

# Homeless in Galilee

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This article has located Jesus' saying about homelessness in the context of the Roman Empire as it was experienced in Galilee. Homelessness is part of a broader picture that translates into loss of access to the resources of the land. The thesis is that in light of a theology of land resulting from the development of Abrahamic covenant traditions and the prophetic hope expressed especially in Isaiah, Ezekiel and Psalm 37, Jesus proclaimed God's kingdom as God's rule over heaven and earth, which implicates restoration of equitable access to the resources of the earth. The Lord's Prayer, presumptions about the water of Jacob's well in John 4 and the parable of the unjust steward in Luke 16 are used to demonstrate understandings of violations of equitable access according to Abrahamic covenant traditions and the hope for the restoration thereof.

## Introduction

For all the differences in what land means today in comparison with Palestine in Jesus' day, there are striking similarities. Today land obviously means much more than a plot for planting vineyards or building a house. It also means the source for petroleum, minerals and diamonds. But as with the dominance of today's elites who exploit such resources of the earth, the mining of minerals and metals in antiquity, including coinage and the technology to produce jewellery or metal tools (e.g. ploughs), were also controlled by elites (Oakman 2008:101 and *passim*).

Today land often means gigantic agribusinesses that create the anomaly that people who produce food have no direct access to it. Rather, they earn money with which to buy food to which they otherwise have no access. The first goal of such businesses is obtaining human labour as a resource for producing food for commercial profit. Large landowners who do not farm the land themselves profit from others' labour like the harsh master in Matthew 25:24 who reaps where he did not sow. Ancient Galilean peasants had little access to money with which to purchase food (Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:39), but if they were tenants of elite landowners or otherwise in debt, they paid with staggering percentages of their farm products.

Whereas in the long run of history most human beings have lived in some relationship with subsistence farming, statistics from 2010 indicate that 50.46% of the world's population of slightly less than 7 billion have flocked to metropolitan areas (United Nations 2010) where they may live in multifamily dwellings owned by others or take up residence as squatters on land that presumably does not belong to them. Ancient Palestine, by stark contrast, was a rural world with a few cities dominated by urban elites. Nevertheless, access to land and its resources was a burning issue for the masses in Jesus' day.

It so happens that I was working on these pages on 12 January 2010 when I heard of the devastating earthquake in Haiti with loss of life of more than 230 000. By comparison, an earthquake of the same magnitude that struck San Francisco in the United States of America (USA) in 1989 produced 69 deaths. The immense loss of life in Haiti was not merely an 'act of God', but involved human complicity in a long history of domination of peasants by elites, a long history documented by Jean Casimir (Casimir 2009).

Haiti was established as a colony of slaves who, like oppressed peasants elsewhere, were forced into an artificial society in which they were exploited for agricultural commerce (Casimir 2009:14–15). But this was possible only because of the development of Haitian elites who dominated peasants and who initially were collaborators with the French imperial system. After independence in 1804, Haitian elites continued to build their privilege on the backs of labourers (Casimir 2009:178–180, 209–212). This history of elite privilege on the backs of peasants resulted in woefully inferior construction of structures that collapsed and crushed the victims of the 2010 earthquake in comparison with San Francisco, which had built reinforced edifices to withstand earthquakes.

Change in political power inevitably produces change in the distribution of resources (Magalhães 2007:223; Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:61–62). Thus, when apartheid came to an end in South Africa, the redistribution of land was a priority. However, with the systems of mining, farming and urbanisation already mentioned, certainly distribution in South Africa means not only plots of land, but also equitable access to the resources of the earth.

## Homeless in Galilee

The historical Jesus is in essence an effort on the part of interpreters to understand traditions about Jesus and because it is an effort to understand traditions, I feel little compulsion to demonstrate that the traditions go back to one construct of the historical Jesus or another. My concern is to understand the tradition itself. Nevertheless, a strong case can be made for tracing Jesus' homelessness back to a very early stratum. Q 9:58 fits in John Dominic Crossan's arbitrary earliest stratum as the first three decades after Jesus' crucifixion: 'Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head'. Further, the saying has multiple independent attestations with virtually the same wording in *Gos. Thos.* 86. It also fits the multiple independent attestations of Jesus' typical character as an itinerant.

Understanding Q 9:58 as a reference to Jesus must contend with the interpretation of 'son of man' as a semitism for human beings in general (Crossan 1991:110; Nickelsburg 1981:215). It is unlikely that son of man could refer to humanity in general in this saying, given that virtually all human beings live in homes and the household was the basic human institution in Jesus' day (Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:18). Crossan takes Jesus' saying to mean that foxes and birds have natural homes whereas human beings have no fixed dwelling (1991:256). But the appearance of the saying without a context in the *Gospel of Thomas* notwithstanding, to take it as a freestanding terse sapiential saying (as Crossan does), actually makes it *anti-sapiential* because it contradicts observations of nature where, like humans who build homes, foxes dig dens and birds weave nests. In this sense it can hardly be a reflection of general human existence. Rather, already Q represents this as Jesus' response to a potential follower in order to emphasise his abnormal way of life.

It is possible to think of Jesus' homelessness as the chosen way of life of a wandering charismatic (Freyne 1988:241; Theissen 1992:37, 39–40). But his homelessness hardly fits as an ascetic's choice; on the contrary, his conviviality is also attested in the earliest stratum (Q 7:34), has multiple independent attestations as typical of Jesus and both friend and foe are in agreement. Further, again and again Jesus' healings and exorcisms attest to the restoration of marginalised people to their home community, a sharp contrast to renunciation of home life. Far from being his choice, was homelessness forced upon Him?

When Jesus declares that He has no place to lay his head, there is no sense of renunciation of home as Theissen

asserts (1992:37). His homelessness is presented as a fact of life that substantiates his existence on the margins of subsistence (Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:202). Theissen and Winter demonstrate that not only does distinguishing what may come from the historical Jesus require the criterion of dissimilarity, but it must also be supplemented with a criterion of similarity, which they call the criterion of plausibility (2002:esp. 172–191). Jesus' homelessness must also fit the historical plausibility of the time, which certainly means fitting into systems of the Roman Empire as they were experienced in Galilee.

In the time of Jesus, Galilee was dominated politically and economically by the urban centres Sepphoris and Tiberias, administrative centres in a region that could be described as a client kingdom of Rome. Archaeological evidence such as Jewish ritual baths in upper-class houses attests to the prominence of observant Jewish elites in these administrative centres (Freyne 1995:605). This fits the sociological pattern of Herodians, urban elites and large land owners over against peasants in the countryside in a social order with an upper stratum of elites, who form 1%–5% of the population, in tension with a lower stratum of the masses (Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:67–95). Although Galilee was no cauldron of revolt, Paula Fredriksen's summary judgement that Galilee in the time of Herod Antipas was 'quiet' does not do justice to such tensions (Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:165). Freyne describes the era as 'less troubled' and in conversation with Richard Horsley notes some cases of social banditry and signs of disaffection (Freyne 1988:150, 166). Josephus testifies that the attempt of Antipas to make Tiberias the preeminent urban centre of Galilee led to tensions between urbanites and peasants (*Life* 32–38; see Crossan 1991:100). Herodians, urban elites and large land owners were in an uneasy tension with peasant farmers, day labourers and slaves in which access to resources of the land was unequal. In fact, benefactors who might distribute food at festivals provided virtually nothing to eliminate the inequity – in contrast, they rather demonstrated it.

In the imperial system Galileans experienced the Empire indirectly through a governor, an aspiring client king and local ruling elites. From time to time they also experienced violent force from soldiers when local elites failed to keep the peace. The experience of this imperial system included the expropriation of land, which Stegemann and Stegemann call the 'hallmark' of the Herodian period (1999:112). Moreover, patronage systems requiring debt payments of large portions of harvests from peasants put them at great risk of losing lands due to crop failure or other catastrophes such as illness (Crossan 1991:221–222; Freyne 1988:148, 1995:608). Although many peasants were able to maintain small plots from 2.5 to 3.5 hectares, there was increasing movement from small land holders to tenants and the development of estates under wealthy landowners who shifted from subsistence to commercial crops (Freyne 1988:157, 1995:607–609; Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:111).

The off-hand reference to Jesus as an artisan ([τέκτων], Mk 6.3) as a presupposition of the people of Nazareth without further ado likely places Jesus amongst peasants who had



lost their lands and had to resort to serving other peasants (Lenski 1966:278; Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:90, 92). In 1988, without consideration of Lenski, Freyne argued explicitly against *τέκτων* as a position of deprivation and took it to imply social mobility above peasantry (Freyne 1988:241). Lenski speaks of *urban* artisans as perhaps having advanced skills, which could give them social mobility above peasants, but this would hardly apply to Jesus who was a *village* resident. Rather, as an artisan, Jesus was likely an example of downward mobility from the peasant class to a status where he served other peasants (see Lenski 1966:289–290). If Jesus' homelessness were voluntary, it could easily symbolise the abandonment of security grounded in possessions. On the other hand, if it were a sheer social reality, it would more readily reflect the need under imperial systems for equitable access to the resources of the land.

In such a world, Jesus had no place to lay his head. Thus, the tensions generated by these imperial realities under Antipas likely formed the context for a prophetic critique from Jesus against such oppression. Jesus proposed an alternative, namely restoration of access to resources of the land based on ancient Israelite theology of the land, which deserves its own discussion.

## The development of Abrahamic covenant traditions

A complicated history of Israel's understanding of its relationship to the land developed under humiliations by and liberations from other nations. Although some interpreters question the historicity of Egyptian enslavement, exodus and conquest, Israel's *traditions* made it their constitution: God led us out of the house of bondage and brought us into the land of promise (repeated references in Exodus and Deuteronomy).

Though these traditions had a major impact on Israel's understanding of its relationship to the land during exile, they took the shape of the distribution of the land amongst members of Israel's tribes centuries earlier. Texts such as Deuteronomy 1:8 show that the entrance into the land is an inheritance according to the divine promises to Abraham. Thus, the equitable distribution of the land of Canaan was understood in terms of a patrimonial heritage that fulfilled divine promises to Abraham's descendants. Israel's constitution was so attached to these divine promises that the patrimonial heritage became sacred to Israelite identity.

This identity is what Naboth understands and Ahab and Jezebel fail to understand. When King Ahab offers Naboth a better vineyard or the value in money in exchange for his vineyard, Naboth refuses: 'The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance' (1 Ki 21:3–4). To jump far ahead, the cultural presumption of the sacredness of the patrimonial heritage is also in play when the prodigal son squanders his ancestral heritage (Lk 15:13). Jewish identity was determined fundamentally by heredity and attachment

to the land (Schiffman 1981:138–139). When biblical and developing rabbinic traditions are taken into account, the loss of the son's patrimonial inheritance presumes his forfeiture of Israelite identity as much as the unspoken assumptions about feeding swine.

In this sense, the prodigal son is not only a parable of the micro family but also of the macro family. Under imperial domination, Abraham's children lost their patrimonial heritage of land. This produced a double reaction. On the one hand, it focused attention back to the equitable distribution in Canaan of old according to the Abrahamic covenant. On the other hand, the promises were projected into the future in anticipation. Thus, Isaiah produces a drama of the return from exile in which he directs his audience to look back to the rock from which they were hewn, to father Abraham and mother Sarah, so that they can see that the sterile mother, who corresponds to Jerusalem in captivity, will give birth to numerous children (see Is 51:1–55:13). The word of the Lord that like rain and snow from heaven does not return without accomplishing its purpose (Is 55:10–11) is nothing other than God's promises to Abraham concerning the land.

A prominent view reflected in Deuteronomy, Isaiah and Ezekiel is that exile is punishment for injustice and the return from exile means restoration after punishment. Return means not merely restoration of the nation but also restoration of equitable access to the resources of the land. For example, Ezekiel gives a picture of turning from wickedness, in which he juxtaposes 'wickedness' and 'justice' (Ezk 33:14). The following verse stipulates that restitution for wickedness involves the return of what has been pledged. The tragedy against which Ezekiel prophesies is the desolation of the patrimonial heritage (נְהִלָּה [inheritance], 35:15), which has been lost through failures to pay debts for which land has been given in pledge. Ezekiel seeks the restoration of the Abrahamic ideal thematically – restoration of the patrimonial heritage that has been forfeited. Further, restoration also means access to resources of the land (Ezk 34:37–39). This is vividly clear in Ezekiel 45:1 where the heavenly pattern includes the allotment of the land as an inheritance, which means equitable division in Ezekiel 47:14, 21. Under these conditions, Ezekiel prophesies about the distribution of the land to Israel's tribes in Chapter 48. The allotment of the land in the Septuagint is typically expressed with *κληρονομία* [inheritance] and its cognates and this terminology also appears in the New Testament. In fact, I would go so far as to say that when the New Testament uses the image of *κληρονομία* [inheritance], it carries overtones of an inheritance through kinship from the distribution of the land according to the Abrahamic covenant.

Ezekiel also views a *misconstrual* of the Abrahamic tradition as wickedness. The remnant inhabitants of the ruins that the Babylonian exile left behind assert that their number, in comparison to Abraham as one person (rather than their justice), will re-establish their possession of the land (Ezk 33:24–26). Although Walter Eichrodt denies that the remnant

is using the Abrahamic covenant as a pretence for taking the lands of others (1970:462), this is precisely the kind of issue Joseph Blenkinsopp raises with the possibility of sectarian expropriation of land (1990:150–151), which would mean that the remnant appropriate land at the expense of the exiles (Pfister Darr 2001:1457). Ezekiel also decries the gap between elites and the people, for whom he uses the metaphor of shepherds and sheep respectively (Ezk 34:2–21).

Furthermore, extra biblical traditions make the promise of land to Abraham's descendants universal. In her monograph *Jesus and land*, Karen Wenell argues that Jesus himself focused on Israel and that perspectives embracing the whole world are post-resurrection developments (2007:133–134). But this fails to note the development of God's promises to Abraham in Jewish tradition to include the entire earth. Already in Genesis 12:1–3 the promise of the land is associated with the blessing of all the families of the earth. But something remarkable occurs with reflection on the very term ארץ [land, earth], which can mean not only a plot of land for a home and agriculture and not only the land that defines the nation, but also the entire planet. The promise of land obviously means plots like Naboth's vineyard without excluding the promise of the land of Canaan. But where would reflection on texts like Genesis 13:14–15 lead?

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

It was possible in Jewish tradition to understand the four directions as the cardinal points of the compass and to comprehend the promise of the ארץ [land, earth] as the whole earth without any contradiction that it also included the land of Canaan. Sirach may not go all the way, yet he can speak of the promised land as extending from sea to sea and to the ends of the earth (44:21). Jubilees alludes explicitly to Genesis 13:14–15 and relates that Abraham rejoiced that God had given him descendants to inherit the earth (Jub 17:3). Further, Abraham's departing blessing to Jacob is that he may inherit the whole earth (Jub 22:14). Finally, Jubilees 32:18–19 presents God's promise as the gift of all the earth and asserts that Abraham's descendants 'will get possession of the whole earth and inherit it for ever'. If Paul does not allude directly to Jubilees, he assuredly shows that the New Testament era was well acquainted with such traditions when he presumptively mentions God's promise to Abraham and his descendants that they would inherit the κόσμος [world] (Rm 4:13). According to Sipre on Deuteronomy 34:1–4, when God showed Moses all the land on Mount Nebo, he saw not only Canaan but the whole earth. In this vein Philo says that God gave Moses the whole world as a possession (*Life of Moses* 1.155).

## Jesus and Abrahamic covenant traditions

Formidable evidence indicates that Jesus proclaimed a relationship to the land from an understanding in his environment of the Abrahamic covenant as extending to all

and to all the earth. A strong piece of this evidence is the beatitudes, most especially the third in Matthew's version, in which Jesus declares that the meek will inherit the earth (Mt 5:5). The obvious reference in this beatitude to Psalm 37:11 and its absence in Luke lead most interpreters to make this a secondary development after Jesus, particularly in scribal activity in which it was possible to search the Scriptures. On the other hand, orality is more likely to incorporate *brief* allusions, as in this case, in contrast to continuous commentary in scribal midrash (cf. 4 Q 171:1.25–4.20 on Psalm 37). Byung-Mu Ahn's theory that peasant crowds (Korean *minjung*) were the purveyors of Jesus traditions should be taken into account. He identifies Jesus traditions as narrated 'rumours' that reflected the oppressed minority status of peasants – especially illness, deprivation and marginalisation – rather than aesthetic elaborations from a scribal class. Ahn conceded that Q traditions centred on sayings more readily than events but also could not imagine how narratives developed from abstract sayings to provide settings for the sayings. Rather, the process was the other way around. Under the development of the kerygma by early church leaders, sayings were abstracted from events (Ahn 1985:299–308).

But even if Matthew is a secondary development, the naming of the poor and hungry in both Matthew and Luke is indicative of the lack of access to the resources of the land that is the object of Jesus' attention (see Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:204–205). Whether it was Jesus, the crowds, pre-Matthean scribal activity or Matthew, someone had the genius to interpret the blessedness of God's kingdom as the inheritance of the land as in Psalm 37:11.

Psalm 37 is very much in line with traditions in Isaiah and Ezekiel about the violation of the equitable distribution of the land according to the Abrahamic covenant and the restoration thereof. In contrast to defining 'meek' predominantly as an interior attitude, I have suggested elsewhere that it should be defined by the context of Psalm 37 (Brawley 2003:608–616). There the meek are the victims of oppression who have lost their patrimonial heritage to the unjust who have expropriated the land of others by economic abuse and violence (Ps 37:14, 21, 32). But the Psalm also keeps alive the divine promise in the Abrahamic covenant by repeating the refrain six times: The meek (oppressed) will inherit (live in) the land (vv. 3, 9, 11, 22, 29, 34).

Further, the parallel with Matthew's poor in spirit in the first beatitude should not be understood as implying that Matthew's beatitudes are depoliticised by turning them into internal attitudes. Firstly, the βασιλεία [kingdom] image (Mt 4:17) is built on a political model. In addition, to speak of those who are poor in spirit is not to spiritualise the status of Jesus' referents. Rather, as Freyne shows, they are the materially poor who accept a relationship with the resources of the land that rejects hoarding wealth and their spirit is indicative of a social world where communal values are prevalent (1988:72–73). Even in Matthew's version, the poor belong to an economic and social stratum.

## Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God

With the exception of a handful of Q<sup>1</sup> enthusiasts (e.g. Hedrick 1994:73–81), it is a virtual consensus that God's βασιλεία [kingdom] stood at the centre of Jesus' proclamation. But what does God's βασιλεία mean? It has become conventional to understand the βασιλεία as God's ruling activity, God's reign more than God's domain. Hans Kvalbein has challenged this conventional conception on several occasions for more than a decade. Rather than a functional understanding of God as king, Kvalbein emphasises the concrete expression of the time and place of salvation (1998:203–205, 212). On the one hand, this promotes the concrete, local meaning of βασιλεία, but on the other hand it diminishes God as an actor in God's βασιλεία. I wish to pose the question of whether the genitive phrase βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ [kingdom of God] is not to be understood with equal emphasis on both nouns. The βασιλεία does mean a concrete domain, but it is the domain over which God rules. When God rules over the land, there is an equitable distribution of the resources of the earth. I wish to substantiate this understanding by developments in biblical and early Jewish traditions about the land as they resonate in some Jesus traditions, which the following selected examples demonstrate.

God's domain is expressed in the prayer that Q 11:2–4 attributes to Jesus. The petition that prays for God's βασιλεία [kingdom] to come identifies the domain where God's will is done in all creation, which consists of both heaven and earth. Douglas Oakman has associated the ἐπιούσιος [necessary for existence, for today] of the Lord's Prayer with the image of bread that comes from God's 'estate' (2008:220, 250). This is in keeping with the notion that the land belongs to God and its inhabitants are sojourners who are God's tenants, as in Leviticus 25:23.

Stegemann and Stegemann view Jesus' perspective in terms of deviance against the establishment (1999:206–207). Deviance, however, does not mean a break with Judaism, but an alternative to abuse, for which I employ the notion of restoration in line with the traditions of Isaiah, Ezekiel and Psalm 37, that is, a strong affirmation of biblical traditions (see Freyne 1988:239; Stegemann & Stegemann 1999:208).

Such affirmation of restoration of equitable access to the resources of the land is not unique to Jesus, but can be substantiated as a broadly based expectation. An incident that few New Testament interpreters would trace back to the historical Jesus reveals, unwittingly perhaps, a degree of this as a peasant cultural consensus. When Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman in John 4, the woman's response to Jesus' request for a drink of water indicates her difficulty with social interchange between Judeans and Samaritans and she is surprised that a Judean is willing to use a Samaritan vessel. But an assumption that goes without question as a cultural consensus is that the resources of Jacob's well are available to both the villagers of Sychar and Judean sojourners. Much of the perplexity of the difficult parable of the unjust

steward in Luke 16:1–9 falls away when it is understood against the background of the issue of equitable access to the resources of the land. Because the rich κύριος [lord] commends the manager for his shrewdness, interpreters are tempted to take this as Jesus' commendation for shrewd behaviour. But two features militate against this. Firstly, Jesus does not characterise the manager as 'unjust' (not the adjective ἄδικος [unjust]), but as one whose life flows from injustice (τῆς ἀδικίας [of injustice], genitive of origin, Lk 16:8). Secondly, all the actors in the story, the manager, the master and the debtors, who are likely merchant contractors who sell the master's goods for their profit (Herzog 1994:249–250), deal with each other as children of *this age* with excesses of wealth that violate communal values and biblical law and Jesus contrasts them all with the children of light. The images of children of this age or of light reiterate the genitive of origin. Jesus' tag on the parable to make friends by wealth that derives from injustice (ἐκ τοῦ μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας [by means of the mammon of injustice], Lk 16:9 [the same genitive of origin as in v. 8]) is ponderous irony. Such friendship corresponds to the shrewd way children of this age deal with each other, but the 'eternal homes' of the NRSV is quite an oxymoron – 'eternal tents' (εἰς τὰς αἰωνίους σκηνάς [into the eternal tents]). In contrast to covenantal communal values of equitable access to the resources of the land, these children of this age who manipulate the wealth gained by injustice to obligate others to themselves will indeed discover that the relationships they build on wealth will last no longer than a tent. The parable dramatises the demise of players in a system that violates the values of equitable access to the resources of the land.

## Conclusion

Evidence of Jesus' status as an artisan who experienced downward mobility from landed peasantry indicates that far from his preferred choice, his homelessness was a fact of life for which He had no option. In the midst of development of cities and estates in imperial systems that stripped land and its resources from peasants, Jesus declared his homelessness in solidarity with the poor and dispossessed. The kingdom of God that He proclaimed included not merely God's ruling activity, but also God's ruling activity over the earth, which also means the land. A theology of the land with restoration of the Abrahamic ideal of equitable access to the resources of the land in the Galilean environment is implicated in Jesus' sayings. Inasmuch as Abrahamic traditions of the land had been pushed to universal dimensions, it is not going too far to say that equitable access to the resources of land in God's kingdom is the heritage for everyone on the face of the whole earth.

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