

# **Porous Borders and Textual Ambiguity: Why ancient Israel is no model for modern nationalism**

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Across Europe we are currently seeing a rising tide of hard right-wing movements; some achieving political power, some operating at the fringes of society. They are, as we shall see, quite heterogeneous, but the concern of this paper is the use that some of them are making of Christian symbols and language.

Olivier Roy describes how such 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 counter narratives of hate and othering if they feel that their own sacred text might be lending support to the ideology?

What I would like to do this morning is to identify some elements of nationalistic ideology, particularly focusing on those which may appear to have some consonance with the Bible. We 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. But in order to say anything meaningful in the time that we have, it will be important to

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<sup>1</sup> Roy, Olivier. 2016 "Beyond populism: the conservative right, the courts, the churches and the concept of a Christian Europe." in Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, and Olivier Roy (eds). *Saving the people: How populists hijack religion*. London: Hurst: 185-201, p.186.

make some generalisation. So what I say, I offer with some tentativity, and with the stated 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 and so on.

If this weren't complex enough, the ways that different writers may use these terms differ, which can make it hard to relate one scholar's work with another's, unless we carefully check what is under discussion – and, of course, not every writer defines their terms clearly.

Delineating most of these terms cannot detain us on this occasion, but I will take a moment to define **nationalism**. Nationalism is an ideology that 'focuses on the congruence of the cultural and the political community; that is, the nation and the state'.<sup>2</sup> This is generally understood to fall into two categories: civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism. *Civic* nationalism is inclusive, and focusses on the autonomy, unity and identity of the legal population of a nation. *Ethnic* nationalism, on the other hand, is exclusive; focussed 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 I will be discussing in our time together this morning. From here on, I will simply refer to it as 'nationalism'.

## **Far right ideology: mapping the terrain**

So what are the key elements of far-right ideology which might appear to find support from the Bible?

1. First, far right movements are often associated with an appeal for moral reform, for law and order, for an ethical clean-up. This may be a backlash against political and financial corruption; it may be a response to street crime, perceived as being the responsibility of non-natives in society; or sometimes it takes the form of the policing of sexual conduct, particularly homosexuality.

Resistance to such movements can be cast in terms of opposing law and order and promoting criminal activity. It will be apparent that such ideologies may

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Kaufman, in Bonikowski, Bart, et al. "Populism and nationalism in a comparative perspective: a scholarly exchange." *Nations and Nationalism* 25.1 (2019): 58-81, p.72

appear to find support from biblical themes of ethical purity of Israel, the Levitical law, and the very hierarchical society which is found in theocratic Israel.

2. Second, the rise of the far-right has generally 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';<sup>3</sup> and ethnopluralism, which argues that 'people are divided into ethnic groups, which are equal, but should remain segregated'.<sup>4</sup> This form of nationalism expresses itself in *othering* and *abjection*;<sup>5</sup> in its most extreme form, it may be expressed as a re-emergence of German fascism, where the *Übermenschen* are destined to dominate the inferior *Untermenschen*.

Support for such beliefs might be sought in the biblical themes of the ethnic purity of Israel; the rules against intermarriage; the conquest of Canaan and the herem of the Canaanite tribes; and the 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. An expressed objection desire to this can then be cast in terms of a rejection of Christianity.<sup>6</sup> This then becomes 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.

3. Third, some far-right movements are associated with a particular form of nationalism, sometimes expressed as exceptionalism; a form of national self-

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<sup>3</sup> Mudde, Cas. 2019. *The Far Right Today*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p.27

<sup>4</sup> Mudde, Cas. 2019. *The Far Right Today*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p.27

<sup>5</sup> Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>6</sup> 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?' Peace, Timothy. 2016. "Religion and Populism in Britain: An infertile breeding ground?" in Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, and Olivier Roy (eds). *Saving the people: How populists hijack religion*. London: Hurst: 95-108, p.108.

identity wherein the nation views itself as *sui generis*. This may express itself as a moral superiority over other nations and a sense of self-congratulation, accompanied with a blindness to the moral defects of the home nation.

Additionally, it may express itself an expectation of special treatment within the international community; the Brexit phenomenon within my own nation carries a strong element of British exceptionalism.<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes that exceptionalism is viewed in theological terms. The USA's nineteenth century myth of 'manifest destiny'<sup>8</sup> was based upon the Founders' understanding of America having a peculiar role in God's purposes. It is in some ways easy to see how this compares to the exceptionalism of Israel in the Old Testament. In the time of the Puritans the notion became mapped onto the new world through the language of the 'New Israel'.<sup>9</sup> In his lecture of March 21, 1630, delivered in Southampton to a group of travellers bound for Boston, John Winthrop referred to these New World colonists as 'a city on a hill'. The phrase has since been used of the USA by John F Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama and others.

4. A fourth component of much nationalism and far-right political expression is the masculine leader, the 'strong man' who is authoritarian, charismatic, often from a military background, and may conduct himself in a crude, perhaps violent manner. In populist movements this leader represents himself as a man of the people, a man of action, who is not afraid to take difficult decisions, and make bold, decisive choices.<sup>10</sup> Such bellicose language lends itself to violent interpretation, perhaps acts of terror or street violence, in the case of fringe groups; perhaps international conflict in the case of far right parties which have achieved significant political influence.

This can often be accompanied by gendered language and sexual stereotyping. Many far-right groups actively promote so-called '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.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/brexit-europe-british-exceptionalism-drove-vote-but-eu-media-arent-buying-it/>

<sup>8</sup> Hastedt, Glenn. "Manifest Destiny." In *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*, by Glenn Hastedt, and Allison Shelton. 2nd ed. Facts On File, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Chapman, Roger. "American Exceptionalism." In *Culture Wars in America: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices*, edited by Roger Chapman, and James Ciment. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

It will be apparent that here, too, the Bible contains texts to which supporters of this ideology may appeal. The messianic thread of the Old Testament, with its reference to the (male) leader who will save the people, often accompanied by strong military imagery, provides convenient rhetoric behind which those so-inclined may shelter. Additionally, the complementarian theology of highly dichotomised 'biblical manhood and womanhood', lends itself to support this notion.<sup>11</sup>

### **Bible and Nationalism: An Unholy Alliance**

Why should biblical tropes be so fertile a breeding ground for nationalistic sentiment? Adrian Hastings, and building upon his work Willie Jennings, offer us 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.<sup>12</sup>

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 the 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.<sup>13</sup> As Willie Jennings argues, this is directly oppositional to faithful scriptural interpretation.

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the Danvers Statement, produced by the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood in 1987.

<sup>12</sup> Hastings, Adrian. 1997. *The construction of nationhood: Ethnicity, religion and nationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.2-3.

<sup>13</sup> 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.' Nicolson, Adam. *Power and glory: Jacobean England and the making of the King James Bible*. HarperCollins UK, 2004 p.60.

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.<sup>14</sup>

How are we to respond to this set of challenges? Are we to throw up our hands and concede defeat in the face of such a depressing litany? After all, we know that the Bible can be (mis)used to support many ideologies. But it can be read more faithfully than that. And in order to do this, or to try to do it, it is important that the biblical theology of the themes we have identified be examined. It is not good enough to try to map our own setting onto Israel's history.<sup>15</sup>

This has not stopped people from trying to do so. As Oliver O'Donovan writes,

There has been no lack of interest in the beckoning fruitfulness of Israel's political categories.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup>

### **Land, bloodline and vocation: towards an Old Testament theology**

To that end, then, I'd like to gesture towards a biblical-theological reading of some of the themes identified above. It will not be possible to treat them all in the time that we have available, so I will focus on what I perceive to be the main one which might, if misinterpreted, provide grist to the mill of the nationalist project. This is the theme of ethnic purity and exceptionalism in Israel. While those themes are no doubt present in the Old Testament, there is also a strong counter-theme of porous borders,

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<sup>14</sup> Jennings, Willie James. *The Christian imagination: Theology and the origins of race*. Yale University Press, 2010, p.209.

<sup>15</sup> Willie Jennings provides a number of examples of such 'mapping' in the hymns of Isaac Watts, including (p.213) 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.

<sup>16</sup> O'Donovan, Oliver. 1999. *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the roots of political theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.22.

<sup>17</sup> O'Donovan, Oliver. 1999. *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the roots of political theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.22.

good Canaanites and unexpected meetings. We will briefly examine these within the Old Testament and then, in agreement with O'Donovan's appeal for an architectonic hermeneutic, try to identify how the themes 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, NRSV). 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.<sup>18</sup> This vocation is reiterated to Noah in Genesis 9:1. It then starts to be fulfilled in the table of nations in 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.

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 blessed<sup>19</sup> – through Abraham's obedience. Here, alongside some what we might call 'exceptionalist' language 'I will bless those who bless you', we see the purpose of the blessing of the nations.

This balance of the special, chosen, status of Israel with its responsibilities for the blessing of 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. 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

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<sup>18</sup> Eg Habakkuk 2:14 or Isaiah 24:16.

<sup>19</sup> The question hangs upon the translation of the *niphal* form of the Hebrew verb *bārach*.

Genesis and Joshua to individual Canaanites, which is often quite positive.<sup>20</sup> So, the Israelites are told not to marry the Canaanites (Deut 7:3). But in actual fact, there are many stories of women from pagan nations marrying into Israel – some of these are quite prominent. Rahab (the Canaanite) and Ruth (the Moabite) are two examples, both admitted to the nation on the basis of their 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)

The completeness of the integration of each of these women is highly striking. We all know that Ruth finds herself in the family tree of David, and consequently of Jesus. Rahab's integration is less well-known. We should note that she is brought into the *heart* of the nation (Josh 6:25: Hebrew *qereb*, meaning 'innards'). We should also note that 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, is strongly reminiscent of the Passover event that took place among the Israelites a generation earlier.

And while we're on the subject of the Exodus, we should notice that among the departing people group were 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,<sup>21</sup> were permitted to participate in the Passover once circumcised,<sup>22</sup> and were present at the covenant renewal.<sup>23</sup>

Admission to the nation on the basis of a faith commitment was not the privilege of women alone. In the time of Joshua the Gibeonites, also known as the Hivites, were one of the nations subject to 'the ban'.<sup>24</sup> Yet they managed to trick Joshua into making a peace treaty with them, in a passages 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; certainly a *Leitwort* to draw our attention to the way that they have manoeuvred their way into covenant blessings. Indeed, in 11:19, the other nations are censured for not having

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<sup>20</sup> Ford, William. "The Challenge of the Canaanites." *Tyndale Bulletin* 68, no. 2 (2017): 161-184.

<sup>21</sup> Exod. 20:10.

<sup>22</sup> Exod. 12:48-9, Num. 15:15-16.

<sup>23</sup> Josh 8:33,35, cf. Deut 16:10-14; 26:10-11; 27:4-14, Exodus 12:43-49; 20:10.

<sup>24</sup> cf. Deut 20:17.



sued for peace as the Gibeonites did. We should not miss the unexpected nature of this – another strand of the text has these seven nations irrevocably designated for the ban.

The ethnic boundaries of Israel are far more porous than we might initially imagine.

The geographical borders 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. Moreover, the biblical testimony of how complete the conquest was, is highly ambiguous. 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, to give just one further example – though there are plenty more – 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.

Textual ambiguity of this sort is known as polyphony. It is as if there are two or more voices in debate with one another. 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. 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 something aspirational – a theological claim – in dialogue with a more factual account of events. 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 and tells him that he is not on Israel's side.

There are plenty of other examples along these lines. We might notice the astonishing story of Jonah, where God's tenderness towards Nineveh is writ large – we should hold this in polyphonic tension with Nahum, which is a polemic against that same city.

And, while we're on the subject of Nineveh, which was the capital of Assyria, may I draw to your attention to an astonishing little passage in Isaiah, which is often overlooked. In Isaiah 19, 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.<sup>25</sup>

### **Land, bloodline, vocation in the New Testament<sup>26</sup>**

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 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.

Yohanna Katanacho summarises the evidence like this.

The claim that God gave Israel her land[...] does not pay sufficient attention to the territorial fluidity of the land; to the notion that biblical Israel is a non-exclusive ethnic group, or to the moral requirements for dwelling in the land[...] The alternative is this: Christ is the owner of the land.<sup>27</sup>

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

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<sup>25</sup> 'On that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the LORD of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun. On that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the center of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the LORD at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the LORD because of oppressors, he will send them a saviour, and will defend and deliver them. The LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the LORD on that day, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the LORD and perform them. The LORD will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the LORD, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them. On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyria will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage."' (Isaiah 19:18–25).

<sup>26</sup> I am grateful to Revd Dr Stephen Finamore for a conversation which helped me to sharpen my thinking for part of this section.

<sup>27</sup> Katanacho, Yohanna. 2013. *The Land of Christ: A Palestinian Cry*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, p.30.

(Acts 1:8) – which, incidentally, reflects the creation mandate of Genesis 1:28 – Paul takes the gospel to Jew and to Gentile. For both of 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.<sup>28</sup>

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.<sup>29</sup> Then, after his ascension this same mission and vocation is vouchsafed 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.<sup>30</sup>

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

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<sup>28</sup> A useful discussion of this matter may be found in Howard-Brook, Wes, and Anthony Gwyther. 1999. *Unveiling Empire: reading Revelation then and now*. Orbis Books.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example Wright, N. T. 2013. *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

<sup>30</sup> 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'. (This means that spiritual Israel and physical Israel are two different names for the same people. This belief, incidentally, permitted the early editors of the AV to use section titles in the Old Testament such as 'God comforteth his Church'.)

*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, 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. *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 Jacob, Alex. 2010. *The Case for Enlargement Theology*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edn) Glory to God Publications. 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.

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 at, the New Testament has writ large.

This, of course, 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<sup>31</sup> 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 dissolved into ephemeral 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. 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 we Gentile Christians 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':<sup>32</sup>

We [Gentiles] are in the story [despite]<sup>33</sup> a prohibiting word to his disciples, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans" (Matt

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<sup>31</sup> This theological perspective is also known as 'Enlargement theology'. See Jacob, Alex. 2010. *The Case for Enlargement Theology*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edn) Glory to God Publications. The interested reader is referred to this book for a much more thorough analysis of replacement theology, two-covenant theology, and enlargement theology.

<sup>32</sup> Jennings, Willie James. 2010. *The Christian imagination: Theology and the origins of race*. Yale University Press, p.259.

<sup>33</sup> *sic* through

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.<sup>34</sup>

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.

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

### **Concluding remarks**

The nationalism of the far right is a dangerous phenomenon which is threatening the peace and perhaps the stability of many parts of Europe 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.'<sup>35</sup> 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'.<sup>36</sup> In other words, the church has no business

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<sup>34</sup> Jennings, Willie James. 2010. *The Christian imagination: Theology and the origins of race*. Yale University Press, p.262.

<sup>35</sup> Wright, Nigel G. 2011. *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, p.211.

<sup>36</sup> Wright, Nigel G. 2011. *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, p.212.

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 up. And the danger that we in the Church could become complicit with this is real. 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.'<sup>37</sup>

I'd like to conclude with a more positive view of how the church might relate to the political movement or to the state; that is the role of prophet. In 1 Kings 22, we see two different models for prophecy in ancient Israel. The state, or court, prophets were effectively cheer-leaders for the king, telling him exactly what he wanted to hear. *Should I go up to battle against Ramoth-Gilead?*, he asks (v.6). And the court prophets, 400 of them, reply with one voice, *Go up; for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king* (v.6).

Not so Micaiah. He is not present at that time, since he is not resident within the royal court and – it would appear – he is not on the king's payroll. Micaiah has to be sent for, and on the way, the messenger attempts to coach him to get him on-message. *As the LORD lives*, replies Micaiah, *whatever the LORD says to me, that I will speak* (v.14). And so it should be with all true prophets of the Lord, and with a Church that is truly prophetic.

Helen Paynter  
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Bristol, November 2019

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<sup>37</sup> Green, Bernard. 2008. *European Baptists and the Third Reich*. Baptist Historical Society, p.iii.