's rebellion against YHWH, within the context of God's promise of the land. When the Israelite spies returned from their expedition of the land, however, they "discouraged the Israelites that they would not enter the land which the LORD had given them" (Num 32,9). Therefore, "the LORD's anger was kindled on that day, and he swore (*wayyischāba*), saying: 'Surely none of the people who came up out of Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob'" (Num 32,11).

The idea of God's promise to Israel to possess the land, implies the question about the original inhabitants of that land. It is this topic which will be dealt with in the next section of this paper.

4. "A Land Without a People for a People Without a Land"?

Even if there is a lot of discussion about its origin and its precise use and misuse in recent history, in general, the slogan "A land without a people for a people without a land" – or variations on it – is widely associated with the 19-20th century movement to establish a Jewish state⁷.

I do not aim at interfering with political matters regarding the recent history of the state of Israel. However, against the background of our analysis of the 'Promised Land' in the Biblical traditions, this theme cannot be denied. Anyway, the Biblical tradition is unanimous regarding this question: the land which God promised to give to the Israelites was not an empty land. Already in God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:5-6, the land is considered to belong to the 'Canaanites': "At that time the Canaanites were in the land".

In particular within a Deuteronomic context, one finds, within the framework of narratives dealing with the taking into possession of the land, lists of autochthonous peoples living in the country. Exodus 23:28 mentions three peoples (Hivites, Canaanites, and Hittites); Exodus 13,5 adds the Amorites and the Jebusites, and in Exodus 3:8, 17; 23:23; 33:2, 34:11 also the Perizzites are mentioned⁸. The most complete list of peoples can be found in Deuteronomy 7,1:

When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you – the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you ...".

It is not at all easy to determine what precisely was understood by these names of peoples in the Old Testament⁹. Often, our knowledge about these historical peoples – such as the Amorites or the Hittites – does not correspond with the Old Testament's use of the names. For example, within the Old Testament, the 'Amorite' seems to be a generic term in order to denote the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan. Being used already in the 2nd half of the 3rd millennium BCE to indicate different regions and population groups, because of the invasion of the

⁷ See, for example, A. Shapira, *Land and Power*, p. 42: "The slogan 'A land without a people for a people without a land' was common among Zionists at the end of the nineteenth, and the beginning of the twentieth century. It contained a legitimization of the Jewish claim to the land and did away with any sense of uneasiness that a competitor to this claim might appear". A concise and nuanced presentation of the slogan's origins and use can be found on https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_land_without_a_people_for_a_people_without_a_land#cite_note-38 (access 23 August 2017).

⁸ On the lists of the autochthonous peoples, see H. Ausloos, *The Septuagint Version of Exod 23:20-33*, pp. 91-100.

⁹ For an overview, see C. Houtman, *Exodus*, pp. 102-127. See also A. Versluis, *The Command to Exterminate the Canaanites*, pp. 286-298.

Sea Peoples in the 12th century BCE, the term Amorite had no longer a precise political or ethnic connotation. Also the term Hittites as a designation for the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan poses problems. Although in the 2nd millennium BCE, the Hittite empire was very powerful – reaching even until Syria in the 14th and 13th centuries BCE –, according to extra-biblical material, the Hittites never penetrated Canaan¹⁰.

There can be no doubt that the lists of peoples do not provide historical accurate information. Referring to the wicked nations that God will replace in order to allow Israel to take possession of the 'Promised Land', these lists rather serve ideological or rhetorical goals.

Within inner-Israelite disputes on the claim of the land, however, the idea of the 'empty land' can nevertheless, to a certain extent, be found in biblical literature. Against the background of the Babylonian exile, and in particular in the context of the return after the exile, there were some disputes between those who did not leave the land due to the exile, and those who had to leave it and were exiled. As propagandistic literature, and in order to legitimate the returning exiles' claim on the land, 2 Chronicles 36,20-21 suggests that during the exile, the land indeed was desolate and empty:

²⁰ He [the king of the Chaldeans] took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, ²¹ to fulfil the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfil seventy years.

The fact that the land the Israelites will inherit thanks to God's promise is not an empty one, urges to ask the question how the biblical authors dealt with the destiny of the indigenous peoples who inhabited the land. In the next paragraph, some of the diverging responses to this question will be presented.

5. What Will Happen to the Autochthonous Population?

The answers that the biblical authors have given on the question how the Israelites shall encounter the indigenous population of the land they receive from God largely depend on their distinct ideological and theological concerns.

The most radical approach can be found in Deuteronomy 7:1-2, the text that has already been cited in the preceding paragraph:

¹ When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you – the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you – ² and when the Lord your

¹⁰ So, Van Seters, *The Terms 'Amorite' and 'Hittite'*, p. 65, states: "Nowhere in the Old Testament does the use of 'Amorite' and 'Hittite' correspond to what we know about these historical peoples in the second millennium B.C."

God gives them over to you and you defeat them, *then you must utterly destroy them* (*haharém taharím 'ôitâm*). Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.

In this pericope, the technical term *hèrèm* has been used, which, at least within a context of war against the autochthonous inhabitants of the land, means their total extermination¹¹. In the same sense, the term is used – either as noun or as verb – within numerous texts in the Bible. So, according to Numbers 21:2, the Israelites made a vow to God, saying: “If you will indeed give this people into our hands, then we will utterly *destroy* (*wehaharmî*) their towns”. Or, on the eve of the conquest of the city of Jericho, Joshua commands the Israelites: “The city and all that is in it shall be devoted (*harèm*) to the Lord for destruction” (Josh 6:17).

The reason for the command to utterly destroy the indigenous population undoubtedly has been a religious one: if Israel will live amidst those peoples, they will seduce them to worship their gods. This becomes clear from the following verses in Deuteronomy 7, which forbid mixed marriages (and immediately illustrate that the extermination of the peoples was considered as an ‘ideal’, that could not so easily be put into practice):

³Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, ⁴for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of yhwh would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. (Deut 7:3-4)

Besides texts that require a complete extermination of the peoples, several Old Testament texts also presuppose a cohabitation with the Israelites. One of the most representative texts in this respect is a passage in the book of Judges:

¹ Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, “I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you into the land that I had promised to your ancestors. I said, ‘I will never break my covenant with you. ²For your part, do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; tear down their altars.’ But you have not obeyed my command. See what you have done! ³So now I say, I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become adversaries to you, and their gods shall be a snare to you” (Judg 2:1-3)

In this pericope, the continuous presence of the autochthonous peoples is presented as a punishment by God: because of the fact that Israel did not obey God’s law, the peoples will remain in the land, thus being in line with what has been said already about God’s conditional promise of the land. Moreover, the peoples will stay in the land, because, through them, God will continuously test the Israelites.

This approach of the relationship between the Israelites and the non-Israelite inhabitants of the ‘Promised Land’ is probably due to a continuous confrontation

¹¹ A survey of the interpretations, function, and Near-Eastern background of the term *hèrèm* is given by A. Versluis, *The Command to Exterminate the Canaanites*, pp. 45-69.

with them: even if it should be a theological ideal to be the sole inhabitants of the 'Promised Land', the Israelites always will have to live amidst other peoples.

6. The Promised Land: a Land of Milk and Honey

Although, as it has been indicated, the first book of the Bible already explicitly deals with God's promise to give the land to Israel's ancestors, its characterisation as a "land, flowing with milk and honey" (*èrèç zâvat hâlâv ôudebâsh*) is found for the first time within the context of the narratives about the exodus out of Egypt (Exod 3:8)¹². In the rest of the Old Testament, the expression occurs in Exodus 3:17; 13:5; 33:3; Leviticus 20:24; Numbers 13:27; 14:8; 16:13, 14; Deuteronomy 6:3; 11:9; 26:9, 15; 27:3; Joshua 5:6; Jeremiah 11:5; 32:22; Ezekiel 20:6, 15. In Deuteronomy 31:20, the land is referred to as *'adâmâh*. In Deuterocanonical literature, the expression is present in Baruch 1:20 and Jesus Sirach 46:8. With the remarkable exception of Numbers 16:13, in which Dathan and Abiram blame Moses for having led the Israelites out of Egypt, which is remarkably characterised as a land flowing with milk and honey, the expression exclusively points to the 'Promised Land', *i.e.* the land of Canaan.

Much research has been done already into the exact rendering of the words *hâlâv* and *devash*. In the Old Testament, the term *hâlâv* is used *a.o.* to refer to the milk of sheep, goats, cows or even camels. Although *devash* undoubtedly can denote bee honey, as suggested by Judges 14:8-9, 14, many different meanings, such as artificial date or grape syrup, have been proposed as well.

Whatever the origin and the exact meaning of the terms *hâlâv* and *debâsh* may have been, their actual function within the expression is clearly metaphorical¹³. For people living at the beginning of the twenty-first century, 'milk' and 'honey' are everyday products, which do not bear any metaphorical meaning. In ancient Israel, however, these goods presumably evoked wealth, fertility and a good life. Milk not only presupposes healthy animals that are able to calve. A sufficient production of milk also assumes that cows, sheep or goats have enough food and water at their disposal, a condition that can only be realised when there is enough rain.

A similar argumentation can be proposed for the noun *devash*, whether it means bee honey or artificial syrup that is made from fruit. Bees can only produce honey when there are enough flowers. Plants, however, only can flower when there is sufficient water and sun, and when the soil is fertile, conditions that must be fulfilled in order to produce fruits as well.

In short, the formula "a land flowing of milk and honey" evokes a verdant environment with fruitful fields. Consequently, a land that is typified as such,

¹² This section resumes earlier insights, as presented in H. Ausloos, "A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey", pp. 297-314.

¹³ C. Houtman, *Exodus*, p. 358 characterises the expression as a – probably hyperbolic – "*pars pro toto* of the good gifts of the land".

will be very attractive to live in: the land God promises to the Israelites is a land of plenty¹⁴.

7. God Is the Owner of the Land

Within the Old Testament, the designation of the land as a ‘Promised Land’ also functions as a reminder that the land factually does not belong to Israel, but is given to them by God. Israel did not get the land by its mere merits. No, the Biblical authors accentuate that it is God who gives that land to Israel. This implies that it is actually God who is the real owner of the land, and that Israel cannot claim to be its possessor.

In order to express this notion, the Old Testament authors make use of different concepts. Several texts explicitly accentuate God’s ownership of the land, thus considering Israel as ‘strangers and sojourners’. Within the context of the legislation of the jubilee, for example, God addresses the Israelites with the following words: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants” (Lev 23:23).

In order to indicate that God transfers the land to Israel, that factually belongs to him, the Old Testament often uses the technical term *nehālâ* (‘inheritance’): even if Israel can make use of the land, it remains God’s property. This implies that Israel is not allowed to sell the land. Moreover, the term is illustrative for the close bond between God and Israel. For example in Deuteronomy 4:38, one reads:

And because he loved your ancestors, he chose their descendants after them. He brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, driving out before you nations greater and mightier than yourselves, to bring you in, giving you their land for a possession (*nehālâ*), as it is still today.

Closely related to the noun *nehālâ*, some texts use the term *’ahouzzah* (also translated as ‘possession’), which also suggests that the land that Israel – either the people of Israel as such, either the real estate that is handed from generation to generation – now possesses, once belonged to God¹⁵.

8. The Taking Possession of the ‘Promised Land’

The Biblical presentation of the conquest of the ‘Promised Land’ is quite clear: according to the book of Joshua, after having escaped Egyptian slavery, Israel did take possession of the Promised Land by a violent campaign. Even if some elements of these stories may have been inspired by historical events,

¹⁴ The description of Egypt as a land that flows with milk and honey in Numbers 16:13, 14 is a supplementary argument in favour of the assumption that the expression is a summary of a land’s delights. ‘Milk’ and ‘honey’ are not peculiar to denote the qualities of Canaan as the Promised Land; every place where “milk and honey flows” – even Egypt – is attractive to live in.

¹⁵ See for example Leviticus 14:34: “When you come into the land of Canaan, which I give you for a possession (*’ahouzzah*) ...”.

the Bible, being primarily theological literature, is not a reliable source for the reconstruction of the history of ancient Israel. This reconstruction of the Israelites' settlement in the 'Promised Land', – which is closely linked to the question about the origins of Israel as such – is much debated, not the least because extra-biblical sources do not seem to confirm the Bible's version of the conquest of the 'Promised Land'. Therefore, in scientific literature, several models – with a lot of variants – have been developed in order to explain Israel's 'acquisition' of the Promised Land¹⁶. Within the scope of this contribution, a very concise presentation of some of these models has to suffice.

The peaceful infiltration model argues that peasants in search for pastures settled in regions within the context of existing city-states that were not heavily populated. So, at a certain moment, the Israelites changed from a seminomadic life into an agrarian way of life. In a later stadium, it is argued, these settlements were expanded, often with violence, thus making a link with the narratives about a violent conquest within the book of Joshua.

Besides the infiltration model, a peasant's revolt hypothesis has been developed. Based on the hypothesis of a hierarchical organised society – on its top the king of the city state, and at the lowest level the farmers – it is argued that at a certain moment, poor farmers revolted against the leading class, no longer being loyal to the cities, and starting their own settlements. Closely related to this model is the hypothesis that, because of lack of land for agriculture, farmers came into conflict with Canaanite centres. In this process, religious aspects could have played an important role: strengthened by their belief in God, the farmers have been able to dethrone the sovereigns and to take the power.

From an archaeological perspective, the model proposed by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman seems to be the most plausible one¹⁷. Archaeological findings make clear that at the beginning of the Iron Age (ca 1200 BCE), a lot of new settlements came into existence in Palestine, living in harmony with the existing cities. Moreover, the findings indicate that there has been a certain degree of continuity between the existing cities and the new settlements. Because of the decline of the cities, those groups – as the *Habiru* – no longer could rely on the support of them and became more independent. From a later perspective, these settlements have been regarded as Israelite tribes, and considered to be 'Israel' as a nation. Undoubtedly, their belief in a national God YHWH has played an important role within this process.

9. The Extent of the 'Promised Land'

When contemporarily talking about countries and land, people actually have a map in mind, clearly indicating the country's borders. This is also the case when thinking about the controversial actual state of Israel/Palestine.

¹⁶ For a concise presentation of these models, see W.C. Kaiser, *A History of Israel*, pp. 144-150.

¹⁷ I. Finkelstein & N.A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, pp. 72-122.

Within biblical literature, however, there is no univocal presentation of Israel's borders. Besides the vague indication "from Dan to Bersheba" – as for example in 2 Samuel 24:2 – four different demarcations of the 'Promised Land' can be distinguished.

In Genesis 15:18, God promises to Abraham to give his descendants the land, "from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates". This demarcation of the land never coincided with historical reality. Therefore, and in order to harmonise this text with 1 Kings 4:21, biblical scholars often tried to weaken this presentation, thus interpreting the formula *nehar miçraîm* (the 'river' of Egypt) as 'brook' of Egypt. According to 1 Kings 4:21, king Solomon was reigning over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the border of Egypt (*geboûl miçraîm*), which was considered to have been indicated by the so-called brook of Egypt.

A much more restricted territory is presented in Ezekiel 47:13-20 and Numbers 34:1-12. In these passages, Transjordan is not part of the 'Promised Land', whereas a big part of Southern-Syria (including Damascus) does belong to it. This presentation undoubtedly is a theological one, since, according to a majority of Old Testament passages, the crossing of the Jordan marks the beginning of the taking into possession of the Promised Land. The borders of the land as presented in these texts more or less correspond to its extant between 1400-1200 BCE, when it was an Egyptian province.

Contrary to these passages, in Joshua 13-19 and Deuteronomy 34:1-4, the land is presented as the Israel of the Twelve Tribes. Here, Transjordan is part of the 'Promised Land'.

Finally, also Genesis 13:11-15 seems to refer to the extent of the 'Promised Land'¹⁸. When Abraham and his nephew Lot are going to separate, God addresses Abraham, standing on a mountain between Bethel and Ai, with the following words:

Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever.

From a geographic point of view, this story has to be situated on the so-called hill 913. The sight from there is rather limited: in the north, Abraham saw almost nothing because of mount Asur (1016 meters); in the south he could look to Bet-Sur, south of Jerusalem (but not unto Hebron because of the mountains). The territory that Abraham – according to this story – could oversee, was thus rather limited. Being almost identical with the Persian province Yehud, this passage undoubtedly considered this restricted land as Israel's 'Promised Land' within the historical context of Persian dominance.

¹⁸ See E.A. Knauf, *Der Umfang des verheißenen Landes*, pp. 152-155.

10. Conclusion

The concept of the 'Promised Land' is one of the most important themes within biblical literature. Nevertheless, as this contribution has illustrated, there is no univocal presentation of the Promised Land within the Old Testament. Each text dealing with the Promised Land is inspired by its concrete historical background. Taking the risk to be too generalizing, in this respect, two different approaches can be distinguished.

On the one hand, there are people who dream of and talk about a 'Promised Land' they are not living in. The 'Promised Land' they dream of is something like an utopia, a land where there will be no enemies, where there will be wealth, work, food, drink, prosperity, in sum: a "land flowing with milk and honey". Within the context of Old Testament literature, the historical situations of exile and diaspora seem to have given rise to this type of presentation of the 'Promised Land'.

From an inside perspective – i.e. the view of those actually living in it – the 'Promised Land' is often not that ideal. Once – or again – living in the 'Promised Land', one is confronted with reality: the ideal world one was dreaming of, often seems to be an illusion. Confronted to this deception and disillusionment, people look for an explanation: why the place we live in is not the 'ideal world'. Within the context of the Old Testament, this confrontation with reality undoubtedly has given rise to a conditional formulation of God's promise of the land: the fact that the 'Promised land' is not that ideal, or that the Israelites, time and again, will lose their 'Promised land', is due to their own sins: that's why Israel has to share the land with the 'Canaanites'; that's why Israel is even punished by its expulsion from and even by the destruction of the 'Promised Land'.

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Abstract

Although the English designation 'Promised Land' is not used as such in the Old Testament, the theological motif of the land being promised by God to Israel is undoubtedly one of the main themes that connects most books of the Old Testament. However, due to the fact that these books have been composed by various authors in very different historical contexts, there is no single uniform treatment of this motif within the Bible. Whereas some biblical pericopes speak about an unconditional gift of the land by God's grace, others stipulate that not obeying God's commandments will lead to the loss of the Promised Land, a land that originally was not Israel's own. Moreover, even if promised to be possessed by Israel, several texts accentuate that, in the end, it remains God's land: Israel can make use of it, but the land itself belongs to God. The present paper will deal with both literary and historical questions with respect to this theological motif, that is ubiquitous within the Old Testament. After some concise remarks regarding the terminology 'Promised Land', the following topics are dealt with: the addressees of God's promise of the land; the myth of the empty land; the fate of the autochthonous possessors of the land, the characterisation of the land as being "of milk and honey"; God as the ultimate owner of the land; Israel's taking possession of the 'Promised Land', and the extent of the 'Promised Land'.

Resumo

Embora a designação "Terra Prometida" não seja usada como tal no Antigo Testamento, o motivo teológico da terra prometida por Deus a Israel é, sem dúvida, um dos principais temas que conectam a maioria dos livros do Antigo Testamento. No entanto, devido ao facto de que esses livros foram compostos por vários autores em contextos históricos muito diferentes, não existe um único tratamento uniforme deste motivo dentro da Bíblia. Enquanto algumas perícopes bíblicas falam de um dom incondicional da terra pela graça de Deus, outros estipulam que não obedecer aos mandamentos de Deus levará à perda da Terra Prometida, uma terra que originalmente não era a própria de Israel. Além disso, mesmo se prometida a Israel, vários textos acentuam isso, ela acaba por permanecer a terra de Deus: Israel pode usá-la, mas a terra em si pertence a Deus.

O presente artigo aborda questões literárias e históricas com respeito a este motivo teológico, que é omnipresente no Antigo Testamento. Após algumas observações concisas sobre a terminologia "Terra Prometida", tratam-se os seguintes tópicos: os destinatários da promessa de Deus sobre a terra; o mito da terra vazia; o destino dos possuidores autóctones da terra, a caracterização da terra como sendo "de leite e mel"; Deus como o último dono da Terra; a posse da "Terra Prometida" por Israel e a extensão da "Terra Prometida".