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# Introduction

Israel is a prominent topic in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, though it was not prominent in Christian theological reflection until the aftermath of the Holocaust. Actually, over the centuries and in the contemporary world there have been many Israels, and similar theological issues repeatedly arise through the Scriptures and outside them in connection with Israel. This article deals with these issues as a set of recurrent questions.

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## Israel’s Identity

In the scriptural narrative, ‘Israel’ starts off as the name of an individual, then becomes the name of a people and nation that traces its ancestry back to him. It becomes attached to the land where this people lives, though this article will not elaborate on the topic of the land. When the nation splits into two, it becomes the name of the larger of the two entities, though then and later it continues to be a title for the entire people that traces its origin back to the ancestor with this name. When both (northern) Israel and Judah lose their political identity and become spread around the world, Israel becomes a different kind of community in which commitment to the Torah and involvement in worship join ethnicity as key markers of what it means to be Israel.

### 1.1 Person, People

Israel is a community that sees itself as related to the individual of that name who appears in Genesis. The name thus starts off as a new name given to Abraham’s grandson, Jacob. Jacob is on his way back Canaan from Mesopotamia. Someone fights with him throughout one night, and eventually says, ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed’ (Gen 32:29). The declaration thus makes a link between the name Israel (more precisely *yiśrāʾēl*)and a verb (*śārâ*) that means tussle or struggle. Etymologically, it would be more natural to take the name to mean ‘God strives’, and the fight had been initiated not by Jacob but by some other ‘person’ (an *ʾîš*),who might be God or might represent God. But explanations of scriptural names commonly involve paronomasia rather than etymology. Yet Jacob has indeed been engaging tenaciously in the fight. Either ‘God strives’ or ‘He strives with God’ would make an appropriate gloss for the name of the nation of Israel in light of its life over the centuries.

The Scriptures do not elsewhere appeal to the name’s significance, but they attach great significance to Israel’s seeing itself as the descendants of this man Israel, and they refer some two hundred times to Yahweh as ‘the God of Israel’. Jacob/Israel is the father of twelve sons who will be the eponymous ancestors of the clans that make up Israel. One implication is that inter-clan warfare is grievous because it involves members of one family fighting each other, as is it is grievous when Christian denominations attack one another. The way Jacob/Israel’s sons recover from dreadful strife issuing from unwise relationships and jealousy, and find reconciliation with one another, sets a challenge before the brothers’ descendants, the clans who do engage in dreadful strife from time to time. More constructively, the Israelites being brothers provides a positive support for ethical responsibilities such as refusal to profit from economic difficulties experienced by fellow-Israelites, and a practice of generosity to them instead (Deut 15).

Jacob/Israel was not the beginning of this family. God gave a commission to his grandparents to leave their homeland and family to go to Canaan, and gave Abraham an associated promise that laid a key foundation for Israel’s life: he would make of him a great nation, bless him, and make him a blessing, which at least means he would become a standard whereby people prayed for blessing (Gen 12:2–3). God brought Israel into being by a command and a promise that Abraham obeyed and trusted. It’s not clear whether or why Abraham and Sarah would be keen to migrate to another country, be the fountainhead of a big nation, be famous, or be paraded as a standard of blessing. But the point about the commission and promise recounted in Genesis is its importance to the Israel that reads the story, not its importance to Abraham and Sarah. They see little of its fulfilment, though that corresponds with the fact that Israel is always a people on the way, between promise and fulfilment. And for individuals who see themselves as the children of Abraham and Sarah, the same considerations apply.

The promise takes up the theme of blessing going back to Genesis 1, and implies that in Abraham and Sarah and their progeny God will fulfil his purpose of blessing that goes back to creation. Blessing and curse is one recurrent motif in Genesis 1–11, but the chapters do not establish whether blessing or curse is going to win out in world history. God’s promise to Abraham declares that blessing will win out, though it does not clarify unambiguously how it will do so. Is God blessing Abraham because he has abandoned the world as a whole or as a means of fulfilling a purpose for the world as a whole?

In partial fulfilment of the promise, by the end of Genesis Jacob/Israel’s descendants have become a big family (Exod 1:1–5). The ‘Israelite people’ (Exod 1:9), then, is an ethnic group. It can be described as a kin-group (*mišpāḥâ*; Amos 3:2), a household (*bayit*;Exod 16:31), and a tribe (*šēbeṭ*). It is bounded, though its boundaries are permeable. Joseph had married an Egyptian, who was therefore the foremother of Manasseh and Ephraim. Moses marries a Midianite. An ethnically mixed group accompanies the Israelites from Egypt (Exod 12:38). Caleb, a Jephunnite, can become a member of Judah (Num 13:6). Rahab and her family, Canaanites, can come to live in Israel (Josh 6:25). Boaz, a Judahite, can marry a Moabite (Ruth 4). A Syrian general can find healing and become a worshiper of Yahweh (2 Kings 5). Subsequently, belonging to the Roman military does not rule you out of the company of the people on whom the Holy Spirit comes (Acts 10; cf. Matt 8:5–13). On the other hand, Israelites can get into trouble for marrying foreign wives (Ezra 9–10). Perhaps marriages are acceptable if a potential spouse from another people has come to identify with Israel and acknowledge Yahweh, but not otherwise. The Esther story presupposes that the preservation of Israel as an ethnic group is vitally important, while also describing Esther as taken into Ahasuerus’s harem.

As Israel is not closed to people joining it from outside, ethnicity does not guarantee someone’s security within Israel: for Moses’s nephews, for some Reubenites, or for Achan, the Judahite correlative to Rahab (Lev 10; Num 16; Josh 7). God can generate children for Abraham from the desert rocks (Matt 3:9). Analogously, people cannot count on membership of the company of people on whom the Holy Spirit comes; Ananias and Sapphira share the fate of Achan (Acts 5).

God’s promise of blessing recurs towards the end of the account of Israel’s descendants’ story in the Torah, when they are on the edge of Canaan. The Mesopotamian prophet Balaam restates it:

Blessed is everyone who blesses you,

and cursed is everyone who curses you. (Num 24:9)

Balaam spells out the blessing’s implications in terms of Israel’s becoming a numerous people and triumphing over its enemies, with specific reference to peoples who will actually be a problem to Israel.

### 1.2 Nation, State

When Abraham and Sarah arrive at Shechem, which will be the geographical centre of the land of Israel, Yahweh declares that their offspring will not merely live here like Bedouin; he will give them the country (Gen 12:7). I shall ‘give you this land to possess’, he says (15:7). This idea is actually implicit in calling them a nation (*gôy*; Gen 12:2). A nation is a cluster of people with a common sense of identity, heritage, lineage, law, government, right of self-determination, awareness of itself over against other nations—and land (or most of those). Land is thus integral to the notion of Israel, and ‘Israel’ can denote the land that has come to belong to the people (Deut 18:1, 6).

The importance of the land promise exposes a shortfall in the fulfilment of Yahweh’s promise by the time of Moses. The Israelites are no longer even living in the land as shepherds, let alone do they have possession of it. They are no longer even living free in Egypt as shepherds; they have no right of self-determination. Yahweh promises them both of these. He will get them out of servitude to Egypt and get them into settlement in Canaan (Exod 2:23–3:10). And in the future, while he may feel free to throw them out of his land, he may also be minded to restore it to them when some other people appropriates it (see Obadiah).

Yahweh duly enables Israel to get out of Egypt and begin a journey to Canaan. It is impossible with any conviction to get behind the narrative account of this event to an account of what actually happened and what proportion of the ancestors of later Israel was involved. In the memory of Israel that expresses its self-understanding, however, it was ‘Israel’ that Yahweh delivered. This act established who Yahweh was for Israel, and established who Israel was as a people delivered by Yahweh in fulfilment of the commitment that went back to Abraham, Isaac, and—Israel. Yahweh is now Israel’s great king. The song Israel sings after its deliverance from the Egyptians declares, ‘Yahweh will reign forever and ever’ (Exod 15:18; here and elsewhere in this article, where NRSV substitutes ‘the LORD’ for the name Yahweh, quotations replace it by the name). Israel has no human kings. It has Moses and Joshua as leaders for a while, but Joshua has no successor. Israel is a theocracy.

Meanwhile, Israel now becomes a people that gets mentioned in an official record, on Pharaoh Merneptah’s inscription commemorating his military achievements in the 1200s. Being a nation implies being an entity that is prepared to be involved in war. It is not merely in modern Europe that ‘self-consciousness as a Nation implies, by definition, a sense of differentiation from other communities, and the most memorable incidents in the group memory usually are of conflict with, and triumph over, other communities’ (Howard 1979: 102).

The account of Israel’s establishment or emergence as a people in Canaan raises a broader question about Israel’s bounded nature. A quick read of Joshua can give the impression of a speedy and comprehensive conquest of Canaan and the annihilation of its previous inhabitants. But the story’s footnotes indicate that its narrative involves considerable hyperbole. There was no genocide or ethnic cleansing. The Canaanites remained in control of the areas where they had always lived, and the Israelites lived alongside and among them. The next two centuries saw both conflict and mutual assimilation; only in David’s time did Israel come to control Canaan as a whole. Culturally and religiously a two-way assimilation continued, generating the phenomenon of hybridity.

 The process whereby the land of Canaan becomes the land of Israel, and Israel’s subsequent history as a nation and a state, is in part amenable to reading in light of other accounts of settlement (such as those of Anglo-Saxons in England and Europeans in the Americas) and of the relationship of imperial powers to their vassals. Neither the Canaanite city-states nor the Israelite invaders are imperial powers; both have been under the control of the imperial power of Egypt. But Israel is on the way to being something like an imperial power in its relationship with the indigenous peoples of Canaan.

As the nation’s ethnic boundaries are externally permeable, its internal unity is tenuous. While its memory portrays it as one people under Moses and Joshua, it recognizes that the links between the clans are subsequently fragile. Even if the memory does not exaggerate the earlier unity, it would be inevitable for the nation to become fissiparous once it was distributed around the land. When the clans were engaged in conflict not only with Canaanites but with other neighbouring peoples such as Ammon, Moab, and Edom, these conflicts did not involve invasions of Israel as a whole but local incursions to which localized groups of clans would respond. But the book of Judges describes them as conflicts involving ‘Israel’. Although the clans are scattered and only a number are involved in any one conflict, the conflicts all involve ‘Israel’.

The walls of Israel’s thinking are also permeable; there are positives and negatives about the influence of Canaanite culture, religion, and theology upon Israel. The story in Judges shows that existing as a theocracy doesn’t work, and Israel insists on having a king like other peoples. Their second king acquires a city that can be the state’s capital and administrative centre, and locates the nation’s focal sanctuary there. Their third king builds a palace for himself, and one for Yahweh to replace his more moveable sanctuary. This temple facilitates and requires a more sophisticated form of worship that looks as if it is modelled on that of other peoples in Canaan. But monarchy doesn’t work very well either. It costs money and it encourages the development of something like a class system. The emergence of the confrontational prophets in Israel and the tension between prophets, kings, and priests follow.

### 1.3 Community

On the eve of Israel’s departure from Egypt, Yahweh gives the people instructions for observing the Passover, and speaks of them as ‘the congregation of Israel’ (*ʿēdat yiśrāʾēl*), then as ‘the assembly of the congregation of Israel’ (*qāhal ʿēdat yiśrāʾēl;* Exod 12:3, 6). Both *congregation* (mostly in Numbers) and *assembly* (preferred by Chronicles and Ezekiel) frequently suggest Israel gathered for worship, though *congregation* more often also refers to a gathering for military, political and judicial purposes. The distinction in translating the two words is made for convenience. Both are ways of talking about Israel as a whole as a community.

It is both political and a religious entity. Western readers are used to a separation of church and state, but traditional societies are used to the expression of a common faith in worship being a feature of a community’s existence. In Israel, religion and politics are one in its life rather than separate spheres. It continued to be so, one way or another, through First and Second Temple times, though it then ceased to be so for nearly two millennia. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1947 as a European-style nation-state reopened the question of the relationship between religion and politics, and the question has become more fraught in Israel over subsequent decades.

The association of religion and politics means that religious and ethical questions become integral to political questions. The state ceases to be its own god. The downside is that religion and worship can become subservient to the state’s political and economic policies and can lose their link with ethics. The role of worship as part of the definition of Israel can thus be controversial. God comes to dismiss Israel’s worship and reminds Israel that it did not offer worship in the form of sacrifices in the wilderness, before its arrival in Canaan (Amos 5:25), though in due course, the Sinai narrative includes an account of God’s laying down specifications for the building of a sanctuary where he would dwell within Israel and where Israel would offer him its worship and its sacrifices (Exod 25:1–31:17; 35:1–40:38; Leviticus; Numbers). The establishment of (northern) Israel as a separate state leads to its introduction of its own worship centres, as a politically necessary adjunct to its existence as a state. Babylon’s action against Judah in response to its assertion of political independence includes the devastation of its temple.

On the other hand, the temple’s rebuilding unaccompanied by political independence means that for Israelites who live in the land, life as a worshipping community is more central to Israel’s self-understanding in the Second Temple period, as is reflected in Chronicles’ telling of Israel’s story. Scholarly opinions vary over how far the material in the Torah that pictures Israel as a worshipping community reflects the First Temple period, or the time after the temple’s devastation, or the Second Temple period, but one way or another it adds to this dimension of what ‘Israel’ is. Similar questions apply to the prominence of Israel in the Psalms. Whatever is the imperial power at the time, in worship the Psalms express the conviction that Israel matters because it is Yahweh’s people, and chanting the Psalms expresses the conviction that what the people affirm as a worshipping community is the real truth about Israel, about Yahweh, and about the world.

Although some Israelites (perhaps most) looked forward to the reestablishment of the monarchy and thus of the nation’s independence, the Scriptures do not give the impression that they fretted much more about their colonial status than they had once fretted under the leadership of their self-indulgent and unwise kings. Being an independent monarchic state had never been the heart of Israel’s identity. Israel now becomes a community is a more central sense. It still sees itself as bound together by ethnicity; it does not become an elective community, such as the church will be. But it has little by way of political identity or geographical limitedness (its people remain spread all over the world, east, west, north, and south of Canaan) or of linguistic distinctiveness (Aramaic and Greek become as important as Hebrew to Israel’s linguistic identity). The geographical spread also means that worship in the temple could not be central for the broader Israel as it could be for people living in Judah. Conversely, commitment to the Torah gained more distinctive importance as an identity marker for the Israel spread over the world. Once again, in the twenty-first century the question of the relationship of ethnicity and Torah has become of key importance in connection with what it means to be Israel.

## Israel’s Position and Significance

Why is Israel important? Why was Israel important? Why did Israel matter to anyone but itself? What was God’s relationship with it? What was its relationship to God?

### 2.1 Favoured

Theologically or ethically, how could Yahweh undertake to give his people the land of Canaan notwithstanding the presence of the Canaanites there (Gen 12:6–7)? He comments briefly on the question in noting that it cannot happen yet, ‘for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete’ (Gen 15:16; Amorites is an alternative term for Canaanites). And at the time they show no sign of completing it. There is no further comment on this question until after the exodus, though much comment on the waywardness of Abraham and his descendants. Moses envisages the Canaanites melting away (Exod 15:15). God then promises that he will dispose of them (Exod 23:23); he uses a rare verb (*kāḥad* hiphil) that could mean destroy but needn’t have that implication, and he goes on to say that actually he will drive them out, though not all at once (23:27–30), then to say that the Israelites themselves will drive them out so that they don’t lead them astray (23:31–33).

Why did God get involved with Israel as opposed to some other people? Why did he not get involved with the Canaanites themselves? Deuteronomy gives a neat non-answer that involves no rationale in terms of other peoples’ waywardness.

You are a people holy to Yahweh your God; Yahweh your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that Yahweh set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because Yahweh loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that Yahweh has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deut 7:6–8)

Why did God favour Israel? He just did. Deuteronomy expresses the basis or nature of his involvement by means of three verbs. First, he chose this people (*bāḥar*). Whereas in Christian theology the object of the term ‘choice’ or ‘election’ has commonly been the ordinary individual, in the Scriptures the object is either someone with a special role such as David or Paul, or it is the people of God—Israel or the church. Second, he set his heart on this people (*ḥāšaq*). It is a rare word suggesting desire, used for fancying a woman (e.g., 21:11). Third, God thus acted out of love for Israel (*ʾahăbâ*). The translation ‘love’ for this noun and its related verb is commonly misleading, because the word suggests something broader and less focused on emotion than the word ‘love’ (NJPS here has ‘favor’), but in this context in association with the verb for setting the heart, the translation ‘love’ may be appropriate. In emphasizing the reality of God’s personal commitment to Israel, Deuteronomy implies that it has the unpredictable, inexplicable, and uncalculated nature of a personal commitment.

Deuteronomy uses the verb ‘set his heart on’ again (10:15) in connection with Yahweh’s feelings for Israel’s ancestors. In the account of Yahweh’s commitment to Abraham and Sarah, too, there had been no indication of reasons for settling on this couple, except possibly the paradoxical one that Sarah couldn’t have children (Gen 11:30). God’s favour and choice are not merely independent of deserve or qualification; if anything they go against deserve and qualification. By no means do Israel’s ancestors subsequently show themselves models of wisdom or piety in Genesis. They may be no worse than average, but they are hardly better than average. The same applies to Israel itself. Yahweh speaks of having ‘acknowledged’ Abraham as someone through whom he intends to work (Gen 18:19), and he uses the same verb of Israel in declaring, ‘you alone have I acknowledged of all the families of the earth’ (Amos 3:2). Each time the verb (*yādaʿ*) is one that commonly means simply ‘know’; NRSV has ‘chosen’ and NJPS has ‘singled out’. By this choice Israel becomes Yahweh’s domain or property (*naḥălâ*, Deut 4:20), like the stretch of land that a family’s enjoys as its inheritance. It becomes his personal possession (*sәgullâ*, Deut 7:6), which no one else can touch. It becomes his flock as shepherd (Ps 100:3). In the Psalms more broadly, Israel is therefore challenged to trust in Yahweh, delight in Yahweh, commit its way to Yahweh, relax before Yahweh, wait for Yahweh, hide in Yahweh.

Israel thus becomes the servant that has Yahweh as its master, and is therefore secure (Isa 41:8–10), yet is also under obligation. While God’s favouring of Israel does not issue from its piety or faithfulness, it must issue in piety and faithfulness (cf. Sanders 1977). Paul expounds the same understanding in responding to the possible question of whether people can do as they like because their relationship with God issues from his grace and their response of trust in him, rather than from actions on their part (Rom 6). His response is that asking such a question would reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of what God was doing with Israel or through Jesus. God was engaged in an act of faithfulness to Israel and potentially to the gentile world that was designed to produce a people characterized by a reciprocal faithfulness. To think in terms of sidestepping that implication is to fail to see the entire logic of God’s action.

When the pregnant Mary receives her cousin Elizabeth’s blessing, part of her response is to proclaim that ‘God has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy’ (Luke 1:54 CEB); she adds that he is thus acting in accordance with his promises to Israel’s ancestors, which stand forever. Her words take up God’s declaration about Israel’s servant status in the context of Babylonian domination (Isa 41:9). They form part of the declarations in Isaiah 40–55 that God intends to act in grace towards Israel in a way that matches his original act of grace. Mary’s reference to God’s remembering then takes up an expression of praise in the Psalms (Ps 98:3 [97:3 LXX]). As usual, the word translated ‘mercy’ (*eleos*) is the equivalent in biblical Greek to the Hebrew word for steadfast love or commitment (*ḥesed*), which is in turn closely related to the word for grace (*ḥēn*). It denotes a commitment that derived from the decision of the person taking this action rather than from any deserve on the part of its recipient, or a commitment that continues despite the recipient’s having forfeited any right to it by their own faithlessness. Israel in the Babylonian period to which Isaiah 40–55 belongs had indeed forfeited any right to divine commitment or mercy; so, perhaps, has Israel in the Roman period in which Mary lives. But God shows it anyway, because that is the nature of God’s commitment, mercy, grace, or favor. It was not based on deserve in the first place.

Mary’s other cousin, Zechariah, speaks in similar terms and at greater length (Luke 1:68–79) when Elizabeth has had the baby whose arrival marks the beginning of God’s coming to his servant Israel’s aid. He too speaks of ‘the Lord God of Israel’ thereby acting with mercy (*eleos/ḥesed*) to Israel’s ancestors in remembering his sacred covenant to Abraham and therefore rescuing his people from their enemies, so that they may ‘serve him . . . with holiness and righteousness (*dikaiosynē*,faithfulness)’. When he grows up, this baby will ‘give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins’. John the baptizer thus appears as part of the process whereby Jesus ‘might be revealed to Israel’ (John 1:31). And Jesus indeed focuses on Israel and commissions his students go preach to Israel (Matt 10).

### 2.2 Witnessing

If God’s commitment to Israel did not issue from its deserve, what did it issue from? On almost the last page of the Prophets (and thus almost the last page of the Jewish Scriptures in their Christian order), Yahweh says, ‘I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau (Mal 1:2–3). ‘Love’ and ‘hate’ give a misleading impression in English; NJPS has ‘I have accepted Jacob and have rejected Esau’. The story of the brothers Jacob and Esau makes clear that God’s favour of Jacob rather than Esau bore no relation to their deserve, and Malachi gives no hint that things were different subsequently with Jacob’s people and Esau’s people in his day. As Paul puts it when he take up God’s words in Malachi, ‘even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad (so that God’s purpose of election might continue, not by works but by his call), that was when Rebekah was told, “the elder shall serve the younger”’ (Rom 9:11–13; cf. Gen 25:23). In the background in Malachi is Edom’s appropriation of much of Judah’s land, and Malachi is reassuring Judah that God intends to deal with Edom. When Paul takes up God’s words from Malachi, he does point to a rationale for God’s choice, as he goes on to describe a principle underlying God’s treatment of Pharaoh. God distributes his mercy and compassion not on the basis of deserve but in connection with the proclamation of his name through all the earth (Rom 9:17, picking up the words of Exod 9:16).

Paul is spelling out implications of Yahweh’s commission to Abraham, which included the promise of Abraham being a blessing and all earth’s kin groups pronouncing a blessing by him (Gen 12:2–3). The promise indicated the wonder of what God intended to do for Abraham—his blessing would be such that all the nations would want it. It could hardly also be implying that they couldn’t have it; that would be mean! And the background of the promise lies in God’s involvement with the whole world in Genesis 1–11. The promise implies that God’s involvement with Abraham and thus with Israel plays a part in taking the world as a whole to the fulfilment of his creation intention for it. Perhaps this dynamic hints at the answer to the question why God brought a new people into being in connection with his purpose, rather than taking over an existent one: it was an act of creativity and grace that matched the original act of creativity and grace. The promise recurs in Genesis, though it then disappears, and there is little indication of an interest in this theme in Genesis or elsewhere in the narratives of the Jewish Scriptures.

On the other hand, there is an allusive hint along these lines in Leviticus 11–16. Israel’s lifestyle is to include a set of distinctive practices relating to matters such as food, bodily emissions, and skin conditions. The practices are not random, like driving on the right or on the left; they have underlying rationales relating to questions such as sex and death, though Israelites might be hardly aware of these rationales. And the practices would not look strange in a traditional society, as they do in a Western society. But they would be distinctive, even over against other peoples that had analogous practices. The practices distinguished Israel from other peoples.

God’s concern with all nations coming to acknowledge him is a more prominent theme in the Psalms. Psalm 96, for instance, urges the nations to ascribe glory to Yahweh and urges all the earth to worship him. Such psalms make clear the awareness that Yahweh is not just Israel’s God: Israel is to worship him as the God who rules over all the nations, and Israel is (figuratively) to proclaim this fact to them and urge them to come to the Jerusalem temple with their offerings. Prophets from time to time expound similar points. Isaiah 12 makes more explicit the paradoxical fact that Yahweh’s deliverance of Israel is something to proclaim among the nations.

After affirming that Israel is Yahweh’s servant (Isa 41:8–9), Isaiah 40–55 declares that Yahweh’s servant is to ‘bring forth justice to the nations’ (Isa 42:1). This declaration is enigmatic in various respects, but at least it indicates that Yahweh’s servant has a responsibility like the one of which the Psalms speak, to proclaim to the nations that Yahweh has acted in spectacular ways that call for the nations’ acknowledgment. ‘You are my witnesses’, Yahweh thus says (Isa 43:10). It is even harder to imagine how the prophet expects Israel to fulfil this role, and it might be misleading to say that Israel has a mission to the nations. Yet Israel perhaps accidentally fulfils this role in the late Second Temple period. The picture in Isaiah 40–55 of the entirety of Israel returning to the land of Israel did not find fulfilment, perhaps in part because Yahweh did not make it possible, but also because Judahites were happy living where they were. And in this context the synagogue developed, by an uncertain process and chronology, so that living in a ‘foreign’ land did not mean ceasing to pray and study as ‘Israel’. Indeed, it meant that neighbours of Judahite worshipers could be drawn into the synagogue. They might become full members of Israel (‘be converted’), which meant a commitment to keeping the Torah, and for the men meant circumcision. Or they might become ‘God-fearers’ (better, ‘God worshipers’), a lesser obligation. Judaism’s spread around the Mediterranean world meant that the synagogue and the phenomenon of God-fearers facilitated the spread of Paul’s version of what it meant to be Israel, as the company of people who recognized Jesus as Israel’s messiah. The incidental way in which Israel thus fulfilled its ‘mission’ is thus instructive for the church.

### 2.3 Amplified

The Psalms and Isaiah 40–55 presuppose that Yahweh’s acts on Israel’s behalf are not for it alone. One might infer that this was Yahweh’s intention, not merely an accidental by-product of his action. As Joshua put it, ‘Yahweh your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as Yahweh your God did to the Red Sea,. . . so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of Yahweh is mighty, and so that you may fear Yahweh your God forever’ (Josh 4:23–24). When Simeon takes the new-born Jesus, he describes him as ‘a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel’ (Luke 2:32). Simeon thus picks up words from Isaiah 42:1–9 and 49:1–6. When the ascended Jesus appears to Paul, he describes Paul’s vocation in terms that cohere with Joshua’s words: ‘he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel’ (Acts 9:15). Christ was destined to ‘proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles’ (Acts 26:23). John the seer speaks similarly: he sees worshipping God 144,000 people from Israel’s twelve clans and also a numberless throng from all the nations (Rev 7:4). God’s intention continues to be that both Israel and the world should acknowledge him, the latter through the former.

Paradoxically, the strange fact that most of Israel does not recognize Jesus as its Messiah leads Paul into a consideration in Romans 9–11 of Israel’s role in relation to God’s purpose for the world. He does not explicitly refer to God’s promise to Abraham in this connection, though he eventually refers in general terms to God’s promise to the ancestors and note other Scriptures in this connection (Rom 15:8–12; cf. Ps 18:49 [50]; Deut 32:43; Ps 127:1; Isa 11:10). In Galatians, he does take up God promise to Abraham concerning the blessing of the nations, which comes about through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Gal 3:8, 14). Ephesians 2:11–22 expresses the point in a radical fashion. Gentiles used to be separate from Christ, excluded from Israel and from the covenants with their promise and hope, and thus without God (admittedly, one might find a touch of hyperbole there). But now they have been brought near. Indeed, Christ ‘has made both groups into one’ by annulling the regulations that formerly enabled Israel to stand out as Yahweh’s people, ‘that he might create in himself one new humanity’. The gentiles are thus ‘no longer strangers and aliens but . . . citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God’.

Through Christ, Israel comes to be expanded as a new version of the people of God. To believers in Jesus scattered over Turkey, 1 Peter 2:9–10 can declare: ‘You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Once you were not a people,
    but now you are God’s people;
once you had not received mercy,
    but now you have received mercy’.

In later contexts, such an affirmation would seem to imply that a body of gentile believers in Jesus had replaced Israel as God’s people. In a first-century context, it constitutes a declaration that they are an embodiment of the people of God that shares in the position of ethnic Israel.

### 2.4 Pledged

Yahweh had taken action to deliver Israel in Egypt because they were ‘my people’ (Exod 3:7), not ‘nobody’s people’ as they might be tempted to think. ‘Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’ (2:23–25). God made a commitment to Abraham in commissioning him to migrate to Canaan. He later underscored his commitment by solemnizing it as a ‘covenant’ (*bәrîṭ*; Gen 15; 17). That English word has a wide range of meanings. In Genesis and in Exodus 2 the stress lies on its one-sided nature as a pledge that Yahweh makes. Given the seriousness of this vow solemnized to Israel’s ancestors, Yahweh has no alternative but to listen to the Israelites’ cry and respond to it. Israel is a pledged people (cf. Exod 6:4–5). It is not Egypt’s people. Subsequently Yahweh will affirm that neither is it a people that belongs to one of the empires such as Assyria (see e.g., Isaiah; Nahum). Israel belongs to him, which protects it from other overlords.

The pledge or covenant God made to Abraham was for all time, a *bәrîṭ ʿôlām* (Gen 17:7, 13, 19). Arranging subsequently for Israel to be scattered, for Jerusalem to be destroyed, and for the temple to be rendered unusable would seem to imply an annulling of this pledge. On the eve of these events, however, Ezekiel promised that Yahweh would be mindful of his pledge and would establish with Israel a pledge for all time (Ezek 16:60). After these events, he repeats this promise (Ezek 37:26). In effect, Yahweh promises to re-establish the entire arrangement between himself and Israel. Jeremiah does the same in promising to make a new pledge with Israel (Jer 31:31–34; cf. Isa 61:8).

Such promises nuance the declaration that Israel is to be Yahweh’s servant through whom the nations come to hear of Yahweh. After identifying himself as the one who gives breath to ‘the people’ on the earth, he affirms to Israel:

I have given you as a covenant to the people,
    a light to the nations,
    to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
    from the prison those who sit in darkness. (Isa 42:6–7; cf. 49:8).

His acting in fulfilment of his pledge to Israel by delivering them from servitude to Babylon will speak to ‘the people’ of the world to whom he gave their breath. Israel will thus be a light to nations not by going and doing something but because of what they embody, in what Yahweh has done for them.

### 2.5 Obligated

Belonging to Yahweh, which protects Israel from other overlords, does not give it a right to self-determination. Yahweh expects to determine its religious, social, and political policies. When Yahweh sends Moses to Pharaoh ‘to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt’, he sends a message to Pharaoh that begins, ‘Israel is my firstborn son’, and goes on, ‘let my son go that he may worship me’ (Exod 3:10; 4:22–23). It is the first occasion when the name *Israel* occurs as a stand-alone term for the people. While this description of Israel as Yahweh’s son is almost unique, the assumptions for which it stands are quite regular, and are underlined by the addition of *firstborn*. A father has a commitment to a son that does not apply to everyone else’s sons, and a son is expected to have a reciprocal commitment to his father. He is expected to ‘serve’ his father (the more general meaning of *ʿābad*,the verb translated ‘worship’). A firstborn has special privileges and special responsibilities. Yahweh’s metaphor expresses his claim on and commitment to Israel. Pharaoh expects the Israelites to serve him (Exod 5:18). But he is to ‘let my people go, so that they may worship me,’ serve me (Exod 8:1 [7:26]).

After forcing Pharaoh to let the Israelites go in order to serve him (Exod 12:31), Yahweh develops the point and restates it in other forceful metaphors that lie behind the words from 1 Peter quoted above.

Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. (Exod 19:5–6)

The covenant or pledge in Genesis 15 was a one-sided commitment on God’s part. In Genesis 17, God required Abraham and his descendants to keep the pledge to him, but the obligation was only that boys should be circumcised at birth. ‘Obey my voice and keep my covenant’ introduces a wider set of expectations concerning relationships with Yahweh and relationships within the community (see Exod 20–23). The covenant becomes two-sided. The metaphor spells out the implications of Israel being Yahweh’s son and firstborn, and specifically its position and responsibility to serve Yahweh. The image of being a possession of great value (*sәgullâ*) restates the image of being the firstborn. *If you obey* could make the statement sound conditional: Israel’s being such a possession will depend on its commitment. But Yahweh already views Israel as his firstborn, so the *if* is hardly conditional and *you shall be* is hardly merely chronological. By Yahweh’s decision, Israel already is a possession of great value. Here as elsewhere in the Scriptures, talk in terms of conditionality may ascribe too much power to Israel. Yahweh’s ‘if’ more logical than chronological.

The same logic obtains in the double hendiadys that follows. For the first time Israel is described as a nation, which indicates the fulfilment of Yahweh’ promise to Abraham (Gen 12:2). Yes, Israel is at least a cluster of people with a common sense of identity, heritage, lineage, right of self-determination, and awareness of itself over against other nations. Specifically, it is Yahweh’s kingdom, as opposed to the realm of a human king and as opposed to the kingship Yahweh exercises over the whole earth. This description as a kingdom is unique, though it fits other references to Yahweh reigning or to Yahweh as king (Exod 15:18; Num 23:21; Deut 33:5). Yahweh is a nation over which Yahweh reigns, and therefore Israel had better submit to him.

The phrase *holy nation* is also unique, though *holy people* recurs (e.g., Deut 7:6; Isa 62:12). Holiness or sacredness stands over against the everyday or ordinary. There is nothing negative about being everyday or ordinary, but something sacred or holy is something that God has put into distinctive association with himself for some reason. Here, the further unique description of Israel as (literally) ‘a kingdom of priests’ points to the reason. Israel has a special vocation as a priesthood. Priests mediate God’s teaching to people and guide them in the interpretation of that teaching, and they manage the offering of sacrifices on behalf of the people (Deut 33:10). As English speaks of church ‘services’, Israel’s ‘serving’ of Yahweh does include worship; the argument for Pharaoh letting the Israelites go from Egypt was that they should be able to ‘serve’ Yahweh in this sense. The Israelites will function as Yahweh’s priests, while other nations do the regular work that makes human life possible (Isa 61:5–6). In due course Israel will have kings and priests, but initially Yahweh is Israel’s king and Israel is his priesthood. In the Second Temple period, Israel will be a people with a priesthood but not a king. And after the destruction of the second temple, it will once again be a kingdom without a king and a priesthood without priests.

In response to Yahweh’s ‘if’, the Israelites affirm that ‘everything that Yahweh has spoken we will do’ (Exod 19:8), anticipatorily accepting things that Yahweh has not yet said. The two-sided nature of the pledge becomes more explicit when Moses passes on the words in Exodus 20–23, now identified as ‘the book of the covenant’. The people again make their response and Moses scatters sacrificial blood on people and altar to seal the mutual commitment (Exod 24:3–8; cf. 34:10–27). Yahweh goes on to give Moses the specifications for a sanctuary where Aaron and his sons will act as priests (Exod 28:1; according to the usual scholarly view, these specifications are a conspicuous example of material that comes from a later period than the surrounding narrative). The mutual pledge becomes a more prominent motif in Deuteronomy, which works out its implications by analogy with the nature of a political covenant or treaty (*bәrît* can apply to the political as well as the personal and religious). This further underlines Yahweh’s being Israel’s king and Israel’s being his kingdom. It also underlines the fact that being in covenant with Yahweh rules out other commitments.

Grace and election, then, did not mean being set free. It meant being freed from service of Pharaoh to be servant of Yahweh, and the Torah is the means of that service, in worship and community life. The requirement of this commitment again makes explicit that it is not ethnicity alone that counts in connection with people’s identification as belonging to Israel. The norm is ethnicity plus commitment. Given commitment, a shortcoming in ethnicity can be overcome, but the right ethnicity cannot overcome the absence of commitment. There is a comparison and contrast with Christians’ finding freedom from sin but thereby entering into a new service of God.

## Israel’s Problematic

Being a people that is favoured, blessed, and drawn into a commitment to God is an auspicious position. But there is a contrasting diverse negative aspect to Israel’s position. It suffers for no fault of its own. It also fails in its commitment and suffers further. And its entire being is imperilled.

### 3.1 Victimized

When Israel’s story as a ‘people’ starts (Exod 1:9), it is a refugee people that scares its host nation, which attempts to cut it down to size but fails. This introduces a recurrent feature of Israel’s experience. While the Israelites’ journey from Egypt to Canaan saw much self-inflicted trouble, on the edge of Canaan they met with trouble they did not earn. They sought peaceful passage through Edom, but were met with hostility (Num 20:14–21). The people of Arad attacked them and took some Israelites captive, in the first contradiction of Yahweh’s promise about the Canaanites; the Israelites fought back, and on this first occasion when they fought, they adopted the ancient Near Eastern notion of ‘devoting’ Canaanites in that connection (Num 21:1–3). When Sihon and Og treated them the same as the Edomites, the Israelites treated them as they treated Arad’s Canaanites (Num 21:21–35). Balak sought to utilize supernatural resources against Israel, but Yahweh prevented his doing so (Num 22–24).

Israel has learned to flex its muscles, and it uses them to get into Canaan and get control of the country. After the split into two states, they experienced reverses that they deserved and ones that they thought they did not deserve.

Because of you we have been slain every day—

we have been thought of as sheep for slaughter. (Ps 44:22 [23])

Because of you? Because you have let this happen to us or made this happen to us (44:9–19 [10–20])? And because you now do nothing about it, giving the impression that you are asleep (44:23–24 [24–25]; see further Ps 74; 80)? For Paul, there is another nuance in the charge: because we have been proclaiming Christ (Rom 8:36).

In the Second Temple period, people in Judah continue to live as the exploited underlings of an imperial overlord. Their subjugation reaches new depths with the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes. The closing vision in Daniel reflects the vision in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 of a persecuted servant. This vision does not identify the servant and it is thus open to being applied in various directions, and it becomes a lens through which community is invited to look at itself. The Targum sees the servant’s suffering as the suffering of Israel, and the vision has provided the Jewish people with insight on itself over the centuries.

Although God fulfilled his promise of deliverance expressed in the Daniel visions and things were less tough for Israel, a century later they found themselves under Roman rule. Israel’s story had surely not reached a proper conclusion and the question is when it will. John the baptizer declares that God’s reign is now becoming a reality (Matt 3; Luke 3), but for most of Israel then and subsequently it was not obvious that it had. When Christian faith became imperial faith, Jews could eventually lose legal status. They were expelled from England in 1290 and allowed back only four centuries later. Their story was a story of suffering, but it did not seem to deserve dignifying as a tragedy (Roemer 1999). In Europe overall, emancipation was sporadic, and the oppression of Jews comes to a climax with the Holocaust.

### 3.2 Fickle

Israel’s position as son, firstborn, kingdom, and priesthood brings obligations, but Israel fails to live up to them. Already at Sinai, everything goes wrong. The Israelites get Aaron to make them gods to lead them and receive their worship (Exod 32:1–6). It emerges that Israel is a tough-minded people (32:9; cf. 33:3, 5; 34:9). It is Moses’s prolonged absence that leads to Aaron’s extraordinary action: while these leaders are God-appointed, the relationship of leadership and people is religiously and ethically equivocal. Moses himself urges Yahweh not to annihilate the Israelites, but he breaks the decalogue rocks and commissions a slaughter among the people, while also not wishing his name to be in Yahweh’s book if Yahweh will not forgive the people (32:32).

Their journey from Sinai to Canaan (Num 11–21) further illustrates Israel’s fickleness, and the Exodus sequence of commitment and failure recurs in Canaan. As his final act, Joshua solemnizes Israel’s pledge to Yahweh (Josh 24:25), then Judges almost begins with Yahweh declaring that ‘this people has transgressed my pledge with which I charged their ancestors’ (Judg 2:20). Their ongoing story can be told as an account of their waywardness rather than one of Yahweh’s acts on their behalf (e.g., Ps 106; Ezra 9; Dan 9). Many of Israel’s laments about suffering reflect an awareness of its own waywardness; even if the trouble seems out of proportion to the waywardness, Israel cannot claim to be undeserving of the trouble (e.g., Ps 79). The Joshua-Judges sequence recurs in 2 Kings, as prophets such as Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel imply. Like Joshua, King Josiah gets the people to reaffirm their pledge, but they subsequently give up on its requirements (2 Kings 23–24)..

In the background is another fact about the people called Israel. As the Scriptures tell the story, the decisive core of Israel comprised people who came from outside Canaan, and the book of Joshua sometimes gives the impression that the Israelites annihilated the Canaanites. But its footnotes make clear that it did nothing of the sort. The Israelites lived among the Canaanites. Eventually they became the ruling power, so that everyone in Canaan became Israelite, and no doubt many came to acknowledge Yahweh. But part of the background to the widespread practice of traditional, Canaanite religion in Israel is that the ‘Israelites’ were traditional Canaanites. The dynamics of Israel’s experience thus raises questions about the relationship between faith in Yahweh and the culture, insights, and religion of other peoples.

A related further factor behind Israel’s unfaithfulness is the influence of its relationship with big powers such as Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon, which puts pressure on Israel through the interwovenness of religion and politics. This pressure is a key consideration in the understanding of Israel implicit in the preaching of Isaiah ben Amoz. He urges Israel (specifically, Judah) to trust in Yahweh, not to attempt to safeguard its future by alliances with powers such as Egypt and Assyria. The dynamics of Israel’s experience raise the question of the relationship between being the people of God and living in the world.

In the view of the Qumran community, John the baptizer, and Jesus, fickleness continues to be a feature of Israel’s life towards the end of the Second Temple period. At the end of a puzzlingly discursive account of Israel’s early history, Stephen picks up the language of the Sinai story and of Isaiah in accusing his fellow-Jews: ‘You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit’. Like the leaders of the Qumran community, Stephen sees them as having done so through their history. They have now done it again in killing Jesus, and they have not kept the Torah (Acts 7:51–53). This capriciousness is then a key theme for Paul. He takes up expositions of the theme from the Scriptures in order to generate a composite picture of Jews as being just as wayward as gentiles, in their relationships with one another and with God, and therefore in just as much need as gentiles for Jesus to die for them (Rom 1:16–3:30). And he takes up the mystery of the most puzzling aspect of Israel’s fickleness, its refusal to recognize Jesus as its Messiah.

Subsequent Christian writings through two millennia critique the Jews for crucifying the Messiah and becoming the enemies of the servant in Isaiah 53, which they see as the logical climax to a story of sin that runs through the Old Testament story.

### 3.3 Chastised

How is Yahweh to respond to Israel’s fickleness? Ignore it? Simply send prophets to condemn it? Take punitive action? Throw the people out of the country he gave them? Wipe them out? The account of events at Sinai in Exodus 32–34 constitutes a subtle and astute theological meditation on the question. Israel’s idol-making means they are in danger of Yahweh wiping them out and starting again (Exod 32:10). Moses dissuades Yahweh from that swingeing reaction, but does himself commission a slaughter among them, and Yahweh sends an epidemic (32:25–29, 35). Moses urges Yahweh to ‘carry’ their offence (*nāśāʾ*, 32:32)—it is the literal meaning of the word commonly translated ‘forgive’. When Yahweh confirms that he does act in that way, Moses repeats the plea (34:6–9), though this time he uses the verb ‘pardon’ (*sālaḥ*, the forgiveness extended by someone in authority). The Sinai narrative thus makes explicit the parental circle Yahweh has to square: he must be faithful but he also must take action against waywardness.

The fall of Samaria and the fall of Jerusalem are the peak expressions of his willingness to take action against his people, and Lamentations is the most systematic recognition of and protest at it. These events are severe instances of a prominent way whereby Yahweh seeks to square that circle, by severely diminishing Israel yet not quite eradicating it, letting something remain and survive; the traditional term for the survivors is a ‘remnant’ (e.g., Isa 10:22). Thus (northern) Israel goes out of existence, though some of its people survive and join Judah. But northern Israel as a people disappears from the story of Israel in Chronicles, and Ezra and Nehemiah show no inclination to readmit people who claim to represent it. Yet the Scriptures have hardly given up on the promises that Yahweh will restore it, expressed by Hosea and expressed in Ezekiel’s vision of the two sticks being joined together (Staples 2021).

Jesus finds that some people respond to him with insight and commitment, some respond but don’t really understand who he is and do not maintain a commitment, some are quite opposed to him. He resembles a farmer sowing seed on different kinds of soil. ‘To you has been given the secret [*mystērion*]of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that

they may indeed look, but not perceive,

and may indeed listen, but not understand;
so that they may not turn again and be forgiven’. (Mark 4:11–12)

He thus quotes from God’s message via Isaiah regarding the Israel of his day (Isa 6:10). Only a relatively small ‘remnant’ get the message, and that is God’s intention. It is God’s response to Israel’s waywardness.

Israel’s not recognizing Jesus is a puzzle and heartbreak for Paul. It would logically seem to imply Israel’s excluding itself from being the people of God. His puzzling leads him into an exposition of a theology of Israel in Romans 9–11 that seeks to work out implications from the Jewish Scriptures. First, he notes how important Israel has been. To Israel belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the Torah, the worship, the promises, and the ancestors; and from Israel comes the Messiah. So has God’s commitment to Israel come to an end? The first principle Paul goes onto is that God’s promise in Genesis 12 always applied to a smaller group than the descendants of the one to whom the promise was given. That principle not only narrowed down its recipients among Abraham’s descendants so that it applied only to Israel. Subsequent Israelite history narrowed down the recipients within Israel to a relatively small group, while also preparing the way for broadening it so as to include gentiles. This process was one over which God was sovereign, and he could not be faulted because he is God and he can do as he wishes, but it is also one in which Israel has to accept responsibility for its contraction because it had failed to respond to God with trust.

### 3.4 Imperilled

At Sinai, then, Yahweh thought about wiping Israel out and starting again, and he later commissioned Isaiah with the message that Jesus picks up. How long will the chastisement last? It will issue in utter desolation, Yahweh says, and if ten percent remains, the tree will be burned again. But then comes the final line: ‘the holy seed is its stump’ (Isa 6:13). Yahweh does not quite mean what he says about annihilation. The usual scholarly view is that this last line is a later addition to Isaiah’s message, deriving from the situation when Israel has indeed not been wiped out. If so, it does then reflect how Israel indeed was not wiped out. The rest of Isaiah’s message does not cohere with his thinking that actually it would be. Perhaps the aim of the message in Isaiah 6 is that it should disprove itself as people responded to it. Isaiah’s alternative picture in Isaiah 28–32 is that Yahweh would take Israel to the edge of catastrophe but finally rescue it, with which the narrative in Isaiah 36–37 fits. Jeremiah reflects the dilemma in a parallel way: Yahweh says he will wipe Israel out, definitely and without exception, and also says he will exempt a remnant, while additionally allowing for the possibility of Israel turning to God and of his cancelling the projected disaster.

Jesus speaks with similar tension. On one hand, he comes to bring good news to Israel. But like John the baptizer, he warns that the people whom one might think are the model Israelites (people such as theologians and priests) are in danger of being thrown out in favour of people who look as if they are compromised in their loyalty to Israel and to the Torah (Matt 21:28–32; cf. 13:24–50). The wheat will thus be separated from the chaff (Matt 3:12). Jesus can sound as if he is announcing God’s repudiation of Israel as a whole alongside God’s welcome of gentiles (e.g., Matt 8:11–12). But his warning is designed to draw people to turn so as not to be caught by this reversal (Luke 13:22–30). Sometimes it is hard to tell whether he envisages the turning over of the vineyard to other Jewish tenants or to gentile tenants (Matt 21:33–46).

One might have thought that rejecting the Messiah would be the end of the road for Israel. Actually, God raised Jesus from death and exalted him ‘so that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins’ (Acts 5:31). He thus sent the risen Jesus to Israel first, to bless it by turning each person from their acts of wickedness (Acts 3:26). Did its continuing resistance then mean that God eventually decided ‘that’s it’? While it does mean that Paul turns to focus on gentiles (Acts 13), Paul’s argument in Romans 9–11 rules out that implication.

## Israel’s Promise

Israel is not wiped out; but after the faithlessness and the cutting down to size, who is Israel? Gentiles who believe in Jesus may come to be part of Israel, but God’s longstanding commitment to Israel hardly allows for an almost entirely gentile community taking over the position of Israel. It is possible to see the revival of a Jewish community in the land is a sign of his faithfulness. It does not mean that Israel has now fulfilled its vocation: most of Israel does not worship and has not recognized the Messiah, and Israel pursues political policies towards the Palestinians that are uncomfortably analogous to ones that characterized Israel in First Temple times. But God is not finished with Israel, any more than he is finished with its sidekick gentile church.

### 4.1 Contested

The name *Israel* belongs to an individual and then to the twelve-clan people that traces its descent back to him. The subsequent split between the clans seems theologically problematic, and the Scriptures see it as problematic, because of its links with the religious tolerance of Solomon, his son’s stupidity, the new northern state’s separation from the chosen city and the Davidic line, and that state’s religious innovations that seek to compensate for its separation. But at this point the splitting of Israel in itself does not seem so worrisome. Neither does the strange and apparently uncontroversial fact that the name *Israel* comes to belong to the northern state, separate from David and from Jerusalem.

At some level, however, Judah still sees itself as Israel, without necessarily thinking to exclude the northern state; it uses the name ‘Israel’ in the Psalms. The same applies to Second Temple Judah, an ethnic group that sees itself as representing the twelve clans (Ezra 6:17). The Jews at Qumran and the people who believe that Jesus is the messiah also see themselves as Israel or as the real or authentic Israel or as an anticipation of the final Israel, without quite disenfranchising the rest of Israel (Bergsma 2008). They are the remnant, which is now a term for a minority committed to faithfulness, not simply for the leftovers from a disaster. But all Israel is destined to become faithful Israel. This will be the connotation if ‘Israel of God’ (Gal 6:16) denotes the people who believe in Jesus, and when Paul says, ‘we are the circumcision’ (Phil 3:2), and even when Justin Martyr says, ‘The true spiritual Israelite people . . . are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ’ (*Dialogue* 11). Gentiles are also ‘members of God’s household’ (Eph 2:14–19), but the implication is not that the church is God’s household in a way that Israel is not.

In Romans 9–11, Paul sees a divine purpose behind Israel’s tripping up and his own consequent turning to the gentiles. Indeed, the gentile responsiveness will in turn lead to Israel’s restoration, because it will make Israel jealous. It is a startling, original, neat argument, without any basis in the Scriptures like the rest of Paul’s argument. It is a revelation granted to Paul that is key to the *mystērion* (Rom 11:25), the revelation he is expounding through these chapters. The result will be that the people of God reaches its destined form as a body that comprises the gentile world and the people of Israel. ‘So all Israel will be saved’ (Rom 11:26). Because Western thinking focuses on the calling, election, faith, and salvation of individuals, the declaration that all Israel will be saved raises the question how this applies to every individual Israelite. Paul’s interest lies somewhere else. It is also a question what ‘Israel’ refers to here. While it might have become a term for the body that embraces both Jews and gentiles, on the other eleven occasions when Romans 9–11 refers to Israel it means Israel.

### 4.2 Secure

Arguably Romans 9–11 is centrally about God’s faithfulness (M. Barth 1983: 29–30; K. Barth 1957). In this connection Paul’s argument takes a turn that both is and is not surprising. It might be theologically coherent to accept the existence of a predominantly gentile church with a small representation of Israel. But Paul argues that, while the bulk of Israel has tripped up, Israel has not done so terminally. Prophets had promised that the deliverer would remove ungodliness from Jacob and take away their sins (Isa 59:20; Jer 31:34; the first quotation depends on reading the text with the Septuagint, but there are other prophetic statements along these lines). Paul sees a principle behind such statements: ‘the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable,’ not open to being subject to a change of mind (Rom 11:29). God’s apparent disowning of Israel cannot be permanent. In due course Israel will receive mercy.

 In *City of God* 18:46, Augustine takes up Paul’s argument: the Jews had forfeited God’s love and so were scattered among the nations, but they still had an unwitting ministry of witness (Fredriksen 2010). By its continuing existence Israel continues to witness to God’s faithfulness, God’s grace, God’s election, God’s mercy, to the people of God’s unreliability, and to the importance of this world, of this life. Pope Gregory in about 598 took up Augustine’s argument and declared that the Jews must be protected, but this argument ceased to be effective in the twelfth century (Stone 2019), and replacement theology or supersessionism became a common Christian view: God cast off Israel because it rejected its Messiah and crucified him, and the Christian church replaced Israel as the people of God. While there are passages in both Testaments that can be quoted to support this view, it sidesteps the sophistication of Exodus 32–34 and the creativity of Romans 9–11.

Paul does not comment on the significance of the ongoing community of Israel that has not acknowledged Jesus. While the New Testament speaks of a new covenant having been inaugurated and Ephesians in particular speaks of the annulling of the Torah, it does not quite say that the Sinai covenant had been annulled, any more than had happened on previous occasions when a new covenant had been inaugurated. Perhaps the covenants are upwardly compatible and Jews who believe in Jesus may properly live by the Sinai covenant; this idea would fall short of a two covenant theology that saw the Sinai covenant as the way for Jews and the Jesus covenant as the way for gentiles.

The Augustinian inference from Paul recurs in the development of dispensational theology in the nineteenth century and in evangelical commitment to the idea of the Jews having a national home in the land. While the New Testament also offers little insight on the theological significance of the modern return of many Jews to the land of Israel, God’s promise to Abraham suggests seeing this as witnessing to God’s faithfulness to his promise, even if it also raise questions about God’s faithfulness through the loss it has brought to Palestinians, including Palestinians who believe in Jesus. After Israel’s victimization comes to a climax with the Holocaust, the establishment of the state of Israel is another such sign.

Theologies of Israel have thus changed over the two millennia since Jesus, in ways that reflect their context. First millennium church leaders were concerned about Judaizing in the church. Medieval societies were concerned about the flourishing of Jewish merchants. Enlightenment thinkers were committed to equality. Late twentieth-century theologians were seeking to come to terms with the church’s complicity in the Holocaust.

### 4.3 Renewed

The unreliability that characterized Israel from the beginning indicated that Yahweh had to do something to recreate Israel if it was to become more reliable. Josiah’s reform and a Torah book could not solve the problem. Deuteronomy 30 speaks of Yahweh circumcising Israel’s mind, Jeremiah 31 of Yahweh writing his instruction into their mind, Ezekiel 36 of him giving Israel a new mind and a new spirit. All are ways of picturing a process of moral and religious transformation that will work from the inside out. Insofar as one can infer how Yahweh will effect this transformation, it seems to be through the effect on people of the wonder of his forgiving Israel for the faithlessness that eventually led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the forced migration of many of its people, and the wonder of their restoration as a people.

Arguably Israel lived a more committed life during the Second Temple period, though the waywardness that the Qumran community laments and the resistance to Jesus that the New Testament laments indicate that any transformation is incomplete. Thus the Qumran community sees itself as the new covenant community, as does the community of people who believe in Jesus. But in the New Testament, the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Jewish community gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost, and then to gentiles in fulfilment of God’s promise to Abraham, does not resolve the community’s fickleness. Subsequently, this fickleness is arguably more obvious in the largely gentile church than it is in the Jewish community. But like the church, Israel continues to be a people on the way, between promise and fulfilment.

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