

# Colonial Exile: Place and Biblical Faith in North America

by William Pearson

A Thesis Submitted to the Atlantic School of Theology,  
Halifax, Nova Scotia, in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

April, 2016, Halifax, Nova Scotia

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## **Abstract:**

This thesis is an exploration of how Christian communities ought to imagine themselves vis a vis their inhabited landscapes, as well as how the Biblical text (especially the Old Testament) can serve to root communities in their respective geographical places. I argue that North Americans are only tenuously connected with their places, a result of the history of colonialism, and that as a result the Biblical text, which is itself a reflection on the experience of exile and homelessness, confronts North Americans in a profoundly relevant way. I also explore how Christians in North America might develop resources from within their tradition to reclaim a sense of rootedness, including disciplines of presence taken from the Old Testament and Christian “theologies of place,” the latter of which in particular having become a topic of increased attention in recent years.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“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.’”*

- Genesis 12:1

*“When we go into the Rockies we might have the sense that gods are there. But if so they cannot manifest themselves to us as ours. They are the gods of another race, and we cannot know them.”*

- George Grant

I begin with these two quotations, both of them prophetic in their own way, because I believe they make plain a certain truth about existence in North America for people whose lives are informed by some kind of biblical faith, namely, that it is through our sense of unsettlement in this landscape, our sense of homelessness, that we might most easily identify with the Biblical text, and allow it to address us directly. For the Bible is above all a story of movement, a story of a people unsettled. It is a story of a people whose faith is intimately related to a particular place on Earth, even though they may not inhabit it except imaginatively, through memory and hope, indeed perhaps are never meant to. Similarly, we North Americans (and I speak only for the

non-Indigenous majority) are an assembly of settlers and immigrants, having come from away, be it in our own lifetimes or in those of our ancestors. But we did not arrive in a land of milk and honey, or in El Dorado, as many early settlers dreamed. Settler life was, to the contrary, an arduous one. And even now, when the material conditions of life in the new world have improved, many of the voices I engage in what follows (especially in chapter two) would say we still have not yet properly arrived in this continent, in the sense that we have not yet made it home, not yet learned enough about it, not yet come to love it. While God's promise to Abraham and the Israelites is that when they arrive in the Land they will be with their God there, George Grant suggests that the gods here, in North America, still appear to us as aliens. We find ourselves in a position of apprenticeship, being here, but still learning *how* to be here. For this reason, I find the Bible's story of unsettlement and exile illuminates the story we, as Canadians, tell of our relationship with this place, and vice versa. "Exile" is one of the defining metaphors of the Bible and the many faiths inspired by the Bible. It is an apt one to describe life in North America, as well, I want to argue in what follows.

The project begins (in chapter one, section one) with an examination of the central event of the Old Testament, the Babylonian Exile, and how the shock of that event has left traces throughout much of the Biblical text. Recent scholarship has increasingly recognized the importance of the Babylonian Exile to the Bible's composition, and I want to highlight some of the ways the Bible responds to that event, as well as the ways it can be

understood as a product of that event, even if some parts of it were written well after the exile itself. When understood in this way, the Old Testament confronts us as a book profoundly concerned with themes of land and place.

In section two of chapter one I move on to examine the work of what I will refer to as the “exilic theologians.” These thinkers, the most prominent of whom are John Howard Yoder and Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, are inspired by the portrait of exile found in the Old Testament, as well as the history of Jewish diaspora which is that exile’s legacy. They argue for the cultivation of a diaspora consciousness as a way of overcoming the exclusive territorial claims and inherent violence of nationalism. Better to imagine oneself as an exile, these thinkers would say, than claim a homeland by excluding others from it, as nationalist constructions of belonging and identity so often do.

Chapter two changes tack entirely. It begins by engaging another group of voices, these ones arguing that in the face of modernity’s fragmented communities and ecological crises, what we most need to do is put down roots, and “become native” to our places, to use the words of agrarian activist Wes Jackson.<sup>1</sup> Community identity needs to be rooted geographically, agrarians believe. Instead of the diaspora consciousness promoted by the exilic theologians, agrarians like Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson want to see just the opposite cultivated, what we might call an indigenous consciousness. Agrarian thinkers express a resilient hope that by

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<sup>1</sup> Wes Jackson, *Becoming Native to This Place* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), 87-100.



fostering deep bonds between people and places we might overcome some of our most pressing ecological and social challenges.

In the second section of chapter two I explore how these themes play out in colonial contexts, especially Canada's. I examine some common Christian religious interpretations of colonization, and how the Biblical narratives of migration and settlement have influenced the self-understanding of many Christian colonists. I then turn to the specifically Canadian context, and read works from the Canadian literary tradition that reflect on the meaning of land and place. Place, and our relation to it as settlers, has been one of the enduring themes of literature in Canada.<sup>2</sup> I use the work of Susanna Moodie, Margaret Atwood, Dennis Lee, George Grant, and many others, to show that settler life in Canada has very often been understood as a kind of geographical exile. With the exception of Moodie, I read more or less contemporary sources here. This is because while I am interested in historical interpretations of colonization, my project is ultimately a forward-looking one, and so I concern myself with more recent writers who investigate how patterns of settler-consciousness continue to be replicated in Canada. These writers would argue that while we have a firmly established way of life in North America, that way of life is superimposed upon, and not integrated with, the land we inhabit. This is characteristic of a

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<sup>2</sup> In this work I mean by place the geographical realities within which we live our lives. Place is also a human category, of course. Our communities serve to place us, and, as we will see below, our relationships with each other are intimately connected to our geographical placement. But in the following I will be concerned primarily with reestablishing a connection to our natural habitats.

settler-consciousness. As Grant makes clear in the epigraph above, the gods here are not our gods. These writers all, in their own ways, suggest that we are still learning how to be here, to use a phrase made popular by Canadian eco-poet Tim Lilburn. Lilburn, for example, titles a book of his essays *Living in the World as if it Were Home*, and would suggest that we have not yet learned how to do this in the Canadian landscape.<sup>3</sup>

In these first two chapters, one of my purposes is simply to open a conversation between the various schools of thinkers which I am engaging. While they are pursuing related ideas, many of them seem to be doing so in ignorance of each other. For example, the tension between the exilic theologians' and agrarians' respective visions is stark, and I am surprised to find little reference to one another in their work. I present their two visions side by side in an attempt to show how the need for movement and the need for staying put temper each other. Additionally, I find it helpful to consider these more generic visions in relation to the specific discourse around place being pursued in Canadian literature. This latter discourse is for the most part a-religious, and it was illuminating to introduce into it the reflections of religiously minded thinkers who are also concerned with the human being's relationship with place.

If it is true that North Americans have an ambiguous and strained relationship with their adopted place, it is partly because our inherited

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<sup>3</sup> Tim Lilburn, *Living in the World as if it Were Home* (Dunvegan, ON: Comorant Books Inc., 1999).

traditions are often ambivalent about that relationship as well, an ambivalence I explore in chapter three, which engages the problem of place and belonging from a more theoretical perspective. Recognizing that our contemporary alienation from the natural world has roots in many of the Western intellectual tradition's foundational assumptions, I explore how the importance of place has been undermined by Western philosophy and Christian theology in the third chapter's first and second sections, respectively. But this ambivalence has begun to be challenged in many different disciplines in recent decades, and in the final section of chapter three I explore a number of Christian writers who advocate for the reclamation of a "sense of place" through an attention to those parts of the Christian tradition that do, in fact, recognize the importance of place in human life. I summarize the main arguments these writers put forward, because I believe that crafting a theology of place will be an essential part of learning how to live well as Christians in a colonial context such as Canada's.

The project ends with a brief reflection on the possible directions it could be expanded into, and questions it leaves unanswered. I suggest that a more comprehensive framing of settler-consciousness is required, especially as to how it differs from what I call an immigrant-consciousness. I suggest that an examination of the Indigenous spiritualities of Canada, which do serve to root in place those who practice them, would be relevant. A study of Mennonites' (and other religious farming communities') sense of land and place would be helpful. And lastly, a project that explores how Christian

doctrines of revelation could help us develop a sense of how the human being can relate to land, which, like revelation, is extra-linguistic, wholly other, and yet still meaningful. These topics do not belong to my present discussion, but they are certainly related and relevant.

My guiding assumption in much of what follows, though it may not always be explicit, is that the meaning of North America for Christianity has not yet been properly theorized, at least not from a post-colonial perspective. Christians can no longer imagine themselves as arrived in another Promised Land, or as missionaries delivering truth and civilization to the ignorant and backward. The post-colonial turn in intellectual discourse challenges these kinds of narratives. What, then, is the meaning of this continent for Christians, if it is not to be claimed gloriously in the name of their God? Why are they here, how ought they to be here, and how can they share this place well with others? An attention to the ways Christianity and the Bible relate to land and place, for good and ill, as well as an attention to the experiences of settlers and colonials and the nature of this awe-inspiring continent, will lay the groundwork for responding to these questions, though I do not purport to answer them here, not least because I cannot, as an individual, speak for the faith as a whole.

## **CHAPTER ONE – EXILE AND ITS INTERPRETERS**

The Babylonian Exile of 597 and 586 BCE have long functioned as organizing metaphors for Jewish and Christian communities alike. The loss of land, and life away from an imagined home, is at the heart of Jewish experience especially. In this chapter I trace a recent instantiation of this focus on the exile as a paradigmatic event, the meaning of which is profoundly relevant for contemporary thought and praxis. In section one I explore the new understandings of the exilic period that have developed over the last half-century or so, especially how the exile has come to be considered a key catalyst for the production of the Hebrew Bible and Jewish culture. In section two I then engage recent and contemporary writers who want to reclaim an “exilic theology” for the present, a theology that interprets the exile not just as a significant historical event, but as a positive model for how we ought to exist today. The Babylonian Exile is no longer regarded as an end, but as a beginning. As a result it has become for many a functional metaphor that articulates how we might move forward two and a half millennia later.

### **The Hebrew Bible: Making Sense of Exile**

Recent scholars have increasingly regarded the final form of the Hebrew Bible as a product of and reaction to the exile of 597 and 586 BCE. This is not

to deny that it contains materials older than this, as well as some materials from after the Restoration, for certainly it does. But one key impetus for the Bible's composition was the crisis of the early sixth century, and the older materials have been included in light of this crisis, redacted and reinterpreted in response to the exile.<sup>4</sup> In this section I consider how certain of the biblical texts have come to be regarded in this way, and how the exile is now seen as a period of "enormous literary generativity," in which "a variety of daring articulations of faith were undertaken,"<sup>5</sup> and which is the "dominant and shaping event of the entire Old Testament."<sup>6</sup>

First we should note that this assessment of the exilic period represents a reevaluation of an earlier perspective, one that considered the pre-monarchical and monarchical periods to be normative, and the exilic and post-exilic ones to be periods of decline, both religiously and creatively. Religiously, the exile had been represented as a turning point at which Israelite religion began to deteriorate into an empty ritualism upheld by the priestly school in Babylon. Critics ascribed to the exile a newly heightened concern for cult and law, as opposed to the "purer" concern for prophetic morality that supposedly defined Israelite religion under the monarchy.<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that this model of decline, often associated with the nineteenth century work of Julius Wellhausen, was undergirded by Christian

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 74-78.

<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 75.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 4-6.

notions of supersessionism that have now fallen out of favour in many circles.<sup>8</sup> Literarily, as well, the monarchy had been represented as a more creative age than the exilic one, with the sixth century prophets essentially repeating what had already been stated by those who came before them.<sup>9</sup> To speak positively of the exilic period, as Brueggemann's appraisal quoted above does, and to recognize its impact on the entire Old Testament, thus represents a shift to a new perspective, one which my present work aims to inhabit.

Two important and oft-cited works that helped establish this perspective are Peter Ackroyd's *Exile and Restoration: A Study of Hebrew Thought of the Sixth Century B.C.* and Ralph W. Klein's *Israel in Exile: A Theological Interpretation*. The approach adopted by both these works was to analyze separately the different schools or traditions thought to be operative during the exile, and show how they resulted from the Israelites' historical situation. They sought to show how these theological and literary traditions responded to the exile, and how they guided the Israelites through their crisis. These traditions included the Deuteronomistic and priestly schools, who together were responsible for much of the material from Genesis through to II Kings, the Jeremian community, and those responsible for the books of Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah, among others. The conclusion Ackroyd and Klein both reach is that the shock of exile has left its trace in all the traditions they consider. All of them can be considered in some way to be

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<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 12-13

<sup>9</sup> Ackroyd, *Exile*, 3.

interpreting or responding to the historical disasters of 597/586. I

summarize these ideas, among others, below.

*Deuteronomistic History* – The Deuteronomistic History consists of the books Deuteronomy through to II Kings. It is thought to have been drawn together during the exile, and in Palestine.<sup>10</sup> The content of the work is Israel's history from its entry into and conquest of the promised land to its exile. Martin Noth, who was the first to suggest that the work formed a distinct literary unit, believed that a single author or redactor produced it by gathering various older historical materials into a chronological narrative, sometime in the mid-sixth century.<sup>11</sup> The Deuteronomistic History (DH) presented the exile as Israel's divinely mandated punishment for not fulfilling the laws which Yahweh gave Israel on the occasion of its entry into the land.<sup>12</sup> The work functions almost as a catalogue of Israel's repeated failures to live up to the religious ideals set out by Moses at the beginning of the work (in Deuteronomy). While Josiah and David are presented as pious, nearly every other king is said to have done "evil in the eyes of Yahweh." This lengthy account of Israel's misdeeds functions as a justification of God's action against Israel in the exile. It is an explanation of why the tragedy unfolded. Ackroyd has called the whole of DH a kind of "confessional statement," one

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<sup>10</sup> Ackroyd, *Exile*, 64-67.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 79-83. Originally published in 1943.

<sup>12</sup> Ralph Klein, *Israel in Exile: A Theological Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 23-38.



that faithfully acknowledges the justice of exile.<sup>13</sup> The Deuteronomistic History is an act of literary explanation, a rationalization and acceptance of the events of the sixth century.

Smith-Christopher has extended these ideas. By engaging various post-colonial theorists and sociologists, who argue that the construction of historical narratives is a common way displaced people and communities suffering trauma cope with their circumstance, he shows that the production of the Deuteronomistic History can be understood in this way as well.<sup>14</sup>

Hilde Nelson calls this narrative process an exercise in “repairing identities,”<sup>15</sup> and this is precisely what Smith-Christopher thinks is going on in the Deuteronomistic History. He writes that “while some would consider the Deuteronomistic Historian’s moralism with regard to Israel’s past to verge on being destructive, I would argue that it serves a crucial purpose in redefining identity.”<sup>16</sup> Read in this way, DH is not only a theodicy designed to defend God in the face of the exile, but also a therapeutic exercise for the community that accepted it as normative. In both cases, it is clear that the Deuteronomistic History (though it makes use of older materials) was developed in reaction to the exile.

*Priestly Work* – The priestly work, or P, is another compilation consisting of new and old materials that was put together during the exile,

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<sup>13</sup> Ackroyd, *Exile*, 78.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 79-80 and 105-108.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, 106.

<sup>16</sup> Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, 108.

though, in contrast to the Deuteronomistic History, P is thought to have originated in Babylon.<sup>17</sup> The Priestly Work is found in the first four books of the Pentateuch. While voices other than P's are discernible in these books it was the priestly school that was responsible for gathering and editing these materials, so it is appropriate to seek in this school the meaning and motivation behind the presentation of these texts.<sup>18</sup> (The Priestly Work is much like the Deuteronomistic History in this way.)

One of P's main concerns is ritual purity and the right ordering of the cult, which is why it is assumed to have been produced by priestly circles and has thus received its name. As I noted above, Christian writers of the past have used this focus to denounce the developments of exilic religion as retrograde. But Klein presents a more sympathetic portrait. To him, the new focus on ritual reflects a community that, newly made marginal, is trying to maintain its identity in the midst of a larger, dominant culture (Babylon). The P creation story (Gen 1:1 – 2:4a,) with its climax in the Sabbath, indicates the high importance Sabbath would have had as a confessional act in Babylon, one which would mark the Jews as separate from their neighbours.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Genesis 17 is thought to be a creation of P, and it functions in the same way; circumcision would have taken on new significance as a method of maintaining identity in Babylon.<sup>20</sup> Smith-Christopher concurs with this

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<sup>17</sup> Ackroyd, *Exile*, 84-85.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Smith-Christopher, *Religion of the Landless* (Indiana: Meyer-Stone Books, 1989), 144.

<sup>19</sup> Klein, *Israel in Exile*, 126.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, 135-138.

analysis of the P legal texts, adding to the discussion a sociological analysis of how such ritual has been observed in other, modern, displaced communities.<sup>21</sup> The laws have also been understood as a program for Israel's regaining of God's trust and love,<sup>22</sup> and both Ackroyd and Klein note P's focus on God's promises in the former's narrative texts, and read this as a hopeful response to exile.<sup>23</sup> Klein writes, "P ends his narrative [the conclusion of Numbers] with old Israel on the verge of the land and full of hope, and that is *where* and *how* he wanted his audience to understand themselves as well."<sup>24</sup> The path to restoration is still open, in other words; P wants to suggest that Israel can still be holy. P responds to the realities of exile by focusing on ritual and cult in order to maintain a Jewish identity in Babylon, but also by making a gesture of hope, one which sees ritual and law as a way out of the crisis, and a return to holiness and perhaps even the Land.

*Exilic Prophecy* – That Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Deutero-Isaiah are products of the exile is more obvious than it was with DH and P, and I therefore do not mean to linger on them. All three reference the exile directly, and articulate a position in response to it. Like DH, they interpret the events of 597/586 as divinely warranted because of Israel's religious failures and sins. Like P, they reveal a certain hopefulness, with Ezekiel (40-48) and Deutero-Isaiah explicitly imagining a return to the land. Jeremiah, too, expresses hope (32:36-44, for example). Though Jeremiah also displays a

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<sup>21</sup> Smith-Christopher, *Religion of the Landless*, 144-145.

<sup>22</sup> Ackroyd, *Exile*, 90-91 and 98-102

<sup>23</sup> Ackroyd, *Exile*, 93-93 and Klein, *Israel in Exile*, 140, for example.

<sup>24</sup> Klein, *Israel in Exile*, 148

certain realism, advising the exiles to put down roots in Babylon, for no restoration is imminent, in his famous letter in Chapter 29. The prophets of the exile all meditate on the meaning of the events they have lived through, and attempt to identify an explanation, but also a way forward, a hopefulness.

One final note on how the Old Testament has come to be thought of as a text situated in the exile, and articulating responses to it. Epp Weaver, following the sociological method of exilic biblical interpretation that Smith-Christopher helped to establish, has recognized how common it is for displaced communities (whether their displacement be physical or cultural) to turn to text as a place of dwelling, a security and fixity in times of trauma. He cites Adorno, who “looked to the text, to literary production, for new dwelling,”<sup>25</sup> and Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, whose assertion that he has “a country of words” suggests that “return from exile ... will be textual rather than physical.”<sup>26</sup> Smith-Christopher has also noted the tendency of minorities in exile to produce new folkloric literatures,<sup>27</sup> which he believes illuminates the Joseph, Daniel, Esther narratives.<sup>28</sup> It is thus not only the content of the exilic material that is of interest to us. The very act of writing, editing, and reading appears to take on new significance in exilic situations like that of Israel in the sixth century. The Bible’s very compiling can be understood as a response to exile.

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<sup>25</sup> Alain Epp Weaver, *States of Exile* (Waterloo: Herald Press, 2008), 47.

<sup>26</sup> Epp Weaver, *States of Exile*, 41.

<sup>27</sup> Smith-Christopher, *Religion of the Landless*, 84-88.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, 153-164.

As Brueggemann asserts, the sixth century certainly was a profoundly creative era for the Israelites. Not only were new literary works produced (the exilic prophetic books), but older ones took on new significance in response to the Israelites' defeat, and were redacted into new works (DH and P). Much of the Old Testament should be placed in the historical/cultural matrix of Israel's exile, and needs to be understood in relation to it.

### **Light For Our Exile?**

In a concluding chapter called "Light For Our Exile," Klein reflects on some of the resonances between the faith situation during the Babylonian exile and our own contemporary circumstance. He writes that we too have experienced a long history of idolatry, that we too have witnessed the collapse of our culture's organizing principles in recent decades, and he urges us to take inspiration from the prophets and other exilic biblical materials.<sup>29</sup>

But Klein's was only a short reflection; in the work of Walter Brueggemann we find a more persistent and thorough attempt to think through the similarities that obtain between the Israelites' and our own exiles. And while Brueggemann presents the exile as a descriptive analogue to our own times, other thinkers like Daniel Smith-Christopher and Alain Epp Weaver, developing especially the work of John Howard Yoder, have begun to see it as a paradigm worth pursuing. They describe the exile prescriptively, in other words, treating it as a model for how the people of

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<sup>29</sup> Klein, *Israel in Exile*, 149-154.

God ought to be in the world. In this section I explore this body of work, showing how the revised opinions about the religious and literary impact of the Babylonian Exile I presented above have been accompanied by a revised evaluation of exilic existence more generally, one characterized by new affirmations of exile and diaspora as positive models of political being.

In books such as *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles*, and, more recently, *Out of Babylon*, Brueggemann has repeatedly argued that the portrait of exile in the Hebrew Bible has much in common with contemporary Christian experience (he focuses on Christianity in America). Just as the Jews in Babylon would have lived amid a culture that denied their religious vision and affirmed a foreign one, Brueggemann claims that “Christians find themselves increasingly at odds with the dominant values of consumer capitalism and its supportive military patriotism; there is no easy way to hold together core faith claims and the social realities around us.”<sup>30</sup> As religious discourse becomes more and more discredited and marginalized, the Christian begins to identify as a cultural exile, in opposition to the values that operate in the wider world. Furthermore, today’s Christian has also experienced, along with her secular neighbours, a destabilizing collapse of Enlightenment modes of thought that has left her feeling further displaced.<sup>31</sup> Brueggemann’s main argument is that “the loss of the authority of the dynasty and temple in Jerusalem is analogous

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<sup>30</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>31</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 5-6.

to the loss of certainty, dominance, and legitimacy in our own time.”<sup>32</sup> We are, Brueggemann believes, *displaced* people, just as the early Jews were.

Brueggemann’s analysis is pastorally motivated – his work aims to show how the biblical presentation and response to the exile can become a resource for today’s Christians to help them live through their own version of exile.<sup>33</sup> Thus we find him encouraging us to emulate the three great prophets of the exile, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Deutero-Isaiah: Jeremiah in his honest grieving, Ezekiel in his ritualism which makes present a God who appears to have departed, and Deutero-Isaiah in his preservation of memory and tradition, combatting the amnesia which can threaten communities in exile.<sup>34</sup> He encourages meditation on the genealogies to reclaim a sense of rootedness.<sup>35</sup> Most of all, he sees the Jewish struggle to maintain a coherent identity as inspirational to Christians, who today are tasked with nurturing their own counter-identity, and with “the assertion of a deep, definitional freedom from the pathologies, coercions, and seductions that govern our society.”<sup>36</sup>

Brueggemann also maps the earlier periods of American history in terms of Israel’s pre-exilic experience, to show again how American

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<sup>32</sup> Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 6. We should remember, though, that this loss of legitimacy, like Israel’s, is not at all undeserved.

<sup>33</sup> I suspect Brueggemann may be guilty of anachronism in his portrayal of the Hebrew prophets as akin to Christian pastors, but this does not discredit his presentation of the similarity in situation.

<sup>34</sup> Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 131-133 (this is a summary – see individual chapters for Brueggemann’s in depth discussion).

<sup>35</sup> Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home*, 5-6.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, 12.

Christians have arrived at their own version of the exile. He notes that Israel's narrative, which tells of a sojourning people's promise of land, then their life in it under a confessional government, and their ultimate loss of sovereignty due to political and religious failings, parallels the American journey. The latter begins with a promise of manifest destiny, continues as Imperial presence legitimated by religion (a presence that generally fails to realize the ethical and ritual demands of that religion) and is now beginning to crumble, along with the ideologies that supported it.<sup>37</sup> Again, he rehearses this history so he can then suggest Israel as a model for how to meet the challenges of exile, emphasizing the need for memory, criticism of empire, hope, and other "disciplines of readiness" that exilic Judaism displayed in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>38</sup>

Brueggemann reads the Bible as the story of a minority population maintaining its vision of life and the world amidst a dominating culture that denied that vision. He diagnoses contemporary Christian existence in similar terms, and thus reads the Bible as a trove of resources for present day Christianity, especially its expression in America.

But unlike the writers I will examine below, Brueggemann is not so quick to affirm the possibility of exile as a positive space. In fact he is much more likely to refer to it as a crisis that needs resolving. He opens his 1977 book *The Land* by noting that "the sense of being lost, displaced, and

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, 110-114.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, 115-134.



homeless is pervasive in contemporary culture,” and that rootlessness is one of the most pressing social crises of our day.<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, John Howard Yoder, who was developing an exilic theology close to when Brueggemann was developing his own, interprets exile in a different light. For him, exile is the proper place for the people of God, a situation to be met with affirmation. In an essay from 1973, Yoder described Exodus and Exile as “two faces of liberation,” two opposing models of how Christians should organize themselves politically and socially.<sup>40</sup> Yoder’s essay expressed a concern with the rise of liberation language in the theological culture of his day, and its attendant focus on the Exodus as the dominant image and paradigm in the Bible. Yoder critiqued the way that Exodus was being trumpeted as the core theme in the Bible, and how theologians, especially those associated with the liberation movement in Latin America, were using this vision to promote only a certain kind of political emancipation, one predicated on a Western sense of nationhood as the highest expression of a people’s identity and freedom. He argues that this is biblically selective, since there are many themes other than Exodus in the Bible, that it reflects theological pandering to the secular idioms in vogue at the time, and that the liberation movement itself was a new form of “cultural colonialism” which imposed “upon oppressed peoples yet another no less alien, no less self-righteous, no less violent form of minority rule in the name

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<sup>39</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 1-4.

<sup>40</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Exodus and Exile: Two Faces of Liberation,” in *Cross Currents*, Fall 1973, 297-309.

of a Marxist or a nationalist vision of independence.”<sup>41</sup> Lastly, for Yoder liberation theology’s appropriation of the Exodus motif was actually dishonest and incoherent, since the Exodus was a *going out* of Egypt, not the violent *taking control* that revolutionaries advocated for in Latin America.<sup>42</sup>

In response Yoder puts Exile forward instead of Exodus as the proper model of religious peoplehood. And this is not just a program for our time, he would suggest, but the very argument the Bible makes:

Israel’s experience with trying Kingship and even empire, and ultimately abandoning them, is part of the lesson of the biblical witness; exile and the abandoning of nationhood as the form of peoplehood are prophetically interpreted as the way of JHWH. Ezra and Nehemiah reestablish the community precisely without national sovereignty.

Most relevant to the “oppressed people” theme, and most in tension with the juxtaposition of exodus language with modern guerilla theology, is the fact that over against the paradigm of leaving Egypt and destroying Pharaoh on the way we find in the Old Testament, more often, another model of how to live under a pagan oppressor. It is the way of Diaspora.<sup>43</sup>

Yoder’s claim is that liberation language, and the privileging of Exodus that goes with it, is undergirded by a violent form of nationalism that the Bible expressly denies. The Exodus is a precursor to Israel’s life as a sovereign monarchy, and the Bible, as was shown in the above, explicitly relates this history as a failure. For Yoder, Exile was a more fruitful metaphor, and indeed the one that the Bible itself affirmed.

In other essays, collected posthumously in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, Yoder further developed his sense of *galut*, or dispersion,

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<sup>41</sup> Yoder, “Exodus and Exile,” 298.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, 300.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, 306.

(diaspora, exile) as a divinely given vocation.<sup>44</sup> He interprets this vocation in a handful of ways, always using the exile as grounding metaphor. Most importantly, he reads it as a call to pacifism, a rejection of political power, and a missionary attitude that, in the words of Jeremiah (29:7) “seeks the welfare of the city” where Israel finds itself. This is a favourite verse of Yoder’s, and he quotes it often, in order to argue that according to God’s plan exile “is not a hiatus, after which normality will resume,” but the proper “calling of the Jewish faith community.”<sup>45</sup> Placed among the nations, the Jews were meant to proclaim God by living faithfully in the midst of idolatry.

Yoder reads early Christianity as heavily indebted to this original vision of diaspora ethics, which rejects kingship, power, and violence. He considers subsequent Christian history, starting with Constantine, to be an abandoning of it. He can thus write, rather provocatively, that it is the Jews of the diaspora who have most fully followed Jesus throughout most of history, because, until 1948 at least, it has been they that have lived without any political power, and have cultivated a distinct identity amidst the many Babylons of history.<sup>46</sup>

It is clear that Yoder’s normative reading of exile is related to his pacifist ethics and anti-nationalist politics. It also bears on his ecclesiology. He compares the Protestant free-churches to Rabbinic Judaism’s

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<sup>44</sup> See especially, John Howard Yoder, “On Not Being in Charge,” in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* ed. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 168-180 and “See How They Go with Their Faces to the Sun,” in *ibid.*, 183-204 and “Jesus the Jewish Pacifist” in *ibid.*, 69-92.

<sup>45</sup> Yoder, *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 183.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, 81-82.

organizational structures, and argues that these denominations (Anabaptists and Mennonites, for example) have finally realized again for Christianity the original Jewish vision of a diaspora ethics: "Every foreign land could be their home, yet every homeland remained to them foreign."<sup>47</sup> For him, the free church movement has recovered the Jewish roots of Christianity.

Much of Yoder's work in the *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* touches on themes we are already familiar with, including Babylon as an intense centre of cultural and literary production, and text as an instrument for the maintenance of identity, as well as a space to inhabit imaginatively in the stead of land and temple. His unique contribution, though, was to suggest that the biblical witness, along with its interpretation in Rabbinic Judaism and the earliest Christian communities, actually affirms exile as a positive mode of communal existence. He reads exile as a rejection of nationalism as the only coherent model of peoplehood, as a rejection of violence, and as a refusal to assimilate.

Other writers have taken up Yoder's project in recent years. (This is not surprising, especially given the post-nationalist turn that critical discourse has taken in disciplines other than theology.<sup>48</sup>) Foremost among these writers are two I have already discussed, Daniel Smith-Christopher and Alain Epp Weaver, and two I have not, Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin. Smith-Christopher's 1989 book *Religion of the Landless* offered a sociological study of the Babylonian exile. In it he made use of twentieth century observations

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<sup>47</sup> Yoder, *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 109.

<sup>48</sup> Smith-Christopher, *Biblical Theology of Exile*, 15-21.

of displaced people and communities in stress to throw light on the Israelite experience and its articulation in the Bible. He shows how the scriptural depiction of Israelite life matches many patterns of resistance and coping observed more recently. And in a concluding chapter he engages Yoder's claims directly, agreeing that the exodus/liberation model is problematic, and that a "theology of exile" will be the proper way to follow Christ into the future.<sup>49</sup>

Smith-Christopher's more recent book, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (2002), continues the approach he laid out in his first. He explores ways in which the exile inspired and left its mark on much of the Hebrew Bible, even extending his analysis to texts not always associated with the period, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, for example.<sup>50</sup> Most importantly, he renews his commitment to an exilic theology, writing that it "promises to be the most provocative, creative, and helpful set of ideas that modern Christians can derive from the ancient Hebrews' religious reflections on their experiences."<sup>51</sup> As with Yoder, for Smith-Christopher this means a rejection of the nation state: "Diasporic theology challenges the virtual capitulation to the normative status of nationalism as the only viable context for Christian theology and Christian social existence."<sup>52</sup>

Alain Epp Weaver's book *States of Exile* (2008) is another example of this commitment to exilic theologies. A Mennonite, many of Epp Weaver's

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<sup>49</sup> Smith-Christopher, *Religion of the Landless*, 201-215.

<sup>50</sup> Smith-Christopher, *Biblical Theology of Exile*, 163-189.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, 8.

concerns overlap with those of Yoder's, indeed much of his book deals with Yoder's thought directly. More than Yoder, though, Epp Weaver focuses on the implications of an exilic theology for Palestine/Israel, and situates his discussion within a post-Zionist critique of Israeli nationhood. Through a reading of the Palestinian/American critic Edward Said, Epp Weaver emphasizes the painful realities of Palestinian exile, an exile of one people caused by the supposed return from exile of another.<sup>53</sup> Said's warning against the romanticizing of exile, and the attendant minimizing of its real, lived, consequences is often quoted, but Epp Weaver explains that even Said saw positive elements to exile. It is, Said wrote, the proper place for intellectual critique, a place from which the closed binary of home and exile, landed- and landlessness, a binary which so often lead to violence, can be overcome, in favour of a sustained tension between home and away.<sup>54</sup> Epp Weaver's book, as the juxtaposition in his title suggests, seeks to articulate and defend this tension, refusing the "root opposition of exile to homeland."<sup>55</sup> To this end he quotes Gerald Schlabach, who contends that "Christians can live rightly in the land that God gives only if they sustain a tension with landedness itself."<sup>56</sup> Epp Weaver goes on to advocate for the cultivation of a "diaspora consciousness in the land," and a notion of landedness that manages to express itself in terms other than that of the nation state.<sup>57</sup> This,

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<sup>53</sup> Epp Weaver, *States of Exile*, 41-49.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, 46-49.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, 50.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 50.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, 60-64.

he believes, offers a way forward for Israel/Palestine, one which will allow both peoples to inhabit the land peacefully.<sup>58</sup>

With his vision of diaspora consciousness within the land, Epp Weaver was developing ideas put forward by Daniel Boyarin, who had already argued for the critical concept of “diasporized states.”<sup>59</sup> I turn now to the work of Daniel Boyarin, and his brother Jonathan, the only thinkers engaged thus far who are themselves Jewish. An essay authored jointly by the brothers in 1993, “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity,” focused on Jewish methods of identity formation in diaspora.<sup>60</sup> Beginning by noting that group identity has been traditionally constructed by reference to either geography or genealogy, and that the latter has been stigmatized because of its apparent essentialism and racism,<sup>61</sup> one of the Boyarins’ goals in their essay was to “articulate a notion of Jewish identity that recuperates its genealogical moment – family, history, memory, and practice – while it problematizes claims to autochthony and indigenesness as the material base of Jewish identity.”<sup>62</sup> The Boyarins note that the Jews profess an ancestry of homelessness in the Tanak (there is no myth of autochthony, the Israelites clearly come to Canaan from away), and they move on to argue that this is one of the geniuses of Judaism, that it “calls into question the idea that

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, 55-60.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, 60.

<sup>60</sup> Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity,” in *Critical Inquiry*, Summer 1993, 693-725.

<sup>61</sup> Boyarin and Boyarin, “Diaspora,” 693-694.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, 714.

a people must have a land in order to be a people.”<sup>63</sup> It is true that the history of Judaism shows that Jews can be Jews anywhere. Their identity, while certainly implicated with an imagined or remembered promised land, is not a function of where they actually live in the present, or what land they may (or may not) have a right to now.

This is an inspiring achievement for the Boyarins, just as it is for the others I discussed above. It is inspiring because the Boyarins consider autochthony “one of the most potent and dangerous myths” operative in world history.<sup>64</sup> They believe that constructions of group identity that are founded upon geographical proximity are no less dangerous than other ruthlessly ethnic ones, because they lead to forms of nationalism that are inherently intolerant. These intolerances are exactly what a diaspora consciousness challenges. As they write in a more recent book:

A brief glance at a globe confirms the truism at the heart of critical geography, that territorialist nation-statism is the hegemonic modern mode of polity. As the very term “state” implies, nation-statism as a global and universal logic seeks to fix ethnically (genealogically and culturally) homogeneous human groups within nonoverlapping, neatly bounded, and permanent geographical boundaries. It is this neat mapping of nations onto nonoverlapping and unique global spaces that the powers of diaspora confront.<sup>65</sup>

In their rejection of myths of autochthony, then, the Boyarins also reject the legitimacy of nation-states as a way of organizing people and peoplehood.

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<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, 718.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, 699.

<sup>65</sup> Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 9.



Applied to their own situation as Jews, this also means a rejection of Zionism. “Zionism itself is predicated on a myth of autochthony.”<sup>66</sup>

Jewish history thus witnesses not only to the possibility of diasporic identity for the Boyarins, but to its desirability as well, since they theorize diaspora as essentially non-violent. They write of the “profound disjuncture between Zionism and traditional Jewish diaspora identity,”<sup>67</sup> suggesting that Zionist calls to return to the Land are a “subversion of Jewish culture and not its culmination.”<sup>68</sup> Instead, they propose, like our other thinkers above, “a privileging of Diaspora” and the “renunciation of sovereignty.”<sup>69</sup> They put forward diaspora as “a theoretical and historical model to replace national self-determination.”<sup>70</sup>

In *Powers of Diaspora* (2002) the Boyarins teamed up again to show how the Jewish experience of diaspora can guide and inspire other cultures facing similar situations. This time their focus is more cultural than political. Their arguments for diaspora portray it as a space that opens up new sources of energy and cultural vibrancy; the book explores, for example, the subversively powerful literatures and cultural forms that life in diaspora makes possible. Importantly, in this book they also acknowledge that Jews do not have some sort of monopoly on exile, only that their millennia long

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<sup>66</sup> Boyarin and Boyarin, “Diaspora,” 701.

<sup>67</sup> Boyarin and Boyarin *Powers of Diaspora*, 15.

<sup>68</sup> Boyarin and Boyarin, “Diaspora,” 712.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, 723.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, 711.

meditation on it has produced insights not found easily elsewhere.<sup>71</sup> In *Powers of Diaspora* the Boyarin brothers continued their defense of diaspora as a positive space, and reiterated that identity need not be a function of geographical location.

We see, then, that a variety of thinkers have begun to engage exile and diaspora as critical concepts with great potential. I surveyed above some of those who are doing so within explicitly religious horizons, though it should be noted that it is a concern for thinkers operating without theological commitments as well. For both, an attention to the Jewish experience of diaspora is and will continue to be crucial.

### **Conclusion**

I will not be so bold as to suggest a direct causal link (in either direction) between the two phenomena I have observed above, the reevaluation of the Babylonian Exile's impact on the community that experienced it and the reevaluation of exile as a model of political being for our own time, but it is interesting to note the near simultaneity in thinking. Scholars seem to have recognized the viability of exile as a form of social organization at once in ancient Israel and modernity. The writers I have examined in this chapter believe that we no longer need to regard exile and landlessness as aberrations in need of a resolution, at least not a resolution that would involve sending peoples back to their supposed "homelands" instead of

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<sup>71</sup> Boyarin and Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora*, 10-11.

integrating them and welcoming them wherever they are. Rather, they believe life in diaspora may actually affect our relations with each other and the land positively, and allow for a more flourishing expression of identity, as it so clearly did for the first Jews in Babylon.

## CHAPTER TWO – ROOTS AND COLONIES

### The Agrarian Vision

The exilic theologians examined in chapter one are inspired by the portrait of exile found in the Hebrew Bible, as well as the long history of Jewish diaspora which is that exile's legacy. They put forward exile and diaspora as fruitful models for how communities should imagine themselves today. Their primary motivation for this is a desire to resist nationalist ideologies that make unfounded claims to territorial sovereignty; people ought to relinquish such claims, they believe. Insofar as these theorists seek a political vision that transcends nationalism, with its attendant violence and exclusive territorial claims, I am in fact very sympathetic with their project. Now, however, I wish to listen to another group of voices which act as a counterpoint to this vision of exilic theologies. They are not in direct conflict or opposition with those explored above, but they do help to highlight an important tension – that between the diaspora consciousness promoted by the exilic theologians and something we might call an indigenous consciousness – the latter being, we shall see, essential to various modes of ecological and agrarian thought. We might say that while the exilic theologians refused to claim territory, those I now turn to go one step further, desiring not only this, but to actually *be claimed* by territory. I showed above how the Boyarins argue that peoplehood can be considered a function of generation, history, memory, and practice, and not primarily one of geography. I want to suggest in this section that this ignores the very real way that place shapes a people, and the way

community is rooted geographically. It also ignores the huge importance many peoples' attachment to place has for them. "To be rooted," Simone Weil famously wrote, "is perhaps the most important and least recognized needs of the human soul."<sup>72</sup> The Boyarins, as well as the exilic theologians, might not deny this; only they would argue that a person can root themselves in text, memory, and ritual. I want to add that geography is another essential source of roots.

The agrarian essays of Wendell Berry are, I think, an obvious point of departure here. Born and raised on a long-held family farm in Kentucky, Berry left the land of his childhood to pursue an education and a writing career in New York City, but then returned to his farm in adulthood and has lived there ever since, dedicated to the land and working it well so that he may leave it healthier and more fertile than it was upon his inheritance.<sup>73</sup> Berry's essays are thoroughly infused with his love of and commitment to the Kentucky countryside. His farm is the place he "loves more than any other," and he speaks almost longingly of the "intimacy the mind makes with the place it awakens in."<sup>74</sup> His work is dotted with minute observations of the land he loves, and in this sense it is an ode to particularity, to Berry's own place in the world and the meaning it has for him.

But his work also makes the wider claim that everyone needs such a place, especially considering the ecological havoc wrought by our

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<sup>72</sup> Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind*, trans. A.F. Wills (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Inc., 1987), 41.

<sup>73</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace* (California: Counterpoint, 2002), 3-14.

<sup>74</sup> Berry, *Art of the Commonplace*, 6-7.

contemporary placelessness. In a culture ever more obsessed with mobility, Berry reaffirms the value of staying put, of residing permanently, and, to use the central metaphor of this section, the importance of growing roots.<sup>75</sup>

Persistence in place is especially valuable in Berry's agrarian vision, because it is only through this persistence that he believes a community can come to know a land well enough to farm it responsibly. "A healthy culture holds preserving knowledge *in place* for a *long* time. That is, the essential wisdom [of good farming] accumulates in the community much as fertility builds in the soil."<sup>76</sup> Berry believes that the kind of connection to place that good farming requires can only develop over generations of presence. Only this presence and commitment can foster a knowledge of the land and its needs, as well as a love for it, and a willingness to care for it. This is hugely important for Berry, because "human continuity is virtually synonymous with good farming,"<sup>77</sup> and so this kind of permanence is essential to the species' continuation as well as the Earth's. A community must be rooted, committed to a piece of land throughout generations of presence if it is to be an ecologically healthy one.

Not only good agricultural practices, but more stable and more loving communities result from an attention to the land they inhabit, Berry argues. When describing the requirements for happy marriages, for example, Berry includes a commitment to place. "A marriage without a place," he writes, "has

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<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, 35-36.

<sup>76</sup> Berry, *Art of the Commonplace*, 189, Berry's emphasis.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

nothing to show for itself.”<sup>78</sup> Marriage partners need to attend to their common ground together: “A part of our definition is our common ground, and a part of it is sharing and mutually enjoying our common ground.” Importantly, Berry makes plain that by referring to common ground he does not intend to speak metaphorically, so that common ground might refer to culture and memory, a value system, or some other mechanism that binds communities together. No, he makes clear that he means “the actual ground that is shared by whatever group we may be talking about – the human race, a nation, a community, or a household.”<sup>79</sup> These former things, religion, culture, or a particular social imaginary, to use Taylor’s phrase,<sup>80</sup> may have a claim on us too, but the most immediate and inescapable force that makes communities cohere, and ultimately, love, are the demands and gifts their shared places bestow upon them.

The vision of human community put forward in Berry’s essays is one that implicates its physical context – the landscape and non-human life around it. Human community is not something superimposed on a landscape or place, capable of transport or being theorized in the abstract. It is concrete and materially rooted. In this sense, Berry is echoing claims made by one of his biggest influences, the American ecologist and conservationist Aldo Leopold. In his well-loved book *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold developed a notion of land-ethic, which (when realized) would be the extension of human

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<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, 140.

<sup>79</sup> Berry, *Art of the Common Place*, 138.

<sup>80</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

ethics to apply to our natural environments.<sup>81</sup> Leopold understood ethics to rest on the premise “that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts,” and so believed that the land-ethic would “simply [enlarge] the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.”<sup>82</sup> For Leopold, Berry, and other agrarian writers, human community cannot be imagined apart from its relationships with its natural context. This understanding of humans as members of a land-community has become a foundational idea in contemporary ecological writing: “One aspect of the shift to an ecological ethos is the rediscovery of community,” writes William Vitek in a book he edited with Wes Jackson, *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*. Berry and Leopold loom large as influences on that volume, a diverse collection of essays that share the assumption that “human communities must actively participate in a known landscape.”<sup>83</sup>

Many of the writers in this collection observe that mobility and uprootedness are actually valorized in much of contemporary culture. It is not only the religiously informed writers I looked at above who defend exile. “Numerous modern writers have applauded the condition of ‘perpetual exile’ as ethically healthy, a necessary severance from the sentimentalities of nationalism,” writes Deborah Tall in her essay, going on to examine the work

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<sup>81</sup> Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac* (UK: Oxford University Press, 1987), 202-203.

<sup>82</sup> Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 203-204.

<sup>83</sup> William Vitek, “Rediscovering the Landscape,” in *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*, ed. Wes Jackson and William Vitek (Michigan: Yale University Press, 1996), 2.



of thinkers like Harvey Cox and David Sopher before concluding that “individualism and mobility are at the core of American identity.”<sup>84</sup> Academics especially are expected to deny their loyalties to particular places, to abandon their homes and become world citizens. They are “supposed to belong to the boundless world of books and ideas and eternal truths, not the infinitely particular world of watersheds, growing seasons, and ecological niches,” writes Erik Zencey.<sup>85</sup> As a result, they “tend to think of education as little more than an organized assault on the parochial point of view, the view of the rooted ‘I.’”<sup>86</sup> Zencey argues that while education certainly is supposed to broaden one’s horizons, it also ought to strengthen one’s connection to home. But this idea is regarded as outmoded by many. There is a strong bias against the sedentary in contemporary culture, a bias which may or may not motivate the work of the exilic theologians.

It is against this bias that agrarian writers mobilize, motivated by a vision of healthier and happier human communities, but also by the recognition that our placeless culture is in many ways the cause of our present ecological crisis. Indigenous consciousness would benefit both humans and the planet, in other words. Wes Jackson, a prominent American advocate for more sustainable and ecological farming practices, maintains

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<sup>84</sup> Deborah Tall, “Dwelling: Making Peace With Space and Place,” in *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*, ed. Wes Jackson and William Vitek (Michigan: Yale University Press, 1996), 107.

<sup>85</sup> Erik Zencey, “Rootless Professors,” in *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*, ed. Wes Jackson and William Vitek (Michigan: Yale University Press, 1996), 15.

<sup>86</sup> Zencey, “Rootless Professors,” 15.

that “homecoming,” and “becoming native” to our places is an essential first step towards reestablishing responsible agriculture.<sup>87</sup> He believes, along with many others (Berry, for example), that it is our detachment from and ambivalence towards particular places that has given rise to the soil depletion and species extinction that result from industrial farming techniques.<sup>88</sup> Fostering an indigenous consciousness that values and loves our landscapes, as well as establishing viable local economies and cultures, will be one step towards renewing our planet and our communities.

The Biblical text provides support for this kind of vision, just as it also was found to support the vision of diaspora. The story of Naboth’s vineyard, for instance, can easily be interpreted as a defense of family ownership of farmland, and the ideal of local communities tilling the land themselves instead of under the administration of governments or bureaucracies.<sup>89</sup> Naboth, who refuses to relinquish his ancestral farmland, even when offered a good price by King Ahab, represents the kind of commitment to land that Wendell Berry applauds.

This is one of many examples of the Hebrew Bible’s agrarian vision that Ellen F. Davis puts forward in her book, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*. Davis’ book is an exploration of “the biblical writers’ abiding

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<sup>87</sup> Wes Jackson, *Becoming Native to This Place* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), 87-100.

<sup>88</sup> Jackson, *Becoming Native*, 1-5.

<sup>89</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 111-114.

awareness of their place,”<sup>90</sup> and the way that awareness relates to the work of contemporary agrarian writers, especially Berry. Davis senses that the Israelites’ material placement, their land and their communal life within it, shapes much of the Biblical text:

Certainly the Scriptures of ancient Israel know where they come from. They reflect the narrow and precariously balanced ecological niche that is the hill country of ancient Judah and Samaria ... The Bible as we have it could not have been written beside the irrigation canals of Babylon, or the perennially flooding Nile, any more than it could have emerged from the vast fertile plains of the North American continent. For revelation addresses the necessities of a place as well as a people. Therefore, ancient Israel’s Scripture bespeaks throughout an awareness of belonging to a place that is at once extremely fragile and infinitely precious.<sup>91</sup>

Davis is reflecting here especially on a passage from Deuteronomy (11:10-12), “For the land that you are about to enter to occupy is not like the land of Egypt,” a passage which speaks of Israel’s peculiar dependence on rain (Egypt, unlike Israel, had its fields irrigated by the Nile’s seasonal floods).

O’Donovan also notices a marked appreciation for the Israelites’ geographical situation in the Deuteronomistic voice:

Nothing could be more affecting than the loving detail in which the Deuteronomistic authors of Joshua have gathered and preserved, between the thirteenth and nineteenth chapters, the ancient boundary-descriptions of each tribal territory, together with a list of villages and towns for each. From this section of the book ... we form the most powerful impression of the bond which tied the people to the land. We are led, with the greatest geographical precision, up hills and down valleys, through tiny communities otherwise unknown to us.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 26.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Oliver O’Donovan, “The Loss of a Sense of Place,” in *Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present* by Joan Lockwood and Oliver O’Donovan (Grand Rapids Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 307-308.

Davis goes further, and perceives the influence of the land, and the concerns of small-scale farming communities, throughout the Bible. She sees this, for example, in the earlier prophets' constant attention to the soil, the expectations it makes on those who would get their livelihood from it, and the rights of subsistence farmers. She even suggests that Amos and Hosea were the first agrarians.<sup>93</sup> She also perceives an agrarian agenda in the book of Leviticus, whose food and land care laws promote a culture of "wholesome materiality," and ethical eating.<sup>94</sup> (That place and materiality are intrinsically linked will be explored in more depth below). Lastly, she argues that the Bible promotes local economies that grow their own food and support themselves.<sup>95</sup>

Most importantly for us, Davis contends that the Bible reveals a culture irremovably rooted in its land; it is meant to guide life in one particular place. "The spirituality that wrote itself into the highlands of Canaan in the Iron Age was genuinely agrarian because it reflected the characteristics and the exigencies of the place from which it emerged."<sup>96</sup>

This reference to the Iron Age reveals something significant. While Davis engages the whole Biblical text, she focuses more on the older materials, and the farming culture she holds up as an ideal is that of the 8<sup>th</sup> Century. It is not surprising that Davis would find an affirmation of

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<sup>93</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 120-138.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, 80-100.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, 106-114.

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*, 107.

rootedness and agrarianism in the older Biblical materials, from a time when Israel was still in possession of its land, while the exilic theologians would find their vision affirmed in the later exilic and post-exilic materials, which were written at a time when local farming communities had been made less viable by the world politics of Empire. Ultimately, though, I don't believe it is worth asking whether the Bible affirms one of these visions, that of the agrarians or that of the exilic theologians, any more than the other. Being the polyphonic text that it is, it is reasonable to say that the Bible affirms both. The Bible portrays a people dedicated to its place in the world, but also learning to live, and even thrive, outside of it. As such it can inspire equally those who would grow roots and those who would (or must) wander. In the next section, I examine how the Biblical narrative has helped shape the experiences of the latter (migrants and colonials, especially in North America), before turning to the specifically Canadian context, and arguing that existence as a settler Canadian should be understood as a kind of exile, and therefore can be compared profitably to the portrait of exile found in the Old Testament.

### **Colonial Exile**

The Old Testament story of the Hebrews and their land has often been called upon as a model for understanding modern colonial projects in religious terms. As Brett claims, the new world that opened up to Europeans in the early modern period has often been cast as a new Israel (indeed in some

cases the true Israel) and God's promise of land to Abraham and his progeny then comes to refer to these new territories (this promise serving to establish Christians' right of possession).<sup>97</sup> Tragically, this interpretation has also led to the identification of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, Africa, and Australia with the sinful and backwards Canaanites, thereby making them the objects of God's pronouncement in Deuteronomy 20:16 that "You [the Israelites, or, modern settlers] shall annihilate them." The early history of the Israelites, which is a history of coming from away (i.e., from Mesopotamia) and being given a land by God in which to be His people, has proven very powerful in the imaginations of Christian settlers.<sup>98</sup>

Interestingly, though, the new world does not always get identified with or compared to Israel. The Puritans, for example, did not understand their migration as an arrival in a promised land. Rather, they cast their colonial project as an "errand into the wilderness," and considered their community in New England to be a "church of the wilderness."<sup>99</sup> This was in keeping with the Puritan account of European history up until their migration, which identified Catholic Europe and the failed Reformation in England with the sinfulness of Egypt and Babylon, and imagined the migration to America as an escape into the desert wilderness that lay

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<sup>97</sup> Mark G. Brett, *Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 7-24.

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.* and Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 34.

<sup>99</sup> Avihu Zakai, *Exile and Kingdom: History and Apocalypse in the Puritan Migration to America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 198.

between Egypt and Jerusalem.<sup>100</sup> Another biblical image of wilderness that was operative in the Puritans' account of their migration was the woman who flees to the wilderness in Revelation 12:6, a flight which again was understood as an escape from Catholic Europe.<sup>101</sup>

At times, however, the Puritans' application of Old Testament categories to their own situation appears to lack the nuance of the Biblical text. Apostatizing Europe is identified as both Babylon and Egypt, for example, even though these are not perfect analogues in the Old Testament. Similarly, early Puritan minister Increase Mather refers to his church as "being in an exiled condition in this wilderness,"<sup>102</sup> seemingly conflating exile and wilderness, while the Biblical text would consider these to be two different stages on the way towards God's promised end.

Nevertheless, the Puritans are a good example of an early colonial community that did not identify North America as a promised land, but rather as a place of hardship. That said, the Puritans still held fast to a faith that their migration was providentially arranged. Mather preached, "God has led us into a wilderness, and surely it was not because the Lord hated us but because he loved us that he brought us hither into this Jeshimon."<sup>103</sup> Despite the new world's seeming desolation, and the hardship associated with life there, the Puritans sensed God's hand behind their trip across the Atlantic.

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<sup>100</sup> Zakai, *Exile and Kingdom*, 120-155.

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*, 155-206.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*, 198.

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*, 199. Jeshimon is a Biblical name that represents a wasteland or wilderness.

They were moving towards God's intended end for His people. This is a common theme among early colonials (it will appear again below when I consider the work of Susanna Moodie). Migration comes to be framed as a part of God's plan for humanity, a conviction that is reinforced by the fact that God's very first instruction to His chosen people, represented by Abraham, is to go to a new land (Gen. 12).

Groody, commenting on the "integral relationship between theology and migration," writes that "as a theological concept, migration is a universal metaphor of what it means to be human before God, to be a pilgrim people in this world ... migration describes human life in terms of a fundamental movement from God and return to God."<sup>104</sup> This deployment of migration as a metaphor for spiritual progress is not uncommon in the Christian tradition. For example, Origen, in his *Homily 27 on Numbers*, reads the Israelites' migration from Egypt into the Promised Land as a spiritual journey in addition to an earthly one.<sup>105</sup>

It is worth pausing to note how significant it is that biblical geography, and especially the Bible's place names, have come to serve as such potent symbols for non-geographical realities, especially one's relationship with God. Babylon, Egypt, and Jerusalem function as metaphorical landmarks and waypoints on the human being's spiritual journey towards God. This penchant for describing the state of one's soul using the language of

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<sup>104</sup> Daniel G. Groody, "The Spirituality of Migrants," in *Contemporary Issues of Migration and Theology*, ed. Elaine Padilla and Peter C. Phan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 141.

<sup>105</sup> Groody, "The Spirituality of Migrants," 142.



placement is very telling; I believe it reveals the human subject's intimate relationship with place, as well as her inescapable embodiment. It was from within this tradition of literally mapping the soul's pilgrimage as a journey not only of the spirit but also of the body, through space, that the first settlers were able to represent their landfall in North America as a spiritual event as much as a geographical one.

One suggestion I make in this work is that the Canadian experience of life in North America resonates better with representations of the new world as a wilderness and site of exile than those of the new world as a promised land or new Israel. European presence in North America can just as easily be cast as a sojourn in Babylon as it is an arrival in Jerusalem. Any American roadmap would lead you to think otherwise, with its New Canaans, Providences, Bethels, and Nazareths (not to mention the town of Promised Land, South Carolina). But, though I confess it may be a little discouraging for the town's inhabitants, my sense is that a Babylon, USA, or a New Egypt, Nova Scotia would not be out of keeping with the experiences of some settlers in North America (in fact, there is a Goshen, Nova Scotia). In many cases this continent has proven to be a difficult one to inhabit, and rarely has it been the land of milk and honey settlers imagined they were sailing to when they left Europe.

We saw above that Walter Brueggemann is one contemporary thinker who does compare the biblical portrait of exile to contemporary life in North America. He argues that there is an affinity between the Hebrew experience

of the Babylonian Exile (as it is depicted in the Old Testament) and the experience of contemporary Christians in America. I related Brueggemann's main reasons for thinking this, but I did not include an important negative claim he makes about his diagnosis: "exile is not primarily geographical," he writes, "but it is social, moral, cultural."<sup>106</sup> Brueggemann makes this point repeatedly, in many different works. According to Brueggemann, the contemporary Christian is in exile because of the violent capitalist and nationalist assumptions which undergird American society and which serve to alienate the Christian from that society. It is a function of how the Christian relates to the human environment around her, not the natural one. I cannot agree with this appraisal. The exile that characterizes contemporary life in North America, be it Christian or otherwise, and on either side of the border, is very much a matter of geography. If Christians feel homeless in North America, it is not only because they are increasingly excluded from public life there, but also because they, along with their secular neighbours, have a strained relationship to the physical space they inhabit, the land. In the remainder of this section, I highlight the ways that colonial life in Canada has been understood as a kind of geographical exile, a sojourn in a place often misunderstood, and made into a home only with great difficulty. To accomplish this I examine some of the robust body of Canadian literature that meditates on the meaning of place, and on the complications involved in living well in a land acquired colonially.

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<sup>106</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 2.

For most of its history, place has been one of the central concerns of Canadian literature. Northrop Frye writes that “Canadian sensibility has been profoundly disturbed not so much by ... the question ‘Who am I?’ than by some such riddle as “Where is here?””.<sup>107</sup> Margaret Atwood, in response, adds that

“Who am I?” is a question appropriate in countries where the environment, the “here,” is already well defined ... “Where is here?” is a different kind of question. It is what a man [sic] asks when he finds himself in unknown territory, and it implies several other questions. Where is this place in relation to other places? How do I find my way around in it?<sup>108</sup>

Atwood implies that one’s identity is a function of one’s place; in order to know who we are, we must first know where we are. This is consistent with the agrarian writers I looked at in the first section of this chapter, who argued that human community has to be grounded geographically. And for Atwood, as well as many other Canadian writers, Canadian identity is clouded because our relationship with our place is clouded. She describes us as “lost,” having “misplaced [our] landmarks or bearings” and in need of a new map.<sup>109</sup> This sense of displacement is given a religious overtone in the epigraph above, where George Grant writes that “when we go into the Rockies we may have the sense that gods are there. But if so, they cannot manifest themselves to us as ours. They are the gods of another race, and we cannot know them.”<sup>110</sup> And lastly Don McKay, writing as recently as 2011,

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<sup>107</sup> Quoted in Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1972), 17.

<sup>108</sup> Atwood, *Survival*, 17.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*, 18.

<sup>110</sup> George Grant, *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1969), 17.

shows that this is not an outdated concern. According to him, place is still “our shibboleth, our darling obsession.”<sup>111</sup>

One particularly stirring exploration of this theme, as well as how it relates to the practice of writing, is found in Dennis Lee’s influential essay from 1974 called “Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space.” *Cadence* is Lee’s word for that inspirational energy which visits him, and which he translates into poetry when he writes (when he writes well, that is).<sup>112</sup> What is important for us is how Lee understands cadence as locally specific: “we never encounter cadence in the abstract; it is insistently here and now,” he writes.<sup>113</sup> One’s place has a cadence, and to write well is to heed that cadence and respond to it truthfully.

Lee’s essay tells of a period of his life during which he could not access this cadence. The reason was that all of Lee’s literary techniques, all of his words, were palpably foreign, either imported from his European heritage or imitating the style of America. He had not learned to write as a Canadian. “The words I knew ... did not say my home.”<sup>114</sup> This inability to speak truthfully is, according to Lee, characteristic of the colonial experience: “Try to speak the words of your home and you will discover, if you are a colonial, that you do not know them. You are left chafing at the inarticulacy of a native

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<sup>111</sup> Don McKay, *Shell of the Tortoise* (Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press, 2011), 62.

<sup>112</sup> Dennis Lee, “Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space” in *Body Music: Essays* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1998), 3-7.

<sup>113</sup> Lee, “Cadence, Country Silence,” 9.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*, 17.

space that may not even exist. So you shut up.”<sup>115</sup> But Lee had a breakthrough. Soon enough, he found his voice. It happened when he realized that the job of the colonial writer “was not to fake a space of [his] own and write it up, but rather to speak the words of [his] spacelessness. Perhaps,” he thought, “that was home.”<sup>116</sup> The colonial’s home is precisely her homelessness, in other words. She exists in a liminal space, sensing the cadence of her country but only being able to respond to it hesitantly, or, we might even say, apophatically. It was the realization of this contradiction that led Lee to write again, finding inspiration in his own placelessness, and it resulted in one of Lee’s defining works, the long poem “Civil Elegies,” which is a lament of the loss of Canada’s culture and soul, in much the same spirit as George Grant’s similar and near contemporaneous *Lament for a Nation*.<sup>117</sup>

This coupling of the sense of homelessness with literary concerns may seem counterintuitive at first, until we remember how important text became for the exiled Hebrews, how it became an alternative place of dwelling after the geographical had been lost. Lee’s desire to *write* his homelessness might then reflect a similar response to such a loss. Furthermore, I would suggest that Lee’s literary impasse described in “Cadence, Country, Silence” is very similar to that captured in the famous lament in Psalm 137: “how shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” Both Lee and the psalmist seem to acknowledge that song and literature are

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<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*, 18.

<sup>116</sup> Lee, “Cadence, Country Silence,” 18.

<sup>117</sup> George Grant, *Lament for a Nation* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967).

situated things, and that migration, forced or otherwise, makes the old artforms untenable.

Lee is not the only example of a writer struggling to “become native” to his or her place in the world.<sup>118</sup> There is a widespread conviction that the European settler in North America has never properly learned how to live well in his or her new land. Tim Lilburn, a nature poet and essayist from Saskatchewan, writes in his book *Going Home* of the struggle he faced, upon returning to the Moosewood Sandhills to live again after a long absence, “to find a way into the good graces of this particular bit of land.”<sup>119</sup> (One is reminded of Wendell Berry’s story of return to a childhood landscape.) Lilburn writes that after moving home to Saskatchewan he “worried a single thought for nearly ten years: how to be here?”<sup>120</sup> And this question, this challenge, is framed in Lilburn’s work as a symptom of the colonial mindset.

Taking in the Regina cityscape, he reflects that

it seemed as if all of it were leaning backward from this place, as if it were caught in a gust of longing for some old country, some metropolis, wherever the action currently was believed to be. What had been built here didn’t seem to move easily in the body of the locale; this whole massive effort of civilization put together through incredible effort by European settlers and their descendants seemed tentative, seemed to have its eye on some other place, waiting for judgment; it was elsewhere.<sup>121</sup>

The settler in Canada has not learned how to accept her new landscape as home, Lilburn is suggesting. Spurred on by “late capitalism’s nomadism” and

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<sup>118</sup> Wes Jackson, *Becoming Native to this Place* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

<sup>119</sup> Tim Lilburn, *Going Home* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2008), 169-170.

<sup>120</sup> Lilburn, *Going Home*, 172.

<sup>121</sup> *ibid.*, 170.

“money’s unintended *telos* of placelessness,” she lives as if she were hovering a little off the ground.<sup>122</sup> “Descendants of European settlers have so recently embarked on the undertaking of learning to be in western North America we hardly know we’re engaged in it, [learning to be] autochthonic, learning to be spoken by the grass and the cupped hills.”<sup>123</sup>

While not a Canadian, Wendell Berry, who I quoted above, also presents North Americans’ disharmony with their environment as a particularly colonial problem. The settlers of North America, he writes,

were *placeless* people ... having left Europe far behind, they had not yet in any meaningful sense arrived in America, not yet having *devoted* themselves to any part of it in a way that would produce the intricate knowledge of it necessary to live in it without destroying it. Because they belonged to no place, it was almost inevitable that they should behave violently toward the places they came to. *We still* have not, in any meaningful way, arrived in America.<sup>124</sup>

Elsewhere Berry describes whites in America as *refugees*, refugees whose colonial agenda has been haphazard and lacking in intention or foresight.<sup>125</sup> His answer to our dilemma is simple – we must finally begin to pay attention to where we are, and what demands our place might make of us: “a man ought to study the wilderness of a place before applying to it the ways he learned in another place.”<sup>126</sup>

One is reminded of the biblical text here. In particular I think of the oracle against Damascus in Isaiah 17, where one of the charges the prophet

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<sup>122</sup> *ibid.*, 174.

<sup>123</sup> Lilburn, *Going Home*, 176-177.

<sup>124</sup> Berry, *Art of the Commonplace*, 11, Berry’s emphasis.

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*, 35.

<sup>126</sup> *ibid.*, 26.

brings against the people is that they “plant pleasant plants and set out slips of an alien god” (Isaiah 17:10, NRSV). Other translations call these plants “foreign slips,” “imported vines,” “imported seedlings,” or “exotic vines.” The prophet announces that these plants, as well as the community that sowed them, will “flee away” and be “chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind” (17:11-13, NRSV). The lesson is that whatever is not indigenous will not take root; it will be whisked away. In addition to this, we must also remember that the overarching claim God has against Israel in the Hebrew Bible is the worship of foreign gods. We might read this as an expression of a xenophobia among the early Hebrew communities, but it might also represent a more admirable concern to cultivate a lifestyle in harmony with one’s place. In any case, it appears that the community responsible for Isaiah 17 understood that the land has certain propensities and inherent possibilities, and that trying to live in one place as if you were actually in another can have disastrous results, just as Wendell Berry observes in relation to settler activity in America.

Returning to Canadian literature, this very theme of imported flora failing in a new landscape is developed in John Steffler’s book of wilderness writing, *The Grey Islands*. Steffler’s book is part narrative and part long-poem; it tells the story of a man’s retreat to a remote region of coastal Newfoundland, and is interspersed with the speaker’s intricate observations of the land and community he encounters there. *The Grey Islands* might easily be considered Canada’s answer to *Walden*, or *Tinker Creek*. At one point in



the book, the speaker, moored in solitude by the sea, begins to recognize the misguidedness of one of the projects he pushed forward as city planner in another Newfoundland community. To spruce up the main drag, he had maple trees imported from Ontario, hundreds of them, at a cost of tens of thousands of dollars. They lined the avenue by the end of October, and through the winter got buffeted by snow levels the speaker had never experienced, nor even imagined were possible. They died, and got made into furniture. The town teases the speaker, who muses that he then “started to see the logic in bareness.”<sup>127</sup> That is, the speaker, in the town where he is planner but especially when he removes himself even further into the outports, begins to appreciate the land’s own logic, and how it differs from the logic of his native Ontario. *The Grey Islands* provides yet another example from Canadian literature of a character struggling to become native to a place, or at least learn enough about it to live there well.

One key conviction shared by all these Canadian writers is that North Americans are still living out the consequences of their initial contact with the land they now inhabit. This is given a philosophical expression in “In Defense of North America,” the opening essay of George Grant’s 1969 book, *Technology and Empire*, from which the epigraph to the Introduction was taken. The essay, which is mainly a critique (in line with much of Grant’s work) of modernity’s mad drive towards technological mastery, and the ideologies of individual freedom and autonomy which undergird this drive, is

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<sup>127</sup> John Steffler, *The Grey Islands* (London ON: Brick Books, 2000), 95.

particularly interesting for us because of the way it places the European encounter with North America at the center of this ideology.

Grant observes that the colonization of North America effected a significant change in the consciousness of the settlers:

All of us who came made some break in that coming. The break was not only the giving up of the old and the settled, but the entering into the majestic continent which could not be ours in the way that the old had been. It could not be ours in the old way because the making of it ours did not go back before the beginning of conscious memory ... none of us can be called autochthonous, because in all there is some consciousness of making the land our own. It could not be ours also because the very intractability, immensity and extremes of the new land required that its meeting with mastering Europeans be a battle of subjugation.<sup>128</sup>

Two important ideas are being developed here. One, that colonial North Americans cannot profess a sense of autochthony because they remain conscious of their arrival in North America, and two, that because of the particular exigencies of settling in what seemed a hostile land, that arrival was necessarily characterized by a kind of violence towards the land (not to mention its original inhabitants). For Grant this violent encounter is the “primal” event that lies behind the rest of North American history.<sup>129</sup> Life in the early colonies seemed a battle against nature, and this battle as much as anything else has contributed to the modern understanding of humanity as “an Archimedean freedom outside nature,” one that “creatively will[s] to shape the world to [its] values.”<sup>130</sup> Grant’s critique of this philosophical liberalism, and his defense of Western traditions of contemplation and

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<sup>128</sup> Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 17.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*, 19.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*, 32.

conservativism in opposition to it, is not our especial concern at present. What I mean to highlight is only how Grant understood the colonial encounter with a new land to be implicated in the development of this liberalism. The toil demanded of the first settlers by a seemingly unrelenting, stark, and unloving landscape had served to exaggerate the “pragmatic liberalism” that Grant thought plagued Western thought for much of the twentieth century.<sup>131</sup> And now, the “victory over the land” having been accomplished, and the “conquering relation to place [having] left its mark within us,” Grant laments that we have become homeless creatures.<sup>132</sup>

When we read the writing of settlers themselves, we find that they did indeed represent the great drama of colonization as an exercise in freedom. Susanna Moodie, whose sketches of colonial life in Upper Canada in the 1830s and 1840s cast it as a hard battle against a hostile environment, frequently describes Canada as a “free country,”<sup>133</sup> and when she meditates on Canada’s gloominess it is in freedom and independence that she finds her purpose for remaining there:

Oh Canada! thy gloomy woods  
Will never cheer the heart;  
The murmur of thy mighty floods  
But cause fresh tears to start  
From those whose fondest wishes rest  
Beyond the distant main;  
Who, ‘mid the forests of the West,  
Sigh for their homes again.

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<sup>131</sup> *ibid.*, 35-36.

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*, 17.

<sup>133</sup> Susanna Moodie, *Roughing it in the Bush*, ed. Michael Peterman (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 85.

I, too, have felt the chilling blight  
Their shadows cast on me,  
My thought by day – my dream by night –  
Was of my own country.  
But independent souls will brave  
All hardships to be free;  
No more I weep to cross the wave,  
My native land to see.<sup>134</sup>

In bringing together her perception of the Canadian landscape as stark and forbidding with her sense of her family's pursuit of freedom there, Moodie channels almost perfectly Grant's argument. But we cannot push this interpretation too far. Moodie also speaks of the "stern necessity" that led her family to Canada, and in an evocative passage, describes her love for Canada as "a feeling very nearly allied to that which the condemned criminal entertains for his cell."<sup>135</sup> As much as Moodie experienced Canada as a land of freedom, it was also for her a realm of demanding necessity.

But our real question is, did Moodie understand her immigration biblically? This question must be answered equivocally. There is no reference in *Roughing It* to the Israelites' history of homelessness, landedness, and exile as you find in the Puritan or other Christian colonial writings. That is, there is no association with Abraham as a sojourning settler, no sense of either England or Canada as a new Egypt, Babylon, or Israel. Moodie does, however, occasionally refer to her life in Canada as an "exile," and at one point she reflects that "the unpeopled wastes of Canada must present the same aspect to the new settler that the world did to our first parents after their expulsion

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<sup>134</sup> Moodie, *Roughing It*, 75.

<sup>135</sup> Moodie, *Roughing It*, 91.

from the Garden of Eden,” this last statement being the only clear comparison Moodie makes in *Roughing It* between her own immigrant experience and a biblical event.

One thing is certain, however. Moodie did feel God’s hand at work in her life (or wrote as if she did, at the very least). It is clear that Moodie believed God was present with her and her family in Canada, and that He looked favourably upon her immigration. When food is scarce or wild animals threaten, Moodie trusts in God and providence to see her through. And in more comfortable times, when she is able to appreciate the beauty and serenity of the Canadian wilderness, she finds God there. Canoeing with her family late one moonlit summer night, she reflects that “the very spirit of peace seemed to brood over the waters ... Amid these lonely wilds the soul draws nearer to God, and is filled to overflowing by the overwhelming sense of His presence.”<sup>136</sup> Moonlight seems to have been particularly stirring for Moodie; under another full moon out in the woods she exclaims “life is a blessing, a precious boon indeed,” and she revels in “the glorious privilege of pouring out the silent adoration of the heart to the Great Father in his universal temple.”<sup>137</sup> Evidently, despite the difficulties Moodie experienced raising a family in the backwoods of Canada, she did not consider it a country forsaken by God; He was, for her, palpably present. Most importantly, she understood her immigration as providentially ordained. On a journey from the relatively well-settled town of Cobourg to the bush where she would live

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<sup>136</sup> Moodie, *Roughing It*, 229.

<sup>137</sup> *ibid.*, 196.

for seven years, Moodie sheds tears at the “savage scene” around her, and, in the following passage, asks what brought her there:

‘Providence,’ was the answer which my soul gave. ‘Not for your own welfare perhaps, but for the welfare of your children, the unerring hand of the Great Father has led you here. You form a connecting link in the destinies of many. It is impossible for any human creature to live for himself alone. It may be your lot to suffer, but others will reap a benefit from your trials. Look up with confidence to Heaven, and the sun of hope will yet shed a cheering beam through the forbidding depths of this tangled wilderness.’<sup>138</sup>

While she may not relate her experiences typologically to biblical events, Moodie evidently thought that God was guiding her migration. Had she sought to find biblical analogues to her own experience,<sup>139</sup> Moodie might have associated the freedom and independence she felt characterized life in Canada with God’s liberating gesture in the Exodus, which provided the Israelites a land of their own in which they could be free from other nations. And when Moodie located the meaning of her suffering in her children’s future, she might have related this to God’s promise to Abraham, which was as much a promise to his descendants as it was to Abraham himself.

We see, then, that the Canadian literary tradition is more likely to represent settler presence in North America as a kind of geographical exile, a sojourn in a strange land, and a struggle to become native, rather than an arrival in a divinely appointed home. As such, I would suggest we extend Brueggemann’s thesis referred to at the beginning of this section, and say that exile *is* primarily geographical, and that Canadians’ sense of

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<sup>138</sup> *ibid.*, 178.

<sup>139</sup> And I think she likely would have, though they are not documented in *Roughing It*.

homelessness in the vast landscapes they inhabit is one more way that life in North America might find an analogue in the experiences of biblical Israel. Both communities find themselves in landscapes their traditions would suggest is not entirely their own. For Canadians attentive to their own literary history and experience, which has long struggled to come to know and belong to the “majestic continent” George Grant refers to, the biblical struggle with life in diaspora, along with the Bible’s promise of eventual placedness, might have deep resonances.

### **CHAPTER THREE – SPACE, PLACE, AND THE LATTER’S THEOLOGIES**

The experience of being uprooted, homeless, or lost can be understood in relation to wider philosophical and theological currents. If our everyday experience is inflected with an uneasy relationship to the land we inhabit, we might do well to examine how place has been treated theoretically, which is what I intend to explore in this chapter. There is a history in both Christian theology and Western philosophy of deemphasizing the importance of place; while both traditions furnish us with counterexamples, the dominant trend has been towards a favouring of the abstract and universal “view from nowhere” over the concrete and particular. This is especially true of philosophies inspired by the spirit of the Enlightenment, and theologies that focus too much on spiritual transcendence and the gospel’s universalism. Both tend to encourage a lifestyle divorced from geography, and with little commitment to place.

In this chapter’s first and second sections I explore how the importance of place has been downplayed in much of Western philosophy and Christian theology, respectively. My implicit suggestion is that these traditions’ theoretical predilection for the abstract, immaterial, and universal is at least partly responsible for North Americans’ ambivalent relationship with their places.

In the third section, however, I go on to examine the revolt against this placelessness which has begun to take shape in much recent



philosophical and theological discourse. Calls to reclaim “a sense of place” are often heard in both camps. In particular, I look at how this reclamation is articulated *vis a vis* the Christian tradition, and how many are now articulating a “theology of place,” a theology which would serve to ground Christians wherever they are and help them put down roots. These writers argue that the Church does possess resources that, if attended to, would help us to grow roots and honour the places we inhabit. I engage them because I believe their project is an important one for Christians living in North America who experience something like the alienation and uprootedness I discussed above.

### **The Obscuration of Place in the Philosophical Tradition**

An examination of the western philosophical tradition’s relationship with place must start with a reference to the work of Edward Casey, whose book *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* has been very influential in its criticism of modern philosophy’s ambivalence to place. *The Fate of Place* traces the history of place as a philosophical category from the classical era through to the twentieth century, and Casey identifies the slow growth of a disinterest in, and even an outright suppression of, place as an object of philosophical interest. While place was a central category in early Greek philosophy, “by the end of the eighteenth century, it vanished altogether

from serious theoretical discourse in physics and philosophy.”<sup>140</sup> The eclipse of place reached a crescendo in the Enlightenment, but Casey’s book ends with a consideration of how place has reasserted itself as a philosophical category in various modes of late-modern and post-modern thinking.<sup>141</sup> Place, as will be made clear in more detail below, is once again considered an important category.

What supplanted place, according to Casey, was space. He considers the key moment in this unseating to have come in 1277, when the Bishop of Paris issued a document, by request from the Pope, stating that space was infinite. The vision thus opened up to the Western mind, of a universe infinitely vast, empty, and ultimately homogenous, was in stark opposition to a sense of place, which is necessarily confined, particular, and pregnant with matter and meaning.<sup>142</sup> Space, we must note, is undifferentiated, abstract, empty. Place, by contrast, is unique, concrete, and limited by boundaries (i.e., it is finite).<sup>143</sup> Given this distinction, it is easy to appreciate why space overtook place in theoretical import, for it is only abstract and undifferentiated space which can be described by the the kinds of universal laws that Western science was to develop in modernity. Indeed, the year

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<sup>140</sup> Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (California, University of California Press, 1997), 133.

<sup>141</sup> Casey, *Fate of Place*, xi.

<sup>142</sup> *ibid.*, 106-7.

<sup>143</sup> John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Great Britain: Ashgate, 2003), 1-2.

1277 has been called the beginning of modern science by some commentators.<sup>144</sup>

The eclipse of place by space is thus thoroughly implicated with the development of the modern scientific world-view. By seeking laws that were universally true (that is, true everywhere and at all times,) Enlightenment-era science rejected the privileging of particular places. What is true only for a particular place or only at a particular time is not true at all, according to the scientific paradigm. The philosophical analogue to this commitment can be found in the Enlightenment's search for *a priori* truth. *A priori* truth is truth that is independent of all experience, and for which factors of situation and placement are therefore irrelevant. Neither scientists nor philosophers of the Enlightenment period thought the particular, and therefore place, merited any concern. They sought universals. This is one of the main causes of the "obscuration of place" that Casey identifies, namely "the universalism inherent in Western [intellectual] culture from the beginning," which, he continues, "is most starkly evident in the search for ideas, usually labeled 'essences,' that obtain *everywhere* and for which a particular *somewhere*, a given place, is presumably irrelevant."<sup>145</sup>

O'Donovan notes that Western philosophy's privileging of consciousness and the intellect over against the body and its materiality has also contributed to the "obscuration of place."<sup>146</sup> Running from Platonism

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<sup>144</sup> Casey, *Fate of Place*, 107.

<sup>145</sup> *ibid.*, xii.

<sup>146</sup> O'Donovan, "The Loss of a Sense of Place," 301.

through to their modern apogee in Descartes and his followers, doctrines of the immaterial soul (and its freedom and fulfillment in contemplation) have “bred the conviction that local relations, which we necessarily have by virtue of being embodied souls, are to be transcended and left behind.”<sup>147</sup> In Plato, the soul has access to a transcendent realm of truth. In Descartes similarly, it is the immaterial soul only that attains knowledge, precisely because it can look beyond the experiences of the here and now supplied by the body and its senses. It can look beyond place, in other words. The Western intellect has for much of its history privileged the mind over the body, and this has left it disengaged from problems of place, since place is known primarily through the body.<sup>148</sup>

Fascinatingly, the space/place distinction is not only an ontological or metaphysical one. Whether we imagine ourselves situated in a particular place or floating untethered through an amorphous space has real effects on our actions. The concepts are imbued with their own ethical dimensions. As Casey insightfully points out at the beginning of his book, our words for ‘politics’ and ‘ethics’ are both derived from Greek words associated with place: *polis*, or ‘city-state,’ and *ēthea*, which means ‘habitats.’<sup>149</sup> Not surprisingly, then, a connection can be made between the western philosophical tradition’s disregard for the importance of place and some of the central commitments that have developed in that tradition’s ethical and

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<sup>147</sup> *ibid.*, 302.

<sup>148</sup> That place and the body are intimately related will be explored in more detail below.

<sup>149</sup> Casey, *Fate of Place*, xiv.

political theory, namely the valorization of human freedom and independence that defines liberalism.

I return to Brueggemann to unpack this. He writes that space “means an arena of freedom, without coercion or accountability, free of pressures and void of authority.” Place, on the other hand, “is space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made, and demands have been issued.”<sup>150</sup> To live consciously in a place for Brueggemann is to make “a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom.”<sup>151</sup> To put it a little differently, place makes claims on us in ways space cannot.

Representations of the world as empty, infinite and undifferentiated, then, seem to go hand-in-hand with liberalism’s positing of freedom as the chief end of human action. In contrast, a proper appreciation for the peculiarities of place necessarily entails the acceptance of a law. (The reader should be reminded of the discussion above [pp. 47 – 48] about foreign flora. Lands and places have limits; we cannot live in any way in any place, but rather must accept the strictures of our geography). This idea is captured well in the Bible, for it is no coincidence that God gives the Israelites a law at the same time as he promises them a land (we might like to read the wilderness wanderings as a sojourn through space, which is relieved by the Israelites’ arrival at place, the Land). The suggestion here is that Torah is a

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<sup>150</sup> Brueggemann, *The Land*, 4.

<sup>151</sup> *ibid.*

situated thing, meant to guide life in the Land and having an integral relationship with it. Torah is, quite literally, the law of the land.

This is an idea we have already encountered in the philosophy of George Grant. The reader will remember that for Grant there was a geographical element to the evolution of political liberalism in North America. It was settlers' experience of the North American landscape as a hostile environment, one to be subjugated and altered according to human will, that for Grant was one of the most telling examples of liberalism at work. Liberalism regards the world not as a limit, but as a field of freedom, an empty playground for human striving. Grant, critical of the unrestrained freedom that characterizes life in liberal society, thought that the land (as well the Good – he writes in the Christian-Platonist tradition) ought to present a real limit on human freedom, a limit that liberalism's pursuit of technological mastery (a pursuit of space instead of place) transgressed. I am arguing that the "obscuration of place" Casey identifies in the philosophical tradition should be understood in relation to this liberal political philosophy: place is ignored and suppressed because it is a limiting force, and liberal philosophies are committed to enlarging the human being's field of freedom.

To conclude this section, I have briefly indicated that during much of the West's philosophical history, and especially in the modern period, place has been largely disregarded. This is because the particularity of place does not fit well with the scientific paradigm's universalizing aspirations, because the materiality of place makes it suspect, and because the limiting nature of

place is repugnant to liberalism's pursuit of freedom and independence. In the next section, I make similar observations, but with regard to the theological treatment of place instead of the philosophical.

### **The Obscuration in Christian Tradition**

I begin this section with a personal reminiscence, one that made concrete for me the ways Christianity can be complicit in the obscuration of place. Living rurally one summer in northeastern Newfoundland, I decided to wake early on the solstice to acknowledge the sunrise on the longest day of the year. I did so alone. In an attempt to give the dawn a sense of ceremony I fingered through my prayer book as the sun rose, reading through the office of Morning Prayer. I was struck at the prayer book's ignorance of what was going on around me. One would expect at least some acknowledgement of the significance of the sunrise taking place that morning. But the prayer book, one purpose of which is to regulate my experience of time as a repeating cycle, appeared ignorant of the way I was also being regulated by the repeating cycle of the seasons. I noted, very much in anticipation of a thesis I will present below, that this is because the prayer book is trained upon the life of Christ rather than my place. The shape given to time by the prayer book, the periods of feasting and fasting, celebration and mourning that it prescribes, represents for us the life of Christ – it is Christ that regulates our time rather than the seasons. The prayer book appeared to me that morning to be regulating time according to a logic of elsewhere.

I am not alone in having felt this way. It is not uncommon to find representations of Christianity as a non-territorial and unplaced religion. In this section I highlight three aspects of Christianity that serve to reinforce this opinion, all three of which are related to each other. These three aspects are: Paul's and the Gospel's radical universalism, Christianity's anthropocentric tendency to locate divinity not in nature or place, but in person(s), and, lastly, Christianity's doctrines of spiritual transcendence and ascent.

It would be helpful to acknowledge now, however, that I only wish to highlight certain strains of the Christian tradition which appear to neglect place, not make the totalizing claim that Christianity as a whole is essentially placeless. Indeed I agree with Santmire that the nature-denying tendency of Christianity has been overstated.<sup>152</sup> Just as we encountered the Bible as luminously polyphonic, the Christian tradition also has many voices. Thus in the next section I examine how the tradition can, in fact, inspire a commitment to place. First, though, I will consider how that vision has been subverted.

To begin, Christianity is an avowedly universalistic religion. The resurrected Jesus imagines his message spreading "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Saint Peter believes "God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable" (Acts 10:34-35). And Paul's missionary endeavours, which sought to extend the scope of

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<sup>152</sup> Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 8-12.



salvation beyond the borders of Israel, function as one of Christianity's founding myths. Often, the founding of Christianity is understood as an overcoming of the particularity of the revelation to Israel. As a result of these universal aspirations the importance of place and geography are sometimes obscured in Christian theology.

In his now classic work on early Christianity's doctrine of the land (or lack thereof, more accurately) W.D. Davies has argued at length that the biblical authors, and even Jesus himself, showed little to no interest in matters geographical.<sup>153</sup> In particular, Davies argued that the universalizing movement of Paul led him to reject Jewish doctrines of the land, and in doing so, render all places irrelevant to salvation. Indeed, Paul's universalism led him to do away with all the particularly Jewish forms of life and worship. Thus, according to Paul, Abraham's promise is no longer received through the flesh, but through the Spirit (which is available to all, everywhere) and the necessity of the Law in the economy of salvation is rescinded as well.<sup>154</sup> "With the coming of Christ the wall of separation between Israel and the Gentiles was removed," Davies writes, and this "include[d] the geographic separation between those in the land and those outside the land." Continuing, Davies writes that "salvation was not now bound to the Jewish people

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<sup>153</sup> W.D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land* (California: California University Press, 1974), 164-219.

<sup>154</sup> Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 175-179.

centred in the land and living according to the Law: it was 'located' not in place, but in persons in whom grace and faith had their writ."<sup>155</sup>

O'Donovan similarly notes how the universal ambitions of Christianity necessarily led it to forsake any commitment to a theological sense of place.

He writes,

The revelation to Israel had been a situated revelation, in a land which YHWH had hallowed and in a city where he had chosen to dwell. But the revelation in Christ broke down this elective particularity, not only of race but also of place. This theme has been constantly recurrent in Western Christianity (no less before than after the Protestant Reformation), safeguarding Christian faith against a relapse into the concept of a situated place of divine presence.<sup>156</sup>

As an amusing piece of evidence for this, O'Donovan quotes a medieval Irish couplet: "To go to Rome is little profit, plenty pain / The master that you seek in Rome you find at home, or seek in vain."<sup>157</sup> Christianity professes a radical accessibility of the divine in all places. In the Old Testament, God chooses Israel as a place to dwell in a unique way, but in the New, He is everywhere. As such, it would seem, places can have little to no theological import; they can have no bearing on the divine.

Philip Sheldrake perceptively notes that many early Christian conversion stories take place "on the way," in between well-defined locations, on roads and highways especially.<sup>158</sup> (This may be related to something I noted above, that there is a deep connection between migration

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<sup>155</sup> *ibid.*, 179.

<sup>156</sup> O'Donovan, "The Loss of a Sense of Place," 7.

<sup>157</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 34.

and religious experience). They transpire in non-places, nowhere in particular and therefore everywhere - in a sort of universal space. This sense of abstract space is a critical element in Christianity's sense of itself as a universal revelation, for a universal revelation cannot, it would seem, be located anywhere in particular.

Davies' ultimate conclusion in his book was that in the first century Christ took on all the significations that the Land had previously bore in Jewish thought. He writes, "in sum, for the holiness of place, Christianity has fundamentally, though not consistently, substituted the holiness of the Person: it has Christified holy space."<sup>159</sup> This is not unlike his argument I rehearsed above, that with the advent of Christ salvation became "located not in place, but in persons in whom grace and faith had their writ." This brings us to the second aspect of Christian theology which calls into question the importance of place, namely the way the tradition has come to locate divinity in people rather than places. For it is not only the person of Christ that comes to take on the theological significance that the land had in earlier Jewish thought, but the *persons* of individual believers.<sup>160</sup>

Consider, for example, Christianity's pantheon of saints, and the way they acted (and continue to act) as sites of divine encounter. "Holy people and their stories, more than any other medium, localized the Christian God," writes Sheldrake.<sup>161</sup> This is reflected in the way sites of pilgrimage became

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<sup>159</sup> Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 368.

<sup>160</sup> Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 37-44.

<sup>161</sup> *ibid.*, 38.

identified in early Christianity not so much by their natural features, which you might expect in the Indigenous spiritualities of North America and Australia, for example, but by the presence there of holy people, or their stories associated with the place.<sup>162</sup>

A brief survey of the New Testament is revealing of the early Christian idea that God was made present in the faithful, and made his will known through them. The author of Ephesians identifies the church as one of God's mediums of revelation, for example, when he writes, "through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known" (3:10). Paul writes in 1 Cor 3:16, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" The tradition of associating the church with Christ's body is another example (Col 1:24, and elsewhere). Lastly, and perhaps most famously, there is Jesus' own saying: "for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt 18:20). For Christians who follow this line of interpretation, God is present not so much in the world, in nature, or in place, but in humanity, through the dwelling of the Spirit in the souls of believers.

This focus on the human as the primary location of divinity is what led Lynn White, in his wildly influential essay 'The Historic Roots of our Ecological Crisis,' to charge Christianity with being "the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen."<sup>163</sup> White contrasts this anthropocentrism with the animism that characterized pagan religion, in

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<sup>162</sup>*ibid.*, 39.

<sup>163</sup> Lynn White, 3.

which “every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit.” By denying nature its divinity and locating the Spirit in God and humans only, White thought Christianity promoted not only an ambivalence towards nature, but an outright assault on it: “By destroying pagan animism Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.”<sup>164</sup> In a longer passage, White captures well the migration of the Spirit from nature to humans, particularly saints:

It is often said that for animism the Church substituted the cult of saints. True; but the cult of saints is functionally quite different from animism. The saint is not in natural objects; he may have special shrines, but his citizenship is in heaven ... In addition to saints, Christianity of course also had angels and demons ... but these were all as mobile as the saints themselves. The spirits in natural objects, which formerly had protected nature from man, evaporated. Man's effective monopoly on spirit in this world was confirmed.<sup>165</sup>

This, then, is the second way that Christian tradition has fostered a blindness to place, by holding fast to the doctrine that God, when He is in the world, is so only in humanity, be it in Jesus Christ or the church. For a people whose God resides in their own souls and their neighbours', there can be little reason to attend to the nature of their external situation and placement.

Thirdly, Christianity is a religion which can be said to train its eyes upon a world distinctly other than this one. Christians often interpret their scriptures and traditions as encouraging them to turn their back on this world in expectation of a new life in a better one. Consider Heb 11:16, which

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<sup>164</sup> Lynn White 3.

<sup>165</sup> Lynn White, 3-4.

argues that the Patriarchs never settled in the land, content to be “strangers and foreigners on the earth,” precisely because they desired “a better country, that is, a heavenly one.” This passage celebrates rootlessness on earth as necessary step towards achieving a home in heaven.<sup>166</sup> The lesson is that God does not intend to resolve the contradictions inherent in a life lived in exile or diaspora, because the home God promises is not an earthly one. We are not meant to put down roots in this world, but rather to wander, faithfully, in anticipation of a place to come. This coincides with the picture given us in the Gospel of John, in which Jesus refers to himself and the Kingdom as being “not of this world” (17:16). Consider also the following, written by Thomas Taylor in 1836 and found in the Lutheran and Presbyterian hymnals:

I'm but a stranger here,  
Heav'n is my home;  
Earth is a desert drear,  
Heav'n is my home;  
Danger and sorrow stand  
Round me on ev'ry hand;  
Heav'n is my fatherland,  
Heav'n is my home.<sup>167</sup>

The hymn continues for another three verses, and remains committed to a vision of the earth as a desert through which we must pass to arrive at our true, other-worldly home. How would this hymn influence a congregation singing it on Sunday morning?

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<sup>166</sup> O'Donovan, “The Loss of a Sense of Place,” 13-14.

<sup>167</sup> “I’m But a Stranger Here,” Cyber Hymnal, accessed March 22, 2015, <http://cyberhymnal.org/htm/i/m/imbutash.htm>.

In his 1985 analysis of Christianity's ecological promise, Paul Santmire identified two major motifs that appear in the tradition's thinking about nature. He called these the spiritual motif and the ecological motif. The spiritual motif characterizes those theologies which stress the spiritual transcendence of nature. They are often expressed using metaphors of ascent, in which the believer's rise towards God is attended by an equal rise *away* from this world, the earth. Theologies aligned with the ecological motif, on the other hand, do not look forward to a transcendence of nature, but to its ultimate redemption, and the establishment of a more proper relationship between it and humanity. Whereas the spiritual motif stresses ascent upwards to the Good, the ecological motif stresses the overflowing of God's goodness down towards the earth.

Santmire's book is intended to reclaim the ecological motif for our era of environmental crisis. But he acknowledges, with regret, that the spiritual motif has been more dominant throughout Christian history.<sup>168</sup> Thus we find Origen asserting that the created world is meant only as a instrument, a ladder if you will, to help humans climb back to God, and outlining a fully spiritual interpretation of the Old Testament themes of land and place.<sup>169</sup> In a similar fashion, the great medieval voices of Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Dante (St. Francis is of course a counterexample from this period) imagine the world as a chain of being, with the material world at the bottom, and God's transcendent, immaterial self at the top. "Each of these writers

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<sup>168</sup> Santmire, *Travail of Nature*, 1-29.

<sup>169</sup> *ibid.*, 44-53.

shapes his thought according to a hierarchical vision, predicated on a teleology of ascent."<sup>170</sup>

One of Christian theology's legacies has been to impart a sense that the human being does not belong on earth, but should strive to attain a place in another, better realm. For a Christian influenced by these kinds of doctrines, the facts of their material placement, the peculiar traits of their landscapes and homes, must appear to them as irrelevant.

This section has demonstrated that certain strains of Christian theology exhibit an aversion to place, just as Enlightenment-era philosophy does. The strains are: those predicated on a sense of the Christian revelation as a radically universal one, those which posit the human as the primary site of divine presence in the world, and those which teach humans to look for a place in heaven rather than earth. But as I alluded to at the outset of this chapter, Christian tradition also furnishes us with counterexamples, and it is to these which I now turn. In the next section I will examine Christian resources for reclaiming a sense of place, and the value of the particular.

### **Theologies of Place**

Today, the theoretical predilections for universality and immateriality I discussed in sections one and two above are reinforced by the lived experiences caused by industrialization, globalization and communications technology. Human beings, especially in the developed world, are less and

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<sup>170</sup> *ibid.*, 178.



less tethered to particular places. We can travel at will, and this travel no longer requires the slow passage between origin and destination that acquaints us with where we come from, where we are, and where we are going. Mass production renders our built environments identical across cultures and places, and this homogeneity, in the words of O'Donovan, "numbs our sense of how one place differs from another."<sup>171</sup> Our food is increasingly sourced from elsewhere, so we begin to lose our sense of reliance on the places we inhabit. And communications technology has given us the ability to form relationships and peer groups that are not rooted in place; communities have become more and more disembodied. To use the words of O'Donovan once again, we have created "a technology of placeless culture."<sup>172</sup> In practice as well as theory, then, place is becoming more and more irrelevant.

But the assault made on place by Enlightenment thinking, strains of Christian theology, and the practical consequences of globalization has not gone unquestioned or unopposed. A chorus of voices calling for the reclamation of what is often referred to as a "sense of place" has risen up. The agrarian thinkers examined in chapter two should be counted among these voices, and in *The Fate of Place* Edward Casey traced the reappearance of place as an important category for many twentieth century philosophers.<sup>173</sup> John Inge, reading Casey's book, extends the latter's thesis, noting that

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<sup>171</sup> O'Donovan, "Loss of a Sense of Place," 296.

<sup>172</sup> *ibid.*, 297.

<sup>173</sup> Casey, *The Fate of Place*, xi.

disciplines as diverse as geography, psychology, and political and social theory have all made a turn towards a more embodied and phenomenological sensitivity, and have thereby reestablished place as worthy of investigation.<sup>174</sup> In this section my focus will be on how this turn has played out (or could play out) in Christian discourse. Inge regrets that the move towards a sense of place is one that theology has yet to make in any substantial way, and so his book functions as an invitation to theologians to begin crafting what he calls a Christian theology of place. Sheldrake shares Inge's regret, writing that while "place is a critical theological and spiritual issue ... the Christian tradition has been ambivalent about the subject."<sup>175</sup> In addition to these two, a handful of other Christian writers have taken up the project of crafting a theology of place, including Lilburne<sup>176</sup> (not to be confused with Lilburn), Hjalmarson<sup>177</sup> and Bartholomew.<sup>178</sup> Lilburne's exploration of Christian place-making is especially interesting for us, since it consciously situates itself in the post-colonial context of Australia, and takes inspiration from Aboriginal doctrines of the land there.<sup>179</sup> Lilburne is the only one of these authors to note the post-colonial potential of a theology of place. I include the following summary of the main emphases of these writers'

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<sup>174</sup> John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Great Britain: Ashgate, 2003), 13-28.

<sup>175</sup> Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 1.

<sup>176</sup> Geoffrey Lilburne, *A Sense of Place: A Christian Theology of the Land* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

<sup>177</sup> Leonard Hjalmarson, *No Home Like Place: A Christian Theology of Place*, (Portland, Oregon: Urban Loft Publishers, 2014).

<sup>178</sup> Craig Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011.

<sup>179</sup> Lilburne, *A Sense of Place*, 35-44.

thought because I am convinced that crafting a theology of place will be integral to learning how to be a Christian in a post-colonial context such as Canada's, since there is some indication that the colonial experience here is characterized by an uneasy relationship with our place(s).

While Inge thinks Christian theology has yet to fully articulate a theology of place, he puts forward his own suggestions for doing so, and notes that the Christian tradition does provide us with resources for the construction of such a theology. He argues especially that through its doctrine of the incarnation<sup>180</sup> and its traditions of pilgrimage<sup>181</sup> Christianity might inspire us to put down roots and resist the spatially homogenizing influences of our intellectual traditions and globalization.

The incarnation is especially important, because in it we meet a God whose redemptive work has been realized in and through the confines of a particular place and time. It thus opens up the possibility that we (i.e., modern readers of the Bible) might meet God in our own places as well, and not in a heaven understood as transcendent or in a people (the church) considered in isolation from their environment. Frost, in a book more recent than Inge's, uses incarnation as a central metaphor for how we should understand the cultivation of locally engaged communities,<sup>182</sup> and advises us

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<sup>180</sup> Inge, *Theology of Place*, 51-54.

<sup>181</sup> *ibid.*, 91-93.

<sup>182</sup> Michael Frost, *Incarnate: The Body of Christ in an Age of Disengagement* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2014), 148-174.

to “embrace a more thoroughly embodied faith, a truly placed way of living that mirrors the incarnational lifestyle of Jesus.”<sup>183</sup>

We should note, though, that the incarnation is not always interpreted this way. Davies, while he does acknowledge in his analysis of the Gospel of John that Jesus’ “flesh was real flesh, and [that] he was geographically conditioned as all men,” thinks that the geographical placement of Jesus did not ultimately matter to John. “Rather what was significant to John was the descent of Jesus from above and his ascent thither. The fundamental spatial symbolism of the Fourth Gospel was not horizontal but vertical.”<sup>184</sup> For Davies, the fact that God became flesh does not lend importance to geography, because the significance of that flesh lies in the relationship it makes possible between humanity and an otherworldly, transcendent, God.

Nevertheless, on account of its sheer particularity the incarnation does anchor most recent attempts to articulate a theology of place, including Inge’s, Lilburne’s, and Sheldrake’s.<sup>185</sup> The latter argues that “the particularity of the event of Jesus Christ permits the placed nature, the always particular nature, of discipleship,” and Lilburne’s counsel for those who would reclaim a sense of place is that they adopt an “incarnational praxis” that roots them where they are.<sup>186</sup>

A second reason the incarnation inspires thinkers such as these has to do with its bodily element. For the suppression of place in the Western

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<sup>183</sup> Frost, *Incarnate*, 12.

<sup>184</sup> Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 335. Quoted in Inge, 51.

<sup>185</sup> Lilburne, *Sense of Place*, 87-110, Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 22-32.

<sup>186</sup> Lilburne, *Sense of Place*, 111-133

intellectual tradition is part of a complex of assumptions that equally denigrates the body. Indeed, in Casey's discussion he shows that the reappearance of place in Western philosophy has been effected through a new attention to the body.<sup>187</sup> He writes of the "late modern effort to reclaim the particularity of place from the universality of space by recourse to bodily empowerment."<sup>188</sup> In his Christian treatment of the subject, Inge concurs that place and body "are inseparable ... as there is no experience of place without body, so there is no experience of body without place."<sup>189</sup> Given this relationship between body and place, the incarnation, being the doctrine that in Christ "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Colossians 2:9), can easily be read as an affirmation of place. Indeed it is a powerful assertion that the particularity of material existence, and thus of place, carries great importance. This leads Inge to his conclusion that "the incarnation – and the particularity of God's relationship with humanity which flows from it – supports the notion of place retaining vital significance."<sup>190</sup>

A caveat – this requires that we understand incarnation not as a one-time event that transpired long ago in a distant place, but rather as a model of how God continues to relate to the world today, wherever we may be. If we adopt the former view we will find ourselves, as I found the prayer book doing on the solstice in Newfoundland, directing our attention elsewhere, to first-century Palestine instead of our own place in the world. If we adopt the

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<sup>187</sup> Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 202-242.

<sup>188</sup> *ibid.*, 238.

<sup>189</sup> Inge, *Christian Theology of Place*, 53.

<sup>190</sup> *ibid.*, 58.

latter view, then the particular facts of our daily life, including where we are, will shimmer with divinity, not as signs of something other (a transcendent God) but in their very particularity, here. I would urge a reading of the incarnation that sees it as an assertion that God is in the world, and therefore, placed. The Christian desire for God need not, then, lead one away from the earth, and one's place in it; it might rather lead one more deeply into one's material placement.

A second way that the divinity of place manages to shine through in Christianity is in its traditions of pilgrimage and holy places. Inge devotes a chapter of his book to an analysis of this tradition, in which he presents Christian pilgrimage as a counterexample to the placelessness I examined in section two.<sup>191</sup> "The phenomenon which has demonstrated the appreciation of place in the Christian tradition more than any other is that of pilgrimage," he writes.<sup>192</sup> Inge rehearses the development of Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land in the Church's first centuries, before then outlining how a "sacred geography," emerged in Europe, especially in the medieval period. This sacred geography centered around the locations of relics, the homes of saints, and sites where divine encounter between God and humanity had taken place.<sup>193</sup> Of course, as one might expect given the universalism I explored in section two, this development was met with a certain wariness in many quarters of Christianity. It was unclear how to reconcile the doctrine that God

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<sup>191</sup> Inge, *Christian Theology of Place*, 91-124.

<sup>192</sup> *ibid.*, 91.

<sup>193</sup> *ibid.*, 96-97

was in all places with the idea that he was somehow uniquely present in particular places.<sup>194</sup> Nevertheless, holy sites and pilgrimages did take hold in practice, and even today, though admittedly more in the Catholic than Protestant traditions, “the landscape of the Christian world is dotted with places which have been recognized as being holy by virtue of sacramental encounter.”<sup>195</sup>

The places singled out as sites of Christian pilgrimage reveal for us an essential element in the human experience of place, namely its intimate relationship with our human past, and the stories which are said to have occurred there. Christian holy sites are holy by virtue of something that has happened there; either a saint has lived there, or God has intervened in the life of humanity in a unique way there. Holy sites are memorial in nature. “Shrines,” Inge writes, “root people in their sacred past and the history of the Christian community of which they are a part.”<sup>196</sup> This is Biblically resonant; the holy places of the Old Testament serve as memorials to significant events in the Israelites’ history with their God as well. I believe these examples from religion speak to a broader truth: that humans root themselves in places as they root themselves in their past, and places become significant to people as they live out their history in them. Don McKay, a Canadian poet who is concerned with our relationship to our landscapes, writes that “place is wilderness to which history has happened,” and that “place is land to which

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<sup>194</sup> *ibid.*, 99-100

<sup>195</sup> *ibid.*, 91.

<sup>196</sup> Inge, *Christian Theology of Place*, 104.

we have occurred.”<sup>197</sup> This is to say, wilderness becomes place by virtue of our life and history in it. Walter Brueggeman similarly notes the relationship between place and history: “Place is space that has historical meanings.”<sup>198</sup> By providing its followers with a sacred history that is placed, Christianity invites those followers into a deeper relationship with particular places; it offers them roots.

My sense, however, is that we need to refine a little further our understanding of how the experience of place is related to our past. To say that place is land to which we have occurred is perhaps to make it into too human a category. I would urge that we should not lend such a primacy to the human element of place making, as if the world were empty and homogenous before it became storied. Lilburne makes this criticism of Brueggemann, suggesting that the latter’s definition of place “is overly dependent upon history and human activity as the distinguishing characteristics of place.”<sup>199</sup> He argues instead that “a sense of place is a function of the nature of [places] themselves.”<sup>200</sup> Place is not merely a result of human story-telling and meaning-making; rather, we should focus on the *inherent* particularity and concreteness of places in order to get a sense of what they are. Humans may have a history in a place; indeed this is one of the primary ways we relate to place, but place also has its own history, and its own meaning. “The physical landscape is a partner, and an *active* rather than

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<sup>197</sup> Don McKay, *Deactivated West 100* (Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press, 2005), 17.

<sup>198</sup> Brueggemann, *The Land*, 4.

<sup>199</sup> Lilburne, *A Sense of Place*, 26.

<sup>200</sup> *ibid.*, 28.



a purely passive partner, in the conversation which creates the nature of a place,” writes Sheldrake.<sup>201</sup> And in the essay I quoted from above, McKay was more concerned with reestablishing a connection not with place, but with wilderness, which he understood as the world unmediated by human knowing and story-telling.

This bears on the Christian project of place-making in North America in a significant way, for one of the biggest challenges associated with developing a sense of place in North America as Christians is the relatively short time that we’ve been here. If place is exclusively a function of human story telling, it is no wonder we have a tenuous connection with the land here: it is because we have relatively few stories from this place. The pioneer Susanna Moodie, whose book I examined above, expresses this idea perfectly when she remarks (betraying her ignorance of Indigenous history in Canada) that this land is “too new” to be the home of any spirits, or the site of any supernatural occurrences. But if, as Lilburne, Sheldrake, and I am suggesting, place is as much a feature of the natural landscape in itself as it is a result of story-telling, we ought to be able to get a sense of this place simply by paying better attention to it. We would also do well to recognize that the Indigenous peoples of this continent have a rich story-telling tradition that roots them where they are. This continent is not “new” in any sense.

These, then, are two initial movements we can make in order to begin re-placing ourselves as Christian in North America. First, we must attend to

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<sup>201</sup> Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 15, emphasis added.

the ways that the incarnational style of God's self-disclosure implies a redemption of the material and particular, and in doing so restores to our local places an inherent value. Second, we should make an effort to learn more about the stories that have given this place meaning for the people who have lived here far longer than us, but also recognize that the land here was God's before humans had anything to do with it, and is thus sacred simply by virtue of being the way it is, created. This will help us to develop in North America the kind of "sacred geography" that existed in Christian Europe. While it is true that the Christian tradition has often been complicit in the obscuration of place, it is not irredeemable by any means, as its doctrines of incarnation and pilgrimage make clear.

## CONCLUSION

In the preceding excursion I have made a number of suggestions relating to theology, biblical studies and contemporary life (particularly for European Christians) in North America. The central claim has been that if we want to understand colonial presence in North America biblically, that is, through biblical categories and by finding some analogue to our own experience in the biblical text, we might do so by framing our sojourn on this continent as a kind of exile. I showed in chapter one that the Bible itself is deeply concerned with how to live well outside of one's imagined homeland, and I showed in chapter two that colonial presence in North America is often understood, at least in the Canadian literary tradition, as a kind of exile, a struggle to learn how to be at home in a foreign landscape. If these claims are both true, then we should expect the Bible to confront us as a book profoundly relevant to our present situation.

I have also engaged debate on how human communities *ought* to relate to their inhabited places. While I ultimately share the agrarian commitment to communities that root themselves geographically, I hope I have presented the vision of the exilic theologians, who argue that identifying people with places too deeply can lead to an exclusionary closed-mindedness, with some sympathy, for I do appreciate their critiques of nationalist constructions of identity based on claimed territory and its borders. Nonetheless, I have argued that this approach ignores the real ways

that place shapes a people, and our pressing ecological need to reestablish an appreciation for and commitment to our inhabited places.

In the final chapter I outlined how the biases of our philosophical and theological traditions have produced a theoretical posture that ignores the importance of place, a posture which also tends to dismiss the particular and embodied in favour of the universal and immaterial. I also noted that, considered practically, our every day experience is no longer determined by where we are. The loss of roots is endemic in today's world, though thankfully many thinkers have begun to argue for their importance. In the last section of chapter three, I introduced the work of a group of Christian writers who advocate for the reclamation of a "sense of place" through a renewed attention to those parts of the Christian tradition that do help us to root ourselves. These thinkers call for the development of a "theology of place," and I summarized their approach because I contend that developing such a theology will be critical if we want to live well as Christians in a colonial context such as Canada's, since, as I showed in chapter two, the colonial mindset is very much characterized by an alienation from the settler's inhabited place. I suggested that a Christian looking to forge a healthier relationship with his or her place in North America might yet find materials for doing so in their own tradition.

While writing this work I came upon many avenues for further study and consideration that I could not take for lack of ability and limits on my time. I therefore wish to close by drawing attention to three of the more

pressing gaps in the above work, forks in the road I could not take but which I feel ought to be recognized. They are, as it were, invitations to the reader for further consideration and study.

*Settler vs. Immigrant Consciousness* – Many of the Canadian writers I engaged interpret Canada as a European settler nation, some because they were writing in the mid-twentieth century, when this was still largely the case, and some because they are exploring their own family histories, which are European. But settler Canada has ceased to be a purely European nation, if it ever was one, and the experience of immigrants today is not of joining a nation in progress but of one already established. One can immigrate straight to major urban centres; the need to clear one's land and eke out a living in the wilderness is no longer there. Surely this changes one's impression of the land. It is even easier now to come to Canada and never truly see the land here. How might we differently interpret settler culture from immigrant culture, especially from a Christian perspective?

*Mennonites and Jewish Farmers* – One theme of this project is that farming and food production is an essential way into an appreciation of place and the land. A missing element of my essay is the way that Mennonites and other Christian communities with a dedication to farming relate to the land in North America. This would be especially interesting in the case of the handful of Jewish farming colonies that took hold in the Canadian prairies. The stereotypical Jew is a wandering urbanite, at home in time and text more than in place. But Jewish farmers have existed and continue to do so. How

would they challenge this stereotype? How would a Jewish farmer or a Mennonite in North America relate to his or her land, and how would this affect their relationship to the land of Israel?

*The Role of Revelation* – In addition to incarnation and doctrines of pilgrimage, Christian doctrines of revelation might provide resources for a theology of place. We have seen in the forgoing that a proper attention to place requires a suspension of human categories (to the extent that this is possible). The goal is to let the land be known on its own terms, in its own language if you will. Revelation can be construed in similar ways, as a relinquishment of human knowledge production in favour of a more receptive (instead of prescriptive) relationship with truth. How might doctrines of revelation help us understand how human subjects can be receptive to the truths of our particular places? Indeed, how might we better understand the land *as* revelation, as it is understood in so many forms of Aboriginal spirituality?

*Aboriginal Spirituality and the Land* – The reader might have noticed a lack of Indigenous voices in the forgoing work. This was largely intentional, not because they are irrelevant, but because I did not have the expertise or space to represent Indigenous relationships to the North American landscape accurately. Nevertheless, this avenue of inquiry is essential for anyone asking questions such as the ones I am asking. The fact is there is a population in North America that calls this place home, and whose spiritual traditions do serve to root them in their shared place. Putting down roots in North

America will require engaging these people and their traditions, not only because of the knowledge they possess about this land, but because they are, quite literally, part of this place and integral to it.<sup>202</sup>

It may be that as carriers of a tradition developed in another place and time we will never wholly become native to our place in North America. Perhaps we are not meant to. Perhaps, as Simone Weil writes in her journals, “we must take the feeling of being at home into exile. We must be rooted in the absence of a place.”<sup>203</sup> Even so, the cultivation of a genuine desire to become native, a sincere longing to come home, should serve our communities and our environments well.

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<sup>202</sup> For those who wish to pursue this line of inquiry, I recommend Winona Laduke, *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1999), Lisa Brooks, *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), and Vine Deloria Jr., *For This Land: Writings on Religion in America* (United States: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>203</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, ed. Gustave Thibon, trans. Emma Crawford and Marion von der Ruhr (New York: Routledge, 2010), 39.

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