# Israel in the Christian Bible

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Israel is a prominent topic in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, though it was not as prominent in Christian theological reflection until the aftermath of the Holocaust. As is the case with any theme in theology, insight on it benefits from considering it in the various historical and social contexts in which it has been expounded. But Israel is a historical reality in a distinctive sense. Within Israel’s story, as the scriptures tell it, Israel has been a wandering clan, a theocratic nation, an institutional state, a dispersed remnant, an imperial colony, and a religious community (Goldingay 1987). In subsequent millennia it has been a recognized religion, a persecuted minority, a martyred victim, and a secular state. Israel is a historical entity (more than one), but also a literary entity and a theological entity (Davies 2007). To complicate theological reflection, the question of Israel’s actual history, behind the story that the scriptures tell, is widely controverted. This article will focus on the implications of the story rather than taking positions on the history, though making use of insights that emerge from historical study.

While there have been many Israels, some theological issues are common to all, arising through the scriptures and outside them. Consequently, while the various ways that Israel can be described indicate how insights emerge from considering Israel’s history stage by stage, further theological insight emerges through standing back from the sequential story and asking what emerges from the story as a whole. This article will focus on that broader level of theological reflection, dealing with the issues as a set of recurring questions, and paying most attention to the implications of the way the Torah, the Prophets, the Writings, and the New Testament speak of Israel. Although the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings stand alone as the Jewish scriptures and one can ask about the significance of Israel in their context, the New Testament sees itself as picking up from them. There are significant parallels between the New and Old Testaments’ frameworks of thinking about Israel, as well as developments in the New Testament in light of Jesus’ coming. The diversity between the Testaments is not so different from the diversity within the Jewish scriptures, and this article will therefore interweave discussion of Israel in the two Testaments.

Keywords: Ancient Israel, People of Israel, Old Testament, Christian theology, State of Israel, Israelite monarchy, Hebrew Bible, Torah, Jacob, Covenant, Diaspora, Election

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## Israel’s identity: who or what is Israel?

In the scriptural narrative, ‘Israel’ appears first as the name of an individual, then as the name of a people and nation that traces its ancestry back to him. It also becomes attached to the land where this people lives. When the nation splits into two, ‘Israel’ becomes the name of the larger of the two, though it continues to be a title for the entire people that traces its origin back to the original ‘Israel’. When both nations lose their political identity and their people become dispersed through the surrounding world, ‘Israel’ becomes a different kind of community in which commitment to the Torah joins ethnicity as a key marker of what it means to be Israel. In the post-scriptural era, Israel comes to be set over against the church as a religious community. In the modern period, ethnicity again becomes the key marker.

### 1.1 Israel as a person and a people

Israel is a community that sees itself as related to the ‘Israel’ who appears in Genesis. The name begins as a new name given to Abraham’s grandson, Jacob. One night, when Jacob is journeying back to Canaan from Mesopotamia, an unidentified assailant fights with him 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 makes a link between the name Israel (more precisely *yisraʾel*)and a verb meaning ‘struggle’ (sa*ra*). One would more naturally take the name to mean ‘God strives’, and the fight had been initiated not by Jacob but by some other person, who is called an *’ish* (which usually denotes an individual human being) but might be God or represent God. Yet explanations of scriptural names commonly involve paronomasia (wordplay), working suggestively with possible meanings of words, rather than etymology. Jacob, however, did indeed engage tenaciously in the fight. Both ‘God strives’ and ‘he strives with God’ would make plausible glosses for the name of the nation of Israel in light of its subsequent life.

In the biblical texts, Jacob/Israel is the father of twelve sons who will be the eponymous ancestors of the clans that make up Israel. The clans comprise an extended family. One implication of this origin is that inter-clan warfare is grievous because it involves family members fighting; an example is the conflict between Benjamin and the other clans in Judges 20–21. The sons of Jacob/Israel, despite suffering from unwise relationships and jealousy, manage to find reconciliation. This is a challenge to their descendants, the clans who frequently fall into strife with one another (Dumas 1978: 24–42). The Israelites being brothers provides a support for ethical responsibilities such as refusal to profit from economic difficulties experienced by fellow Israelites, and a practice of generosity instead (e.g. Deut 15).

Jacob/Israel was not the beginning of this family. God had commissioned Jacob/Israel’s grandparents to leave their homeland and family to go to Canaan, and had given Abraham a promise that laid a foundation for Israel’s life: he would make of Abraham a great nation, bless him, and make him a blessing (Gen 12:2–3). The last phrase is ambiguous, but it at least means that the blessings received by Abraham would become a standard whereby people prayed for blessings of their own. His blessing would be such that all nations would want it. God thus brought Israel into being by a command and promise that Abraham obeyed and trusted. God’s promise of blessing recurs in Genesis, and frames the Torah’s account of Israel’s ancestors’ story as Balaam spells out the blessing’s implications in terms that recall God’s promise to Abraham (Num 24:9). Yet the promise then virtually disappears in the narratives of the Jewish scriptures ­– though it could remain important to their readers.

The promise in Gen 12:2–3 takes up the theme of blessing that goes back to Genesis 1 where God blesses the first human beings and encourages them to be fruitful, and implies that in Abraham and Sarah and their progeny God will fulfil his purpose of blessing, has in its background the story of creation. This dynamic may hint at 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. Within Genesis 1–11, blessing and curse are recurrent motifs, but the chapters do not establish whether blessing or curse will prevail in world history. God’s promise to Abraham declares that blessing will prevail, without indicating how. 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 (Moberly 2009: 141–161)?

Abraham and Sarah see little of the promise’s fulfilment, which corresponds with the fact that Israel is always a people on the path between promise and fulfilment. There is partial fulfilment at the end of Genesis when Jacob/Israel’s descendants have become a large family (Exod 1:1–5). The ‘Israelite people’ (ՙ*am*; Exod 1:9), then, is an ethnic group that can subsequently be described as a kin-group (*mishpaḥa*; Amos 3:2), a household (*bayit*;Exod 16:31), and a tribe (*shebeṭ*; Ps 74:2).

Israel is bounded, though its ethnic boundaries are permeable. Joseph had married an Egyptian, who became the mother of Manasseh and Ephraim. Moses marries a Midianite. An ethnically mixed group accompanies the Israelites from Egypt (Exod 12:38). Caleb, a Kenizzite, becomes a member of Judah (Num 13:6). Rahab and her family, who are Canaanites, come to live in Israel (Josh 6:25). Boaz, a Judahite, marries a Moabite (Ruth 4). Naaman, a Syrian general, finds healing and becomes a worshiper of Yahweh (2 Kgs 5). In the New Testament, similarly, belonging to the Roman military does not exclude someone from the company of the people on whom the Holy Spirit comes (Acts 10; cf. Matt 8:5–13). On the other hand, Israelites are critiqued in the biblical texts for marrying foreign wives (Ezra 9–10); such marriages might be considered acceptable only if a potential spouse has come to identify with Israel and acknowledge Yahweh (e.g. Ruth). The Esther story presupposes that Israel’s preservation as an ethnic group is imperative, but also relates how Esther joins Ahasuerus’ harem.

As Israel is not closed to people from outside, ethnicity does not guarantee someone’s security within Israel. Israelites can be struck down for wrongdoing (Lev 10; Num 16; Josh 7). John the baptizer notes that God can generate children for Abraham from the desert rocks (Matt 3:9). For the company of people who believe in Jesus, likewise, their position within that company is not an insurance against the consequences of wrongdoing (Acts 5).

### 1.2 Israel as a nation and a state

When Abraham and Sarah arrive at Shechem, which will become the geographical centre of the land of Israel, Yahweh declares that their offspring will not merely live here as unsettled resident aliens. He will give them the country (Gen 12:7) ‘to possess’ (Gen 15:7). Indeed, the idea of possessing a land is implicit in speaking of Israel as a nation (*goy*; Gen 12:2), and ‘Israel’ can denote the land that comes to belong to the people (Deut 18:1, 6). A nation is a cluster of people with a common sense of identity, heritage, values, lineage, law, government, right of self-determination, awareness of itself over against other nations – and land (or most of those). The notion of land is thus integral to the notion of Israel, though it also needs to be considered theologically in its own right (Frankel 2013; Brueggemann 1977; Habel 1995; Koorevaar and Paul 2018; Martens 1994; Wright 1990; Zimmerli 1978: 64–69).

The importance of the promise of the land exposes a shortfall in the fulfilment of Yahweh’s promises by the time of Moses. The Israelites no longer live in the land, still less do they have possession of it. They no longer even live free in Egypt; they have no right of self-determination. Yahweh promises to take them out of servitude in Egypt and into settlement in Canaan (Exod 2:23–3:10). In this context Yahweh is for the first time called ‘the God of Israel’ (Exod 5:1); the scriptures refer to him thus some two hundred times.

There is no scholarly consensus on what actually happened behind the scriptures’ account of the exodus, or on what proportion of later Israel’s ancestors were involved. In Israel’s self-understanding, however – expressed in its memory in the book of Exodus – it was ‘Israel’ that Yahweh delivered. This act established who Yahweh was for Israel, and it established who Israel was: a people delivered by Yahweh in fulfilment of his commitment to Abraham, Isaac, and indeed Israel. The song Israel sings after its deliverance 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 restore the name). Yahweh is now Israel’s king. Israel at this point has no human kings. It has Moses and Joshua as leaders subordinate to God, but Moses dies and Joshua has no successor. Israel is a theocracy.

While the narrative does not portray Israel as making war to get out of Egypt, it does portray it as making war to enter Canaan. Being prepared to make war is perhaps integral to Israel being understood as a nation: ‘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 process whereby the land of Canaan becomes the land of Israel, and Israel’s subsequent history as a nation and state, is illuminated by being read 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 imperial Egypt – but Israel is on the way to being something like an imperial power in its relationship with the indigenous peoples of Canaan whom it comes to rule.

Meanwhile, however, Israel’s internal unity is tenuous. Its memory, in the form of scripture, portrays it as one people under Moses and Joshua, but the links between the clans are subsequently fragile. Even if the scriptural memory does not exaggerate the earlier unity, the nation would inevitably become susceptible to fragmentation when distributed over the wide area that the land constituted. When the clans were engaged in conflict, not only with Canaanites but with other neighbouring peoples, these conflicts did not affect Israel as a whole; they involved local incursions to which localized clan groups would respond. Yet the book of Judges describes them as conflicts involving ‘Israel’ (e.g. Judg 4).

Whereas the story from Exodus to Joshua pictures Israel as a theocracy, the book of Judges portrays theocracy falling short as a system of government, and Israel eventually insists on having a king like other peoples (Judg 21:25; 1 Sam 8). Its second king, David, acquires a city that will be the state’s capital and administrative centre, and locates the nation’s focal sanctuary there (2 Sam 5–6). Its third king, Solomon, builds one palace for himself and another for Yahweh, to replace Yahweh’s moveable sanctuary (1 Kgs 6–8). Israel briefly becomes a more coherent national entity, and gains control of an area beyond the bounds of the land of Israel. The Jewish scriptures define these bounds in different ways at different points. While the most notable variation relates to whether the land extends east of the Jordan, portrayals of the bounds that would resonate in David and Solomon’s time extend them to include control of an area from Egypt to Mesopotamia. They thus portray Israel on a level with one of the empires, which could suggest one form of fulfilment of God’s promise to Abraham (Gen 15:18–21; Kallai 1997). Israel then discovers that monarchy also falls short as a system of government. Among the factors are its imposing a heavy financial burden and encouraging 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 Israel as a religious community

On the eve of Israel’s departure from Egypt, Yahweh had given the people instructions for observing the Passover, and spoken of them as ‘the assembly of the congregation of Israel’ (*qahal ʿedat yisraʾel;* Exod 12:6). Both ‘congregation’ and ‘assembly’ are terms frequently used to describe Israel gathered for worship, although ‘congregation’ more often refers to a gathering for military, political, and judicial purposes (e.g. Num 16; 2 Chr 30). Both are ways of talking about Israel collectively as a community.

This entity is both political and religious. Whereas Western readers may be used to the separation of church and state, traditional societies may assume that a common faith expressed in worship is a normal feature of a community’s existence. In the First Temple period, religion and politics were united in Israel’s life rather than being separate spheres. This was less so in Second Temple times, and that unity ceased to be for nearly two millennia. The establishment of the state of Israel in 1947 as a nation-state reopened questions about the relationship between ethnicity, religion, and politics, which have become more fraught over subsequent decades (Langer 2008; Hacohen 2019; Yadgar 2020).

The association of religion and politics may mean the state ceasing to be its own god, or religious matters may become subservient to the state’s policies and lose their link with ethics. In connection with this, the role of worship as an aspect of the definition of Israel can be controversial. God can dismiss the temple and its worship (Jer 7) and remind Israel that it did not offer worship in the form of sacrifices before its arrival in Canaan (Amos 5:25), even though the Sinai narrative includes an account of God laying down specifications for the building of a sanctuary where he would dwell within Israel and where Israel would offer him worship and sacrifices (Exod 25:1–31:17; 35:1–40:38; see also the books of Leviticus and Numbers). The establishment of (northern) Israel as a separate state led to the creation of its own worship centres, a politically necessary adjunct to its existence as a state (1 Kgs 12:26–29). Babylon’s action against Judah in response to Judah’s assertion of political independence included the devastation of its temple (2 Kgs 25).

In contrast, the temple’s rebuilding – unaccompanied by political independence – means that life as a worshipping community is more central to the self-understanding of Israelites living in the land in Second Temple times, as is reflected in Chronicles’ telling of Israel’s story. Scholarly opinions vary over whether the material in the Torah that pictures Israel as a worshipping community reflects the First Temple period, the time after the temple’s devastation, or the Second Temple period, but this material adds to the picture of what ‘Israel’ is. Similar questions apply to the prominence of Israel in the Psalms. Whatever the imperial power at any particular time, in worship the Psalms imply that Israel matters because it is Yahweh’s people, and chanting the Psalms expresses the conviction that Israel’s affirmations as a worshipping community are the real truth about Israel, Yahweh, and the world (e.g. Ps 95; 100).

Although Israelites in Second Temple times may have looked forward to the reestablishment of the monarchy and of the nation’s independence, the scriptures do not give the impression that they agonized about their colonial status. Being an independent monarchic state had not been integral to Israel’s identity. The Second Temple community still saw itself as a community constituted by ethnicity; it did not become a community to which people belong chiefly on the basis of their choice, as the church will be later. But it had little by way of political identity or geographical limitedness (its people remained dispersed through the surrounding world) or of linguistic distinctiveness (Aramaic and Greek became important alongside Hebrew). Israel’s geographical spread also meant that worship in the temple could not be as central for the broader ‘Israel’ as for people in Judah. Conversely, commitment to the Torah gained greater importance as an identity marker for the Israel that was widely dispersed. In the twenty-first century, the question of the relationship between ethnicity and Torah has again become of key importance in connection with what it means to be Israel.

## Israel’s position and significance in the purpose of God

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 Israel as a people favoured (chosen) by God

In the story in the Jewish scriptures, the land of Canaan was the home of the Canaanites. Theologically and ethically, how could Yahweh give it to Israel? Yahweh comments on the question in noting that he cannot fulfil that undertaking yet, ‘for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete’ (Gen 15:16). At that time the Amorites (an alternative term for Canaanites) apparently showed no sign of ‘completing’ their iniquity, and there is no further comment on this question until after the exodus. Moses envisages the Canaanites melting away (Exod 15:15). Yahweh promises that he will dispose of them (Exod 23:23), using a rare verb (*kaḥad* hiphil) that could mean destroy but need not have that implication. He goes on to say that he will drive them out, though not all at once, then that the Israelites will drive them out so that they do not lead them astray (Exod 23:27–33).

The Jewish scriptures speak of God choosing Israel (Kaminsky 2007; Preuss 1995, 1996; Zimmerli 1978: 43–48). Why did he become involved with Israel in particular? Why did he not engage with the Canaanites themselves? Deuteronomy implicitly raises that question but does not answer it; specifically, it offers 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? In Deuteronomy, the answer is that he simply did. Deuteronomy expresses the basis or nature of his involvement by means of three verbs. First, he chose this people (*baḥar*). Whereas in Christian theology the object of the terms ‘choice’ and ‘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, God set his heart on this people (*ḥashaq*). This rare word suggests desire; it is used for being attracted to a woman (e.g. Deut 21:11). Third, God thus acted out of love for Israel (*ʾahaba*). The translation ‘love’ for this noun and its related verb can be misleading, because the Hebrew words suggest something broader and less focused on emotion (NJPS here has ‘favour’). But in this context, linked 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 relationship (Moberly 2013: 41–74).

Deuteronomy uses the verb ‘set his heart on’ (10:15) again in connection with Yahweh’s relationship with Israel’s ancestors. The Genesis account of Yahweh’s commitment to Abraham and Sarah had given no indication of the reasons for settling on this particular couple, only paradoxically referring to the fact that Sarah could not have children (Gen 11:30): God’s favour and choice are not merely independent of people’s deserving or qualification but can go against merit and qualification. Yahweh speaks of having ‘acknowledged’ Abraham as someone through whom he intends to work (Gen 18:19), and he uses the same verb in declaring that he has ‘acknowledged’ Israel alone of all the families of the earth (Amos 3:2). The verb (*yada*) commonly means simply ‘know’; NRSV has ‘chosen’ and NJPS has ‘singled out’.

By this choice Israel becomes Yahweh’s domain or property (*naḥala*, Deut 4:20), like the stretch of land that a family enjoys as its inheritance. It becomes his personal possession (*segulla*, Deut 7:6), which no one else can touch. As he is a shepherd, it becomes his flock (Ps 100:3). Israel can therefore be invited to trust in Yahweh, delight in Yahweh, commit its way to Yahweh, relax before Yahweh, and wait for Yahweh (all in Ps 37:1–7). It is the servant that has Yahweh as its master and is therefore secure (Isa 41:8–10).

Yahweh issues that last declaration in Isaiah in the context of Babylonian domination and the affirmation of Yahweh’s intention to act in grace towards Israel, in a way matching his original act of grace related in Genesis. In the New Testament, when the pregnant Mary receives her cousin Elizabeth’s blessing, she proclaims that ‘God has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy’ (Luke 1:54 CEB); he is thus depicted as acting in accordance with his promises to Israel’s ancestors. Mary’s reference to God remembering Israel also takes up an expression from the Psalms (Ps 98:3 [97:3 LXX]). The word translated ‘mercy’ (*eleos*) is the equivalent in biblical Greek to the Hebrew word for steadfast love or commitment (*ḥesed*), which in turn relates to the word for grace (*ḥen*). It denotes a commitment deriving from the decision of the person taking this action, rather than from any worthiness on the part of its recipient. It also means a commitment that continues despite the recipient’s having forfeited any right to it by their faithlessness. According to the scriptural narrative, Israel, in the period that forms the background to Isaiah 40–55, had indeed forfeited any right to divine commitment or mercy. Isaiah 40-55 affirms that God shows this stance towards Israel anyway, because that is the nature of God’s commitment, mercy, grace, or favour, which were not based on what people deserved in the first place.

Later in Luke, Elizabeth’s husband also speaks of ‘the Lord God of Israel’ acting with mercy (*eleos/ḥesed*) 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’; their son will ‘give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins’ (Luke 1:67 –79). John the baptizer thus preaches repentance to Israel (Acts 13:24) as part of the process whereby Jesus ‘might be revealed to Israel’ (John 1:31). Jesus himself focuses on Israel and commissions his students to preach to Israel (Matt 10; 15:24).

### 2.2 Israel as a witness to the nations

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’ gives a misleading impression in English, and so does ‘hate’; NJPS has ‘I have accepted Jacob and have rejected Esau’. The story of the brothers Jacob and Esau shows that God’s favouring of Jacob rather than Esau also bore no relation to anything they deserved. Malachi gives no hint that things were different with Jacob’s people and Esau’s people in Malachi’s day. As Paul puts it when taking 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 of Malachi is the story of Edom’s appropriation of much of Judah’s land, and Malachi is reassuring Judah that God intends to deal with Edom (cf. the book of Obadiah). Later, in the New Testament, Paul does point to a rationale for God’s choice, as he describes a principle underlying God’s treatment of Pharaoh. God, says Paul, distributes his mercy and compassion in connection with the proclamation of his name through all the earth (Rom 9:17, picking up the words of Exod 9:16). Thus, for Paul, the basis for Israel’s election lies in a purpose God has for the world.

Leviticus 11–16 contains an allusive hint regarding this purpose. According to Levitical law, 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 the left; they have underlying rationales relating to matters such as sex and death, though ordinary Israelites might be hardly aware of these rationales. The practices would not look strange in a traditional society, as many of them do in a Western context. Nevertheless, they would be distinctive, even over against other peoples with analogous practices (examples are not eating pork, not sacrificing children, observing Sabbath, and circumcising boys at birth rather than at puberty). As obligations, they would distinguish Israel from other peoples. The practices do not necessarily make Israel superior; they simply distinguish Israel as a people.

God’s concern with all nations coming to acknowledge him through Israel 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. Yahweh is understood there to be 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 to the nations and urge them to come to the Jerusalem temple with their offerings. The 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. Rahab’s testimony to the Israelite spies makes explicit that Yahweh’s acts on Israel’s behalf were designed to be significant for other nations, and that this was Yahweh’s intention, not merely an accidental by-product of his action: ‘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).

After affirming that Israel is secure as his servant, Isaiah 40-55 then records how Yahweh declares that, as his servant, Israel is naturally also under obligation to him. That obligation is to ‘bring forth justice to the nations’ (Isa 42:1). This edict is enigmatic but at least 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). How does the prophet envisage Israel fulfilling this calling? It might be misleading to say that Israel has a ‘mission to the nations’, though Israel incidentally fulfils such a role in Second Temple times.

The picture in Isaiah 40–55 of the entirety of Israel returning to the land of Israel did not find fulfilment. Yahweh did not make it possible, and many Judahites were content living in dispersion. In this context the synagogue developed, so that living in a foreign land did not mean ceasing to live, pray, and study as ‘Israel’. Indeed, it meant that neighbours of Judahites could be drawn into the synagogue. They might become full members of Israel (‘be converted’, to use a Christian theological term), which meant a commitment to keeping the Torah and entailed circumcision for the men, or they might become ‘God-fearers’ (better, ‘God worshippers’), a lesser obligation (Sim and McLaren 2013). Through Judaism’s spread around the Mediterranean world, the synagogue and the existence of God-fearers eventually facilitated the spread of Paul’s version of what it meant to be Israel: a company of people who recognized Jesus as Israel’s Messiah. For Paul, Israel thus fulfilled its ‘mission’ in an inadvertent way.

In the New Testament, Simeon takes the new-born Jesus and describes him as ‘a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel’ (Luke 2:32), taking up words from Isa 42:1–9 and 49:1–6. Later, the ascended Jesus describes Paul’s vocation in terms that cohere with Simeon’s: ‘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). Paul himself describes the Messiah as destined to ‘proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles’ (Acts 26:23). John in Revelation sees 144,000 people from Israel’s twelve clans worshipping God, and also a numberless throng from all the nations (Rev 7:4). The idea is that God intends for both Israel and the world to acknowledge him, the latter through the former. Paul thus declares that Jesus ‘has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy’ (Rom 15:8–9). Paul takes up God’s promise to Abraham concerning the nations’ blessing, which comes through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Gal 3:8, 14). Ephesians 2:11–22 expresses the point in a radical fashion, perhaps with some hyperbole: Gentiles used to be separate from the Messiah, excluded from Israel and from the covenants with their promise and hope, and thus without God; now they have been brought near; indeed, Jesus ‘has made both groups into one’ by annulling the regulations that formerly enabled Israel to stand out as God’s people, ‘that he might create in himself one new humanity’. The gentiles, says Paul, are thus ‘no longer strangers and aliens but […] citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God’.

For the New Testament writers, Israel thus comes to be expanded as a new iteration of the people of God through Jesus. To believers in Jesus scattered over Turkey, 1 Pet 2:9–10 declares:

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 could 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 such an entity has a share in the position of ethnic Israel as an embodiment of the people of God.

### 2.3 Israel in a pledged or covenantal relationship with God

Yahweh delivered Israel from Egypt because they were ‘my people’ (Exod 3:7). ‘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’ (Exod 2:23–25); God had underscored his commitment to Abraham by solemnizing it as a covenant (*beriṭ*; Gen 15; 17; see Childs 1992: 413–451; Dumbrell 2013; Eichrodt 1961; Freedman 1964; Nicholson 1986). Both the English and the Hebrew word for ‘covenant’ have a range of meanings. Genesis, and Exodus 2, stress the covenant’s one-sided nature as a pledge made by Yahweh. 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, or nobody’s people, as it might be tempted to think. Subsequently Yahweh will affirm that neither is it a people that belongs to one of the empires such as Assyria (e.g. Isa 36–37; the book of Nahum). Jewish scripture is clear that Israel belongs to Yahweh, which protects it from other overlords.

The pledge or covenant God made to Abraham was for all time, a *beriṭ ʿolam* (Gen 17:7, 13, 19). God 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, a promise he repeats after the events have occurred (Ezek 16:60; 37:26). In effect, the prophet sees Yahweh undertaking to re-establish the entire arrangement between himself and Israel. Yahweh does the same in undertaking to make a new pledge or covenant with Israel (Jer 31:31–34; cf. Isa 61:8).

Such promises further 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, Yahweh 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)

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 Yahweh gave breath. Israel will be a light to nations because of what it embodies, in what Yahweh has done for it.

A significant image for Israel’s covenanted relationship with Yahweh is that of Israel as Yahweh’s wife. This need not mean that marriage itself was understood as a covenant, rather that marriage involves a mutual commitment of a quasi-covenantal kind. The relationship between Yahweh and Israel could then be understood in terms of marriage, in the patriarchal terms of its context. The patriarchal nature of marriage did not imply that it likely involved a wife’s oppression by her husband, nor (to judge from accounts of marriage relationships in Genesis and elsewhere) a wife’s having no scope for initiative and achievement. But, in a legal sense, a husband had responsibility and authority, and in this connection his wife submitted to him. Such an understanding of marriage could provide a model for prophets such as Hosea and Jeremiah in understanding the relationship of Yahweh and Israel. Like the image of master and servant, the image of husband and wife suggests that belonging to Yahweh protects Israel from other overlords but does not give it a right to self-determination. Yahweh expects to decide Israel’s religious, social, and political policies.

In the terms of another image, 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 continues, ‘let my son go that he may worship me’ (Exod 3:10; 4:22–23). It is the first occasion when the name ‘Israel’ appears 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 owes a reciprocal commitment to his father. He is expected to ‘serve’ his father, the more general meaning ofthe verb translated ‘worship’ (*ʿabad*). Moreover, a firstborn has special privileges and responsibilities. Yahweh’s metaphor thus expresses his claim on and commitment to Israel. Pharaoh expects the Israelites to serve him (Exod 5:18); Yahweh says, ‘Let my people go, so that they may worship me’, again the verb that means ‘serve’ (Exod 8:1 [7:26]).

### 2.4 Israel as obligated to live as a holy nation

Being in a covenanted relationship thus implies obligation as well as security. After forcing Pharaoh to let the Israelites go in order to serve him (Exod 12:31), Yahweh restates the point in other forceful metaphors that underlie the words from 1 Pet 2:9–10 quoted in section 2.2 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 covenantal pledge to him, but the obligation was only that baby boys should be circumcised. ‘Obey my voice and keep my covenant’ introduces a wider set of expectations concerning the relationship with Yahweh and relationships within the community. 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 (*segulla*) restates the image of being the firstborn. The phrase ‘if you obey’could make the statement sound conditional: Israel’s being such a possession will depend on its commitment. Since Yahweh already views Israel as his firstborn, the ‘if’ is hardly conditional, nor is the ‘you shall be’ merely chronological. By Yahweh’s decision, Israel is already a possession of great value.

The same logic obtains in the description that follows. For the first time Israel is described as a nation, which indicates the fulfilment of Yahweh’s promise to Abraham (Gen 12:2). Israel is indeed at least a cluster of people with a common sense of identity, heritage, values, lineage, right to 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 being under the kingship that 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 (e.g. Exod 15:18; Num 23:21; Deut 33:5). Israel is a realm over which Yahweh reigns, and therefore Israel must submit to him.

The phrase ‘holy nation’ is also unique, though ‘holy people’ recurs (e.g. Deut 7:6; Isa 62:12). Holy or sacred stands over everyday or ordinary. While being everyday or ordinary is not negative, something sacred or holy is something that God has put into distinctive association with himself. The further unique description of Israel as (literally) ‘a kingdom of priests’ points to the reason for this association. Israel has a vocation as a priesthood. Priests mediate God’s teaching to people and guide them in the interpretation of that teaching, and manage the offering of sacrifices on behalf of the people (Deut 33:10). As English speaks of church ‘services’, Israel’s ‘serving’ Yahweh includes worship; the argument for Pharaoh letting the Israelites go from Egypt was that they should be able to ‘serve’ Yahweh in this sense. In due course, Israel would have kings and priests, but initially Yahweh is Israel’s king and Israel is his priesthood. In Second Temple times, Israel would be a people with a priesthood but not a king, though Isaiah 61:5–6 pictures the Israelites functioning as Yahweh’s priests while other nations do the everyday work that makes life possible. After the destruction of the second temple, Israel is once again 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 in Exodus 20–23, now identified as ‘the book of the covenant’. The people again make their response and Moses scatters sacrificial blood on both 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; on the usual scholarly view, these specifications are a conspicuous example of material from a period later than the surrounding narrative). The mutual pledge becomes a more prominent motif in Deuteronomy, which expounds its implications by analogy with the nature of a political covenant or treaty; the word *berit* 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, and the covenant with Yahweh’s ruling out other commitments.

Grace, election, and covenant, then, did not mean being set free. It meant being freed from service of Pharaoh to be a servant of Yahweh, and the Torah is the means of that service in worship and community life. While God’s favouring of Israel does not issue from Israel’s piety or faithfulness, it must issue in those qualities (Sanders 1977). The requirement of commitment again makes explicit that it is not ethnicity alone that defines Israel. The norm is ethnicity plus commitment. If there is 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 the New Testament understanding of freedom from sin that leads into a new service of God (e.g. Rom 6:1–22). Can God’s people live as they wish because their relationship with God issues from his grace, rather than from actions on their part? Such a question would reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of what God was doing with Israel or through Jesus. God’s commitment to Israel and potentially to the gentile world was designed to produce a people characterized by a reciprocal commitment. To think of sidestepping that implication is to fail to see the logic of God’s action.

## The ambiguity and problematic of Israel’s life

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

### 3.1 Israel as the victim of attack, exploitation, and persecution

When Israel’s story as a ‘people’ starts (Exod 1:9), it is a refugee people that causes fear in its host nation, which attempts to cut it down to size but fails. This introduces a recurrent feature of Israel’s experience. While Israel’s journey from Egypt to Canaan saw self-inflicted trouble, on the edge of Canaan Israel encountered trouble it did not earn. It sought peaceful passage through Edom but was met with hostility (Num 20:14–21). The people of Arad attacked it and took some Israelites captive, which hardly fitted Yahweh’s promise about the Canaanites. Israel fought back, and, on this first occasion when it fought, proposed adopting the ancient Near Eastern practice of ‘devoting’ the people it fought (slaughtering them as a way of giving them to God), and Yahweh accepted this proposal (Num 21:1–3). When Sihon and Og behaved the same way 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, though Yahweh prevented his doing so (Num 22–24).

Israel has learned to flex its muscles, and it uses them to get control of Canaan. After the division into two states, Israel experiences reversals that it deserves and ones that it thinks it 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’ might imply ‘you have let this happen to us’ or ‘made this happen to us’ (Ps 44:9–19 [10–20]). Moreover, ‘you are now doing nothing about it and giving the impression that you are asleep’ (Ps 44:23–24 [24–25]; see further Ps 74; 80). Psalm 44 is taken up in the New Testament with an added nuance: the suffering happens as a result of association with Jesus (Rom 8:36).

In Second Temple times, people in Judah continued to live as the exploited subjects of an imperial overlord, and their subjugation reached new depths with the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century. The closing vision in Daniel reflects the vision in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 of a persecuted servant. That vision does not identify the servant, and it was thus open to being applied in various directions. It became a lens through which the community could look at itself. The Isaiah Targum sees the servant’s suffering as Israel’s suffering, and the vision has provided the Jewish people with insight on itself over the centuries.

It was possible to see the success of the Maccabean revolt as God fulfilling his promise of deliverance expressed in the Daniel visions, and things did then become less arduous for Israel. A century later, however, the people found themselves under Roman rule. Israel’s story had surely not reached a proper conclusion. When would it? In the New Testament, John the baptizer declares that God’s reign is now becoming a reality (Matt 3; Luke 3), but for most of Israel at that time and subsequently it was not obvious that this was true. When Christian faith became imperial faith, Jews would eventually lose legal status, and centuries of persecution followed. They were expelled from England in 1290, for instance, and allowed back only four centuries later. In Europe as a whole, emancipation was sporadic, and the oppression of Jews came to a climax with the Holocaust.

### 3.2 Israel as fickle in its relationship with God

Israel’s position as servant, wife, son, kingdom, and priesthood brought obligations which the scriptures portray Israel as failing to fulfil. Already at Sinai, trouble arises. In Moses’ long absence, the Israelites urge Aaron to make gods to lead them and to receive their worship (Exod 32:1–6). It emerges that Israel is a tough-minded people (Exod 32:9; cf. 33:3, 5; 34:9), and also that the relationship of Israel’s God-appointed leaders to their community can be religiously and ethically equivocal. Moses himself urges Yahweh not to annihilate the Israelites, but breaks the rocks on which the Ten Commandments are written 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 (Exod 32:32).

Israel’s 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), but within a few pages Yahweh is declaring that Israel has transgressed the pledge with which he charged its ancestors (Judg 2:20). The people’s ongoing story can be told as an account of its waywardness rather than an account of Yahweh’s acts on its behalf (e.g. Ps 106). While many of Israel’s laments about its suffering insist that it has shown a commitment that makes the affliction undeserved, some acknowledge waywardness or recognize that Israel cannot claim to be undeserving of trouble even if the trouble seems out of proportion to the waywardness (e.g. Ps 79). The Joshua-Judges sequence recurs in 2 Kings, and is presupposed by prophets such as Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Like Joshua, King Josiah gets the people to reaffirm its pledge, but it subsequently gives up on the pledge’s requirements (2 Kings 23–24).

In the background is another fact about the people called Israel. A broader question regarding Israel’s bounded nature arises from its emergence and establishment as a people in Canaan. 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 of a speedy and comprehensive conquest of Canaan and the annihilation of its previous inhabitants. But the story’s footnotes indicate the hyperbolic nature of its narrative. Israel’s arrival in Canaan involved 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. Culturally and religiously the interrelationship of Israelites and Canaanites thus involved a two-way assimilation, generating the phenomenon of hybridity (Gossai 2019). The walls of Israel’s thinking prove permeable, and there are positives and negatives about the influence of Canaanite culture, religion, and theology. Only in David and Solomon’s time did Israel come to control Canaan as a whole, and Solomon’s temple facilitates and requires the more sophisticated form of worship that is described in the account of its origin, comparable with forms of worship used by other ancient Near Eastern peoples.

Everyone in Canaan now becomes Israelite, and no doubt many acknowledge Yahweh quite seriously. They come to make the exodus story their own. But part of the background to the widespread practice of traditional Canaanite religion in Israel is this fact that many ‘Israelites’ were traditional Canaanites. The dynamics of Israel’s experience raises questions about the relationship between faith in Yahweh and the culture, insights, and religion of other peoples. The scriptures both critique Israel for being influenced by the indigenous people of Canaan and reflect the positive influence of their religious ideas and practice.

A further parallel factor behind Israel’s unfaithfulness is its relationship with major powers such as Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon, which puts pressure on Israel through the interwovenness of religion and politics. The dynamics of Israel’s experience raise the question of the relationship between being the people of God and living in the world. This pressure is a key consideration in the critique of Israel for failing to trust in Yahweh and attempting to safeguard the future by alliances with the great powers (e.g. Isa 30–31).

For the Qumran community, John the baptizer, and Jesus, fickleness continues to be a feature of Israel’s life. In the New Testament, at the end of a discursive account of Israel’s early history, Stephen picks up the language of the Sinai story and of Isaiah in accusing his fellow members of Israel: ‘You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 7:51–53). Having done so through their history, says Stephen, they have done it again in killing Jesus – and they have not kept the Torah. Israel’s capriciousness is a key theme for Paul. In Romans, he takes up scriptural expositions of the theme in order to generate a composite picture of his fellow members of Israel. He sees them 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 – and as crowning their fickleness by refusing to acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah.

Subsequent Christian writings through two millennia have critiqued 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 scriptures. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, however, a number of churches have officially repudiated this stance (Kinzer 2005; Pope Paul VI 1965; Soulen 1996).

### 3.3 Israel as subject to God’s chastisement

Is Yahweh to ignore Israel’s fickleness or simply send prophets to condemn Israel, or take punitive action, or expel Israel from the country he gave or wipe them out? The account of events at Sinai in Exodus 32–34 constitutes a subtle theological meditation on the question. Israel’s idol-making means it risks Yahweh eliminating it and starting again (Exod 32:10). Moses dissuades Yahweh from that extreme reaction, but himself commissions a slaughter among the people, after which Yahweh sends an epidemic among them (32:25–29, 35). Moses urges Yahweh to ‘carry’ their offence (*nasaʾ*, 32:32), the literal meaning of the word commonly translated ‘forgive’. When Yahweh confirms that he does carry their waywardness, Moses repeats the plea (34:6–9), now using the verb ‘pardon’ (*salaḥ*), which is the forgiveness extended by someone in authority. The Sinai narrative thus meditates on the parental circle Yahweh has to resolve: he must be faithful but he must take action against wrongdoing. Near the end of the account of Israel’s time at Sinai, Leviticus 26 lays down in some detail how Yahweh will act in a hostile fashion towards Israel if it behaves in a hostile fashion towards him. Near the end of the Torah itself, Deuteronomy 27–30 fleshes this out in more detail. (On the usual critical view, both these sets of warnings are formulated at least in part to explain why Israel experienced the blows that eventually fell upon it.)

In the Jewish scriptures, the fall of Samaria in 721 BCE and the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE are the peak expressions of Yahweh’s willingness to take action against Israel, and Lamentations is the most systematic recognition of and protest at that willingness. Those disasters are severe instances of a prominent means whereby Yahweh seeks to square that parental circle, by severely diminishing Israel yet not quite eradicating it. He lets something remain and survive. The traditional term for the group that survives is a ‘remnant’ (e.g. Isa 10:22). Thus (northern) Israel goes out of existence, though some of its people escape and join Judah. As a people, however, it disappears from Israel’s story in Chronicles, and Ezra and Nehemiah resist readmitting people to their community who may claim to represent it. Yet the scriptures more broadly have not given up on Yahweh’s promises to restore the northern people, as expressed in Hosea and in the vision in Ezekiel 37 of two sticks joined together (Staples 2021). Jesus assumes an Israel that comprises twelve clans (e.g. Matt 19:28), as does Paul (Acts 26:7). The gates of the new Jerusalem bear the names of the twelve clans (Rev 21:12).

Jesus finds that some people within Israel respond to him with insight and commitment, some respond but do not really understand who he is and do not maintain a commitment, while some are quite opposed to him.

To you has been given the secret [*mysterion*]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)

Mark is quoting from God’s message via Isaiah regarding the Israel of Isaiah’s day (Isa 6:10). Only a relatively small ‘remnant’ understand the message, and that is God’s intention: it is God’s response to Israel’s waywardness.

### 3.4 Israel as in peril of being abandoned by God

At Sinai Yahweh contemplated eliminating Israel and starting again, and he later commissioned Isaiah with the message picked up by Jesus that speaks in such terms. How long will the chastisement last, Isaiah asks? It will issue in utter desolation, responds Yahweh, and if ten percent remains, the tree will be burned again. But a final line adds: ‘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 eliminated. Yet the rest of Isaiah’s message does not suggest that he thought it actually would be. Part of the aim of the message in Isaiah 6 is that it should disprove itself as people responded to it. Isaiah’s picture in Isaiah 28–32 is that Yahweh would take Israel to the edge of catastrophe but finally rescue it, and the narrative in Isaiah 36–37 fits this picture. Jeremiah reflects Yahweh’s dilemma in a parallel way: Yahweh says he will annihilate Israel, definitely and without exception, but also says he will exempt a remnant and additionally allows for Israel’s turning to God and his cancelling of the projected disaster (e.g. Jer 6:9; 5:10; 18:1–12).

Jesus speaks with similar tension. He comes to bring good news to Israel but, like John the baptizer, warns that the people whom one might think are model Israelites 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). Jesus can sound as if he is announcing God’s repudiation of Israel as a whole alongside his welcome of gentiles (e.g. Matt 8:11–12). Nevertheless his warning, like Isaiah’s, 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, using the imagery of one of his parables, Jesus envisages the vineyard’s handover to other Jewish tenants or to gentile tenants (Matt 21:33–46).

One might have thought that rejecting the Messiah would indeed be the end for Israel. Yet 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).

In light of Israel’s subsequent continuing resistance, did God then decide that the end really had come for it? While Israel’s continuing resistance does mean that Paul turns the focus of his ministry onto gentiles (Acts 13), Paul’s own argument in Romans 9–11 rules out that implication. Israel’s failure to recognize Jesus is a cause of bafflement and anguish for Paul. His puzzling leads him into an exposition of a theology of Israel in Romans 9–11 that fleshes out implications from the Jewish scriptures, beginning from 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. Can God’s involvement with Israel now come to an end? The first principle Paul discusses 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 (Rom 9:6–13). That principle not only narrowed down the promise’s recipients among Abraham’s descendants so that it applied only to Israel; subsequent Israelite history narrowed down the recipients within Israel itself to a relatively small group, while also preparing the way for it to be broadened to include gentiles (Rom 11:7–12). This process was one over which God was sovereign, and he cannot be faulted because he is God and can do as he wishes, though it is also one in which Israel has to accept responsibility for its cutting down because it failed to respond to God with trust (Rom 11:13–36).

## The present and future of Israel

Israel is not eliminated; but, after the faithlessness and the cutting down to size, who is Israel? Gentiles who believe in Jesus come to be part of Israel, but God’s longstanding commitment to Israel hardly allows for an almost entirely gentile community taking over ethnic Israel’s position. It is possible to see the renewal of a Jewish community in the land since the late nineteenth century as a sign of God’s faithfulness; God has not cast off Israel. Yet most of this renewed Israel does not worship Yahweh or follow the Torah and has not recognized the Messiah, and Israel pursues political policies towards the Palestinians that are uncomfortably analogous to ones that the prophets critiqued. But God is not finished with Israel, any more than he is finished with its half-brother, the largely gentile church.

### 4.1 The contested nature of the question ‘who is Israel?’

In the scriptures, the name ‘Israel’ belongs first to an individual, then to the twelve-clan people that traces its descent back to him, then to one part of that people as the clans split into two. Theologically, this development seems inherently problematic. The scriptures do see it as problematic, because of its links to the religious tolerance of Solomon, his son’s stupidity, the new northern state’s separation from the chosen city and that city’s Davidic line, and the northern state’s religious innovations that seek to compensate for its separation from Judah (1 Kgs 11–12). Yet Yahweh countenanced the split – indeed, he gave a promise to Jeroboam (1 Kgs 11:29-39) in connection with it. In the end, then, the scriptures do not portray the splitting of Israel in itself as so worrisome. Neither do they seem disturbed by 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, the southern kingdom of Judah continued to see itself as Israel, without necessarily thinking to exclude the northern state which has also claimed that title. When Judahites compose and chant psalms, they see themselves as at least part of the ‘Israel’ of which these psalms speak. Second Temple Judah can see itself as representing the twelve clans (Ezra 6:17; 8:35). In Ezra 1–6, this community emphasizes its status as Israel over against other peoples around (Ezra 3:1; 4:1–3; 6:16–22). Yet the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who feature in that story, speak mainly of ‘Judah’ and of Jerusalem, and mention ‘Israel’ only with reference to the northern kingdom, envisaging Yahweh’s restorative work on Judah and this northern Israel (Zech 1:18–21 [2:1–4]; 8:13). Their messages are ambiguous as to whether the community should expect a future leadership that continues to involve a Davidic leader like Zerubbabel or one focusing on a head priest like Joshua. These prophetic texts may be reflecting the ambiguity of what actually happened subsequently and the differences of view within the community during succeeding decades. Ezekiel 40–48 implies another variant on these questions, with its references to a (presumably Davidic) ‘leader’ (a *nasi’*)who is not termed a king, and to priests, but with no mention of a head priest.

In the vision in Ezekiel 40–48, the land of Israel covers an area west of the Jordan, while more generally in Second Temple times the term ‘land of Israel’ means something like the land of Judah. The establishing of Jerusalem as the nation’s capital and the building of the temple by David and Solomon had buttressed the security and significance of Israel as a landed state, but this development made the capital increasingly important, and facilitated the process whereby city and temple became more significant than the land to the definition of Israel.

The ongoing story in Ezra-Nehemiah continues to assume that the Judahite community centred on Jerusalem *is* Israel (e.g. Ezra 7:10–11; 10:1; Neh 9:1–2). Ezra brings ‘the Torah of Moses’ from Babylon with a view to its becoming a basis of the community’s life. In this period, ‘the law defines the community and determines who does or does not belong to it’ (Blenkinsopp 1995: 139). What the community sees as faithful adherence to the Torah exacerbates relationships with neighbouring communities. Ezra’s bringing of the Torah from Babylon signals that the ongoing people of Israel is not understood as simply the colonial entity in the land or even that entity plus some of its neighbours. Israel is a people spread around a wide area, embracing Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Turkey, for whom exile or forced migration has created a dispersion to which its people have assented. In the New Testament, James 1:1 refers to ‘the twelve clans in the dispersion’, which might refer to ethnic Israel or to people who believe in Jesus.

The scriptures do not directly inform us about the perspective of other groups who may have claimed Israelite identity. Those neighbouring communities in the region around Judah may well have seen themselves as part of Israel, as the later Samaritans do (Pummer 2015). Documents from the Persian era reflect the life and beliefs of an Egyptian Jewish community at Elephantine, near Aswan, that had its own temple (Becking 2020). First Maccabees 1:11–15 speaks of people emerging ‘from Israel’ who propose a covenant with the gentiles that would involve a different lifestyle from that of the covenant as laid down in the Torah (Goldstein 1976). The Qumran community saw itself as seeking to live by the Torah in a way that other Jews do not, and saw the Jerusalem temple as having departed from the Torah (Avery-Peck 2001; Hultgren 2007). For practical purposes, the existing temple became dispensable to the notion of Israel, though the Qumran community either saw itself as the temple, or looked forward to the establishment of a renewed temple, or both. This way of thinking forms the background to the view of the Christian community as ‘exiles of the dispersion’ and as a metaphorical temple in 1 Peter (1 Peter 1:1; Mbuvi 2007). First Peter 1:1–4 also speaks of the Christian community as destined for a future ‘inheritance’, from which readers might infer that the land as an ‘inheritance’ (e.g. Deut 4:38) no longer counts (Walker 1996).

The Jews at Qumran and the people who believe that Jesus is the Messiah see themselves as the authentic Israel, or as an anticipation of the final Israel, without necessarily quite disenfranchising the rest of Israel. The Qumran community is ‘an “Israel” within “Israel”’ (Bergsma 2008: 178). They are the ‘remnant’, which is now a term for a minority committed to faithfulness and not simply a term for the survivors of a disaster. The ‘Cairo Damascus Document’ (a community rule known originally from Egypt that speaks mysteriously about Damascus) describes them as the successors of the remnant whom God preserved after he delivered Israel up to Nebuchadnezzar. Israel, according to this document, is now planted as this community and challenged to insight and new obedience (CD 1:1–11). With them ‘God established his covenant with Israel forever’ (CD 3.13). The Qumran ‘Rule of the Congregation’ describes itself as ‘the rule for the entire congregation of Israel in the final days’ (1QSa 1.1).

The Qumran ‘Rule of the Community’ speaks of the people who acknowledge it as ‘Israel, the community of the eternal covenant’ (1QS 5.5–6). But people who ‘enter the covenant’ (CD 2.2) do not have to be ethnically Israelite; the community is open to proselytes (*gerim*, the old word for resident aliens) as well as priests, Levites, and lay Israelites (CD 14:3–6). All Israel is said to be destined to become faithful Israel, to be ‘Israel, the community of the eternal covenant’ (1QS 5.5–6). The New Testament’s implications are similar, if ‘Israel of God’ (Gal 6:16) means people who believe in Jesus, as when Paul says, ‘we are the circumcision’ (Phil 3:2). Likewise, Justin Martyr later says, ‘[t]he true spiritual Israelite people […] are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ’ (*Dialogue with* *Trypho* 11). Gentiles, according to Paul, are also now ‘members of God’s household’ (Eph 2:14–19).

### 4.2 The security of Israel’s position as God’s people

In Romans 9–11, Paul argues that, whereas the bulk of Israel has tripped up, Israel has not done so terminally. How indeed could that happen, asks Paul, if God is faithful? The question of God’s faithfulness is central in Romans 9–11 (M. Barth 1983: 29–30; K. Barth 1957). Paul sees a divine purpose behind Israel’s tripping up and his own consequent turning to the gentiles as a result of their resistance to the gospel. Indeed, gentile responsiveness could make Israel jealous and lead to Israelites being grafted back into Israel’s olive tree (Rom 11:11–24). This startling, original thesis – without any basis in the scriptures, in contrast to the rest of Paul’s argument – is a revelation granted to Paul that is key to the *mysterion* (Rom 11:25), the revelation expounded through these chapters of Romans. The result will be that the people of God reaches its destined form as a body comprising both the fullness (*pleroma*) of 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 of how this applies to every individual member of Israel. Paul’s interest, by contrast, lies in the question about the corporate body. There is also ambiguity in the reference to ‘Israel’ here. It may have become a term for the body embracing both Jews and gentiles, though on the other eleven occasions when Romans 9–11 refers to Israel it denotes Israel in the traditional sense. Either way, Paul goes on to note God’s promises that the deliverer would remove ungodliness from Jacob and take away their sins (Isa 59:20 LXX; Jer 31:34). The principle behind such statements is that ‘the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable’ – *ametameleta* – not 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 testify to God’s faithfulness, God’s grace, God’s election, God’s mercy, the people of God’s unreliability, and the importance of this world and this life. In about 598, Pope Gregory took up Augustine’s argument and declared that the Jews must be protected; this argument ceased to be effective in the twelfth century (Stone 2019) and replacement theology or supersessionism became a common Christian view. According to this understanding, 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 Hebrews 8 speaks of a new covenant having been inaugurated, and Eph 2:15 speaks of the annulling of the Torah, they do 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 New Testament might be thought to allow for the possibility that the covenants are upwardly compatible, and that Jews who believe in Jesus may properly live by the Sinai covenant; this idea would fall short of a two covenant theology that sees the Sinai covenant as the way for Jews and sees the Jesus covenant as the way for gentiles.

### 4.3 The restoration and renewal of Israel

The Augustinian inference from Paul recurs in the development of dispensational theology in the nineteenth century (Scofield 1945) and in an Evangelical commitment to the idea of the Jews having a national home in what had been the ‘promised land’ (McDermott 2016). The New Testament offers little direct insight on the theological significance of the modern return of many Jews to the land of Israel. Yet, God’s promise to Abraham does suggest understanding this as witnessing to God’s faithfulness to his promise. After Israel’s victimization came to a climax with the Holocaust, the establishment of the state of Israel can be understood as a related sign of God’s faithfulness to his people. These do also raise questions about God’s faithfulness in another connection through the loss they have brought to Palestinians, including Palestinians who believe in Jesus (Gregerman 2014, 2018; Korn 2008; Lux 2008; Pawlikowski 2009; Šlajerová2004).

Theologies of Israel have thus changed over the two millennia since the time of 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.

The Christian church looks forward to the future coming of Jesus and the creation of a new heavens and a new earth, but for the most part this nominal expectation does not affect people’s everyday lives. Something similar was true in Israel. It was especially in times of crisis, such as the period before and after the fall of Jerusalem or the Maccabean period, that prophets and visionaries such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the author of Daniel encouraged and formulated hopes of deliverance and restoration. These hopes might cover the return of exiles to the land, the reconstitution of the two nations as one, and a transformation of the people into one that lived by the Torah rather than ignored it.

The fickleness characterizing Israel from the beginning of the scriptural narrative indicated that Yahweh had to do something to recreate Israel if it was to become more reliable. Josiah’s reform and the rediscovery of a Torah book (2 Kgs 22–23) could not achieve it. Deuteronomy 30 speaks of Yahweh circumcising Israel’s mind, Jeremiah 31 of him writing his instruction into Israel’s mind, and Ezekiel 36 of him giving Israel a new mind and a new spirit (NRSV has ‘heart’, but in Hebrew thinking the heart corresponds more closely to the mind in English). All are ways of picturing a process of moral and religious transformation working from the inside out. Jeremiah 31:31–34 hints that this will happen through the effect on people of the wonder of Yahweh’s forgiveness of Israel and restoration of Israel as a people, after the faithlessness that eventually led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the forced migration of many of its people. Arguably, Israel did live a more religiously committed life in Second Temple times, though the waywardness lamented by the Qumran community and the resistance to Jesus lamented by the New Testament indicate that any transformation is seen as incomplete.

When Jesus was born, too, there were elements within Israel who were reasonably content with how things were and elements who were looking for the fulfillment of God’s promises. Simeon was ‘looking forward to the consolation of Israel’ (Luke 2:25). After Jesus’ death, two of his disciples speak of having ‘hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel’ (Luke 24:21). Jesus comes to rule Israel (Matt 2:6), comes as king of Israel (Matt 27:42; Mark 15:32; John 1:49), and comes to implement a new covenant with Israel (Heb 8:6–13, quoting Jer 31:31–34). In Jesus ‘God has brought to Israel a Saviour’ (Acts 13:23). He comes as ‘the hope of Israel’ (Acts 28:20).

Tantalizingly, Acts almost begins with the question, ‘Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ (Acts 1:6), to which Jesus in effect answers, ‘I’m not telling you’, and perhaps implies ‘I don’t know’. But he adds that the disciples are going to bear witness to him in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:7–8), which might imply the gentile world but primarily implies ethnic Israel. Acts then keeps emphasizing that the apostles addressed the Israelites (Acts 2:22, 36; 3:12; 4:8; 5:35; 13:16). God has thus sent a message ‘to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ’ (Acts 10:36). ‘God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins’ (Acts 5:31).

The New Testament also indicates that the Holy Spirit’s coming upon the community gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost, and then upon gentiles in fulfilment of God’s promise to Abraham, does not resolve the community’s fickleness. Subsequently, this lack of constancy is arguably more obvious in the largely gentile church than it is in the Jewish community. Israel and the church continue to be peoples on the way, between promise and fulfilment.

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