

Porous Borders and Textual Ambiguity: Why Old Testament Israel is No Model for Modern Nationalism

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The phenomenon of ethnic nationalism might appear to be endorsed by the Bible. How are local churches to counter narratives of hate and othering if they feel that their own sacred text might be lending support to the ideology? This paper will identify elements of nationalistic ideology which may appear to have some consonance with the Bible. These focus around the particular theme of the ethnic purity and exceptionalism of Israel. It then offers a biblical-theological reading of this theme. The study concludes that the potentially nationalistic themes of Israel's bloodline, land, and vocation all operate in highly ambiguous ways in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament are revealed to be symbols and shadows of the great work that is begun in Christ. There is nothing in these themes which offers genuine support for ethnic nationalism.

Keywords

Nationalism; biblical theology; Old Testament; New Testament; Baptist ecclesiology

Introduction

Across Europe and the Americas we are currently seeing a rising tide of hard right-wing movements; some achieving political power, others operating at the fringes of society. The concern of this paper is the use that some of them are making of biblical imagery and language.¹

There is significant heterogeneity among these movements. Some are anti-Christian, while others seek to find common cause with Christianity.² Chillingly, one alt-right blogger recently wrote,

The Alt-Right shouldn't get hung up on being anti-Christian because Christianity is infinitely malleable [...] Christian conservatives will embrace our racial views again when we have the power to determine respectability.³

¹ A case study of the use of the Bible in far-right extremism can be found in the analysis of Anders Breivik's 'Manifesto' in Hannah Strømmen, 'Christian Terror in Europe? The Bible in Anders Behring Breivik's Manifesto', *The Journal of the Bible and its Reception*, 4 (2017): 147.

² Daniel Odin Shaw, 'Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed: The Alt-Right on Building Christendom Without Christ', *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 18 (2019): 79-92.

³ Hunter Wallace, 'First Things: The Anti-Christian Alt-Right', *Occidental Dissent* February 9, 2018. <<http://www.occidentaldissent.com/2018/02/09/first-things-the-anti-christian-alt-right/>> [accessed 31 December 2019].

Olivier Roy describes how religious themes tend to be used by right wing populist parties:

Religion matters first and foremost as a marker of identity, enabling them to distinguish between the good ‘us’ and the bad ‘them’. Most populists tend to be secular themselves, and do not consider Christianity as a faith, but rather as an identity. They place Christendom above Christianity. We have also seen that, when evoking the Christian identities of their nations, populist leaders tend to refer to symbols such as the cross, rather than to theological dogma.⁴

Notwithstanding this emphasis on the form rather than the beliefs of religions, there are elements of right-wing ideology which might appear to be endorsed by the Bible, and this can prove problematic within the Church. How are local churches to oppose narratives of hate and othering if they feel that their own sacred text might be lending support to the ideology?

This paper will identify some elements of nationalistic ideology which may appear to have consonance with parts of the Bible. It will then take a closer look at some of the relevant biblical themes, in order to test the question of whether the Bible — and in particular, the Old Testament — does indeed support such ideology.

Because of the heterogeneity of nationalistic far-right movements, it is somewhat risky to attempt sweeping statements about their ideology or organisation. Therefore, the following discussion is offered with the caveat that counter-examples can always be found.

We will begin by considering the question of definitions.

Definitions

Right wing movements are categorised with a cluster of overlapping but non-identical terms: nationalism, populism, the far right, the radical right, the extreme right, ethnocracy, racism, nativism, ethnopluralism, identitarianism, fascism, and so on. The reader is referred to standard texts on far-right nationalism for the definition of most of these terms.⁵

It is, however, important to define nationalism. Nationalism can be defined as an ideology that ‘focuses on the congruence of the cultural and the political community; that is, the nation and the state’.⁶ This is generally understood to fall into two categories: civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism. *Civic* nationalism is inclusive, and focuses on the autonomy,

⁴ Olivier Roy, ‘Beyond populism: the conservative right, the courts, the churches and the concept of a Christian Europe’, in *Saving the people: How populists hijack religion*, ed. by Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, and Olivier Roy (London: Hurst, 2016), pp. 185-201 (p. 186).

⁵ See, for example, Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

⁶ Eric Kaufman, in Bart Bonikowski, and others, ‘Populism and nationalism in a comparative perspective: a scholarly exchange’, *Nations and Nationalism* 25 (2019): 58-81 (p. 72).

unity and identity of the legal population of a nation. *Ethnic* nationalism, on the other hand, is exclusive; focused upon a particular group within a nation state, which is deemed to constitute the true population, and whose culture is deemed to constitute the national culture. It is the autonomy, unity and identity of this ethno-cultural group which is the preoccupation of ethnic nationalists, and it is this form of nationalism which will be under discussion here. From here on, it will simply be referred to as ‘nationalism’.

Far-right Ideology: Mapping the Terrain

The ideology of far-right groups is heterogeneous, complex, and sometimes mutually contradictory.⁷ Several interrelated elements which might appear to find support from the Bible can be teased out.⁸

The rise of the far-right has often mirrored the rise of immigration, particularly from non-white countries. The ideologies that drive the far right here include white supremacy and other forms of racism; nativism, which holds that ‘states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group’;⁹ and ethnopluralism, which argues that ‘people are divided into ethnic groups, which are equal, but should remain segregated’.¹⁰ This form of nationalism expresses itself in *othering* and *abjection*;¹¹ in its most extreme form, it may be expressed as a re-emergence of fascism, supported by so-called ‘race science’.

Support for such beliefs might be sought in the biblical themes of the ethnic purity of Israel; the rules against intermarriage; the conquest of

⁷ For example, some far-right groups are very pro-Israel, and others are overtly anti-Semitic.

⁸ There are two further elements of far-right rhetoric which might appear to find biblical support. First, appeal is often made for moral reform, for law and order, for an ethical ‘clean-up’. For example, on 11 August 2019, Nick Griffin of the British Nationalist Party wrote of ‘the sheer decadence of terminal liberalism’, and speculated that psychologists might ‘succeed in brainwashing the population that devouring the neighbours is normal’. Source: APF website, <https://apfeurope.com/2019/08/11/terminal-liberalism-sinks-to-new-lows/> [accessed 31 December 2019]. Second, much nationalist and far-right political expression is based around a strong, authoritarian masculine leader, often accompanied by an appeal to ‘traditional’ roles for women, sometimes cast as ‘benevolent sexism’ where women are viewed as morally pure and physically weak, in need of strong male protection. See, for example, the leaflet produced by Italy’s Lega Nord party, on the occasion of International Women’s Day in March 2019. This described the role of women in highly traditional terms. Source: Alessia Rotta, <<https://www.facebook.com/AlessiaRottaPd/posts/2092914607440723>> [accessed 31 December 2019].

⁹ Mudde, *The Far Right Today*, p. 27.

¹⁰ Mudde, *The Far Right Today*, p. 27. For example, the pan-European far-right group the NPF states, ‘We cherish the rich diversity which forms a tapestry of human belonging both within Europe and beyond and which is under threat from the homogenizing tendencies of a world shrunk by technology and globalism.’ Source: APF website, <https://apfeurope.com/> [accessed 31 December 2019].

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of these terms, see Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

Canaan and the *herem*¹² of the Canaanite tribes; and perhaps the concept of rigid geographic boundaries around the borders of the ancient land of Israel.

Further, the ‘traditional culture’ to which white nationalists appeal often refers to Christendom, especially in the face of what is perceived as a threat from Muslim immigrants.¹³ An expressed objection to this can then be cast in terms of a rejection of Christianity.¹⁴ This then operates like a bait and switch, where defence of the ‘culture’ becomes a defence of the Christian faith, with all the totalising claims which this entails. We have been seeing this in the UK in recent years in the activities of a movement called ‘Britain First’, who march through predominantly Muslim areas of our large cities carrying crosses and shouting inflammatory rhetoric.¹⁵

Some far-right movements are associated with a particular type of nationalism, sometimes expressed as exceptionalism; a form of national self-identity wherein the nation views itself as *sui generis*. This may express itself as a moral superiority over other nations and as a sense of self-congratulation, accompanied with a blindness to the moral defects of the home nation. Additionally, it may express itself as an expectation of special treatment within the international community; the Brexit phenomenon within my own nation carries a strong element of British exceptionalism.¹⁶

The unique nature of the election of Old Testament Israel has sometimes been used as a model for more modern exceptionalism. The USA’s nineteenth-century myth of ‘manifest destiny’ was based upon the Founders’ understanding of America having a peculiar role in God’s

¹² *Herem* is the Hebrew word often translated ‘devote to the Lord’ or ‘utterly destroy’. It is a technical term referring to the utter and irrevocable dedication of people or objects to the deity, which may or may not involve destruction. The nations closest to the people of Israel were designated for *herem* (e.g. Deut. 20:16–18). For a much more detailed discussion, see John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton, *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest: Covenant, Retribution and the Fate of the Canaanites* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017).

¹³ For example, the website of the Alliance for Peace and Freedom says, ‘We stand for a Europe of sovereign nations in which the independent states work together on a confederated basis to address the great challenges of our time and to protect, celebrate and promote our common Christian values and European cultural heritage.’ (<<https://apfeurope.com/>> [accessed 31 December 2019]).

¹⁴ An example of this was seen in the British National Party’s campaign poster for the 2009 European Elections. Following a refusal by the Church of England to endorse BNP policy, the party produced a poster quoting John 15:20 ‘If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you’, alongside the slogan, ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ (Timothy Peace, ‘Religion and Populism in Britain: An infertile breeding ground?’ in *Saving the people*, ed. by Nadia Marzouki and others, pp.95-108 (p.108)). A second example can be found in the use of the image of Martin Luther by the NPD during German elections in 2017 and 2019. Alongside the image were the words, ‘Ich würde NPD wählen. Ich könnte nicht anders.’ (I would vote NPD. I cannot do otherwise.) Source: Religion News <<https://religionnews.com/2019/10/09/campaign-posters-in-luther-country-raise-specter-of-anti-semitism/>> [accessed 31 December 2019].

¹⁵ This is a matter of public record, although Britain First’s website now appears to have removed all such photographs. Some examples can be viewed at <<https://www.indy100.com/article/britain-firsts-christian-patrol-has-ended-very-badly-for-them--W1ntKsLpLW>> [accessed 31 December 2019].

¹⁶ Source: Politico <<https://www.politico.eu/article/brexit-europe-british-exceptionalism-drove-vote-but-eu-media-arent-buying-it/>> [accessed 1 January 2019].

purposes.¹⁷ In the time of the Puritans, Israel's vocation and destiny became mapped onto the New World through the language of the 'New Israel'.¹⁸ In his lecture of 21 March 1630, delivered in Southampton to a group of travellers bound for Boston, the Puritan John Winthrop referred to these New World colonists as 'a city on a hill'.¹⁹ Such language has since passed into the political mainstream in the USA. 'City on a hill' was used of the USA by John F Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama; and others have also asserted American exceptionalism in more general terms.²⁰ White American exceptionalism is today being echoed by the American alt-right.²¹

It will be apparent by now that the biblical themes we have identified which might appear to lend support to modern nationalism all centre on the Israel of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament — the (apparent) themes of ethnic purity, exceptional vocation, priority over ethnically 'other' nations, and possession of the land.

But is the use of scripture in these ways truly in line with its divine purpose and grand narrative? It has long been known that the Bible can be (ab)used to support many ideologies. How are we to detect when hermeneutical abuse is occurring? How are Christians to respond to these nationalistic movements in a biblically faithful way?

It is for others to offer a positive theology of political engagement, and many great thinkers have done so from across the ecclesial spectrum. What I am attempting here, as a biblical specialist rather than a political theologian, is something more modest — to offer a challenge to the abuse of the biblical trope of Israel (as land and as nation) in defence of ethnic nationalism.

¹⁷ Edward Bennett, 'Colonialism and Neocolonialism', in *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy I*, ed. by Alexander DeConde and others (New York: Scribner, 2002), pp. 285-293.

¹⁸ Roger Chapman, 'American Exceptionalism', in *Culture Wars in America: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices*, ed. by Roger Chapman and James Ciment, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 25.

¹⁹ This, of course, is a quotation from Matthew 5:14, where Israel's vocation as light to the nations is applied to followers of Jesus.

²⁰ Trevor McCrisken, 'Exceptionalism', in *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy II*, ed. by Alexander DeConde and others (New York: Scribner, 2002), pp. 63-80. Dick Cheney and his daughter have published a book entitled 'Exceptional: Why the World Needs a Powerful America'. On page 5 (in an introductory chapter entitled, 'Yes, we are exceptional') they write, 'Our children need to know that they are citizens of the most powerful, good and honorable nation in the history of mankind, *the exceptional nation*.' (Dick Cheney and Liz Cheney, *Exceptional: Why the World Needs a Powerful America* (New York: Threshold, 2015)).

²¹ See, for example, the speech given by Richard Spence, president of the white supremacist think tank the National Policy Institute (NPI), given on 21 November 2016, following the election of Donald Trump. 'To be white is to be a striver, a crusader, an explorer and a conqueror. We build; we produce; we go upward [...] They [other racial groups] need us, and not the other way around [...] Within the very blood in our veins as children of the sun lies the potential for greatness. That is the great struggle we are called to. We are not meant to live in shame and weakness and disgrace [...] We were meant to overcome [...] [America] was, until this past generation, a white country, designed for ourselves and our posterity. It is our creation. It is our inheritance. And it belongs to us.' Source: The Atlantic <<https://youtu.be/1o6-bi3jlxk>> [accessed 31 December 2019].

The word ‘Israel’ refers to many historical loci within scripture (including, but not limited to, a person, a people, a land, and two different nation states). It also occupies a number of theological loci within the narrative. None of these is in direct continuity with any nation state or people group today. This is not to say that the histories of Israel have nothing to say to twenty-first century Christians, of course. But it is far too simplistic to try to map our own setting onto Israel’s history.²²

What is needed is a close reading of the grand narrative of the themes we have identified: ethnic particularity, land ownership, and divine election.

Land, Bloodline and Vocation: towards an Old Testament Theology

To that end, then, I would like to gesture towards a biblical-theological reading of these themes, which are closely linked. While they are no doubt present in the Old Testament, there is also a strong counter-theme of porous borders, good Canaanites and unexpected meetings. We will examine these within the Old Testament and then identify how they track into the New Testament.

While the story of Israel begins with Abraham, of course, the purpose of God for humanity is set out in Genesis 1. ‘Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion’ (Genesis 1:28).²³ This idea of filling the earth, addressed as it is to the man and the woman who have just been identified as image-bearers, is indicative of the human vocation to be representatives of God throughout every part of the world — taking his glory to the ends of the earth, as the prophets put it.²⁴ This vocation is reiterated to Noah in Genesis 9:1. It then starts to be fulfilled in the table of nations in

²² This has not stopped people from trying to do so. Willie Jennings provides a number of examples of such ‘mapping’ in the hymns of Isaac Watts, including these three verses from a hymn based upon Psalm 60:

“Lord has thou cast the nation off?/ Must we for ever mourn?/ Wilt thou indulge immortal wrath?/
Shall mercy ne’er return?

Great Britain shakes beneath thy stroke/ And dreads they threat’ning hand;/ O heal the island thou
hast broke,/ Confirm the wav’ring land.

Our troops shall gain a wide renown/ By thine assisting hand./ ‘Tis God that treads the mighty
down,/ And makes the feeble stand.”

Quoted in Willie James Jennings, *The Christian imagination: Theology and the origins of race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 259.

Oliver O’Donovan writes, ‘There has been no lack of interest in the beckoning fruitfulness of Israel’s political categories.’ O’Donovan refers to WCC documents about shalom, the Protestant movement for jubilee, and the Catholic-centred theology of liberation, before continuing, ‘What was needed was an architectonic hermeneutic, which would locate political reflection on [the politically significant events under examination] within an undertaking that had its centre of gravity in the Gospels.’ (Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the roots of political theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 22).

²³ Biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

²⁴ E.g. Habakkuk 2:14 or Isaiah 24:16.

Genesis 10, and then again — admittedly with a firm shove from God — in Genesis 11 with the scattering of the nations after the tower of Babel.

All of this, we should note, takes place before the call of Abraham, and therefore is independent of the blood line of Israel, or of the Sinai covenant. It applies equally to all people. Moreover, the diversity and equal worth of the created peoples is clear from the Genesis accounts. As Doug Gay writes,

The primal *us* has sexual difference and [egalitarianism]²⁵ inscribed within it here [...] Genesis offers to the Jewish and Christian imagination the narrative basis for a rich celebration of sociality which is rooted and grounded in a single humanity, a single human race, all of whom are made in the divine image.²⁶

We should regard the opening chapters of Genesis as having a particular privilege; something approaching an ethical normativity. They show us, in some way, how life is *intended* to be. The extent to which we can re-create this prelapsarian innocence is clearly limited (no one is seriously suggesting that we stop wearing clothes, and few vegetarians derive their ethic from the Genesis accounts). Nonetheless, this glimpse of divine intention for human vocation is very significant, and should provide a hermeneutical control for the narratives that follow.

In Genesis 12 we come to the call of Abraham, which right at the outset includes a reference to ‘all the nations’ being blessed — or counting themselves blessed²⁷ — through Abraham’s obedience. Here, alongside some ‘exceptionalist’ language, ‘I will bless those who bless you’, we see its purpose: the blessing of the nations.

This expression of the special, chosen, status of Israel as a responsibility to bless the other nations is equally apparent many generations later, when God makes the covenant with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai.

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. (Exodus 19:5–6)

Priests, we recall, operate for the benefit of the people, representing them before the deity. If Israel is to be a priestly nation, then their vocation is to operate for the benefit of non-Israelites.

Now we must interrogate the attitude of the text to the Canaanites and other pagan nations. Within the exodus account, the departing people group

²⁵ Gay uses the word ‘complementarity’, but explains in a footnote that he means this in the sense of egalitarianism. I have here chosen to use the word which I believe will better express his intention in the current climate, where complementarianism has rather different connotations.

²⁶ Doug Gay, *Honey from the Lion: Christian Theology and the Ethics of Nationalism* (London: SCM Press, 2013), p. 40.

²⁷ The question hangs upon the translation of the *niphal* form of the Hebrew verb *bārach*.

includes many of non-Israelite origin (Exod. 12:38). And provision was made for them in the law: non-Israelites were entitled to observe the Sabbath,²⁸ to participate in the Passover once circumcised,²⁹ and were present at the covenant renewal.³⁰

William Ford encourages us to draw a distinction between the attitudes to the Canaanites as a *category* — generally viewed as a warning — and the attitude in Genesis and Joshua to *individual* Canaanites, which is often quite positive.³¹ So, although the Israelites are told not to marry the Canaanites (Deut. 7:3), there are many stories of women from pagan nations marrying into Israel. Rahab (the Canaanite) and Ruth (the Moabite) are two examples, each admitted to the nation on the basis of her statement of faith:

The LORD your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below (Josh 2:11).

Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. (Ruth 1:16)

It is striking how completely these women become integrated into the nation. It is well known that Ruth and Rahab both find themselves in the family tree of David, and consequently of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). Rahab's integration is further emphasised. She is brought into the *heart* of the nation (Josh 6:25: Hebrew *qereb*, meaning 'innards'). And the red cord hanging in her window, and the instruction that her whole family is to take shelter with her all night on pain of being destroyed, are strongly reminiscent of the Passover event that took place among the Israelites a generation earlier.

Emphasis on faith rather than ethnicity is found in many other places. In Isaiah 19:18–25, the prophet foretells a day when there will be altars to the Lord in Egypt, Assyria and Israel, with highways joining the three centres for the purpose of pilgrim travel. Assyria and Egypt, of course, were the two great nations which had oppressed Israel.

In the time of Joshua, the Gibeonites (also known as the Hivites) were one of the nations subject to the *herem*.³² Yet they managed to trick Joshua into making a peace treaty with them, in a passage which is surely not intended to be any indictment on Joshua's foolishness so much as a commendation of their faith. They, like Rahab, live in the *qereb* (innards) of the nation; they also make a statement of faith, 'Your servants have come because of the name of the LORD your God' (9:9). Further, the word for covenant, *berit*, is used five times in a few verses; a *Leitwort* to draw the reader's attention to the way that the Gibeonites have manoeuvred their way

²⁸ Exod. 20:10.

²⁹ Exod. 12:48–9; Num. 15:15–16.

³⁰ Josh. 8:33,35; cf. Deut. 16:10–14, 26:10–11, 27:4–14; Exod. 12:43–49, 20:10.

³¹ William Ford, 'The Challenge of the Canaanites', *Tyndale Bulletin* 68 (2017): 161–184.

³² cf. Deut 20:17. See also Footnote 12.

into covenant blessings. Indeed, in 11:19, the other nations (designated for the *herem*, according to Deuteronomy 20) are censured for not having sued for peace as the Gibeonites did. The ethnic boundaries of Israel are far more porous than we might initially imagine.³³

The geographical borders of Israel are ambiguous, too. Compare the vast territory claimed in Deuteronomy 11:24, or Joshua 1:4, with the more sober assessment in Numbers 3:1–12. Nor did Israel ever unambiguously own the land; it remained the property of God (Lev 25:23, cf. Ps 24:1).

Also ambiguous is the biblical testimony of how complete the conquest was. Compare the first half of Joshua 10:20, ‘When Joshua and the Israelites had finished inflicting a very great slaughter on them, until they were wiped out...’, with the second half of the same verse, ‘... and when the survivors had entered into the fortified towns’. Or compare Judges 1:8, ‘The people of Judah fought against Jerusalem and took it. They put it to the sword and set the city on fire,’ with verse 21 of the same chapter, ‘The Benjaminites did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem; so the Jebusites have lived in Jerusalem among the Benjaminites to this day.’³⁴

Textual ambiguity of this sort is known as *polyphony*; it is as if there are two or more voices in debate with one another.³⁵ Polyphony is a way of testing truth, of approaching a rich, complex subject with nuance. Perhaps the ambiguity around the completeness of the conquest reflects a theological claim in dialogue with a more historical account. Indeed, this would be borne out by the angel of the Lord with the drawn sword whom Joshua meets (Joshua 5:13–6:5) who simultaneously gives Joshua instructions for the conquest of Jericho (historical strand) while asserting that he is not on Israel’s side (theological strand).

Land, Bloodline, Vocation in the New Testament

Let me pull out the threads we have identified so far. God’s assertion of human vocation, cast in terms of royal dominion, long pre-dates the historical election of Israel. There is textual concurrence between the exceptionalism of Israel and its mission to bless the nations. There is an

³³ This theme within the Deuteronomic writings has been ably set out by my colleague David Firth in: David Firth, *Including the Stranger: Foreigners in the Former Prophets* (Downers Grove: Apollos, 2019).

³⁴ These and other examples are set out in Paul Copan and Matthew Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide? Coming to terms with the justice of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), p. 90.

³⁵ This is not a comment about the sources of the text, but reflects a decision to notice the intentional ambiguity which the final redactor has permitted to remain. It was Mikhail Bakhtin who highlighted the importance of polyphony to literary theorists (Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.)). Another good example of biblical polyphony concerns Nineveh. The astonishing story of Jonah, demonstrating God’s tenderness towards the pagan city, while the book of Nahum is a polemic against it.

ambiguity concerning attitudes to the Canaanites and other pagan nations; and membership of the covenant community can be claimed through faith as well as through blood. There is polyphony around the geographical boundaries of the land and the completeness of the conquest.

The New Testament shows that Jesus is instituting a new kinship, which is stronger than any pre-existing ties of family or nation. Thus, Jesus described his followers as having an allegiance to him that trumped allegiance to family (Luke 9:59; 14:26; Matt 19:29), and he was unequivocal that it is not possible to serve two masters (Matt 6:24). In response to Jesus' commission to take the gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) — which reflects the creation mandate of Genesis 1:28 — Paul takes the gospel to Jew and to Gentile. For both these groups, allegiance to God is now of pre-eminent importance. The book of Revelation addresses groups of these Christians in time of persecution, showing them that faithfulness to God precludes faithfulness to an abusive state — Rome, in this instance.³⁶

In order to consider how the physical realities of land and nationhood map from the Old Testament to the New, we need to understand that the entire mission and vocation of Israel has been funnelled into the life of Jesus Christ.³⁷ Then, after his ascension, this same mission and vocation is entrusted to the Church. But what is the Church, and how does it relate to Israel? One of the key passages to consider is Romans 11.³⁸

If some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches.

³⁶ A useful discussion of this matter may be found in Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: reading Revelation then and now* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999).

³⁷ See, for example N. T. Wright, *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

³⁸ This discussion assumes that both supercessionism and two-covenant theology/dispensationalism have been discarded as non-viable interpretive stances. (Two-covenant theology and dispensationalism are not identical but share sufficient features to be grouped together for our purposes here.) I do not consider that either of these approaches does justice to Paul's argument in Romans 11 or elsewhere, and they both have dangerous consequences when interpreted in the modern world. The issue is this: is there more than one 'people of God'? The overwhelming evidence of both Testaments is that the answer is 'no'. However, *supercessionism* allows only one people of God at a time; first Israel and then the Church. While this might be supported from certain readings of the book of Hebrews, Romans 9–11 clearly show that Israel is the root that sustains the church, and that Israel has not been utterly and permanently rejected — because God's gifts and his call are irrevocable — and that the hardening of Israel is only temporary. By contrast, *two-covenant theology/dispensationalism* consider there to be two peoples of God in the present age. Although this is very influential in parts of the worldwide church, it too is hard to sustain with a careful analysis of Paul's writing. For Paul the great mystery of the gospel is that it transcends former divisions, particularly those based on race or nationality (Eph. 3:1–6; Gal. 3:27–29). God has made one church out of the two. Dispensationalism has no adequate answer to this question. Moreover, it fuels a dangerous assumption that the nation state of Israel today is in direct theological continuity with the covenant people of God in the Hebrew Bible.

The theological perspective of in-grafting which I refer to here is also known as 'Enlargement theology'. See Alex Jacob, *The Case for Enlargement Theology*, 2nd edn (Baton Rouge: Glory to God Publications, 2010). The interested reader is referred to this book for a much more thorough analysis of replacement theology, two-covenant theology, and enlargement theology in the light of Romans 9–11.

If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. (Rom 11:17–18)

The Church is composed primarily of that directly continuous part of Israel which acknowledges Jesus as the Christ; and into this, Gentile believers are grafted.

Alongside this continuity, however, is the radical discontinuity achieved by the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. The Church is now the people of the age to come, and therefore the physical categories of land and blood-line have now become eschatological categories. The world is the Lord's, and membership of the 'nation' is now wholly by faith. What the Old Testament hinted, the New Testament has writ large.³⁹

This is announced in the gospels. In Matthew, John the Baptist denounces the Pharisees, 'Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham' (Matt 3:9). In similar vein in the fourth gospel, Pharisees tell Jesus, 'Abraham is our father,' and Jesus replies, 'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did' (John 8:39).

This in-grafting is a key idea to help us to understand how the physical, tangible events of Israel relate to the Church today. The theological stories of 'land' or 'bloodline' have not become spiritualised — by which I mean that they have not weakened into ethereal other-worldly categories, which might suggest a latent Platonism or Gnosticism in our theology. Rather they have become *concretised* into an eschatological reality, which is none the less real for being at present intangible. What this means, however, is that the physical nature that they have occupied in the Old Testament is no longer in force, pending the eschaton. Therefore, they do not persist in categories which can serve modern nationalism. Israel's history has become our history, but not in a way that permits us to appropriate the 'land' or 'bloodline' narrative.

But more than this, there is a scandal to the Gentile in-grafting which Gentile Christians (of whom I am one) are liable to overlook. *We* are the ones who have been grafted in; *we* are the unexpected guests at the eschatological banquet. Too often we have assumed our place at the table as if entitled to be there. As Willie Jennings reminds us, urging us to 'take our positions as Gentile readers of the Jesus story':⁴⁰

³⁹ I am grateful to my colleague Revd Dr Stephen Finamore for a conversation which helped me to sharpen my thinking for part of this section.

⁴⁰ Jennings, *Christian imagination*, p. 259.

We are in the story [despite]⁴¹ a prohibiting word to his disciples, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans” (Matt 10:5b). We are in the story in the form of humble requests, for example, as the centurion who, recognising, even if through the lens of military hierarchy, the distance between himself and Jesus, asks for Jesus to heal his servant (Luke 7:1–10). We are also in the story as desperate pleas for help, as with the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21–28), which releases for us the dynamic of Israel and the Gentiles, yet with a profound difference.⁴²

This is not to say that we are permitted into the Church under sufferance, or that blessing of the Gentiles is ‘plan B’. (Remember Genesis 12.) But it does behove an attitude of humility rather than one of entitlement, as the apostle urges, ‘Do not boast over the branches [...] remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you’ (Romans 11:17–18).

The Bible and Modern Nationalism: An Unholy Alliance

We have seen that the potentially nationalistic motifs of bloodline, land and vocation are all highly complex themes within the Old Testament. Then, when they move to the New Testament, we discover that they were, in any case, only symbols and shadows of the great work that is begun in Christ. Membership of the people of God is now by faith; the whole earth is the land of Christ; the vocation of the people of God is for the blessing of those who are still outside the covenant. Moreover, those of us who are Gentile Christians should recognise that we are in the family as a late arrival, a welcome guest. There is therefore nothing in these themes which offers genuine support for ethnic nationalism.

Why should biblical tropes be so fertile a breeding ground for nationalistic sentiment? Adrian Hastings, and building upon his work Willie Jennings, offers a disturbing explanation, which relates to the development of national identities in the wake of the availability of vernacular translations of the Bible. First, Hastings:

For the development of nationhood from one or more ethnicities, by far the most important and widely present factor is that of an extensively used vernacular literature [...] A nation may precede or follow a state of its own but it is certainly assisted by it to a greater self-consciousness. Most such developments are stimulated by the ideal of a nation-state and of the world as a society of nations originally ‘imagined’[...] through the mirror of the Bible, Europe’s primary textbook.⁴³

⁴¹ sic ‘through’.

⁴² Jennings, *Christian imagination*, p. 262.

⁴³ Adrian Hastings, *The construction of nationhood: Ethnicity, religion and nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 2-3.

Intensifying the effect of this is the fact that the Authorised Version of the English Bible became highly influential in shaping the English language — and along with the language — the thought-patterns of English-speaking people. And the ideology with which the Authorised Version was translated was to bolster the position of King James I of England by means of bolstering the episcopacy.⁴⁴ As Willie Jennings argues, this is directly oppositional to faithful scriptural interpretation. ‘Once biblical literacy began centrally to aid the building of a national consciousness, the Bible and its important pedagogical trajectory for forming faithful Christian identity became compromised.’⁴⁵

Reading as Baptists

The ethnic nationalism of the far right is a dangerous phenomenon which is threatening the peace, and perhaps the stability, of many parts of Europe and the Americas at present, including my own nation. It is deeply to be regretted that proponents of this ideology have sometimes imagined that they can find support for their views in Scripture. But this provides opportunity as well as threat. It gives the Church the chance to speak a counter-narrative of inclusion, welcome, generosity and peaceableness. The misapplication of biblical tropes and themes may — ironically — give us purchase to address a group which would otherwise be outside our orbit.

Our Baptist distinctive of the separation of church and state helps us here, because it reminds us that the goals, methods and divine vocation of these institutions are entirely different and irreconcilable. As Nigel Wright says, the Church is

a community called into being by the redemptive activity of God in the power of the Holy Spirit which is orientated towards a kingdom that is not of this world.⁴⁶

In contrast, the State is

a limited, this-worldly reality with a constant tendency to self-exaltation. [... It is] a fallen power in possession of immense coercive potential [which] has the greatest difficulty in minding the things of God and seeking God’s kingdom in any shape or form.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ The new translation would be ‘revised by the bishops, then given [...] to the Privy Council, in effect a central censorship committee with which the government could ensure that its stamp was on the text, no deviationism or subversion allowed; and finally to James himself, whose hostility to any whiff of radicalism [...] had been clear enough. And this ferociously episcopal and monarchist Bible was to be the only translation that could be read in church.’ (Adam Nicolson, *Power and glory: Jacobean England and the making of the King James Bible* (London: HarperCollins UK, 2004), p.60).

⁴⁵ Jennings, *Christian imagination*, p. 209.

⁴⁶ Nigel Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011), p. 211.

⁴⁷ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, pp. 211-2.

In other words, the Church has no business endorsing a political party, and what the party can offer the church — political power, influence, freedom — comes at too high a price. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world but lose their soul?

Unchecked, the threats presented by the far right are manifold. They may begin with attitudes of superiority and condescension, the victimisation or marginalisation of minority groups, othering and abjection. Unchecked, this may grow into violence: structural, criminal, or state-sponsored. We are surely not so far removed from the wars of the twentieth century that we have forgotten how this could end. And it is a real danger that we in the Church could become complicit with this. As Bernard Green argues, in his history of European Baptists during the rise of the Third Reich, ‘The propaganda machine was able to manipulate people not least by using religious code words that rang positively in the hearts and minds of people of faith.’⁴⁸

It is a pressing task for the Baptist Church today to resist such an appropriation of the word of God.

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⁴⁸ Bernard Green, *European Baptists and the Third Reich* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2008), p. iii.