



# Roots: Biblical Norm or Cultural Anachronism?

by Michael Schluter

*"We are witnessing a historic decline in the significance of place to human life"* Alvin Toffler in 'Future Shock' (1970)

## Summary

Western society at the end of the twentieth century values individual mobility as highly as any in history. Christians in the past have not questioned that mobility is desirable. If anything, the New Testament (NT) seems to endorse a culture which holds lightly to place, and to encourage Christians to find their roots in Christ and in the fellowship of believers. However, the Old Testament (OT) appears to teach that 'roots' in place are important for personal identity and social stability.

This paper will argue that Old and New Testament perspectives on roots are compatible. Christians must hold in tension the practice of roots in their personal lives and the promotion of roots through public policy whilst recognising that Christ may require them at any time to leave home and even family to follow his calling.

## Introduction

Writing about the trial of Rosemary West on ten counts of murder, *The Economist* (October 7th 1995) commented as follows,

'Orwell blamed the decline of the English murder (*sic*) on the fragmentation of society. It is precisely this that has made serial killing possible. The women whom Mrs West is accused of murdering were mostly drifters. Bed-and-breakfasting here, taking a short-term job there, they had lost touch with families and roots. That was why their disappearances went unnoticed for so long. In a less mobile society, where children stayed at home, couples stuck together and people kept tabs on each other, so many women could not have disappeared without a grand fuss being made.'

High levels of mobility have been a feature of Western European societies since 1945, and of the United States for much longer. Many households change home frequently so that the movement resembles not a tidal wave but an electron dance. Whilst such mobility may have contributed to broadening individual experience, and to the breakdown of class divisions and regional parochialism, research has shown that it has had a strongly negative impact on neighbourhood solidarity and family cohesion.<sup>1</sup> How should Christians respond to the culture of mobility? Does the Bible encourage strong ties to land in its teaching on the Jubilee, or weak ties to property and other earthly possessions through Christ's example and teaching on the Kingdom? Are roots a biblical norm or a cultural anachronism?

## Old Testament Teaching on Land and Roots

Throughout Israel's history, land stands as the symbol of the special relationship God has with his people. The land was a divine gift, Israel's inheritance as God's first-born among the nations. It was held in tenancy, not from the King as owner, as in surrounding nations, but from God. If the land as gift gave the people rights, this 'tenant' status also laid on them responsibilities, both to obey God and to love neighbour.

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<sup>1</sup> For a summary of this research, see Helen Hayward, "The Impact of Mobility on Personal Relationships", Jubilee Centre, Cambridge, 1992.

To explore the 'roots' theme in the Old Testament, a brief description of Israel's land-holding system is necessary. When Israel entered Canaan, every clan and family (except those of the Levites) was allocated a piece of land within its tribal land block (Joshua chapters 13-19). This initial allocation was made permanent by the Jubilee Year provisions; every fiftieth year each family was to return 'home' to occupy its ancestral land which, if leased out or lost, was returned free of charge. The prospect of a future Jubilee meant there was no freehold land market; land could only be leased until the next Jubilee year (Leviticus chapter 25). Several consequences followed. Neighbours generally were relatives; names of towns and clans were often interchangeable (e.g. Gilead, Etam); family names were associated with specific pieces of land. Potential parochialism was overcome in part by the required triennial visits to Jerusalem for the feasts, and by strong national religious integration.

Thus, at the family level, ownership of a piece of land (or urban property for a Levite) symbolised membership of the covenant community. This is seen in the Naboth incident (1 Kings 21). If land had been merely an economic asset, and if the Jubilee had been primarily about a redistribution of those assets, Naboth would not have objected so strongly to Ahab's offer of cash or an alternative piece of land. Naboth, however, viewed his 'ancestral land' as symbolising his membership among God's people, his roots and identity as an Israelite. To remove his land would not only strike at his relationship with God, but would threaten the future of the Naboth family-line as secure and supported members of the Jezreel community; perhaps this is why the judgment on Ahab for seizing Naboth's land is for his own family to be extinguished (1 Kings 21:21).

These long-term attachments to a specific locality in God's social design for Israel would have profoundly influenced social relationships to the extent that they were obeyed. The approximate equality of land distribution, preserved by the Jubilee, would have inhibited growth of rural elites and prevented long-term landlessness, ensuring fewer class divisions in the community. In this way, land distribution was the foundation of economic justice in Israelite society. In addition, the overlap of kin and neighbours would have reinforced continuity and obligation in the local community and contributed to long-term, committed and multi-faceted relationships. Every individual and household would have been bound into, and supported by, an extended family and a specific community through their permanent stake in the land. Indeed, if an individual could not support himself on the land, the neighbours were urged to provide help so as to prevent mobility (Leviticus 25:35-37).

At a national level, also, the land played a central role in defining social identity. When Israel repudiated God, judgment involved the nation being uprooted from the land (Deuteronomy 29:28). Equally, return from exile to the land would result from their renewing allegiance to Yahweh (Deuteronomy 30:1-5). In OT thinking, land and those who live on it are so closely intertwined that the word 'land' gradually ceases to mean the physical place and instead becomes a concrete way of talking about society (e.g. Amos 8:8, Zechariah 12:12).

Clearly the land in Israel did more than provide the basis of family and national identity. The Jubilee was not just about roots, but about wealth and income distribution, and guaranteed all members of society the resources for self-employment. However, the Naboth incident and other OT references to land make it clear that roots and identity are not just a by-product of the Jubilee law but part of its primary purpose.

## New Testament Teaching on Land and Roots

Christopher Wright has argued for three levels of fulfilment or application of OT teachings under the new covenant: 'typological, eschatological and paradigmatic'<sup>2</sup>. Using this framework, we explore how OT

teaching on land and roots is applied by NT writers within the context of the new covenant.

### *Foreshadowing of Christ (Typological)*

In the New Testament, the land of Palestine ceases to have its former theological significance; it is not an aspect of God's relationship with the new Israel. The role of the land is now taken by Christ who becomes the source of security, status and cultural identity for the people of God.

Jesus teaches that the Jews can no longer claim to be planted as vines in the land, as taught by the OT prophets (e.g. Isaiah 5:1-7). Instead they have to be grafted into himself as the true vine, and he in turn is rooted in the Father (John 15)<sup>3</sup>. In the same way, Paul constantly uses the term 'in Christ' for the roots and identity of the Christian where the Old Testament might have referred to being 'in the land'.

The land also prefigures the 'Koinonia' - the fellowship of believers. Those with a stake in the land under the Old Covenant prefigure those who are a part of the fellowship under the New. Those who depart from the fellowship, like those who left their land, show that they have no real part among God's people (1 John 2:19). Both the land and the fellowship entail shared experiences and shared responsibilities such as concern for the poor and needy (e.g. Leviticus 25:39-43; Acts 2:44-45). There is the same 'prophetic indignation' at those who defile the land as there is against those who harm the fellowship (e.g. Jeremiah 16:18; Acts 5:1-11).

### *Signpost to the Future (Eschatological)*

As well as the typological fulfilment of the land in the New Testament, there is also an eschatological fulfilment. The land of Israel, the dwelling place of God's people, is fulfilled in the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:4 ff). Jesus insists that his followers must be willing to leave their roots, their home and even the closest of their human relationships, if they are to be his disciples, but promises them eternal life if they make such sacrifices (Mark 10:29-30), as well as a home in heaven (John 14:2).

In the Epistles, also, there is stress on Christians not finding their home and roots on the earth, but in heaven. Peter writes to 'God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus' and speaks of their inheritance as one that 'can never perish, spoil or fade' and which is 'kept in heaven' (1 Peter 1:1-4). The writer of Hebrews uses the example of Abraham, who 'by faith made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country ... he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God' (Hebrews 11:8-10).

### *Example for Society (Paradigmatic)*

All this NT fulfilment of the motif of the land would seem sufficient for the Christian to look no further for contemporary application of OT teaching. Indeed, this is where much Christian discussion of the land issue ends. However, as argued in an earlier *Cambridge Paper* (Vol. 3, No. 3), OT law can also be interpreted as a set of interconnected principles which form a coherent pattern for the ordering of society. Israel's sharply distinctive social pattern was part of its role as an example to other nations, to demonstrate what love and justice mean when translated into social, political and economic life (Deuteronomy 4:8). Thus, in Isaiah the task of Servant who is a 'light to the Gentiles' (Isaiah 42:6) refers to both his role of generating the social blessings which should have been found in Israel as well as to his role in salvation (Isaiah 42:1-7; Luke 4:18-21). Jesus teaches that the key to applying OT law under the new covenant is to consider its implications for relationships with God and neighbour (Matthew 22:34-40).

OT law instructs Christians about social order in a way the NT does not. Although set in a covenantal context, it is given to a society most of whom are characterised by Jesus as having 'hardness of heart'

3 See Gary M. Burge, "Territorial Religion, Johannine Christology, and the Vineyard of John 15", in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ*, eds. J. Green and M. Turner, Eerdmans, 1994.

(Matthew 19:8), a description applicable to any fallen society. NT teaching is addressed to Christians; extrapolation from the church to society is dangerous as secular society has neither the motivation nor the help of the Holy Spirit to attain standards laid down for Christians.

Without the paradigmatic application of OT teaching of the law, many OT provisions concerning land would lack contemporary relevance. Yet Jesus urges his disciples not to lose sight of even the smallest detail of the law's teaching (Matthew 5:13-19). For example, why should urban and rural land be treated differently in the year of Jubilee? Why was leasehold transfer permitted but not freehold sale? Why does the land legislation so obviously complement the interest ban and year of debt remission in providing a safety net for the poor?

The one ethical principle which we wish to draw here from OT teaching on land is that roots are important for individual, family and social relationships. God arranged that Israel should not be forever nomadic but should have roots in land, and ordered the ownership and distribution of land to ensure each person and household would have long-term roots in a specific place. From this the principle may be derived that it is important for all societies to foster and promote a long-term association for each family and individual with a specific place or locality. This is to create conditions favourable to the sustaining of 'community', that is long-term, committed, stable relationships.

NT writers, while stressing that the land of Israel finds spiritual fulfilment in Jesus, are not unaware of the importance of place in people's lives. Just as Jeremiah urges the exiles to 'seek the welfare of the city', even when the city is the home of their arch-enemies the Babylonians, Peter urges the Christians of his day to become socially involved wherever they find themselves (Jeremiah 29:4-7, 1 Peter 2:11-17). Paul sends most of his letters to Christians in specific cities, recognising the particularities of each situation. Even in Revelation, each church's life is assessed in the light of its specific local and spiritual context (Revelation chapters 2,3).

## The Roots Issue Today

The Christian church has not generally had the political and economic influence necessary to implement biblical teaching on land distribution and rootedness in society. After the Reformation in Britain when such an opportunity did exist, the church's continuing position as major landowner stifled any radical critique of land-owning structures such as those by the Levellers or Fifth Monarchists. Thus, the later enclosure movement, which resulted in large-scale population mobility and contributed to class antagonisms past and present, went largely unchallenged by the church. Only the Methodists seriously addressed issues of land reform, and then not until the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

The reason why so few people in Western societies today can identify roots in a place is due to the contemporary culture of mobility. This has a long history. Indeed, MacFarlane has traced the origins of English individualism back to a period prior to 1200.<sup>5</sup> Western liberal philosophy, stressing the freedom of the individual, 'searched for universals in every sphere, and recognised no particularism or uniqueness, least of all of a geographic-religious kind'<sup>6</sup>. As Christopher Lasch argued, for certain elites in the Western intellectual tradition, 'progress is mobility'.<sup>7</sup>

In neo-classical economic theory, not only is land a commodity to be traded like any other commodity, but mobility is regarded as essential to maximise labour productivity; to encourage rootedness would create skill scarcity in growth areas and thus slow economic progress. Mobility is an essential feature of a capitalist economy.

Both occupational and residential mobility have become accepted as a necessary, inevitable and even desirable aspect of contemporary culture. Mobility contributes to freedom from restricting obligation to family and neighbour, freedom to do as you like with no danger of social censure. This is why urban life for some is so appealing; no-one knows who you are, where you come from or what is your business.

The pattern of university education and career progression has helped inculcate a mobile culture among the better educated. In Britain, university applications are cleared nationally; graduates rarely return to their former home areas. Thereafter, moving house becomes part of career progression. Thus, in the United States about a fifth of the population change their address annually.<sup>8</sup> In Britain, even under present difficulties there were over 1.25 million housing transactions in 1994.<sup>9</sup> For those on low incomes or trapped by negative equity, long-distance commuting is sometimes the only way to obtain work, and while not requiring house relocation equally disrupts family and neighbourhood relationships.<sup>10</sup>

Mobility is linked to stress-related physical and mental ill-health; symptoms include irritation, somatic complaints, tension, anxiety, depression, smoking and heart disease, with women often the worst affected; it is also a recurring feature of marriage breakdown.<sup>11</sup> A study of hospital doctors documented the effects of mobility on their families,

'These wives found that mobility was isolating because it both severed established ties with relatives, friends and neighbours and placed them in new and unfamiliar situations. When moves were frequent, feelings of non-belongingness were ongoing ... building up new relationships was usually a lengthy process.'<sup>12</sup>

Mobility also often creates relationship difficulties for children as they move school and neighbourhood. For the elderly, the mobility of their adult children often leaves them isolated and lonely. It becomes impossible for adult children to fulfil obligations to elderly parents simply because they live too far away.

The overall impact of high mobility is greater superficiality in personal relationships. Durkheim deplored the cult of the individual and coined the term 'anomie' to describe the condition of individuals no longer satisfactorily relating to one another. Immundo, in his phrase 'the mobility syndrome', extends Durkheim's principle to explain a way of behaving that is geared to developing only temporary relationships. Toffler describes the 'modular man' who establishes a fragmented network of limited, functional relationships, in which he plugs into a module of another's personality rather than engaging the person; 'the knowledge that no move is final ... works against the development of relationships that are more than modular.'<sup>13</sup> Thus, mobility directly undermines the sustained and multi-faceted relationships which are required to achieve social integration and personal development.

## Implications for Personal Lifestyle Decisions and the Local Church

Against this background of a high-mobility, placeless culture, how can Christians reaffirm the biblical emphasis on roots? At the personal level, clearly the norm of roots is not antithetical to all mobility. Some may choose to broaden their experience and pursue career development before putting down roots. Often hard choices must be made between

4 Helen Hayward, "Christian Attitudes to the Ownership and Distribution of Land in Britain 1500-1930", Jubilee Centre, Cambridge, 1992.

5 Alan MacFarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1978.

6 W. D. Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism*, University of California Press, London, 1982, p.13.

7 Kenneth Anderson, "Heartless World Revisited: Christopher Lasch's parting polemic against the New Cross", TLS, September 22, 1995, p.3.

8 Daniel Bell, "The Disunited States of America", TLS, June 9 1995, p.16.

9 Central Statistical Office, London.

10 Philippa J Semper, "Weekly Long-distance Commuting: Its Effect on Family and Community Life", Jubilee Centre, Cambridge, 1989.

11 Helen Hayward, "The Impact of Mobility on Personal Relationships", Jubilee Centre, Cambridge, 1992, p.53.

12 Faith Elliot Robertson, "Mobility and the Family in Hospital Medicine", *Health Trends*, Vol.13, 1981, pp.15-16.

13 Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*, Bodley Head, London, 1970.

making roots the priority for the benefit of family and local church as against career advancement for the breadwinner. There are no rules here; the balance between relationship priorities and the best use of personal talents for God's glory has to be weighed by each individual and household. However, Christians must face the fact that if they choose mobility to pursue career opportunities there will be long-term relational costs, both for themselves and for others in their family, church and neighbourhood.

Principles for personal lifestyle decisions might include the following. First, those asked to move for job reasons should weigh up carefully the long-term relational implications. Second, Christians generally should stay in one town, and if possible in one house, as long as possible so that they can develop relationships in the locality. Third, families need to develop a long-term 'roots' strategy; couples on marrying might be encouraged to plan where their roots should be (perhaps even where they plan to retire) so that they can organise their long-term career decisions accordingly.

However, Christians must be ready for God's call to override the desire for roots here on earth: Christians must be ready to go anywhere, anytime. Such mobility is essential, for example, for the evangelisation of unreached billions in Asia and nearer home to strengthen Christian witness in inner cities. This ambivalence towards roots is part of the paradox Christians face as they live with one foot in the 'present age' and the other in the 'age to come'.

For those Christians who have been compelled to lose their roots by political upheaval or other tragic circumstances, the biblical perspective can be a source of encouragement. Ultimately, roots which provide meaning, belonging and identity are found in Christ, and as the Israelite exiles discovered in Babylon, God is able to help build new relationships in the local community to provide a sense of plan and purpose (Jeremiah 29:4-14).

It is difficult for Christians to implement the NT vision of the local church when a high proportion of the congregation is transient. Eclectic congregations in suburbs or city centres undermine the claim that Christian faith transcends class and culture. The vision of the sharing and caring community is hard to bring about where relationships last for months rather than years. So local churches need to teach and encourage rootedness among their members. Equally difficult is the church's task of penetrating local communities which are highly mobile. It is tempting not to bother to seek friendship with a family which is likely

to move on shortly. Deliberate strategies are needed to befriend short-stay households if they are to be presented with the gospel.

## Implications for Corporates and Governments

The corporate sector could play an important role in reducing levels of mobility. Personnel departments would probably be less enthusiastic to relocate staff if they appreciated fully the impact indirectly on the employee's family and directly on employee productivity. Also, corporations could make greater effort to take capital to depressed regions rather than expecting labour to move to growth areas. However, it is only if a new consensus develops in society about the benefits of strong roots to individuals, families and wider society that companies are likely to reduce levels of relocation.

At the level of government, there are a range of options. As a major employer, government departments can act directly to reduce mobility - for example among NHS and military personnel. In schools, governments could introduce 'family education' into the core curriculum, including discussion of the relational costs of high levels of mobility. Indirectly, the government could discourage mobility through fiscal policy, housing policy and strong regional policy. For example, because much job mobility results from capital being transferred out of depressed areas by national level financial institutions, economists have begun to call for establishment of regional banks as a means of stemming the outflow of funds from the periphery to the core.<sup>14</sup>

The reason governments fail to tackle mobility is not primarily an absence of policy instruments. It is the failure to appreciate the true economic and social costs of mobility, or the personal and relational benefits of roots. Our task as Christians who wish to be salt and light in society, based on a biblical agenda, must be to actively promote roots in both public and private life, however much this contravenes the prevailing social ethos.

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14 S. Dow, *Financial Markets and Regional Development*, Gower, Aldershot, 1990.

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