

The People of God and the State in the Old Testament

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Introduction

My main purpose in this study is to trace the changing concept of the people of God in relation to the state in the period covered by the Hebrew Bible. So I am taking for granted several assumptions that would fall within the range of creation-based theology, since I have briefly discussed them elsewhere,¹ and they are fairly commonplace in discussions of the topic of the Bible and the state. First, I assume that ethnic diversity and the multiplicity of nations is part of God's creative intention for humanity and not in itself the result of sin. This seems to be evident from texts such as Deuteronomy 32:8, echoed in Acts 17:26, and the eschatological vision that the redeemed humanity will include, but not obliterate the distinctions between, every tribe, language and nation. Second, I assume that there is a social dimension to human life which is also part of God's creative intention, so that the proper and harmonious ordering of relationships between individuals and communities, locally and internationally, is part of human accountability to God as creator of all. The political task of maintaining a morally acceptable social order is a human duty under God.²

Our procedure will be to look at Israel as the people of God in five different phases of their OT history. In each context we shall discuss the nature of the people of God themselves at that time and the nature of the state as portrayed in that context. This may throw up apparently contradictory viewpoints on the relationship between the two, but it is important that we see the breadth of canonical material on this subject and not focus on a single, narrow band of texts which can lead to a distorted idea of 'the' OT view of the state.³

I The pilgrim family: the patriarchal period

The people of God in the patriarchal context is primarily a community called out of the socio-political environment and given a new identity and future by the promise of God. They are a people only by this act of God's election. It was not that he elevated an existing people to a chosen status, but that he called Israel into existence as his people, as an entity distinct from the surrounding nation states, from their very beginning. This went along with a form of life

¹ C. J. H. Wright, *Living as the People of God (An Eye for an Eye)* (IVP, 1983), ch. 5, 'Politics and the World of Nations', pp. 103-108.

² For a helpful discussion of this issue, see Paul Marshall, *Thine is the Kingdom: A Biblical Perspective on the Nature of Government and Politics Today* (Marshalls, 1984), pp. 41f.

³ I am heavily indebted to John Goldingay's book *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1987), ch. 3, for the structure and some of the inspiration behind this article. He takes precisely the question of the people of God as a case study in his discussion of a historically contextual approach to the diversity of the OT. His book was reviewed in *Themelios* 15.2 (Jan. 1990).

which included maximum independence from the socio-political and economic structures of their day. They did not own land, and regarded themselves as resident aliens, sojourners, in the land of their movements. Not that they were isolated. Genesis records plenty of occasions of social and economic intercourse between the patriarchs and their contemporaries. But they remained a pilgrim people, called out and called onward.

Corresponding to this given status, there was the requirement of faith in the promise of God and obedience to his command. Here again a distinctiveness emerges with the surrounding peoples. The most illuminating text on the ethical character of Israel from the patriarchal tradition is Genesis 18:19.

‘For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.’

The context of this declaration is God’s imminent act of judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, whose wickedness has caused such an outcry that God must intervene. In contrast to that kind of society, the world in which Abraham lived, God requires that the community now emerging from Abraham himself is to be characterized by totally different values. They are to be a people who imitate the character of Yahweh himself (‘the way of the LORD’) by their commitment to righteousness and justice. These are unquestionably social values, with economic and political implications. It is clear, therefore, that while God’s intention for his people is to be called out from the surrounding environment, that does not mean an abdication from the socio-political process itself. Rather, that sphere, as all spheres of their corporate life, is to be governed by justice, because that is precisely God’s own way.

So then, the people of God in this context:

- * are called into existence by God’s act of sovereign election,
- * live in the light of his promise, which enables them to
- * sit loose to the surrounding socio-political power centres while not losing contact with the communities among which they live,
- * are committed to an ethical obedience specifically characterized by God-imitating justice.

The portrayal of the state in the patriarchal context, as it is represented by the various political power centres and cities of the ancient Near Eastern world, varies from neutral to negative. They are not portrayed as excessively oppressive, in anything like the same way as the Egypt of Moses or the Babylon of the exile. Yet when Abraham first appears, in Genesis 12, it is in the context of a society already marked by the story of the tower of Babel in chapter 11. Indeed, it is the land of Babel out of which he is called. As the story indicates, it was a culture of immense self-confidence and pride. At the very least, Abraham’s God-required departure relativized it. Human salvation was not to be found in the state. The ultimate redemptive purpose of God lay elsewhere, invested in the typically tenuous human vessel of the ageing husband of a barren wife. The calling of Abraham out of his country and his people (Gn. 12:1) was ‘the first Exodus by which the imperial civilizations of the Near East in general receive their stigma as environments of lesser meaning’.⁴

⁴ E. Voeglin, *Israel and Revelation* (Louisiana State University, 1956), p. 140; quoted in Goldingay, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

As well as being portrayed in this relativized fashion, however, the external city-state can also be seen as a place of moral rebellion against God and thereby a source of threat to the pilgrim people of God. Sodom and Gomorrah are obvious cases. God was aware of an 'outcry' against them (Gn. 18:20f.—twice). The word is virtually a technical term in the OT for the cries of those who are suffering from oppression, cruelty and injustice. It figures prominently, for example, in the story of Israel's groaning in bondage in Egypt. Genesis 19 catalogues the two cities' violence and perversion. Isaiah 1:9f., seen in the light of the rest of the chapter, links them with innocent bloodshed. Ezekiel 16:49 lists the sins of the cities of the plain as arrogance, surplus affluence, callousness, and failure to help the poor and needy. For these reasons, they stood in the blast path of God's judgment.

The *portrayal* of God in such a context, therefore, is significantly not merely that he is in sovereign control, as much in

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Mesopotamia, as in Canaan, as in Egypt, but also that he is a God of redemptive purpose, whose ultimate goal is the blessing of all nations. In initiating his special relationship with a people of his own creation and possession, God actually has in mind the best interests of the nations. The promise of blessing for the seed of Abraham is a promise of blessing for the nations.

So although we understand from books such as Daniel and Revelation that God's judgment is especially directed at human states in their 'bestly', rebellious condition, nevertheless the very existence of the people of God in the midst of those states is a sign of God's wider and final purpose of redemption of humanity, and the transformation of the kingdoms of the earth into the kingdom of God.

The influence of the patriarchal material on Christian views of church-state relationships has been strong, particularly via the use that is made of it in Hebrews 11. Negatively, it can result in a world denying attitude, in which believers are discouraged from any participation in the affairs of this world, since, like Abraham, we are to be seeking a city not made with hands. If this is now recognized as a mistaken use of the patriarchal texts, we still need to remember that our involvement with society for the purpose of earthing the love-justice of God is to be undertaken as a people called out, looking for the fulfilment of his promise of redemption, but not expecting our hope of salvation to be found in the state itself.

II The liberated nation: the Exodus to Judges period

The People of God begin this period as an oppressed ethnic minority within a very powerful imperial state. The demand of Yahweh confronts Pharaoh: 'Let my people go that they may worship/serve me.' A state which denies freedom to those who wish to worship Yahweh finds itself Yahweh's enemy. The God who, in the patriarchal narratives, had shown himself to be transcendent in the sense that he was neither bound to, nor very impressed by, the greatest of human imperial civilization, upholds the right of his people to freedom of worship in the midst of a state with other gods, including the pharaoh himself.

His demands go much further than the spiritual right of freedom of worship. Egypt was engaged in civil discrimination against Israel as an ethnic minority on the grounds of political expediency, playing on public fears and claiming to act in the public interest. They were engaged in economic exploitation of this pool of captive labour. And they were guilty of gross violation of normal family life through a policy of state-sponsored genocide. On all these fronts Yahweh demanded and then achieved the liberation of his people. In the course of events, the state, which had professed ignorance of who Yahweh is (Ex. 5:2), learns his identity and his power in no uncertain terms. Indeed the process of Egypt's move from ignorance to acknowledgment of Yahweh is undoubtedly one of the sub-plots of the narrative.⁵ The claims of Pharaoh and the other gods of the state must bow to the fact that Yahweh is God as much over Egypt as over Israel, his own people. The climax of the song of Moses, after the sea had sealed the reality of Israel's deliverance, celebrated that *Yahweh is king*, for ever; and not, it was implied, Pharaoh (Ex. 15:18).

Moving from the exodus of the people of God out of an imperial state, we come to their arrival in the midst of a city-state culture in Canaan. The arrival or the emergence of Israel in Canaan⁶ produced a most remarkable social, political, economic and religious transformation there. Israel, the people of God, not only thought of themselves as different—they *were* different. Gottwald's work, with all its ideological flaws, has demonstrated this at the factual level, I think, beyond doubt.⁷

The main feature of the people of God at this stage is that they were a theocracy in reality. And the rule of God was bound up with a commitment to certain societal objectives embodied in the Sinai covenant and law—objectives that were characterized by equality, justice, and community values. Being the people of God at this stage was a moral and social task to be worked out. It was an alternative vision, requiring 'detailed obedience in the ethical, social and cultic spheres ... [which] ... establishes the notion of the people of God as an ethical principle. In their behaviour the people of God are bound to one another. Yahweh being their overlord, they have no human overlords. Theocracy and socio-political equality (radical theology and radical sociology) go together.'⁸

This point underlines the importance of Sinai. Sinai stands significantly midway between liberation from Egypt and settlement in Canaan. Liberation was not an end in itself. The newly free people constantly fell prey to the disintegrating forces of licence, rebellion, dissent and failure of nerve. Through the Sinai covenant God provided the bonding and moulding institutions and laws by which they were to progress from a mass of freed slaves to an ordered and functioning society. It is there, in the Torah, that we find the bulk of those features of Israel's

⁵ Notice the train of ideas through the following texts: Ex. 5:2; 7:5,17; 8:10, 22; 9:15, 29; 14:18, 25.

⁶ The question of how and when Israel established itself in Canaan (by conquest, infiltration, revolt, or a mixture) is still a much debated area among historians of the period. See F. S. Frick, *The Formation of the State in Ancient Israel: A Survey of Models and Theories* (Sheffield, 1985), and J. J. Bimson, 'The origins of Israel in Canaan: an examination of recent theories', *Themelios* 15.1 (1989), pp. 4-15.

⁷ N. K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 BCE* (Orbis, SCM, 1979).

⁸ J. Goldingay, *op. cit.*, p. 66, with references to the work of Mendenhall, Gottwald, and other sociologists of Israel. I have tried to outline the ethically significant features of Israel's social life and the hermeneutical considerations that enable us to apply them to the people of God today, in C. J. H. Wright, 'The Ethical Relevance of Israel as a Society', *Transformation* 1.4 (1984).

polity that made them so distinctive: the kinship rationale of land tenure; the jubilee and sabbatical institutions; the ban on interest; the equality of native and 'stranger' before the law; the civil rights of slaves; the diffusion of political leadership and authority among the elders; the limitation on the economic power of cultic officials. Israel at this period, though not a state in our sense of the word, did not lack social institutions with consistent goals and a coherent rationale.

The state at this period is represented by Egypt on the one hand and Canaan on the other. The former was a large empire, exercising its power in blatant oppression of the people of God, in its own interests. The latter was a patchwork of small city-state kingdoms with pyramidal forms of political and economic power, which were oppressive and exploitative of the peasant population. Both are presented in the text also as idolatrous in nature and stand as enemies of Yahweh and a threat to his people. In both cases the stance of the people of God towards the state is one of confrontation, challenge and conflict.

The exit and entry of the people of God respectively spells judgment on both opposing human states, the one primarily because of its oppression, the other primarily because of its idolatry and 'abominable practices', which are catalogued in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The state, then, in this particular context, stands over against the people of God as something to be opposed, defeated, dismantled, and finally replaced by a wholly distinctive kind of human society under the direct rule of God.

The portrayal of God in this context is exclusively the portrayal of Yahweh, the name which bursts on the scene to herald the exodus itself, and goes on to become the primary identity of the people of Israel. Thereafter, they are the 'tribes of Yahweh'. And Yahweh is a God who sets himself against injustice and oppression, initiating the exodus expressly to put them right. In so doing he enters into history, and specifically political history, in a way not so apparent in the patriarchal narratives. His transcendence injects itself into Pharaoh's empire and blows it open.⁹

Yahweh, the liberating God of justice, is next perceived as king. The essence of theocracy was that Israel initially acknowledged no king but Yahweh. That Israel regarded Yahweh as king from Mosaic times (and not just from the time of her own monarchy) is clear in several very ancient texts (e.g. Ex. 15:18; 19:6; Nu. 23:21; Dt. 33:5). Belief in the kingship of a deity is not at all unique to Israel, and existed in the ancient Near Eastern world long before Israel emerged.¹⁰ But if theocracy in the general sense of a nation regarding its god as a king was not unique, Israel's particular manifestation and experience of it certainly was. For in Israel theocracy excluded, for several centuries, a human king. Lind comments,

⁹ Brueggemann comments forcefully on the double significance of the Mosaic 'alternative' to Pharaoh's statism. Moses challenged the mythical claims of Pharaoh's empire with the 'alternative religion of the freedom of God'. At the same time he attacked Pharaoh's oppression with the 'politics of human justice and compassion'. 'Yahweh makes possible an alternative theology and an alternative sociology': W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Fortress, 1978), pp. 16f. This is a most stimulating book on the political and social dimensions of some of the prophets.

¹⁰ 'Yahweh was regarded as political leader both of Israel and of the world, a concept which in itself was not unique, however, as the rule of divinity was a belief held by all ancient Near Eastern peoples': Millard C. Lind, 'The Concept of Political Power in Ancient Israel', *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute*, 7 (1968-9), pp. 4-24.

While the kingship of Yahweh as such is paralleled... in the ancient mythologies of the Near East, this exclusion and polemic against the human institution is unparalleled, and gives to Yahweh's kingship a new dimension... the remarkable point is that the kingship of Yahweh excluded human kingship.¹¹

The reason why Yahweh's kingship is incompatible at this time with human kingship is that Yahweh took to himself entirely the two major functions and duties of kings in the ancient world, namely the conduct of war and the administration of law and justice. Indeed, in the exercise of these two functions, human kings

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in the ancient Near East were at their most sacral—*i.e.* acting on behalf of the god they represented (or embodied). But in Israel, Yahweh himself took over these roles, and human political leadership was thus decisively demoted and relativized. Instead, Israel was a covenant nation, with Yahweh, as lord of the covenant, responsible both for their protection, by war if necessary, and for the just ordering of their social life in every aspect.

So there was, then, in this period of Israel's history, a truly radical and alternative political option being launched on the stage of human history. And this radical political option was effected in the name of Yahweh, in such a way that the religion of Yahweh was inseparable from the social objectives of Israel. For Israel was not just the people of God (many nations would claim that in one form or another), but specifically the people of Yahweh, and that in itself meant a covenant commitment to a certain kind of society that reflected Yahweh's character, values, priorities and goals.

What this amounts to is that 'theocracy' in itself is not an ideal aim for the people of God in their political realms. It all depends on who or what is the *theos*. Only the vision of Yahweh as the God he truly is initiated and sustained Israel's theocracy. But sadly the state, like humans, tends to make its god in its own image. As Israel itself moved from the radical, alternative, surprising theocracy of Yahweh to the institutional state of the monarchy, it did just that, in spite of being reminded by the prophets of its true identity and calling.

The influence of the exodus paradigm and the story of the conquest on social and political history has been simply incalculable. In Israel itself it became a model and a point of appeal at all times of suffering and oppression in biblical and post-biblical history. Through Christian history it has fired hopes and imagination, sometimes fruitfully, sometimes disastrously. The confrontational stance of the people of God *vis-à-vis* the state, perceived as evil, satanic, godless, etc., has fuelled many varieties of Christian utopianism, millenarianism and radical non-conformity. Such movements often end up in 'unreal expectations, fanatical devotion, irrational behaviour, dictatorial regimes and ruthless repression or elimination of the enemy'.¹² They were usually also fuelled by apocalyptic beliefs which set their whole agenda

¹¹ Lind, *op. cit.*, pp. 12f. He adduces Gideon's resistance to proffered kingship (Jdg. 8:22f.); Samuel's critique of monarchy as an essentially enslaving burden (I Sa. 8:10-18); and Jotham's fable (Jdg. 9:7-15) in which monarchy is mocked as 'a socially useless, even harmful institution'.

¹² Gregory Baum, referring to a historical study of such movements in Europe by Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London, 1957), in his own article, 'Exodus Politics', in B. van Iersel and A. Weiler (eds.), *Exodus—A Lasting Paradigm, Concilium* 189 (1987), pp. 109-117. This volume includes helpful surveys of the use of the exodus paradigm in various theological traditions.

in a kind of trans-historical mode. By contrast, the exodus itself and the events which followed it were very much within the boundaries of historical reality, and, astounding though they were, they were limited by the possibilities of history. Things were not perfect for Israel after the exodus, either in the wilderness, or in the land of promise. But within the limitations of history, an unparalleled act of justice and liberation did take place and a radically different kind of society was brought to birth. This reading of the exodus paradigm has been explored by Michael Walzer and lays much greater emphasis on the achievement of attainable goals within history, goals which fit the objectives and values of the exodus paradigm.¹³

It is this latter use of the exodus paradigm which has been so much the backbone of liberation theology, in ways too many to document. It is also a major factor in black and feminist theologies, as well as the less sophisticated biblical encouragement that many groups of suffering believers have clung to in hope.

III The institutional state; the monarchy period

By the time of Samuel, the strain of living as a theocracy was proving more than the people felt able to bear in the face of external pressures. They opted for monarchy, survived Saul, served David, suffered Solomon, split in two and finally sank respectively into oblivion and exile. During this period (from Saul, or at least David, to the exile) the people of Yahweh were unmistakably an institutional state, with central leadership, boundaries, organized military defences, etc. Yet the identification of people of God with political state was never wholly comfortable. Within the OT itself there are hints of conscious distinction between the two realities, even while there is formal and apparent identity. So there is the problem of the relationship of people of God and state internally to Israel itself. This is further complicated by there being two markedly different evaluations of the monarchy, even within closely related texts: pro and anti. Then, if we see the monarchical states of Judah and Israel as at least notionally the people of God, we should look at their relationship and attitude to the external states of their day—especially the dominant empires.

The origins of monarchy in Israel are laid before us in a narrative which subtly and intentionally interweaves two understandings of the process (1 Sa. 8-12). On the one hand the demand for it arises from a retrograde desire of the people to be like the other nations by having a king. Their reasons at first sight seem unexceptionable: leadership against their enemies and the protection of justice (8:3-5, 19f.). Samuel (and Yahweh) interpret the request as a rejection of direct theocracy. But their explicit objection to monarchy is not so much theological as practical, and fundamentally economic. Samuel predicts that if a king is accepted, it will result in the characteristic forms of royal slavery: confiscation, taxation, military and agricultural conscription (8:10-18). The portrayal of Solomon's later reign is an unmistakable 'I told you so'. All very negative. So much so that Brueggemann can speak of the whole spirit, ethos and accomplishment of Solomon as a reversal of the Mosaic alternative, a return to the values and management mentality of the empire, a countering of the counterculture of Sinai.¹⁴

¹³ Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York, 1985). His approach is also summarized in Baum, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ In *The Prophetic Imagination*, ch. 2, Brueggemann lists the characteristic features of the Solomonic era as 'an economics of affluence (1 Ki. 4:20-23), politics of oppression (1 Ki. 5:13-18, 9,15-22) and a religion of immanence and accessibility (1 Ki. 8:12-13)'.

On the other hand, it is Yahweh himself who gives Israel a king, choosing, anointing and (for a while) blessing him. It is Yahweh who goes on to exalt David, embarrassing him with the multiplicity of victories, gift of a city, rest from his enemies, and a covenant for his posterity. 'Solomon in all his glory' suffered no embarrassment, but his greatness is still attributed to Yahweh's generosity. In other words, Yahweh takes the human desire and resultant institution and makes them fit in with his own purposes. Indeed, he goes further, and tries to mould the monarchy, for all its origins as rejection of theocracy, into a *vehicle* for theocracy by subsuming the reign of the king under his own reign. And so the royal theology of Jerusalem is absorbed into the transcendent rule of Yahweh and given a covenant framework which harks back to Sinai in its call for loyalty and obedience.

If the monarchy thus stands in a position of ambiguous legitimacy before God, neither totally rejected nor unconditionally sanctioned, it likewise had to struggle for legitimacy at a human level. This is how South African scholar Gunther Wittenberg interprets the texts of the Davidic-Solomonic era, seeing in them both attempts at theological legitimizing and also theological resistance to the claimed legitimacy of the Davidic house.¹⁵ The legitimizing texts, of course, are those which related to the Davidic covenant, the temple, Zion, and the relationship of the king to God. Resistance was crystallized in the secession of the northern tribes under the leadership of Jeroboam. The presenting cause of this was the social and economic oppression which had developed during Solomon's reign, and which Rehoboam, though offered the chance of a change of policy, deliberately chose to continue and intensify. But there are hints also of a theological refusal in principle to accept the legitimacy of the glorious Davidic 'new thing'. The prophet Ahijah, who accosted Jeroboam to launch him on his secession from Judah, came from Shiloh. Shiloh was an ancient cultic centre of the pre-monarchic tribal federation, former resting place of the ark of the (Sinai) covenant and all its links with Israel's historical, exodus traditions. Above all it was closely associated with Samuel, whose denunciation of monarchy must have echoed loudly among northern Israelites in the later years of Solomon. Furthermore, there are echoes of the cry of the Israelites in their Egyptian bondage, in the plea of the northerners to have their burdens lifted. Had Solomon become a pharaoh? Noticeably, in setting up the religious foundations of his own state, Jeroboam recalls the exodus liberation: 'Here is your God, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt' (aside, 'not to mention, out of Jerusalem') (1 Ki. 12:28).

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What we have seen, then, is that the transformation of the people of God into an institutional state generated both approval and rejection, in the heat of the process itself, and also in theological and canonical assessment. It seems that the institutional state, like certain other human conditions of life which the law permits but never wholly approves, such as divorce and slavery, is a concession to human 'hardness of heart': permitted but transient.

¹⁵ G. H. Wittenberg, 'King Solomon and the Theologians', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 63 (June 1988) (special issue on church and state and the problem of legitimacy), pp. 16-29. Brueggemann also finds implicit criticism of the golden age of Solomon in the texts themselves which catalogue it, texts which he claims conceal a social criticism designed to lead the reader to enquire exactly what kind of shalom it was under Solomon which brought the people such satiety. See 'Vine and Fig Tree—a Case Study in Imagination and Criticism', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981); 'The Bible and Mission', *Missiology* 10.4 (1982), pp. 397-411; 'Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98 (1979), pp. 161-185.

The *prophets reinforce* the conditional and qualified nature of God's acceptance of the monarchy as the political form of his people. One could summarize the view of the prophets towards the monarchic state of Israel (in both northern and southern forms) by saying that they accepted its God-giveness, but refused its God-surrogacy. For example, at the point of the secession of the northern tribes away from Judah, one and the same prophet, Ahijah, both acknowledged that Jeroboam's rebellion was divinely willed as judgment on the house of Solomon, and also later severely criticized him for the idolatry into which he had led the Israelites (1 Ki. 11:29-39; 14:1-16).

That idolatry of the northern kingdom was focused on the golden calves at Bethel and Dan. But from 1 Kings 12:26ff. we see that Jeroboam did not apparently intend the worship of false gods as such. The calves represented the presence of Yahweh, who brought Israel up out of Egypt. The real thrust of Jeroboam's idolatry lies in the motives of his action, and the additional cultic action which he initiated. His intention was clearly the political protection of his own nascent kingdom from any hankering after the splendour of Jerusalem (vv. 26f.). To make completely sure, he elaborated an alternative cultic system for the northern kingdom, designed, appointed and run by himself, to serve the interests of his state (vv. 31-33). In effect, 'Yahweh' had become a figurehead for his state. *The state in itself was idolatrous.*

This is clear from the ironic angry words of Amaziah, the high priest at Bethel under Jeroboam II (nearly two centuries later), against Amos: 'Get out, you seer! ... Don't prophesy any more at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom' (Am. 7:12f., italics mine). Amos, however, refused to be silenced by the usurped divine authority of the political regime. God may have permitted it to come into existence, but that did not bind him to serve its self-interests. The prophets refused to allow the authority of God or his prophetic word to be hijacked to legitimize human political ambitions. Sometimes they paid the cost of that role—as must the church if it chooses to exercise a comparable prophetic stance today.

One prophet who certainly could not be hijacked was Elijah. His ministry took place in the ninth century BC in the northern kingdom during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, when the whole state became virtually apostate. Nevertheless there were a faithful 7,000 who had not capitulated to the palace-imposed worship of Baal (1 Ki. 19:14,18). The origins of the idea of a faithful remnant probably go back as far as this. It was not the state of Israel itself that constituted the true people of God, but a minority of 'true believers' within it.

We are then given two opposite responses to this dichotomy. Elijah represents the voice from outside. He denounces the king and queen for their apostasy and their socio-economic vandalism (Naboth, ch. 21), predicts divine judgment, and even arranges the anointing of the avenger, Jehu. But there was a presence on the inside of the state system also—that of Obadiah, who meets Elijah in 18:1-15. He is described as a loyal worshipper of Yahweh (his name means that, and he had managed to preserve it, even under Jezebel) from his youth. Yet he was also the top official in the palace—actually employed in the civil and political service of the apostate king and queen. Not content with surviving in such a dangerous position, he was actually using it for the protection and maintenance of a hundred of the prophets of Yahweh, at a time when Jezebel was exterminating them. The text does not comment on Obadiah's stance (though Christian commentators through the centuries have both condemned

and commended it). Probably, in my view, we are invited to regard both stances—Elijah's on the outside, and Obadiah's on the inside—as equally valid. God had room for both and used both.

In the southern kingdom of Judah, in spite of all the theological legitimization of the state and its monarchy, the prophetic voice of Yahweh could still stand out in conflict with it and challenge the moral validity of any given incumbent of the throne of David. And the criterion of assessment was the covenant law. Unequivocally the prophets subordinated Zion to Sinai.

The law in Deuteronomy which permitted (note, not commanded) monarchy laid down strict conditions for it, including the requirement that the king should know, read and obey the law. He was to be, not a super-Israelite, but a model Israelite among his brothers and equals (Dt. 17:14-20). As one entrusted with the law, the king was committed to the maintenance of justice in a spirit of compassion (*e.g.* especially Ps. 72). Jeremiah could proclaim this strong tradition of the legal, covenantal requirement on the king, at the very gates of the palace in Jerusalem. His words are really a statement of the Davidic monarchy. Zion must conform to Sinai, or face ruin.

'Hear the word of the Lord, O king of Judah, you who sit on David's throne—you, your officials and your people who come through these gates. This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place. For if you are careful to carry out these commands, then kings who sit on David's throne will come through the gates of this palace.... But if you do not obey these commands, declares the LORD, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin' (Je. 22:2-5).

On this basis, Jeremiah then goes on, on the one hand, to commend with approval the reign of Josiah, who lived by the standards of covenant law, which is what it means to know Yahweh (22:15f.), and on the other, utterly to reject Jehoiakim, whose actions and policies included forced labour without pay, personal aggrandizement, dishonesty, violence and oppression. The legitimacy or illegitimacy of the two kings is evaluated respectively on the grounds of their treatment of the poor and needy, the workers, the 'innocent'—*i.e.* precisely the dominant concerns of the Sinai law.

Thus, even when the socio-political contours of the people of God had changed radically from the early theocracy to the institutional, royal state, the controlling paradigm was still that of the law and the covenant. This meant that royal theocracy could never be rightly regarded as 'the divine right of kings per se. Being 'the Lord's anointed' was not an unconditional guarantee. The king was subject to and correctable by the covenant law.

The same moral criterion applies in the prophetic perspective on *the authority of external, secular rulers*. For they too rule by Yahweh's authority (19:15). In the eighth century Isaiah regarded Assyria and its tyrannical sovereigns as no more than a stick in the hand of Yahweh (Is. 10:5ff.). Jeremiah could announce, in a seventh-century international diplomatic conference hosted by Zedekiah in Jerusalem, that Yahweh had delegated to Nebuchadnezzar supreme, worldwide authority and power—for the foreseeable future (Je. 27:1-11, especially vv. 5-7).

Now if Israelite kings as Yahweh's anointed were subject to evaluation by the moral standards of Yahweh and his law, so too were the pagan ones. The clearest example of this is Nebuchadnezzar again. Daniel had clearly absorbed the point of Jeremiah's assertion about Nebuchadnezzar, for he repeats it, almost verbatim, to his face (Dn. 2:37f.). Nevertheless, on another occasion Daniel warned Nebuchadnezzar that unless he repented of the injustice on which his boasted city had been built, by lifting the oppression of the poor and needy in his realm, he would face

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inevitable judgment. The boldness of Daniel's prophetic word in Daniel 4:27 should not escape us, hidden as it is in the midst of an otherwise somewhat weird story. The one to whom Yahweh had given all authority and power, far beyond what any Israelite king had ever wielded, is here weighed in the balance of God's justice and found wanting (to pinch a metaphor from the following chapter).

This must have some bearing on interpretations of Paul's view of state authority in Romans 13. The Hebrew Bible would wholly endorse the view that all human authorities exist within the framework of God's will. It would wholly reject the view that gives them a legitimacy regardless of their *conformity to God's justice*, as revealed in the covenant law.

So then, the historical experience of the people of God in actually being a state generated enormous tensions. There was never complete ease with the monarchy, even in Davidic Judah, as the continuing existence of a group like the Rechabites in the late monarchy showed (Je. 35). There was always the feeling that Israel was really meant to be something different. Nevertheless it is from the prophetic critique of the kings and institutions of this period (in both narrative and prophetic books) that we learn most in the OT concerning God's radical demand on political authorities.

The influence of the model of Israel as an institutional royal state can probably be seen most comprehensively in the 'Christendom' idea, in the centuries during which Christians seem to have collectively considered that the best way to save the world was to run it. The Constantinian transformation of Christianity and its dubious effects have often been compared to Israel's adoption of monarchy and statehood.¹⁶

IV The suffering remnant: the exile

In 587 BC the institutional, monarchic state of Judah vanished under the rubble of Jerusalem, devastated by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar. The northern kingdom of Israel had long since disappeared, scattered by the Assyrians in 721 BC. The people of God were not only no longer a state; they were scarcely even a nation. As a tiny remnant they learned once again to live like their forefathers, as strangers in a strange land, in the very land indeed from which their forefathers had departed in obedience to God's call. Now they were back there under his judgment.

¹⁶ Goldingay has some perceptive comparisons between the various stages of Israel's development and the history of the Christian church, from its familial origins to its present 'post-exilic' (post-Enlightenment) tensions. See *Theological Diversity*, p. 83.

But Babylon was not just strange. It was also an enormous, hostile and threatening environment, in which the people of God were now a small, uprooted, endangered species—exiles. At this point in their history, then, the people of God constitutes a persecuted remnant, with the state as an ambient, hostile power within which they have to survive and somehow continue to live as the people of God. The danger at such a time was two-fold: to lose their identity by compromise and assimilation into their new environment, and thus cease to be distinctive; or to stand out as so intractably different that they brought destructive fires of persecution on themselves that might finally consume them. The same dilemma has faced the people of God at many times in history when they have been a suffering minority in a hostile environment. And in this case also we have a variety of responses from the Hebrew Bible to such a situation. We shall quickly look at four—two positive and two negative.

First, there was the advice to pray for Babylon. This was the astonishing message sent by Jeremiah in a letter to the first group of exiles, recorded in Jeremiah 29. Contrary to those who were predicting a short exile, or a quick rebellion to end their exile, Jeremiah forecasts a long stay of two generations, and therefore counsels a policy of settling down to that. The exiles must realize that Babylon had done what it had done by God's permission, and in that sense, to pray for Babylon would put them in line with the purposes of God again. The *shalom* of the people of God was bound up with the *shalom* of the pagan nation in which they now resided.

Second, there was the response of Daniel and his friends, who went beyond praying for Babylon and were willing to serve the young imperial state of Nebuchadnezzar. The book of Daniel is a fascinating analysis of the extreme dangers, as well as the unique opportunities, of such a decision. There are parallels with the story of Joseph. Both were able to witness to the living God in the midst of a pagan and idolatrous state; both were able to influence the state's policies; both were able to benefit the people of God by their 'secular' career positions.

Third, coming again from the pen of Jeremiah, is the response of wholesale declaration of *judgment* on Babylon. It is this which underlines the astonishing paradox of Jeremiah's advice to the exiles to pray for Babylon. Virtually in the same postbag as that letter, he also sent the massive tirade against Babylon recorded in Jeremiah 50-51. The scroll was to be read, and then dropped with a stone in the Euphrates, there to sink as mighty Babylon was destined to do. This shows clearly that the letter in chapter 29 was not a piece of rosy-eyed quietism based on a naive faith in Babylon's benevolence. Jeremiah told the exiles to pray for the *shalom* of Babylon with his eyes wide open to the realities of Babylon, and the fact that all it stood for was destined to be destroyed in the blast path of God's judgment. One is reminded of Abraham's intercession for Sodom, much closer to the brink of their annihilation.¹⁷

Fourth, there was the response of deliberate mockery and debunking of Babylon's imperial pantheon and sophisticated, 'scientific' civilization. The importance of Isaiah 46 and 47 can be missed if we fail to see their links with each other and the context. Here is a prophet seeking to energize his depressed people to believe that Yahweh can again do something great; that their present condition is not final; that they can actually get up and get out of Babylon. The people of God must again claim their identity in the world—an identity of servant hood, but now universalized to be of saving significance for all nations. Awe of Babylon stands in the way. So even before the armies of Cyrus dismantle Babylon's empire,

¹⁷ I have discussed these responses to the state further in *Living as the People of God*, pp. 122-130.

the prophet's poetry is already dismantling it psychologically and spiritually in the perception of his fellow exiles. There is therefore a profoundly political significance to the mockery of idolatry and the deflating of cultural arrogance in these chapters. Brueggemann captures this point with his usual pithiness.

The poet engages in the kind of guerrilla warfare that is always necessary on behalf of oppressed people. First, the hated one must be ridiculed and made reachable, then she may be disobeyed and seen as a nobody who claims no allegiance and keeps no promises. The big house yields no real life, need not be feared, cannot be trusted, and must not be honoured.

When the Babylonian gods have been mocked, when the Babylonian culture has been ridiculed, then history is inverted. Funeral becomes festival, grief becomes doxology, and despair turns to amazement. Perhaps it is no more than a cultic event, but don't sell it short, because cult kept close to historical experience can indeed energize people. For example, witness the black churches and civil rights movements or the liberation resistance in Latin America. The cult may be a staging for the inversion that the kings think is not possible.... We ought not to underestimate the power of the poet. Inversions may begin in a change of language, a redefined perceptual field, or an altered consciousness.¹⁸

Yet, having said all this, the future of the people of God still depends on Cyrus, who was as much a pagan king of a pagan empire as Nebuchadnezzar had been. The state that Isaiah 46-47 was mocking was the one that Jeremiah described as God's servant, executing his judgment on Israel (Je. 25:9; 27:6). This prophet avoids the term 'servant' for Cyrus, since it has special significance in his prophecy as applied to Israel and the one who will fulfil Israel's mission. But he does describe Cyrus as Yahweh's 'shepherd' and his 'anointed' (Is. 44:28; 45:1): terms normally applied to Israel's own kings. So, while the prophet certainly declares that the deliverance of Israel from exile will be a triumphant work of Yahweh, he looks to the newly rising external state to accomplish it. The new exodus will have a pagan for its Moses.

Once again we see how fully the OT puts all human political authority and military power under the sovereign will of Yahweh.

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The external empire state may be oppressive and enslaving, as an agent of his judgment; or it may be more enlightened and liberating, as an agent of his redemption. Either way it is the arm of the Lord at work.

V The distinctive community, the post-exilic period

After the return from Babylon to Judea, the people of God were not an institutional state again. But neither were they a tiny dislocated group of exile slaves. They were scarcely a nation, in any sense of national independence. But they were a community with a clear sense of distinct ethnic and religious identity. As a sub-province within the vast Persian empire, they remained politically insignificant. Yet at the same time they had a much enhanced view of their own significance as the people of God in the world with a continuing role as his

¹⁸ Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, p. 75.

servant and a mixture of hopes as to how God's purpose for them and through them would ultimately be accomplished. So they were a restored community, a community of faith and a community of promise.

Goldingay identifies four main features of the post-exilic community. They were a worshipping community, going back to the original conception of the Israelite *'edah*, the assembly gathered for worship. Ezra laid the foundations of this, and the Chronicler provided its validation in his narrative history. They were a waiting community, looking forward with varieties of apocalyptic expectation to a new future from God. They were an obeying community, with a new devotion to the law, fired by the realization that it was neglect of the law which had led to the catastrophe of exile. Thus the law, even more than the covenant of which it had originally been the responsive part, becomes the heart of the new community of faith to be known as Judaism. And they were a questioning community. The tensions of faith posed by their own history produced doubts and uncertainties which some strands of the Wisdom literature wrestle with. Not all the questions found answers within the limits of the old faith.

As to the *state* during this period, there were enormous fluctuations in the extent to which it impinged upon the life of God's people. Under Persia, they experienced a comparatively benevolent policy of religious freedom and considerable local autonomy, without independence, of course. But this could be used against them by unscrupulous enemies within the system. The stories of Nehemiah and Ezra repay study from the angle of their availing of state sponsorship, protection and authority both in building up the infra-structure of the community, and in resisting its enemies. In the later years of the Greek control of Palestine, under the Antiochene rulers, however, the community came in for extreme pressures. Some of these threatened to split the community, between those who could accept and accommodate to Greek culture and ways, and those who would preserve the faith and its distinctive at all costs. If it was for these that the book of Daniel was written or preserved, then the response therein was one of patience, fortified by apocalyptic hopes, and the assurance that all was still in God's control. Neither an exodus nor a Cyrus are expected. Only endurance is called for.

Conclusion

Having observed the great range of material available to us for reflection on the relationship between the people of God and the state, what are we to do with it? How can we carefully exploit its diversity?

(a) We need to make careful correlations between the facts of any given situation in which a community of God's people may find itself in relation to a modern secular state on the one hand and the features of specific periods of Israel's history on the other. As we do so, we must avoid blanket assertions which may be more romantic than real. Not all Christians are living under oppression. Nor are all Christians under oppression living in circumstances parallel to the Israelites in Egypt. Babylon may have closer parallels and more important challenges. Some Christians may be living in a time of nation-building or major political changes (such as Eastern Europe and South Africa), in which they have the real potential of affecting the contours of the nascent state according to values drawn from the Sinai and theocracy paradigm and further refracted through NT development. Others may be living as a tiny minority in a moderately benevolent state, but with little chance of any actual influence upon it. Others may be undergoing the intense kind of minority persecution that threatens their very

existence as a believing community, and can draw encouragement from the endurance motifs of apocalyptic. So we need to think through the diversity of Israel's experience to see when and where it matches our own and what lessons it has to teach.¹⁹

(b) We need to avoid making an arbitrary selection which may enable us to have a twisted view of the response of the people of God to the state, by simply conforming to the image of Israel in a given period and falling prey to the same temptations. Even if we find that a particular period has most to say to our situation, we need the corrective and balance of an awareness of the other periods also. For the great thing is that Israel 'found' God in all of them, and learned and coped within them.

It is a genuine encouragement to find within the scripture itself the people of God coping with different modes of being with the ambiguities that we ourselves experience. God has said yes to each of these. The monarchy was part of God's will, even though it had its earthly origin in an act of human rebellion. The community has to find ways of living with the experience of God's promises not being fulfilled. [But] ...

The danger is that our choice of a perspective from the various ones the OT offers us may be an arbitrary one. A predetermined understanding of what it means to be God's people may be bolstered exegetically by appeal to biblical warrants which support a stance chosen before coming to the Bible.²⁰

If we ask whether any particular period has prime significance as setting a paradigm for the rest, then I think we have to come back to the normative significance of the covenant and law at Sinai, and the attempts of the early theocracy to initiate a community that embodied those social objectives. We have already seen in detail that the prophets exercised a critical function during the monarchy on precisely that basis.

Another good example of the normative stature of the covenant law even in a pagan situation would be Daniel again. Living at a time when his people were an oppressed minority, he had visions of the empire as essentially 'beastly' in character. In other words, like Jeremiah, he was fully aware of the state as ultimately an enemy of God, indeed a kind of God-surrogate, destined for God's final destruction. Nevertheless, he not only chose to serve the state at the civil-political level, but also took the opportunity to challenge that state in the name of the 'God of heaven' to mend its ways in line with a paradigm of justice derived from Sinai (4:27).

The subtlety and mature balance of Daniel's stance is remarkable. Knowing that it was God himself who had given Nebuchadnezzar all authority and dominion, he nevertheless did not feel bound to obey him in every particular but set limits on the extent of his submission to the state. His understanding of divine appointment of human authority did not make him a passive pawn of the state. But on the other hand, knowing that Babylon was one of the 'beasts' of his visions, an agent of evil and destruction with spiritual dimensions, he nevertheless continued his daily political duty at the office desk (8:27), maintaining his integrity and his witness at the top level of national life. His understanding of satanic influence on human powers did not make him an escapist from political involvement.

¹⁹ G. Baum, 'Exodus Politics', suggests various paradigms as helpful and biblical ways of looking at conflicts in our modern world.

²⁰ Goldingay, *Theological Diversity*, pp. 91f.

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