

The Israelites & the Nations: A Systematic Theology of Israel in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament



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ABSTRACT: *The present essay is primarily an attempt to define biblical Israel. Because of recent events in the Middle East, namely, the attacks on 7 October 2023, and the unfolding war in Gaza, the work aims to be a resource for both pastors and practitioners who seek a more comprehensive biblical understanding of how 'Israel' is used in the Bible, and how this differs from the modern State of Israel. Through briefly surveying the origins of Christian Zionism and the use of 'Israel' in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, the author contends for clarity on what is meant by 'Israel' in current Christian discourse, and how this can affect the Church's witness in the Middle East today.*

KEYWORDS: *Israel-Palestine, Covenant Theology, Christian Zionism, Supersessionism*

Theology does not occur in a vacuum, and I believe good theology considers this. The present article is the result of my experience growing up in a German household, to grandparents who witnessed the horrors of the *Third Reich*, and vehemently warned of how persistent the plague of *antisemitism* can be.² I therefore approach the present topic with no small degree of trepidation. Considering hostilities between Christianity and Judaism that have persisted for well over a millennium, it is perhaps only right to begin with a note of lament.³ The relationship

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² The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) defines antisemitism as, "a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred towards Jews" (European Commission, *Handbook for the practical use of the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism*. Federal Association of Departments for Research and Information on Antisemitism e.V. [Bundesverband RIAS], November 2020). Though this definition has been criticized for being too broad, and therefore unhelpful (Carl Philipp Schröder, "Antisemitism among Adolescents in Germany" In *Youth and Globalization 2* (2020): 165), it has nonetheless been adopted by several international bodies, including the German Federal Government (Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, *National Strategy against Antisemitism and for Jewish Life* [2023]: 4).

³ For a summary of hostilities, see: Deborah Forger and Susannah Heschel, "Christianity and Antisemitism" In *The Routledge History of Antisemitism* (New York: Routledge, 2024) 247–254. For a theology of justice within the two traditions, see: Salim J. Munayer, *Reconciling Justice: Concepts of Justice in the Multireligious Context of Palestine/Israel* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2024).



between the two religions has been strenuous, with pogroms and crusades taking place against Jews as early as the fourth century CE with the formation of a textual tradition known as *Adversus Iudaeos* (against the Jews).⁴ It is a tragic reality of life that many social movements, particularly those which prove to be disruptive, have extremists on the margins—and the Church is no exception. Because of this, as a Christian, I first want to acknowledge this past and, with a heart full of sorrow, apologize to those of the Jewish tradition on behalf of your persecutors who claimed the name of Christ.

The first-century Jesus movement's question, *par excellence*, was how to covenantally relate to the God of Israel in light of the Nazarene and his teaching. The persistent controversy over *halakhic* law and who qualified as "Israel" permeated early Christian writing, as seen in the Council of Jerusalem's debate on the inclusion of Gentiles in the covenantal community between Israel and their God (Acts 15:1–21); or more lucidly, in the writings of the Apostle Paul (Rom 3–4; 9–11; Gal 3:1–29), where defining the Church, Israel, and the qualifications for covenantal inclusion was of the utmost importance (Rom 3–4; 9–11; Gal 3:28–29; Eph 2:11–22).⁵

Supersessionism: The Current Scholarly Debate

The problem can be summarized in the word, *supersessionism*, which Deborah Forger and Susannah Heschel describe as a "kind of theological colonialism," contending that it is an appropriation of Judaism, in which Christianity began to define itself as the "new Israel."⁶ Considering what is at stake, and how Christian theology has repeatedly been weaponized by antisemites, it is of no surprise that Heschel and Forger give supersessionism such a critical designation.⁷ However, this notion of the Church being the "new Israel" is persistent amongst the Church Fathers, and, perhaps, even as old as the New Testament (NT) itself (Rom 11:17–24). Justin Martyr (100–ca. 165), for example, calls the Church "the true spiritual Israel."⁸ This is not an isolated theory but postulated in one degree or another within the writings of Irenaeus, Origen, John Chrysostom, Augustine, and John Calvin.⁹ We therefore cannot simply dismiss the possibility that the Church could be classified as Israel. The theory has since received several

⁴ Forger and Heschel, "Christianity and Antisemitism," 248.

⁵ Though Ephesians is not included in the 7 letters of the uncontested Pauline corpus, I will follow Church tradition and refer to the writer of Ephesians as Paul.

⁶ Forger Heschel, "Christianity and Antisemitism," 247.

⁷ Susannah Heschel, "Nazifying Christian Theology: Walter Grundmann and the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life" In *Church History* 63, no. 4 (1994): 587–605.

⁸ St. Justin Martyr, "Dialogue with Trypho," in *Selections from the Fathers of the Church*, ed. by Michael Slusser, Thomas P. Haltonrans, and Thomas B. Falls, vol. 3. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003) 21.

⁹ St. Justin Martyr, "Dialogue with Trypho," 21; Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," in Philip Schaff, *Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993): 4.14.3, 4.15.1–2; Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1973); John Chrysostom, Homily 6, "Against the Jews," 6.11; Paula Fredriksen, "Secundem Carnem: History and Israel in the Theology of St. Augustine," in *Augustine and World Religions*, ed. Brian Brown, John A. Doody and Kim Paffenroth (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008): 29–30; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960): 4.2.3.

names, including “replacement theology,” “covenant theology,” or more recently, “fulfillment theology,” with the latter being notably different from the former, but nonetheless considered by its opponents to be a break from NT writers.¹⁰

Those who contend with fulfillment theology, such as Michael J. Vlach or Mark S. Kinzer, propagate a two-covenant theology which Kinzer calls “bilateral ecclesiology,” and argues that Paul’s pedagogy on Jewish cultural distinctives affirm what is essentially a two-covenant soteriology.¹¹ Kinzer uses Galatians 2 to postulate this theory, which if taken to its logical fruition, presents a salvation model for Jews *outside* of the Christ event:

Galatians 2 was understood as implying more than just the establishment of two missions. The agreement speaks of “the good news of the circumcision” and “the good news of the uncircumcision,” but it implies the existence of “the Ekklesia of the circumcision” and “the Ekklesia of the uncircumcision.” The one Ekklesia of Messiah Yeshua is not made up of individual Jews and Gentiles, mixed together in an undifferentiated collective, but of two distinct corporate entities joined in what should be an indissoluble bond of love and mutual commitment.¹²

Heresy may be measured by its distance to or from Jesus, and in Kinzer’s model, he regrettably contends for a salvific paradigm based on obedience, *vis-à-vis* circumcision, which places Jews into a covenant *outside* the Christ event. With such a reading of Galatians 2, one may wonder if Kinzer’s Bible is missing Galatians 3, where Paul emphatically proclaims that in Christ, there is no longer a divide between Jew and Gentile (Gal 3:28–29).¹³

Finally, it is worth briefly mentioning the work of Michael J. Vlach, who also provides an apologetic for a two-covenant model but relies on land promises (Deut 30:1–6; 28–29; Jer 16:14–15; Ezek 37:21; etc.).¹⁴ It is outside our scope to address land directly, and others, such as Palestinian theologians Salim J. Munayer and Munther Isaac have already provided extensive

¹⁰ While replacement theology and covenant theology are often used as synonyms for supersessionism, in that the Church has “replaced” Israel, fulfillment theology, on the other hand, sees Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel and continues as a covenantal community called the Church. For an example of how fulfillment theology is developed, see: Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, (Trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; 5 vols.; T & T Clark, 1957) II, 195–210; cf. Gerald R. McDermott, “A History of Supersessionism: Getting the Big Story Wrong” in *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land* (Downer Groves: IVP Academic, 2016), 36; Michael J. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010); Gerald R. McDermott, “Introduction: What Is the New Christian Zionism?” in *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel & The Land* (Downer Grove: IVP Academic, 2016).

¹¹ Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?*

¹² Mark S. Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005) 164.

¹³ It is also worth noting that in the Genesis account, Abraham’s faith is accredited to him as righteousness (cf. Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6; Jas) *before* the covenant of circumcision in Gen 17:9–11. Paul refers to this chronology in Rom 4, writing: “Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, ‘Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.’ How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised.” According to Paul, Abraham’s righteousness is accredited based on faith, not circumcision, a point of paramount importance which Kinzer fails to consider.

¹⁴ Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?*

work in this regard.¹⁵ However, it is worth noting that Vlach makes a fundamental error in his exposition, which the present work seeks to correct, namely, the definition of Israel in the Hebrew Bible.

Before I begin with my line of argumentation, it will first be helpful to clarify that the present work is *not* an apologetic for supersessionism. Rather, I contend that the Church has not replaced Israel but is simply a *continuation* of Israel (fulfillment theology). Second, my primary goal is for the reader to come away from this essay with an ability to distinguish—both while engaging with modern media and the Bible—between biblical Israel and the modern State of Israel. To fall into the error of conflating these terms and entities will have egregious consequences for our engagement with Israeli domestic politics, geopolitics, and more importantly, the mission of Jesus.

My primary thesis is that biblical Israel as a social entity in the Exodus account was ethnically diverse, and that God’s plan of Gentile covenantal inclusion is present from the very beginning of Israel’s formation, and not isolated to NT authors. For example, Peter’s vision at Jaffa (Act 10:1–48), when he sees the “unclean” meat and is subsequently sent to the house of the Roman centurion, Cornelius, seems to indicate that Peter’s mission to the Gentiles was not a change in God’s heart, or focus, but rather, a change in Peter’s understanding of God’s heart, upon which he finally grasped the will of God as it has always been.¹⁶ I therefore suggest that the primary way “Israel” is used in the Hebrew Bible is not as an ethnicity, but as a disposition of the heart—those who chose to believe and obey God, thereby entering into covenantal relationship with YHWH. Selected texts used to postulate and test this hermeneutic will include

¹⁵ Salim J. Munayer, “Theology of the Land: From a Land of Strife to a Land of Reconciliation” in *The Land Cries Out: Theology of the Land in the Israel-Palestinian Context* (Eugene: Cascade, 2012) 234–264; Munther Isaac, *From Land to Lands, from Eden to the Renewed Earth: A Christ-Centered Biblical Theology of Land* (Langham Monographs, 2015).

¹⁶ Cornelius is filled with the Holy Spirit (Act 10:1–48), and Peter beautifully proclaims, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Act 10:34–35), which is likely a reiteration of Deut 10:17: “For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, *who is not partial*” (emphasis added). Furthermore, it is significant that Peter’s vision occurs at the port of Jaffa (Acts 9:43), the same place that Jonah retreats to after receiving the call to preach in the Gentile city of Nineveh (Jonah 1:3). When we read this in connection with the *Confessio Petri* (Matt 16:16), we see that this significant moment is placed within Matthew’s Gospel narrative after Jesus’ interaction with a Canaanite woman in the region of Tyre and Sidon (Matt 15:21), upon which Jesus responds to her plea for mercy with a peculiar statement, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 15:24). The woman’s response is worth mention since I believe it sets the context for what happens next. She responds to Jesus, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table” (Matt 15:27). Jesus then grants her request and proceeds to feed the multitudes in the multi-ethnic region of Galilee, after which, Matthew tells us that there were seven baskets full of leftovers, no insignificant number—the figurative “crumbs under the table” (Matt 15:37). Jesus then, in an interaction with the Pharisees and Sadducees, begins to use the Jonah narrative as an example of a sign that points to himself (Matt 16:4); the disciples are then confused at the teaching (Matt 16:7), and Jesus responds by asking them to recall the number of loaves that were left over after the multiplication (Matt 16:10). Then, is the *Confessio Petri*, arguably the principle of Matthew’s entire gospel account, where Peter identifies Jesus as the Christ (Matt 16:16), after which, Jesus renames “Simon son of Jonah” as Peter (Matt 16:17–18). Simon’s name, “son of Jonah,” is again an illusion to Jonah, the prophet to Nineveh; this, in combination with the multi-ethnic nature of the crowds who were fed, and Jesus’ reference to Jonah in his apology against the Pharisees, all seem to indicate a pattern, in which Jesus is establishing Peter as the rock upon which his church will be built, “Israel,” which includes all *ethnē*.

the narrative spanning from Abraham to the Exodus; the inclusion of foreigners in the conquest of Canaan; the role of the nations in the Psalter and Isaiah; and finally, Jesus and Paul's use of the Hebrew Bible as found in Luke 4, Galatians 3, and Romans 9. Throughout, I will seek to answer the following questions: Who is Israel in the Hebrew Bible? What is Israel's role? And what is the nations' relationship to the Abrahamic covenant?

The Reformation, Dispensationalism, and Christian Zionism

Before we begin with our exposition, it may be helpful to briefly trace the theological origins of Vlach and Kinzer's two-covenant model. The opposition to Church Fathers regarding the Church being a continuation of Israel began with the *apocalypticism* that developed during the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.¹⁷ Many recall 1517 as the year of Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*, but few consider that this was the same year the Ottomans took Jerusalem from the Mamluks, which seems to have informed Luther's eschatological imagination.¹⁸ In 1529, Ottoman Sultan Suleiman began his siege of Vienna, an event Luther was well aware of as indicated in his preface to the *Augsburg Confession*.¹⁹ Luther's conflation of biblical prophecy and current events is further seen, as Robert O. Smith observes, in "Martin Luther's 1530 commentary on Ezekiel in which he identified the Ottoman Empire as 'Gog and Magog,'"²⁰ and in Luther's 1530 translation of Daniel, in which Luther identifies the "fourth beast of Daniel with the Roman empire and the small, arrogant horn (Dan 7:8) as Islam."²¹ Smith postulates that Luther's thinking informed the writing of English polemicist John Bale (1495–1563), whose work, *The Image of Both Churches* (1545), contained the first full-length commentary on the book of Revelation in the English language and identified the 144,000 from Rev 7:1–8 and 14:1–5 as Jews who would convert to the Protestant faith.²² Therefore, Yaakov Ariel contends that the Reformers, "in contrast to other branches of Christianity," saw the Jews as "continuators of biblical Israel, heirs to the covenant between God and Abraham, and the object of biblical prophecies about a restored David kingdom in the land of Israel."²³

This thinking gained exceptional headwind in the late nineteenth century following increased antisemitism in Europe, as well as a reckoning within many Protestant denominations and the Catholic Church regarding Christian complicity in Jewish pogroms.²⁴ Theologians, particularly amongst the Plymouth Brethren, began to postulate a theory known as "dispensationalism," which divided the grand arch of redemptive history into different

¹⁷ Robert O. Smith, *More Desired than Our Own Salvation: The Roots of Christian Zionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 47–59. An example of this is Luther's 1530 translation of Daniel, which included "a preface and a dedicatory letter to John Frederick of Saxony indicating Luther's belief that the world would soon end" (Smith, *More Desired than Our Own Salvation*, 51).

¹⁸ Smith, *More Desired than Our Own Salvation*, 49.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 50.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 47.

²¹ *Ibid*, 51.

²² *Ibid*, 56–57.

²³ Yaakov Ariel, "It's All in the Bible: Evangelical Christians, Biblical Literalism, and Philosemitism in Our Times" in *Philosemitism in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 258–259.

²⁴ David E. Holwerda, *Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 4.

“dispensations” or “ages,” suggesting God had initially focused redemptive history on national Israel, then pivoted to “the church age,” only to return to national Israel in the “last days.”²⁵

The Christian conflation of biblical Israel and the Jewish people led to widespread support for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, an ideology known as *Christian Zionism*.²⁶ The movement gained prominence in part due to the work of American evangelical William E. Blackstone who, in 1891, “organized a petition to the president of the United States requesting that the American government convene an international conference of the world powers that would give Palestine back to the Jews.”²⁷ Though the petition inevitably failed, this did not negate Blackstone’s efforts, and he devised a theory that, as Yaahov notes, “has become a cornerstone of American Christian support of Zionism and Israel ever since... that the United States had a special role and mission in God’s plan for humanity: that of a modern Cyrus, to help restore the Jews to Zion.”²⁸ In 1916, Blackstone organized a second petition, which proved successful, and convinced American president Woodrow Wilson to support the *Balfour Declaration* in 1917, which promised a state for the Jewish people in British Mandatory Palestine.²⁹ After the Holocaust, and the formation of the State of Israel in 1948, Christian support for Israel gained exceptional prominence, believing such an event to be a sign of Christ’s imminent return.³⁰ One notable publication postulating this eschatological narrative was Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), which received widespread acceptance within American popular culture.³¹

Thus, theologians today are left seemingly at an impasse: either the Church is a continuation of Israel, or God has two redemptive plans, one for national Israel, and another for

²⁵ Smith, *More Desired than Our Own Salvation*, 165–66. The “orthodox” understanding of dispensationalism was brought to North America from Great Britain by John Nelson Darby in the mid-nineteenth century and was widely spread through commentary in the Scofield Reference Bible (Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1875-1925* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979] 17.)

²⁶ For example, Lord Ashley Cooper, the leader of the evangelical party in Britain, petitioned the British foreign minister in 1840, requesting that British government “initiate the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine” (Ariel, “It’s All in the Bible,” 262).

²⁷ “More than four hundred prominent Americans signed the petition—congressmen, governors, mayors, publishers and editors of leading newspapers, notable clergy, and leading businessmen,” writes Ariel, “It’s All in the Bible,” 262.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 263.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 265.

³⁰ David R. Reagan, *Israel in Bible Prophecy: Past, Present & Future*. (Lamb & Lion Ministries, 2017); John F. Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis: What the Bible says about the future of the Middle East and the end of Western civilization* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974); Dwight J. Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Dunham Publishing Company, 1958); Mark Hitchcock, *The Second Coming of Babylon* (Multnomah Books, 2003).

³¹ Weber describes the work as “a popularly written attempt to show that ancient biblical prophecies about events leading up to the personal second coming of Jesus Christ are being fulfilled in our own time. The significance of Lindsey’s book is not so much its thesis...Rather, the book is noteworthy because it has been able to reach many people who are outside of those groups traditionally receptive to its message. Previously, books on prophecy could be found only in Christian (i.e. evangelical) or Bible bookstores. But *The Late Great Planet Earth* began showing up in drugstores, supermarkets, and ‘secular’ bookstores, right alongside gothic romances, cheap westerns, and books on the latest fads” (Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*, 5.)

the Church;³² and following the deadly attacks by Hamas on 7 October 2023, and the unfolding war in Gaza, the question of defining the State of Israel, not as a secular nation-state, but as a covenantal people of God, has grown poignantly louder within Western Evangelical discourse.³³ It is not uncommon to hear amongst some Western Christians an apologetic for the State of Israel based on biblical texts such as Gen 12:3, “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse.”³⁴ This creates further problems because promises given to Israel in the Hebrew Bible that pertain to land and inheritance (Gen 12:1–3; 12:7; 13:14–17; 15:7, 18–21; 17:8; 28:13–15; Exod 6:4, 8; 23:31; Lev 20:24; Num 34:1–12; Deut 1:8; 6:10–11; 11:24; 34:4; Josh 1:2–4; 21:43–45), as well as affirmations of said promises (Isa 49:15–16; Jer 31:35–37; Psalm 94:14; Isa 44:21; Ezek 16:60), are so abundant, that following the disintegration of the Davidic Kingdom under Rehoboam (1 King 12:1–24), and the destruction of the Herodian Temple by the Romans in 70 CE, confessional biblical scholars and theologians alike have been left to wrestle with these promises, how they could be fulfilled, and what that means for today.³⁵

In sum, scholars within the fields of systematic and biblical theology who postulate a theology of covenantal particularity between YHWH and modern Jewish Israelis is incredibly problematic, because to use Gen 12:3, or any other argument based on quasi-covenantal theology or eschatology, is not only unbiblical, but heresy of the subtlest kind, in which it is not Israel that has been replaced by the Church, but Christ who has been replaced by a secular state.³⁶ There is, therefore, a certain tragic degree of irony in my choice of topic for the present work; in “reimagining” ministry for the 21st century, we have again returned to the same debate as seen in Acts 15.

³² Mark S. Kinzer calls this “Bilateral Ecclesiology” (Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 2005. 160; Also see, Ariel, “It’s All in the Bible,” 259. For a detailed overview of the theological debate, see Holwerda, *Jesus & Israel*, 1–26.

³³ For examples of this discourse, see: Jack Hibbs, *Living in the Daze of Deception: How to Discern Truth from Culture’s Lies* (Harvest House Publishers, 2024), it is also noteworthy that this publication contains a forward by former United States Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo; Stephanie Quick, *The Torn Tents of Abraham & The Ordained Bridge of Reconciliation: Preeminence, Covenant and Controversy* (13 September 2024), Frontier Alliance International, Accessed 26 October 2024: <https://fai.online/articles/torn-tents>; Jonathan Cahn, *The Dragon’s Prophecy: Israel, the Dark Resurrection, and the End of Days* (Frontline, 2024); Charles C. Ryrie, *What You Need to Know About the Rapture* (Harvest Prophecy, 2024); Richard Pearson, *53 Descriptions of America’s Role in Bible Prophecy* (Rick Person Ministries, 2023).

³⁴ John Hagee, *In Defense of Israel: The Bible’s Mandate for Supporting the Jewish State* (Lake Mary: Frontline, 2007).

³⁵ For responses to a Christian Zionist reading of land promises, see: Munther, *From Land to Lands, from Eden to the Renewed Earth*; Munayer, “Theology of the Land,” 234–264; and finally, though Brueggemann does not directly address the Israel-Palestine context, his conclusions are in large part consistent with the Palestinian apologetic: Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

³⁶ For a concise and compelling lecture on this topic, see: Tony Deik, *CATC2024 Day 4: Missiology After Gaza: Christian Zionism, God’s Image, and the Gospel*, Christ at the Checkpoint, 2024, accessed on 30 September 2024: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTw5U6fLO5Q&ab_channel=ChristatTheCheckpoint; Deik contends that heresy may be measured by the distinct between Jesus and our theological centre.

Israel in the Hebrew Bible: The Problem of Terminology

The oldest inscriptional evidence of the name *Israel* occurs in hieroglyphic form (*ysrꜥꜣr*) in line twenty-seven of the *Song of Merneptah*, on the so-called “Israel Stele,” dated to ca. 1225 BCE.³⁷ It should be noted, as Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann suggest, that “whether this Israel is already identical with the tribal league known from the OT or signifies an even older sociological entity remains uncertain.”³⁸ However, in the Hebrew Bible, the name *Israel* appears more than 2,500 times,³⁹ and is used in no-less than six different contexts: in Genesis, it is almost exclusively used to refer to Jacob (Gen 32:28; 33:20; 35:10), with two exceptions where it references a geographic local (Gen 34:7; 49:7); it is used to reference the twelve tribes composing of Jacob’s descendant’s and their elders (Gen 49:28; Exod 3:16; 24:4);⁴⁰ YHWH’s first born son (Exod 4:22); the assembly in Egypt and the wilderness (Exod 12:3); the kingdom under Saul, David, and Solomon (1 Sam 15:35; 16:1; with an exception in 1 Sam 17:52 and 18:16 where there is a distinction made between Israel and Judah); and in the Prophets, it commonly refers to the Northern Kingdom (Isa 1:3; Jer 2:4; 31:31; Ezek 37:21; Hos 1:4, 10; Joel 2:27; Amos 2:6; Micah 1:14; Nah 2:2; Zeph 3:13; Zech 11:14; Mal 1:5; etc.), with at least one exception where it becomes messianic (Isa 10:17), or even seems to refer again to Jacob (Isa 14:1; 17:3; Ezek 37:16, 19; Micah 1:5). We therefore cannot assume a monolithic reading of the term, and any usage must be preceded by contextual clarification.

From an etymological perspective, that is the study of the development and meaning of a word, יִשְׂרָאֵל (*yis·rā·’êl* – *Israel*) is a construct of two Hebrew roots, which has often been understood as meaning “striver with God;” however, as Jenni and Westermann suggest, it could also have its origins as a liturgical cry in the context of holy war, and translated as “May El (God) contend.”⁴¹ In either understanding of the noun, the name indicates one who is in a struggle with God, or the one for whom God will contend. As is common with much of Christian theology, it may be that the meaning is itself found in the tension. Covenantal relationship takes no less than two parties, and in the context of Jacob’s name change, it is the Patriarch who has striven with God (Gen 32:28), and it is God who will contend for Jacob in the reconciliation process with his brother, Esau (Gen 33:4), the father of the Edomites (Gen 25:30; 36:1–43). The changing of Jacob’s name is therefore not a change of his cultural or ethnic identity, but rather,

³⁷ Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997) 581.

³⁸ Jenni and Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 581.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 581–582.

⁴⁰ Many English translations of the Hebrew Bible, such as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), and the New International Version (NIV), make a distinction between *Israel* and *Israelites* where such no such differentiation exists in the Hebrew. For example, in Exodus 1:7, the Hebrew is יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּנֵי (ū·ḥā·nē·yis·rā·’êl – *children of Israel*); here the King James Version (KJV) gets the translation right with “the children of Israel.” However, this problem is widespread within both the NRSV and NIV (Gen 32:32; 36:31; 46:8; 50:25; Exod 1:7,9,12,13; 2:23; Jud 13:1; 1 Sam 2:14; 2 Sam 15:6; 1 King 6:1; etc.) and presents challenges to the reader on how we understand the concept of biblical Israel. For when the term “Israelite” is used, when it is actually “children of Israel,” the reader naturally assumes an ethnic identity when the text is referring to Jacob’s descendants. This can refer both to biological descendants who have submitted to the terms of the covenant, namely, circumcision of the heart (Deut 30:6; Jer 9:26; Ezek 44:9), and those who have been ingrafted into the covenant, which in the practice of including ancient proselytes, literally meant the joining of paternal lineage to Jacob and kinship with his descendants.

⁴¹ Jenni and Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 581.

an outward sign of an inward changing of the heart, upon which Jacob is finally willing to reconcile with his brother.

From Abraham to the Wilderness

To further understand how Israel is used in the Hebrew Bible, it is necessary to make brief mention of how the term Hebrew (*hā·'īḇ·rî*) is used in the OT. The grandfather of Jacob, Abraham, is explicitly called a Hebrew in Genesis 14:13 and the term is not used again until Genesis 39:14, in reference to Joseph; Joseph then uses Hebrew to describe the land of his forefathers (Gen 40:15); it is also used to describe Joseph's brothers (Gen 43:31); and finally, it is used for the Hebrew midwives (Exod 1:15).⁴² Though it is tempting to use Hebrew and Israelite interchangeably, they are not the same. Jason A. Staples has convincingly argued that the primary designation of Hebrew is linguistic.⁴³ Staples makes use of Josephus, who regularly uses the term *Hebraios* when speaking of the pre-exilic period, but in doing so, he will often identify *Hebraioi* with *Ioudaioi* (Judean) (*Ant.* 1.146),⁴⁴ as he does with Israel, but never the other way around.⁴⁵ So too in 2 Maccabees (7:31; 11:13; 15:37), where each usage of the term is used to distinguish between Hebrew and Greek-speaking foreigners. Paul only uses the term "Hebrew" twice (2 Cor 11:22; Phil 3:5), and in each instance, it is to legitimize his ministry over that of rival teachers. In doing so, Paul is claiming authority in that he can read the Hebrew Bible in its original language.

Considering that Abraham was born before the naming of Jacob as Israel, it should then come as no surprise that Abraham is never referred to as an Israelite, but as a Hebrew (Gen 13:14). Again, this would make most sense as a linguistic designation since Abraham is an *Aramean* (one who comes from Aram/Syria).⁴⁶ In the case of Isaac, Abraham's son, he marries Rebekah, the sister of Laban, who is also an Aramean (Gen 25:20). Similarly, both Leah and Rachel, the daughters of Laban and the wives of Jacob, are both Aramean (Gen 29:10). This is why Deut 26:5, the prayer corresponding to the offering of first fruits, can refer to Jacob as an Aramean: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there

⁴² The term *Hebrew* continues to be used in the *Torah*, and, at times, appears to offer certain rights to the Hebrew speaking community; one such example is Deut 15:12, which speaks of Hebrew (*hā·'īḇ·rî*) slaves in the year of Jubilee. The reader is instructed to remember the bondage of Egypt (Deut 15:15), and therefore release fellow Hebrews on the seventh year, which complicates the term as being strictly linguistic. The extent to which Hebrew was spoken amongst the *ethnē* who join Israel is unclear, so one may be tempted to note a degree of ethnically specific obligation to fellow Hebrew speakers. However, it could also be an "in-group" designation, meaning the community is not to keep other "insiders" as slaves in perpetuity. Nevertheless, this highlights the complexity of this topic, and demonstrates why there has been such varying opinions and interpretations on the matter.

⁴³ Jason Staples, *The Idea of Israel in Second Temple Judaism: A New Theory of People, Exile, and Israelite Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) 60.

⁴⁴ It is worth mentioning the distinction between "Israel" and "Jew" or "Judean" (Gk. *Ioudaios*) as seen in the work of Josephus. In the Second Temple period, according to Josephus, the former is the Northern Tribes, and the latter the Southern tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi. For a complete overview of this distinction, see: Staples, *The Idea of Israel in Second Temple Judaism*, 22–50.

⁴⁵ Staples, *The Idea of Israel in Second Temple Judaism*, 61.

⁴⁶ Though there is no verse explicitly stating that Abraham was an Aramean, we do know that he lived amongst the Arameans (Gen 14:13), and that he was related to Laban (Gen 11:26–29; 22:20–20–30; 24:15, 29), who is explicitly called an Aramean (Gen 25:20).

as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.”⁴⁷ Now, this brings us to the controversial anthropological field of ethnic studies.⁴⁸ Anthony D. Smith has suggested six features that are often associated with ethnic boundary markers in ancient groups: collective name, common myth of descent, shared history, distinctive shared culture, association with specific territory, and a sense of solidarity.⁴⁹ Caroline J. Hodge contends we could also add “moral values, language, eating practices, physical characteristics, adherence to the same laws, and so on.”⁵⁰ For Fredrik Barth, the most important element in the formation of an ethnic identity is not the actual make-up of the group, but how the group distinguishes itself from those on the “outside.”⁵¹ If we are then to assess Jacob and his descendants in these terms, linguistically, he is a Hebrew; geographically, he is an Aramean; but covenantally, he is Israel, an identity that transcends his other ethnic markers and sets Jacob apart as one who would not let go of God until he blessed him.⁵²

In Exod 3:16 Moses is instructed to assemble the זְקֵנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (*ziq-nê yis-rā-’êl* – *elders of Israel*), it is the first time “Israel” is used which is not directly associated with Jacob. In Exod 12:3 this changes, and there is a seemingly new designation, the עֲדַת יִשְׂרָאֵל (*’ă-dat yis-rā-’êl* – *congregation of Israel*). In both instances, the elders and the congregation, the text still appears to be referencing the biological descendants of Jacob. However, the situation then gets a little more interesting following Exod 12:38, in which we are told that many עַרְבֵי (’ê-reb – *mixed tribes*) joined the children of Israel on their departure from Egypt. After this, ’ă-dat yis-rā-’êl, seems to reference the entire wilderness community, including the mixed tribes (Exod 12:47).⁵³ This corresponds with the writing of Mark Leuchter, who contends the Exodus account is the most notable biblical motif in the formation of Israel as a social entity.⁵⁴ Similarly, French historian Katell Berthelot contends the formative period of Israelite identity was during the reception of the Sinaitic covenant (Exod 19–20), upon which Israel is no longer marked by genealogical descent but by obedience.⁵⁵ This is further seen in the *Torah* with instructions for “foreigners” living amongst the Israelites being permitted to use the *cities of refuge* (Num 35:15), and welcomed to offer sacrifices on the altar and participate in other religious rights (Lev 22:18; Num 9:15; 15:14–16), including the *paschal* feast after completing the rite of

⁴⁷ All Scripture is quoted from *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989).

⁴⁸ Albert J. Harrill writes: “The term *ethnicity* is a neologism coined first in the field of anthropology during the 1940s as an academic substitute for older terms such as ‘race’ and ‘tribe’, which fell into disfavor because of their embarrassing history as pejorative language supporting the horrific ideologies and institutions of modern racism made abundantly clear in the Second World War” (Albert J. Harrill, “Ethnic Fluidity in Ephesians,” in *New Testament Studies* 60 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 382).

⁴⁹ Anthony Smith, *Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 22–32.

⁵⁰ Caroline Johnson Hodge, “Paul and Ethnicity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Pauline Studies* 54 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022): 552.

⁵¹ Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), as cited by Hodge, “Paul and Ethnicity,” 552.

⁵² See Genesis 32:26.

⁵³ This research has been completed in collaboration with Salim J. Munayer for his forthcoming book, *A Theology of Reconciliation* (working title).

⁵⁴ Mark Leuchter, *The Levites and the Boundaries of Israelite Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) 34. Leuchter references: Exod 15:4–5; Deut 1:30; 4:20; 5:6; 6:21; 9:7; Judg 5:2; 1 Sam 2:27; 8:8; 12:6; 1 Kgs 6:1; 8:16; 12:28; Hosea 11:1–4; Amos 9:7; Jer 2:6; 7:22; 32:21; Ezek 20:5–6, etc.

⁵⁵ Katell Berthelot, “Genealogy versus Merit? On the Role of Lineage in Ancient Judaism. Introduction,” *Journal of Ancient Judaism*, 11, No. 1 (2020): 3–4.

circumcision, thereby being granted full membership into the commonwealth of Israel (Exod 12:48). Berthelot, therefore, concludes the qualifications to be considered an Israelite are no longer genealogical but based on merit, namely, “on the basis of their willingness to observe God’s commandments, despite their non-Israelite lineage.”⁵⁶

It is therefore in the wilderness where we not only see Israel forming as a multi-ethnic people, but this coincides with the reconciliatory process between the house of Israel and *the mixed tribes who joined them* in the Exodus (Exod 12:38), upon which the entire community are commanded to love the stranger (Deut 10:18, 19, 14; Lev 19:34), echoing the reconciliation that happened between Jacob and Esau when he too was named Israel (Gen 32:28). The mixed ethnic nature of the congregation of Israel is further seen with Rahab the Canaanite joining the Israelite community (Josh 6:25), and Caleb the Kenizzite participating with the Israelites in the conquest of Canaan (Num 13:17–25; 32:12; Josh 14:6). In fact, as David G. Firth contends, the story of Rahab being included into the community of Israel, because of her faith and obedience to the God of Israel (Josh 6:25), is intentionally contrasted with the story of Achan, who is cut off because of disobedience (Josh 7:24), despite possessing a biological connection to Jacob through the tribe of Judah (Josh 7:1).⁵⁷ What is more, Rahab ends up being listed in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus, being one of the four women included, all of whom are “Gentiles”: Tamar the Canaanite (Matt 1:3; Gen 38:1–30; 1 Chron 2:4); Rahab the Canaanite (Matt 1:5; Josh 2:1); Ruth the Moabite (Matt 1:5; Ruth 1:16–17);⁵⁸ and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite (Matt 1:6; 2 Sam 11:3).

A Light to the Gentiles: From the Assyrian Conquest to the Post-Exilic Period

In the Hebrew Bible, the Prophets and Psalmists routinely write of a day when all nations will “stream to the mountain of the Lord” (Isa 2:2; Mic 4:1–2). Psalm 87 is perhaps the most lucid text within the Psalter as it pertains to the covenantal inclusion of the nations. The psalmist writes that Rahab (Egypt), Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, and Ethiopia, will say, “this one was born [in Zion]” (Psalm 87:1–4). Indeed, “And of Zion it shall be said, ‘This one and that one were born in it;’ for the Most High himself will establish it. The Lord records, as he registers the peoples, ‘This one was born there’” (Psalm 87:5–6). The image is that of holistic, cosmological redemption, which includes every tribe and tongue. The confessional scholarly consensus within systematic theology has therefore rightly explicated Psalm 87 and Isaiah, particularly Deutero-Isaiah (40–

⁵⁶ Berthelot, “Genealogy versus Merit?” 3–4.

⁵⁷ David G. Firth, *Including the Stranger: Foreigners in the Former Prophets* (Vol. 50; New Studies in Biblical Theology; Downer Grove: IVP Academic, 2019) 24–27.

⁵⁸ Katherine Southwood writes, “The narrative within the book of Ruth may also provide an example of ethnic change in relation to the homeland. Some scholars have already noted the change for Ruth herself who, given the epithet ‘the Moabite’ appears not to be a returnee. For example, Lau argues that Ruth subordinates and overrides her own identity since kinship is her priority. Likewise, Glover emphasizes the transformation in Ruth’s ethnic identity by the end of the narrative, noting that ‘Ruth’s ethnic transformation is mysterious because at the last the text abandons its obsession with Ruth’s ethnicity.’ Indeed, Ruth is continually called a Moabite (Ruth 1:4, 22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10). However, in the text’s final reference, Ruth is given no ethnic identifier. She is no longer ‘Ruth the Moabite,’ neither is she ‘Ruth the Israelite;’ rather she is simply ‘Ruth’” (Katherine Southwood, “The Impact of the Second and Third-Generation Returnees as a Model for Understanding the Post-Exilic Context,” in *Exile and Return* [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015]: 326–27).

55) and Trito-Isaiah (56–66), as proclaiming an eschatological hope that includes the redemption of all nations.⁵⁹ Within this corpus, Isaiah stands out among the rest within the prophetic canon advocating for Israel to be a “light to the nations” (גֹּיִם – *gôy*) (Isa 42:6; 49:6). What is interesting, the term *gôy* does not pertain exclusively to those outside the biological house of Jacob but is used to reference those who do not believe or obey the God of Israel, regardless of genealogical connection to Abraham.

This is seen in Isaiah 1:4 where the term *gôy* (nation) is used to describe Judeans who have disobeyed the commandments of YHWH, or in Isaiah 10:6, where it is used for the Northern Kingdom, Israel.⁶⁰ Jill A. Middlemas therefore suggests that this indicates the “prophet of the redacted material attributes what is foreign to those people acting in ways inconsistent with Yahwism as he defines it.”⁶¹ In other words, Isaiah describes disobedient Judeans and Israelites as foreigners, and foreigners who believe as “Israel” (Isa 44:5).

The situation then begins to take a drastic turn following the Babylonian Exile. We know from the writings of Josephus that it was primarily the Judeans who went into captivity (*Ant.* 11.173; cf. 2 King 24:14).⁶² It is in this period, as Jason A. Staples observes, that within the latter portions of Isaiah, the usage of “Israel” undergoes a drastic transformation.⁶³ Both Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah no longer use “Israel” to designate the Northern Kingdom but as a holistic qualifier for Judean identity. For example, in Isa 1:3 or 5:24 from the Assyrian period (ca. 911–605 BCE),⁶⁴ the prophet is addressing the Northern Kingdom within the context of a pending Assyrian invasion. However, in Isa 41:8, the prophet addresses “Israel,” which seems anachronistic, since Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BCE.⁶⁵ This becomes particularly interesting since Deutero-Isaiah is widely considered to have been written during the Neo-Babylonian period (ca. 625–539 BCE), over a hundred years after the destruction of Israel.⁶⁶

It seems that Israel during this period begins to be described with theocratic language, looking forward to a Davidic Kingdom by looking back to the Davidic kingdom. For example, “Israel” is used in the context of servant language (Isa 41:8), culminating in the mysterious *Suffering Servant* (Isa 52:12–53:12), and there is a prophetic oracle of Jacob’s descendants’ “adopting” the name Israel: “This one will say, ‘I am the Lord’s,’ another will be called by the name of Jacob, yet another will write on the hand, ‘The Lord’s,’ and adopt the name of Israel”

⁵⁹ Andreas J. Köstenberger and T. Desmond Alexander, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Second Edition; Vol. 53; New Studies in Biblical Theology; Downer Grove: IVP Academic, 2020) 11. Also see, Bart Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophets of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Jill A. Middlemas, “Trito-Isaiah’s Intra- and Internationalization: Identity Markers in the Second Temple period,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Period: Negotiating Identity in an International Context*, eds. Oded Lipschits, Gary N. Knoppers, and Manfred Oeming, (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 113–15; Yohanna Katanacho, “Jerusalem Is the City of God: A Palestinian Reading of Psalm 87” in *The Land Cries Out: Theology of the Land in the Israeli-Palestinian Context* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012).

⁶⁰ Middlemas, “Trito-Isaiah’s Intra- and Internationalization,” 117.

⁶¹ Middlemas, “Trito-Isaiah’s Intra- and Internationalization,” 117.

⁶² Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987) 297.

⁶³ Staples, *The Idea of Israel in Second Temple Judaism*, 119.

⁶⁴ Klaus Baltzer, “The Book of Isaiah,” in *Harvard Theological Review* 103, No. 3 (2010): 261.

⁶⁵ Gordon McConville, *Exploring the Old Testament, Volume 4: A Guide to the Prophets* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002) 24.

⁶⁶ Baltzer, “The Book of Isaiah,” 261.

(Isa 44:5). The language of adoption is again peculiar, considering that if Israel is now being used to reference Jacob's descendants (Isa 44:3) the language of adoption is redundant. However, it seems rather that this is an ingathering of the nations, everyone who chooses to believe in the God of Jacob. It is therefore clear that the qualifications for Israel are not based on genealogy but obedience, which becomes apparent by the end of the book, where YHWH declares, "They will declare my glory among the nations... and I will also take some of them as priests and as Levites" (Isa 66:19c, 21).⁶⁷ Staples, therefore, contends that we see something similar in the end of Isaiah, where "the emphasis is that [YHWH's] salvific intentions have the potential to include an international body of persons while excluding members of the intranational community that fails to observe certain requisite behaviors."⁶⁸

In sum, Isaiah's use of Israel changes as the redacted material continues. It moves from specifically referencing the Northern Kingdom to a holistic qualifier for covenantal inclusion, which is not genealogically specific, but rather, based on Sinai, where inclusion into the Commonwealth of Israel is based on obedience, faith, and the mysterious work of the *Suffering Servant* (Isa 53:4–5).

Jesus' Exposition of Isaiah

In Luke 4 we are introduced to Jesus' first public teaching in Nazareth. His text is Isaiah 61:1–2, which is an interesting choice, particularly because of Isaiah's emphasis on Israel being a light to the nations. Luke's gospel account records Jesus proclaiming that the Scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing (v. 4:21b), and that "all spoke well of him" (v. 4:22a). However, as is so common with Jesus, he then proceeds to radically exposit the text. Jesus makes note of both Elijah and Elisha's ministry (4:25, 27), and claims that in the time of Elijah, though there "were many widows in Israel and severe famine, that Elijah was not sent to any of them, except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon" (4:25–26), modern-day Lebanon. Similarly, though "there were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha... none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian" (4:27). Therefore, Palestinian theologian, Naime Ateek can write, "Ethnocentricity is opposed, ethnic arrogance is challenged, and any superior feeling is discouraged and shattered."⁶⁹ Jesus is pointing the people to the nations, shattering their ethnocentric paradigm, a rebuke taken with such disdain that Luke tells us "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff" (4:28–29). In other words, the crowd refused to accept that God would send Elijah and Elisha to Gentiles, and the people who Jesus likely grew up with in Nazareth so vehemently opposed such a notion that they tried to kill him.

What the crowds failed to see is that Jesus was succeeding where Israel had failed. Jesus is the fulfilment of Israel. We see this with even more clarity toward the end of Luke's gospel account, when Jesus explains the Scriptures to the disciples on the Road to Emmaus, "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Lk 24:27). Colin G. Chapman suggests that:

⁶⁷ Staples, *The Idea of Israel in Second Temple Judaism*, 123.

⁶⁸ Staples, *The Idea of Israel in Second Temple Judaism*, 123.

⁶⁹ Naim Ateek, "The Earth is the Lord's: Land, Theology, and the Bible," in *The Land Cries Out: Theology of the Land in the Israeli-Palestinian Context* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012) 177.

[Jesus] wanted them to understand that *all* that the prophets had said about *Israel* and its redemption had been fulfilled in *himself*. It was not that he was disinterested in their hopes for a nation. Rather he was trying to tell them that he *had* accomplished the redemption of Israel—although not in the way they had expected.⁷⁰

This is not an isolated theory but has been postulated by theologians such as Karl Barth⁷¹ and N.T. Wright, who argues that Jesus “saw himself as the leader and focal point of the true, returning-from-exile Israel.”⁷² Wright makes specific note of Jesus’ context, namely, Roman occupation that was preceded by the Hasmonean and Herodian dynasties, which provided models of kingship and set the expectation of what a messianic theocracy could look like, or rather, what could be the antithesis, with the expected Messiah replacing these corrupt dynasties with the God-given Davidic kingdom.⁷³ It is evident, from the first and second centuries violent uprisings, such as the destruction of the Herodian Temple in 70 CE and the Bar-Kokhba revolt, that Jesus’ theocratic model did not fit the paradigm of many who had a different vision for the kingdom. The people influenced by the Hasmonean ethnocentrism expected a kingdom made in their own image; however, Jesus brought a kingdom that shattered such notions, coming as the fulfillment of Israel. As Wright notes, “Jesus believed that he was embodying, and thus symbolizing in himself, the return of Israel from exile.”⁷⁴ In sum, Jesus inaugurated the coming Davidic kingdom, in which he took on the title and role of Israel, succeeding in every way that Israel had previously failed, namely, making way for all *ethnē* to enter the Kingdom of God.

Paul: The Apostle to the Gentiles

Paul, the self-proclaimed “Apostle to the Gentiles” (Rom 11:13; Gal 2:7–8), covers the theme of Gentile covenantal inclusion with such consistency and depth (Rom 4:9–12; 4:16–17; 9–11; Gal 3:6–9, 14, 26–29; Eph 2:11–13; 3:6; Col 3:11–12; Phil 3:3; 1 Cor 7:18–20; 12:13; 2 Cor 5:16–17; 1 Tim 1:3–7; 2:3–7; 3:16; Titus 3:9), that it must be considered the main concern of his ministry. Krister Stendahl, the influential Swedish Pauline scholar, argued that Paul was not necessarily concerned with Gentiles standing before God in general, but the standing of Gentiles before the God of Israel.⁷⁵ Stendahl’s work proved influential for E. P. Sanders’ watershed publication for Pauline studies, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977), upon which Sanders suggested that Paul remained within Judaism and should be understood more as a Jewish reformer.⁷⁶ The theory has since become known as the “New Perspective on Paul” and has in one degree or another

⁷⁰ Colin G. Chapman, *Whose Promised Land? The Continuing Crisis Over Israel and Palestine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002) 159–60.

⁷¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II, 195–210.

⁷² N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Augsburg: Fortress Publishers, 1997) 930.

⁷³ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 939.

⁷⁴ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 937.

⁷⁵ Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” in *The Harvard Theological Review* 56, No. 4 (1963): 199–215.

⁷⁶ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977).

dominated Pauline scholarship ever since.⁷⁷ It is a profound new scholarly consensus and makes Paul's statements on the inclusion of Gentiles into the House of Israel that much more compelling. He is an Israelite (Rom 11:1; 2 Cor 11:22), an *Ioudaios* from Tarsus (Acts 21:39), of the tribe of Benjamin (Rom 11:1), studied under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), of the seed of Abraham (2 Cor 11:22), and most significantly, accused of bringing Trophimus, a Gentile from Ephesus, into the Herodian Temple (Acts 21:28–29)—a rumour, whether true or not, which sparked such outrage that the crowds in Jerusalem tried to kill him (Acts 12:31). The significance of these accusations, and most notably, the crowds response, should not be overlooked, and may be an incident that Paul recalled while writing his letter to the Ephesians, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19). It is the great mystery of Paul that after an encounter with the living God he would repent from being ethnically particular to proclaiming reconciliation for not only Gentiles but the entire cosmos (2 Cor 5:16–21; Eph 2:15–22; Col 1:15–23).⁷⁸

Due to the scope of Paul's discourse on these matters, to cover his theology in detail would no doubt require several volumes. Therefore, for the sake of brevity, I will briefly make note of his two most striking pericopes. The first, and perhaps most lucid, comes in Galatians 3:28–29:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

The main point here is Paul's development of kinship language, indicating that those who are in Christ have become children of Abraham. In the Roman world, as Paula Fredriksen suggests, religious conversion, given its ethnic embeddedness and contribution to one's core identity, hardly made sense; rather, the closest analogues to conversion were, as Fredriksen notes, “adoption and marriage, both of which ritually created a bond of (legal but fictive) kinship,

⁷⁷ Mark D. Nanos, “Introduction,” in *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, ed. Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015); P.F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in Paul's Letters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); L. Sechrest, *A Former Jew: Paul and the Dialectics of Race* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2010); C. Concannon, *Ecclesia laus Corinthienis: Negotiating Ethnicity under Empire* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 2010); Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); Mark D. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in the First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002); Mark D. Nanos, “Paul and the Jewish Tradition: The Ideology of the Shema,” in *Celebrating Paul: Festschrift in Honor of Jerome Murphy-C' Connor, O.P., and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J.*, ed. P. Spitaler (Washington: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2011); P. Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009); Paula Fredriksen, *Sin: The Early History of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); D.K. Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul: A Student's Guide to Recent Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009); S. Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The 'Lutheran' Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 2.

⁷⁸ My awareness of these three texts, and their focus on reconciliation, may be attributed to research conducted with Salim J. Munayer for his forthcoming publication, *A Theology of Reconciliation* (working title).

obligating the adoptee, or the wife, to new deities, rituals, and ancestors.”⁷⁹ Thus, Fredriksen continues, “a pagan’s ‘becoming’ a Jew was tantamount to changing his own past, reconfiguring his ancestry, deserting his own pantheon, family, and *patria*.”⁸⁰ This aligns with Paul’s language of kinship, which is best understood within the custom of Gentile proselytes, upon which their “conversion” into “Judaism” is seen as a forsaking of paternal family and joining the family of Jacob, thereby receiving the name “Israel.” They are now sons and daughters of not only Jacob and Abraham but God himself. This means that Paul is not advocating for an erasure of ethnic distinctness, but as Johnson Caroline Hodge contends, “The unity Paul speaks of in Christ is itself ethnically specific; it is tied to Israel. Those who are baptized into Christ become descendants of Abraham, and thus heirs of God’s promise. This new identity is described in terms of ethnicity, kinship, and standing before Israel’s God.”⁸¹ In other words, the community in Christ, regardless of their ethnic background, are brought into the house of Israel, which according to first-century customs, grafted Gentile converts into the family of Jacob, subsequently granting the right to be called children of God.

Paul continues with this language of kinship in Romans 9:6–8, which sets the context for the entirety of his 9–11 pedagogy of covenantal inclusion:

It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, and not all of Abraham’s children are his true descendants; but “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.” This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants.

Paul emphasizes this point by quoting Hosea 2:23 and 1:10: “I will call them ‘my people’ who are not my people; and I will call her ‘my loved one’ who is not my loved one,” and, “It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘sons of the living God’” (Rom 9:25–26). Paul is consistent in stating that those who are Israel are children of the Promise, not by physical descent, but by faith. It is also noteworthy that Paul substantiates his claim by quoting a Hebrew prophet, indicating that this is not a new development, but is consistent with the heart of God all along.

It is therefore of no surprise that Paul calls the Gentile believers the children of Abraham, which is seen elsewhere in both Jesus and John the Baptist’s teachings. In John’s gospel account, Jesus reiterates this point in a conversation with the “Jews who had believed” in John 8:31–59, concluding, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing what Abraham did” (Jn 8:39). Jesus rebukes the hearers, clarifying that their inclusion into the house of Abraham—and thereby Israel—is not based on genealogy but on obedience. Similarly, John the Baptist says, “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; Luke 3:8), again, reiterating this point. In sum, Paul’s theology is consistent with not only Jesus and John the Baptist, but with the Hebrew Scriptures at large. He contends that inclusion into Israel is based not on biology, but on merit, namely belief and obedience to God in Christ.

⁷⁹ Paula Fredriksen, “Paul, Practical Pluralism,” 4: As cited by Albert J. Harrill, “Ethnic Fluidity in Ephesians,” in *New Testament Studies* 60 (2014): 389–90.

⁸⁰ Fredriksen, “Paul, Practical Pluralism,” 4.

⁸¹ Hodge, “Paul and Ethnicity,” 556.

Conclusion

We have so far covered a great deal of ground, and no doubt, this is only the surface. The theme in focus saturates the Hebrew Bible and NT, and there have been significant points left unsaid. However, what I have presented is a brief overview of Christian Zionism's origins and demonstrated that this was a sixteenth-century development contrary to the teachings of both the Church Fathers and NT, which define "Israel" as a multi-ethnic people in covenantal relationship with YHWH. Furthermore, it is my hope that the work's guiding questions have been sufficiently answered: (1) Israel in the Hebrew Bible is a people in covenantal relationship to YHWH as marked by a disposition of the heart, and lived out in belief and obedience, which is seen in the life of Jacob, the wilderness community, the Prophets, Gospels, and Pauline Epistles; (2) biblical Israel's role is to be a light to the nations, bearing witness to the nature of YHWH, and the good news of his kingdom, which through Christ, all people are offered citizenship; (3) the relationship of the nations (*ethnē – gentiles*) to the Abrahamic covenant is one of kinship, namely, that those who believe and obey are to not only called children of Abraham, but children of God.

In sum, biblical Israel today are those who have entered into covenantal relationship with YHWH, which according to the disciples Peter and John as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, can only be through Christ (Act 4:12).⁸² If this is true, then the current State of Israel is a nation-state—and this alone—meaning that biblical Israel and the modern State of Israel are fundamentally different; the former being those in Christ, the latter a temporal state; one is a covenantal community, made possible because of the true Israelite, Jesus; the other is birthed in 1948. To confuse the two is a regrettable conflation, and as noted in a recent article by Gazan native and Palestinian Christian, Yousef K. Alkouri, has caused a great deal of harm to the mission of Jesus in Palestine.⁸³ However, despite these obstacles, though the Church in Palestine is small, they are determined, and as the Palestinian Patriarch of Jerusalem, Michel Sabbah once wrote:

To be small in this land is simply to live as Jesus lived here. That does not mean having a diminished life on the margins or a life made up of fear and perplexity. We know why we are small, and we know what place we should occupy in our society and in the world. We are part of the mystery of Jesus and we remain with him on Calvary, strong and supported by the hope and the joy of the Resurrection, which are to be lived and shared with all.⁸⁴

There is indeed hope, and there is a remnant within the Palestinian Church who are determined to remain in the land, witnessing for Christ. According to *Kairos Palestine*, a collective statement by the heads of churches and religious leaders in Palestine, the invitation to Christians of the world is: "Come and see. We will fulfill our role to make known to you the truth of our reality, receiving you as pilgrims coming to us to pray, carrying a message of peace, love and reconciliation."⁸⁵ Indeed, as Palestinian theologian, Mitri Raheb writes, "we are here as a stumbling block, a stumbling block that was created by Christ himself, 'my witnesses'

⁸² According to Acts 11:26, the followers of Jesus were first called "Christians" at Antioch.

⁸³ Yousef Kamal Alkouri, "Which Gospel? The Militarization of Sacred Texts in Israel's Genocide in Gaza," in *International Journal of Public Theology* 18 (2024): 488–508.

⁸⁴ Michel Sabbah, *Faithful Witness: On Reconciliation and Peace in the Holy Land* (New York: New City Press, 2009) 175.

⁸⁵ *Kairos Palestine: A Moment of Truth*, 2009. 6.2.

witnessing to the crucified Lord.”⁸⁶ With all my heart I pray this witness continues, that God would have mercy on his Church in Palestine, and for Christians around the world, that we would again place Christ at the centre of our covenant theology, making no distinction between Jew or Gentile.

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⁸⁶ Mitri Raheb, “The Third Kingdom: Theology, Politics and the Israel-Palestine Conflict,” in *Challenging Christian Zionism* (London: Melisende, 2005) 268–269.

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