

LAND-VIOLENCE UNHOLY UNION: A RE-IMAGINATION OF LAND THEOLOGY

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Abstract

Land comes across as a spirit. Conversations around the land motif have played significant socio-cultural, historical, political, economic, and religious roles throughout human civilization. Land discourse is often linked to human survival, history, identity, and spirituality. In Africa, in particular, land discourse revolves around beliefs and belongingness. The land seems comparable to a shrine where ancestral memories are preserved, and future destinies are formed. However, it sometimes incites violence and a ready-to-die attitude. Beyond a metaphysical emphasis on land, this article posits history-telling as a significant catalyst that spurs an intransigent attitude toward land acquisition, retention and reclaiming.

Keywords: Land, Violence, Africa, Biblical Hexateuch, and History-Telling.

1. Introduction

Human history has repeatedly shown people's intransigent attachment to their land. In effect, responses to questions of identity have increasingly engendered territorial implications arousing racist, nationalist, xenophobic, and ethnic sentiments. The "milieu factor" often marred the sense of belongingness and commitment to shared humanity, as spatial affiliation sometimes defines relationships. This attachment to the so-called fatherland, motherland, or ancestral land triggers the question: What ideology fosters a ready-to-die attitude toward one's land? Indeed, land assumes a symbolic representation of human identity, so much so that estrangement or loss of one's land through systemic forced migration or war provokes, in most cases,

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episodic traumas. As a result, the campaign for its retention or reclaim often stirs cross-generational violence. This article adopts an interdisciplinary approach to discussing the complexities surrounding land disputes. First, it exposes some causes of the land-violence union, arguing that some of the ongoing wars across the globe include a territorial expansion agenda. Second, the article offers a sacramental understanding of land theology. Third, referring to the biblical land motif, the article shifts from a metaphysical explanation of one's intransigent land attachment to perceiving such sentiment as an outcome of historical constructs, maintaining that history-telling (factual or fictional) fuels such attachment.

2. Loss of Land as Threat to Life

As an entity, land has played significant socio-cultural, historical, political, economic, and religious roles throughout human civilization. Its worth is cross-generational, timeless, and immeasurable. Land gives identity and a sense of belonging. Its sizable possession often suggests economic prosperity, ethnic supremacy, and political sovereignty. Land is symbolic of citizenship and often carries more weight than any legal definition of citizenship.²

3. Land Dispute: A Global Phenomenon

The attachment to one's land seems to have everything to do with human survival. A brief look at the global sense suggests that the recent Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine wars seem to have a territorial expansion agenda. One of the several reasons purported by conflict theoreticians regarding the Russia-Ukraine war is that, in view of creating a greater Russia similar to the Soviet Union, the former refuses to see the latter as a separate and independent state but as an extension of Russia in terms of ethnic, cultural, historical, geographical, and religious similarities.³ Also, in the case of the perennial Israel-

² Edmond J. Keller, *Identity Citizenship and Political Conflict in Africa* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014), 104.

³ Sertif Demir, 'The 2022 Russia-Ukraine War: Reasons and Impacts,' *Mayis* 6, no. 1, (2022): 13-40, esp. p. 17, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/2369182>;

EYEOWA: *Land-Violence Unholy Union: A Re-Imagination of Land Theology*

Palestinian war, the land expansion and control agenda cannot be ignored on both sides of the divide.⁴ Similarly, in Africa, land disputes played a significant role in intra-state conflicts,⁵ taking different dimensions and forms, with economic and cultural factors at the forefront of conflict. It then follows that loss of land seems to amount to a threat to life.

4. Large-scale Agricultural Land Acquisition Initiative

Increasing global food insecurity and expanding liberal economy have contributed to the rise of foreign investment in the agricultural sector of several African countries.⁶ According to the Africa Agriculture Status Report (AGRA),⁷ land in sub-Saharan Africa is a significant economic game-changer as about 70 per cent of its inhabitants engage in small-scale agriculture, contributing about 32 per cent of the continent's gross domestic product (GDP).⁸ As such, Africa seems to be a deliberate

John J. Mearsheimer, 'The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War,' *Horizon* 21, (Summer 2022): 12-27, esp. p. 14.

⁴ Cf. Herbert C. Kelman, 'The Interdependence of Israeli and Palestinian National Identities: The Role of the Other in Existential Conflicts,' *Journal of Social Issues* 55, No. 3, (1999): 581-600; The Carter Center, *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Historical and Prospective Intervention Analyses*. October 18–20, 2002; Congressional Research Service Report, *Israel and Hamas October 2023 Conflict: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)*. October 20, 2023

⁵ Liz A. Wily, 'Tackling Land Tenure in the Emergency to Development Transition in post-Conflict States: From Restitution to Reform.' in *Uncharted Territory: Land, Conflict and Humanitarian Action*, ed. Sara Pantuliano (London: Practical Action Publishing, 2009), 29.

⁶ According to United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the investment of FDI in sub-Saharan Africa in 2007 amounted to over US\$ 30 billion, a new record level compared to US\$ 22 billion in 2006 and US\$ 17 billion in 2005, with the explicit goal of addressing issues of food security, energy and fuel supply. Cf. UNCTAD, 'World Investment Report 2008 – Transnational Corporations and the Infrastructure Challenge,' (Geneva, 2008), accessed 4 October 2023, https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/wir2008_en.pdf.

⁷ Africa Agriculture Status Report (AGRA), *The Business of Smallholder Agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa, Issue 5* (Nairobi: Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, 2017), vi.

⁸Reporting on the collaborative research on the impact of large-scale land acquisitions in Africa between the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the International

target for the large-scale agricultural land acquisition global initiative.⁹ While several African countries initially adopted this project, governments' policies to create an investor-friendly environment suffered great resistance from locals who interpreted the intention and move as land grabbing.¹⁰

The government's aim to transfer land ownership to investors could push Africans to wallow in hunger as small-scale farmers are dispossessed of their main assets and livelihoods.¹¹ It also encourages land corruption, an operational concept reflecting the illicit acts and abuse of power for private gain by those mandated with land governance.¹² It damages the livelihood of small-scale producers, agricultural workers, and landless rural and urban poor.¹³ In effect, locals vehemently resist the project for cultural and financial reasons, as they perceive the initiative as a deliberate effacing process of their home, livelihood, culture and history. On the one hand, the loss of their land threatens the spatial situating of their existence (origin, identity,

Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), the report of Cotula *et al.* focuses on sub-Saharan Africa, their reason being that the region is perceived as a hotspot for international land acquisitions, particularly countries like Sudan, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Mozambique and Tanzania. Cf. Cotula *et al.*, *Land grab or development opportunity? Agricultural Investment and International Land Deals in Africa* (London/Rome: FAO, IIED and IFAD, 2009), 3.

⁹ Ward Anseeuw, 'The Rush for Land in Africa: Resource Grabbing or Green Revolution?' *South African Journal of International Affairs* 20, no. 1 (2013): 159-177. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2013.780326>.

¹⁰ Kerkvliet justifies such resistance as 'what people do that shows disgust, anger, indignation or opposition to what they regard as unjust, unfair, illegal claims on them by people in the higher, more powerful class and status positions or institutions.' Cf. Benedict J. Kerkvliet, 'Everyday Politics in Peasant Societies (and ours),' *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, no. 1 (2009): 233, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150902820487>.

¹¹ Ayodele Odusola, 'Land Grab in Africa: A Review of Emerging Issues and Implications for Policy Options,' *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2014), 2. DOI:10.2139/ssrn.3101806.

¹² Sèdagban H.F. Kakai, *Government and Land Corruption in Benin* (Brighton: Land Deal Politics Initiative, 2012), 34.

¹³ Zúñiga Nieves, *Land Corruption: Topic Guide* (Berlin: Transparency International, 2018), 2.

EYEOWA: *Land-Violence Unholy Union: A Re-Imagination of Land Theology*

and history). On the other hand, it threatens their source of livelihood as most of them survive on farming.

5. Herders-Farmers Conflict in West Africa: A Land-grab Agenda?

West African countries have been in the news recently for all the wrong reasons, the latest being the repetitive and frequent rate of *coup d'états* in the region. Besides the *coup d'état* pandemic, the region has also been unable to satisfactorily handle the long-aged herders-farmers conflict. The recent violent bang during the Christmas of 2023 in Jos, Nigeria, is a clear example of interminable scuffles between agrarian and nomadic communities over land access, use and claim. According to Brottem, the herders-farmers crisis has claimed more than 15,000 lives since 2010, with geographic concentrations in northern Nigeria, central Mali, and northern Burkina Faso.¹⁴

Over the centuries, population growth and climate change have remained undisputable among several advanced causal factors igniting conflicts between herders and farmers. However, Islamic extremists and militia have recently fuelled and given the conflict a religious colouration in these milieux mentioned above. The religious colouration of the conflict makes it seem like the propagation of the Islamic Jihad for land grabbing. Such insinuation emerges because most of the herders involved are Muslims, and the targeted farmers reside mainly in Christian and traditionalist regions. The farmer-herders crisis has been ethnicized and religiously weaponized, provoking complex inter-communal violence that overwhelmingly outplays historical and statistical antecedents.¹⁵ Yet, beyond ethnicity and religion, land possession is at the crux of the experienced violence.

¹⁴ Leif Brottem, 'The Growing Complexity of Farmer Herder Conflict in West and Central Africa,' *Africa Security Brief* 39 (2021): 1, <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/ASB39EN-The-Growing-Complexity-of-Farmer-Herder-Conflict-in-West-and-Central-Africa-update-7-27-21.pdf>.

¹⁵ For statistical details see: Andrew Ajijah, 'Church Says '808 Killed in Southern Kaduna,' *Premium Times*, 29 December 2016, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/219173-church-says-808-killed->

Consequently, the unannounced encroachment or destructive invasion of a group into the land of another elicits violent tension and is threatening. Those whose land is encroached feel obliged to restrict the invaders, most often through violence. The rationale for such moves is simple: the loss of their land appears synonymous with the loss of their livelihood, culture, religion, history, identity, and existence.

6. Re-imagining Space: Land as Sacrament

The concept of sacredness is central to theology. In monotheistic and natural religions, sacredness transcends the qualitative character of beings (divine and human), as some inanimate things are also considered sacred. Everything is presumed or at least has the potential to be sacred.¹⁶ This theological position emanates as a necessary implication of the *creation theology* – *and God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good* (Gen 1:31). While the theological mantra *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing) retains its relevance, the thought of creation from and for cannot be neglected. Creation is from God and is for a benevolent purpose. This explains why creation passes as a sacrament, simultaneously revealing its divine source and calling for human contemplation. So, in various faith and cultural institutions and traditions, particularly in Africa, land as creation is considered valuable and sacred.¹⁷ The latter is understood in

southern-kaduna.html; Peter Duru, '7000 Persons Displace in Fulani Herdsmen, Agatu Farmers Clash in Benue,' *Vanguard Newspaper*, 29 February 2016, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/02/7000-persons-displaced-in-fulani-herdsmen-agatu-farmers-clash-in-benue/>; Emmanuel Nwakanma & Stanley E. Boroh, 'Demography of Conflict and the Herders-Farmers Crisis in Nigeria,' *The Nigerian Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (2019): 28-40, [https://doi.org/10.36108/NJSA/9102/71\(0220\)](https://doi.org/10.36108/NJSA/9102/71(0220)); E.A. Oghuvbu & O.B Oghuvbu, 'Farmers-Herdsmen Conflict in Africa: The Case of Nigeria,' *Vestnik RUDN International Relations* 20, no. 4 (2020): 698-706. DOI: 10.22363/2313-0660-2020-20-4-698-706.

¹⁶ Stephen Eyeowa, 'Ezekiel's Visionary Temple: A Blend of Tradition and Innovation in Theological Temple-Discourse,' *Hekima Review* 64 (May 2022): 111-124, esp. p.111.

¹⁷ While the theory of the sacred seems very close to the theory of value, I acknowledge that not all valuable things may be necessarily sacred. For instance, the logic of liberal

EYEOWA: *Land-Violence Unholy Union: A Re-Imagination of Land Theology*

its theological garb so that beyond economic reason, the intransigent attachment to land becomes more sensible when perceived from the perspective of religious or spiritual commitment.

From the preceding, the attachment to one's land becomes more explainable based on beliefs. The land is perceived as a distinct cultural symbol that qualifies life and survival, on the one hand, and shapes identity, mores, and history, on the other hand. Land appears as a *raison d'être*, a valuable sacred fortune worth dying for. Considered within this scope, the Land-Violence unholy union is usually intense because the connection between the natives and their land incites social, cultural, spiritual, economic, and political responsibilities. The motivation for engaging in such violent battles is not simply for the fun of war but because the land involved is not just any land; it is the land with colossal cultural, historical, existential, religious, and worth. Simply put, the land becomes a sacred shrine that determines and shapes existence.

In Africa, land symbolizes life, ensuring its occupants' survival. The symbolic role of land in the African context tends to inspire locals toward having and emphasizing a material and spiritual relationship with their land. The functional relevance and belief in the land, as expressed in the biblical portrayal of the promised land as a sacred land from which flows milk and honey, is a perfect description (Exod 3,8). On the one hand, land is seen as a means of "providing food, medicine, fuel, grazing and browsing for livestock, fish and non-market valuables such as water retention, inheritance value, aesthetic, shade, initiation

capitalism is often based on the argument for the desacralization of land, to make it a mere asset or commodity. The desacralization of land still does not make it unvaluable at least in the market. In this regard, land is perceived as an economic, valuable asset but not sacred. The idea of sacrality comes in at the level of religious valuation in that land is considered in its sacramental status. One the one hand, it helps humanity to grasp the meaning of its existence and responsibility vis-a-vis creation. On the other hand, it mirrors the Creator. Land conflict arises when its sacramental status is belittled and the theological orientations safeguarding this sacramentality disregarded.

sites, sacred areas, and the prevention of soil erosion.”¹⁸ On the other hand, land “provides a collective identity and well-being in that people, land and culture become indissolubly linked.”¹⁹ As such, its loss jeopardizes cultural values and spiritual communion with the ancestors and sacred spaces.

Moreover, even the threat of forced migration for economic or security reasons remains ineffective in taming one’s passionate attachment to the land. The experience of Africans in the diaspora has shown an umbilical cord-like connection to their respective African homeland. The African proverb that notes that home is a place to die, although it may not always be homely, furthers the point. To demonstrate how important the land is to its legitimate owners or inhabitants, departure of whatever sort does not hinder passion and longing for return or its repossession.

The case of the Burundian refugees in Tanzania is a typical example of Africans who, though accommodated in another African country, demonstrated the sacred link between land and people beyond psychological attachment or cultural longing for home. Following the 1972 civil unrest in their home country, which made thousands of Burundians flee to Tanzania, the latter “in partnership with the Burundian government and UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency), adopted the Tanzania Comprehensive Solutions Strategy (TANCOSS) which outlined a plan for durable solutions for the Burundian refugees.”²⁰ The Tanzania government launched the initiatives of voluntary repatriation to Burundi, processing of citizenship for naturalization in Tanzania, and relocation of the naturalized from

¹⁸ Ben Cousins, ‘Tenure and Common Property Resources in Africa.’ in *Evolving Land Rights, Policy and Tenure in Africa*, eds. C. Toulmin and J. Quan (London: Department for International Development, International Institute for Environment, and Development and Natural Resources Institute, 2000): 151.

¹⁹ Darlene M. Johnston, ‘Native Rights as Collective Rights: A Question of Group Self-Preservation.’ in *The Rights of Minority Culture*, ed. Will Kymlicka (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 193-194.

²⁰ Amelia Kuch, ‘Naturalization of Burundian refugees in Tanzania.’ *Forced Migration Review* 52 (2016): 63.

EYEOWA: *Land-Violence Unholy Union: A Re-Imagination of Land Theology*

refugee settlements to other regions of Tanzania. According to available data, “79% of refugees opted for Tanzanian citizenship while 21% opted for repatriation and duly returned to Burundi.”²¹

Indeed, the decision of those who opted for repatriation boggles the mind. What could have informed the decision for a return? Such a decision appears more profound than it seems. The fact that 79% of Burundians opted to become Tanzanians indicates or at least suggests the latter’s healthy and cordial treatment of the former. Moreover, “the refugees often cited historical affinity and familiarity with Tanzania as important factors in their decision to opt for naturalization. Many Tanzanians thought living with the refugees was possible due to ethnic, religious and linguistic similarities.”²² These testimonies indicate, with comparison, that those who opted to return are convinced of their committed attachment to their homeland. Beyond economic or political gains, their choice to return can only be fully grasped from the perspective of spirituality. They may probably not have the opportunity to live on their ancestral land. However, the closeness to their ancestral land and the spatial retracing of their history, identity and culture to the land comes across as sufficient consolation. In other words, the returnees know their choice does not automatically translate into an absolute solution. Yet, they made a choice, assuring them of closeness to the cradle and, most probably, the meaning of their existence. Their choice portrays the land not just as a physical, imperishable entity but as a spiritual being that attracts, demands and commands absolute loyalty and commitment from its legitimate occupants.

Accordingly, the reason for land retention and reclaim often goes beyond economic gains to underscore the unquenchable motivation of natural spirituality. While livelihood is guaranteed by the productive use and access to the land, the loss of the latter seems synonymous with the loss of origin, identity, history, and the meaning and purpose of life.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

It is perceived as sabotaging the ancestors, a show of cowardice and irresponsibility, and a disservice to posterity.

7. Land Theology: An Upshot of (Hi)story-Telling

Beyond the sacramental status of the land, (hi)story-telling plays a potent role in constructing land theology. Here, cosmogonies, myths, legends, and historiographies appear crucial in constructing beliefs around the land, as demonstrated in the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) land culture and the biblical land motif in the Hexateuch (Gen-Josh).

Promised or Conquered Land?

Controversies over land ownership predate the contemporary era to situate its origin in the pre-axial civilization. During the time, land disputes, grabbing, or expansion seemed a prevalent way of flaunting religious supremacy and military prowess. Religion seems a viable tool for instigating and fuelling the Land-Violence reality. For instance, the historiographical studies of Gerlinde Baumann highlight the dominance of Land-Violence rapport in several ANE textual sources, portraying the pre-axial deities (Yhwh inclusive) as violent land grabbers and distributors.²³ Whether these narratives are textual fiction or contextual facts, the appetite for violent land-grabbing, expansion, occupation, or reclamation seems engrained in pre-axial deities, and YHWH appears entrapped in such narratives. In other words, while some pre-axial land conquest descriptions may be qualified as theatrical and fictional materials, their *Rezeptions-* and *Wirkungsgeschichte* (reception and impact history) remain weighty. The Hebrew Hērem campaign (Deut 7:1-2), the Islamic Jihadist culture and the Christian mediaeval Crusade propaganda did not simply aim at religious recruitment. More to these campaigns is the systemic acquisition, expansion, or reclamation of the

²³Gerlinde Baumann, *Gottesbilder der Gewalt im Alten Testament verstehen* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2006), 88-89, notes that such violence sought primarily to increase the prestige, fame, security, and prosperity of the local gods and their worshippers. The resort to the divine by kings portrayed the 'religious-political conscientiousness' of the Assyrian Kings. And as a result of this close alliance between the kings and the local deity, it is often ambiguous to determine to whom victory is to be ascribed – the god or the King?

EYEOWA: *Land-Violence Unholy Union: A Re-Imagination of Land Theology*

land of the so-called idolaters, infidels or pagans, depending on what religious lens plays the evaluative role. Cultural dominance or faith relevance is strongly connected to land acquisition.

The biblical narratives of Israel's attachment to the (promised) land and the subsequent land conquest expeditions appear unparalleled. Israel's conviction about being the rightful owner of the land is based on her *Yahweh-centric* national ideology, as Israel's existential dynamism revolves around Yhwh. While the term "land" could be expressed differently vocabulary-wise (*Eretz, Adamah*), the most used Hebrew word for land (*Eretz*) appears 2,505 times across the 39 books of the Hebrew Bible. In every book of the Hebrew Bible, reference to the connection between Yhwh and the land is evident. The only exception to this claim is the book of Esther. From the times of the first humanity and Patriarchs in Genesis to the return of the Israelites from the Babylonian exile, the land plays significant symbolic roles in Israel's expectations and possessions, hopes and memories.

Israel's Land as Inalienable

Evident in biblical accounts about the Israel-Land nexus is the fact that there was never a time in biblical history when Israel was utterly dissociated from the land. First, in anticipating the fulfilment of YHWH's land promise, the land existed as an object of Israel's deepest longing. The latter is evidenced in the Genesis promises and Deuteronomic expressions such as "Go to the land that I will show you (Gen 12:1); to your offspring, I will give this land (Gen 12:7); when the Lord your God brings you into the land (Deut 6:10, 7:1, 11:29); when you enter the land, the Lord your God is giving you (Deut 17:14, 18:9, 26:1, 27:3)." Second, following the success of the various land conquests (narrated especially in the book of Numbers and Joshua), Israel exhibits a physical relationship with the land. The land symbolizes Yhwh's faithfulness and an invitation to embrace the *Yahweh-centric* agenda. The latter is based on the condition that Israel's idolatrous and unfaithful behaviour would lead to the loss of the land (Josh 23:12-16, 24:19-24). Third, the Joshuarian prophecies came to pass through the Assyrian and Babylonian deportations, leading several

of Israel's prophets (particularly exilic and post-exilic prophets) to re-invent another way of ensuring Israel's intransigent attachment to the land. The prophets advocated for Israel's resolute attachment to the land through memory and history-telling. In other words, the land freshly lived on in the memory of the exiled warranting the psalmist's rhetorical inquiry – How can we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land? (Ps 137:4).

As such, Israel never for once found itself dissociated from the land because “the land is not simply a theme which runs consistently through the Hebrew Bible, but the brackets within which the whole story of God at work in the history of Israel is set.”²⁴ This way, biblical narratives establish the firm link between land and covenant, land and temple, and land and law. For instance, the substance of the Noachic and Abrahamic covenants borders on the land: to preserve and give the land as an inheritance to Israel (Gen 9:11, 17:3-8). The return and presence of *kabod YHWH* in the temple have a fruitful and fertile effect on the land (Ezek 47:1-12), warranting the confessional statement *Ywhw Shammah* (God is there – Ezek 48:35). As for the link between the land and law, the stance of the Deuteronomistic Historian is clear: failure to keep the law attracts expulsion from the land as punishment (Deut 28:15-68, Josh 23:12-13.16).

Furthermore, Israel's land is depicted as flowing with milk and honey, buttressing its economic value. However, besides this economic description of Israel's land, the latter is sacred. The Ahab-Naboth deadlock business saga (1Kgs 21:1-4) reveals that “the land is not a tradable commodity, but an inalienable inheritance,²⁵ permitting Israel to be truly Israel, as well as permitting God and Israel to tangibly have a shared history.”²⁶ Another instance that justifies the untradable state of the land is the case of the unique female inheritance of the land in

²⁴ Philip Culbertson, ‘Eretz Israel: Sacred Space, Icon, Sign, or Sacrament?’ *Shofar* 6, no. 3 (1988): 37.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 142.

EYEOWA: *Land-Violence Unholy Union: A Re-Imagination of Land Theology*

the Pentateuch. As an exception to the norm that gives the right only to the male folk to inherit land, the daughters of the Zelophehad are to inherit their father's land as caretakers until they marry within their father's tribe in order to ensure that "no inheritance shall be transferred from one tribe to another, for each of the tribes of the Israelites shall retain its own inheritance" (Num 36:9).

Israel's expressed diehard memory and commitment to the land beg the question: What existential experience of Yhwh could have spurred such an attachment even without the physical land? Because Israel's attachment to the land begins within the context of "promise-desire/promise-anticipation" and gradually grows into forming a promise-fulfilment arc, a Hexateuchal consideration appears as a responsive path, exposing an overarching pattern for appreciating Israel's sacred space.

8. The Potency of History-Telling in Israel's Land-Consciousness

Statistics within the Hebrew Bible show that the Hexateuch dominates significantly in terms of the number of references to the land motif. In addition to the major prophets and psalms, the Hexateuchal books are all among the top ten references for *Eretz* (land) in the Hebrew Bible.²⁷ This data suggests the crucial role of the Hexateuch in a meaningful understanding of the land motif within the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, as the first books of the Hebrew Bible, which introduced major biblical themes, the Hexateuch remains significant in the biblical land discourse. The Hexateuch solidly sets the motion, buttressing the land motif as Israel's crucial identity and unifying paradigm. Israel's biblical foundational history seems interwoven with the land motif, as the relationship between YHWH and Israel's ancestors emphasizes the land as a sign, symbol or sacrament of God's presence in Israel's history.

²⁷The first ten reference to the land (*Eretz*) within the Hebrew Bible appears in the following descending order: 311x in Gen, 272 times in Jer, 198x in Ezek, 197x in Deut, 190x in the Pss, 190x in Isa, 136x in Exod, 123x in Num, 107x in Josh, and 82x in Lev.

The binding nucleus regarding Israel's attachment to the land is graspable in the construction and telling process of Israel's foundational history. The narratives of Israel's founding leaders serve as a compelling drive to inculcate hope, belief, respect, and commitment to the land. Without exception, Yhwh's initial or first conversation with all of Israel's foundering fathers referenced in the Hexateuch begins and strongly alludes to *Eretz Israel* (land of Israel). In other words, in his first conversation with each of Israel's Patriarchs and leaders in the Hexateuch, Yhwh introduces, emphasizes, and promises the land.²⁸

First, the promise of the land is integral to the call of Abram and his eventual covenant with Yhwh (Gen 12:1.7). Yhwh repeatedly promises to give the land to Abraham and his offspring (Gen 13:14-17, 15:18-21, 17:8). In other words, the Yhwh-Israel covenantal relationship begins around the divine promise of land (Gen 12:1.7). Yhwh's first words to Abram emphasize the significant role of the land. The imperative "go" that opens the divine utterance in Genesis 12 indicates its seriousness, such that embracing the land is not voluntary but an obligation or order. The land appears as a necessary spatial symbol of greatness as it intermingles with the promise of descendants (Gen 12:7). Subsequently, the land becomes a covenantal sign to Abraham and his descendants (Gen 17:8). This new development indicates the land "not as a reward for keeping the covenant, but as a gift given freely in perpetuity."²⁹ As such, Israel's intransigent attachment to the land is an expression of her most profound gratitude to Yhwh and her father in faith – Abraham, whose obedience won his descendants a sacred space, a holy dwelling.

Second, the divine promise to Isaac (Gen 26:1-5) emphasizes the land as a cross-generational inheritance.³⁰ While the cycle of Isaac begins in

²⁸The subsequent paragraphs take inspiration from another work of this article's author: S. O. Eyeowa, *Commemoration, Choice and Commitment: Joshua 23-24 as a Literary Bridge*, Unpub diss, (Innsbruck: University of Innsbruck, 2022).

²⁹ Culbertson, 'Eretz Israel,' 40.

³⁰ Within this short pericope (Gen 26:1-5), the Hebrew ארץ (land) appears six times and stands out as the most referenced or cited motif besides the multiple pronominal

EYEOWA: *Land-Violence Unholy Union: A Re-Imagination of Land Theology*

Gen 25:19, revealing issues of fertility and child-bearing in Isaac's family, YHWH's first explicit words to Isaac reiterate the land promise (Gen 26:2-5) as He charges Isaac to remain in the land and forbids him from going to Egypt. What is interesting about this promise is the divine insistence that Isaac settles and resides in the land. The divine insistence is expressed through an interdiction "do not go down" and a dual imperative (settle and reside) belonging to the semantic field of habitation.

Third, although the cycle of Jacob begins in Gen 37:1 following the death of Isaac (Gen 35:27-29), Jacob had twice received the divine pledge of the land during his unique encounters with YHWH (Gen 28:13-15, 35:12). YHWH's first direct words to Jacob underline the land promise – the land on which you lie I will give to you and your offspring (Gen 28:13). Here, YHWH remains consistently committed to Israel's cross-generational possession of the land. Contrary to Isaac, charged not to leave the land, YHWH assures Jacob of bringing him back to the land. Similarly, within the Jacob cycle, which begins in Gen 37:1, Gen 46:2-4 is the first and only time YHWH directly speaks to Jacob. At his migration to Egypt, YHWH reassures Jacob's return to the land (Gen 46:4). Therefore, following textual evidence, YHWH spoke directly to Jacob only three times (Gen 28:13-15, 35:10-12, 46:2-4) and at each moment, the promise of the land as a cross-generational gift is underscored.

Moreover, the story of Joseph overwhelmingly dominates the cycle of Jacob (Genesis 37-50). While a considerable chunk of his life takes place outside the promised land, that is, in Egypt, the belief in the divine promise of the land permeates and shapes Joseph's worldview. At the hour of his death, Joseph demands that his bones be buried in the land (Gen 50:25).³¹ This deathbed wish expresses hope and trust in the

references to Isaac. Similar to Abram in Gen 12:1, YHWH determines the land (Gen 26:2) and offers it as a gift to Isaac and his descendants.

³¹ While the exodus account (Exod 13:19) indicates Israel's seriousness in respecting Joseph's deathbed wish, the latter finally happens in the final verses of the book of Joshua (Josh 24:32), where Joseph's bones were buried at Shechem.

fulfilment of the divine land promise so that what plays out from Exodus to Deuteronomy is nothing other than Israel's strategies and processes for reclaiming the land. The latter eventually happens in the book of Joshua (Josh 11:16, 23, 21:43-45, 22:4, 23:1, 24:13). Hence, at the beginning of Jacob's life outside of his immediate family (Genesis 28) and the end of the Jacob cycle (Genesis 50), the divine promise of the land and the hope of a restful resettling in the land form a literary frame.

Fourth, in the case of Moses, his leadership cycle extends from the book of Exodus to Deuteronomy. The divine land promise frequently appears within these books, especially in Deuteronomy.³² Like the Patriarchs, Yhwh's first conversation with Moses, within the context of his call narrative, reveals the purpose of the encounter – to rescue and bring Israel to the promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Exod 3:8). In other words, within YHWH's first direct conversation with Moses, the land motif appears as part of the divine agenda. This context accounts for the first instance in the Hebrew Bible where the qualitative character of the promised land is exposed – a land flowing with milk and honey. The latter expression became a motivating factor that kept Israel's eyes fixed on the land. The qualitative description of the land was eventually confirmed in the divine speech in Num 13:27 and Josh 24:13.

Finally, following the death of Moses (Deut 34:5-8), Joshua, who eventually led Israel to the promised land, had his own share of receiving the divine mandate regarding the land project at the beginning of his reign as Israel's leader. Yhwh's first engagement of Joshua as Israel's new leader reiterated the land promise, identifying its spatial grandeur (Josh 1:2-7). In other words, the first conversation between Yhwh and Joshua, upon the latter's ascending to Israel's highest leadership position, emphasizes the possession of the land. This time, the tone shifts from a promise to a mandate. The combined use of "now"

³² Off the 790 occurrences of the combined *NaTan* (give) and *Eretz* (land) in the Hebrew bible, the book of Deuteronomy takes the lead in the order of usage with 149 references.

and the imperative “proceed” signals the urgency to possess the land. At the end of the book, the land promise comes to fulfilment (Josh 21:43-45).

9. Implications of History-Telling on Biblical Land Theology

The above panoramic biblical investigation attests that the initial/first utterance or conversation between Yhwh and all of Israel’s founding fathers in the Hexateuch attests to consistency regarding the land promise. Tightly woven and constructively told in Israel’s foundational history, which eventually developed into a core pillar of faith, is the fact that (i) the land is a divine gift, (ii) Israel’s possession and settlement in the land is of divine initiative, (iii) Israel’s land is sacramental as it is tied to the covenant, and (iv) the land serves a historico-identity purpose. Therefore, the loss of the land, either physical or memorial, amounts to Israel’s ingratitude to Yhwh, unfaithful to the covenant, sabotaging the founding fathers, a show of cowardice, and a disservice to posterity.

Evident is the fact that Israel’s multiple leadership transitions did not impede Yhwh from constantly working towards fulfilling the land promise. This divine consistency in faithfulness buttresses divine seriousness in gifting the land to Israel. The consistency also offers Israel some confidence as Yhwh’s choice of offering them the land seems deliberate. As such, Israel’s lackadaisical attitude toward the land would seem to betray the divine plan and effort in securing them a sacred space, a divine dwelling. A distant attitude towards the land would mean Israel’s shameful and outright showcasing of ingratitude.

As people bound by a divine covenant, of which the land is its eternal sign, Israel’s intransigent attachment to the land is indissociable from its divine acquisition. *Eretz Israel* exhibits a multi-dimensional hermeneutical web, where identity, cultural, historical, sacramental, and theological undertones are an indissoluble composite of the biblical land motif. In fact, before circumcision, there was the land. Hence, the land could be regarded as Israel’s first sacramental sign, a foundational and existential core upon which the Yhwh-Israel relationship remains

sure. The land becomes a shrine, a sure place for divine God as buttressed by the psalmist: I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living (Ps 27:13).

10. Conclusion

This article acknowledges that acquiring, retaining or reclaiming one's fatherland, motherland, or ancestral land could exacerbate violence. While survival is often flaunted as a critical factor for an intransigent attachment to one's land, paramount is the obtainment of satisfactory responses to the meaning and purpose of one's existence, bordering on identity, culture, history, and natural spirituality. Because land singly represents these paradigms, it is thus considered sacred and sacramental, conferring identity. Here, the history-telling process around the land seems crucial in that people become or assume who they are told they are. This orientation, especially in relation to land, sometimes takes a theological dimension, where the divine-land nexus forges identity, defines existence, and incites a ready-to-die attitude. Tampering with the sacred narrative about the land instigates existential crises that disentangle one from history and suffocate belongingness. Hence, land is a spirit; even in its physical absence, it freshly lives on in the memory.