



A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey

By Iwan Borst

The land of Canaan is described as a land “flowing with milk and honey” both by God (Ex. 3:8) and the twelve spies (Num. 13:27). Why this combination of milk and honey? Why not a land flowing with barley and wine? Is it a way to describe a land of abundance? Certainly, but why is the particular combination of milk and honey used? A closer look at the situation of the Israelites and Isaiah 7 will show that God described the Promised Land to the Israelites using imagery that would sound amazing to the ears of shepherds and nomads. He uses what they would consider superlative language.



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A land flowing with milk and honey is something of a nomad’s or shepherds paradise. Neither of these goods was obtained by hard labour. Both are products of nature that do not require the breaking up of soil or the growing of crops. Wild honey is something you can pick up along the road. Just think of the honey found by Samson or Jonathan. Both these men wandered upon honey that was free for the taking and they did not have to work for it. Milk is something that an animal produces for you. Most nomads would have depended on their animals for meat and milk. So milk and honey

are the kind of products that shepherds would enjoy and need for their existence.

The ease of living off of milk and honey is also used in Isaiah 7, but in this case it is used in a negative light. In Isaiah 7:10-24, the prophet declares that the Promised Land will become a land flowing of milk and honey again, but this time it indicates that the land has regressed. God will provide for the people that are left in Israel after the exile, but the text makes it clear that the land will undergo severe changes. What had been cultivated will again become pasture and wilderness. Therefore, everyone left in the land will eat curds and honey, because all the cultivated plots will turn to weeds and bush. It will only be good for the sheep and cattle to graze. To live off of curds and honey is a herder’s existence. It is the opposite of being a farmer, who uses the land to grow his food.

Even though a land of milk and honey is a sign of disaster in Isaiah, we can imagine that the Israelites in the time of Moses would have loved the idea of a land flowing with milk and honey. The Patriarchs had been shepherds. Jacob and his sons had entered Egypt as shepherds, making it an important point so that Pharaoh would give them Goshen, for shepherds were detestable to the Egyptians (Gen. 47:1-6). And after the exodus, the Israelites spent 40 years as nomads in the desert.

So when the Lord described the land of Canaan to his people, he uses language that speaks to the Israelites. He does not use the language of a

farmer or villager. A farmer would likely wonder what is wrong in a land that only produces milk and honey, but a shepherd would love to see this land where the pastures are lush and green and able to support his flocks. There his flocks of goats and sheep will have room to roam and graze. He imagines a land where the trees and clover produce enough nectar for the bees to overflow their hives. To the ears of a nomad, it is a land of superlatives. Such is the land that the Lord promises his people and such is the land that they also find in Numbers 13.

Now there are two conclusions that we can draw from this description of the land. First, when the Lord describes the Promised Land to his people, he uses language and imagery that they would understand. Surely, he could have described the land of Canaan by describing the heavy black soil in the Jezreel valley in a way that any farmer would have loved to get his hands dirty. Or he could have painted a picture of vineyards beaming in the light of the rising sun just waiting to be pruned by an avid horticulturalist. But instead, the Lord chose to use imagery that would speak powerfully to a people used to herding and wandering. For they were to receive a land where all they would need could be found in copious amounts.

This leads to the second conclusion. The land that the Israelites were going to receive was

not a land of mediocrity or subsistence agriculture. It was a land of fertility, of plenty and it would be perfect. Only superlatives would do to describe the land, even if these superlatives are best understood by the Israelites in their own context.

Jumping ahead to apply this to today, we see our similar situation. When the Lord describes the new heavens and the new earth he uses superlatives. We receive amazing descriptions in Revelation, in which only the most beautiful and precious metals are mentioned. It uses language of the closest communion with God, speaking of the New Jerusalem as a bride and the city having the dimensions of the holy of holies. When the Lord describes the inheritance of his saints, he uses superlative language, but sometimes the superlatives are hidden in language that is foreign to us. So when we study the descriptions God gives us, let us not forget to look for these superlatives. Sometimes they might be clear, at other times we have to unpack the descriptions by understanding the language in its context. But in every case, we know that when the Lord uses the most glorious language known to us, it means that the reality will be even more glorious. The Lord knows his people and paints them a picture of the best place imaginable to describe what he has in store for them.



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