

**December 16, 2012**

Measuring the World

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

All the earth has a limited capacity; it is always something measured.

Indeed, some lines of the Bible are devoted to measuring it. For example: "From the desert and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the River Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and to the Great Sea toward the setting of the sun, shall be your territory" (Joshua 1:4). In this text, the land is measured by lines that run from a southern desert to a northern mountain range, from an eastern river to a western sea. It is worth considering the quality of those lines.

At first, certain natural barriers, to which the text refers---desert, mountain, river, sea---may appear to be the determining factors in the measuring of the land. That is to say, it may seem that the territory is able to establish its own limits. This impression is illusory, however. In fact, the lines of the determination are invisible. They are spiritual. They exist in the words addressed to Joshua. True, these demarcating words do have a physical quality, but this material existence of the words is obviously evanescent; their real power is of a spiritual nature.

In the example just cited, the contours and natural features of the land, while they certainly suggest certain terms of its measurement, do not really fix them. The true fixing of the land---the determination of its capacity---comes from another sort of line, namely, the linear sequence of the words imposed upon the land.

These territorial lines form an easily recognized example of the prescription of spirit over matter, the imposition of the human upon the natural, and the supremacy of history over geography. (Size is hardly the issue; planets much larger than earth have far less meaning.)

It is the word of promise that makes the Promised Land important. As Aristotle would say, the word provides the morphe, or determining form, for the hyle, or matter. The word, much larger than the land, makes the land what it is. The

word is graced with a spiritual dimension---let us think of it, perhaps, as a cubic capacity---which the land, by itself, does not have.

Indeed, words sometimes confer more on the land than the land can safely carry. Because of this, a person aware of the power of speech will sense a danger that certain words may overwhelm their geography.

Such a man was Amaziah, the priest of Bethel. Amaziah was hardly a man gifted with spiritual discernment, but even he was able to sense that the message of the Prophet Amos was more than the land could carry: "The land is not able to bear all his words" (Amos 7:10). Indeed, the prophetic words were so immense and overcrowding that violent adjustments would be required to make room for them: "Jeroboam shall die by the sword, / And Israel shall surely be led away captive / From their own land" (7:11).

It was---and is---the special destiny of the Holy Land that its significance is far too large for its size. That particular piece of real estate, more than any other, suffers the dilemma of too much history and not enough geography. Its meager frame is inadequate to hold the massive messages pronounced over it. It groans under their weight. No other land bears such an oversized load. For this reason we are not surprised at the periodic violence attendant on the Holy Land's many historical adjustments.

All the earth, however---to return to our thesis statement---has a limited capacity, and spirit is more massive than matter. The dense and heavy destiny of the earth is not determined by geology, but by anthropology---even theology. Even a single field may not sustain everything enacted upon it.

The earth, then, always stands in peril from its burden of words---the resolutions enacted on its surface over the centuries. Testifying to the supreme incidence of that truth, Saint John observed, "And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which, if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

What things have transpired on the face of the land--when at last they all come together---will form too bulky a volume to fit into so confined a space. And this, I suppose, may be the reason Isaiah foretold that the final resolution of history would require a new earth (Isaiah 65:17; cf. 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13).

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