This essay is dedicated to the memory of Yair Mordechai, who died on Sukkot of 5762 while preventing a suicide-bomber from entering Kibbutz Sheluhot, saving many lives.

The Land of Israel (hereafter referred to as "the Land") is one geographical region that is certainly viewed with high regard by Scripture. Consider how Moses describes the Land to the Israelites who eagerly awaited entry into it:

For the land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come. There the grain you sowed had to be watered by your own labors [lit. by your foot], like a vegetable garden; but the land you are about to cross into and possess, a land of hills and valleys, soaks up its water from the rains of heaven. It is a land which the Lord your God looks after, on which the Lord your God always keeps His eye, from year's beginning to year's end.

If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the Lord your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil. I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle and thus you shall eat your fill (Deut. 11:10-15).

Here the Bible presents us with a distinction: the Land does not equal Egypt. Egypt may have been the country best suited to survive the droughts that plagued the ancient Near East, but the Land is superior to it. While Egyptian farmers must exert themselves to irrigate their crops with water drawn from the Nile, Israelite farmers could look forward to having their crops automatically watered by timely rain showers. Of course, these agricultural conveniences were available only on the condition that the Israelites remained faithful to God. With no local Nile to fall back on, a drought brought on by idolatrous practices could be catastrophic:
Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For the Lord’s anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is assigning to you (11:16-17).

According to Scripture, the Land of Israel is a very special kind of place. Its climate reacts to the spiritual condition of its inhabitants. In the words of the Rashbam on Deuteronomy 11:10: "This land is better than all other lands for those who observe His commandments, and worse than all other lands for those who do not observe them." Actually, there may be worse calamities than famine. Although Deuteronomy says that upon sinning the Israelites would soon perish from the good land, biblical historiography never cites famine as a cause of the Israelites losing sovereignty over their land. Foreign conquerors were the instruments of such ultimate catastrophes. It is no wonder that given the choice, King David picked natural disaster over military conflict: 'Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for His compassion is great; and let me not fall into the hands of men' (II Sam. 24:14).

One might speculate that local weather in the Land of Israel was thought to serve as a kind of automatic religious feedback mechanism. If the Israelites get out of line, drought and famine will draw them back to God before their actions warrant more drastic punishment. One is reminded of an idea forwarded by the great medieval poet and philosopher Judah Halevi. In his magnum opus, the Kuzari, Halevi compares the Jewish people to the heart, which is both the "healthiest" and "sickest" (or perhaps "weakest") of the organs. Because the heart is so frail it is sensitive to even the slightest ailment. This hypersensitivity affords the heart early warning of medical problems, allowing it to purge itself of any dangerous influences before they can take root and wreak irreparable damage.

Similarly, the Jewish people are burdened by suffering "whilst the whole world enjoys rest and prosperity," but "these trials are meant to prove our faith, to cleanse us completely, and to remove all taint from us." Analogously, the climate of the Land may be viewed as an instrument of Divine discipline meant to keep the Jewish people from sliding into irredeemable depravity. The carrot of rain and the stick of drought will save them from genuine
calamity. Famine may be terrible, but it is a price worth paying for the avoidance of even worse punishments.

Surprisingly, the Torah does tell us about a certain region immediately contiguous with the Land that once did enjoy the advantages of Egyptian-style agriculture. Soon after their arrival in Canaan, quarrels broke out between Abraham's and Lot's herdsmen. They decided to take their leave of each other. Lot decided to move into the Jordan plain area:

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\text{Lot looked about him and saw how well watered was the whole plain of the Jordan, all of it – this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah – all the way to Zoar, like the Garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt (13:10).}
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This last verse sets up an interesting set of new equivalencies: Sodom equals Egypt equals the Garden of the Lord (Eden). How does the Garden of Eden fit into the equation? If Egypt has its Nile, Eden is served by an even greater watercourse, the headwaters of the great rivers of the biblical world:

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\text{A river issues from Eden to water the garden, and it then divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon, the one that winds through the whole land of Havilah, where the gold is . . . . The name of the second river is Gihon, the one that winds through the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris, the one that flows east of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates (2:10-11, 13-14).}
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So Eden may be counted together with Sodom and Egypt as a riverside habitat. If Eden and Sodom are similar to Egypt, and the Land so different from Egypt, we may infer that the Land is also dissimilar to Eden and Sodom as well. Of course, neither Eden nor Sodom worked out very well for humanity. While the Land's spiritually sensitive climate would not abide the radical moral decline of its inhabitants, Sodom's forgiving climate and geography kept its populace well fed even as they rushed downwards to the depths of radical evil: \textit{Now the inhabitants of Sodom were very wicked sinners against the Lord} (13:13). Punishment came too late for rehabilitation. In the end, the people of Sodom became so irreparably evil that they became subject to total annihilation. As in Sodom, Divine discipline in the Garden was an all-or-nothing affair. The great river of Eden afforded no possibility of a soul-chastening drought or famine. While God was not about to destroy Paradise
in retaliation for human sin, He did the next best thing. Driven forever out of Eden, Adam and Eve would never again be seduced by the economically secure life-style of river dwellers.

Unfortunately, local climate control proved unequal to the task of suppressing the Israelites’ proclivity to sin. Eventually, God took harsher measures, bringing in foreign conquerors to exile the people and devastate their land, just as the Israelites had wrested the Land from the Canaanites in punishment for their sins. In fact, that final catastrophe was something of a foregone conclusion. Deuteronomy 28:49 already threatens that the Lord will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, which will swoop down like an eagle, bringing destruction and exile.

Now the Bible is describing a predicament much more serious and enduring than a temporary drought; cities will be razed and the people carried away. Devastated by war, the Land becomes comparable to Sodom; not the Eden-like Sodom which Lot found so appealing, but the ruined Sodom from which he had to flee. The old contrast between the Land and Egypt (and the inferred contrast between the Land and Eden or Sodom) becomes irrelevant. The new equivalency, the Land equals Sodom, becomes a recurring feature of the biblical rhetoric of catastrophe. For example:

And later generations will ask the children who succeed you, and foreigners who come from distant lands and see the plagues and diseases that the Lord has inflicted upon that land, all its soil devastated by sulfur and salt, beyond sowing and producing, no grass growing in it, just like the upheaval of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the Lord overthrew in His fierce anger (Deut. 29:21-22).

Had not the Lord of Hosts left us some survivors, we should be like Sodom, another Gomorrah (Isa. 1: 9).

Fortunately, there is also a bright side to the new equation. If Sodom-like devastation may befall the Land, Eden-like restoration may await it in the future. The old contrast between Egypt and the Land made it impossible to describe the latter in idyllic terms that only made sense for a riverside habitat. The complete desolation of the Land broke down the old metaphor, making room for metaphorical identification of the Land not only with the ruins of Sodom, but also with Eden's bounty:
Truly the Lord has comforted Zion, comforted all her ruins; He has made her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the Garden of the Lord (Isa. 51: 3).

And men shall say, "That land, once desolate, has become like the garden of Eden; and the cities, once ruined, desolate, and ravaged, are now populated and fortified.' (Ezek. 36:35).

Of course, the new metaphor is not without its difficulties. Not the least of these is the simple geographical fact that the Land has no great rivers of its own. Despite its historical significance, the Jordan is a mere creek compared to the mighty Nile. (One may well wonder how Sodom was kept so well watered before its destruction!) The conversion of the Land into a new Eden would require constant Divine intervention (or drip irrigation). I would suggest that biblical writers were aware of the dissonance implicit in the identification of the Land's future glory with descriptions belonging to fertile river valleys. Perhaps the following verses from Zechariah may be understood as offering a solution to this difficulty:

On that day, He will set His feet on the Mount of Olives, near Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall split across from east to west, and one part of the Mount shall shift to the north and the other to the south, [forming] a huge gorge. And the Valley in the Hills shall be stopped up, for the Valley of the Hills shall reach only to Azal; it shall be stopped up as it was stopped up as a result of the earthquake in the days of King Uzziah of Judah . . . . In that day, fresh water shall flow from Jerusalem, part of it to the Eastern Sea, and part to the Western Sea, throughout the summer and winter (Zech. 14:4-8)

Zechariah offers us a radical resolution of the strain between the rhetoric of messianic hope and the plain facts of geography. In those future days, geography will change to fit the metaphor, and, like Eden, the Land of Israel will have a river running through it. Presumably, the Jewish people will no longer require the services of climactic spiritual control. However, Zechariah continues the prophecy from which I have quoted to explain that while the Land will be freed from its dependence on rain, all other countries will find themselves subject to a regimen similar to that described in Deuteronomy 11:
All who survive of all those nations that came up against Jerusalem shall make a pilgrimage year by year to bow low to the King Lord of Hosts and to observe the Feast of Booths. Any of the earth’s communities that does not make the pilgrimage to bow low to the King Lord of Hosts shall receive no rain (Zech. 14:16-17).

Zechariah has neatly executed a complete reversal. The Land will become a riverside paradise, while all other regions will live by whatever rain God deems them to deserve. Only one detail is left to attend to. What will become of Egypt? Must the Nile dry up so as to make Egypt a rain-dependent nation? As translated by the Jewish Publication Society, Zechariah leaves us guessing exactly what Egypt's punishment shall be: However, if the community of Egypt does not make this pilgrimage, it shall not be visited by the same affliction with which the Lord will strike the other nations that do not come up to observe the feast of Booths (14:18).

I would like to suggest an alternative translation, which better fits my general interpretative scheme. Consider two additional verses. Zechariah 14:19 seems to imply that if Egypt does not observe the Feast of Booths, it will suffer the same punishment as all the other nations (i.e., drought): Such shall be the punishment of Egypt and of all the other nations that do not come up to observe the Feast of Booths. How could that be possible if Egypt is not dependent on rainwater? Remarkably, an earlier verse (10:11) clearly suggests that God will indeed dry up the Nile: And all the deeps of the Nile shall dry up . . . and the scepter of Egypt shall pass away. Now it seems clear that Egypt will indeed cease to be a riverside habitat, but how can Zechariah 14:18 be brought into line with this new information? A comparison with two other phrases may help:

Shall I not bring retribution on a nation such as this? (Jer. 5:9)

Have I not the power to save? (Isa. 50:2)

Both of these rhetorical questions are introduced by the same Hebrew word, "ve’im" [literally "and if"] as is Zechariah 14:18, and both share its basic structure. Our verse from Zechariah may therefore be similarly construed as asking a rhetorical question:

And if the community of Egypt does not make this pilgrimage, shall it not be visited by the same affliction with which the Lord will

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strike the other nations that do not come up to observe the Feast of Booths?

The verse's new translation suits the geographical reversal of Zechariah's apocalypse quite nicely. While the Land of Israel will be watered by a mighty river throughout the summer and winter, the deeps of the Nile shall dry up, leaving Egypt prone to the same disastrous draughts with which the Lord will strike the other nations that do not come up to observe the Feast of Booths.

NOTES
2. John Goldingay reminds me that Ezekiel 47:1-12 offers an even more striking description of the great river that will emerge from Jerusalem in the end of days, bearing plentiful fish (Ezek. 47:9) and watering ever-bountiful fruit trees on both its banks (Ezek. 47:12).

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STARTING THE 2ND WEEK OF NOVEMBER, WE BEGIN A NEW CYCLE OF THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR
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