

Soil and Spirit / “Land en Gees”

Some Biblical Perspectives in the Land Debate, SACC, 30th of May 2018

Chairperson, brothers & sisters –

Does the Bible “says” anything about land? Yes, and No.

Let me start with the “no”.

No, the Bible is not a political manifesto, a 21st century handbook for economic policies/systems of capitalistic or socialistic orientation; nor is the Bible a technical guide for modern day (mega) agricultural practices and mass food production... quite the contrary: it is an ancient Book, coming to us from a different world and time, speaking a different tongue...

Another “no”: the Bible is also not a collection of texts or verses which I can collect in alphabetical or chronological order by typing in “land” on Google, and then link them all together to proof this or that ideological point of view – we do have such documents in our – the DRC’s history – unfortunately, regretfully; we were the authors of a heretical theology which costs us – and our country – many tears, many years... I’m sorry for that, again: mea culpa.

But, then: yes – the Bible do speak about land.

Keeping in mind my introductory remarks, I think as Christians we can ponder on at least seven – yes: seven – Biblical perspectives in the current debate on landreform, justice and the way ahead for us as churches in this country...

1. God is the Creator of the heavenly spheres, a universe ever expanding and legions of stars... and of this, the only earth we know surely of; land and soil, all the resources, water and minerals belongs to Him.
Psalm 24: *“The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it; the world and all who live in it, for He founded it...”*
The titled deed is His, He is the only rightful owner and therefore: our respect, and thanksgiving, also belongs to the Lord God.
2. The Bible tells us that when God created the earth, He blessed it with His ever-enduring presence and care – Genesis 1: *“Let the water teem with living creatures... Let the land produce living creatures... Be fruitful and increase... I give food...”* – so that this land can sustain life. Psalm 104 praises God for the way He made life on earth possible: the sun, the seasons, the rain, the fountains, day and night, a rythm of which we as humans, together with the plants and all animals, can be part of, can share, healthy and joyful...
3. Coming to us, humans, God also gave (and is still giving) a living space to people, as individuals, communities and nations – Acts 17: *“From one man God made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live”*... Of that dynamic process, recorded history gives evidence and we should therefor engage with the past: who are we, where do we come from, how did we end up here... For the migrations of families and communities through the ages is an ongoing process and we can meditate on the role God is playing in these migrations, not only of old Israel... Speaking of Israel: the Books Deuteronomy, Joshua and Judges ask for a careful interpretation in this sense – for example: what do we say of a text like Deuteronomy 6:10 – *“When the Lord your God brings you into the land – a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did*

not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant...” – is this land expropriation without compensation? And let us not forget, brothers and sisters, that as we sit here this afternoon, a violent war against innocent people is waging on this exact frontier between Jews and Palestines; a war which you won’t understand if we don’t take that complex history in due regard...

4. That same text, however – Deuteronomy 8 – also leads us to the next point: with a place to stay and making a living of it, God also gives a responsibility to humans: we were appointed and mandated to be faithful stewards, treasurers, managers of land and soil, and all its resources. Genesis 1: *“And God said: Fill the earth... and rule over it...”* That means that as responsible human beings, we should use all our capacities to know our world, trying to understand God’s creation, unlocking the sciences underlying life, developing the ways in which we build houses and cities, produce food for millions of people... and to do that in a just way: with respect to plants and animals, water and soil; we cannot just exploit and manipulate this garden God gave us. It is also unbearable to see that some collect the riches of the earth for themselves, more and more, while others – millions – are suffering daily just to get something to eat and a shelter against the cold. The widening gap between rich and poor on this planet, and our country, cries aloud to the high heavens...
5. Linking on this, a next principle: the Bible is very clear – Exodus 20 – that what God gives to me, is mine; and what God gives to you, is yours: your life, your living space, your resources and opportunities to live of – for example, your work and working place. *“Thou shall not steal”*, God taught Israel. Short and clear.
6. But, there is another purpose of God’s giving land and living space to us, namely to take care of the weak in our society – that I should use my land and economic opportunities to give work to the jobless; to grow the economy so that more people can take part in it; and specifically, that I – in honour of God and thankful for what He gave to me – should lend a helping hand to the poor, the landless and the stranger/foreigner/refugee. The Book Leviticus – chapters 19 and 25 for example – give direct instructions on how to take the marginalized in account when we harvest our crops, and the institution of the Jubilee Year as an opportunity for the unfortunate in the society who lost their land, to restore their identity, dignity and sense of belonging in a community that cares...
7. My last remark: the Bible indicates the way in which God want to organize our lives here on earth, by giving authority to parents, heads of families, kings and governments – institutions through which He want to manage and regulate the use of land, living space and resources in general in creating and sustaining viable, healthy communities – Romans 13, for example. In the kingdom of God, my own perspectives and will, are bound in to and restricted by the will and concerns of others, God in the first place. I cannot occupy or consume whatever I want, and therefore we as Christians should look for a just and sustainable social contract with regards also to the land issue in our country.

In conclusion, where to then with these Biblical principles?

May I propose that we as churches set the example in the way we partake in this current debate:

- a) that the spirit of our deliberations, really should be “in the Spirit” (Galatians 5);
- b) that our contribution will start at home, with our own histories, properties
- c) that our participation will be in the footsteps of Christ, as prophet, priest and king (witnessing to the truth, to power, and urgently; praying and pastoring to our members; leading with responsibility and in a orderly way)

I thank you.

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