CHAPTER FOUR

THE PEOPLE OF GOD

If the primary point of reference in the understanding of who God is in the Old Testament is that he is 'the God of Israel', then the natural correlate of this is that Israel is to be understood as 'the people of Yahweh'. This clearly involves some understanding of the identity, scope and purpose of the people called 'Israel'. From the point of view of the Old Testament the answer to this question of identity is resolved very simply by the portrait of Israel as the patriarchal ancestor of the nation, whose twelve sons produce offspring which become twelve tribes, who themselves ultimately grow and prosper until they become a nation (Gen. 35.22–6). Such is the simplicity of the tradition, although the theological implications of understanding it are not resolved by its form. For one thing Israel comprised a single nation for only a remarkably small part of the period covered by the Old Testament. After less than a century the united nation split into two, the larger part of which survived for two centuries, and the smaller for little over a century more. After this the time when all Israel, or all who claimed descent from Israel, could be defined as a nation ceased, and has never been recovered. Although for a brief period a new national entity of Judah emerged in the late Old Testament period, this never embraced all those who felt themselves to be Jews, nor even a majority of them. In the modern world the revival of the state of Israel since 1947 has not incorporated all Jews into its citizenry. The national dimension therefore has remained something of an 'ideal' point of reference for an understanding of the people of God.

The claim that the people of Yahweh have all been descended from one man asserts, by its nature, a 'racial' theory of identity and membership within this community. Yet we find that, precisely because it is understood as a religious community, the racial criterion alone has seldom sufficed to resolve all questions

about the nature and role of 'Israel' in relation to Yahweh. Other factors of a moral, spiritual and political kind have all played their part. Indeed the importance of the concept of Israel's nationhood in the Old Testament witnesses to a measure of overstepping of the straightforward 'racial' theory of accounting participation in this community. There is therefore, even at a surface level of understanding the situation, no easy resolution of the difficulties which emerge once the question is raised 'who is a Jew?' (cf. Rom. 9.6–8).

In fact, however, the situation becomes more complex once the Old Testament evidence is examined in critical detail. First of all we find that the picture of the origins of Israel from the twelve sons of one ancestral figure is a kind of 'image' or 'structure' imposed upon a tradition which was historically very much less clear. The Old Testament itself does not know more than a few features concerning the historical origins of many of its member tribes. Furthermore, how and why the 'image' of the descendants of the twelve sons as twelve tribes arose in the way it did has been a matter of considerable debate.[1] Even the time of origin of such a portrayal has been strongly contested. Whether it does accord with some kind of prenational social and institutional structure, or represents a later 'idealised' picture of a past are views which have each gained adherents.

The world of the Old Testament was one in which the political and social mechanisms of government were much less developed and sophisticated than they are today. As a result the Old Testament does not possess a technical vocabulary to define what constituted a 'state', and who qualified as a 'citizen', with anything like the precision that we should desire, or find necessary in the modern world.[2] Such vocabulary as existed in ancient Israel was of a broader, and more loosely defined kind concerning such entities as a 'people' (Hebrew *ʿam*) a 'nation' (Hebrew *gôy*), a 'tribe' (Hebrew *šēḇeṭ*) and a 'father's house' (Hebrew *beṭ ʾāḇ*). It is only when we come to look at aspects of a more pragmatic nature concerning the structure of a nation that we obtain a clearer picture. This particularly concerns the aspects of territory and government, so that for Israel questions of its land and kingship become of outstanding importance. Alongside the interest in, and em-

phasis upon, racial descent these two features each played a vital part in establishing the nature and identity of Israel as the people of God.

Nevertheless all three aspects – race, territory and government – are not in themselves, or in combination, necessarily religious in their nature, so that a more directly religious quality of 'faith', or 'allegiance to *tôrâh*', also came to play its part. How this occurred, and how differing emphases came to be placed upon each of them, is a feature of the unfolding of the tradition in the Old Testament. The ability to interpret the history of this tradition by reference to the actual course of Israel's political and social history, enables us to see it in a fuller light. It does not of itself, however, enable us to resolve the tensions that are apparent between the different factors. Even more important from the theological point of view, it does not enable us to single out any one feature of the Israelite tradition so as to make it possible for us to establish this as the 'norm' or the 'ideal' of what constitutes Israel.

It is in this regard that considerations that were raised in an earlier chapter regarding the ability to trace 'development', or some natural line of progress, in the Old Testament must be borne in mind. The fact that the earliest form in which Israel appears is that of a tribal community does not mean that this must be considered the norm for all time; nor does the fact that by the end of the Old Testament period the 'national' stage of Israel's life had been severely reduced mean that the hope of restoring it in full measure had been abandoned.

From the Christian perspective the understanding of Israel came to be interpreted in a more exclusively 'religious' light, with the emphasis falling upon the people as religious 'community', or *ekklēsia*. All we can hope to do in examining the theological aspects of Israel's belief in its calling to be the people of Yahweh is to try to understand better the varying factors that played their part. This requires not only some attention to the political fortunes of Israel in the Old Testament period, but also some awareness of the social factors that were involved as well. Above all, however, it requires that we should endeavour to single out those institutions in the people's life, and those concepts by which they interpreted them, which have a

particular bearing upon the way in which Israel came to understand itself as the people of God.

From this basis we can then begin to see that the formulae that have tended in the past to dominate the discussion of these issues are seldom in themselves entirely adequate. It is not true that universalism eventually predominates over nationalism, or that 'religious community' naturally displaces the 'territorial state'. Nor is it clear that the Old Testament maintains any single interpretation of what constitutes the ultimate 'goal' of Israel's election. The images that are used to describe the future eschatological Israel are not of a kind that can be easily recast into explicit theological categories.

I. PEOPLE AND NATION

Within the Old Testament tradition a very clear presentation is made of the occasion when Israel became a nation. It is the moment when Yahweh made a covenant with the people whom he had delivered out of the bondage of Egypt:

> Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod. 19.5–6).

This report of the institution of the covenant with Israel on Mount Sinai is certainly not contemporary with the event it describes, but represents a reflection upon it from a much later age. The question of the date when this particular presentation emerged will call for discussion later in considering the history of the use of the concept of covenant in this connection. What is important here is to notice that Israel is understood to be a 'holy nation' (Hebrew *gôy qāḏôš*) and a 'kingdom of priests' (or a 'kingdom in respect of priesthood'; Hebrew *mamleḵeṯ kōhᵃnîm*) from the time that God made his covenant with the people on Sinai. The making of this covenant is more or less synonymous with the constitution of the nation.

What exactly 'kingdom of priests' means, whether it concerns the special role that priests were to play within the nation's need to maintain its holiness, or whether it denotes a 'priestly

kingship', or whether, as is more usually understood, it points to a unique priestly role that Israel is to play in respect of other nations, cannot be determined with certainty. What is striking about this particular tradition is that it makes the covenant between Israel and Yahweh a basic and conditioning element in the existence of Israel as a nation. The origin of the nation, therefore, is pushed back to the relatively distant moment in the past of its constituent tribes, before it had acquired its territory or government. The tradition makes the institution of the covenant the decisive moment in the nation's life. In this way the religious element has very dramatically been set in the foreground. The view that Israel's life as Yahweh's people can be understood from this far back in the history of its origins is further supported by the tradition of Deuteronomy 26.5: 'A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great mighty, and populous.'

This summary, which probably comes from the seventh century BC, looks back on the nation's past and sees the natural growth in Jacob's descendants while they were in Egypt as the point at which they became a nation. Such a view is also that suggested by the account of the oppression in Egypt, which looks upon the sheer growth in numbers of Jacob's descendants as making them into a people (Exod. 1.7–8). From the point of view of the Old Testament tradition, therefore, there is a near unanimity in regarding the time spent by the nation's ancestors in Egypt as the period of growth into the proportions of a nation, with the actual moment of constitution coming at the time when Yahweh made his covenant with them on Mount Sinai.

All of this contrasts somewhat with a critical historical view of the time and circumstances in which the nation of Israel appeared on the stage of history. If we take 'nation', which is the closest counterpart to the Hebrew *gôy*, to mean 'territorial state', then we do not really encounter this as an established reality until the time of David. Until this period the land upon which the tribes of Israel were settled was shared by them with other ethnic groups, as the Old Testament itself is fully aware. In particular also we know that the Philistines had come to exercise a powerful political hold upon much of the land,

exercising their control even where they were not in direct occupation. Furthermore, from the perspective of imperial politics, it appears that the Egyptian empire had by no means conceded that the land of 'Canaan' was no longer a vassal province under their suzerainty. Competing interests and conflicting claims existed until the time of David, when for the first time Israel gained sufficient internal political strength to establish a stable government, to lay claim to reasonably firm borders, and to introduce some basis of unity among the mixed ethnic groups occupying the land. If our criteria were to be those of modern statehood, then we should first find that a state of Israel became a reality under David. As such, however, it flourished for only a short time, since after Solomon's death the youthful nation split apart into the two separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

It is characteristic of the Old Testament that it should take a rather different viewpoint in its own approach to understanding the origins of Israel, for its concern is to look more deeply into the religious meaning of such events. As a consequence it offers only a piecemeal and incomplete record of how the land as a whole was brought under Israelite control, the rival claims of other factions countered, and even how the Egyptian claim to control was overthrown. Instead, the Old Testament tells us about the divine purpose which had brought about the rise of Israel. This it does by recounting the providentially governed lives of the patriarchs, the divine miracle of the exodus from Egypt, and the chastening and educative value of a period spent in the wilderness before entering the promised land. The focus is less upon the political realities than upon the hidden theological purposes which are seen to have been at work. So the account of the conquest itself, which brings the nation into full possession of its land, is more theological than political in its orientation. It is more concerned to demonstrate the great power of God that was at work in making this act of conquest a reality, than in narrating how all the different regions of the land of Israel were occupied.

On one point, however, the tradition is very clear and positive. This is that Israel existed as a people, and spent some time in occupation of the land, before it set up a firm central

government in the form of a kingship. The aspect of government, therefore, which would appear to be indispensable to any modern concept of what constitutes a nation, is set in a relatively secondary position. Israel had been a people before it introduced a monarchy, so that this latter was not to be regarded as essential to the life of the nation. In fact, as we shall see when we examine this institution, it was a part of the national life which came to be looked at very critically.

Just what feelings of unity existed between the tribes before there was a monarchy, and what means of common action in war and social affairs enabled them to express this unity in concrete policies, are far from clear. According to a widely accepted and attractive hypothesis, this period, which the Old Testament views as one in which Israel was ruled by 'Judges', was that of an amphictyony.[3] Others see it as a tribal federation, and the two social patterns are not entirely identical. Certainly it was one in which the nascent Israel was moving towards a greater feeling of solidarity, and a growing awareness of the need for unified government for military and defence needs. In a number of ways we can see that politically it was ultimately the need for effective military action against the threat of the Philistines that forced Israel to introduce a monarchy and from this to move towards the establishment of a full territorial state.

The fact that the Israelite tradition came to view its life as a 'people' as older than its acquisition of its land or the founding of its monarchy was of inestimable importance when the time came that both realities were lost. When, in 587 BC, the last remnant of the state of Judah fell to the Babylonians, we find a new phase of the life of the people of God coming into being. Jews who had been deported to Babylon came to form a community in exile, and this cherished the hope of returning to its old homeland to re-establish the nation and rebuild its cities. Its goal was clearly the complete restoration of the people of Israel, which it believed still remained the intention of God, now re-affirmed through the mouths of prophets.

In spite of an initial attempt at restoration in the late sixth century, this hope was never fully realised in the Old Testament period. The exile instead grew into the Diaspora, with an ever-

increasing number of Jews scattered throughout the Mediterranean and Asiatic lands. In time they outnumbered the Jews who lived in Judah under Persian and subsequently Hellenistic rule. So far as the Diaspora was concerned two conflicting interests become apparent. On the one side it was of the utmost importance to show that the tradition of the people of God, as it had come to be accepted, did not disinherit these Diaspora Jews from their part in God's election, nor release them from their obligation to live in obedience to him, nor deprive them of their hope of sharing in the final blessedness of Israel. Yet on the other side the national dimension of Israel's life could not be forsaken, nor the hope abandoned which had grown up among the early exiles that the nation of Israel would be fully restored. The result was that the tensions arising from these conflicting interests could only be resolved by projecting the hope of the restoration of the nation more and more into the future. For some the concept seems to have lost much of its appeal, while for others it awakened the deepest and most searching of desires for the final 'salvation' of Israel. Much of the sectarian conflict in later Judaism can be seen as a reflection of these competing desires. When we find that the Old Testament is a book concerning the promise of salvation, therefore (cf. Luke 1.30–2), it is essentially this understanding of the ultimate salvation of Israel that is referred to.

From the point of view of historical development we can see that the period when Israel existed as a single nation was a relatively small part of the time-span covered by the Old Testament. Yet it established an important point of reference and brought into being many of the central concepts and ideas by which the belief in 'the people of God' was understood. At no point in the later Old Testament literature is the hope of restoring the nation altogether given up, even though a new emphasis came to be placed upon the organisation and life of Jews as a religious community. Similarly the period before the nation became a full political reality under David is viewed by the Old Testament tradition so completely from the point of view of this emerging nationhood that the separate nature of the events that led up to it is entirely overlaid. Everything is seen from the perspective of 'all Israel'.

This fluidity in the structure of Israel during the Old Testament period is one contributory factor in the difficulty of writing a 'history' of the people. The entity that is itself to be studied does not remain constant, but has a surprising variability of form. Even more strikingly the major historical sources in the Old Testament view this reality of Israel from very distinctive perspectives. So the period of the two kingdoms – Israel and Judah – is recounted in the books of 1 and 2 Kings as though the people still remained one ideal entity, and had only temporarily been split into 'two houses'. The view that there ever were two separate 'nations' (Hebrew *gôyim*) is conceded only in retrospect (Ezek. 37.22). In the history of 1 and 2 Chronicles, which was written later still, but which also covers this period of division, the belief in the unity of Israel is brought out as forcibly, although in a rather different way.[4]

There is a very real measure of conviction throughout the Old Testament, therefore, that the belief in Israel's special role as 'the people of Yahweh' was to be seen as something that reached to a deeper level than a simple nationalism. It did not regard nationhood alone as the criterion by which the role of Israel was to be understood. The implications of this for Judaism and for Christianity have been immense, enabling each to retain a vital sense of continuity with the community of the Old Testament. At the same time the important consequences this has had upon the understanding of God are hard to over-estimate, since it has ensured that Yahweh is thought of as much more than simply a national God. Just as the 'people' of Israel are constantly pressed into becoming something more than a nation, so the God of Israel was never a God whose popularity might rise and fall with the fortunes of the nation of Israel. Had this been the case then all effective regard for him would have ceased long ago, engulfed by the catastrophes that overtook the Israelite-Jewish people.

2. THE THEOLOGY OF ELECTION

When we come to ask the question why Israel is the people of Yahweh in this unique fashion, the Old Testament presents us with the answer in the form of a theology of election.[5] The most

striking affirmation of this is to be found in Deuteronomy 7.6–8:

> For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the LORD loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

The theology of election that is given here, with the assertion that Yahweh has 'chosen' (Hebrew *bāḥar*) Israel, marks a very prominent feature of the teaching of the book of Deuteronomy. As such it cannot be clearly shown to have arisen in this form before the seventh century BC, when this particular vocabulary of 'election' becomes current. Yet the main ideas of such a theology are certainly very much older, and the belief that Israel is Yahweh's people carries with it many of the essential elements of such an election faith. The whole tradition concerning Abraham and the other patriarchs of the nation (Gen. 12–50) is viewed from the perspective of belief in such an election. The promise made to Abraham that his descendants would become a nation, possess the land of Canaan, and be a blessing to other nations (Gen. 12.1–3, etc.) conveys most of the ideas implicit in such a theology of election, even though the special vocabulary of 'choosing' is not actually employed. There is a very real sense, therefore, in which the whole of the tradition about Israel's ancestors that has been preserved in the book of Genesis must be seen as a theology of election, since it is strongly coloured by this particular forward-looking interest in the rise of Israel as a nation, and a promise of its greatness. From the point of view of the actual written form of the history, there is a virtual unanimity among scholars that this national existence had become a reality when the main outlines of the account were established.

What the vocabulary of election adds in the book of Deuter-

onomy is a more conscious relating of this special bond between Yahweh and Israel to the existence of other nations: Yahweh 'has chosen you . . . out of all the peoples . . .'. What in fact this is to mean for these other nations is not made the subject of any special reflection in Deuteronomy, although later it was to become an important point of concern in understanding the divine choice of Israel. It raised a number of questions about what Israel's role was to be in regard to these nations. The theology of election, in the strict sense, is therefore a very particular facet of the teaching of the book of Deuteronomy. This work, which is the product of a school of thought which emerged in the seventh century, shows throughout a sense of crisis and threat. It is very conscious that Israel might, at this stage in its history, come to grief altogether, and lose everything that Yahweh had given to it: land, freedom, holiness and its special destiny among the nations. A pervasive assumption throughout the book is that Israel is a nation, and it can scarcely be said to countenance the possibility that Israel might continue to live as Yahweh's people in some form other than that of a nation. For its authors, to be thrown out of the land and scattered among the nations would be death (cf. Deut. 4.25–8).

If the book of Deuteronomy brings into the forefront of Israel's understanding the concept of a 'chosen nation', it also witnesses in a rather different way to the importance of three institutions which served in their separate ways to give content and visible reality to this belief in divine election. These were the kingship, the central sanctuary, and the land.

The introduction of a monarchy into Israel is described in a hesitant and critical manner, firmly recognising that it was not of itself essential to the salvation of Israel (1 Sam. 8–12; cf. esp. 1 Sam. 12.15, 25). Yet this rather negative approach to the ideology of kingship in the Old Testament is countered by the very strong and positive emphasis which is placed upon David and his dynasty as the divinely chosen royal family of Israel (cf. 2 Sam. 7.18–29). All the good and beneficient aspects of monarchy which belong to a favourable view of the institution are centred upon David and his descendants. Here in fact we find a surprisingly rich vocabulary, which could view the

king as 'the son of God' (Ps. 2.7), a priest of a unique order (Ps. 110.4), and even the very breath that gave life to his people (Lam. 4.20). The king could, if he remained obedient to the divine will (cf. 1 Sam. 12.14; Ps. 132.12), be a source of life, salvation and blessing for Yahweh's people.

Yet the Old Testament is careful to insist that it is not the institution of monarchy as such, but the special 'chosenness' of the Davidic family (cf. 1 Kgs. 11.32; 2 Kgs. 19.34) which can accomplish this. The governmental aspect of the life of the people of God, therefore, is, from the point of view of the Old Testament, very firmly put into the hands of David and his descendants. Once this distinctive outlook concerning the role of the Davidic dynasty is understood, we can see that within this limitation the Old Testament retained a quite positive attitude towards the kingship. When the disaster of 587 BC overtook the nation, the hope of the restoration of the Davidic monarchy became the focal point of the hope of restoring Israel's political independence (cf. Jer. 33.14–26; Ezek. 37.24–5). In very many respects, therefore, we can see that the Davidic kingship became a visible symbol of Israel's election, and served as a witness to the special bond between Yahweh and the nation. The relationship between God and the king, which could at times be described as a 'covenant' (cf. 2 Sam. 23.5; Isa. 55.3; Jer. 33.19–22), was a central point of contact and mediation between God and his people.

It is quite in keeping with this that once the political possibilities began to fade, after the exilic age, of restoring one of David's descendants to the throne of Judah, the figure of the coming messiah (= Anointed One) of David's line was thought of in increasingly transcendental terms. The frustrated political hopes forced attention back to the theological groundwork upon which all such hope was built. This lay with the belief in Yahweh's purpose for his chosen people Israel.

Certainly we can see very important points of criticism directed against the monarchy, sometimes on account of its moral and social failures (cf. 1 Sam. 8.11–18); sometimes on account of its religious and cultic shortcomings (cf. 1 Kgs. 11.7–13; 12.26–33); and sometimes because the people put greater trust in the institution than it properly warranted (cf.

1 Sam. 8.7; 12.15, 17, 25). Yet these criticisms do not lead to a complete rejection of the institution from the perspective of the Old Testament writers. It was believed to have its special part to play as an embodiment and representation of the unique relationship between Yahweh and Israel.

The second of the great institutions which served as a visible sign of Israel's elect status was the chosen sanctuary set on Mount Zion. Primarily this was in the form of the temple, built by Solomon (1 Kgs. 6.1–38; 7.15–51), destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kgs. 25.9, 13–17), and rebuilt by Zerubbabel (Ezra 3.8–13; 6.13–22). Yet the particular vocabulary of the Old Testament speaks more broadly than in terms of the magnificence of the temple as a sanctuary, and develops a distinctive theological view of the chosen status of Mount Zion (Pss. 84.5–7; 87.1–3; 132.13–14).

The roots of this theological development are to be sought in the widespread importance attached to sacred mountains and to temple-mountains in the ancient Near East. From the Israelite historical situation a special strengthening and vindication of the belief that Mount Zion had been chosen in this way to be Yahweh's abode was supplied by the installation of the Ark there (2 Sam. 6.1–15; 1 Kgs. 6.19). Most probably, however, we should also recognise some prophetic oracular utterance as a part of the origin of the belief.

There is no sure support for claiming that it was a simple Israelite adaptation of an older Canaanite tradition, since this fails to account for many of the distinctively Israelite features that belonged to it.[6] As with the kingship, so also with the Zion theology, the development of the tradition came to see in the temple of Jerusalem, the sacredness of the temple hill, and ultimately the special holy nature of all Jerusalem (cf. Jer. 3.17; Isa. 62.1–12), a visible sign of the elect status of Israel. The nation's election, and the visible testimony to this in the sanctuary on Mount Zion, were related aspects of the belief in the unique bond that related people and God to each other.

What we have said earlier about the significance of the cult in ancient Israel and the particular way in which the blessing and holiness of the cult were conceived of in a quasi-physical fashion has a special importance in its application to Jerusalem.

It encouraged the view that Jerusalem was itself the source of life, light and prosperity for God's people (cf. Ps. 92.12–15; Ezek. 47.1–12). From it justice would be dispensed to the nations (cf. Isa. 2.3–4); light and truth spread abroad among them (Isa. 60.1–14), and in the peace and prosperity of Jerusalem the well-being of the people of Israel, and ultimately all mankind would be advanced (cf. Zech. 14.16–21).

Here is a distinctive area in which the traditions and symbols of the cult took on a unique form in Israel, and from this became the basis for a quite remarkable kind of theological understanding. The chosenness of Mount Zion came to be seen as a special aspect, and in its own way a special guarantee, of the chosenness of the people of God. As the cult had been regarded as providing a point through which divine blessing and life could flow into the nation, so now in a broader, and less cultically oriented fashion, the political and social well-being of Jerusalem came also to be thought of as contributing to this. The very name 'Zion' became a part of the special vocabulary concerning the elect status of God's people (cf. Isa. 40.9; 51.3, etc.).

In a further extension of this meaning and symbolic significance attaching to the concepts of Zion and Jerusalem we find them later being used as images of heaven, and in particular to express the final state of blessed fulfilment which would attend the destiny of the people of God (cf. Rev. 21.2). Alongside this we find too that Jerusalem came to be linked in a very special way to the eschatological expectations of Judaism so that the names acquired both concrete and symbolic meanings, which at times are not all that easy to distinguish from each other.

The third of the institutions of Israel's life which acquired a very special significance as a visible expression of Israel's elect status was that of the land.[7] Already at a very fundamental stage in the growth of the Israelite tradition we find that the promise of the land was a constituent part of the promise to Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation (Gen. 12.1–3). This land then became the subject of the basic theme of divine promise which binds together the patriarchal traditions. Its extent is set out in idealistic terms to cover the maximum area of control which the Davidic empire attained

(Gen. 15.18–21; cf. 2 Sam. 8.1–15; 24.2). The extent of Israel's actual boundaries at any given time and the effect that the nation's diminishing political fortunes had upon these territorial claims can be pursued historically only with the greatest difficulty. The sparseness of information precludes our drawing more than very tentative boundary maps for much of the historical period covered by the Old Testament. Certainly, by the time of the Assyrian conquests in the latter half of the eighth century, little was left of the immense territorial area that the Davidic-Solomonic empire had claimed.

However, from the perspective of Old Testament theology it is not the extent of the land, but the particular theological significance that was attached to holding it, that concerns us. Here it is once again the book of Deuteronomy that provides the fullest theological treatment of the conditions and consequences of Israel's holding of its land. This land is interpreted as the nation's 'patrimony', or 'inheritance' (Hebrew *naḥᵃlâh*), which stood in the forefront of God's gifts to his people:

> And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you (Deut. 8.10).

> Know therefore, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness; for you are a stubborn people (Deut. 9.6).

As the gift of the land is so important to Israel, so its loss would be synonymous with the destruction of the nation. To be driven out of the land was the direst of the consequences that could follow from Israel's disobedience to God's commands:

> If you act corruptly ... you will soon utterly perish from the land which you are going over the Jordan to possess; you will not live long upon it, but will be utterly destroyed (Deut. 4.25–6).

Although, therefore, there is a less articulate tradition underlying its special significance, such as we find in the cases of the kingship ideology and in connection with the Mount Zion temple theology, yet the land also served for Israel as a visible symbol of its special relationship to God. The people were never to forget the God who gave them this land (cf. Deut.

8.11 ff.), and were to take steps in their worship to ensure that they displayed a proper gratitude to him (cf. Deut. 26.5–11, esp. v. 10). To live long on the land that God had given was the reward of an obedient and responsive life (cf. Deut. 5.16). As in the case of the kingship, so with the land, the particular aspect of national life that it represented was regarded as so important that without it Israel would no longer be a nation (cf. Deut. 11.26–32; 28.15–68). To be driven out of the land was consequently seen as the forfeiting of all that God's election of Israel had brought to the people. The land was not only a gift of God's election, but to some extent it was also an expression and confirmation of it.

It is in this respect that we discover a gradual change developing in the interpretation of the significance of the land during the time of the exile. Once the people had been driven out from their inheritance they did not completely perish, but retained, with the encouragement of prophets, a very real expectation that they would one day return to it. Surprisingly also the exiles in Babylon came to regard themselves, rather than those who had actually survived on the land, as more fitted to retake possession of it (cf. Jer. 24.1–10; Ezek. 33.23–9). The land became for these people a sign of hope, and an object of promise. That they would one day be able to go back to this land, purge it of all its unclean elements, and rebuild within it a new community which would truly be the chosen Israel of God was their deepest spiritual longing (cf. Jer. 29.10–14; Ezek. 40–8). From being the gift of God, the loss of which would spell disaster, it became the central object of hope and eschatological expectation. It became impossible to think of a restored Israel, and a cleansed and purified community, except in relation to this land. Even more than the hope of a messiah it appeared as an indispensable part of the life that was anticipated as the fulfilment of Yahweh's choosing of Israel.

Even within the later period of the Old Testament literature we find the formative stages of that faith emerging which regards this land as necessary to the fullness of Israel's salvation (Isa. 65.17–25).

We have already mentioned that it is an unexpected feature of the teaching of Deuteronomy in regard to Israel's election

that, although it consciously considers Israel's position in relation to the nations, it does not develop from this any role or service that Israel is to play in regard to them. Yet in the earlier tradition of God's promise to Abraham there is an assertion that Abraham's descendants are to be a 'blessing' to the nations (Gen. 12.2). This may be taken simply in a reflexive sense to mean that the nations will swear by the 'blessing' of Israel as an example of what such a rich destiny may mean. More probably, however, we should see in this a wider affirmation that in Israel's blessing other nations too will be blessed. If so, then it would appear to be through Israel's rise to nationhood and imperial greatness, with a Davidic king at its head, that this promise was believed to find fulfilment (cf. Ps. 72.8–11, 17).

The earliest model that we find for the interpretation of what Israel's election means for other nations is that of an imperial power bringing peace, prosperity and righteous government to those over which it ruled. For a brief period such a 'political' interpretation of the goal of Israel's election prevailed. Yet the realities of the actual historical situation after the division into two kingdoms made such a hope hollow and pretentious. We find, in consequence, that it re-appeared in a modified, and much more directly religious, form.

The most striking expression of this religious re-interpretation of Israel's imperial expectations is to be found in Isaiah 2.2–4 (= Mic. 4.1–5), with its picture of a great pilgrimage of the nations coming to Mount Zion to hear God's law (*tôrâh*). In the preaching of the later exilic prophet of Isaiah 40–55 we find this understanding of the special religious purpose which Israel is to fulfil among the nations brought yet further to the fore (Isa. 45.14–17, 20–3; 49.6, 7; cf. 60.1–9; 61.5–7). It is clear that in part the strong emphasis upon the subservient role that was to be given to the nations, which made them into Israel's servants and slaves, tends to detract from the higher level of the prophetic vision as it first appeared. Yet it still retains something of an expectation that Israel's election is an election for service to bring other nations to a knowledge of Yahweh.

Most fully is this brought out in the interpretation of Israel's role as 'servant' which is to be found in the 'Servant Songs' of Isaiah 42.1–4; 49.1–6; 50.4–9; 52.13–53.12. Broken and

incomplete as the images are of the servant's work that are set forth here, they look for Israel's blessing to be carried beyond the boundaries of the survivors of the old nation (esp. Isa. 49.6). The light that God had given to Israel would become a light by which other nations also might live. Strikingly too the servant-master image is reversed, and it is Israel's task to be the servant in order that God's truth and righteousness might be made known to the nations. The picture is not that of a 'mission' in the strict sense of a going out to the nations, but rather that, when Israel returns to its homeland, it will bring the faithful of other nations in its train.[8]

3. THE THEOLOGY OF COVENANT

If the concept of election represents the basic Old Testament viewpoint on why Israel is Yahweh's people, then that of covenant stands as the most widely used of the concepts, or analogies, to express the nature of the relationship between them.[9] It is not, however, the only analogy that is used, and we find that the image of Israel as Yahweh's 'son' has a deeply embedded place (Exod. 4.22–3; cf. Hos. 11.1–9; Jer. 31.20). So also the marriage imagery of Israel as the 'bride' or 'wife' of Yahweh finds employment (cf. Jer. 2.2–3).

Prominent as the sonship imagery is in parts of the literature, it remains very much a metaphor, and undergoes little in the way of theological explication and reflection. It hints at the 'naturalness' of the bond between Yahweh and Israel, without defining this in any explicit fashion, or adducing any mythology to support it. Evidently too the use of marriage symbolism was restrained on account of the antipathy to the strong sexual overtones that were current in the cult tradition of Baal.

All of this points to 'covenant' as the most flexible and convenient of the analogies by which the relationship between God and people could be expressed. Such at least is suggested by the prominence which the term receives in certain parts of the Deuteronomic tradition. It comes to provide as full and as considered a theological account of the God–nation relationship as the Old Testament anywhere presents. Of added significance is the fact that this particular covenant theology has exercised

a profound effect upon the growth and shaping of the literary tradition of the Old Testament.

Before examining this theology and its antecedents it is necessary to consider the main features of the Deuteronomic movement and its literature. It has long been recognised by scholars that the book of Deuteronomy represents a seventh-century revision of the Mosaic tradition of Israel, with a special focus on a revised edition of the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20.22–23.19).[10] This Deuteronomic law-book was certainly, in some form or other, the law-book discovered in the Jerusalem temple which became the basis of the great reform under king Josiah (2 Kgs. 22–3). Yet the book of Deuteronomy is not the work of a single author, but of a circle of writers and reformers which was active over an extended period, leaving marks of progressive expansion in the book. This same circle has clearly had a considerable hand also in shaping the writing of the history of Joshua to 2 Kings, which has frequently been termed the 'Deuteronomistic (or Deuteronomic) History' in consequence. It was composed in the first half of the sixth century BC, although many scholars detect in it signs of a revision, apparently made after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 587 BC.

A third literary product of the Deuteronomic movement is to be seen in the book of Jeremiah, where both an extensive narrative tradition about the work and preaching of Jeremiah, as well as a number of 'sermons' based on themes from the prophet's ministry show signs of Deuteronomic editing. Evidently the Deuteronomic movement had found in Jeremiah's preaching an important source of authority for its own work. All three literary works, therefore, the book of Deuteronomy itself, the history of Joshua to 2 Kings, and the edition of the book of Jeremiah reflect the hands of the Deuteronomic 'school'. These writings can also be seen to reflect some progressive development of certain themes, which is most noticeable in the case of the theology of 'covenant'. It is apparent that the tradition of the covenant of Horeb (Deut. 5.1–21) has become the centre of an elaborate covenant theology in these different literary works which have passed through the hands of the Deuteronomists.[11]

We noted earlier that the birth of Israel's life as a nation is ascribed by Exodus 19.5–6 to the moment when Yahweh instituted his covenant with the nation on Mount Sinai (= Horeb). The language of covenant in this passage has certainly been incorporated into it by the Deuteronomic movement, as also is the central theme that makes Israel's obedience to the covenant a condition of the continuance of its life as a nation (so especially Exod. 19.5). Here we encounter a marked feature of the covenant theology of the Old Testament, and one which has occasioned considerable discussion.

A covenant, as normally understood, points to a compact, or agreement, between two or more parties to which all are bound. As Exodus 19.5–6 affirms, and as other aspects of the covenant tradition corroborate (cf. 2 Kgs. 23.3; Jer. 11.1–8), the idea of a covenant that was binding upon both parties is clearly presented by the Deuteronomic teaching. Yet there is in the Old Testament a stream of tradition regarding the making of covenants which speaks of them as virtually synonymous with the making of a solemn promise. This is most noticeable in connection with the covenant made by God with Abraham (Gen. 15.18), but it is also reflected in the tradition which interpreted the divine promise to David and his descendants as a covenant (cf. 2 Sam. 23.5).[12] How are we to reconcile these apparent differences between the conception of a covenant which was that of an unconditioned promise and that which saw in it a conditioned agreement in which the mutual obligations were prominently declared? No entirely satisfactory answer has been forthcoming, although a number of important suggestions have contributed to a better understanding of the different patterns of covenant. We may note the following three main lines of investigation:

(1) It was suggested by J. Begrich as long ago as 1944[13] that the original Hebrew meaning of 'to make a covenant' was 'to make a solemn promise', and that no conditions would be attached to this. Later, under the influence of Canaanite commercial practices, this was changed to make the institution that of a 'conditioned' agreement, thereby seriously weakening its theological clarity. However, this view reconstructs a history of the concept which is largely a matter of supposition, and it

fails to take account of the fact that by far its greatest theological development in the Old Testament is based upon the understanding that it denotes a conditioned agreement.

(2) A somewhat different approach has been argued for in an extensive series of studies by E. Kutsch.[14] He defends the view that 'to make a covenant' was originally a unilateral action, tantamount to meaning 'to impose an obligation'. This could either be upon oneself, in the form of giving a promise, or upon another in which a 'binding' of the other person would be undertaken. Eventually the situation in which each of two, or more, parties gave and accepted obligations to each other gave rise to a situation in which a mutually conditioned covenant agreement arose. It is in this form that the belief in a divine covenant between Yahweh and Israel has ultimately been developed. This, like the view of J. Begrich mentioned above, depends upon the reconstruction of a rather uncertain semantic history of the vocabulary of covenant-making in ancient Israel. It also fails to allow enough room for the appearance of both types of covenant alongside each other. A quite different approach to the problem has been advocated on the basis of a study of the forms of covenant-making.

(3) A large number of scholars, led by G. E. Mendenhall,[15] have detected in the forms of covenant-making in the Old Testament a dependence upon an ancient Near Eastern form of vassal-treaty. In this political form of treaty a suzerain power granted a covenant to a subordinate (vassal) power, but stipulated certain conditions in doing so. Hence the superior position of the suzerain was fully acknowledged, whose initiative was stressed, but an element of bilateral obligation was present. Mendenhall distinguished such vassal-treaty covenants from promissory covenants, such as that with Abraham, where no explicit obligation on the part of the recipient was acknowledged. This hypothesis has been extensively explored, both in its implications for the date of origin of covenant concepts in the Old Testament, and in the particular significance that the borrowing and adaptation of this form may be thought to reveal about Israel's religio-political ideology. Only a brief summary of criticisms may be put forward here.

Of itself the claim for an Israelite dependence upon this

special ancient Near Eastern treaty form has failed to establish a convincing basis for showing the Mosaic introduction of such a covenant ideology into Israel. It is abundantly evident that the mainstream of covenant language and ideas enters into the Old Testament tradition with the Deuteronomic movement.[16] It may be that some influence was felt here from contemporary political ideology, but, if so, it was much modified. In consequence this particular hypothesis does little to assist us in understanding the unique way in which the Deuteronomic movement has developed the concept. In fact, most of the features of this Deuteronomic ideology can be adequately explained without resort to this particular hypothesis of a borrowing of a form, coupled with a major modification in its purpose and significance.

Furthermore, the marked differences between such treaty-covenants and promissory covenants are noted, without any clear explanation being offered why the same term is used to describe them. Not least we may also mention that so many features of Israel's distinctive covenant ideology have been held to derive from this ancient oriental form that it has come close to overwhelming the features it has been adduced to explain. We must therefore regard it with considerable caution. Once the Old Testament tradition is looked at critically, then the parallels that have been adduced to support a dependence upon this treaty form are much less prominent than has been maintained by its advocates. The amount of light that can, in consequence, be brought to bear upon the Old Testament by appeal to such a borrowing becomes drastically reduced. Whether such a hypothesis can be sustained at all, therefore, remains in question, and it can offer little elucidation of the distinctive way in which the Old Testament interprets Israel's relationship to Yahweh after the analogy of a covenant. We are entitled to assume that covenant-making, both in the political and the social sphere, was sufficiently well known in ancient Israel for the use of such an analogy to be ready at hand.

When we come to look in detail at the origin and nature of the Israelite covenant theology, we find several points emerging with reasonable clarity. First among these we must put the fact

that, in spite of a number of earlier instances where the term 'covenant' (Hebrew *b^e^rît*) is used in a uniquely religious way (especially in Gen. 15.18 and 2 Sam. 23.5),[17] it is with the Deuteronomic movement that it becomes the major term by which to describe Israel's relationship to Yahweh. It is unlikely that this Deuteronomic vocabulary was an entirely novel introduction in the seventh century to describe the relationship, but it clearly acquired a quite new emphasis then. It is in any case in the Deuteronomic History and the development of Jeremiah's preaching that the concept of a covenant between God and people receives its fullest development.

In covenant ideology two points stand out very prominently, and have greatly influenced all subsequent development of it in the Old Testament. The first of these is that Israel's existence and continuance as a nation is made dependent upon its obedience to the covenant (cf. esp. Exod. 19.5–6; Deut. 4.13–14; 2 Kgs. 17.15). In particular, as we have already noted in connection with Israel's beliefs about the land, its occupation of the land of Canaan is singled out as the most prominent of all the features by which this nationhood is signified. The supreme punishment is seen as that of being driven out from the land to perish among the nations. The conditional nature of the covenant is therefore taken very seriously and no hesitation appears in drawing the direst consequences from the threat which this inevitably brought. Just as Israel had been given birth as a nation by the election of God, so its death could be brought about by disobedience to the covenant through which the election had been given expression.

The second major point about Deuteronomic covenant theology is that the stipulations of the covenant which are binding upon Israel are set out in the form of a written 'law'. This 'law' is called a *tôrâh* (Deut. 4.44), and contains obligations of a legal, social and more directly religious nature. The actual scope of this *tôrâh* is defined in more than one way, since supremely it is made to refer to the Ten Commandments of Deuteronomy 5.6–21 (= Exod. 20.2–17; cf. Deut. 4.13). However, the broader commands of Deuteronomy 4.44ff. are also included as *tôrâh*, in which the Deuteronomic law-code proper of Deut. 12–26, must be seen as having a special place.

There are signs therefore that the precise scope of *tôrâh*, and the injunctions that it contained, was itself the subject of development and elaboration. This was to have a great bearing upon the growth of the Old Testament. Of particular significance is the fact that from the beginnings of this covenant theology there was an acceptance that this *tôrâh* was written. Indeed, we find that 'covenant' (Hebrew *b*ᵉ*rîṯ*) and 'law' become such close synonyms that 'to obey the law (*tôrâh*) and 'to obey the covenant' become virtually synonymous expressions (cf. Jer. 11.6, 8).

When we ask why a covenant theology of this kind, which certainly raises some far-reaching theological issues, was so appealing to the authors of the Deuteronomic movement, we can draw only one conclusion. The particular moment in history in which the Deuteronomists saw themselves and their people to be standing was a moment of crisis. The loss of the Northern Kingdom to the Assyrians in 722, followed by progressive and appalling deportations of so many inhabitants of that kingdom, left only a small remnant of what had been the great empire of David. All could yet be lost, and in the hour of threat the Deuteronomists stressed the danger that faced their fellow countrymen. They hoped that by learning the lessons of the past and recognising the threat of the present, Israel might yet be saved. The conditions of salvation were consequently very fully spelt out.

We find, however, that as the crisis unfolded and Judah's darkest hour came with the fall of its king and the destruction of its temple in 587 BC, a message of hope remained for the people. Central to this message was the preaching of Jeremiah, who had prophesied a future for his nation and people (Jer. 32.1–15, esp. v. 15; cf. 31.2–9, 20). As the Deuteronomic school came to develop its covenant theology in the light of events, and with a deep consciousness of the importance of Jeremiah's preaching, so they came to look beyond the uncertainties of a conditional covenant agreement with God to the greater certainties of the divine grace and love. A new message of hope developed which did not discard the old covenant theology, but which came to extend it in very distinctive directions.[18]

The most direct and memorable way in which this hopeful development is to be found is in the promise of a new covenant,

or more strictly a 'renewed covenant', as we find it set out in Jeremiah 31.31–4. The famous prophecy takes up the substance of Jeremiah's assurance of a future for the nation, but sets it in the distinctive theological language of the covenant ideology. What it promises is a new kind of covenant:

> But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people (Jer. 31.33).

God will not only set the conditions of the covenant in his *tôrâh*, but he will himself, by his action within the human heart, give the power and strength to fulfil them (cf. Ezek. 36.26–7). In this way a covenant, which is recognised by the tradition to be a bilateral obligation, becomes effectively a unilateral one, since God himself ensures the fulfilment of the obligations that he makes. It becomes synonymous in effect, though not in name, with a covenant of promise.

This is not the only way, however, in which the covenant theology of the Old Testament was developed during and after the exile. More prominent in some respects is the appearance of a changed emphasis, in which the whole weight of the tradition of Israel's election is placed on the covenant between God and Abraham and the 'conditional' nature of the Sinai covenant given a much reduced place.[19] We shall note some of the wider consequences of this in considering the growth of the Old Testament and the particular importance of its role as *tôrâh*.

Throughout the Old Testament a special relationship between God and Israel is assumed and made the basis for its own distinctive presentation of the knowledge of God. In a very deep and inescapable fashion the belief that there is a special revelation of God in the Old Testament is related to the belief that he has chosen and used Israel in a special way to bring this knowledge to all mankind. Each of the different forms in which Israel appears – tribal community, nation, and a remnant scattered among the nations – brings to light some facet of the nature and activity of its God.