"Finish Then Thy New Creation:" God's Promise to Inherit the World

Carla Works
Wesley Theological Seminary
Washington, D.C.

In the classic hymn, "Love Divine All Loves Excelling,"[1] Charles Wesley speaks of the joy of heaven coming down to earth, indwelling believers, liberating our spirits, transforming us to be "pure and spotless" until in "heav'n we take our place, till we cast our crowns before Thee, lost in wonder, love and praise." In this hymn that celebrates God's power and the Spirit's presence, the scope of "new creation" is limited to people, more specifically people in whom dwell God's Holy Spirit. Salvation is equated with individual, spiritual transformation. Moreover, this theme courses throughout Methodist hymnody, as the theme for this conference well illustrates. It is indeed fair to say that John and Charles Wesley took transformation seriously, believing that God had the power to sanctify believers and urging the church to manifest this transformation in outward signs of holiness. Wesleyan theology developed from individual holiness to social responsibility. Though all our hymns may not reflect it, John Wesley's expectation for God's transformative power even grew to the hope of cosmic renewal.

This hope of new creation that includes the cosmos demonstrates Wesley's close reading of Paul's letters. Rather than sweeping up the believers to heaven to escape the evils of this world, Paul's vision of new creation in Romans 4:13 encompasses the rectification of the whole earth. This paper reads Romans 4:13 in concert with other Jewish interpretations of the promise to Abraham and Paul's belief in new creation. It is argued that Paul's gospel assumes and expands the promise of land as it hopes in God's renewal of the cosmos. In other words, God's refusal to abandon creation is at the heart of Paul's good news. How might the renewal of the whole world—a belief shared by Wesley—help revive and revolutionize Methodism today?

Interpretations of Romans 4:13: "Inherit the World"

In Romans 4, Paul is making the case that God's granting of promises to Abraham was solely based on God's grace. The promises were not contingent upon following the law. Rather, Abraham trusted God. According to Paul, all who share in that Abraham-like faith are descendants of the promise. The first time that Paul explicitly mentions the promise to Abraham is in Romans 4:13. He writes, "The promise to Abraham and to his descendants, that they should inherit the world, did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith." The bulk of the argument answers the question of who those descendants are who should receive such an inheritance. The promise itself—to inherit the world—is never in question. Yet, interpretations of this text rarely take the promise at face value.

There is a temptation to spiritualize the promise. For example, in his commentary on Romans, Leon Morris writes, "*Heir of the world* is not a particularly easy expression. It could be understood as an enthusiastic description of great material prosperity, but we expect something in the way of spiritual blessing here. Perhaps material blessing is used as a symbol of spiritual blessing. It is possible to see the prosperity in terms of the family of faith that Abraham

[1] Charles Wesley, 1747.

would beget, a worldwide family."[2] This interpretation is common. In fact, early in his ministry, it seems that John Wesley might have been in full agreement with Morris. Randy Maddox writes of Wesley's early ministry, "…Wesley was raised in a setting that broadly assumed our final state is 'heaven above,' where human spirits dwelling in ethereal bodies join with other spiritual beings (no animals!) in continuous worship of the Ultimate Spiritual Being. He imbibed this model in his upbringing, and through the middle of his ministry it was presented as obvious and unproblematic."[3] It is little wonder then that many of our Methodist hymns preserve this theology—a world to come that is an escape from this earth as the spirit of believers dwell in heaven.

The language of inheriting the world should cause us to question this theology. In considering the language of inheritance in Rom 4:13, many commentators mention the parallels with scripture, particularly with Gen 22:18, which indicates a possession of "all nations,"[4] but most do not spend much time on this promise. James Dunn notes that the promise of inheritance is almost exclusively in connection with land in scripture, but that the promise of land had been expanded before Paul is writing.[5] Leander Keck acknowledges that Paul has expanded the promise from the land to the world, but quickly shifts to the focus on the promise being granted apart from the law.[6] After all, the focus of the argument in Romans 4 is not explaining the promise—knowledge of the promise is assumed. Nevertheless, the promise itself is what is dangling in front of the Romans. What is that promise? Is the promise to inherit the world a ticket to heaven—Morris's "spiritual blessing," or is it an expectation of the earth's renewal?

"Come, O My God, the Promise Seal"[7]

The highest concentration of promise language in Paul's letters occurs in Romans and Galatians where he develops his argument in reference to Abraham: (Rom 4:1-25 and Gal 3:6-4:7 and 4:21-5:2). In both letters, Paul emphasizes the faith of Abraham and the faithfulness of God. In Romans 4, Abraham takes center stage in Paul's argument. This ancestor is reckoned as righteous based on faith rather than performing any works of the law. The blessing of God was given before he was circumcised (Rom 4:9-12). The timing is crucial to Paul's argument. Since the divine blessing pre-dated circumcision, which Paul equates to the "sign or seal" of his

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[2] Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 206.
[3] Randy Maddox, "Nurturing the New Creation," in *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation*, edited by M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2004), 45. Maddox cites as an example the preface to Wesley's first volume of sermons (*Sermons* [1746], Preface §5, Works 1:105).
[4] See, for example, C.K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Black's New Testament Commentary; London: Hendrickson, 1991), 89; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, 1998), 213. Brendan Byrne's commentary on inheritance and promise serves as a refreshing exception (*Romans* (Sacra Pagina; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 157.
[5] Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 213.
[6] Leander E. Keck, Romans (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries; Nasvhille; Abingdon, 2005), 126-127.
[7] A hymn by Charles Wesley

righteousness (Rom 4:11), the blessing was not contingent upon circumcision, or any human deed. Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." (Gal 3:6; cf. Rom. 4:3). So too in Galatians, the timing of Abraham's trust is highlighted. The promise of God to Abraham predated the law by four hundred thirty years according to Gal 3:17. It is important to note, as Paul does, that the law is incapable of nullifying the promise (Gal 3:18) and is not opposed to the promises of God (Gal 3:21).

God's blessing of Abraham included many descendants (e.g., Gen 12:1-3; 15:1-6; 17:7). As stated above, Morris highlights the importance of Abraham's progeny—"a worldwide family." Certainly, in both Romans and Galatians, all who share in Abraham's faith are considered children of Abraham and heirs to the promises. Both letters cite scripture to demonstrate that Abraham is both the father of the circumcised and the uncircumcised (Rom 4:11-12, 16-17), indeed, the father of many nations (Rom 4:17; Gal 3:8).

What is the benefit of being Abraham's descendants? There is more to the Abrahamic promise than progeny. *Land is the inheritance* of Abraham's descendants (e.g., Gen 12:7; 13:15; 15:7; 17:8). The promise of land rests entirely on grace and is guaranteed to all Abraham's descendants—including all who share in the faith of Abraham, "for he is the father of us all" (Rom 4:16). This guarantee stems from God's faithfulness, not from human effort. Abraham may be lifted up as an example of human faithfulness, but it is God who is the main actor in this drama. God gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist, such as granting heirs to a barren couple (Rom 4:17). The blessing to Abraham is a promise of God that reveals God's glory and power to bring life in the midst of death and barrenness (4:13-25). God is the one who reckons Abraham as righteous. God is the one who makes an old man who is "as good as dead" a father of many nations (4:19). God is the one who brought life to Sarah's infertile womb (4:19) and who raised Jesus from the dead (4:24). God is capable of producing heirs and reckoning heirs of the promise (4:25). And God is capable of providing *land*.

And herein lies the problem: Paul makes no explicit reference to the land. If both progeny and land are integral to God's promises to Abraham, how is Paul appropriating the promise of land for the Gentile mission? As noted above, it is common to interpret Romans 4:13 in a spiritual sense—a world to come that is divorced from this present experience. Yet, how can the Gentiles possibly be, as Paul claims, "children of the promise, like Isaac" (Gal 4:28) if land is *not* part of the inheritance? How can Paul claim that the Roman believers will inherit the promises to Abraham, that is, "the whole world" (Romans 4:13)? In short, what on earth has happened to the promise of land in Paul's theology?

The land promises to Abraham, though reinterpreted by Paul, have by no means disappeared from Pauline theology. Rather, the promise of land finds its fulfillment in the hope of *new creation*—a creation that is not simply spiritualized, but is nothing short of the consummation of God's created order, the entire cosmos. This new creation is not only marked by resurrection, but includes land and all the blessings of life in God's redeemed cosmos.

The Absence of "Land" in Paul's Language

First, it must be acknowledged that Paul avoids talking about the "land" explicitly. If land is part of God's promise to Abraham, why does Paul not mention land as part of the inheritance? In his meticulous study of land in the New Testament, W. D. Davies highlights the lack of land

language in Paul's letters.[8] In Romans, Davies argues, Paul would have good reason to avoid the mention of land as part of the Abrahamic promises.[9] The apostle's cautionary words in Romans 13:1-7 demonstrate sensitivity to the political environment. Perhaps, Paul did not desire to stir up trouble in a letter written to believers in the heart of the empire. But, as Davies notes, the letter to the region of Galatia would not necessarily share the same political cautiousness. Davies writes: "In Galatians we can be fairly certain that Paul did not merely ignore the territorial aspect of the promise for political reasons: his silence points not merely to the absence of a conscious concern with it, but to *his deliberate rejection of it*. His interpretation of the promise is a-territorial"[10] (*italics* mine). The promise, in essence, becomes a blessing to all nations and, therefore, unboundaried. Furthermore, Davies argues, Christ is the key to Paul's argument:

> "For Paul, Christ had gathered up the promise into the singularity of his own person. In this way, 'the territory' promised was transformed into and fulfilled by the life 'in Christ.' All this is not made explicit, because Paul did not directly apply himself to the question of the land, but it is implied" (Davies, 179).

Thus, Davies concludes, "…the land, like the Law, particular and provisional, had become *irrelevant.*"[11]

There is much to commend in Davies' observations. First, Davies acknowledges that land is a concept that gets redefined apart from a particular nation or territory not only in Paul's letters but also in the Hebrew Bible. Calling the non-Jewish audience, "heirs" of the promise, therefore, emphasizes the multi-national blessings that the promises to Abraham were meant to facilitate. In Gal 3:8 Paul cites Genesis 12:3:[12] "In you shall all the nations be blessed." This citation highlights the Abrahamic promise as inclusive of all nations and not limited to one nationality, or as Davies has pointed out, one territory or land.

Second, Davies argues that Paul avoids explicit language of land due to his own thought transformation about the land via Christ. For Davies, being "in Christ" personalizes and universalizes the promise, thereby, dislocating the promise from one people and one place and relocating it "in Christ."[13] Without a doubt, Paul's argument in Galatians 3 and 4 hinges on the Galatians being "in Christ" and therefore part of Abraham's seed. Furthermore, it is Abraham's faith that takes center stage in Romans 4, and Paul is drawing parallels with the Romans' faith that God's power for salvation has been made manifest in Christ.

There are problems, nonetheless, with Davies's claim that the promise of land is now irrelevant—a dated promise that falls away now that Christ is on the scene. Land, after all, is a promise of God. According to Gal 3:17-18 not even the law—which is holy and good (Rom 7: 12, 16)—can annul a covenant ratified by God or void a promise. And Paul, according to Romans 11:29, sees the promises of God as *irrevocable*. Rather than interpreting Paul's lack of land language as a dismissal of the land promise, what happens if we *assume* the land promise in Paul's argument? After all, in Romans 4, both the world and the nations are mentioned as part of the promise to Abraham (Romans 4:13-25). In Gal 3:16 it is interesting that Paul does not refer

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[8] W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1974), 167.
[9] Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 178.
[10] Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 178-179.
[11] Davies, *The Gospel and the Land,* 179.
[12] Also Gen 18:18.
[13] Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 179.

to a *single* promise made to Abraham, such as progeny, but refers to the promise*s* (plural) that were made to Abraham and to his offspring. What if the promise of land is intrinsic to being "children of the promise?"

"To Spread Through All the Earth Abroad:"[14] The Blessing of Land

When God made the promise to Abraham, the promise included all the land that he could see. The territory is not neatly demarcated with borders. In fact, even as the story progresses, the physical territory is not consistently defined. There are at least two "maps" in the Hebrew Bible:[15] (1) the land of Canaan[16] and (2) an extension of that land, during the united monarchy, to include both sides of the Jordan (minus Moab and Ammon) as well as north to the Euphrates River (Deut 11:24).[17] It is telling that the text does not consistently speak of the same boundaries. Rather, the *idea* of land takes on a significance that is bigger than either of these maps.

The biblical text speaks of the land both *literally* and *symbolically*—both the fertile soil which sustains life *and* the symbolic notion of prosperity, security, and abundance.[18] The literal and symbolic concepts are not easily disentangled since land as territoried space finds its meaning and purpose in land as symbol. Brueggemann defines land as a place with the Lord, "a place well filled with memories of life with him and promise from him and vows to him. It is land that provides the central assurance to Israel of its historicality, that it will be and always must be concerned with actual rootage in a place which is a repository for commitment and therefore identity."[19] As for promise, Brueggemann claims, God's promise to God's people is always God's land.[20] Plus, that physical territory, the longing for it or the loss of it, consumes much of the plot line from the Abrahamic promises onward. It is little wonder that Brueggemeann would see in the land a central if not the central theme of the text.

Life on the land depended completely on the Lord. The Lord provided rain. The Lord provided security. The Lord sustained life. The land was always so deeply connected to the Lord that in a profound way the land always belongs to God. Israel never "owns" the promised land.[21] Even the year of Jubilee was meant to ensure that the land returned to the users God had elected as its tenders from the beginning.[22] In short, the Lord is sovereign over the land. That sovereignty is not confined to borders. The bordered space was always intended to be a witness, and thus a blessing, to the nations.

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[14] A line from Charles Wesley's "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing"
[15] Gary M. Burge, "Land," pages 570-575 in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), p. 571. See also Davies, *The Gospel and the Land,* p. 17, n. 3.
[16] The land from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea and from the Wadi of Egypt to Hamath (Numbers 34:1-12).
[17] Burge, "Land," 571.
[18] Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), p. 2.
[19] Brueggemann, *Land,* 6.
[20] Brueggemann, *Land,* 6.
[21] Burge, "The Land," 572.
[22] Burge, "The Land," 571.

What might it look like to fulfill the promise of land? Fulfillment requires more than just the granting of land. The land as territory is always meant to be the land as a space where people can prosper. The land is even characterized as a place flowing with milk and honey—an area that produces more than enough to support life (Exod 3:8, 17, 13:5; Lev. 20:24; Num 13:27). Fulfillment of the land promise must look like people living and thriving on a land of plenty—a land that can support a growing population. For the land to serve this function, then its inhabitants must be good stewards of the land and its resources—hence the land's connection to the covenant (Genesis 17:8-9).[23]

The intertwining of covenant and promise reflects God's good intentions for the created order. In his book, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, R. Kendall Soulen highlights the importance of God's blessings for God's creation. Rather than seeing the great plot line of the biblical story as the redemption of humanity, Soulen argues persuasively that God longs for the consummation of creation. Through land God blesses Israel with life and the fullness of life.[24] The gift of land embodies the kind of blessed life that God wants not just for Israel, but for all nations.[25] Soulen writes: "By electing Israel and blessing it 'in the land,' God elects Israel together with the whole human family in all its time-, place-, and season-bound earthiness as the object of God's consummating work."[26] Thus, the land is both a means and a symbol for God's blessing. As such, life on the land serves as a microcosm of God's desire for all creation.

How does land then factor into Paul's gospel? Paul is ministering during a time of Roman occupation both of the promised land and of the known world. Could the land promise not seem like a distant wish, a pie-in-the-sky hope, with no grounding in reality? Would it not be easier on God if the land promise could just be spiritualized so that God does not have to be invested in the actual created order? Based on many interpretations of the land in Christian theology it seems that interpreters have wanted to protect God's reputation. The land, like the law, has fallen to the wayside. What happens, though, if we take seriously the land as a tangible vehicle of God's blessing for creation? Paul's promise of new creation is not a promise divorced from the created order. Rather, new creation for Paul is just as tangible as circumcision.

"Let Us All in Thee Inherit:"[27] Expanding the Promise

Paul's view of salvation involves the renewal of creation. In Romans 4:13—within the discussion of Abraham's faith, Paul introduces God's promise to Abraham and his descendants by saying that they should inherit the *world*. Paul avoids saying "land," as though "land" is simply not big enough to encompass the extent of God's power and grace. Instead, the inheritance of Abraham is nothing short of the cosmos. Though promise language courses throughout Rom 4:13-25, the promised inheritance is only mentioned in Rom 4:13, where Paul expands the promise to include the whole world.

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[23] The first fruits and first crops were sacrificed to the Lord (Lev. 27:30-33; Deut 14:22; 26:9-15), and the Sabbath was even observed *by* the land (Lev. 25:2).

[24] R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 123.

[25] Soulen, *The God of Israel,* 124.

[26] Soulen, *The God of Israel,* 123.

[27] From Charles Wesley, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling"

Paul's expansion of the promise is not unique. In Genesis, the promise is for the land that Abraham can see. By the time of Paul, though, the boundaries of that land have broadened to incorporate the whole world (cf. Sirach 44:21; Jub. 19:21; *Mos*. 1.155; *Bib. Ant.* 32:3 "inherit the world"; cf. 1 Enoch 5:7b).[28] For example, Sirach 44:21 reflects this extension of the land promise:

> "Therefore the Lord assured him {Abraham} with an oath that the nations would be blessed through his offspring; that he would make him as numerous as the dust of the earth, and exalt his offspring like the stars, and give them *an inheritance from sea to sea and from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth*" (Sir 44:21 NRS, italics for emphasis).

Similarly, Jubilees 22:14 expresses Abraham's blessing for Jacob in terms of inheritance of "all the earth." This promise is reiterated in Jubilees 32:19: "And I shall give to your seed all of the land under heaven and they will rule in all nations as they have desired. And after this all of the earth will be gathered together and they will inherit it forever." In 1 Enoch 5:7, the chosen will receive this great inheritance: "But to the elect there shall be light, joy, and peace, and they shall inherit the earth." These elect will "not return again to sin," but live long peaceable lives according to wisdom (*1 Enoch* 5:7-10). Wisdom will create peace and happiness on the earth (*1 Enoch* 5:7-10).

The hope of inheriting this peace is related to eschatological blessing. In *2 Baruch* 14:7, the anticipated inheritance is the world to come: "Therefore, they [the righteous] leave this world without fear and are confident of the world which you have promised to them with an expectation full of joy." Baruch laments that the wicked seem to prosper while the righteous suffer (*2 Bar* 14:1-19; cf. *4 Ezra* 6:55-59), yet it is for the righteous that God created the world (*2 Bar* 14:19; cf. *4 Ezra* 6:55). In his pleading with the Lord, Baruch bemoans, "For if only this life exists which everyone possess here, nothing could be more bitter than this." (*2 Bar* 22:13). The text is written during a time of foreign occupation of the land,[29] and there is fear that "the Mighty One does not anymore remember the earth" (*2 Bar* 25:4; cf. 32:9). Baruch's hope is placed in an Anointed One who will resurrect all who sleep in hope of him (*2 Bar* 30:1). Ultimately, "the Mighty One will renew his creation" (*2 Bar* 32:7), and the righteous will inherit this renewed earth (*2 Bar* 44:12-14; 51:3; cf. *4 Ezra* 7:9). In *2 Bar* 57:1-3, the renewal of the earth is equated with the promise of life for the righteous.

Likewise, in *Sib Or* 3, the world to come is a renewal of the created order. The Sybil longs for the transformation of the earth with a land of plenty (3:619-623), a renewed Temple (3:701-730), and a just kingdom on earth (3:767-795).[30] The transformation is equated with God's promise of the earth and the world and the "gates of the blessed and all joys and immortal

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[28] Even during the second temple period, the language of inheritance is tied to the land (see 2 Macc 2:17-18; Wis 12:21; 18:6; cf. the inheritance language of Pss. Sol. 12:6 and the earth's actions on behalf of the righteous in Pss. Sol 11:1-9).

[29] It seems that the author lives after the destruction of the second Temple in A.D. 70, if *2 Bar* 32:2-4 is interpreted to presuppose two destructions. This work also has many parallels with 4 Ezra. If a common source or literary dependence is possible, then 2 Baruch may date to the beginning of the second century. For a discussion, see A.F. J. Klijn "2 (Syriac Apocalypse of) Baruch: A New Translation and Introduction," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature & Testaments,* edited by James H. Charlesworth (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), 616-617.

[30] See Appendix for *Sib Or* 3:767-795.

intellect and eternal cheer" (3:669-771). This coming kingdom is marked by peace (3:780), "just wealth" (3:784), and the judgment and dominion of God (3:784). In language reminiscent of Isaiah, the oracle imagines a time when wolves and lambs will feed together, bears will sleep with calves, lions will feast on husks, like an ox, and "mere infant children will lead them with ropes. For he will make the beast on earth harmless. Serpents and asps will sleep with babies and will not harm them, for the hand of God will be upon them" (3:787-795; cf. Isa 11:6-8; 65:17-25). This coming kingdom will exhibit God's justice on earth and abundant life in a world of peace.

In sum, Paul's language of inheriting the world, though bigger than land as territoried space, is congruent with other Hellenistic Jewish literature. Far from spiritualizing the promise of the land, this literature expands the physical space of inheritance to incorporate the whole earth. Far from abandoning the created order, there is an expectation that God will renew it. This expectation lives on in the early church. Severian, Bishop of Gabala in Syria in the fourth and fifth centuries, describes the world to come as a world that has been renewed: "Paul says that the righteous will inherit the world because the ungodly will be thrown out and handed over to punishment on the day of judgment, but the righteous will possess the universe which remains, and will have been renewed, and the good things of heaven and earth will be theirs."[31]

Paul and New Creation

Ultimately, in Galatians, Paul links the promise to "new creation." He concludes the body of his argument by reiterating that the fruit of the Spirit rather than the marks of circumcision are the outward signs of God's work. God is renewing and rectifying the whole cosmos, not just the physical descendants of Abraham. In Gal 6:15 Paul exclaims: "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation." This "new creation" stands in contrast to the "present evil age" of Gal 1:4, that has been subjugated under sin's power (Rom 5:12-21). New creation is the reign of God's grace that is marked by abundant life in a redeemed world. This redemption has already begun. According to 2 Corinthians 5:17, those who are "in Christ" are already a new creation. Yet, God's rectification does not stop with humanity. In Romans 8, Paul writes that all creation is suffering under the power of sin. As Beverly Roberts Gaventa has argued, the longing of creation must include more than the plight of human creatures.[32] Rather, the longing of creation must indeed be all God's creation—both human and nonhuman. All have suffered under the reign of sin.

To recall Soulen's argument, God has not abandoned any of God's creation, but works toward its consummation. The God of Israel invests and reveals godself in creation—by electing a human family—the family of Abraham, by granting that family children, and by giving those children land. These specific gifts were intended to be a blessing to all nations. For Paul, the land promise has been magnified. The borders are bigger than one territory. The whole cosmos is in view because the whole cosmos stands in need of rectification. In short, to claim that the land promise is now irrelevant misses the reality that the gift of land is a divine investment in the

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[31] Severian, "Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church," cited in *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Romans*, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 118.
[32] Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 53-55.

created order. The problem with hope in a non-spatial, spiritual kingdom is that God never consummates creation. Only humanity finds redemption while the rest of creation suffers.

This anthropocentric reading runs counter to the vision of new creation in Isaiah 65 (cf. *Sib. Or*. 3:767-795). There, the new world imagined by the prophet includes peaceful and abundant existence on the land—where people live long lives, build houses, plant vineyards, and reap the benefits of their own harvest, where even the predators live at peace with their former prey (Isa 65:17-25; cf. Isa 2:4; 11:6-8; Ezek 34:25; Hos 2:18; Job 5:23). The new heavens and new earth are characterized by God's abundant blessings (65:23).

What on earth has happened to the land in Paul's theology? It is nothing short of abundant life in a redeemed world. Dunn rightly notes that the promise is the restoration of God's created order.[33] The gift of land embodies blessing—God's commitment to the blessing of abundant life that God desires for God's creation. Paul's appeals to the promises of Abraham do not dismiss God's promise of land. Rather, Paul *assumes* the blessing of land as testimony of God's faithfulness and as witness to God's intention to rectify creation. Through faith, the Galatians are indeed heirs and children of the promise, and what they are inheriting is life—the kind of abundant life that rectifies and reclaims human and nonhuman creation alike.

Wesley and New Creation

It was noted at the beginning that Wesley took seriously the spiritual transformation of humanity. It was also noted that initially Wesley's eschatology was a product of his environment. Maddox argues that Wesley's interpretation developed as he began to contemplate the renewal of the whole world.[34] Holiness for Wesley progressed from individual transformation to include social holiness and finally hope in a finished creation. Later in his life, in the 1770s and particularly the 1780s, John Wesley's theology emphasized cosmic hope.[35]

The hope of finished creation became the lens through which Wesley viewed individual transformation. All creation has been marred by sin, and all creation longs for redemption (Romans 8:19-22).[36] In his sermon on "New Creation," Wesley moves from discussing inanimate creation to animals to human transformation.[37] In his vision of new creation, paradise will be restored, and everything will be transformed into a more beautiful paradise than Adam ever saw (*Sermon* 64.11, 16).[38] There will be no more rain because the earth will naturally produce pure water (64.11-12). There will be no more hurricanes or furious storms and no more terrifying meteors (64.9, 11) or earthquakes (64.15). There will be no more extreme

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[33] Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 213.
[34] Maddox, "Nurturing the New Creation," 43-52.
[35] Maddox, "Nurturing the New Creation," 43.
[36] See also Néstor O. Míguez, "The Old Creation in the New, the New Creation in the Old" in *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation*, edited by M. Douglas Meeks (Nasvhille: Kingswood Books, 2004), 62-66.
[37] John Wesley, "The New Creation," Sermon 64 in *John Wesley's Sermons: Anthology*, edited by Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 494-500.
[38] On the beauty of creation before the arrival of sin, see John Wesley, Sermon 56: "God's Approbation of His Works"

temperatures—hot and cold (64.14). All will be serene. Though the landscape of the earth would remain beautifully diverse, there would be no wild deserts or barren sands or bogs (64.15). The rolling hills will be ornaments (64.15). He imagined humans transformed to be like angels in swiftness and strength, able to transport themselves across the globe from one side to the other (64.12).

Wesley preached that every living part of creation was effected by Adam's sin. All were subject "to that fell monster, Death, the conqueror of all that breathe" (*Sermon* 64.17). Wesley imagined that in the new creation, predators would no longer have to kill and devour one another to survive (64.17). In words that echo Isaiah, Wesley proclaims, "'The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,' (the words may be literally as well as figuratively understood) 'and the leopard shall lie down with the kid: They shall not hurt or destroy,' from the rising up of the sun, to the going down of the same" (64.17; see Isaiah 11:6; cf. Isaiah 65:25). There will be no more death. No more sin. Believers will enjoy union with God and a state of holiness and happiness far superior to that that which Adam enjoyed in Paradise (64.18).

This belief in the earth's renewal made Wesley distinctive from some of the most popular theologians of his day.[39] The Cartesian dichotomy between spirit and matter had infiltrated the church so that there was hope of the soul's salvation, but little need for a resurrection of the flesh.[40] As Theodore Runyon writes, "Wesley rejects the notion that evil is due to the material nature of the world."[41] Of the theologians that did believe in the earth's renewal, there was still a distinction between cosmic renewal and the resurrection of believers. Calvin, for instance, proposed that the earth would be renewed but did not believe that people would live on it.[42] Rather, the redeemed would just look down upon it from heaven, as though the rest of the created order had little to do with God's intentions for the abundant life of humanity. Perhaps, it is this element of finished creation, though, where Methodism might refocus its efforts and again be a distinctive voice of hope in our broken world.

What is at Stake?

If we place our hope in an escape from this world, we negate God's investment in the created order. Theology that limits God's rectification to people limits the power of God. John Wesley became convinced that "new creation" encompassed the whole cosmos, all of physical creation, including animals![43] Wesley interpreted Romans 8—all creation's longing—as an indicator that all creation was indeed suffering from sin.

In Romans, Paul devotes the first eight chapters detailing Sin's death-hold on creation. It is as though he does not think that the Romans can see the mightiness of the gospel until they grasp the direness of the situation. Paul's definition of sin is not limited to human transgressions. Sure, people make mistakes. Paul is clear that even those who have the law and who know what should be done fail to do it. By the end of Romans 3, Paul has well established his case that

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[39] Maddox, "Nurturing the New Creation," 43.
[40] Maddox, "Nurturing the New Creation," 43.
[41] Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 11.
[42] Maddox, "Nurturing the New Creation," 44.
[43] Maddox, "Nurturing the New Creation," 44.

every single person—every single mouth—is guilty. But just as death's power is not limited to humanity, neither is the power of Sin. Beverly Roberts Gaventa has noted well the cosmic scope of sin's power.[44] She even talks about "Sin" with an upper case "s" to distinguish this power from the more common definition of sin as human transgression. Sin has dominion. Sin reigns. People can be enslaved to Sin. Sin ensnares and manipulates every facet of our world. The problem is direr than the reality that humans transgress. Humans transgress because this evil power has dominated our culture, our political systems, our sense of what is just, even the goodness of God's creation. The effects of Sin are everywhere. And only God has the power to break Sin's stronghold.

When Paul claims that believers inherit the world, he is not stating that they gain heaven, as though heaven were somehow an escape from this world. No, he is standing firm in his tradition—a tradition rooted to the land. What are the theological implications of an inheritance that encompasses the earth? Inheriting the world is intricately related to the blessing of abundant life that God desires for all creation.

Revival, Reform, and Revolution in Global Methodism

What does the hope of finished creation have to do with revival, reform, and revolution in Methodism? Everything. Wesley had a tension in his theology that paralleled Paul's theology—already God's new creation is visible in this present evil age, but that new creation has not yet come to fruition.[45] All creation longs for rectification, and God has left no part of creation behind. God is actively redeeming what Sin has corrupted. The finished creation not only impinges upon the present, it also equips and enables believers to embody God's new creation here in the "present evil age" (to borrow a phrase from Paul, Gal 1:4).

The gospel of the Methodists has implications for every facet of life as we know it. It is not merely individual reflections of faith. Nor is it only social holiness. Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore makes this point well: "When people within Methodist theological traditions debate whether Wesley's central concern was to evangelize or to reshape social systems, we miss a central point. Wesley was concerned to restore broken relationships and revitalize Christian life with God and the world."[46] Methodism is not limited to interactions between humanity and God because Sin is not limited to those interactions. Just as Sin has affected all of God's creation, Methodism affirms that all the created order longs for God's redemption.

What are the implications of such a cosmic gospel? Methodists have theological reasons for bearing witness to justice. We cannot place our hope in our governments to create justice. Our political systems are corrupted by the power of Sin. Perhaps, Scott Kisker is right, Methodists, especially in the United States, have become too closely aligned with the establishment. In his book, *Mainline or Methodist?,* Kisker argues that Methodism began as a movement that was distinctive.[47] It did not enjoy political power. It was a religious movement

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[44] Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul,* 125-136.
[45] See John Wesley, Sermon 8 "The First Fruits of the Spirit" on Romans 8:1
[46] Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, "New Creation: Repentance, Reparation, and Reconciliation," in *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation*, 107.
[47] Scott Kisker, *Mainline or Methodist?: Rediscovering our Evangelistic Mission* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008).

that attracted those from humble life circumstances. By the mid-nineteenth century, though, Methodism in the U.S. had become the religion of the establishment. As evidence of this, Kisker cites the reality that President Abraham Lincoln's funeral was performed by a Methodist bishop.[48] U.S. political figures such as Hilary Clinton and George W. Bush—from opposing ideologies—both claim the Methodist church as their spiritual home. In 1887, when the Pope decided to establish a Catholic school in the U.S. capitol, the Catholic Church created The Catholic University of America. Not to be outdone by the Catholics, Methodists also established a school in Washington, D.C. They called it American University (AU).[49] The seminary where I work has a close-knit relationship with this school. We share some buildings and services since our seminary is housed at the corner of AU's campus. No one would ever know, however, that AU was a Methodist school.

Bearing witness to a God who remains invested in the whole created order means that we must be distinctive not only in our love for one another, but in our love for everyone and every facet of God's creation. We are neighbors and stewards. We have theological reasons for caring for strangers and for caring for our planet. Perhaps, Methodism needs to be reminded of just how big this good news really is. In our baptismal vows, we covenant to avoid evil, but most of the Methodist churches that I attend rarely talk about the cosmic power of Sin. In reality, Sin's power is everywhere. It is evidenced by immigrants at our U.S. borders who are risking everything for the hope of abundant life, by refugees who are homeless due to war, greed, and the thirst for power, by the unhoused in our streets, by the reality that my country has to be reminded that "Black Lives Matter," and by the abundance of food that rots in our refrigerators while others go hungry. The effects of Sin's power are not hard to find, but they are hard to digest. Though God created the diverse world to be a place of mutual blessing, Sin thwarted those blessings. In his insightful study of the importance of new creation to Wesley's theology, Theodore Runyon writes, "The cosmic drama of the renewing of creation begins, therefore, with the renewal of the *imago Dei* in humankind."[50] Humans are called to live as the image of God in the world.[51] Wesley saw in the transformation of humanity God's work to provide channels of blessing to the rest of the created order.[52] He imagines a world of harmony,[53] and we are all actors in that cosmic drama.

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[48] Kisker, *Mainline or Methodist?*, 16.
[49] Kisker, *Mainline or Methodist?*, 17.
[50] Runyon, *The New Creation,* 12.
[51] Runyon, *The New Creation,* 12.
[52] John Wesley, Sermon 60 "The General Deliverance"
[53] Runyon, *The New Creation,* 10.

Appendix:
Sybilline Oracles 3:767-795

Translation by J. J. Collins, "The Sybilline Oracles," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature & Testaments,* edited by James H. Charlesworth (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), 379.

And then, indeed, he will raise up a kingdom for all
ages among men, he who once gave the holy Law
to the pious, to all of whom he promised to open the earth
and the world and the gates of the blessed and all joys
and immortal intellect and eternal cheer.
From every land they will bring incense and gifts
to the house of the great God. There will be no other
house among men, even for future generations to know,
except the one which God gave to faithful men to honor
(for mortals will invoke the son of the great God).[54]
All the paths of the plain and rugged cliffs,
lofty mountains, and wild waves of the sea
will be easy to climb or sail in those days,
for all peace will come upon the land of the good.
Prophets of the great God will take away the sword
For they themselves are judges of men and righteous kings.
There will also be just wealth among men
For this is the judgment and dominion of the great God.
Rejoice, maiden, and be glad, for to you the one
who created heaven and earth has given the joy of the age.
He will dwell in you. You will have immortal light.
Wolves and lambs will eat grass together in the mountains.
Leopards will feed together with kids.
Roving bears will spend the night with calves.
The flesh-eating lion will eat husks at the manger
like an ox, and mere infant children will lead them
with ropes. For he will make the beasts on earth harmless.
Serpents and asps will sleep with babies
and will not harm them, for the hand of God will be upon them.

[54] This line is likely a later Christian interpolation.