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# Scripture, Law and Fruit: Paul and the Biblical Story



by Sylvia C. Keesmaat

**W**hat does it mean to live out of the scriptural story? What does a reading of Scripture look like if it takes the Bible seriously as our founding story, the authoritative narrative for our life and ethic? What would a God-breathed and scripturally shaped praxis look like?

In this paper we will explore Paul's call to the first-century Colossian Christians to "bear fruit in every good work" (Col. 1.10), in the light of the whole of the scriptural story. We will note the ways in which the theme of fruitfulness is transformed

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throughout the biblical story and attempt to discern how the whole of the story speaks through such transformations. Finally, we will briefly explore what this story, with its emphasis on fruitfulness, might mean in our contemporary context for those of us who claim this story as our own.

Let us begin where we will end, with our contemporary context. What is the context in which we live our lives both locally and globally? What world is this that needs the story of Scripture to make sense of it? For the purposes of this paper I will begin by highlighting four aspects of our contemporary world, four areas of fruitlessness in which the biblical story offers a word of hope.

The first is environmental destruction. We live in a world of literal biotic fruitlessness, where species are disappearing at the rate of one species a minute, and where the use of pesticides and fertilizers has killed not only the land but is slowly killing us. It is becoming increasingly clear that the North American lifestyle is strangling the fruitfulness of the land. What word of hope does Scripture have for a creation whose fruitfulness is denied?

The second context is consumer individualism, which glorifies consumption at the expense of community. The consume-till-you-die lifestyle replaces real human relationships and community with plastic toys and gadgets. What word of hope does Scripture have for a fruitless individualistic consumptive culture?

The third context is that of crippling international debt. In many nations of the world, the economic constrictions imposed by servicing their

debt denies the fruitfulness of the poorest of the poor. Rather than providing health care or education, governments in these countries are forced to spend their resources in payments to the richest nations of the world, effectively denying the fruitfulness that knowledge and health can bring to a people. What word of hope does Scripture have for the strangling fruitlessness of debt?

The fourth context could be described as post-modern ethical paralysis, where the loss of any overarching meaning or metanarrative saps any reason to bear fruit or bring healing to our broken world. What word of hope does Scripture bring to postmodern despair?

This is our world. What does the gospel have to say to the fruitlessness of our age? Let us listen to these words of Paul from Colossians 1.3-6:

In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel, that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God.

In a world of fruitlessness, Paul proclaims a gospel that is bearing fruit and growing, not only in the whole world but also in the Colossian community. What is more, Paul comes back to this theme of fruitfulness further on in v. 10:

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God (Col 1.9-10).

The Colossians, like the gospel, are called to bear fruit in their lives.

What might Paul's allusions to fruitfulness mean? Is it true that the fruit of the gospel is conversion and that "the success of the gospel [is] in producing so many mature and moral people" (Dunn 62)? Is good fruit best defined as "moral maturity", particularly as manifest in the good works of almsgiving and hospitality (Dunn 72)? Does spiritualizing the fruit of the Spirit into inner moral virtues really offer a word of hope to the contemporary situations

of fruitlessness that we just outlined?

Perhaps we will have a better chance of answering these questions if we explore more precisely Paul's language of fruitfulness within the broader context of fruitfulness throughout the Scriptures. How is the metaphor of fruitfulness employed throughout the Scriptures? How do such understandings of fruitfulness call the reader into fruitfulness in her or his own life? How does the biblical text nourish fruitfulness in our own context? Let us see how the theme of fruitfulness unfolds throughout the biblical story and then situate Paul within that story.

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*In a life-giving creation  
the image of God is called  
to till and keep this earth,  
to help it bear fruit.*

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### **Fruitfulness as creational calling**

We first encounter the language of fruitfulness in Genesis 1 in the context of the cultural mandate. After creating male and female in God's own image, God blessed them and said "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1.28). The call to be fruitful is the very first command and blessing given to those creatures who bear God's image. Because this call to fruitfulness is linked with the call to multiply and fill the earth, this language is often interpreted in terms of giving birth. Bearing fruit, then, means having many children. There is good biblical tradition for such an interpretation.

However, as we shall see, fruitfulness also takes on many other meanings as the story progresses, and these also will inform our reading of this call. At the outset, let us notice, however, two important things about this fruitfulness. First, bearing fruit is foundational to our calling as image-bearers of our God. And secondly, the context for our fruit bearing is a created order that God repeatedly calls good. Genesis 2 tells us that the human who bears God's image is *adam* from *adamah*: earth creature from the earth. And that earth creature is placed in the midst of a garden full of fruit-bearing trees. What is more, that garden is so lush and fertile that the

rivers that flow out of it water the rest of the earth (Gen. 2.10-14). It is in a life-giving creation that the image of God is called to till and keep this earth, to help it bear fruit.

However, the life-giving call is so quickly ignored. No sooner have God's image-bearers eaten of the forbidden fruit than their calling is distorted. They still are called to be fruitful and multiply, but childbirth will now occur in a context of great pain and cursed hierarchy. They still are called to till and keep, but this now-cursed earth will bring forth not lush fruitfulness but thorns and thistles by the sweat of the brow. Disobedience has distorted the fruitfulness of both image of God and of good creation.

Two other texts, however, reaffirm the calling. After God has destroyed the whole world in a flood, what seems like a new creation scene is recorded. In Genesis 9 we read that "God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth'" (Gen. 9.1). To Noah and his sons, God reaffirms the call to be fruitful and multiply. Despite significant differences between the calling of humanity in Genesis 9.1-7 and the original calling in Genesis 1, this call to be fruitful has not changed.<sup>1</sup>

The other text that reaffirms this calling is Exodus 1. The Israelites are in Egypt where, we read, they "were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong so that the land was filled with them" (Exod. 1.7). Even in Egypt, under oppression, the people of God were fulfilling their creational calling; in fact, the text says, "The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread" (Exod. 1.12). The implications couldn't be clearer: Israel in Egypt is bearing God's image by fulfilling the creational calling to be fruitful.

The Genesis 9 and Exodus 1 texts not only reinforce the call to fruitfulness as foundational to creation; they also reveal that the call to fruitfulness remains central to humanity's calling in the midst of evil and oppression. Even though the heart of humankind is inclined toward evil from youth (Gen. 6.11-13; 8.21), even though the people of God find themselves in oppression, still our calling is one of bearing fruit.<sup>2</sup>

What is more, Genesis 9 reaffirms the creational context of this calling by recording God's covenant

with Noah and every living creature on the earth. This is the first and the most foundational covenant in the biblical story, preceding even the covenant with Abraham. In promising never to destroy the earth again with a flood, God affirms seven times (the biblical seven is a number of completeness) that this covenant is with all living things, or all flesh. The implications are clear. God's judgment on the earth is not a negation of the earth and all that is on it. The creational context remains central, as does the importance of every living thing as part of that context.

But what precisely is this fruit we are called to bear in this our creational home? Is it merely having many children? Or is there more to this calling?

### **Fruitfulness as a result of obedience to *torah***

After Israel has been redeemed from Egypt in the exodus event, we find that the calling of humanity as image-of-God found in Genesis has been reinterpreted as the calling of Israel to obedience to *torah*. Israel is called to image Yahweh, her God, but in a context of sin and broken-ness, bearing the image of God is interpreted anew. Israel is now called to be holy as her God is holy; she is to free slaves as her God frees slaves (Deut. 15.15); she is to love the stranger because her God is the one who loves strangers (Deut. 10.19); she is to take no bribe, avoid partiality, and execute justice for the orphan and the widow because her God is not partial, her God takes no bribe, her God executes justice for the orphan and the widow (Deut. 10.17,18).

And bearing such an image of God, in obedience to *torah*, will result in fruitfulness in Israel. In Leviticus 26 we read that faithfulness to *torah* means that Yahweh will send rain, that the land will produce and the trees will be fruitful.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, such fruitfulness is inextricably tied to peace in the land (v. 6). When both dangerous animals and enemies are no longer a threat in the land, then Israel, both land and people, will be fruitful and multiply (v.9).<sup>4</sup>

In Deuteronomy 7.12-16 fruitfulness is described in even wider terms: God will bless the fruit of the womb and the fruit of the ground, the grain and wine and oil, the offspring of the cattle and flocks (Deut. 7.17), and God will do so in the land (v.13).<sup>5</sup> However, such fertility and fruitfulness depends on obedience to *torah*; for disobedience the Lord will

make the sky like iron and the earth like copper, so that the land yields no produce and the trees no fruit (Lev. 26.19).

At this point in the story, therefore, the creational calling becomes concentrated in Israel. Israel is called to image God by following *torah*, and where such faithfulness is practiced, fruitfulness is given, a gift from Yahweh as a sign of blessing on this people. This is a fruitfulness that they experience in the *land* both in terms of abundance of crops and animals and in safety. And fruitfulness is linked inextricably to obedience to *torah*. *Torah* is the living water that nourishes the fruitfulness of the people and through them the land.

### **The prophetic call to justice and righteousness and the loss of fruitfulness**

As the story unfolds, however, we see that Israel was unable to live in such obedience. One of the most poignant descriptions of God's covenant with Israel is found in Isaiah 5.1-7. The passage describes a "love-song" concerning the vineyard of the beloved: the tender care with which the vineyard is planted, and the hope that it would be fruitful and yield grapes. But the vineyard yields wild grapes. And so judgment is pronounced on this vineyard: in terms that echo the curse of Genesis 3, the vineyard will become "a waste, it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns" (v. 6).<sup>6</sup> The love-song ends with a heart-rending cry (a word-play in the Hebrew): "he expected justice (*mishpat*), but saw bloodshed (*mispah*); righteousness (*tsedeqah*), but heard a cry (*tse`aqah*)!" (v. 7). This is one of the most extended metaphors concerning the sort of fruitfulness that God expected from his people: the grapes he expected were justice and righteousness, which are the fruit that *torah* obedience yields.

Just as Isaiah 5 describes the punishment for Israel's lack of fruitfulness in terms of creational curse, so further on Isaiah emphasizes the connections between disobedience and judgment on the earth. Isaiah 24 describes God's punishment in this way:

The earth dries up and withers  
the world languishes and withers  
the heavens languish together with the earth.  
The earth lies polluted  
under its inhabitants;  
for they have transgressed the laws,

violated the statutes,  
broken the everlasting covenant.  
Therefore a curse devours the earth,  
and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt;  
therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled,  
and few people are left.

(Isaiah 24.4-6)

Not only is the earth dried up and withered (contrast this with the fertility associated with the rivers in Genesis 1), but the inhabitants of the earth dwindle and few people are left. Disobedience results in lack of human and creational fruitfulness. In Hosea 4 this punishment is explicitly described in even wider creational terms. Because of the people's

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*Israel is called to image  
God by following torah,  
and where such  
faithfulness is practised,  
fruitfulness is given.*

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disobedience to the law, "the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals, the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing" (Hos. 4.3).

As these passages make clear, lack of fruitfulness follows from oppression, from bloodshed and murder, from injustice. And such fruitlessness affects the whole of creation, the whole of the land that the people were to faithfully tend and keep.

### **Fruit in the wilderness, restoration in the land**

Israel is in exile. And although the land she had used harshly was enjoying its sabbaths, it was also becoming a wasteland, a haunt of jackals and wild beasts. In the context of exile, a result of *disobedience* to the law, the relationship between *torah* obedience and the fruitfulness of the land and people is configured differently. There is no longer a hope that Israel can keep the law faithfully and thus once again enjoy fruitfulness in the land. *Torah* obedience cannot bring about the restoration that is required. Only God can do that. Hence, we have in those texts that most clearly express Israel's longing for restoration and forgiveness from her God, the clearly expressed hope for renewed fruitfulness.

A central part of this expectation, prior to any assertion about the fruitfulness or obedience of the people of God, is the theme of fruit in the wilderness. The wilderness itself will become fertile, a place of luxuriant vegetation, trees and pasture.<sup>7</sup> In Isaiah 55 the language used echoes that of the original curse and suggests a reversal: "Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle" (v.13). This is a new creation.

In this renewal, the creation itself gives glory and praise to God. According to Isaiah 43.20 the animals of the wilderness (those associated with the waste places) will give honor to God, and in Isaiah 55.12, "nature" itself is transformed into a praising community (Patrick, 134).<sup>8</sup> In a number of these passages these transformations occur as Israel passes by, echoing God's abundance in the wilderness during the exodus (Patrick, 130). This new exodus, this new liberation of God's people, has creational import.

But God's people are not the ones who are responsible for newness in the wilderness. God's Spirit is explicitly linked to this renewal. In Isaiah 32.14-20, the Spirit will be poured out until the wilderness becomes a fruitful field and the fruitful field a forest (v. 15). The result of this creational renewal will be righteousness, justice, and peace (v. 16-17); hence the people will be able to live in security, peace, and trust. Similarly, in Isaiah 44 the Spirit is linked with renewal, but a renewal of the community, whose restoration still is described in the language of creational restoration.<sup>9</sup>

This renewal and restoration will not, however, occur only in the wilderness. Fruitfulness will also be restored to the land and to God's people. But again, in this new context, obedience to *torah* is no longer the basis for such fruitful blessing. Instead, various reasons are given for God's act of renewal: "God's jealousy for Jerusalem" (Zechariah 8.1), God's compassion and everlasting love for Israel (31.20), and, when those are exhausted, God's holy name (Ezekiel 36.21-23).

Such fruitfulness, moreover, like that of the Deuteronomic discourse, is linked with peace in the land. We read in Zechariah,

for there shall be a sowing of peace; the vine shall yield its fruit, the ground shall give its produce, and the skies shall give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things.

Just as you have been a cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you and you shall be a blessing (8.12,13).

So also Ezekiel speaks of a covenant of peace in the land which will banish wild animals. Showers of blessing will cover the land and the land will yield its fruit. All shall live in safety, none shall be afraid and none shall be hungry (34.25-31).

Although in these passages their obedience to *torah* is not the *condition* for such fruitfulness, the people are nonetheless called to the same sort of justice and righteousness that *torah* obedience results in. Zechariah 8 continues in this way: "These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the Lord" (vv.16-17). Ezekiel takes this renewal even further: the heart of stone in the midst of the people will be replaced with one of flesh, and God will put God's Spirit within them and make them follow God's statutes and be careful to observe God's ordinances (36.26,27). In Jeremiah's language "God will write God's law on their hearts" (31.33). Although obedience to *torah* is no longer a condition of a fruitful people and land, *torah* still is central in this restoration. God will provide fruitfulness and such Spirit-given fruitfulness will enable Israel to continue to practice the justice and righteousness that *torah* calls for.

Two emphases, however, are highlighted in these passages. First, such fruitfulness will result in peace in the land and will call the people to do those things that make for peace. A reconciliation is central to the task of this renewed and Spirit-led people. Second, this new covenant with the people will result in blessing that extends beyond Israel: whereas formerly this people was a cursing among the nations, now they will be a blessing (Zech 8.13). This is a reconciliation that is for the nations as well.<sup>10</sup>

In a new cultural context, where the people's inability to be obedient is acknowledged, these texts describe a world where fruitfulness becomes the context for obedience, for faithfulness, for truth and peace, for blessing. *Torah*, land, and fruitfulness are still inextricably linked. But God rather than *torah* waters the fruitful garden, a people and land, where *torah* obedience, peace, and blessing can then flourish.

### Jesus, the true vine

The texts of the gospels describe a world that drinks deeply from the fruit of the vine; that is, language of fruitfulness and bearing fruit occurs in all four gospels in different traditions. John the Baptist calls the people to bear fruit worthy of repentance; he follows this call with a word of judgment for those not bearing fruit (Matt. 3.8,10//Luke 3.8,9). We are told repeatedly that a tree is known by its fruits and these fruits are the "fruits of the kingdom" (Matt. 21.33-43; cf. Mark 12.1-12; Luke 20.9-19). The parables of Jesus repeatedly challenge his hearers to bear fruit. I will focus on the parable of the wicked tenants to delve deeply into where Jesus fits into Israel's fruit-bearing history.

In Mark 12.1-12 Jesus tells the parable of the wicked tenants. He begins it with explicit reference to the extended metaphor of Isaiah 5. The parable begins: "A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower." Immediately, those with ears to hear in his audience hear the echoes of Isaiah and know that this is a parable about Israel, specifically about Israel's inability to bear the fruit of justice and righteousness. Repeatedly, the man sends slaves to collect the fruit from the vineyard, but the slaves are beaten and insulted. Finally, the man sends his beloved son, saying, "They will respect my son." The son they kill. He expected justice, but behold, bloodshed; righteousness, but he heard a cry! And so the man will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.

This parable provides the context in both the ministry of Jesus and in the larger biblical story for all of Jesus' sayings about the fruit of the vine. Israel has consistently been unable to bear the fruit which her God called her to bear. Hence, in Jesus a radical redefinition occurs, and throughout his ministry this redefinition is described in different ways.

Rather than the *torah*, Jesus is the vine in which the fruit is rooted and nourished. The word that bears fruit in the parable of the sower is the word of God (Luke 8.11) and the word of the kingdom (Mark 4). But no longer is this the word of God found in *torah*, for shaping a holy kingdom. Rather, this is the word of God proclaimed by Jesus, and by a kingdom that Jesus brings. Moreover, fruit is impossible to bear unless one abides in Jesus (John 15.4), the vine who nourishes the fruit. The fruit

that will last is to do *Jesus'* commands, to love one another (John 15.16-17) in the ways described in the parables of the kingdom.

This is a world in which the language of fruitfulness has been completely appropriated and radically reconfigured around a new centre. This fruit is nourished not by *torah* or by the Spirit but by the words and commands of Jesus.

Moreover, the land seems to be entirely missing in this new configuration. No longer is the emphasis on establishing a people in the *land* and the blessings and fruitfulness of that land. Rather, the blessings and place promised are given to a

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*community* who constitute themselves not in the land but around *Jesus*. Jesus is now the living water for a new community, but the promises do not seem to extend to the land.

### The fruit of the Spirit

In a number of key places, Paul uses the language of fruitfulness. We shall look first at Galatians where Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. "There is no *law*," he concludes "against such things" (Gal. 5.23). This reference to the law reveals the antithesis which Paul has been building throughout the letter: as Galatians progresses, Paul's description of the law moves from pedagogue to that which enslaves. Here in chapter 5 law is pitted against Spirit, the Spirit of God's son (4.6); that is, Jesus. Now, it is important to notice that, in contrasting law and Spirit and identifying the life that comes out of the Spirit as "fruit" of the Spirit, Paul is being deliberately provocative. He does this throughout this letter, evoking the narrative of Israel only to radically reconfigure what had seemed to be the non-negotiable centre of the tradition (Keesmaat, chs. 5, 6).

Such a reconfiguration both draws positively upon the prophetic texts that outline Israel's hope

and repudiates them. The language of *Spirit* evokes the texts we explored earlier which described the Spirit renewing the fruitfulness of the land and the people and providing a context for obedience once again. In referring to the Spirit here, Paul seems to be suggesting a context of fulfilment in which fruitfulness and obedience to *torah* are indeed possible. On the other hand, the *torah* is deliberately repudiated. Moreover, the importance of such fruit for the land, for creation, seems to be marginalized. Here the Spirit has become the water that nourishes the fruit of believers themselves, and such fruit seems to be abstracted from a concrete creational context.<sup>11</sup>

### Colossians Revisited

Let us now return to Colossians 1.6 & 10. By the time we get to these verses, a certain amount of tension has arisen around the theme of fruitfulness. We have outlined language of fruitfulness rooted in *torah*, emphasizing the fruitfulness of people and land in obedience to *torah*. We have highlighted the prophetic call to bear the fruit of justice and righteousness and the inability of Israel to heed such a call. We have outlined the promises of the land's fruitfulness restored which provide a context for reconciliation, peace, and blessing. In this restoration, the Spirit will enable the people once again to live obediently to the calling of *torah*. And while Jesus' discourse emphasizes once more the call to fruitfulness, to obedience in the kingdom, *torah* is no longer central for such obedience. Moreover, land seems to be no longer relevant to Jesus' call for obedience. Similarly, Paul has decentred *torah* with Spirit. And although the role of the Spirit in eschatological restoration should evoke land, land also seems marginalized in Paul's writings.

This tension is, of course, most evident in the subsequent Christian readings of Pauline texts, where the language of fruitfulness has been interpreted in ways completely isolated from any Old Testament background. The fruit of the gospel is conversion, we are told, and, on a superficial reading of Galatians 5, "fruit" is spiritualized into individual psychological and emotional virtues. And, as I noted at the beginning of this article, the standard wisdom on the meaning of "bearing fruit" in Colossians 1 is that it refers to "the success of the gospel" and "moral maturity" (Dunn 62, 72).

At first reading, perhaps such an isolation of Pauline texts from the Old Testament context seems justified. After all, Paul seems to be explicitly criticizing *torah* in Colossians 2.16, where he warns against not letting anyone condemn believers in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. Food and drink, of course, could easily refer to the Levitical food laws, and the festivals, new moons, and sabbaths seems to refer explicitly to the Jewish festivals and days of rest. Similarly the commands Paul refers to in 2.21-23 ("Do not handle. Do not taste. Do not touch"), which are then described as merely human commands and teachings, could easily be identified with *torah* (Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* 24-30). Moreover, Paul does clearly wish to distance some of his congregations from *torah* obedience; one need only think of Galatians.

However, even while explicitly warning against *torah* in this letter, Paul cannot help but evoke in these verses the overtones of *torah* obedience and restoration in the land. In the first place, Paul is praying that the Colossians may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in spiritual wisdom and understanding. And what will such knowledge of God's will result in? This wisdom and understanding aims to help them "walk worthily of the Lord so as to please him in every way, as [they] bear fruit in every good work and grow in the knowledge of God" (v. 10). Notice the emphasis on *walking* worthily of the Lord. This is a concept not found in the Greek context of Paul's day. It is deeply rooted in the Old Testament, in *halakah* (Dunn 71; O'Brien 22), particularly those texts such as Deuteronomy 10.12 & 13: "So now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to *walk* in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being." Walking in the way of the Lord is keeping God's commandments. If one were to ask a first century Jew what it is to walk in God's ways, *torah* obedience would be the response (see also Ps 86.11; Prov 28.18; Isa 33.15). To say to first century Christians that they are to walk worthily of the Lord would also have evoked *torah* obedience, though radically reinterpreted in the light of Jesus.



In the second place, the language of forgiveness, which Paul uses in the very next sentence, is rooted in the texts of eschatological restoration. According to the great prophecies of hope, forgiveness of sins would occur when the new covenant was established between God and his people. So Jeremiah 31.31-34 speaks of the new covenant that will be established, when all shall know the Lord, for "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." Similarly, Ezekiel 36.25 promises that God will save the people and clean them from all their uncleanness. In referring to the kingdom of the Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins, just a few verses later (v. 13,14), Paul reinforces the fulfilment aspect of Jesus' ministry. Not only is the promised fruitfulness evident, but forgiveness as central to that fruitfulness is found in Jesus. So the texts of restoration and fulfilment would have echoed through Paul's language here. And in so far as eschatological restoration is in the land, land whispers through these verses as well.

In the third place, the Colossians are enabled to share the inheritance of the saints (v. 12); again, inheritance language is land language. The fruitfulness of the land was Israel's inheritance and in returning to the land they return to a fruitful inheritance. The tension begins to heighten here, for these are God's great promises of fulfilment. If land is not present, how are these promises fulfilled?

This tension becomes even more pronounced when we jump back and look at Colossians 1.6. Here it is the *gospel* that bears fruit. Just as in the prophetic literature God takes the initiative to bring fruitfulness to exiled Israel, so the *gospel* takes the initiative in Colossians, fulfilling the creational mandate, the longing for fruitfulness that permeates the whole story.

But what is the gospel? The word gospel is used twice in Isaiah, in 40.9 and 52.7, to proclaim the return of the king, who brings peace (52.7) and return from exile. In Isa. 40.9 the context is described in this way: the grass withers; the flower fades . . . and then comes the king who *feeds* his flock: from dried barrenness to fruitful plenty.

Such a return from exile was interpreted as a return in and to the land. In Paul's day, this gospel proclaims God's kingship in the face of Hellenistic gospels which proclaim the victory, birth, or ascension of the emperor, Caesar. Paul announces a

fruitful kingship in the face of the impotent ideology of the day.

And what is the realm that this king rules over? That question is answered in the christological hymn of Colossians 1.15-20. This is a hymn about Jesus as creator, the image of God. In him *all things* are created, *all things* hold together in him, through him God has reconciled *all things* under heaven and on earth, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Here we have Jesus quite firmly in a Genesis context, the source of all creation, the image, the same image that was called to be fruitful and

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*Jesus is the central actor  
in the cosmic drama that  
affirms that land and  
creation must be part  
of restored fruitfulness.*

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multiply and to tend the earth and steward it. The repetition of "all things" in the hymn also evokes, of course, Genesis 9 and God's repeated affirmation of a covenant with the earth and every living creature on the earth. Land and creation are now firmly in the picture once again. Not only are they in the picture, but they are also a central part of the story: God will not abandon the earth or any living creature. Both the goodness of creation, with which the story began, and the promised creational restoration are evoked. Jesus becomes the central actor in the cosmic drama that affirms that land and creation must be part of any language of fruitfulness.

Moreover, Jesus has made peace through the blood of his cross. As we saw earlier, the proclamation of peace is central to the texts of restoration; peace is what God will establish in the land and peace is what God's people are called to make, to work toward. And now Paul tells us that this reconciliation, this peace, has been made by Jesus through the blood of his cross. The great promises have been fulfilled.

But Jesus is not the only actor. In Colossians 3.10 Paul describes believers as being renewed in the knowledge according to the image of the creator, thereby extending the call to fruitfulness, land

stewardship, and peace-making (3.15) to the believing community as well. The Genesis echo evokes not only God's promise but humanity's calling—a calling also described in some detail in the *torah*.

In such a context, then, where is *torah*? Whispering through the allusions to walking, and inheritance and forgiveness, affirmed in the ethical grounding of the image of God in a reconciliation of all things on heaven and earth. It is in *torah* that we find the most rooted and far-reaching descriptions of fruitfulness. It is in *torah* that Sabbath for the land and justice for the people provide a basis for the promises of blessing and fruitfulness and the curses of disobedience. That is why the jubilee legislation of Leviticus 25 immediately precedes the blessings and curses of Leviticus 26. It is in *torah* that those called to be God's people are shown how to care for the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan.<sup>12</sup> It is in *torah* that God's people are shown how to redeem both the land and people from slavery. It is in *torah* that they are shown how to care for the land in a sinful and broken world. It is in *torah* that God's people are called to image their God.

It is this *torah* that Jesus claims he has come to fulfill (Matthew 5.17-20). Don't get me wrong. I'm not calling for a return to law observance. Jesus has fulfilled the law in ways that go significantly beyond the five books of Moses. But *torah* is a central part of the story of fruitfulness. And although it is denied by the transformation of the tradition and displaced by the centrality of Jesus and Spirit, the call of *torah* for a this-worldly obedience that is good for the land and good for the poor, in short, the call of the *torah* that leads to fruitfulness for humanity and the world, continues to assert itself through Paul's echoes and allusions in this text. If we know the whole story, we can't help but hear the overtones.

### **Fruitfulness in a culture of death**

What might such fruitfulness look like in the 20th century? How can this story become ours, from ancient Israel to first century Colossae, to Christians in North America at the turn of the millennium? In the cultural context that I have very briefly described, it is not enough to read Paul's language in Colossians without allowing the whole of the story to speak through his words.

First, in a context where devastation is environmental, we need to hear about a calling which leads to fruitfulness in relation to the land. In a context of overpopulation we need to hear a word not of child-bearing but of the healing of an overburdened earth. We need to hear a word of sabbath and jubilee for the land. We need to hear that the fruitfulness promised is for all of God's good creation, that this gospel means good news for the land or it is not the gospel of Jesus.

Second, in a context of fragmentation and individualism, we need to hear a word of fruitful community that can embody the image of God in Christ. In a culture of greed and prosperity, we need a word that will proclaim generosity to the poor and compassionate care for the orphan, the widow, the single mom, the AIDS sufferer. This gospel means a fruitful community that nourishes to fruit-bearing service those within it, or it is not the gospel of Jesus.

Third, in a context of crippling international debt, we need a word which proclaims jubilee, forgiveness and liberation to those enslaved under international debt and dehumanizing globalization. The gospel means that the prisoners are freed and the poor (finally) receive some good news of fair dealing so that they are able to be fruitful once again, or it is not the gospel of Jesus.

Fourth, in a context of postmodern despair and anomie we need a word that says "these ways lead to blessing and these ways lead to curse." In a world of despair, we need a word of hope and reconciliation for all of creation. This word proclaims that right praxis—real fruit—is borne by this gospel, or it is not the gospel of Jesus.

In conclusion, I would like to point to the future. We have seen where the story Paul is telling has come from, but we also need to see where it is going. In Revelation 22.1-2 we have a vision of the new Jerusalem with the river of the water of life, flowing from the throne of God. And on either side of the river is the tree of life, with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. This is where the story is going: the healing of the nations. That is what our fruit-bearing is ultimately for. And so if we are truly living out of the scriptural story, we will look not only to our roots but also to the fruit that this story ultimately calls us to bear.

#### END NOTES

1. For instance, while in Genesis 1:28-30 all plants with seed and trees yielding fruit are given both to humanity and animals for food, in Genesis 9:3 all animals are given to humanity for food as well. In addition, the fear and dread of humanity will rest on all animals and birds and fish. Moreover, an acknowledgement that the lifeblood of both animals and humans will require a reckoning is given, because humankind is made in the image of God. (Gen. 9.4-7).
2. Even in exile, Israel is called to fruitfulness; see Jeremiah 29.4-6.
3. "If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit" (Lev. 26.3 & 4).
4. There is an interesting shift here. While Genesis 9:2 speaks of the dread of humanity that shall rest on the animals, birds, fish, and reptiles, in Lev. 26.6 it is clear that the Israelites have a dread of wild animals.
5. "If you heed these ordinances. . . the Lord your God. . . will love you, bless you, multiply you; he will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock, in the land that he swore to your ancestors. You shall be the most blessed of people, with neither sterility or barrenness among you or your livestock" (Deut. 7.12-14).
6. That briars and thorns will be a result of God's punishment is also found in Isaiah 8.23-25.
7. Isaiah 41.18, 19; 43.19, 20; 49.9.
8. On nature's praise of God in the psalms, see Fretheim 16-30.
9. On the role of the spirit in the eschatological renewal of the wilderness, see Wright, "Spirit and Wilderness" 284.
10. See also Ezekiel 34.26,27: "I will make them and the

region around my hill a blessing; and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. The trees of the field shall yield their fruit and the earth shall yield its increase." The land itself will be a fruitful blessing.

11. But, see Galations 6.15: "For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything."

12. See my "Yahweh's concern for the Dispossed" in the *InterVarsity Women's Bible Commentary* (Downer's Grove: IVP, forthcoming).

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