THE LAND OF YOUR POSSESSION

By Dr. ISAIAH BOWMAN

DIRECTOR OF THE AMERICAN GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY OF NEW YORK; SINCE JULY 1 PRESIDENT OF THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

When we say that “man does not live by bread alone” we imply that bread comes first. Over the greater part of the earth and for at least three fourths of our two billion planetary population the will to eat is the primary urge of “eternally hungry man.” “It was farming time, everybody talked about the land,” was the way one old-timer summed up his motivations as one of the pioneers of the Middle West during the high tide of migration off the stony hillsides of New England to the flatter acres of the prairie plains. While the historical aspects of land use and land dependence tempt me to make excursions, I yield to the temptation at one point only. The title of my address is taken from Joshua, 1: 15, in recognition of the early land movements recorded in our common book of wisdom.

This antiquarian choice is supported by findings in Young’s 1,000-page Analytical Concordance, which has about 1,600 citations on land (metaphorical and literal), while the two other main themes of the Bible, love and sin, come off with but 600 and 300 citations, respectively! The “pioneer fringe” was clearly recognized in that far day: “There remaineth yet very much land to be possessed.” The migrants had an equally clear purpose: “That ye may live, go in and possess the land.” In 1930 a wheat farmer of the High Plains of western Kansas, who had recently migrated from the eastern part of the state, answered my question of purpose as trenchantly as the record runs in Deuteronomy: “I came here, Mister, because I had to live.” Cheap land, high-price wheat and the wet-period success of other High Plains farmers had drawn him forward to the degree that high taxes and high interest charges on the older farm had pushed him away.
Science 82 (2126), 285-306.