THE SEVERN FORUM

Old Testament Conceptions of Israel and Perspectives on Israel-Palestine Today'

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Plan:

1 *Conceptions* of Israel: i.e. there is not a single fixed meaning of the term – rather, **Israel is a contested notion** in the Old Testament and beyond,

including the New Testament (Jesus on Nathanael: John 1:47; Paul in Romans: 'my kindred according to the flesh', and 'not all Israelites truly belong to Israel' – *ou gar pantes hoi ex Israel, houtoi Israel*, Romans 9:6).

and in Judaism (Marc Ellis – arguing that the Israeli state cannot determine what it means to be Jewish).

Israel and *struggle* – a clue in the name! 'struggled with God'; and the iconic narrative of Jacob wrestling with the angelic/divine figure (Genesis 32:25[25] – 'a man wrestled with him *wayye'abeq 'immo 'ad 'alot hashshahar* (*wayye'abeq* a play on the name 'Jacob'). As Jacob he does not prevail. Then he is renamed 'Israel' – because you have *struggled* with God and man (now *sarita* – a play on 'Israel') – and prevailed! Jacob exchanges one name meaning 'struggle' for another, and both overcomes and does not overcome. In such ambivalence is the concept of Israel shrouded by the Old Testament's own deep memories.

Illustrate by observing referents of Israel – (roughly after PR Davies):

The patriarch Israel/Jacob

the 'descendants of Israel/Jacob' - *beney yisra'el* – the people brought out of Egypt ('my people');

these as a league of tribes (under the 'Judges' – Jdg 4:1; 6:1 – 'Israelites'/*beney yisra'el*)

'United Kingdom' of David and Solomon – e.g. 2 Sam 7:5-7

Caveat: even here, 'Israel' and 'Judah' can be distinguished, 2 Sam 5:5 – David reigned 'over all Israel and Judah' (but cf. v. 3 – v. 5 seems to be explanatory; Judah separate, yet somehow subsumed under 'Israel');

'northern kingdom' of Israel (as opposed to Judah): e.g. Ahab, king of Israel (1 Kgs 20: 2 Kgs 3)

Judah (after 722, *qua* Israel), e.g.

II-Isaiah on servant 'Israel' (49:3);

Jeremiah 31:23: 'Thus says Yahweh of Hosts, the God of Israel: Once more they shall use these words in the land of *Judah*

Jeremiah 31:33 'This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days…'

(Jeremiah can also distinguish Israel and Judah, v. 31)

'the exiles' in Babylon, e.g.

Daniel 1:3 – young men 'of the sons of Israel';

Ezekiel 20:1 – 'certain elders of Israel'

'the exiles' (*gola*) in the province of Yehud (Zechariah 9:1, cf. 10:6-7); Malachi 1:2-5.

One could probably add to this list…

> a group within this, the 'laity' as distinct from Aaron [tenuous - possibly as in Psalm 124:1] (PR Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel"*, p. 48)
>
> Davies finds three more (more tenuously): viz. descendants of the patriarch Jacob; 'a tribal grouping in Ephraim'; 'adherents of various forms of Hebrew and Old Testament religion'.

For PRD, these are not just different 'referents', but different *kinds* of thing – for PRD, 'ethnic, political, religious'. He thinks this is a kind of untidiness, which he presses into the service of his argument that the 'ancient Israel' that scholars talk about is difficult or impossible to identify or define historically.

I think these differences are real, but they are played out in, or woven into, an OT 'story' –
In which an *ethnicity* becomes a *political entity*, deriving its identity from a memory that has a strong *religious* dimension (the exodus is the place where this transformation begins); the story goes into reverse, where the 'political' aspect is lost, or falls into abeyance, yet remains as a memory and a sorce of aspiration.

'ethnos* and *politeia

And this tension – between *ethnos* and *politeia* remains embedded in the literature of the OT. (E.g. In Deuteronomy: 'descendants of Abraham' inheriting a promise, 1:8 – yet becoming a political nation, 16:18-18:22).

The OT is well aware of this instability – indeed it addresses it head on.

Example:

Amos 7 – where the issue is, *not* whether Amos is a true prophet (that's the cavil of the priest Amaziah) but whether the kingdom of Israel is truly Israel!

Note:

Amos's visions, and his plea for *Jacob (*posing a question – who is he?) (7:2, 5)

The dialogue, vv. 10-17 – esp. v. 10: Amaziah: 'the very centre (*qereb*) of the house of Israel'; expels him to Judah, as if 'Israel' can be protected by the removal of an awkward prophet; Amaziah forbids Amos from prophesying against 'Israel' (v. 16) – and Amos insists: Yahweh said: Go and prophesy to my people Israel' (v. 15).

What is Israel? A state with an official religion, claiming the inheritance of the past? Or something less easily circumscribed: 'my people Israel' (cf. also Amos 9:14), recalling the birth of the people precisely in deliverance from a self-serving power.

So, Amos stages a conflict in the sphere of *'ethnos* and *politeia* – where the name 'Israel' has been appropriated by a specific political manifestation of Israel – leading to a prophetic protest against this *in the name of Israel*!

2 The 'heart' of Israel?

So is there an 'essence' of Israel? A 'heart'? (a 'centre', *qereb*, in Amaziah's terms). Is there a form of it in the Old Testament that should take precedence as constituting a kind of norm? Is it, for example, the Davidic-Solomonic 'United Kingdom'? This version of Israel holds a certain power over the imagination – possibly because it appeals to our interest in success and power.

There is a wariness about this in modern writing about Old Testament history; an older generation of historians, notable WF Albright, stands accused of being influenced by notions of cultural superiority as justification for military and political domination – with alleged effects up to the present in a failure to grant rights of history and identity in the region to the people now known as Palestinians. (Whitelam in *The Invention of Ancient Israel: the Silencing of Palestinian History*, Routledge, 1997).

Modern history-writing on Israel is unconvinced of the special origins of Israel as a nation (as opposed to an emergent grouping among indigenous peoples of the land), and of the authenticity of the biblical picture of a Davidic monarchy.

Be that as it may, the Old Testament itself does not dwell for long on the glories of David's kingdom as a historical fact, but in its story-telling moves quickly to dissolution and division, thence to exile, and eventually to a much diminished form of 'restoration'. There is a certain harking back to the glories of King David in parts of the Old Testament, and indeed David becomes the focus of some its future hopes. (For PRD the story of a national Israel is told to bolster the claims to ascendancy of a priestly aristocracy in Yehud).
But there is no uniformity about such hopes; and the discrepancy between the brief portrayal of David ruling as a righteous king and the path of both his and the monarchy's decline is an inalienable part of the story.

3 A story of 'failure'? Or of re-invention?

There is a scholarly version of the OT's historiography that sees it as more or less one of 'failure' (Martin Noth on the 'Deuteronomistic History' – a story of judgment). But this hardly rings true. It is much more a story of re-invention.

In fact, I think it is this at its very core. It's hardly possible to peel back the layers to a kind of bedrock that represents the pristine 'truth' about Israel – "here it is, this is the real McCoy!"

This is not even true of the foundational Exodus-Sinai narrative – for here as everywhere else, 'Israel' is being re-conceived against a background of something previously known.
Example: The curious exchange between Moses and Yahweh over the *name* of the latter: 'If they ask me the name of the God who sent me, what shall I say?' And the answer: 'I am who I am/will be who I will be' – and: 'And say to them: "Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you."' (Exod 3:13-15).

Israel thus between past and future ('I will be…');

The composition of the text is also a function of this – ie the re-imagining of 'Israel', for example, in the way in which it turns Abraham into an observant 'Mosaic' *Torah*-keeper (Genesis 26:5 – 'he obeyed my voice, kept my charge: my commandments, my statutes and my instructions [*torotay*]).
And certain strands of Pentateuchal criticism have identified (for example) royal-national over against Priestly accounts of Israel in it.

Thus pervasively in the OT, a memory of origins yields versions or manifestations of Israel – and the memory can stand over it, interrogatively (as with Amos), or as a stimulus to the imagination. Hence:

Deutero- as one of the important OT words! Deutero-Isaiah, Deutero-Zechariah – Deutero-nomy!
(The last of these a misreading of Deut 17:18 – 'a copy of this law', *'et mishneh-hattorah hazzo't*).
Not flippant! – a symptom of sthg fundamental.
Israel is constantly being re-*written* in the OT

Deuteronomy: from its time and place – re-conceives Israel as a supra-tribal, 'political' 'nation' (as opposed to a royal-sacral city-state, or an *ethnicity*); in my *God and Earthly Power*, ch. 5.

Bk of Isaiah: *begins* in confrontation with kings of Judah (Ahaz), holds out 'royal-messianic' hope ('to us a child a born, a son is given… the throne of David he will establish and uphold, with justice and righteousness, for evermore' (Isa 9:6-7),
But runs out in visions of Israel-as-Servant – with 'messianic' language taking a back seat – and a 'democratized' Davidic covenant, 55:3).

New would be a better theological key-word for this. 'New covenant' (Jeremiah); 'a new thing'; 'new creation'; 'new heavens and new earth' (Isaiah).

Differently**: '**the people of God is where the kingship of God is a reality' (Goldingay, 74). This is the prophetic view; and the prophetic message is grounded in the jarring discrepancy between what passes (publicly) for Israel, and what Israel is in truth. As Amos, above (an 'Israel' that keeps the covenant with Yahweh – tho' not so put in Amos).

On diversity of Israel: another account (besides Davies):
(following Goldingay) – variations in the outward manifestation of 'the people of God' over the course of the OT story, viz
a 'family', or 'wandering clan',
through a 'Theocratic Nation' – that is, the people that enters the promised land,
an 'Institutional State' (the monarchy, broadly conceived),
an 'afflicted remnant' (Goldingay has II-Isaiah and Servant here, addressed to 'a demoralized remnant')
a community of promise(so Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the OT*, 59-96).

Goldingay's analysis is a *theological* one:
Re-invention is not opportunism, keeping up with the times, 'new' as a value in itself (New Labour!)

It is of the essence of Israel that it is always being called and re-called to what it ought to be.
Hence re-conception of old tropes;
e.g. Isaiah 11, with its echoes of both David and the exodus, but imagined into a quite new future, that requires paradisal imagery to express it.

And it takes various forms: priestly-sacral (Ezekiel 40-48; cf. Chronicles); apocalyptic-eschatological (Zechariah, Daniel) – Torah-based (Ezra-Nehemiah) (Goldingay, 76-80). These overlap – but the basic tension between *ethnos* and *politeia* remains (eg in Esther – 'the Jews', *hayyeduhim* in Empire - and Ezra-Nehemiah , *Judah*, resp.).

4 'Behold, it is here!' (Luke 17:23, of 'the days of the Son of Man')

Where then is the true Israel to be found? Does the biblical story point us to it?

I suggested at the outset that 'Israel' is a contested notion. And the story I have been unfolding should make us wary of supposing that we might find the 'true' Israel anywhere in some form that can claim exclusive rights.

This is borne out by a consideration of attempts to claim the mantle of Israel historically. The biblical story of Israel almost certainly played a key part in the modern development of the notion of nationhood. Numerous nations, broadly within Christendom, saw themselves as new incarnations of 'Israel' – apparently the first to do this was Serbia, but the roll-call includes France, England, Germany, the United States, South Africa (Grosby, *Biblical Ideas of Nationality*, 213-234) – in England under Cromwell, and in the US with the Puritans.

This appropriation of biblical Israel as a model for nationhood is not all bad. The biblical story does celebrate kings who, at least in theological retrospect and depiction, led and lived 'under the law', notably King Josiah (2 Kgs 22-23). And in Deuteronomy modern scholars have found precedents for 'constitutional' theories of government, because it subjects a system of administration entirely to the Torah, and its interpretation by elders and judges. Positive influences of biblical law on many of our own legal concepts and instances have been demonstrated (by Jonathan Burnside, *God, Justice and Society* (OUP, 2011).

However, there have undoubtedly been baneful effects of the appropriation of the identity of Israel by modern nations.

> "With the development of nation-states, especially in Protestantism, their readiness to adopt the mantle of 'Israel' led very often to extreme violence against populations that posed a threat to their security in what they saw as their God-given lands. [Philip] Jenkins [*Laying Down the Sword* (New York: HarperOne, 2011)] documents the theologizing of violence against kings and

other enemies, often invoking 'Amalek' as the perpetual type of the enemies of God and his chosen people (Jenkins, pp. 127-28, and see Exod. 17.14-16), and Phinehas as the zealous hero who did not hold back from executing the sentence of death on such enemies (see Numbers 25; Jenkins, p. 130, and also p. 160 for Jewish appropriations of this). These paradigms operated in the execution of the English King Charles I, and the English Civil War, which was fed by sharply conflicting interpretations of the Old Testament's understanding of the manner in which authority derived from God in the kingdom. Cromwell's reading of the biblical paradigms extended to the logic of total extermination on the grounds of the dire consequences, according to the biblical story, of Israel's having failed to destroy the Caananites completely, and of Saul's sparing of the Amalekite King Agag (Jenkins, pp. 130-32). In Ireland, Catholics could easily take the role of Canaanites, and the entire population of the Irish town of Drogheda, for example, paid the price. A similar doctrine of 'extirpation' was adopted in America (Jenkins, p. 133-35), and derivations of *ḥērem* and 'holy war' were applied in South Africa against the black population, as well as in the German notion of *Vernichtung* (annihilation), also in Africa decades before Nazism (pp. 139-41). In all these cases, notions of ultimate value were at play, deriving from the theology of Israel's election. But the possibility always existed for such a concept to legitimate the state in and of itself. In the extreme case of Nazi Germany, the state arguably became the object of 'worship', hence the severe critique of it by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (e.g. Bonhoeffer, 1956; cf. Burleigh, 2006, pp. 38-122)." (McConville, *Joshua: Crossing Divides*, Sheffield Phoenix: 2013).

Paraphrase the above:

Philip Jenkins (*Laying Down the Sword*) has documented the theologizing of violence against perceived enemies, often invoking 'Amalek' as the perpetual type of the enemies of God and his chosen people…. Cromwell's reading of the biblical paradigms extended to the logic of total extermination on the grounds of the dire consequences, according to the biblical story, of Israel's having failed to destroy the Caananites completely, and of Saul's sparing of the Amalekite King Agag (Jenkins, pp. 130-32). Catholics in Ireland paid the price. In America, Cotton Mather wrote of the Pequot Indians who attacked the New England colony in 1637: "…these Ammonites perceived that they had made themselves to stink before the New-English Israel" (Jenkins, 133). The language of holy war was expressly adopted to justify the severest measures against native populations.

In these appropriations of the idea of Israel as the basis and justification for an actual state, there has been an entailment of violence. One has to say that the OT has provided the language and concepts for this too, in its deuteronomic programme, and in the narratives of Joshua. But equally, one has to say that when nations (or groups within them) turn violent against minorities, this is where one has to look again at the OT for its prophetic voice, that resists absolutizing historic claims into programmes of aggressive defence 'at all costs'.

The problem: where political imperatives find their justification on basis of 'ethnic' privileges.
Case of Ireland!
'Ireland's Call' as an antidote to ethnic conflict.

Theological dilemma

There is a theological dilemma in this, which comes with the idea of the OT as Christian (or Jewish) Scripture. It is how to read the texts of the OT as authoritative without the entailment of violence, yet also without losing the idea of God's active involvement in human history – and indeed through his people Israel? Such a dilemma can be addressed, I think, from within the pages of the OT, as well as by co-reading with the NT. This kind of reading involves the recognition that the OT does not give permanent or absolute status to any specific political arrangement (we have seen this in our account of the OT story of Israel); at the same time,

it affirms re-framings of 'Israel';

it recognizes parallel claims to those of Israel (in Deut 2-3 God grants territory around the borders of the promised land to other peoples, viz Edom, Moab, Ammon);

and it invokes the name 'my people' for Egypt, and the 'work of my hands' for Assyria, alongside 'Israel my heritage' in Isa 19:25.

Finally, I read Joshua in the context of this absence of an OT warrant for an absolute claim to be 'Israel', in specified land, in perpetuity. This is because the narrative, as often observed, undermines itself ('deconstructs', if you prefer the jargon). The land is taken yet not taken; the borders are clear yet not clear. The identity of 'Israel' itself is in question (because of the recurring niggle about whether Transjordan – and the Transjordanians – are really part of the people and land). Joshua is really 'about' a community finding a way to understand itself in a situation quite unlike that depicted in the book, namely where their distinctiveness is under threat from non-Yahwist religion, and from foreign powers. Its programme is both 'ideal/impractical' and addressed *to the community* as part of an exhortation to 'keep the faith' and to be culturally and religiously distinctive. It is, therefore, part of the OT's struggle to understand what it is to inherit the memory of 'who we are' in ways that can take shape viably and appropriately in given times and places.

5 **The Case of Israel-Palestine**

This is where I wish to bring the OT writings/ Joshua in particular to bear on the case of Israel-Palestine.

Propositions:

The state of Israel is one manifestation of the ancient aspiration to be 'Israel'. It is a case of an *'ethnos* feeling a particular attachment to a certain land, and realizing this in a specific political form. (Cf. Anthony Smith on ethnicity, in which such attachment is one frequently present factor among others, such as language, customs, culture – so Philip Esler in his professorial lecture). has as much right to exist as any other state.

However, the Israeli claim to be 'Israel' – inasmuch as it is an absolute claim - is contested within Judaism. Marc Ellis is one who has resisted Israel's claim that Jews *ought* to make *Aliyah*. 'Israel' in Judaism – as I understand it – often equates with 'all Jews'. There are *other Jewish* ways of negotiating the claims of Jewish identity.

In principle, Israel's claim to be 'Israel' is under the same constraints, moral and theological, as any other nation that claims to be 'Israel'. Statehood brings with it, by definition, all the liabilities and obligations

that fall on *any* state. In Israel's case (as with many others) this has come with an army, a nuclear arsenal, a secret police, a system of alliances. It inhabits a world in which the watchword 'security' has a kind of paramountcy, trumping other considerations. These might be regarded as inevitable entailments of modern statehood. Yet the adoption of the name Israel also makes a unique claim: if Israel is 'Israel', how does it relate to the full range of the traditions that gave it its birth? Can it, for example, hear the word of Isaiah to King Ahaz ('king of *Judah*', actually) *not to fear* the apparent threat to its existence from Aram and (ironically *Israel*), nor his warning *not to trust* for salvation in an alliance with Assyria.

The entailments of statehood have in fact resulted in the permanent division of a population, sustained by force.

The problem with 'memory-narratives' is that other people have them too. (Ref. Ireland).
Palestinian people have their own memories and stories that connect them also with the land.
Specifically, a Zionist reading of the OT (especially a Christian Zionist one) runs headlong into a (Christian) Palestinian counter-reading, which opposes the 'nationalist' strain in the OT with the strain that highlights universality and justice, e.g. the writings of Naim Ateek (corresponding closely to the deuteronomic-prophetic counterpoint in the OT, as identified by many writers, e.g. Robert Jewett and John Shelton Laurence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003)); this Palestinian 'liberationist' reading is a fruitful antidote to the only alternative from a Palestinian point of view, namely Marcionism.

A chorus of voices echoes Ateek's cry for a 'just' application of the Old Testament to the contemporary relationship between the peoples of the land (I list some of these below). But in the best approaches to the subject, there is a recognition that justice cannot be contemplated apart from the virtue of forgiveness – a remarkable fusion of politics and fundamental value, or virtue, that echoes the biblical dilemma between political expediency and adherence to standards of righteousness.
So Naim Ateek (as I cite him in the passage following):

> "In Naim Ateek's thinking about justice, he recognizes the need for the further virtue of forgiveness (in a chapter entitled 'From Justice to Forgiveness', Ateek, 2008, pp. 178-88). This shows an understanding of the profound relationship between the political realities of justice and peace on one hand, and [other realities that may be called moral and emotive, often at the level of the individual]. A powerful contribution to this theme has recently been made by [Marc] Gopin (2012). His title, *Bridges Across an Impossible Divide*, refers to the formidable religious, cultural, historical and spiritual divide between Jews and Arabs in Israel-Palestine. At the same time (intentionally or not), it evokes the 'crossing' of the River Jordan, which we saw to have a symbolic role in Joshua's framing of its radical critique of falsely-based systems. The substance of Gopin's book is the examination of first-person self-analyses by people in the Israel-Palestine conflict who have suffered deeply traumatic personal loss, yet who have chosen to be peacemakers. A striking aspect of his account is its counter-cultural character, even involving elements of risk (pp. 17-18). One context for such transformative thinking and action is the Parents' Circle, composed of Jews and Arabs who have lost children in the conflict. Gopin

recognizes that the hard political realities are inextricably bound to the moral and spiritual decisions that are made in the human heart (pp. 20-26). Connections can be made here to *tôrâ* and covenant, where a right orientation moves seamlessly between the private and public spheres (the classic text is Deut. 6.5). Hope for a just and peaceful future in Israel-Palestine is bound to rest on this. The rhetorical flourish of Josh. 24.19 counsels caution ['You cannot serve the LORD!']; but the peacemakers give a hopeful response." McConville, *Joshua; Crossing Divides*.

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