

Bruce Springsteen and the Biblical Ideal of the Promised Land¹

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The phrase “Promised Land” occurs in no less than nine officially released Bruce Springsteen-penned songs.² Most of these references allude to a dreamy Utopian paradise where the grass is greener than in the current oppressive/repressive location. This is a complete, if popular, misunderstanding of the Biblical Promised Land, and it is one which Springsteen himself recognizes—and to an extent corrects—in his later life and work. The Promised Land is not a Utopia and is not a paradise; it is at once a physical place and an abstract concept, attainable only by a community-oriented society founded upon interdependence both among its constituents and with God.

By contrasting those characters in Springsteen’s corpus who view the Promised Land as Utopia³ with those who understand it as a renewed commitment to their families and communities, we may observe how the biblical ideal of the Promised Land informs the development of Springsteen’s conception of the Promised Land. The self-centered woman in “From Small Things (Big Things One Day Come)” best represents the misguided view of the Promised Land as a place where life is effortless and all her desires are fulfilled. Her selfish interests consistently pull her away from everyone she has ever known, and her lack of commitment to her family and community is emphatically reflected in her ultimate destination: locked away behind bars and literally, as well as figuratively, exiled from society. On the other hand, both the Mexican immigrants of “Across the Border” and the Vietnamese immigrants and native Texans of “Galveston Bay” work selflessly toward the common good of their communities. Upon entering the land, the immigrants of “Across the Border” will one day “eat the fruit from the vine” supplied by “God’s blessed waters” in the Promised Land, while the latter eventually learn to move beyond revenge and coexist peacefully, all the while harvesting their yield.

By contrasting those characters in Springsteen’s corpus who view the Promised Land as Utopia with those who understand it as a renewed commitment to their families and communities, we may observe how the biblical ethic informs the development of Springsteen’s conception of the Promised Land.

The Biblical Concept of the Promised Land

Since Springsteen’s Promised Land derives from the biblical narrative of the Israelites leaving slavery in Egypt to conquer Canaan, the land promised to Abraham’s descendents, the meaning of the Promised Land in the Bible must be fully explored. In Genesis, God appears to the childless Abram, who has migrated to the land of Canaan, and tells him: “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess it” (Gen. 15:7).⁴

While promising this land to Abram,⁵ however, God explains that it will only be the fourth generation of his descendents, returning to Canaan after four hundred years of enslavement in a foreign land (Gen. 15:13-16), who will take possession of it. This passage is

crucial to our understanding of the Promised Land for several reasons: first, those who will enter the Promised Land are identified, and the circumstances and timeline of their entry are given; second, the physical boundaries of the land are defined, setting it apart as a cohesive geographical entity; and third, the organization of the land, both political and religious, is determined, with God and Abram entering into a covenant in which God plays the role of the overlord and Abram the vassal (v. 18). On this last point, the passage not only uses typical covenant terminology from the current political realm (i.e., “to cut a covenant”) but also includes a symbolic action, Abram’s cutting in two of his animal offering to symbolize his fate should he break the covenant (vv. 9-10), that is typical of ancient Near Eastern international treaties.⁶ In Gen. 17, the covenant is again enacted between Abram and God. This time, God changes Abram’s name to Abraham (17:5) and demands that Abraham, his household, and his descendants be circumcised as a sign of the covenant (v. 11). Abraham accepts the promise of the land on behalf of his descendants and, in return, binds them to God’s rule.

Because Abraham accepted God’s covenant, God kept his promise to Abraham’s descendants. In order to find relief from the famine in Canaan, Abraham’s grandson Jacob and his sons eventually settle in the land of Egypt with its abundant food supplies. While in Egypt, Abraham’s descendents, the children of Israel, become a populous nation (Ex. 1:7). Four hundred years later, the children of Israel are ready to leave Egypt and inherit the land promised to Abraham. Thus, we encounter the narrative of the Israelites’ march from Egypt to Canaan.⁷ As virtually everyone knows (if not from the Bible, then from watching Charlton Heston in Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments*, 1956), Moses receives the Law at Mount Sinai on behalf of the people, and they subsequently agree to uphold God’s word, stating: “Everything that the LORD spoke, we will faithfully observe” (Exod. 24:7).⁸ Moses then sprinkles them with blood from the sacrifices,⁹ proclaiming: “This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD cut with you concerning all these matters” (24:7). Moses and the Israelites, as Abram before them, willingly enter a covenantal relationship with God, accepting his promise of land and protection in exchange for their observance of his laws.¹⁰

In Deuteronomy, Moses delivers his final address to the Israelites before they cross the Jordan to take possession of the Promised Land on the other side. Here, at the end of his journey, Moses reminds the Israelites of their forty years wandering in the wilderness (chs. 1-3); restates the laws they received at Sinai (chs. 12-26); and renews the covenant between the people and God, including a series of curses and blessings—again typical of ancient Near Eastern treaties—to be applied depending on their behavior (chs. 27-28). After his speech, Moses ascends Mount Nebo to view the Promised Land and there dies (Deut. 34:1-5), never having set foot in Canaan. The explicit reason for the denial of his entry into the Promised Land is never given, leaving both the Jewish and Christian traditions to debate the issue from antiquity through to the present day. For Springsteen, this debate is irrelevant; evoking Deuteronomy’s treatment of the episode, he recalls it in “The Price You Pay” without explanation or justification:

Do you remember the story of the promised land
 How [Moses] crossed the desert sands
 And could not enter the chosen land
 On the banks of the river he stayed
 To face the price you pay.¹¹

Notably, while Moses' fate is shared by all those who left Egypt (excepting only Joshua and Caleb), the reason why the others cannot enter the Promised Land is clear: they have demonstrated that they "ain't got the faith to stand [their] ground" ("The Promised Land"). Despite witnessing the miracles performed in Egypt and in the desert, they preferred to return to slavery in Egypt than to trust in God's assistance in claiming Canaan (Num. 13:32-14:3), the land he had promised them. Their lack of faith is related in Num. 13-14 when Moses commissions twelve spies to scout Canaan and its inhabitants. While there, they discover the lushness of the land, embodied by a cluster of grapes so impressive that it takes two men to carry it (13:23). Returning after their 40-day mission, however, only Caleb and Joshua believe they can possess Canaan; the other ten spies assert:

²⁷ We entered the land to which you sent us. It does indeed flow milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸ However, the people living in the land are strong, and their cities are fortified and large....³¹ We cannot attack the people because they are stronger than we are (Num. 13).

The Israelites as a group fail to heed Caleb's positive assessment, declaring that they would prefer to die in the wilderness than try to fight for the land God has promised to them (14:1-5). Ultimately, they get their wish; God decrees that their corpses will drop in the desert before their children have another chance to enter the Promised Land (vv. 29-30). Forty years later and immediately prior to his own death, Moses exhorts the next generation of Israelites to heed God's laws, noting that only then will they be able to conquer and retain the land promised to their ancestors: "Now, Israel, keep the statutes and ordinances, which I am teaching you to do, so that you may live and (then) enter and possess the land that the LORD, God of your fathers, is giving to you" (Deut. 4:1). Moses adds that the world will notice their wisdom and be astonished by their laws, urging the Israelites to keep in mind their unique relationship with God and their consequent role as a model for other nations:

⁵ See, I have taught you statutes and ordinances as the LORD my God commanded that you do so in the land which you are entering to possess it. ⁶ Faithfully observe them because they are your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the peoples, who, hearing all these statutes, will say "Indeed, this great nation is a wise and understanding people" (Deut. 4).

Notably, however, life in a blessed land flowing with milk and honey, the Biblical symbol of a highly urbanized and organized society, can lead to complacency and sinfulness and ultimately also to destruction. Moses warns the Israelites against falling victim to this, enjoining them to be ever vigilant in their commitment to the laws: "Just watch yourself conscientiously lest you forget the things that your own eyes saw and lest they depart from your heart (i.e., mind) your entire life. And you shall make (them) known to your children and their children" (Deut. 4:9). All the while, however, he is aware that what he warns against will one day come to pass: in the time of the Babylonians, the Israelites' rebellion against God's laws and their practice of idolatry will break the terms of their covenant and lead to their exile from the Promised Land,¹² in much the same manner as Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden:

²⁵ When you beget children and grandchildren and grow old in the land, you will act antagonistically, make a sculptured image of any form, and you will act wickedly in a

manner displeasing to the LORD your God....²⁷ The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and just a few of you will remain among the nations thither the LORD will drive you (Deut. 4).

Unlike the expulsion from Eden, however, this one is not permanent.¹³ The LORD, as Moses reminds his people, is a compassionate God who will not fail his people. Once those in exile abandon idolatry (v. 28)¹⁴ to seek the LORD and abide by his laws, God “will not fail you or allow you to be destroyed. He will not forget the covenant that he swore with your fathers” (v. 31).

The Biblical concept of the Promised Land, then, cannot be equated with an Edenic paradise where an individual can flee for a better life, free from struggle and toil; it is, rather, a place one enters as part of a community that is bound to God and his laws and which is meant to serve as a model of good behavior for the rest of the world. Moreover, the luxury of the Promised Land is not guaranteed forever: once within its borders, constant work and maintenance are required to reap its bounty.¹⁵ Indeed, in this way, working to maintain the Promised Land corresponds to the work needed to maintain even the Garden of Eden. Despite God’s having already planted everything Adam would need (vv. 8-9), Adam was still expected to do upkeep in Eden (Gen. 2:15). If even Adam had to work in his garden paradise, that the Israelites would have responsibilities in this world is hardly unexpected.

Thus, according to the Bible, each individual must continually strive to uphold his part of the community’s covenantal relationship with God, not only to draw forth the full bounty of the land but also, lest he neglect or forget his obligations, be banished from it. Even for those who are in exile, however, there remains hope: provided they again take up their covenantal duties, they may one day re-enter the Promised Land.

The Springsteen Concept of the Promised Land

Having explored the biblical Promised Land, which informs Springsteen’s use of related imagery, it is now possible to examine the representation of the Promised Land in Bruce Springsteen’s corpus of work. Since the misunderstanding of the Promised Land as a dreamy Utopian paradise occurs early and frequently in Springsteen’s writings, it is useful to first examine the song in which this misunderstanding is most starkly apparent: “From Small Things (Big Things One Day Come).” Moving then to a discussion of the two songs most associated with the Promised Land in the history of rock and roll, “The Promised Land” and “Thunder Road,” both still draw upon Utopian associations rather than the biblical Promised Land. Finally, an analysis of “Galveston Bay” and “Across the Border,” both of which were written during the second half of Springsteen’s career, reveals that the Promised Land is at last understood in a manner comparable to its biblical presentation.

In “From Small Things,” the protagonist is an unnamed teenager constantly in pursuit of more: “At sixteen she quit high school to make her fortune in the promised land / She got a job behind the counter in an all night hamburger stand.” When we first meet her, she has already abandoned her mother and education for her dreams of making it big in the Promised Land. While she takes a job and maintains contact with her mother (if for no other reason than to provide the song’s hook), she repeatedly demonstrates a willingness to abandon anything and

everything to which she has committed when something that seems better comes along, betraying her immaturity and innate selfishness. In the second verse, she appears to have matured somewhat, staying with the handsome Johnny long enough to buy a house and have a couple kids;¹⁶ soon, however, her romantic ideals and impulsive, even erratic, behaviors resurface. Her love, like her commitment, “is fleeting,” and she leaves the responsibility and stability of her family to run away to Tampa with a “Wyomie County real estate man.”¹⁷

Once again, though she reports home that “life is just heaven in the sun,” the protagonist is unable to commit permanently to the life she has chosen. Florida may well be the Utopia she has always mistaken for the Promised Land—a place she believes worth abandoning her mother, her job, and her new family—but she ultimately, and inevitably, finds it empty. Her self-serving instincts, in the end, lead her into exile both from society and from her family, the latter of which was the only thing that might have provided her with the Promised Land she had been seeking all along. Meanwhile, Johnny, who “prays” rather than waits “for his baby’s parole,”¹⁸ dedicates his life to what remains of his family, “a blue-eyed daughter and a handsome son,” and to the community where his burger order and his heart were taken.¹⁹ Broken-hearted, his life is no Utopian paradise but he seems to have achieved and maintained his place in the Promised Land, nonetheless.²⁰

In the songs “The Promised Land” and “The Price You Pay,” Springsteen sets his narratives in the middle of the desert, using the environment to invoke images of the Israelite wanderings in the wilderness. “The Promised Land” begins, “On a rattlesnake speedway in the Utah desert,” with the singer admitting to “chasing some mirage”; this is a definite change from the girl in “From Small Things,” who does not appear to be so self-aware. Here, the singer thinks of himself as committed to his work and to his family (i.e., “working all day in my daddy’s garage”) even as he seeks escape from the life he is leading for an easier and, likely, more Utopian, dream. Asserting, “I’ve done my best to live the right way / I get up every morning and go to work each day,”²¹ his dissatisfaction with his situation still leaves his tension and rage rising until he is ready to snap, “itching for something to start.” That he is prepared—and even seems to desire—to “tear this whole town apart” to remove his pain, however, is testimony to his ultimate selfishness: he has no real regard for the well-being of his family or community and seeks only freedom from and control over his personal oppression. Though aware, deep down, that he is pursuing a mirage, he refuses to give up his chase.

As many other before him, Larry Smith, author of *Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and American Song*, suggests that the singer’s problems will be solved, in the manner of a *deus ex machina*, by the twister forming on the horizon because he, unlike everyone else, has faith:

This individual is not afraid to test his faith; in fact, he warns that without that faith, the “storm” will be all-consuming. For him, however, the storm may contain cleansing powers that rid life of broken dreams and their consequences. Faith is the key—faith will provide the fuel that ensures that the struggle will yield victory. Faith provides the path to the promised land.²²

This passage fails to define a crucial point: in what exactly does the singer have faith? Finding the mirage that he chases—which is, by definition, an illusion? The opportunity to oppress others just as he believes he has been oppressed? Proving (to himself?) that he is deserving of the title

“man?” Thus considered, these desires (perhaps better considered delusions) are hardly noble or worthy of faith. Smith’s romantic interpretation of the song is as shallow as the singer’s commitment to the covenant he shares with his community and more, with humanity. The storm will not miraculously refocus his life by removing everything that constricts him,²³ but it may well lead him to complete despair. The storm may “[b]low away the dreams that break your heart / blow away the lies that leave you nothing but lost and brokenhearted,” but there is no indication of what, if anything, will remain. A better interpretation is provided by Jim Cullen in his discussion “Vision of Kings: Springsteen and the American Dream,”²⁴ where he notes that “The Promised Land” and related songs from *Darkness* “reflect the obsessions of a relatively naïve white boy who is shocked to learn that the world is not his oyster.”²⁵ In this regard, the singer is really no different from the girl in “From Small Things,” except, of course, that he has not *yet* snapped.

In “The Price You Pay,” the desert is similarly evoked as the setting of the narrative and the singer himself is a more mature figure; though he recognizes the pain related in “The Promised Land,” he has now learned both how to live with it and how to fulfill his responsibility to his community. This is not to say that he is resigned; he defiantly claims: “And girl before the end of the day / I’m gonna tear it down and throw it away.” What he plans to tear down in this case is instructive; it is neither himself nor another person but rather the sign “that counts the men fallen away.” Though he has no trouble evoking living narratives of disappointed lives and fallen heroes, reminding the girl and her baby of the denial of Moses’s entry into Canaan,²⁶ the singer is unwilling to let stand a monument to this disappointment. This theme is continued in the second and third verses of the song, which describe those who died prior to Moses in the wilderness as a result of their lack of faith as well as these verses describe modern people.²⁷ The distinction is clear: while the biblical references serve as reminders that we are not alone in our struggles, the sign in the song stands only as a monument to futility, a symbol of the inevitability of disappointment. The chorus itself, “Now you can’t walk away from the price you pay,” the price which man has been paying since the expulsion from Eden, emphasizes the necessity of committing oneself to the good of the community using one’s vocational calling despite the personal costs.²⁸

The Tunnel of Love Express Tour, along with the subsequent Amnesty International Human Rights Now! Tour, inspired Springsteen to re-examine two of his most critically acclaimed songs, “Thunder Road” and “Born to Run.” On his 1975 album, *Born to Run*, the title song and “Thunder Road” are about adolescents in search of better lives. The more explicit song of the two, “Thunder Road,” casts the Promised Land and heaven as synonymous, representing a Utopian paradise: “heaven’s waiting on down the tracks / Oh come take my hand / We’re riding out tonight to case the promised land.”²⁹ “Born to Run” originally tells a similar story, but with much more exciting visual and musical imagery. In April 1988, however, Springsteen spoke of the short-sightedness of these adolescent pursuits:

I guess, when I wrote this song, I thought I was writing about a guy and a girl that wanted to run—and keep on running, and never go back. And that was a nice romantic idea. But I realized that after I put all those people in all those cars, I was going to have to figure out some place for them to go. And I realized that in the end . . . that individual freedom, when it’s not connected to some sort of community, or friends, or their world outside, [that freedom] ends up feeling pretty meaningless. So . . . that guy and that girl, they were

out there looking for connection. And I guess that's what I'm doing here tonight. So this is a song about two people trying to find their way home.³⁰

The Promised Land cannot exist without community and a commitment to its maintenance. The couples in both these songs—like the girl in “From Small Things” and the self-proclaimed man in “The Promised Land”—at best achieve a meaningless Utopia. Without that connection, which comprises the real Promised Land, they are left isolated, which “is the most dangerous thing on earth” (Springsteen 1987).³¹ This theme is more fully developed in “Galveston Bay,” where it is explicitly treated, and in “Across the Border,” where it is implicitly so.

“Galveston Bay” relates the story of Le Bin Son and Billy Sutter, two men who, despite their superficially overwhelming differences, have a great deal in common. Both men fought to keep South Vietnam free from the communists and both men went “home” to Seabrook, Texas, to make a living. In 1968, Billy returned home and took up the family business. In 1975, Le and his extended family relocated to the “promised land” along the Gulf Coast and begin shrimping. Both men are absolutely dedicated to their families, each kissing his child before heading off to work. Both view themselves as members of a community and are devoted to their vocational callings, which benefit society by providing food. The focus of the story is the point at which the two communities come into direct contact and apparent conflict. Billy, afraid that his livelihood will be usurped by the Vietnamese immigrants, joins up with the Texas Klan in the hopes of scaring them away. His response, classic American xenophobia, seems to have been fueled by the mere presence of Le and his fellow immigrants.³² That Le killed two Texans in self-defense and then continued to guard his family should not challenge this supposition in any way, as Springsteen himself tells us (“A jury acquitted him in self-defense / As before the judge he did stand”). Indeed, it reinforces the stability and propriety of Le’s devotion to the well-being of his family and to his calling. It is Billy who plays the dynamic character in the song, finally coming to realize that Le and his fellow immigrants have become a part of, rather than a threat to, the local community. Cullen says that Billy recognizes their common humanity³³ or brotherhood,³⁴ but the relationship between the two men may be more accurately defined using the covenantal terminology of the Promised Land. Moses would consider these immigrants strangers who, along with the orphans and widows, are the proper recipients of charity.³⁵ In this case, Le has left the protection of his homeland with no one to protect his family but himself. He and his cousin fulfill their obligation by working as they are able, reaping the bounty of the land—or in this case the sea—so that they are not dependent on handouts,³⁶ but they remain strangers and are not to be preyed upon.³⁷

Fulfilling familial obligations—and doing so selflessly—is also the central theme of the migrant’s promise to his love in the song “Across the Border.” Although the phrase “the Promised Land,” is not explicit here, this is, nonetheless, the most poetic and romantic of all Springsteen’s Promised Land songs. Ideally, this discussion would end with the song itself, with Springsteen’s falsetto and the violin interweaving as they did occasionally during the stadium leg of the Summer Tour 2003. Instead, the following analysis must suffice. On the eve of his crossing the Rio Grande, the singer anticipates the coming voyage with his love, here called his *corazón* (literally, “heart”), into the Promised Land. There is no sense of urgency here, however, as we saw in “From Small Things,” “The Promised Land,” “Thunder Road,” and “Born to Run.” Tonight, the two will sing together, dream together, and rest in knowing that tomorrow’s strength is dependent upon remaining together.³⁸ The singer has the same commitment to his family as Le

Bin Son and will build them a house “[h]igh upon a grassy hill.”³⁹ Of course, his Promised Land is as much of a dream of something better as is anyone else’s, not only that of the girl in “From Small Things” or the man in “The Promised Land” but also that of the ancient Israelites. To a degree, this is necessary; were the potential pilgrim’s original residence better than the Promised Land, there would be no reason to face the dangers of relocation to a strange land. The singer in “Across the Border” imagines that same house on the hillside that came so easily to the girl in “From Small Things,” which she abandoned just as easily;⁴⁰ the difference is that he is willing to sacrificially work for the house, building it with his own hands and committing to all that comes with it.

Another significant difference between this man and the other seekers in Springsteen’s corpus is that he envisions a relationship—perhaps even a covenant—with God in the new land in addition to his covenant with his family and community. Like the Israelites before him, he has faith that the divine will ensure the safety of the journey and the benefit of both the people and the land. To borrow from “The Promised Land,” it is exactly this that serves as the basis for “the faith to stand [his] ground” for the singer in “Across the Border”:

And may the saints’ blessing and grace
Carry me safely into your arms
There across the border

For what are we
Without hope in our hearts
That someday we’ll drink from God’s blessed waters

He seeks the Promised Land with God’s aid, in cooperation with his community and through his calling to work for the benefit of this same community. Unlike “The Promised Land,” where the desert storm violently blows away the hurt incurred from lies and broken dreams, the cleansing achieved in “Across the Border” is tranquil; he will gently “kiss the sorrow from [his lover’s] eyes” as they embrace under the open skies. Her healing will be his healing, as well as his blessing and his redemption, and no unsuspecting outsider will be hurt in the process.

It is thus only fitting, as the song ends, that the singer envisions the same bounty in the land that the ancient Israelites saw in southern Canaan: “And eat the fruit from the vine / I know love and fortune will be mine / Somewhere across the border.”⁴¹ In “Across the Border,” the biblical ideal of the Promised Land is finally realized and fulfilled. Here in this tender song, the violence is stilled, and for a moment we gain a glimpse of—to quote Springsteen’s intro to “Born to Run” in April, 1988—“two people trying to find their way home.”⁴²

¹My thanks to Dr. Mark Schantz of Hendrix College, who playfully suggested a similar topic in the fall of 1998 and subsequently granted me permission to develop the paper “Bruce Springsteen and the Puritan Ideal of the Promised Land” for *Glory Days: A Bruce Springsteen Symposium*. I would also like to thank Dr. Lynda Coon of the University of Arkansas for her more recent suggestions, which led to this final version of the paper.

²These nine include (listed in order of the first official Springsteen release): “Thunder Road” (1975), “Racing in the Street” (1978), “The Promised Land” (1978), “The Price You Pay” (1980), “Johnny Bye-Bye” (1985), “The Ghost of Tom Joad” (1995), “Galveston Bay” (1995), “Goin’ Cali” (1998), and “From Small Things (Big Things One Day Come)” (2003). A tenth song, “Walking in the Street,” may also be known to many as “Lovers in the Cold” from the popular *Born to Run*-era bootleg album *War and Roses*, which appears to be an earlier, unfinished version of “Thunder Road.”

³Utopia literally means “nowhere,” which is, of course, why we never learn of the characters in Springsteen’s song ever actually making it to their Utopian Promised Land.

⁴All Hebrew Bible translations are my own from the Masoretic Hebrew (*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. ed. K. Kelliger and W. Rudolph. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1977.).

⁵This is not the first time God has promised the land to Abram (cf. Gen. 12:1-4).

⁶See F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) 268.

⁷The exodus from Egypt begins in Exod. 14, and the Israelites finally enter the land of Canaan in Josh. 5.

⁸See Ex. 19:8, when they accept the covenantal promise that they will become God’s chosen people before the actual revelation. Notice, however, that 19:8 lacks the finality of 24:7 where they promise to “observe” in addition to “doing” the covenant.

⁹The sacrifices involved in this ceremony are different from those of Abram in Gen. 15. While Abram’s sacrifice was typical of ancient Near Eastern covenantal ceremonies, Moses and the Israelites offer more cultic types of sacrifice: the “holocaust” (which wholly consumed by the fire on the altar) and the “peace-offerings” (which are returned to the offerer to be eaten as part of a sacred meal. See Exod. 24:11).

¹⁰As part of the covenant, the Israelites were expected to practice acts of charity as they were able and, in fact, as they were commanded (cf. Exod. 22:21-22; Deut. 10:18; 14:29; 24:19,20,21; 26:12-13; and the prophetic statement in Isa. 1:17 and 23). The primary recipients of this charity include children, the poor, and the strangers in the land. In Deut. 27:19, Moses charges the Israelites with the protection of the weak and powerless in their society: “‘Cursed is the one who perverts justice due the stranger, the orphan, and the widow.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’” A stranger or foreign resident lacks the protection of the government, while a widow or orphan lacks the protection normally afforded by a husband or father. All three of these categories depend on society for sustenance (cf. 24:19-21, where the poor collect for themselves food intentionally not harvested, and 26:12-13, where they receive from the Israelites’ offerings). Notably, while many of those in these categories are unable to work at all, it is more likely that what work they do brings in insufficient provisions.

¹¹Indeed, Springsteen’s unwillingness or inability to explain why Moses is unable to benefit from his life’s work remains a theme throughout the song.

¹²The prohibition against making any sculptured image or idol is the second of the Ten Commandments listed in Exod. 20 and Deut. 5 in Jewish and many Christian traditions. Ancient rabbis and modern scholars both have viewed the order of the commandments as one of descending importance. The first commandment (“I am the Lord your God” in the traditional Jewish enumeration but “You shall have no other gods besides [or “in addition to”] me” in the traditional Christian enumeration) is the most important of all laws in religions of “the Book.” Given that fidelity and exclusivity are synonymous in monotheistic religion, the worship of any deity other than the Lord is incompatible with monotheistic religion (much as extra-marital relations are incompatible with a monogamous marriage). The making and worshipping of an idol is wholly antithetical to the worship of the Lord, whether be it by trying to represent him (and breaking the second commandment alone) or by worshipping another god in addition to Him (breaking both the first and second commandments). Thus, in Deut. 4:25, when Moses warns that the Israelites will one day make an idol, he has singled out the ultimate sin, which will inevitably estrange the Israelites from God and break their covenant with him.

¹³Upon the expulsion of Adam and Eve, God placed two cherubim with flaming swords east of the garden (Gen. 3:24), emphasizing the permanence of their exile. Springsteen invokes this imagery in his *Darkness*-era outtake “Iceman.”

¹⁴Indeed, this lesson is repeated throughout the books of Judges and Kings by providing examples of the people’s failure to exclusively worship the Lord and the misfortunes they endured as a result (see 2 King 17 and the destruction of the Northern kingdom of Israel by the conquering Assyrian armies).

¹⁵Cf. Deut. 30:9: “And the Lord your God will make you exceedingly prosperous in all your achievements, in your offspring, in your cattle’s offspring, and your land’s yield; for the Lord will again delight in prospering you, as he delighted in your fathers.”

¹⁶Significantly, just as she recklessly left her childhood behind for a conventional adolescent fantasy, the man she finds, “lonesome Johnny,” is stereotypically “tall and handsome” (perhaps she could not tell if he was “dark” because it was night), suggesting all she ever really wanted was the generic American dream. This interpretation is then reinforced by their purchase of a hillside house and the 2 (though not 2.5) children. However, there is no mention of a dog.

¹⁷Though on *Essential*, Springsteen sings “Wyomie County,” listing it so in the lyrics, Dave Edmunds sings “Wyoming County” in his cover on his album *D.E. 7th* (1982). There are three such counties in the US: one in western New York, one in northeastern Pennsylvania, and one in southern West Virginia. Bob Crane believes any of these is a credible location for the song since each has the rolling waters mentioned in the final verse: the Genessee River, the Susquehanna River, and the Guyandotte River, respectively (Bob Crane, *A Place to Stand: A Guide to Bruce Springsteen’s Sense of Place* (Baltimore: Palace Books, 2002) 101). Why any of these three places—if the real referent of Springsteen’s version—would be considered a “promised land” worthy as a place of escape is unknown. More likely is the possibility that the protagonist left her mother and only made it as far as Wyomie/ing County (which, though unlikely, could even be her home county) before having to give up on her original quest and thence left for Florida, which could more appropriately be labeled a promised land. Against this interpretation, however, is the ironic use of “promised land” in “Racing in the Streets.” In this song, “all the shut-down strangers and hot-rod angels” are “rumbling through this promised land” while the singer and his despondent girlfriend—whose dissatisfaction with life (“She sits on the porch of her daddy’s house / But all her pretty dreams are torn / She stares off alone into the night / With the eyes of one who hates for just being born”) exceeds even Job’s (“May the day I was born perish,” Job 3:3; “Why didn’t I die at birth, expire when I came out of the womb?” v. 7)—head out to the sea together to find redemption. For a more hopeful interpretation of these lines, see Jim Cullen’s discussion in his *Born in the USA* (Jim Cullen, *Born in the USA: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997) 121).

¹⁸This wording implies that she is unlikely to return from exile (or be paroled) anytime soon.

¹⁹Though not a definitive reading of the lyrics, the songs seem to suggest that Wyomie County is both the location of the burger stand and of the house on the hillside. This may be just an argument from silence since nothing indicates that they relocated in order to buy the house, but every other relocation the protagonist makes in the song is explicitly marked.

²⁰By examining “From Small Things” against the backdrop of the popular Christian view of the Fall of Adam (cf. Rom. 5:18-19) and the selfishness of the carnal individual, we get a hint of the theological/psychological answers to the questions posed by *Nebraska* (1982). “From Small Things” compares well with the first and last songs on that album: “Nebraska” and “Reason to Believe.” In the latter song, lonesome Johnny is not all that different from the groom who is “wonderin’ where can his baby be” (“Reason To Believe”). Both men desire to be part of a larger community and wait indefinitely for their (would-be) brides. Also, neither man has any real hope of finding his baby but “still at the end of every hard-earned day / people find some reason to believe.” On the other side of the coin, the girl in “From Small Things” is ultimately driven to meaninglessly kill an unsuspecting person, not unlike the Charles Starkweather-based character of “Nebraska.” At the end of that song, just moments before his execution, he coldly tells us, “They wanted to know why I did what I did / Well sir I guess there’s just a meanness in this world.” Springsteen writes in *Songs*, “There was a stillness on the surface of those pictures [*True Confessions* and Terrence Malick’s *Badlands*], while underneath lay a world of moral ambiguity and violence” (Bruce Springsteen, *Songs* (New York: Avon Books, 1998) 136), which may remind us that the morally ambiguous world and its violence are the result of the Fall of Adam. One may consider, also, the words of the English-born, Puritan leader of New England, John Cotton (1585-1652): the “carnall man” is one who “never served any man but himselfe” (John Cotton, “The Way of Life,” *The Way of Faith* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1983) 447), which agrees with the narrator of “Nebraska” that “there’s just a meanness in this world.”

²¹“The working life” appears again in the next song on *Darkness*, “Factory.” “Factory” and “The Promised Land” tell the same story, wherein the father’s garage of the latter is replaced by the factory of the former. In both songs, the men are devoted to their jobs not because they have been indoctrinated with a Puritan work ethic but because they have no choice but to work in order to survive. This survival, however, is characterized as a slow but implacable path to destruction. In both songs, the singer says the job is slowly killing the workers: after another day’s work in the factories, the men have “death in their eyes,” while the man leaving his daddy’s garage claims to “feel so weak I just want to explode.” That someone else will get hurt seems inevitable in “Factory” (“and you just better believe, boy / Somebody’s gonna get hurt tonight”). During his discussion of the roles of work versus play in an individual’s life, Cullen evaluates the Puritan doctrine of election:

In one sense, it's a fairly straightforward matter: work destroys, play preserves; work pollutes, play purifies. But in this description, grace is not simply conferred to all. Rather, the elect are those who have the strength to play. As in the case of the Puritan religion, however, there is no straightforward equation as to who is saved and who is not; we're not told *which* [Cullen's emphasis] guys start dying, or *why* some come home and wash up, only that some do. For those who do, such salvation—however fleeting or misleading—is a palpable experience. (Cullen 119)

²²Larry Smith, *Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and American Song* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002) 197-98.

²³Smith 218.

²⁴Chapter 3 of *Born in the USA*.

²⁵Cullen 64.

²⁶Springsteen's decision to place the little girl "down on the strand" provides an interesting double-entendre for the song. "Strand," may have been selected primarily because it rhymes with the next four lines (i.e., hands, land, sands, land) and is used elsewhere for rhyming purposes (cf. "I Wish I Were Blind"), but the denotations of this word are also telling. *The American Heritage College Dictionary (AHD, Fourth Edition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002) defines strand¹ (AHD 1364), the noun, as "the land bordering a body of water; a beach," which both recalls the Jersey shore as well as the place of Moses' final speech to the Israelites and death on Mount Nebo, overlooking the Dead Sea. Moreover, as an intransitive verb, strand¹ recalls stranded, which means "to be brought into or left in a difficult or helpless position." The singer warns the girl that she can run but cannot beat "the price you pay." She and her child, along with the rest of mankind, are stranded and left to make the best of it.

²⁷See the discussion of Num. 14, above.

²⁸Another song from *The River* seems to answer the complaints of the singer in "The Promised Land." Whereas in "The Promised Land," the isolated singer complains that "your eyes go blind and your blood runs cold," the singer in "Two Hearts"—like the one in "The Price You Pay"—realizes that community removes the sense of isolation and broken-heartedness that plagues the individual in "The Promised Land." The final verse of "Two Hearts" provides the answer and encourages those who are despondent:

That's if you think your heart is stone
And that you're rough enough to whip this world alone
Alone buddy there ain't no peace of mind
That's why I'll keep searching till I find my special one.

²⁹Cf. "From Small Things," wherein "the promised land" and "heaven" are both appellations given to Florida. Additionally, the Promised Land mentioned in "The Ghost of Tom Joad" may be understood as a reference to the popular Christian concept of heaven in the afterlife, from which there is no return. However, this could be another ironic use of the phrase, where the preacher's "one-way ticket" brought him to California, only to leave him stranded outside society like so many others on the album (cf. "Sinaloa Cowboys" and "Balboa Park"). Note also that a one-way ticket brought the little boy of "Johnny Bye-Bye" out to the Promised Land of California, at least when this song is supplemented by Chuck Berry's song of the same title.

³⁰Bruce Springsteen, "Born to Run (Acoustic)," DVD, *The Complete Video Anthology/1978-2000*, CMV, 2001.

³¹John Duffy, *In His Own Words: Bruce Springsteen* (Norwich, Great Britain: Omnibus Press, 2000) 89.

³²To twenty-first century pluralists, Le may have perfected the Biblical and Puritan concepts of the Promised Land because he intends neither to rid the land of its previous inhabitants nor to convert them: his only goal is survival through assimilation.

³³Cullen 72.

³⁴Cullen defines brotherhood as "love that transcends boundaries" (Cullen 138), but Billy's revelation is more one of tolerance and acceptance than love and brotherhood. As usual, Cullen veers toward the more romantic interpretation of the songs.

³⁵See the discussion of orphans, widows, and strangers in Deut. 24 and 26 above. Over the years, Springsteen has worked to feed the poor in our own society in many ways, giving direct donations to local food banks in the towns hosting his concerts as well as encouraging concert-goers to donate to local food bank volunteers as they leave the concert venue. On the Magic Tour, Springsteen continued to promote the local food banks in his introduction to "The Promised Land," often reminding his audience that these volunteers "are doing God's work."

³⁶In his treatment of "Galveston Bay," Cullen relates that the shrimping industry outside of Houston was highly competitive despite being relatively accessible (Cullen 70).

³⁷We are given no hint that the relationship between Billy and Le relationship ever develops beyond tolerance. In the end, Billy (and presumably Le as well) gets up, kisses his family, and returns to his job.

³⁸His bags are already packed in anticipation of the trip to the Promised Land, as (figuratively) were those of the singer in “The Promised Land” before him.

³⁹The phrase “high upon a grassy hill” is also evocative of Winthrop’s call aboard the *Arabella* for the Puritans to establish their “Citty upon a Hill,” which may suggest that the singer and his lover understand their responsibility to act as model citizens in their new community, as had the Puritans 300 years earlier (For a brief discussion of the Puritan ideal of the Promised Land and their concept of the covenant, see Cullen 53).

⁴⁰That he would have to build his own house stands as an interesting contrast to the Biblical tradition, in which Moses reminds the Israelites that they will occupy whole cities that they did not build and harvest vineyards they did not sow (Deut. 6:10-11).

⁴¹ See the discussion of Num. 13 above.

⁴²A special thanks to Karen Sonik, who edited this article many times over and suggested this concluding sentence.