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The Relation of Land and Faith in a
Selection of Mennonite Novels

by

Carol Elizabeth Enns Goossen

A Thesis submitted to the University of
Winnipeg/University of Manitoba
Joint Master's Program Committee
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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Department of Religion

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THE RELATION OF LAND AND FAITH IN A SELECTION OF
MENNONITE NOVELS

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CAROL ELIZABETH ENNS GOOSSEN

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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CHAPTER ONE

An Introduction to the Relation of Land and Faith

We are human beings shaped in the image of an unimaginable Creator. We learn to know and love this unnamable One in communities extending across time and space. John R. Ruth

Through art we come to discover the sorts of people we are, the problems of our cultures and our communities, the depths of meaning in our common life. Gordon Kaufman

I.

In literature we are provided with portraits of people's lives, both individual and communal. We are invited into the world of the author's creation to experience how life was and is lived, and we are urged to perceive the myriad forces of culture, history, and faith which shape human self-understanding and world view. From our excursions into these other worlds, we can derive meanings about the nature of our own human existence. With these thoughts as my starting point, it is my intention in this thesis to examine a selection of Mennonite fiction for each author's presentation of the Mennonites' faith and religious life. In particular, I

will focus on the relation of land and faith in Mennonite experience.

I have chosen four historical novels written by Mennonites about Mennonite life. The books are organized in chronological sequence according to date of publication. In this order, they form a spectrum of Mennonite life spanning roughly fifty years of Mennonite history.(1)

The first selection, A Russian Dance of Death, by Dietrich Neufeld, is set in Russia in the early 1920's. The book, though not strictly fiction nor a novel, relates the experiences of the Mennonite colonists who, after 120 years of peaceful and prosperous existence, suddenly experience the collapse of their world in the upheaval of the Russian Revolution and the terrorist activities of Nestor Makhno and his bandits.

The story No Strangers in Exile, by Hans Harder, occurs about ten years after the events depicted in A Russian Dance of Death. The novel portrays the lives of a small group of Mennonites who are exiled from their ancestral home in the Volga region to a labor camp in Russia's far north.

In Peace Shall Destroy Many, by Rudy Wiebe, the setting shifts from Russia in the 1920's and 30's to Canada in the early 1940's. This novel focuses on the lives of a small community of Mennonites, the older generation of which has emigrated from Revolution-torn

Russia. The community has, to some extent, re-established a peaceful existence in the bushland of Northern Saskatchewan.

The final selection, The Blue Mountains of China, by Rudy Wiebe is an epic novel detailing the lives of several Mennonite families dating from Pre-Revolution times in Russia to the 1960's in Canada and Paraguay.

Since the Mennonites live by a faith of the Bible - a faith that is reflected in both the style and content of the novels - I have confined my own analysis of the novels to Biblical categories. What this means is that the aim of this thesis is to discover not only how the authors of the selected Mennonite fiction portray the relation of land and faith in Mennonite experience, but also to seek to understand these portrayals in terms of the Biblical experience of land and faith.

As an aid to defining and understanding land motifs in the Bible, I rely on Walter Brueggemann's, The Land. In this book, Brueggemann suggests that land is the central theme in the story of the Bible, and so focuses his Biblical interpretations particularly on the relation of land and faith.(2) For this reason The Land is an especially relevant text for the interpretive intention of this thesis.

It must be noted that aspects of Brueggemann's Biblical interpretation may be considered

somewhat unorthodox. As we shall later discover, his conclusions regarding the New Testament are particularly innovative. In order to place his perspective in context, it is helpful to understand Brueggemann's own attitude toward his research. He explains:

I have in each turn of the history of people [Israel] and land tried to focus on particular texts [Biblical] and explore how these might permit a different reading of the whole of Israel's history. . . . It is my hope that this study may hint at the categories of perception which will permit us to see the text differently and also permit us to discern ourselves and our history differently. . . . The following discussion is offered in conviction that the Bible provides us with peculiar and decisively important categories for facing the crises of the human spirit. I am aware that my conclusions on the relation of the Old and New Testaments are innovative. . . . I hope there is a legitimate suggestion of fresh ways in which the intent of the text might be discerned. (3)

Generally, Brueggemann's work has been well received by the academic community.(4) Thus, it is legitimate to regard The Land as Brueggemann intends; that is, as one among many valid contributions to the ongoing research of Biblical scholarship.(5) It is also important to recognize that it is not my intention to prove or disprove Brueggemann's claims, nor is it to develop a comprehensive Biblical theology of the land. Rather, my intention is to accept Brueggemann's perspective as a prism through which I am able to perceive and illuminate the spectrum of Mennonite experiences of land and faith as they exist in the fictional works.

For this thesis, the particular relevance

of Brueggemann's perspective in The Land lies in his categorical division of the Old Testament story of the land and its inhabitants. For as we shall see, the movements of the people of Israel in and out of the land are in many ways analagous to the stories of the Mennonites upon which this thesis will focus. Thus, more specifically, Brueggemann's text will be used as a point of reference or paradigm for defining terms and identifying Biblical analogy in the Mennonite novels.

In order to clarify the focus of this thesis, the following two sections discuss several key concepts which, together, form the foundation for discussions in later chapters. First, I will define how the term "land" is used in our study of the novels. Second, in order to understand the role of Brueggemann's interpretation of the Old Testament in subsequent chapters of this thesis, I include a brief outline of The Land. Finally, as an aid to understanding the relation of land and faith in the Mennonite novels, a brief historical sketch of the development of the Mennonites' own relation to the land is provided.

II.

The following analysis of the relation of land and faith involves a dual understanding of the term "land." Land refers to actual soil and landscape, but also includes the concept of land as "place". Land is

made place by its inhabitants.

Mircea Eliade's description of how humans create a "place" out of "space" is a helpful introduction to this idea. Eliade explains this phenomenon by distinguishing the two terms cosmos and chaos. Generally, the terms delimit a society's "inhabited territory [cosmos] and the unknown and indeterminate space that surrounds it [chaos]." (6) He comments further:

To settle in a territory . . . is undertaking the creation of the world one has chosen to inhabit. . . Establishment in a particular place, organizing it, inhabiting it, are acts that presuppose an existential choice - the choice of the universe that one is prepared to assume by creating it. (7)

According to Eliade, inhabiting a land involves the act of creating a world, the basis of which is a particular structure of meaning. People create a cosmos by infusing a territory with meaning. Moreover, Eliade ascertains that space is infused with meaning through an act of consecrating the turf. (8) People create a world by making their space "the center of the universe"; the center being the place where communication exists between heaven and earth. Existence is made real or meaningful by the presence of God in the land. By extension, the world outside of consecrated space is regarded as a formless chaos or space.

In his text, The Land, Brueggemann generally affirms Eliade's distinction between place and space regarding the land. "Place" is distinguished from "space" by the addition of meaningfulness in human

life.(9) But Brueggemann adds another dimension to Eliade's idea of meaning through consecration of turf. He writes: "There are no meanings apart from roots."(10) Thus for Brueggemann, humans derive meaning not only from the presence of God in the land, but also from the abiding nature of His presence through history:

Place is space which has historical meanings, where some things have happened which are now remembered and which provide continuity and identity across generations. Place is space in which important words have been spoken which have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny.(11)

So, for Brueggemann, land as place is land where humans find meaning in life not only by the experience of God's presence in the land, but also from the communal memories of God's presence in the land through history. In this way, the land itself takes on special meaning for its inhabitants: " Land is . . . always the bearer of overpluses of meaning known only to those who lose and yearn for it."(12)

This notion of land as place (versus space) is, for Brueggemann, the essence of the Old Testament experience of land:

The land which Israel yearns and which it remembers is never unclaimed space but is always a place with Yahweh, a place well filled with memories of life with him and promise from him and vows to him.(13)

Brueggemann suggests that, for the people of Israel, faith is always connected to the land and centers his analysis on this aspect of Israel's history. As a result, the distinction between land as space or place

underlies Brueggemann's entire interpretation of the Old Testament experience of land and faith.

Brueggemann organizes the history of Israel into three separate histories, each determined by the people's status in relation to the land: 1) Egypt to Canaan, the history beginning with the promise of land and ending with Israel's arrival at their promised land; 2) Canaan to Babylon, the history of managing the land ending in exile; 3) Exile to Jerusalem, the new history of promise which begins in exile and culminates in kingdom. Around these three histories, Brueggeman builds the thesis that, by his word, God gives the land as gift. As such, the land always remains in God's possession. Land, therefore, must be held in covenant. We are responsible for its care according to God's word.

By expanding on this premise, Brueggemann observes in the Biblical story a dialectic regarding care for the land. Those who neglect God's ownership--who grasp the land and presume ownership of land--lose it; while those who risk having no land receive the gift of land.

The term "land," in this context, implies the dual meaning discussed above; namely, as both place and turf. For Israel, land meant not only a chunk of soil, but a place characterized by the presence of Yahweh, "social coherence and personal ease in prosperity, security and freedom." (14) So not only land, but also place in the land, are God's gift and subject to the

dialectic of gift and grasp: ". . . grasping for home leads to homelessness and risking homelessness yields the gift of home."(15)

Drawing on the above mentioned observations, Brueggemann perceives the history of Isarel as a series of histories based on the Israelites' situation in the land. During each history, the Israelites live a particular relation to the land which shapes their relation to Yahweh. At the end of each history, life as it had been known comes to an end. With new history, the people experience a new situation in the land which, in turn, affects their faith. And this is so for Israel precisely because the land is not simply turf, but place.

Subsequently, Brueggemann defines the three histories of Israel in terms of the people's landedness and landlessness.(16) Generally speaking, the terms are correlatives of Eliade's cosmos and chaos. Brueggemann describes the status of landedness as a community securely in possession of land and feeling God's sanctioning presence in the comfort and prosperity resulting from such security.(17) The Israelites' history in Canaan is the Old Testament example of landed existence. The danger inherent in such status is the tendency of humans to regard the land as their own, thus forgetting God's word that land is always a gift.

The result of grasping for land is loss of land. Brueggemann defines landlessness as the condition

of being displaced: ". . . alienated from the place which gave security and identity. . . . alienated from all the shapes and forms which gave power to faith and life."(18) The two examples of landlessness in Israel's history are their forty-year wandering in the Sinai desert and their exile from Canaan into Babylon. In the context of these examples, the meaning of landlessness becomes closely aligned with the Biblical motif of wilderness. That is, to be landless is to be cast into the wilderness.

G. H. Williams comments that although the Hebraic words for wilderness in the Old Testament are numerous, they all translate into the same basic meaning: ". . . the wilderness was the Unsown as distinguished from the Sown (land)."(19) These two terms fall directly in line with the chaos/landless, cosmos/landed distinctions of Eliade and Brueggemann. For the Israelites, unsown land was synonymous with desert, disorder, darkness, and death; while sown land referred to the created order of gardens, orchards, and pastures.(20)

The distinction between wilderness land and paradise land is perhaps most clearly expressed in the Biblical story of Adam and Eve. The garden of Eden symbolizes the paradise in which God's presence is known, and security and prosperity are certain. The world of Adam and Eve exemplifies perfect landedness. In contrast, when the couple is cast out of the garden, they suffer displacement and alienation from God. Consequently, the wilderness is perceived as wasteland.

If we were to extend the symbolism in the story of Eden to the Old Testament distinction between sown and unsown land, it can be seen that the created order of human settlement is, in fact, a re-created Eden, bearing the same connotations of security and the presence of God (landedness). Likewise, unsown land is wilderness wasteland characterized by insecurity and alienation (landlessness).

What all these terms express is the concept that reality or meaning in human life is derived from having a place in the land and living a landed existence. The factors that transform space into place--community, history, and the experience of God's presence--are also the factors that form meaning and provide humans with a sense of security and identity in life. Hence, to be landless is to be severed from all of these reality-shaping structures.

Paul Tournier, in his book A Place For You, suggests that all humans essentially quest for place in the land. The yearning is often defined as a "paradise lost" syndrome or nostalgia for a world of perfection.(21) We desire a place of security, a place with God, a place as perfect as the lost world of Eden.

In short, the meaning of land as place refers to the idea of inhabited land as a world created and divinely sanctioned. It involves the nature of community, part of which is their experience of God in the land. Land as place, therefore, is integral to any

treatment of the relation of land and faith. The concept points to the significance of the interaction of land and people in shaping faith. Faith is affected by one's feeling of having or not having a place in the land. Landed community--life in the garden--provides structures that support faith. On the contrary, to be landless--adrift in the wilderness--is to be in a place where feelings of alienation cause such insecurity and doubt that faith is threatened.

We must not, however, be misled by the categorical distinction between landed and landless existence. For as will later become evident, to live a landed existence does not guarantee a strong and perfect faith. The very security and prosperity designed to support faith can lead to a callous neglect of God's Word. Likewise, life in the wilderness does not automatically imply the demise of faith. For example, during the Israelites' years of wandering in the desert, there were indeed people who succumbed to doubt and lost faith in God's promise of land. But there were also people who never relinquished faith in God's abiding and sustaining presence. These faithful people regarded the wilderness as the place where God's voice was heard most clearly and the covenant bond most secure. Hosea, for one, writes of Israel's relation to God during their time in the desert using the intimate imagery of a bride and her bridegroom.(22) Later, the prophets and early saints of the church write of the wilderness as a place of refuge to

which one might escape from the world and experience mystical union with God.(23) So there is both a positive and a negative understanding of wilderness in the Biblical story and in Christian tradition.(24) The conditions of landed and landless existence, therefore, must not be regarded as having singular and preordained repercussions on faith. Rather, these states of existence must be understood in the context of Brueggemann's dialectic. Grasping for land results in landlessness and risking landlessness yields the gift of land.

III.

In addition to the Old Testament landed/landless paradigm regarding the relation of land and faith, the selected novels also reveal a relation between land and faith that is peculiar to the Mennonite people. As the history of the Mennonites unfolded, these people developed their own particular bond to the land, which directly relates to the understanding of wilderness as a place of refuge. A brief historical sketch will highlight this dimension of the relation of land and faith for the Mennonite people.

The Anabaptist movement, out of which the Mennonites evolved, began in the urban centers of Germany, Holland, and Switzerland during the sixteenth century Reformation.(25) Its founding members are described as having "no proletarian common denominator. . . . the movement was heterogeneous in character with adherents

from all social classes and vocations."(26) As the movement sought ways to sustain itself, however, it became increasingly linked to an agrarian lifestyle.(27) By the time Mennonites began to emigrate to Canada in the late nineteenth century, agriculture was an integral part of the Mennonite way of life.(28)

The Anabaptist/Mennonite transition from a heterogeneous group, which included urban professionals, to a society of rural agriculturalists was encouraged and shaped by several forces in history. A brief overview of these forces will identify the major factors contributing to this change. It is important to note that all of these influences are presented as distinct for the sake of simplicity and clarity. Just as the movement of history is known to gyrate, these factors overlap, interconnect, and repeat over the course of time.

The most direct force that propelled Anabaptists into rural areas was oppression. The first Anabaptists suffered violent persecution from both Catholics and Protestants, and from civic and ecclesiastical parties.(29) Between 1525 and 1560, thousands of Anabaptists were imprisoned, tortured, and martyred. The struggle to simply stay alive kept Anabaptists on a migratory path, and moving increasingly into rural areas where they were less conspicuous to their persecutors.(30)

Secondly, the Anabaptists themselves were committed to separating from the rest of the world.(31)

The foundation of this commitment rested in a dualistic world view, often now referred to as a two kingdom theology. A brief overview of this theology will help to explain the Anabaptists' desire to live in rural areas. Early Anabaptists applied the New Testament distinction between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness to their own existential situation.(32) The kingdom of Christ was not perceived as a sometime future event; rather, Christ's return was anticipated to be imminent. To prepare for this event, true followers of Christ must begin the work of initiating the holy kingdom on earth, here and now: "The Anabaptists believed they were the forerunners of a time to come, in which the Lord would establish His people and His laws throughout the earth."(33) The world was regarded as the kingdom of darkness and sin which must be cast away, both spiritually and geographically, for purity of faith to exist.

Article 4 of the Schleithem Confession of 1527, one of the earliest statements of Anabaptist conviction, details this two kingdom Weltanschauung:

For truly all creatures are in but two classes, good and bad, believing and unbelieving, darkness and light, the world and those who have come out of the world. . . . everything which is not united with our God and Christ cannot be other than abomination which we shun and flee from. By this is meant all popish and anti-popish works and church services, meetings and church attendance, drinking houses, civic affairs, the commitments made in unbelief and other things of that kind, which are highly regarded by the world and yet are carried on in flat contradiction to the command of God, in accordance with all the unrighteousness which is in the world. From all these things we shall be separated and have no part with them for they are

nothing but an abomination . . . (34)

The religious practices and underlying precepts of the Anabaptist religion reflect this basic two kingdom theology. An outline of their main tenets of faith reveals a concern to maintain a community representative of God's kingdom over against the larger fallen world:(35)

1) Believer's Baptism--baptism based on knowledge and confession, and involving a genuine rebirth out of the state of sin

2) Discipleship as "Nachfolge Christi"--following Christ in complete obedience, which includes maintaining an ethic of love and non-resistance

3) Use of the Ban--excommunicating those people of the fellowship who act in disobedience

4) Church as Gemeinde--". . . the living together in peace and mutual exhortation, or the sharing of both material and spiritual things"(36)

5) The Suffering Church--"Conflict with the world was inevitable for those who endeavored to live an earnest Christian life."(37)

Menno Simons summarizes the credo of the Mennonites in these words: "The entire evangelical Scriptures, teach us that the church of Christ was and is, in doctrine, life, and worship, a people separated from the world."(38)

Because of the Mennonites' conviction to separate from the world, the rural setting was an appropriate location for them to live. As a natural isolator, rural areas served to protect the people from their persecutors, while also serving as a practical location for living out their commitment to avoid the sins

of the world.

The Mennonites were further encouraged into rural areas by the influence of the earlier born Waldensian sect.(39) The Waldensians, drawing on Revelation 12:6, maintained that the true church of Christ must withdraw from the world into the wilderness. Through the influence of this group, the idea of wilderness as a place of refuge made further inroads into Mennonite thinking. The effect is understandable, as the Waldensians' proclamation only supported the Mennonites' own belief in separation. The idea that the true church must locate in the wilderness also intensified the link between Mennonite faith and land. The wilderness was God's sanctioned place for his followers; and the most practical way to survive in wilderness areas was to farm. Thus, more and more Mennonites adopted an agricultural lifestyle.

By the late eighteenth century, when Mennonites began migrating to Russia, working the land had already become a tradition; and it was a tradition that influenced their faith:(40)

The Mennonites brought to their new Russian environment a brotherhood-type of church, but not a brotherhood in the creative evangelical sixteenth century sense. It was a quietistic, non-missionary Mennonitism which sought to preserve an historic faith by formalistic, tradition-honoured means. The Mennonites brought to Russia, also, a faith which had acquired certain cultural accretions which in turn had been absolutized and sanctified.(41)

As we shall see, one of those "cultural accretions" was working the land.

The period of history that the Mennonites lived in Russia seemed to solidify the bond between Mennonites and an agrarian lifestyle. During this 130-year period, the Mennonites lived without external strife, and achieved monumental success as agriculturalists. At their peak in 1920, the Mennonite population stood at 120,000 with land holdings amounting to more than 3,000,000 acres.(42) In addition to agricultural prosperity, two other developments occurred during these years that strengthened the bond between Mennonite faith and the land.

One, they developed as a cultural and ethnic group to the extent that they considered themselves to be a distinct people. There are several reasons for this occurrence.(43) First of all, the Mennonites already carried within them feelings of segregation when they arrived in Russia. The governments of their previous homelands had never fully accepted them as citizens. As a result, the Mennonites already understood themselves to be a distinct group. Second, the long distance from their parent churches, combined with the "insulated" environment of the new homeland, further reinforced feelings of peoplehood. Third, the privilege of freedom to govern themselves and to establish their own economic, social, welfare, and educational institutions served to create a "state within a state." Such factors naturally intensified their already existing emotions of detachment. Lastly, the Russian government itself perpetrated this

state of affairs by treating the Mennonites as a group distinctly different from all other colonists who were settled in Russia at that time. Thus: "As a church and as a social, economic, and political entity . . . [the Mennonites in Russia] also assumed the attributes of an ethnic subgroup, or people, and also invariably spoke of itself as *das mennonitische volk*."(44)

One cannot help but call to mind here the two kingdom theology so central to previous generations of Anabaptists and Mennonites.(45) In consideration of this element of Mennonite faith, the social and political factors contributing to the development of a "mennonitisches Volk" lose their incidental quality. The religious/theological goal of the Mennonite people was to develop a community "in the world but not of the world."(46) Religiously, the formation of the community of Mennonites in Russia represents the fulfillment of the two kingdom theology to an extraordinary extent.

The second development during the "Golden Age" in Russia that intensified the bond between Mennonite faith and the land was the integration of religious values into all other affairs of life:

The first settlers to Russia brought with them the machinery for ethnic survival and applied it instinctively to the new setting. . . . group survival depended . . . on a definite cultural identity and a strong social system. Both these dimensions found expression in institutionalized religion. . . . religious values . . . set the boundaries of major institutions and defined the basis of interaction within the community. . . . ecclesiastical and civil interests tended to merge.(47)