Old Testament stories want to be made accessible from their purpose, from their ending. Although this may not hold as an iron-clad unchangeable law, it remains a good rule of experience which merits further notice. The Pentateuch, which M. Noth taught to be seen predominantly as a story, ends with a very eloquent, uplifting as well as painfully unfulfilled scene of the death of Moses outside the promised land. In striking contrast to the tomb of the patriarchs at Hebron (Gen 23), God Himself ordained for Moses a burial place outside the land included in the promise. With the great Moses, to whom is erected at the climax of the Pentateuch, namely in Deuteronomy and its promulgation of law, a definitive monument as the revealer, the original and fundamental document of what is about to become the Old Testament’s canonical way of faith remains out of the promised land, and enters not into the fulfillment.

How this ending, this purpose of the Pentateuch is to be assessed, proceeds from its analogy, hence from the origin of that which was later to be called Israel. For at the conclusion of the primal history the new redactionary unit, Gen 12:1-9, deals with Abraham’s call into “a land that I will show you.” He was called, therefore, not to be Yahweh’s disciple — in the early history Yahweh was of course
the undisputed only God. On the contrary, the call is pointed directly to a land. In the same passage Yahweh’s promise to Abraham near Shechem is issued: “To your descendants I will give this land.” (Gen 12:7.) Down to the events of Bethel, the impression of this promise remains so strong that it is first here that Abraham comes to worship and call on the name of Yahweh.

The land becomes thereby not any ordinary national place of settlement, as it was used by nearly all peoples, but primarily the place for induction into the call, induction into the service of the one and only God, and that means the induction into the anxious waiting for the promise. That is established by the conclusion of the Pentateuch. Deuteronomy 34 closes with a view across Gilead as far as Dan, all of Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all of the land of Judah to the Mediterranean, to the Jordan region and the “City of Palms” as far as Zoar; but, beyond all this, after the manner of a transfer of rights, but without reality. What was a promise to the patriarchs was to remain the original and fundamental document of the Old Testament way of faith. Promise becomes elevated to the main theme of the Pentateuch.

In this analogy, therefore, chance does not rule, as if the theme of land was adopted at the conclusion of the Pentateuch, because this was to lead only up to Moses’ death while a tradition about Moses recalled that he had remained outside of the land. Rather, the theme of land is made explicit as the pledge of Yahweh in Deuteronomy 34:4.

This is the land that I promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with the oath, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over.