

A Theological Critique of Nation-God



On October 7, 2023, Palestinian armed forces (Hamas and Islamic Jihad) launched numerous rockets from the Gaza Strip into central and southern Israel. This then escalated into the Israel–Hamas war...

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The United States and Israel

There is no one who looks at the current Palestinian situation and is not heartbroken by the reports coming out of Gaza. Regardless of how one interprets the origins and responsibility for the current clashes, Israel's overwhelming use of military force is inhumane. However, Western nations remain beholden to Israel, and there has been little change in their official position. At this year's Nagasaki Peace Memorial Ceremony in August 2024, representatives of Western nations refrained from attending in solidarity with Israel's Ambassador to Japan, who was not invited.

The US government has not been swayed by student protests or the outcome of the presidential election, and both the Democratic and Republican parties have been consistent in their official support for Israel. Why is this the case? It is well known that the proportion of Jewish influence in the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of power in the United States far exceeds their proportion in the overall population. But America's interests in Israel extend beyond the realms of politics, economics, and diplomacy to broader, more fundamental dimensions. The fate of the Jewish people is seen as a problem for the future of Christianity before it is a problem for the Jews. This is because the return of the Jewish

people to Zion is seen as a prerequisite for the coming of the millennium as prophesied in the Scripture. Without the restoration of Israel in the Holy Land, the prophesied end times cannot come to pass. The modern state of Israel, realized after an interval of more than two thousand years since the era of the Old Testament, is not only a tangible political reality, but also an issue of profound ideological significance for the Christian world, which has inherited the covenant of the Jewish people. This perspective is particularly strong among evangelical Christians, who tend to interpret the words of the Bible literally.

Some may question how much such theological debates affect the real world. However, even before its founding, the United States began with a self-identification as the “New Israel.” Just as the enslaved Jewish people in the Bible escaped from Egypt and came to a new heaven and a new earth, so the American people will escape the shackles and corruption of the old world of Europe and build a clean new world — this has been America’s self-image, repeated at every turn of history. Like the Israelites in the Bible who entered and settled in the land of Canaan, a land of milk and honey, the settlers who came to the New World displaced the indigenous peoples in order to build their own promised land. This “manifest destiny” led the US to develop the West and expand further westward and across the sea to Asia.

Such a religious understanding of the state is not unique to Israel or the United States, nor is it unheard of outside Judeo-Christianity. However, its world-historical understanding is always presented against the background of biblical eschatological thought. If we want to criticize the behavior of the US or Israel, we must add a theological critique to the eschatological understanding of history that is at the core of their thought process. This critique is most effective when it comes not from outside their worldview, but from the same biblical understanding of history on which they stand. It is unclear to what extent this will constrain the norms of state behavior in the international community. Nevertheless, I must state unequivocally that their self-perception is false and cannot be legitimized by the logic of the religions on which they themselves rely.

The sovereignty of the “Election”

In 1953, Theodoor C. Vriezen, a Dutch Old Testament scholar, published a small book of about a hundred pages on the subject of “election.” According to Vriezen, the term “election” in the Bible is used both secularly and religiously, with diverse subjects and predicates. However, when it comes to “the election of Israel,” the subject is consistently God alone. This election is spoken of exclusively as an act of divine sovereignty: it is God who elects Israel, and the passive expression “Israel is elected” never appears. This distinction between the active and passive forms is not equivalent. The election is entirely grounded in the one who elects, with no inherent reason for Israel to be “the chosen people” nor any intrinsic guarantee that it will remain so. If traces of a “chosen people” consciousness persist in the modern self-understanding of Israel, it is clear, at the very least, that the Bible cannot be used to substantiate such a claim.

Modern Israel was established in 1948, five years before the book was published. Vriezen made this point in a very modest note¹, but it was taken seriously by those who saw Israel fighting a major battle in Palestine (the First Middle East War). The idea that they are “God’s chosen people” gives rise to the belief

¹ Theodoor C. Vriezen, *Die Erwählung Israels nach dem Alten Testament: Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments* 24 (Zürich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1953), S. 49, Anm. 2.

that they have the right to use force to wipe out other peoples if necessary, to erect high barriers in fear of retaliation, and to launch a series of pre-emptive strikes against foreign powers they perceive as potential threats. But their own revered Bible does not justify it.

Israel is also referred to in the Bible as “a people holy [to the Lord your God]” and “His treasured possession.” But the same can be said of these expressions. “[Out of all the nations on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be His treasured possession,” the Bible says. But it is always an exercise of God’s sovereignty, an expression of His freedom. Why did God choose Israel? It was not because Israel was righteous or strong. According to the Biblical perception, “[The Lord did not set his affection on you and] choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.” (Deuteronomy 7:7). This election is not grounded on the part of the elect. There is no reason for God to choose Israel. He could have chosen another people, or no people at all.

This election has certain conditions and purposes, as clearly recognized in the Bible and in later rabbinic tradition. The condition is, “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant” (Exodus 19:5), and the purpose is for Israel to become a “light to the nations” (Isaiah 49:6).²

Faith in the Covenant

The danger of Israel hardening its nationalistic piety into an unfounded claim of chosenness was already recognized in the biblical tradition. The Old Testament prophets had to constantly guard against this dangerous piety. For this reason, they continued to say that election has a clear purpose. Election is not to separate Israel from other nations and to treat them specially, but rather to extend salvation to other nations through Israel. The special grace of God is the calling of God, which refers to the mission to be fulfilled among various peoples, and it is given as a responsibility toward achieving the intended purpose.

What happens when Israel does not conform to these conditions and purposes? The words of one of the prophetic books, the book of Amos, tell us clearly.

“You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins.”
(Amos 3:2)

It is because of God’s special covenant relationship with Israel that He punishes Israel. What God required of Israel was not religious ceremonies or rituals, but social justice. “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:24), a thoroughgoing adherence to very secular, earthly ethics. Yahweh asks for ethics, not religion, as the content of the covenant. And he wants a simple, secular ethic to be realized in the daily lives of ordinary people.

Yahweh’s ethical demands based on the covenant are clear. Oracles are often given in a deliberately ambiguous way, like the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. But this was not the case in ancient Israel. Yahweh is not appeased by human sacrifice. No matter how devoutly people sing praises and offer prayers, God does not care. “If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?” (Psalm 50:12-13). This is almost a mockery by God. It is an indictment

² Emet Ve-Emunah, *Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism* (Jewish Theological Seminary of America: New York, 1988), 28.

and a condemnation of human religious acts. Yes, God does not want religion, He wants ethics. He wants common sense, direct and practical good that everyone can understand. Bombing schools and hospitals, blocking the delivery of food, water, and medicine, and distributing sophisticated communication devices that detonate and kill indiscriminately are not part of that covenant, no matter what the justification.

The State and God

One of the reasons why Western countries are reluctant to criticize Israel is its history of discrimination against Jews in the past. This may be true. However, they must face criticism based on the words of the Scripture, which the Jewish people themselves revere. This is not anti-Semitism or racism against Jews. It is theological criticism based on the texts.

Let's look a little further into the biblical understanding of "election." The idea of such election was not explicitly expressed until relatively late in the history of ancient Israel. As with any religion, the internal logic of a belief system evolves and becomes organized over time. From the outside, it may appear that the biblical people consistently believed in monotheism, or in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the coming of the eschaton. However, these are also ideas that were gradually defined and given clear contours over a long period of time. The idea of "election" developed roughly in parallel with the period when the belief in "creation" and "one God" became more refined.

In fact, here is an important paradox that many critics overlook. "Election" is based precisely on the premise that Israel is not special in any way. The idea of election implicitly presupposes the idea of creation. In order to "choose" something, there must be several objects. When we say, "God chose Israel," we are presupposing the existence of peoples other than Israel. Israel was chosen out of them. Israel's singularity is here denied by the very faith in creation by a monotheistic God.

This is not a natural flow of human thinking. In the ancient world, it is common knowledge that each nation has its own god. The power of nations is the power of their gods, and the battles of nations are the battles of their gods. When the gods are strong, the nations are strong. I should add, just for the record, that this is not just true in the ancient world. Until only a few decades ago, this was also the official doctrine of the divine Imperial Japan.

Destruction and salvation

But Yahweh is not a nation-god. In the words of the Old Testament, God is "the God of heaven and earth and all that is therein," that is, the Creator of the world. According to the book of Amos, God brought up Israel, but he also brought up the Philistines and the Syrians (Amos 9:7). The God of Israel rules the whole world, but Israel itself is not the center or purpose of history. As Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) once pointed out, this is the first universal historical understanding of the world to appear in human history.³ Niebuhr saw in these words of Amos the prototype of the postwar international order. He predicted that

³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Hikari no Ko to Yami no Ko—Demokurashi no Hihan to Yogo (The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defence)*, translated by Takeda Kiyoko (Seigakuin University Press, 1994), p. 156.

great power hegemonism would give rise to the Cold War structure, and he critically discussed the role the United States should play in it.

The fact that Yahweh is not a nation-god means that God does not share in the fate of the nation. It also means that God can destroy the nation. And indeed, this was the biblical understanding of the fate of Israel. Ancient Israel was destroyed by neighboring great powers and experienced the misfortune of losing its land. The Israelites then came to a conviction: “Was our God weaker than the gods of Assyria or Babylon? No, He was not. Our nation was destroyed not because God was weak, but because it was His will. God is faithful, and that is why He punished us for breaking the covenant” — this certainty of judgment also became their only hope. If the destruction of the nation was due to God’s own will, then the same God must have the power to raise us from the ashes. God destroys and resurrects Israel. He judges and saves. That is why they could hold on to the hope for the restoration of Israel for two thousand and several hundred years. The present-day Israel is also under the same covenant with the same God. If they do not keep the covenant, they will have to reap the fruits of their disobedience.

God’s “absolute justice” is often quoted as the source of self-righteous hegemonism in the West. But absolute justice is God’s justice, not the justice of those who believe in it. Rather, believers are placed under the judgment according to that justice. The eschatological justice is God’s justice that delivers the ultimate sentence on to each nation’s selfish understanding of justice. In the human world, there is no absolute justice. It does not exist on this side of history. Who will ultimately be considered righteous cannot be known until the end of the world. This is the biblical understanding of eschatology.⁴

Netanyahu’s understanding

However, Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister of modern Israel, seems to have a completely different understanding of the “light to the nations” that is supposed to be the purpose of the election. According to him, this “light to the nations” is demonstrated by the fact that the Jewish people, once scattered and persecuted throughout the world, now exist as a proud people with a wonderful nation.

In his speech to the United Nations General Assembly in 2017, Netanyahu confidently stated that the State of Israel is the “alight onto the nations” that the prophet Isaiah spoke of.⁵ Of course, he made this statement with an eye on Donald Trump, who became president after Barack Obama. Obama put pressure on Prime Minister Netanyahu to make concessions to Palestine, while making the nuclear deal with Iran. After taking office, however, Trump immediately withdrew from the nuclear deal and moved the US embassy to Jerusalem, much to the prime minister’s delight. Netanyahu must be eager to see his close friend return in the 2024 election.

This understanding is probably not unique to Netanyahu, nor is it new in Israel’s history. In rabbinic tradition, the very existence of the Jewish people is often cited as evidence that they are the “chosen people.”⁶ The Jewish people have survived a long history without even having a land, overcoming many difficulties and discrimination. This fact, they argue, is proof that they have received God’s special grace. However, the “light to

⁴ Please see the essays on Weber and Niebuhr in my book, *Tamashii no Kyoiku* (Education of the soul) (Iwanami Shoten, 2024).

⁵ “Netanyahu’s Address to UN General Assembly,” [Haaretz](#), September 19, 2017.

⁶ “The Chosen People, The Jewish Nation,” *Judaism Online*, https://www.simpletoremember.com/faqs/The_Jewish_Nation.htm, viewed September 22, 2024.

the nations” spoken of in the Scripture does not simply ask “whether” Israel exists, but rather “how” it exists. How will the Palestinian people hear the words of the current prime minister, “Israel will be a light to its neighbors, including Palestinians”?

However, hardliners like Netanyahu are often criticized even within Israel. Just as “Christians” are not all evangelicals, “Jews” are by no means monolithic. Some Jewish organizations overseas are opposed to Zionism (the movement to return to the Holy Land) itself.

The rabbinic tradition also argues that even if Israel were prevented from fulfilling God’s mission of election, it would not become “unchosen.” When you think about it, the sheer fact that an independent state like Israel actually exists on earth, and that this state has a military force so powerful that it overwhelms others, is a completely unprecedented experience even for their long history of sophisticated intellectual tradition. The task of interpreting this new reality may be just beginning.

Where are the prophets?

Statements that confuse God’s justice with their own are common in modern America. Generally, Democratic supporters are considered secular and Republican supporters are considered religious, but at this summer’s national convention, pastors from both parties took the stage to pray. The question is what to pray for.

At the Republican National Convention, the Reverend Franklin Graham prayed. He is the son of the Reverend Billy Graham (1918–2018), America’s most iconic post-war evangelist. He began by mentioning the recent assassination attempt on Trump, saying, “I believe God turned his head and saved his life,” which drew great applause, and ended with a prayer pledging allegiance to the United States. Not only he, but the entire convention prayed for God’s guidance and blessing on America. This may be natural for a convention to nominate a presidential candidate. But for them, God is nothing more than that. In other words, their God is America’s God. Their God does not judge America. Conversely, if someone criticizes America, it is taken as criticism of God and leads to a strong rejection reaction.

Graham’s father, Billy Graham, was often invited to the White House on the eve of important decisions by past presidents. He would stand beside the president as he made important decisions, praying with him and sharing his burden. That is why the American media would predict the start date of military invasions and other things after seeing him invited. In the terminology of religious studies, a person who plays such a role is called a “priest.” A person whose function is to give religious sanction to a country and its leaders and to offer blessings and reassurance.

In contrast, people who exist independently of kings and political powers and critically question the state are called “prophets.” The significance of ancient Israel in world history is that it gave birth to this unique intellectual tradition of “prophets.” This kind of voice of critique of power is needed not only in America and Israel, but in every country in the modern world that seeks to claim democracy. Reinhold Niebuhr was well known in 20th-century America, but where are the prophets of the 21st century?

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