

# Israel, the Nations and the Future

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The nations of humanity preoccupy the biblical narrative from beginning to end. When they are not in the foreground, they are there in the background. When they are not the subject of great international events they are the object of divine inspection or accusation. When they are not the direct focus of God's attention, they remain the surrounding context (for good or ill) of the life of God's people. The obvious reason for this is that the Bible is, of course, preoccupied with the relationship between God and humanity, and humanity exists in nations. And where the Bible focuses especially on the people of God, that people necessarily lives in history in the midst of the nations.

It is clear that "Israel as a light to the nations" is no peripheral theme within the canonical process. The nations are the matrix of Israel's life, the *raison d'être* of her very existence.<sup>1</sup>

The nations first appear in the biblical grand narrative in the context of life after the flood – God's catastrophic judgment upon human wickedness. By Genesis 11 the nations have been scattered in confusion. The conflict of nations mirrors the brokenness of humanity as a whole. With undoubtedly deliberate intent, the final book of the Bible comes to its climax with the picture of the nations, purged of all sin, walking in the light of God, bringing their wealth and splendour into the city of God, contributing their redeemed glory and honour to the glory and honour of the Lamb of God (Rev. 21:24-27). The brokenness of humanity is healed at the river and tree of life (Rev. 22:2). And between these two great scenes in Genesis and Revelation – the primal and the ultimate state of the nations – the Bible records the story of how such cosmic transformation will have been accomplished. It is, in short, the mission of God as we have been seeking to elucidate in the preceding chapters. God's mission is what fills the gap between the scattering of the nations in Genesis 11 and the healing of the nations in Revelation 22. It is God's mission in relation to the nations, arguably more than any other single theme, that provides the key that unlocks the biblical grand narrative.

In these final two chapters we shall survey that great sweep of biblical teaching and expectation, since it lies at the heart of a fully biblical understanding of mission. We shall note how the nations were portrayed in the Old Testament as witness of all that God was doing in, for, or to Israel. Then we shall observe that the expectation of Israel's faith and worship (if not always the outcome of their practice), was that the nations would come to benefit from that history of salvation and give thanks for it. This would eventually mean that the nations would acknowledge and worship Israel's God, YHWH, with all the concomitant responsibilities and blessings of such worship. More remarkably yet, there were voices and visions within the Old Testament that looked for the day when nations would be included within Israel in such a way that the very word 'Israel' would be radically extended and redefined. All of this constituted the horizon of mission to the nations in the New Testament, and provided the strong scriptural justification for such mission for those who engaged in it.<sup>2</sup>

Before embarking on the survey just outlined, however, we need to begin by rehearsing some of the basic affirmations that the Old Testament makes about the nations in general, in relation to God's creative intention and God's governance of history. For this is the platform or stage upon which the historical outworking of God's redemptive mission to the nations takes place.

<sup>1</sup> Duane L. Christensen, 'Nations,' in *Anchor Bible Dictionary Vol. 4*, ed. David Noel Freedman et.al., New York etc.: Doubleday, 1992, 1037-1049, p. 1037.

<sup>2</sup> A helpful survey of some of the themes we will touch on here is provided in Walter Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant: A Biblical Study*, Second ed. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1986, ch. 4, 'The New Universal Covenant', pp. 11-142.

## THE NATIONS<sup>3</sup> IN CREATION AND PROVIDENCE

### **Nations are part of created and redeemed humanity**

Although we first meet the nations in the context of the fallenness and arrogance of humanity even after the flood, the Bible does not imply that ethnic or national diversity is in itself sinful or the product of the fall – even if the deleterious effects of strife among nations certainly are. Rather, nations are simply ‘there’ as a given part of the human race as God created it to be. God’s rule over the nations, amply affirmed throughout the Old Testament, is simply a function of the fact that he created them in the first place. Speaking as a Jew to Gentiles in an evangelistic context, Paul takes for granted the diversity of nations within the unity of humanity, and attributes it to the Creator and to his world-governing providence.

From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live (Acts 17:26).

Although Paul goes on to quote from Greek writers, his language in this verse is drawn from the Old Testament, from the ancient song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32.

When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples (Dt. 32:8).

National distinctives, then, are part of the kaleidoscopic diversity of creation at the human level, analogous to the wonderful prodigality of bio-diversity at every other level of God’s creation.

Furthermore, the eschatological vision of redeemed humanity in the new creation points to the same truth. The inhabitants of the new creation are not portrayed as a homogenized mass or as a single global culture. Rather they will display the continuing glorious diversity of the human race through history: people of every tribe and language and people and nation will bring their wealth and their praises into the city of God (Rev. 7:9, 21:24-26). The image we might prefer for the Bible’s portrait of the nations is not a melting pot (in which all differences are blended together into a single alloy), but a salad bowl (in which all ingredients preserve their distinctive colour, texture and taste). The new creation will preserve the rich diversity of the original creation, but purged of the sin-laden effects of the fall. Or, as we have just seen, the mission of God is not merely the salvation of innumerable souls, but specifically, the healing of the nations.

The creational given of ethnic diversity and the eschatological vision of all races, languages and cultures being included in redeemed humanity, both speak volumes to the sin and scandal of racism. This is not an issue we can pursue here, but it is certainly a vital task of mission to challenge this particular dimension of our fallenness, for it is clear in the New Testament that the gospel radically undermines any racial or racist assumptions in relation to our standing before God.<sup>4</sup>

### **All nations stand under God’s judgment**

For those of us who have absorbed a predominantly individualistic way of thinking about life, faith and our relationship with God, one of the more difficult biblical concepts to get our minds around is the idea that God can and does deal with nations as wholes. Yet the Bible unquestionably affirms it, and not only affirms it, but illustrates it in graphic detail over long stretches of history. From the book of Exodus onwards, nations play their part in the biblical

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<sup>3</sup> We are using the term here in a broad sense, as it is used in the Old Testament, not in the more restricted sense of ‘nation-state’ that developed in post-Reformation Europe. For a good discussion of ancient Near Eastern and biblical concepts of nationhood, in relation to ethnicity, territory, language, kingship and gods, see Daniel I. Block, ‘Nations/Nationality,’ in *Nidotte Vol. 4*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996, 966-972; and *idem*, *The Gods of the Nations: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern National Theology*.

<sup>4</sup> A fine, thorough biblical study of the issue is provided by, J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP and InterVarsity, 2003. An equally perceptive, but more practically applied, analysis is, Dewi Hughes, *Castrating Culture: A Christian Perspective on Ethnic Identity from the Margins*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001.

narrative, and the opening story becomes somewhat paradigmatic. The battle between YHWH and the Pharaoh is not just between God and one recalcitrant individual; the whole nation of Egypt is implicated in the sin of oppression and suffers in the process of God's liberating justice.

The narrative goes on to show how successive nations either set themselves against YHWH and his people out of their own malicious initiative (e.g. the Amalekites, Moabites, Amorites), or have become so incorrigibly wicked that they are to be destroyed in the execution of God's punishment (the Canaanite nations). Thus, while Israel is warned against arrogantly imagining that their victory over the Canaanites will be on account of their own righteousness, God confirms that it *will* be on account of the wickedness of those nations (Deut. 9:4-6). God intended to use Israel as the agent of his historical judgment on the wickedness of Canaanite nations.

On this point I find Walter Brueggemann's otherwise excellent treatment of the theme of the nations in the Old Testament very inadequate. He regard the texts that speak of YHWH's judgment on the Canaanites as 'a violent insistence that the nations do not count when Yahweh gives gifts to Israel.' He speaks of 'Israel's preferentiality'; of 'an exceedingly harsh presentation of the nations in the interests of Israel', which is 'ideological', because 'the sovereignty of Yahweh is drawn most blatantly and directly into the service of Israel's political agenda.... [the destruction of the nations] serves negatively to establish the legitimacy of Israel's claim to the land.'<sup>5</sup>

But Deuteronomy 9 makes precisely the opposite case: Israel has no legitimate claim to the land at all. She has no greater righteousness than the nations. Indeed, the chapter stresses that if anybody deserved to be destroyed, it was Israel herself. Israel still existed only by God's forgiving grace. No, the destruction of the Canaanite nations is repeatedly portrayed not in ideological self-serving terms, but in moral and theocentric terms. YHWH is acting in his divine justice against the signal and excessive wickedness of these nations. And he will do precisely the same to Israel if they follow the ways of the Canaanites. Far from being ideological and self-serving, these texts actually stand as an explicit counter-argument to such assumptions, and are framed as severe warnings that Israel, like all other nations, must recognize their own wickedness that had already aroused the wrath of God, and mend their ways before him.

The prophets in their oracles against the nations, (though they do have remarkable words of hope and potential restoration, as we shall see in a moment), express the overwhelming conviction that the nations in general stand under the imminent judgment of God, for a variety of reasons which are mainly ethical. Isaiah portrays the grim reality in the searing words near the beginning of his so-called 'little apocalypse'

The earth is defiled by its people;  
they have disobeyed he laws,  
violated the statutes,  
and broken the everlasting covenant.  
Therefore a curse consumes the earth;  
its people must bear their guilt.  
Therefore earth's inhabitants are burned up,  
and very few are left.

Isaiah 24:5-6

Universal human wickedness faces universal divine judgment. It is abundantly clear throughout the Bible that this is the default position that the human race is in, for nations as much as for individuals. As the story of the exodus is paradigmatic of YHWH acting in salvation, so the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is paradigmatic of God acting in judgment on human wickedness. It seems very likely that Paul endorses this broad tradition, painted in the colours and language of the Sodom episode, in his portrayal of universal human corruption and liability to the wrath of God.<sup>6</sup>

Against such a bleak background, God's mission to bless the nations, and the mission of God's people as the vehicle of such blessing, constitute very good news indeed.

<sup>5</sup> *Theology of the Old Testament*, pp. 496-497.

<sup>6</sup> Philip E. Esler, 'The Sodom Tradition in Romans 1:18-32', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 34 (2004), 4-16.

### **Any nation can be the agent of God's judgment**

In the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, God delivered his judgment unmediated. That is why the narrative acquires such proverbial force as a symbol of the naked wrath of God, which reaches its biblical climax, of course, in the book of Revelation. However, in the more normal course of history, God uses one nation or another as the instrument of his sovereign justice.

The classic first instance of this in the Bible is the way the conquest of the Canaanites by the tribes of Israel is repeatedly interpreted as the outworking of YHWH's judgment upon a society whose 'iniquity was full' (a condition they had not yet reached when God predicted it to Abraham in Genesis 15:16). The Israelites were severely warned not to interpret their victory over the nations of Canaan as attributable in any way to their own righteousness. But they could certainly infer correctly that it was on account of the nations' wickedness (Deut. 9:4-6). In this instance, God was using the Israelites as the agent of his judgment on the Canaanites.

The lesson Israel had to learn from this signal part of their own history, however, was far from comforting. The fact was, that if God could use Israel as the agent of his judgment on wicked nations, he could readily apply the same principle in reverse to Israel itself. In short, if they adopted the wicked ways of the nations they had driven out, they would suffer the same fate at the hands of other nations. YHWH could use Israel as the agent of judgment on other nations; he could equally use other nations as the agent of judgment on Israel. Warnings to this effect abound in the Torah (e.g. Lev. 18:24-28; 26:17; 25,32-33; Deut. 4:25-27; 28:25, 49-52; 29:25-28).

In the long history of Israel in the Old Testament period, it is the latter direction of God's judgment that predominates. Judges 2 describes the pattern set in the early generations after the settlement of the tribes of Israel in the land of Canaan. Time and again YHWH brought other nations as the tools of his anger against Israel's rebellion and apostasy (e.g. Am. 6:14; Hos. 10:10; Isa. 9:11; 7:18). In the later centuries of the monarchy, even the great empires of the world were seen by the prophets as no more than a stick in the hand of YHWH, a rod to punish Israel.

Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger,  
in whose hand is the club of my wrath!  
I send him against a godless nation,  
I dispatch him against a people who anger me [i.e. Israel]

Isaiah 10:5-6

Then Babylon becomes God's agent of judgment, not only on Israel, but on other smaller states who are urged by Jeremiah to recognize the sovereignty of YHWH, God of Israel, and submit to 'his servant' Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 25:9; 27:1-11). Indeed, the principle that God can use any nation as his agent of judgment on any other nation applies not only to dealings with Israel. God's judgment on Egypt also will be carried out through Nebuchadnezzar, according to Ezekiel 30:10-11. Later, of course, Babylon itself falls under the prophetic word of judgment. Even though God had used it to punish Israel, its excesses put Babylon in turn into the blast path of God's wrath, which will be delivered this time through king Cyrus of the Medes and Persians (Isa. 13:17-19; 47:6-7).

So the overwhelming message is consistent. All nations are in the hands of YHWH the living God. Their victories too are not to be attributed to their own gods, but rather to the sovereignty of YHWH. And sometimes God may use a nation, any nation, as the agent of historical justice in the arena of international affairs. That in itself does not make the nation so used any more righteous than another (as Israel were categorically told). All it means is that God remains sovereign.

### **Any nation can be the recipient of God's mercy**

The same universality by which all nations stand under the judgment of God for their wickedness and idolatry is also deployed in Old Testament thinking about the mercy of God. 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion,' said YHWH, in the course of his remarkable self-revelation to Moses, and in definition of his goodness and his name (Ex. 33:19, cf. 34:6-7). This is a principle that operated not only in, or on behalf of, Israel. Any nation could benefit from it.

The clearest articulation of this impartiality in God's dealings with the nations is given by

Jeremiah, after visiting a potter at work. The lesson that Jeremiah draws from his observation of a potter who declared an initial intention, but then changed his plans and therefore the end result because of some 'response' in the clay, is that God likewise responds to human response to his declared intentions. The focal point of the potter metaphor in Jeremiah 18 is not so much on the unquestionable sovereignty of the divine potter, but on the potential that resides in the clay to cause the potter to change his intention. And that provides an opportunity that God extends, by way of general principle, to any nation at any time. If a nation repents in the face of God's declaration of impending judgment, they will be spared that doom. On the other hand, if a nation does evil in spite of God's declaration of blessing, then they will suffer his judgment (Jer. 18:7-10). This point is established as general principle of God's dealings with all nations, before it is applied in urgent specificity to Judah.

**The book of Jonah** could have been written as a case study of Jeremiah 18:7-8. Jonah proclaims the impending doom of Nineveh. From king to beggar, the city repents. So God also 'repents', and withholds his judgment. But the amazing twist of the book is that this signal demonstration of the mercy of YHWH as God, in dealing with a foreign nation, is an embarrassment to Jonah. Jonah knew the exodus character of YHWH perfectly well, and quotes the key proof-text (Jon. 4:1-2; Ex. 34:6-7). But what should have been a matter of praise, or even merely grudging admiration (that YHWH should turn out to treat the other nations with the same amazing mercy that he lavished on Israel), becomes a matter of bitter complaint in the mouth of Jonah.

The book of Jonah has always featured in biblical studies of mission – sometimes as almost the only part of the Old Testament deemed to be of any relevance. Here at least is someone who has some semblance of being an actual missionary – sent to another country to preach the word of God. However, for all the fascination of the character and adventures of Jonah, the real missional challenge of the book undoubtedly, and intentionally, lies in its portrayal of God. If Jonah is intended to represent Israel, as seems likely, then the book issues a strong challenge to Israel as regards *their* attitude to the nations (even enemy nations that prophets placed under God's declared judgment), and as regards their understanding of *God's* attitude to the nations. The concluding open-ended question of the book is an enduring, haunting, rebuke to our tendency to foist our own ethno-centric prejudices on to the Almighty.<sup>7</sup>

It is interesting to compare and contrast the response of Jonah to the word of divine judgment on a pagan nation with that of Abraham. Commissioned to proclaim Nineveh's doom, Jonah ran away and jumped in a boat, alleging later that he had done so precisely because he suspected that YHWH would revert to type and show compassion. Informed of God's intention to investigate the outcry from Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham jumps to intercession, and finds YHWH prepared to be even more merciful than he initially bargained for.

Nathan MacDonald finds a thread running through texts such as Genesis 18, Exodus 32-34, Psalm 103:6-10, and Ezekiel 18. 'The Judge of all the earth', who will unquestionably do what is right, is also the 'gracious and compassionate God' who 'takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but rather that they turn from their ways and live.' The character of YHWH is exercised in forgiveness and mercy, extended to all nations, not just to Israel.<sup>8</sup>

Jeremiah himself later held out to the nations around Judah the same offer of divine forgiveness and restoration, if only they would turn and learn the ways of YHWH and his people (Jer. 12:14-17). It was the same offer, in virtually the same language, as Jeremiah held out to Judah – and probably with as little hope of it being accepted. The point is, however, that there is no favoritism in God's dealings with Israel and the nations. All stand under YHWH's judgment. All can turn to YHWH and find his mercy.

<sup>7</sup> A fine and perceptive recent missiological reading of Jonah is offered by Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, in *The Message of Mission, The Bible Speaks Today*, Leicester: IVP, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Nathan MacDonald, 'Listening to Abraham – Listening to Yhwh: Divine Justice and Mercy in Genesis 18:16-33', *CBQ* 66 (2004) 25-43. MacDonald suggests that part of the point of the encounter between God and Abraham in Genesis 18 is to teach the nature of true prophetic intercession, and the forgiving nature of God on which it is based. See also the discussion of this passage in Chapter 11 above.

This, surely, has to be one of the most foundational elements of the Old Testament contribution to our theology of mission.

- *If it were not the case that all nations stand under the impending judgment of God, there would be no need to proclaim the gospel.*
- *But if it were not for the fact that God deals in mercy and forgiveness with all who repent, there would be no gospel to proclaim.*

### All nations' histories are under God's control

In previous chapters we have stressed the uniqueness of Israel's relationship with YHWH. Their understanding of election, redemption, covenant and holiness – all of these set them apart from the nations at a fundamental level. God had chosen and called Israel, and no other nation (Deut. 7: 7-11; Amos 3:2). God had redeemed Israel in a way he had done for no other nation (Deut. 4:32-39). God had revealed his law to, and entered into covenant relationship with, Israel and no other nation (Ps. 147:19-20). And Israel were called to embody and demonstrate all this uniqueness in practical, ethical distinctiveness from all other nations (Lev. 18: 1-5). In all these respects, the relationship between God and historical Israel of the Old Testament period was unprecedented (he had done nothing like this before), and unparalleled (he had done nothing like this anywhere else).

Furthermore, we have explored the missiological implications of these great unique claims. All of them flow from God's own mission and Israel's identity and role within that mission. God's mission is to bless all the nations of the earth. But for that universal aim he chose the very particular means – the people of Israel. Their uniqueness was for the sake of God's universality. Thus, their unique standing as God's *chosen* people was in order that the rest of the nations would come to be *blessed* through Abraham. Their unique story of *redemption* was the paradigm of what God would ultimately accomplish (through Christ) for the deliverance of all from bondage. Their unique stewardship of God's *revelation* was so that ultimately the law of God could go forth from them to the nations and the ends of the earth. And their unique structure of social, economic and political *ethics* was designed to show what a redeemed community of humanity should (and eventually will) look like under the reign of God.

All these dimensions of Israel's Old Testament uniqueness, then, are central to our biblical understanding of mission, and all of them have their counterparts in the New Testament teaching regarding the uniqueness of Christ and the identity and mission of the church.

However, it would be quite wrong to construe these affirmations of *Israel's* uniqueness as tantamount to an absence of involvement by YHWH in the affairs of *other* nations. On the contrary, it was part of the bold claim of Israel that YHWH their God was the supreme mover on the stage of international history. All the nations and their kings, wittingly or unwittingly, wove their stories under the master-plan of Israel's God – not their own gods.

This makes the claim to uniqueness actually even more stark. It was not the case that Israel merely claimed that YHWH had uniquely chosen, saved, and covenanted with them, while remaining ignorant of, or indifferent to, all the other nations. That in itself would not really have been much different in principle from the way all nations see their own gods as uniquely interested in the nations that worship them. That's what gods are for in the polytheistic worldview. Let each nation have its own god or gods, and let that god look to its own interests and those of its own people.

'Uniqueness' in that reduced, generic, sense is not what Old Testament Israel claimed for YHWH. It was a much more exalted and universal claim – a claim that would be the grossest arrogance if not true. The claim was that YHWH was in fact the sovereign God of all the earth, ruling the histories and destinies of all nations. And in *that* context of universal involvement with *all nations*, YHWH had a unique relationship *with Israel*.<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes this affirmation that YHWH was sovereign over the history of other nations is made in quite unremarkable, almost parenthetical ways. Sometimes it is made in order to draw out implications that were decidedly shocking and unwelcome.

<sup>9</sup> For a very informative survey of how the ancient Near Eastern nations viewed their gods, and the relationships between gods and nations, and the distinctiveness of some of the claims that Israel made in relation to YHWH, see, Daniel I. Block, *The Gods of the Nations: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern National Theology*, Grand Rapids and Leicester: Baker and Apollos, 1988, 2000.

An example of the former comes in the warnings given to Israel in the wilderness not to attempt to take any land from Edom, Moab or Ammon, on the grounds that YHWH had already given them their lands, after driving out previous inhabitants – in precisely the same way that he was about to do for Israel in relation to Canaan (Deut. 2:2-23). The way these affirmations are made, almost in passing, should not obscure their theological significance.

When Deuteronomy's prominent land theology in relation to Israel's possession of Canaan is taken into account, this direct statement that Yahweh had given other lands to other peoples, supported by the parenthetical notes that follow, is quite remarkable. Three times this passage says that Yahweh had given land to Edom (v. 5), to Moab (v. 9), and to Ammon (v. 9), using the same vocabulary as is characteristically used of his land-gift to Israel. On top of this, the antiquarian footnotes (vv. 10-12 and vv. 20-23) inform us that the processes of migration and conquest that lay behind the then current territorial map had also been under the control of Yahweh. Not only is the same language used as for Israel's settlement, but the comparison is explicitly drawn: other nations had conquered and settled 'just as Israel did in the land the LORD gave them as their possession' (v. 12).

More theology is tucked into these obscure notes than the NIV's understandable use of parentheses might suggest---some of it explicit, some more latent. First, these notes unambiguously assert Yahweh's multi-national sovereignty. The same God who had declared to Pharaoh that the whole earth belonged to him (Exod. 9:14, 16, 29) had been moving other nations around on the chessboard of history long before Israel's historic exodus and settlement. This universal sovereignty over the nations mattered a great deal to Israel in subsequent centuries as they themselves joined the ranks of the attacked and the dispossessed. Later prophetic understanding of Yahweh's 'use' of the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians as agents of Yahweh's purposes in history is in fact consistent with this deeper theme of God's ultimate, universal direction of the destiny of nations (cf. Deut. 32:8; Jer. 18:1-10; 27:1-7).

Secondly, these notes relativize Deuteronomy's land-gift tradition itself, though not in the sense of questioning or undermining it. The affirmation of Yahweh's gift of land to Israel in fulfillment of his promise to Abraham is one of the fundamental pillars of Deuteronomy's whole worldview. However, it was, in principle and at a purely historical level, no different from what God had done in other nations. In the immediate context, Israel's defeat and territorial takeover of the lands of Sihon and Og was no different from other nations' earlier migrations and forceful settlements; all are attributed to the sovereign disposition of Yahweh.

Because God had also given lands to other nations, Israel's uniqueness lay not in having merely received land from Yahweh, but in its covenant relationship with Yahweh. And that covenant was based on God's faithfulness to the promise to Abraham and God's historical act of redemption from Egypt. If that covenant were to be threatened by Israel's neglect, then the mere historical facts of exodus and settlement would count for nothing more in the face of God's judgment than the migrations of other nations.<sup>10</sup>

And that last sentence is precisely the point that Amos makes, as an example of the more shocking use of this theological conviction. Yes, YHWH's covenantal knowledge of Israel was unique (Amos 3:2), but no, they were not the only nation that YHWH was related to in a wider sense, and certainly not the only nation with a history of exodus, migration and settlement.

[7a] Is it not the case that, like the sons of Cush,  
so you [are] to me, sons of Israel?<sup>11</sup> declares YHWH.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher J H Wright, *Deuteronomy*, p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> This is a literal rendering of the Hebrew word order. Most English versions render the construction as meaning: 'Are you Israelites not *the same* to me as the Cushites?' This turns the rhetorical question into a simple comparison in which any special status for Israel is undermined: 'you are no different/better than even distant nations to me.' However, the Hebrew expression 'You to me', normally indicates the possessive relationship, i.e. 'you belong to me; you are mine'. It is the equivalent of one part of the covenant formula 'You my people, I your God'. Significantly, however, the latter affirmation is omitted, in view of the people's rebellious rejection of YHWH and his covenant (cf. v. 8 where they are described as 'the sinful kingdom'). Walter Vogels, therefore, reads the text with this possessive sense of

[7b] For is it not also the case that I brought up Israel from Egypt,  
and the Philistines from Caphtor,  
the Arameans from Kir?

Amos 9:7 (my translation)

It is clear that Amos is here undermining Israel's false confidence in the mere language of their covenant or the mere historical fact of their exodus. They could not claim 'we belong to YHWH', as if *no other* nation mattered to God. They could not point to *their* history without observing that other nations had similar histories, in which YHWH had been active. Instead of being God's 'priestly kingdom' (Ex. 19:6), they have become 'the sinful kingdom'. They might still want to be called *YHWH's people*, but it was now open to question whether *he* would want to be called *their God*. The uniqueness of their election, far from making them immune from judgment, actually exposes them all the more to God's punishment (3:2).

Alex Motyer's commentary at this point is helpful:

There is, and there always has been, and there always will be a sense in which there is no difference between Israel and an other nation - even enemy nations of the past and present such as the Philistines and the Syrians - and it is this, that the Lord is alike the Agent in every national history, every racial migration. In this regard it is no more a privilege to be an Israelite than to be a Hottentot. One Lord rules all, appointing the place they shall leave, the distance they shall move and the spot where they shall settle. This verse is not a statement of denial (You are no longer my people in the sense you once were) but of affirmation: You along with all other peoples are equally and in precisely the same sense subject to My sovereign decrees...

The exodus as a historical fact enshrines no more of God than does the coming of the Philistines from Caphtor or the Syrians from Kir and no more brings automatic benefit than do those other divinely engineered events. A historical act of God can by His will become a means of blessing but does not ever of itself convey the blessing. In this sense the Israel of the Exodus is level pegging with the Philistines who came from Caphtor or the Ethiopians who, for all Amos tells us, never went anywhere!

One divine government rules all, and (8a) on moral providence observes all, and judges all. The Lord does not look on people in the light of their historical past but in the light of their moral present. Every nation is equally under this moral scrutiny.<sup>12</sup>

These sharp points, which are quite consistent with all Amos has said hitherto, are clear enough in relation to Israel. The disputed question, however, is: what does Amos 9:7 affirm about the other nations? Is Amos really saying that there is no difference between Israel and the Cushites, the Philistines and the Syrians? By using the language of belonging and the language of exodus, is Amos going so far as to affirm that these other nations stand on equal covenant ground with Israel in relation to YHWH?

Walter Vogels asks whether this text (along with others such as those from Deuteronomy quoted above) indicates that there were 'parallel divine covenants with different nations'.<sup>13</sup> His answer is negative. It is clear that the Old Testament does make some remarkable affirmations, such as these, which show that:

Yahweh's relationship with the nations is very similar to his relationship with Israel. He intervenes directly in their history, and thereby they belong to him and are responsible

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the phrase 'you to me', and so takes the rhetorical question of v. 7a as affirming that other nations belong to YHWH just as much as Israel does: 'Are you not mine, sons of Israel, as the Cushites (are mine)?' (Walter Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant*, p. 72). It is doubtful however if the word order of the Hebrew would give this as the *primary* sense, and the normal English translation is probably correct. However, Vogels is right to highlight the otherwise common covenantal possessive relationship expressed in the two words 'you to me'. As stressed above, however, Vogels denies that this text implies that the other nations had a *covenant* relationship with YHWH, for they do not *know* him as God.

<sup>12</sup> J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Amos*, The Bible Speaks Today, Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP and InterVarsity, 1974, pp. 196-197.

<sup>13</sup> *Idem*, Chapter Three.

before him. If the nations refuse to accept Yahweh's relationship, they will experience punishment like that of Israel [as evidenced in Amos 1-2], but there is always hope. But ...we will notice one important difference: the nations' lack of knowledge of Yahweh's revelation. Therefore, in the strict sense, we can speak only of a covenant with Israel, but not of a covenant with other nations, since a covenant presupposes mutual knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

To put it simply, the covenant demands two sides: Israel belongs to YHWH, and YHWH belongs to Israel ('You my people, I your God'). But in the case of the nations we may say: the nations belong to YHWH, but YHWH does not [yet] belong to the nations. He is not the God they acknowledge, 'own', and worship. There is no covenant reciprocity involved.

Nevertheless, though the covenant relationship with Israel is still sustained as unique, we need to give full weight (and perhaps more weight than is usually given) to this tradition in the Old Testament that all the nations of the earth stand in some relation to YHWH God, are held accountable by him, and are governed by him in the course of their varied histories. For this is the platform on which God's historical engagement with Israel, as the means of pursuing his redemptive mission, took place.

The God who called Abraham in order to be a blessing all nations is the God who governs the histories of all nations. The God who called Israel to be his 'treasured possession' and 'priestly kingdom', is the God who can say 'the whole earth is mine'.<sup>15</sup> We must resist all taming and reductionism by which YHWH is confined to the borders of Israel, and give full attention to the universal claims that are made about him in the Old Testament.

If, then, on the one hand, all nations on earth are under God's sovereign governance, and if, on other hand, Israel has a status and a history that are in some ways unique, what is the relationship between the two spheres of God's activity? How do the nations in general 'connect' with Israel in particular? The connection may be portrayed in four ways, which build on one another theologically:

- the nations are witnessing observers of what YHWH does in and to Israel;
- the nations can be beneficiaries of the blessing inherent in Israel's covenant;
- the nations will come to know and worship Israel's God;
- the nations will ultimately be included within the identity of Israel as God's people.

To these four perceptions we now give our attention.

## THE NATIONS AS WITNESSES OF ISRAEL'S HISTORY

Israel did not live in vacuum-sealed isolation from the rest of the world. On the contrary, they could not have lived on a more crowded international stage. The land of Canaan, as the land-bridge between three continents, was a veritable public concourse of the nations. Israel's presence there was therefore internationally visible. This being the case, the Old Testament envisages several ways in which the story of Israel was supposed to impact the nations. The nations were spectators, or better, witnesses, of the great sweep of Old Testament history.

### Witnesses of God's mighty acts of redemption

The nations will hear and tremble;  
anguish will grip the people of Philistia.  
The chiefs of Edom will be terrified,  
the leaders of Moab will be seized with trembling,  
the people of Canaan will melt away;  
terror and dread will fall upon them.

By the power of your arm  
they will be as stone –  
until the people pass by, O LORD,  
until the people you bought pass by.

Exodus 15:14-16

With these words the Song of Moses envisages the effect upon surrounding nations of the great deliverance that had just taken place at the Sea of Reeds. Such a manifest defeat of the

<sup>14</sup> *Idem*, pp. 71-72.

<sup>15</sup> See also: Bernard Renaud, 'Prophetic Criticism of Israel's Attitude to the Nations: A Few Landmarks,' in Beuken, Wim (et. al. eds), *Truth and its Victims, Concilium* 20, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988, pp. 35-43; Paul R. Raabe, 'Look to the Holy One of Israel, All You Nations: The Oracles about the Nations Still Speak Today', *Concordia Journal* 30 (2004) pp. 336-349.

most powerful empire in the region – the Pharaoh's Egypt, would doubtless engender fear among the many smaller nations in Israel's pathway. Even a generation later this anticipated effect on the nations proved accurate, as Joshua's spies heard from the mouth of Rahab (Josh. 2:9-11).

Even before the crossing of the Sea, however, the mighty acts of God in Egypt itself occur 'in the eyes of' all the Egyptians. As Vogels points out, this expression, '*in the eyes of*', frequently has the sense of 'before witnesses' – i.e. something done in a publicly witnessed and therefore verifiable way.

The formula, "in the eyes of...", when used in a juridical context, means an action done before legal witnesses. [e.g. Jer. 32:12]. In some texts those before whom something happens are not merely spectators, but witnesses, who are supposed to take a position as well (Dt. 31:7; Jer. 28:1, 5, 11).

It is often said that Yahweh has bestowed his benefits in favour of Israel in the eyes of the nations. In other words, the nations are witnesses, but at the same time they are invited to take a personal stand.<sup>16</sup>

So the signs given by Moses and Aaron are done 'in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants' (Ex. 7:20), and the actual departure from Egypt happened 'in the eyes of all the Egyptians' (Num. 33:3), indeed, 'in the eyes of the nations' (Lev. 26:45). Thus, the nations are called on to reflect on what they have witnessed and draw conclusions about the uniqueness and power of YHWH – just as Israel is, when exactly the same expression is used of them as witnesses of all that God did 'in the eyes of all Israel' (Deut. 34:12, cf. Deut. 4:34-35).

Ezekiel holds the same understanding of the great acts of God in Israel's early history. Whereas God would have been fully justified in acting in judgment against Israel, in fact he had withheld his wrath repeatedly and continued instead to preserve and deliver them. And all of this was precisely in order to protect the reputation of his name among the nations, in whose sight he had brought the Israelites out of Egypt.

But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations they lived among and in whose sight I had revealed myself to the Israelites by bringing them out of Egypt

Ezekiel 20:9, cf. 14, 22.

As we shall shortly see, Ezekiel had the nations in mind even more emphatically when he anticipates God's restoration of Israel after judgment. Then the nations will truly see and know who the true God is.

### **Witnesses of Israel's covenant obligations**

Treaties and covenants in the ancient world, as today, had to have witnesses. In the case of the international treaties contemporary with Israel's Old Testament era, the witnesses were usually the different gods of the parties concerned, and / or the deified natural order (heaven, earth, seas, mountains, etc.). In the case of Israel, of course, no other gods could by definition be called on to witness the covenant between Israel and YHWH, God of heaven and earth beside whom there is no other. So personified nature was summoned to the task. 'I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you this day...' (Deut. 4:26; cf. 30:19; 31:28; 32:1; Mic. 6:1-2; Isa. 1:2; Jer. 2:12). But the earth is the habitation of the nations, and so by extension, the nations also are portrayed as witnesses to the covenant between YHWH and Israel. Micah calls on both as he embarks on his great covenant lawsuit against Israel:

Hear, O peoples, all of you;

Listen, O earth and all who are in it,

that the Sovereign LORD may witness against you [i.e. Samaria and Jerusalem v. 1],  
the Lord from his holy temple.

Micah 1:2

The same summons to the nations as witnesses of God's covenant with Israel (or its breach) is found in Jeremiah 6:18-19 and Amos 3:9 (where the nations are actually specified as Assyria and Egypt – the two great world powers of the time).

<sup>16</sup> Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant*, pp. 65-66.

But the nations are not just summoned to witness the making or breaking of the covenant. Ideally, they should be able to observe Israel living by it. In fact, such testimony to the nations of the wisdom of God's ways embodied in the social life of God's people, is presented as a major motivation for obedience to God's law. In a passage we have had occasion to notice before for its missiological implications, Deuteronomy 4:6-8 portrays the nations as interested and admiring spectators of Israel – both in terms of the nearness and effectiveness of the God they worship and pray to, and in terms of the justice of their social system embodied in the whole constitutional project that is Deuteronomy.

So the nations were in principle invited not only to watch all the wonderful things God did for Israel, they were also supposed to be able to see the responsive righteousness of Israel living within the terms of the covenant. In other words, Israel's visibility to the nations was meant to be, not merely historically remarkable, but radically and ethically challenging.

*God's mission involves God's people living in God's way in the sight of the nations.*<sup>17</sup>

### **Witnesses of God's judgment on Israel**

Tragically, it did not turn out that way. Even before they left Sinai, Israel had fallen into the catastrophic rebellion and apostasy of the Golden Calf (Ex. 32-34). God's declared intention to destroy them utterly was forestalled only by Moses' intercession. A significant element in that intercession (alongside reminding God of both the Abrahamic covenant and the new relationship established by the exodus), is Moses' warning to God of what the nations (and especially the Egyptians) will think of him if he does so. If YHWH had brought Israel out of Egypt 'in the eyes of' all the Egyptians and other nations, let him not imagine that he could now simply wipe them out in the wilderness, as if nobody would notice. What had been so publicly done could not now be secretly undone.

If the nations were expected to draw conclusions from the mighty exodus about YHWH's great redeeming power, what conclusions might they now draw from such an astonishing *volte face*? Would they not infer that YHWH was either incompetent (he could not complete what he had begun), or even worse – malicious (he raised their hopes of deliverance only to dash them in destruction)? Was that the kind of reputation God wanted to be circulating around the Middle East? (See Ex. 32:12; cf. Deut. 9:28; Num. 14:13-16). The clear assumption underlying this bold intercession is that, whatever God does to his people in his anger will be as visible to the nations as all that he did for them in his compassion. And this is a point that echoes on in many places in the Old Testament.

The failure of Israel did not take God by surprise. It is an interesting fact that the book of Deuteronomy begins and ends with failure. Its opening chapter records the failure of the generation of the exodus to go on with God and capture the land of promise. It ends with the anticipated failure of the generations after Moses to stay loyal to the covenant with YHWH. And that future failure will eventually lead to such an outpouring of God's judgment that, yet again, the nations will watch with astonishment.

All the nations will ask: "Why has the LORD done this to this land? Why this fierce burning anger? And the answer will be: "It is because this people abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers..."

Deuteronomy 29:24-25

Ezekiel struggles with the public nature of God's dealings with his people, for of course he was of that very generation that experienced the full outpouring of God's wrath at the time of the exile. He recognizes and accepts that the punishment of Israel was a moral necessity and spent his first five years of ministry trying to persuade the first group of exiles of the point. The sin of Israel was so grotesque, scandalous, and unremittably unrepented, that they left God

<sup>17</sup> Walter Vogels makes the additional suggestive point that in ancient treaties, it was the witnesses to a treaty, namely the gods, who would be called on to execute its penalties on a defaulting partner. Similarly, in Israel's legislation, witnesses also took part in the execution of the one whose conviction their testimony had secured. 'The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting him to death' (Deut. 17:7). 'All this explains, then, why the nations who were the witnesses of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel are also the instruments in God's hand for the execution of curses and blessings. Israel is judged by the world.' *God's Universal Covenant*, p. 68.

no alternative but to fulfil the covenant threats and scatter them among the nations in the curse of exile that had been so prominent among his warning to them from the beginning.

Son of man, when the people were living in their own land, they defiled it by their conduct and their actions. Their conduct was like a woman's monthly uncleanness in my sight. So I poured out my wrath on them because they had shed blood in the land and because they had defiled it with their idols. I dispersed them among the nations and they were scattered through the countries; I judged them according to their conduct and their actions.'

Ezekiel 36:17-19

But the solution of one problem (God's moral anger against Israel's sin and the necessity of it being punished), led to another. Terrible damage was now being done to God's own reputation – that is to his personal name YHWH. It was being mocked among the nations, since clearly (as far as they could see in their interpretation of current events), YHWH was nothing more than one among many defeated gods of the little nations being swallowed up by the Babylonian war machine. This is what is meant by the expression Ezekiel uses to describe the effect of the exile: Israel were 'profaning the name of YHWH'. To profane, here, does not mean using bad language. It means treating as common or ordinary something that should be holy. So the name of YHWH, rather than being honoured as the name of the only, living God, the Holy One of Israel, was being dragged through the gutters of derision among the very nations whom Israel was supposed to draw into the sphere of YHWH's blessing.

Wherever they went among the nations they profaned my holy name, for it was said of them, 'These are the LORD's people, and yet they had to leave his land.' I had concern for [lit. felt pity for] my holy name, which the house of Israel profaned among the nations where they had gone (vs. 20-21).

### **Witnesses of God's restoration of Israel.**

Ezekiel goes on to declare that the resolution of the dilemma God faces will be as much in the sight of the nations as the events that had caused it. That is to say, by punishing Israel, God had vindicated his own moral justice, but risked losing his reputation among the nations (as Moses had warned, centuries before). So God decides to act in forgiveness and restoration.

But it must be made clear that this will be not merely so that Israel can be rescued from the black hole of exile. God has a wider (though not deeper) passion than his saving love for Israel, and that is the protection of his own name *among the nations*, and the vision of bringing them all ultimately to know and honour him, YHWH, as God. Accordingly, the nations will be witnesses of God's restoration of Israel, just as they were witnesses of the original redemptive act (the exodus). Just as they were witnesses of the covenant judgment (the exile); so also they will be witnesses of God's restorative deliverance (the return).

So the wonderful promises of Ezek. 36:24-38, including ingathering, cleansing, new heart, new spirit, God's own Spirit, obedience, re-settlement and covenant blessing, are all preceded by the reminder that the primary and ultimate purpose is the glory of God's name among the watching nations.

It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am doing to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes (vs. 22-23).

Before leaving Ezekiel, it is worth noting that his notorious eschatological depiction in chapters 38-39 of the attack on God's people by Gog, prince of Magog and the host of nations with him, followed by their utter and total destruction, has as its core message that the nations will come to know YHWH as God in all his glory, by this signal and ultimate demonstration of his protection of his people from all who seek their destruction. We can become so fascinated with Ezekiel's characteristic penchant for cartoon detail, or with contemporary garish and gory amplifications of it in 'end-times' predictions, that we overlook the repeated message found in 38:16, 23; 39:6-7, 21-23, 27-29. To the very end, the nations

will see and know what God does for his people, and the conclusions to be drawn will finally be irresistible.

What is the relevance of the whole section we have now completed (on the nations as witnesses of God's work in Israel) to the missional hermeneutic of Scripture we are seeking to develop throughout this book? We have been insisting throughout that our primary datum in biblical missiology must be the mission of God. And we have seen that the mission of God is strongly connected to God's will to be known by his whole creation. To that end he is at work on the whole stage of human history, not merely among the people he has chosen as the vehicle for his great redemptive agenda for the world. And even when we do focus, with the biblical texts themselves, on the story of God's dealings with his people, we must remember that God always acts among his own people with an eye on the watching nations. The nations are not just part of the incidental scenery of the narrative. They are the intended witnesses of the action. These things happen 'before their eyes'. A response is therefore expected to what they witness. As Walter Vogels expresses it,

God has basically the same intention with the nations as he had with Israel because both "will know that I am Yahweh". Far from being pure spectators of something which concerns only Yahweh and Israel, the nations are witnesses, who are directly involved. The whole historical covenant between Yahweh and Israel had from the beginning a universal dimension. The nations are real witnesses. Yahweh's saving actions, the punishment, and the restoration which he imposed upon Israel, were at the same time a preaching to the nations.<sup>18</sup>

In my own discussion of this aspect of the oracles concerning the nations that we find in several of Israel's prophets, including Ezekiel, I summarized the point in this way:

The prophets were thus aware of two complementary truths. On the one hand, whatever Yahweh did among the nations was ultimately for the benefit of Israel, his covenant people. Yet on the other hand, what Yahweh did for Israel was ultimately for the benefit of the nations. This double reality is significant for it preserves the universality of God's sovereignty over all nations, while recognizing the particularity of his unique relationship with Israel. God's providential reign over the nations is related to his redemptive purpose for his people; but his redemptive work among his people is related to his missionary purpose among the nations. The two cannot be separated. ...

In the same way, assuming that the God of Isaiah and Ezekiel is still our God and is still on the throne of the universe, we need to look at the world of international affairs and seek to discern what God is doing that impinges upon the life and witness of his people, the church. At the same time, we need to be asking whether the church, in its life and witness, is truly engaging in its biblical mission of bringing the blessing of God to the nations. God runs the world for the sake of the church;<sup>19</sup> God calls the church for the sake of the world. We need to fix our theology and our mission to both poles of this biblical dynamic.<sup>20</sup>

## THE NATIONS AS BENEFICIARIES OF ISRAEL'S BLESSING

The Old Testament is not content to leave the nations in the passive role of spectators of all that God was doing in Israel. The nations will come to see that God's dealings with Israel were to be, for them, not just a matter of alternating admiration or horror. The whole story was *for their ultimate good*. Or, to pursue the metaphor of spectators: the whole drama was for the benefit of the audience. Two Psalms will illustrate this angle of our exploration.

### Psalm 47

Clap you hands, all you nations;

<sup>18</sup> Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Eph. 1:21-22, speaking of the cosmic dominion of Christ exercised 'for the church'.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel: A New Heart and a New Spirit*, *The Bible Speaks Today*, Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 2001, p. 260.

shout to God with cries of joy.  
How awesome I the LORD Most High,  
the great King over all the earth!

Psalm 47:1-2

With these words, some Psalm writer in ancient Israel invited the nations to join in applause to YHWH, God of Israel. Now, clapping hands is fairly universally a collective sign of approval. Those who are clapping acknowledge something that has brought them pleasure, or benefit. It speaks of appreciation and gratitude. It is a form of physical and audible thanksgiving that supplements or replaces words.

What, then, does our Psalmist invite the nations of the world to give a round of applause to YHWH for? The answer at first sight seems perverse:

He [YHWH] subdued nations under us [Israel],  
peoples under our feet (v. 3).

The nations are being asked to clap YHWH because he is the God who defeated them through Israel. This is like asking the inhabitants of a defeated country to say thank you to the nation that invaded them. Is the Psalm nothing more than imperial cynicism masquerading as worship? The only alternative to reading it in that way is to discern within it a deeper theological conviction about God's dealings with Israel and the nations in the long sweep of his sovereignty in history.

The nations can be summoned to applaud YHWH because ultimately, even the historical defeat of the Canaanites by Israel will be seen to be part of a history for which all of humanity will have ample cause to praise God. While the historical culture of Canaan that confronted the Israelites was degraded to the point of deserving divine judgment (as noted in the first section above), the God who exercised that act of judgment was also the Great King over all the earth (the repeated emphasis of the Psalm), the justice of whose global reign would one day be acknowledged by all. The nations will be the eventual beneficiaries of that.

### Psalm 67

Another Psalmist picks up the most pregnant text in Israel's rich vocabulary and liturgy of blessing, namely the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:24-26. It was the priests' task to pronounce these words and thus 'put the Name on the Israelites'. It would be YHWH himself who would bless his people.

Blessing, of course, was an integral part of the covenant God had made with Abraham (as we saw in Chapter 7). His descendants would live within a relationship of declared and protected blessing. But, as we have so abundantly seen, they were also to be the medium through whom other nations would come into blessing. Accordingly, the author of Psalm 67 takes the Aaronic blessing, which he probably heard repeatedly in the context of worship at the sanctuary, and does two things.

On the one hand he turns its declarative form into prayer, as if to say – 'Yes, may God indeed do what these words say; may God, our God bless us.' But on the other hand he turns it inside out and prays that God's blessing may be the focus of praise, not only in Israel, but among all the peoples to the ends of the earth.

May God be gracious to us and bless us  
and make his face to shine upon us,  
that your ways may be known on earth,  
your salvation among all nations.  
May the peoples praise you, O God;  
may all the peoples praise you.

Psalm 67:1-3

As in Psalm 47, the particular focus at the centre of the Psalm (v. 4), is the just rule of God that will be exercised over all nations. However, verse 6 adds a more economic factor to the political one – namely God's blessing expressed through the harvest of the land.<sup>21</sup> So the

<sup>21</sup> It is characteristic, of course, that the same word – 'eres – is used for the land of Israel (which is doubtless the location of the harvest referred to in v. 6), and for the earth as a whole in verses 2, 4 and 7). This is a verbal common-place which nevertheless embodies the theological truth: the land of Israel has a symbolic and eschatological reference point – the

final two verses bring the Psalm to its climax in a universality that embraces God, Israel and its land, the nations and the whole earth.

Then the land will yield its harvest,  
and God, our God, will bless us.  
God will bless us,  
and all the ends of the earth will fear him (vs. 6-7).

There are several other texts in which the phrase ‘the land will yield its harvest’ is used, in virtually identical lexical terms to Psalm 67:6 (with minor grammatical differences). They help us grasp the full implications of the words in this Psalm. These include *Leviticus 25:19* (in the context of God’s promise to provide food if Israel observed the jubilee year) and *Leviticus 26:4* (as part of the general promise of God’s continued blessing if Israel live in obedience to his law). The Psalmist may well have had such Torah promises in mind, given that he anticipates this particular blessing within the realm of God’s sovereign rule, which implies an obedient people. *Psalms 85:12* similarly locates the promise within the context of a penitent and obedient people. Two prophetic texts, however, also have close parallels.

*Ezekiel 34:27* includes agricultural abundance, in these terms, as part of God’s promise to Israel in the future restoration after the exile. And in that post-exilic period, *Zechariah 8:12-13* picks it up again as the sign of that restored covenantal relationship. Indeed Zechariah connects these words of promise to the Abrahamic covenant by saying that Israel will once again become ‘a blessing’ among the nations, instead of an object of cursing.<sup>22</sup> There will be a new beginning for God’s people, which Zechariah portrays thus:

The seed will grow well, the vine will give its fruit, *the earth will give its harvest*, and the heavens will drop their dew. As you have been a curse among the nations, house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you, so that you may be a blessing.<sup>23</sup>

Zechariah 8:12-13 (own translation and italics)

It has been suggested that Psalm 67 and Zechariah 8 may even have been connected to the same historical context – namely the harvests in the post-exilic period that signalled God’s fulfilment of his promise to protect and bless his people when they returned to the land. If this is so, it is clear that both texts look well beyond this proof of God’s renewed blessing on Israel alone, and see in it *the firstfruits of God’s wider harvest among all nations on earth*.

It may well be, therefore, that we have in Psalm 67 an echo of this prophetic word: “The land has yielded its harvest,” now may God bless us (cf. Zech. 8:13), and may it be visible to all the nations. ...

The land having yielded its harvest,  
may God, our God, bless us.  
May God bless us  
so that all ends of the earth may revere him.

...

A clear analogy to the text of Zechariah 8 is present. The new times, the time of renewal has begun, as is signalled by the fact that a new harvest has been given. May God now continue to bless his people, and may the nations see it and understand what is happening.

...

It is a sign that God’s history goes on not exclusively with his own people. The function of this signally important harvest is to catch the attention of the nations and move them to recognize and praise God. The particular history of God and Israel is meant to become a blessing to all – as the prophecy of Zechariah 8 announces.<sup>24</sup>

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whole earth; just as the people of Israel has its significance within God’s plan for the whole of humanity.

<sup>22</sup> In this context, the meaning of Zechariah’s prophecy probably is that, whereas nations have used the name of Israel as a curse (in view of its manifest ‘bad luck’), they will change to using it as a term of blessing (in view of God’s manifest restoration of their fortunes).

<sup>23</sup> This translation of the last clause recognizes the common construction, in which one future statement followed by another makes the second the intended purpose of the first. God will save Israel and they will be a blessing. But ‘being a blessing’ was God’s intention for Israel from the start, so his new act of salvation will be to enable that intention to be fulfilled.

<sup>24</sup> E. Talstra and C J Bosma, ‘Psalm 67: Blessing, Harvest and History’, pp. 308, 309, 313.

Because of the universalizing thrust of Psalm 67 as a whole, Brueggemann thinks that the 'us' of its final verse may well be spoken by the nations themselves – not just Israel, who are the clearly the speakers in verse 1. This may or may not be the Psalmist's intention, but, Either way, the psalm envisions a whole earth and all its peoples now gladly affirming Yahweh's sovereignty and gratefully receiving from Yahweh all the blessings of a rightly governed creation.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, Psalm 67 echoes the priestly prayer of Aaron, and may indeed have been composed by a priest. It distils the missional nature of Israel's own priestly role among the nations. Marvin Tate quotes 'a remarkable summary of Ps 67 from I. Abrahams, *Annotations to the Hebrew Prayer Book, Pharisaism and the Gospels*:

This Psalm is a prayer for salvation in the widest sense, and not for Israel only, but for the whole world. Israel's blessing is to be a blessing for all men. Here, in particular, the Psalmist does more than adopt the Priestly formula (Num 6:22-27); he claims for Israel the sacerdotal dignity. Israel is the world's high priest ... if Israel has the light of God's face, the world cannot remain in darkness.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, Israel who knew themselves to be the recipients of such great and abundant blessings that they could exclaim, 'how blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD' (Ps. 33:12), knew also that the benefits of all God had given and done in their history would eventually be a matter of gratitude among the rest of the nations, for whose ultimate benefit Israel had been called into existence in the loins of Abraham. The nations will be the final (and intended) beneficiaries of the blessing experienced in Israel.

#### THE NATIONS WILL WORSHIP ISRAEL'S GOD

The only proper response to blessings and benefits received at God's hand was worship and obedience. That was another core belief in Israel. But if that was true for them, then it must also be true of all nations, as they too came within the sphere of God's blessing. Indeed, Israel's own praises for blessing received had a missional edge, in reaching out in 'proclamation' to the nations.<sup>27</sup> And so there is a range of texts anticipating the praise of the nations, and a few that speak of their obedience as well.<sup>28</sup>

Here we have a theme that carries considerable missiological significance in our survey, since the mission of God is to lead the whole creation and all nations to that universal worship that so fills the final vision of the canon of Scripture. *How* the nations will be brought to such worship and obedience to YHWH the God of Israel remains, within the Old Testament era, a mystery (as Paul acknowledged). But *that* the nations will one day bring all their worship to the only true and living God is left in no doubt. The sheer volume of texts that envisage it is quite remarkable. Again these are typically a mixture of Psalms and prophetic texts.

#### Psalms

The theme of the worship of the nations being offered to YHWH, God of Israel, occurs from beginning to end of the Psalter. So we can only point out the key texts without much exegetical comment. Some simple classification will help our grasp of the material.

<sup>25</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*, p. 501.

<sup>26</sup> Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, Word Bible Commentary, Vol. 20, Dallas: Word Books, 1990, p. 159.

<sup>27</sup> Patrick D. Miller, "'Enthroned on the Praises of Israel": The Praise of God in Old Testament Theology', *Interpretation* 39 (1985), 5-19. See also the quotation from this fine article at the end of Chapter 4 above.

<sup>28</sup> Scott Hahn argues passionately for what he calls 'a liturgical hermeneutic', by which he means and approach to Scripture which sees its primary thrust as leading humanity back to the joyful and fulfilling worship of the Creator God. His lively and illuminating essay fits very effectively with the missiological hermeneutic I have developed in this book, since I have stressed the missional importance of God's will to be known and worshipped by his whole creation. See: Hahn, Scott W., 'Canon, Cult and Covenant: Towards a Liturgical Hermeneutic', in Craig Bartholomew et. al., *title unknown*, forthcoming.

The anticipated *praise of the nations* for YHWH is said to occur

- in response to his mighty acts in general,
- and the justice of his sovereign cosmic rule in particular;
- in response to his restoration of Zion (which will be for the nations' benefit);
- and simply as part of the outpouring of the universal praise of all creation.

*i) The mighty acts of God*

Quite a number of Psalms celebrate the mighty acts of God in the history of Israel in particular, or sometimes also in the wider world of creation, and then in that context call on the nations also to join in praising him. We have already seen this dynamic at work in Psalm 47 above. **Psalm 66** observes that the power of God will distinguish between his enemies who will cringe (presumably prior to destruction), and those who willingly praise him.

Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds!  
 So great is your power  
 that your enemies cringe before you.  
 All the earth bows down to you;  
 they sing praise to you,  
 they sing praise to your name."

....  
 Praise our God, O peoples,  
 Let the sound of his praise be heard.

Psalm 66:3-4, 8

**Psalm 68**, cataloguing some of the mighty acts of YHWH, likewise distinguishes between wicked nations to be scattered, and those nations that will submit to God in worship.

Scatter the nations who delight in war.  
 Envoys will come from Egypt;  
 Cush will submit herself to God.  
 Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth,  
 sing praise to the Lord.

Psalm 68:31-32

**Psalm 86** sets the worship of the nations in the context of the uniqueness of YHWH, as demonstrated in his incomparable mighty acts (an affirmation whose profound missiological importance we have already explored above):

Among the gods there is none like you O Lord;  
 no deeds can compare with yours.  
 All the nations you have made  
 will come and worship before you O Lord;  
 they will bring glory to your name.  
 For you alone are great and do marvellous deeds;  
 you alone are God.

Psalm 86:8-10

**Psalms 96 and 98** are very similar. Both celebrate the kingship of YHWH over all creation, and call for the great works of God in salvation and creation to be the subject of a new song that will spread throughout the nations. The content of this new song is essentially a remix of the old songs of Israel – the name, the salvation, the glory and the mighty acts of YHWH. What makes it new is *where* it is to be sung (in all the earth), and *who* is going to be doing the singing (all peoples). What was an old song for Israel becomes a new song as it is taken up by new singers in ever expanding circles to the ends of the earth. Psalm 96 in particular recognizes the polemical or confrontational nature of such a universal vision, for it must inevitably transform the religious landscape. Other gods must be recognized for what they are – 'nothings' (v. 5), and the nations must instead ascribe all glory to YHWH alone and bring their offerings to him (vs. 7-9).

Sing to the LORD a new song;  
 sing to the LORD all the earth.  
 Sing to the LORD, praise his name;

proclaim his salvation day after day.  
 Declare his glory among the nations,  
 his marvellous deeds among all peoples.

Psalm 96:1-3

**Psalms 97 and 99** are also a similar pair, launching their call to praise with the affirmation 'The LORD reigns', and summoning the earth and the distant shores to rejoice (Ps. 97), and the nations and the earth to tremble and shake (Ps. 99). The greatness, justice, holiness and forgiveness of YHWH are the main reasons for anticipating such responses.

**Psalm 138** sandwiches a remarkable prayer for the world in the midst of the Psalmist's praise and prayer for his own relationship with God. Once again, the longed-for praise of the nations is directly related to great truths that they will perceive about YHWH as God. The praise of the nations is no empty acclamation. It is filled with solid biblical content: the nations will come to praise YHWH in relation to his *words*, his *ways* and his *glory*.

May all the kings of the earth praise you, O LORD,  
 when they hear the words of your mouth.  
 May they sing of the ways of the LORD,  
 for the glory of the LORD is great.

Psalm 138:4-5

ii) *God's sovereign rule*

The expectation that all nations will come to worship YHWH is further drawn from the theological affirmation that he alone rules over the whole world. The eschatology is fed by the monotheistic thrust we explored in Chapter 3 above. The fact that YHWH's reign is one of justice, for which the nations will have cause to bring their praise, has already been noted above in relation to Psalm 67.

**Psalm 22** puts the worship of the nations in a very universal frame: it will be offered by the poor and the rich (i.e every segment of society; 22:26, 29), and it will be offered by generations who have already died and generations as yet unborn (29-31). Whether vertically throughout human society, or horizontally throughout human history, the praise of YHWH as sovereign ruler will be universally offered.

All the ends of the earth  
 will remember and turn to the LORD,  
 and all the families of the nations  
 will bow down before him,  
 for dominion belongs to the LORD  
 and he rules over the nations.

Psalm 22:27-28

**Psalm 2** sees the rule of YHWH as a severe warning to the nations not to continue their rebellion against him, but rather to take the wiser course of worshipping him in humility.

Therefore be warned, you kings, be wise;  
 be warned you rulers of the earth.  
 Serve / worship the LORD with fear  
 and rejoice with trembling.

Psalm 2:10-11

The nations ought to adopt this stance towards YHWH because he has installed his anointed king on Zion. The reference to the historical Davidic king became increasingly hollow, of course, as the human incumbents of that throne became more rebellious themselves than even the other nations. Far from leading Israel in such a way that the nations would come to acknowledge YHWH, be blessed by him, and worship him, it was precisely the kings of Israel whose wickedness precipitated the events that became such a scandal among the nations.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> It may be that this failure of the Davidic king provides a clue to the organization of the Psalter itself. In this chapter we adopt a primarily thematic approach to the Psalms in garnering their missional relevance. However, the growth of interest in a canonical reading of the Book of Psalms as a whole may hold further missional significance. Ever since the

iii) *God's restoration of Zion*

However, after all the lament for those events has been expressed, as it richly is in the later Psalter, the hope of the restoration of Zion emerges there too, just as it does in the prophets. And this also will be a factor in the anticipated praise of YHWH among the nations. Even before Israel, it will be the nations who will marvel at the wonderful things God has done in restoring Israel from a hopeless situation of captivity (Ps. 126:2-3).

**Psalm 102** links together very beautifully a restored Zion and worshipping nations, in a text that seems to have had a strong influence on Jewish expectations within which the mission of Jesus himself and his followers emerged. The anticipated scenario was that when Zion would be restored, then the nations would be gathered to the worship and praise of God, so that Jerusalem would resonate to the praises of Israel and the nations together. This sequence certainly influenced Paul's understanding of his own times and mission: the restoration of Israel; the ingathering of the nations; the combined rejoicing of both.

You will arise and have compassion on Zion,  
for it is time to show favour to her;  
the appointed time has come

...

The nations will fear the name of the LORD,  
all the kings of the earth will revere your glory.  
For the LORD will rebuild Zion  
and appear in his glory.

...

So the name of the LORD will be declared in Zion  
and his praise in Jerusalem  
when the peoples and the kingdoms  
assemble to worship the LORD

Psalm 102:13, 15, 21-22

iv) *Universal praise*

Finally, some Psalms anticipate the praise of the nations for no other reason than that YHWH is worthy of the praise of the whole universe, so no nation can be excluded or excused from that duty. We have noted **Psalm 47** in its assumption that YHWH is exalted as the Great

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seminal work of Wilson, Gerald H., *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, Chicago: Scholars Press, 1985, other scholars have explored the effect of reading the Psalms against the narrative background of Old Testament history, and with particular attention to the Psalms around the 'seams' of the five books into which the Psalter has been edited. (For a survey see, Gordon Wenham, 'Towards a Canonical Reading of the Psalms,' in *Unknown*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et. al., Grand Rapids and Carlisle: Zondervan and Paternoster, forthcoming, ).

John Wigfield is exploring the links between Psalms and Deuteronomy, in the light of Patrick Miller, 'Deuteronomy and Psalm: Evoking a Biblical Conversation', with a view to a missiological reading of the Psalter as a whole. If the model Israelite of Psalm 1 represents the model king of Deuteronomy 17, who should be leading Israel in the ways of obedience to God's law, then, according to Deuteronomy 4:6-8, the *nations* should observe and be drawn to Israel. The question of Psalm 2 is therefore sharp and surprising: 'Why do the nations conspire against the LORD?' Was it because Israel and their king had failed to come anywhere close to the ideals of Psalm 1? In spite of much encouragement to humble and faithful obedience in Books I and II, and in spite of the ideals set before the Davidic monarch in Psalm 72 (end of Book II), the reality is that from Solomon on the kings all abandoned God and his law, with the result that the nation ended up in the despairing apparent collapse of the Davidic covenant in Psalm 89 (end of Book III). From then on, the Psalms turn more sustained emphasis towards the nations in general, and to the kingship of YHWH over both Israel and the nations. The universalizing thrust of the whole collection thus gathers power and volume somewhat similarly to the growing eschatological universality of the prophets.

It is an interesting hypothesis, which awaits clarification and demonstration. But it shows another part of the canon on which a missional hermeneutic can open up fresh angles of approach.

King, so all human kings must naturally join in the shouts of joy and praise. **Psalm 100** summons all the earth to shout for joy, while the shortest Psalm of all, **Psalm 117**, invites all nations and peoples to praise YHWH for his great love and enduring faithfulness – qualities known by experience in Israel, eventually to be the subject of universal praise among the nations.

Though the shortest of Psalms, Psalm 117 exercised a theological influence on Paul out of all proportion to its length. It provides the vocabulary as well as the thematic content of Romans 15:8-11, emphasizing not only the faithfulness and mercy of God (in what he has accomplished for the nations through Christ), but also the summons to praise that goes forth now to the nations.<sup>30</sup>

The climax of the Psalter, with its outpouring of praise, rises to rhetorical peaks of universality.

**Psalm 145** envisages the whole creation praising God, but the human part of it will do so because they have come to know the works and reign of God through the testimony of his people.

All you have made will praise you, O LORD;  
your saints will extol you.  
They will tell of the glory of your kingdom  
and speak of your might,  
so that all men may know of your mighty acts  
and the glorious splendour of your kingdom

Psalm 145:10-12

**Psalm 148** is also a hymn of praise to YHWH from the whole created order, so not surprisingly it includes 'kings of the earth and all nations, you princes and all rulers on earth' (v. 11).

I have dwelt at length on this material in the Psalms on the anticipated praise of YHWH by all the nations because, although it is of such manifest missiological significance, it is easy to overlook. We read the Psalms very much as songs of ancient Israel, and we may be inclined to pass over verses such as these as rhetorical flourishes without pausing to marvel at the vast horizons of expectation and imagination contained in them. And we usually read the Psalms one at a time, so we miss the opportunity to feel the overwhelming cumulative force of such a pervasive theme in Israel's amazing liturgical discourse.

Yet, within any biblical theology of mission, or any missiological reading of Scripture, this is surely material of primary relevance. Their breadth of vision, their universal inclusiveness, their breathtaking eschatological hope – all these features of the Psalms are essential components in articulating the scope of the mission of God in scripture. Creighton Marlowe coins a highly appropriate name for the Psalms. He calls them 'the music of missions'.

Both Israel and the church have been commissioned or called to reflect and to report the light of revelation, the good news about the true nature of God as Saviour, Judge, King, and Lord of the earth and all its inhabitants. The platform upon which God's people of any age earn the opportunity to be heard ... may and will change dramatically over the centuries or millennia or may be as different as the individuals or institutions seeking to be a witness. But the main object always remains the same: visualizing and verbalizing the revelation of the one, true God ... before the reachable world of nations. Old Testament psalms are sacred songs (Hebrew poetry set to music) that in part explicitly reinforce this divine purpose for Israel and thus, implicitly for the church. They celebrate the character of cross-cultural outreach. They are the music of missions.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Jannie du Preez, 'The Missionary Significance of Psalm 117 in the Book of Psalms and in the New Testament', *Missionalia* 27 (1999), pp. 369-376.

<sup>31</sup> W. Creighton Marlowe, 'Music of Missions: Themes of Cross-Cultural Outreach in the Psalms', p. 452. George Peters goes rhetorically further, counting 'more than 175 references of a universalistic note relating to the nations of the world. Many of them bring hope of salvation to the nations ... Indeed, the Psalter is one of the greatest missionary books in the world, though seldom seen from that point of view.' George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1972, pp. 115-116.

## Prophets

The texts we have surveyed in the Psalms might well qualify as prophetic, such is their grandeur of vision. However, among the prophets, it is the book of Isaiah that has the most sustained interest in the eschatological vision of the nations offering their worship to YHWH. It is found as early as chapter 2 and it forms part of the climax of the whole corpus in 66:18-23.

There has been an intensive scholarly debate over the nature of the so-called universalism of Isaiah – especially chapters 40-55. On the one hand, there are those who regard these chapters as the pinnacle of Israel's 'missionary' vision – extending the hope of God's salvation to all the nations on earth and generating a vision of centrifugal universalism. On the other hand, there are those who regard these chapters as simply the pinnacle of Israel's exclusivism – all the nations will have to submit to Israel and acknowledge that Israel's God is the only true one. On the latter view, these chapters are imbued more with the spirit of centripetal nationalism than that of universalism.<sup>32</sup>

Excellent and balanced discussions of the debate have been provided by Anthony Gelston<sup>33</sup> and Michael Grisanti.<sup>34</sup> Both argue that to insist on either pole of the above dichotomy would be mistaken. It is worth quoting their conclusions, with which I agree, in full.

The universalism that I submit is to be found in Second Isaiah consist of three strands. There is first the affirmation that YHWH is the only true God, sovereign over all creation, and therefore over all mankind. There is secondly the expectation that this truth will be recognized by the Gentile nations no less than by Israel, with the corollary that they will submit to him and acknowledge his universal rule. ... There is a third strand, consisting of the universal offer of the experience of salvation. Nowhere, however, does the prophet affirm that all will avail themselves of this offer. On the contrary, there is a clear implication in 45:25 that some will not ... to the detriment of those who persist in their idolatry.<sup>35</sup>

Isaiah 40-55 contains passages that manifest both sides of this tension [between nationalism and universalism]. The customary terms "nationalism" and "universalism", do not sufficiently reveal the constitutive issues in this debate. ... Assertions that the prophet is the "missionary prophet of the Old Testament" or that he is an ardent nationalist without any concern for the nations frame this debate. Between these two extremes, the prophet Isaiah neither depicts Israel as a nation of world-traversing missionaries, nor does he exclude the nations from participation in divine redemption. ... the prophet argues that God's special dealings with His chosen people not only benefit Israel, but also carry significance for all nations. Isaiah underscores Israel's role in providing a witness to the nations...in the sense of being a people of God whose life shall draw nations to inquire after Yahweh (cf. Isa. 2:1-4; 43:10-11). It is as God's chosen people that Israel can exercise a mediatorial role with regard to the nations. Isaiah's fervent desire for Israel is that they will respond to God's intervention on her behalf and carry out her role as God's servant nation before the world.<sup>36</sup>

Returning, then, to the theme of the nations bringing their worship to YHWH, Christopher Begg has made an exhaustive study of all the texts in the **book of Isaiah** that exhibit this theme - dividing the book up into fairly standard sections.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> A selection of the relevant literature in the debate would include: Robert Davidson, 'Universalism in Second Isaiah', *SJT* 16 (1963), pp. 166-185; D E Hollenberg, 'Nationalism and "The Nations" in Isaiah XL-LV', *VT* 19 (1969), pp. 23-36; Harry Orlinsky, 'Nationalism-Universalism and Internationalism in Ancient Israel', in H T Frank and W L Reid (eds.), *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament: Essays in Honor of Herbert Gordon May* (Nashville: Abingdon; 1970), pp. 206-236; D W Van Winkle, 'The Relationship of the Nations to Yahweh and to Israel in Isaiah XL-LV', *VT* 35 (1985), pp. 446-458; J Blenkinsopp, 'Second Isaiah – Prophet of Universalism', *JSOT* 41 (1988), pp. 83-103.

<sup>33</sup> Anthony Gelston, 'Universalism in Second Isaiah', *JTS* 43 (1992), pp. 377-398.

<sup>34</sup> Michael A Grisanti, 'Israel's Mission to the Nations in Isaiah 40-55: An Update', *Master's Seminary Journal* 9 (1998), pp. 39-61.

<sup>35</sup> Gelston, 'Universalism in Second Isaiah', p. 396.

<sup>36</sup> Grisanti, 'Israel's Mission to the Nations', p. 61.

<sup>37</sup> Christopher T. Begg, 'The Peoples and the Worship of Yahweh in the Book of Isaiah'.

In **Isaiah 1-12**, the theme puts an envelope around the prophecies concerning Israel. In 2:1-5, the eschatological expectation of the obedient, law-seeking, worship of the nations in the future is contrasted sharply with the contemporary rituals of rebellious Israel in chapter 1. This is echoed in chapter 12, where the abating of YHWH's anger against Israel is met by an outpouring of praise that will include the nations and all the world (12:4-5).

In **Isaiah 13-27**, the section of oracles concerning the nations, the overwhelming burden is, of course, words of judgment against the contemporary nations in the world of the prophet. Nevertheless, 'the expectation of some sort of participation by a nation or the nations as a whole in Yahweh's worship keeps being voiced.'<sup>38</sup> The most remarkable of these voices is the prophecy concerning Egypt in 19:16-25, which we will examine in the next section of this chapter. But in addition to the hope there expressed for Egypt, we find anticipation of worship in the form of gifts and offerings being brought by the Ethiopians (18:7), and by the people of Tyre (23:17-18). The so-called Isaiah Apocalypse (chs. 24-25) also contains portraits not only of God's judgment on all the earth, but of the worship of the nations ultimately being directed to him. After the purging judgment, there will be joyful and grateful worship among the survivors (24:14-16). In chapter 25, it seems clear that the benefits of God's salvation, including ultimately the destruction of death itself, will be for both Israel and all nations, who will gather on the mountain of Zion for YHWH's rich banquet (v. 6), so that 'they' in 25:9 includes both:

In that day *they* [Israelites and all nations] will say,  
Surely this is our God;  
we trusted in him, and he saved us.  
This is the LORD, we trusted in him;  
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.

In **Isaiah 40-55** the theme of the worship of the nations returns to even greater prominence. 'All flesh' will see the glory of YHWH (40:5), and his justice and law will be delivered to the nations who wait eagerly for them (42:1-4). Accordingly all nations to the ends of the earth can be summoned to sing his praise (42:10-12), and will indeed eventually do so, in the wake of God's new redemptive work (45:6, 14). Summons turns to appeal in the climax of chapter 45, as YHWH invites the remnant of the nations (like the remnant of Israel), to turn to him for salvation, and thus to convert from their late lamented false worship to the exclusive worship of YHWH (45:22-25). This appeal, mediated through a new David, will assuredly find willing and hasty response among nations hitherto unknown to Israel (55:3-5).

In **Isaiah 56-66** the early vision of chapter 2:1-5 of the pilgrimage of the nations to Zion is expanded and enhanced in a rich kaleidoscope of anticipation. At an individual level, foreigners previously excluded will find their worship accepted right in the temple itself (56:3-8). Back at the international level, chapter 60, along with 61:5-7, is a glorious evocation for all the senses of the worship of the nations being brought to YHWH, through the mediation of Israel now functioning, as intended, as God's priesthood for the nations. Just as Israelites brought their tithes and offerings to their priests, so the nations will bring their tribute to Israel as the priests of YHWH (61:6). It is not unlikely that Paul theologically viewed his financial collection from among the gentile churches for the impoverished Jerusalem church as a token of the eschatological fulfilment of such prophetic visions.<sup>39</sup> Though there is rhetoric of submission to Israel, this is probably no more than figurative of the recognition that it is Israel's God who reigns supreme. 'The chapter makes clear that their homage is ultimately meant for Yahweh himself'<sup>40</sup> (cf. vs. 6, 7, 9, 14, 16).

Walter Brueggemann agrees, and goes on to make a further point about the role of the Torah in this eschatological worship of the nations. They will worship as nations who have been taught the ways of YHWH (as 2:2-5 and 42:4 also envisage).

<sup>38</sup> Begg, p. 39. See also, as a wider study of the theme of the nations in relation to the unity of the book of Isaiah as a whole, G I Davies, 'The Destiny of the Nations in the Book of Isaiah', in J Vermeylen (ed.), *The Book of Isaiah: Le Livre d'Isaie* (Leuven University Press, 1989), pp. 93-120.

<sup>39</sup> This is argued by C.H.H. Scobie, 'Israel and the Nations: An Essay in Biblical Theology', *Tyndale Bulletin* 43.2 (1992): 283-305.

<sup>40</sup> *Idem*, p. 50.

Two matters are important in this vision. First, the nations come gladly, willingly, and expectantly. They are not coerced or compelled by the political force of the Davidic house, but have come in recognition that this is the only place where the way to peace and justice is available. Second, in the process of coming gladly, it is affirmed that the nations, like Israel, are subject to the Torah of Yahweh. That is, the Torah is as pertinent to the nations as it is to Israel. This makes clear that the nations must deal with Yahweh's sovereignty, but it also makes clear that the Torah, while seated in Jerusalem, is no exclusive Israelite property. It belongs to the nations as much as to Israel.<sup>41</sup>

Walter Vogels also observes the strong connection between Sinai and Zion in this vision for the nations.

What Israel celebrated at Sinai is celebrated by the nations at Zion. At Sinai, Yahweh gave his law to Israel through Moses. He now gives his revelation to the nations through Israel. At that time Israel was designated as Yahweh's people, but now all the nations are Yahweh's people.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, in Isaiah 66, the nations who have been the object of witness and summons, once they have been gathered to the worship of YHWH, themselves become the agents of witness and proclamation. This is the only unequivocally centrifugal articulation of mission in the Old Testament. Those who have been the recipients of Abrahamic blessing now become the agents of mediating it to others.

And I, because of their actions and their imaginations, am about to come and gather all nations and tongues, and they will come and see my glory. I will set a sign among them and I will send some of those who survive to the nations ... and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations.

Isaiah 66:18-19

Christopher Begg's conclusion is worth quoting almost in full.

The theme of the nations' involvement with the worship of Yahweh has indeed emerged as a significant one throughout the book of Isaiah, with increasing attention being devoted to it as one moves from chs. 1-39 to 40-66. To an overwhelming degree the texts speak in positive terms of the nations' relation to Yahweh's worship. ...

In the process of the nations coming to participate in Yahweh's worship, Israel itself has a consistently significant role, it being, for example, Israel's manner of life, of God-given prosperity and teaching of them that inspire the nations to approach the Lord. A number of texts as well envisage Israel as exercising a mediatorial role in the worship of the nations for whom it is to make intercession (45:14) or perform the sacrifices for which they supply the victims (60:7; 61:6). Similarly, the nations' worship of Yahweh himself is intimately tied to their homage to Israel in various texts, for example, Isaiah 60. At the same time, it is especially striking to observe how the texts foresee the nations as Yahweh's worshippers, entering fully and equally into the privileges of Israel. Thus titles used elsewhere of Israel ('my people', 'the work of my hands', 19:25; 'servant[s]', 56:6) will be predicated of them. They will function too as Yahweh's 'missionaries' (66:19) and clergy (66:21). Non-Israelites are to have an altar of their own (19:20), will present acceptable sacrifices to the Lord (19:21, 56:7), participate in his feasts (56:6; 66:23) and have a part in his 'covenant' (56:6). Yahweh for his part will 'teach' the nations (2:3), feed them (25:6), abolish all that causes them grief (25:7-8) and make himself/his 'glory' known to them (19:22, 66:18). *In sum, the nations' worship of Yahweh constitutes a key, insistently underscored component of the future hopes that occupy so large a part of the extant book of Isaiah.*<sup>43</sup>

Compared with Isaiah, the theme is much more rare in other prophetic books, but certainly not entirely lacking. The following list of texts is well worth perusing: Jeremiah 3:17; 17:19-21; Micah 4:1-5; Zephaniah 2:11; 3:9; Zechariah 8:20-22; 14:16; Malachi 1:11.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*, pp. 501-502.

<sup>42</sup> Walter Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant*, p. 122.

<sup>43</sup> Begg, *op cit*, p. 54-55 (my italics).

We can say, then, with a broad range of textual support, that a significant part of Israel's eschatological hope in relation to the nations was that *ultimately they would bring their worship to YHWH, the one living God of all the earth*. And again we must add that such a vision constitutes a major strand within a biblical theology of mission, for it is the indefatigable mission of God – a mission in which he invites our participation – to bring such universal worship of the nations to joyful reality.

#### THE NATIONS WILL BE INCLUDED IN ISRAEL'S IDENTITY

'It is especially striking to observe,' repeating Begg's point above, 'how the texts foresee the nations as Yahweh's worshippers, *entering fully and equally into the privileges of Israel*.' Striking indeed. And so we must finally turn to this climactic point. For, to revisit our earlier metaphor, the Old Testament is not content merely to portray the nations as the spectators of the great drama being played out between YHWH and Israel - not even as clapping spectators who perceive that the drama is ultimately for their own benefit. The most radical part of the Old Testament vision is yet to come. For the divine director intends eventually to bring the spectators out of the stalls onto the stage, to join the original cast, and then to continue the drama with a single, though infinitely enlarged, company. The nations will come to share the very identity of Israel itself. God's people will burst the boundaries of ethnicity and geography. The very name 'Israel' will be extended and redefined.

These things were not the *ex post facto* theological rationalizations of the Apostle Paul seeking to justify the inclusion of Gentiles in the church. These things are *unambiguously stated in the Old Testament itself as part of God's mission* in relation to the nations of the earth. As the following survey of texts, drawn again from Psalms and prophets, will demonstrate, when God accomplishes his great missional project for history and creation, the nations of the world will be found to have been

- registered in God's city,
- blessed with God's salvation,
- accepted in God's house,
- called by God's name, and
- joined with God's people.

No more comprehensive inclusion could be imagined.

#### Registered in God's city

**Psalm 47** has already astonished us with its portrayal of the nations as applauding YHWH for what had happened in the history of Israel, even though it included the subjugation of the nations themselves in the history of the conquest. But it goes on to greater surprises. If YHWH is indeed the King of all the earth, then when the great assembly of nations gathers before him, we read,

The nobles of the nations assemble  
[as] the people of the God of Abraham,  
for the kings of the earth belong to God,  
he is greatly exalted

Psalm 47:9

As the brackets indicate, there is no preposition in the phrase in Hebrew. 'The nobles of the nations' and 'the people of the God of Abraham' are simply set in apposition, the one being identified with the other.<sup>44</sup> That God in this context should be specifically named as the God of Abraham is surely significant, in view of the universality of God's promise to Abraham. So the register of the nations will not set the other nations behind, beneath or even merely alongside Israel, but will actually include them as Israel, as part of the people of father Abraham.

The innumerable princes and peoples are to become one *people*; and they will no longer be outsiders but within the covenant; this is implied in their being called *the people of the God of Abraham*. It is the abundant fulfilment of the promise of

<sup>44</sup> Commentators speculate if Heb. 'im (with) has dropped out, through haplography with the consonantly identical 'am (people) following. LXX takes it thus. However, there is no textual evidence for a longer reading, and the MT makes sense when taken as above.

Genesis 12:3; it anticipates what Paul expounds of the inclusion of the Gentiles as Abraham's sons (Rom. 4:11; Gal. 3:7-9).<sup>45</sup>

**Psalm 87** actually uses the imagery of a register of the nations (v. 6), and quite astonishingly holds the roll-call in Zion itself. Many surrounding nations are listed as having been 'born' there, and as being among those who 'know me' (v.4, language normally exclusively used of Israel within the covenant). The expectation clearly is that 'Zion' will ultimately come to include not just native-born Israelites, but people of other nations who will be adopted and enfranchised as citizens of the city, with as much right as the native born to be registered there by YHWH. Significantly, YHWH is here also named Elyon (v. 5), the original name of the God of Jerusalem, with strong connections to Abraham (Gen. 14:18-20).

The list of nations to be counted and registered as citizens of Zion even includes the two great historical *enemy* empires, Egypt (Rahab), and Babylon, along with smaller neighbouring enemies, the Philistines, trading partners (Tyre), and representatives of the more distant regions (Cush). When the roll is called up yonder, there will be some surprising names on the register.

### Blessed with God's salvation

Personally, as I said in Chapter 7, I find **Isaiah 19:16-25** one of the most breathtaking pronouncements of any prophet, and certainly one of the most missiologically significant texts in the Old Testament.

The chapter begins in a way that we have come to expect from the prophetic repertoire – an oracle of doom against Egypt, in a sequence of such oracles against Babylon, Moab, Syria and Cush. In 19:1-15 Egypt is comprehensively placed under God's coming historical judgement, at every level of their religion, agriculture, fisheries, industry and politics. We have heard this kind of thing before.

But then, from verse 15-22, the more indefinite future ('in that day' is repeated six times) will see an astonishing transformation of Egypt's fortunes, in which they will experience for themselves all that God did for Israel when he rescued them from the Egyptian oppression. The prophet extends to a foreign nation the familiar principle by which predictions of Israel's own future restoration were made in terms drawn from Israel's past (a new exodus, new covenant, new wilderness protection and land entry, etc.). Here Israel's past is used to portray the future blessing promised to a foreign nation that turns to God.<sup>46</sup> They (the Egyptians), who had once refused to acknowledge YHWH, will cry out to him (not to their own gods). He will send them a saviour and deliverer. They will then know YHWH and worship him (as Israel did through their exodus). They will even speak the language of Canaan (i.e. Hebrew, from an Israelites perspective; this is in effect to say that the Egyptians will be *de facto* identified as Israelites). They will be struck by plagues, but YHWH will heal them. All this is Exodus re-visited and turned inside out. It is Exodus re-loaded, with the characters reversed.

The list of affirmations made about Egypt in this incredible piece of eschatological writing is more detailed than anything said about the nations anywhere else.

Isa. 19.16-25 goes beyond not only the rest of Isaiah, but the entire O T, in foreseeing other nations – and traditionally enemy ones at that – coming to participate in such a range of hitherto distinctively Israelite experiences and prerogatives...such that they will stand on a footing of full equality with Israel.<sup>47</sup>

As if what has been said about Egypt were not surprise enough, the prophet then brings Assyria into the equation and foretells that these two great nations would join hands (v. 23). Normally, that would have filled Israelite hearts with dread, for Egypt and Assyria were like giant nutcrackers, squeezing Israel at either end of their history and from opposite ends of the compass. But historical reality is totally inverted in the prediction that the purpose of their uniting will be, not that they will join forces to fight against YHWH and his people, but rather that 'they will worship together.' This goes beyond the promise that *Israelites* who had been scattered in Assyria or Egypt would come together to worship God again, as in Isaiah 27:12-

<sup>45</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 178.

<sup>46</sup> 'The author of Is. 19:16-25 ... chose images of the experience of his own people to depict the salvation offered to the nations... He dared to apply to other nations what Israel believed to be her privilege.' Walter Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant*, p. 96.

<sup>47</sup> Christopher Begg, 'The Peoples and the Worship of Yahweh', p. 42.

13. This is not just a prophecy of the ingathering of the exiles of *Israel*, but about the ingathering of the *nations* among whom (and *by* whom in some cases) they had been exiled. The scattering oppressors become the ingathered worshippers. History is inverted in this eschatological transformation. The enemies of God and Israel will be at peace with Israel and with each other.<sup>48</sup>

Doubtless the prophet uses Egypt and Assyria here in this highly eschatological prophecy in a representational way; that is, they 'stand for' a wider inclusion of other nations, not just the specifically named nations. In the same way, prophecies concerning Babylon (in both Testaments), move beyond predictions about the historical fate of the actual city and empire of Babylon into representational visions of the ultimate fate of the enemies of God. Egypt and Assyria never reached such unity with Israel in Isaiah's time, or indeed in ours. But the vision and the task implied within it (or to put it another way, the mission of God and his people) embraces more than Middle Eastern geo-politics, ancient or modern.

It therefore invites us to look forward and to pray for the coming of the day when nations such as Egypt (and we can then add our own nation) revere God, when its cities (and we can then add our own nation) acknowledge Yahweh, when such nations have a salvation history parallel to Israel's, when the great powers are united in worship, and when the promise to Abraham indeed comes true.<sup>49</sup>

Then comes the final surprise:

[24] In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. [25] The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance.

The identity of Israel will be *merged* with that of Egypt and Assyria. In case the implication of verse 24 were not clear enough, the prophet makes it unambiguous (not to mention scandalous) by applying to Egypt and Assyria descriptions that hitherto could only have been said about Israel. In fact, the word order in Hebrew is more emphatic and shocking than the *NIV* translation. It reads (lit.): 'Blessed be my people, Egypt (!), and the work of my hands, Assyria (!), and my inheritance, Israel'. The shock of reading, 'Egypt' immediately after 'my people' (instead of the expected 'Israel'), and of putting Israel third on the list, is palpable. Yet there it is. The archenemies of Israel will be absorbed into the identity, titles and privileges of Israel and share in the Abrahamic blessing of the living God, YHWH.

Of course, they will not be absorbed into God's people in this way while they remain enemies. The transformation that is explicit about Egypt must also be assumed about Assyria. It is only as God's enemies cry out to him, acknowledge him, worship him, and turn to him (vs. 20-22), that they enjoy rescue, healing, blessing and inclusion. That was as true for rebellious Israel as for their traditional enemies. But that indeed is what the converting love and power of God will accomplish – for the nations as for Israel. That is God's mission. God is in the business of turning enemies into friends, as Saul of Tarsus knew better than most. It is very possible that his triple expression of the inclusion of the Gentiles within the identity and titles of Israel (as co-heirs, a co-body, and co-sharers with Israel), in Ephesians 3:6 owes something to this verse in Isaiah.

### Accepted in God's house

**Isaiah 56:3-8** is unusual in being addressed, not to nations as wholes, but to individual foreigners, along with eunuchs – two groups of people who, in the community to which these words were addressed, feared exclusion from God's people. Their fears were well grounded, for laws such as Deuteronomy 23:1-8 show that castrated males and certain categories of foreigner were indeed denied access to the holy assembly of Israelites at worship.

Among the ancillary reasons for this exclusion may well have been the strong criterion for covenant membership in pre-exilic Israel of belonging within a land-owning household.

<sup>48</sup> 'The day that Egypt and Assyria are peace with one another and with Israel will be the day the whole world is at peace.' Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, The Bible Speaks Today, Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP and InterVarsity, 1996, p. 96.

<sup>49</sup> John Goldingay, *Isaiah*, New International Biblical Commentary, Peabody and Carlisle: Hendrikson and Paternoster, 2001, p. 121.

*Kinship* (belonging to the ethnic tribal structure of Israel) and *land* (sharing in the inheritance of YHWH's land), were key elements in one's identity and inclusion within Israel.<sup>50</sup> The eunuch could have no family, for, as he bemoaned, 'I am only a dry stick' (v. 3). And the foreigner could have no stake in the land, since it was divided up exclusively among the tribes, clans and households of Israel.

These crippling deficiencies are here directly addressed by God. The eunuch will have 'a memorial and a name' better than any family could give him. The foreigner will be brought to God's holy mountain – symbolic of having a rightful share in the land as a whole. They will, in short, fully belong to the citizenry of Israel.

And on what conditions are such promises made? Precisely the same conditions that applied to Israel's own continued enjoyment of the privilege of being the people of YHWH – namely wholehearted covenant *loyalty* to YHWH, exclusive *worship* of him, and careful *obedience* to his laws (vs. 4-6). As has been said, the definition of Israel here is subtly developing from a *chosen* people to a *choosing* people.

These [foreigners] I will bring to my holy mountain  
and give them joy in my house of prayer.  
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices  
will be accepted on my altar;  
for my house of prayer will be called  
a house of prayer for all nations.

Isaiah 56:7

It is not difficult to imagine the growing sense of shock and scandal among the native inhabitants of Jerusalem as the divine invitation draws the foreigner ever closer to the very heart of Israel's exclusive holiness.

Foreigners will be brought to the holy mountain.  
That's close enough surely?  
No, God will give them joy right in the temple.  
But in its outer courts, perhaps?  
No, they can bring their sacrifices right up to the altar.

Nothing that was available to *Israelite* worshippers will be denied to *foreigners* willing to commit themselves to Israel's God. If they accept the terms of covenant membership, they will be accepted at the heart of the covenant relationship. They will find joy in the house of the LORD – the joy of identity and inclusion.

Once again, it is very probable that Paul's mind is saturated with the dynamic of these verses, as he wrote these words to the beneficiaries of their fulfilment:

Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

Ephesians 2:12-13

And it is very hard to imagine that Luke did not have this text of Isaiah in mind, with some ironic sense of humour no doubt, when he recorded that the first believer in Jesus from outside the native Jewish community was indeed a *foreigner*, was a *eunuch*, and was reading the scroll of *Isaiah*, just a few column inches from this passage. Luke is careful to point out, however, in line with his understanding of the fulfilment of all such promises in Christ, that the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, though he had indeed been to Jerusalem to worship, found joy, not in the *temple*, but when he heard about *Jesus*, trusted and was baptised, and went on his way rejoicing. Jesus is the one through whom people of all nations will be accepted in God's house of prayer for all nations. Mission means bringing the nations to find joy in the house of the Lord by bringing them to the one who embodies that house in his own person and the community of believers.

### Called by God's name

**Amos 9:11-12** brings the book of Amos to a startling close. After the fires of judgment, destruction and exile, that have dominated the whole book so far, the final note is one of

<sup>50</sup> See further on this whole nexus of theology, economics, and ethics: Christopher J H Wright, *God's People in God's Land*.

hope. Beyond judgment, there lie restoration and renewal in the plans of God. Since other pre-exilic prophets could combine oracles of judgment and hope, there seems no compelling reason to snip these verses out of Amos's prophecy and assign them elsewhere.

What is striking is that, just as Amos began in the international arena, so he ends there. Amos 1-2 portrays the chaotic wickedness of the surrounding nations – than which, of course, Israel is no better – and YHWH's thundering word of coming wrath. These final verses portray the restoration not only of the Davidic kingdom and temple (remembering Amos was from Judah, even though his prophetic ministry took place in the northern kingdom), but also of 'the remnant of Edom<sup>51</sup> and all the nations that bear my name'.

The great surprise here is the combination of a plural word '*nations*', with the concept '*called by my name*'. Only one nation, surely, could be legitimately described in that way. The expression 'called by the name of' denotes ownership and intimate relationship. In ordinary use, it expressed the longing of anxious women to belong to a husband (Isa. 4:1), or the close, authenticating relationship of a prophet to his God (Jer. 15:16).

But in significant theological usage, 'being called by YHWH's name' applied to the central focal points of Israel's unique relationship with YHWH. The *ark of the covenant* was called by his name (2 Sam. 6:2). So was the *temple* itself, on the day of its dedication, and Solomon prayed that 'all the people of the earth' would come to know it (1 Kgs. 8:43). *Jerusalem*, worthily or not, was the city that was called by YHWH's name (Jer. 25:29). Most significant of all, it was at the heart of God's covenant blessing on Israel that they would be the *people* who were called by his name.

The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are *called by the name* of the LORD, and they will fear you.

Deuteronomy 28:9-10

Indeed, this was precisely one of the distinguishing marks of Israel, for the foreign nations of Israel's own day could be lumped together simply as those had *never* been called by YHWH's name (Isa. 63:19).

So what is Amos saying, then? Nothing less than that this great privilege, which the nations were supposed to recognize about the temple and about Israel, would actually be seen to be true of the nations themselves. This is an eschatological reversal of status.

As in the other texts we have observed above, this is also the language of inclusion and identity. To be called by the name of YHWH was the luggage tag on the ark, the dedication plaque on the temple, the map reference of Jerusalem and the lapel badge of every Israelite. It was the defining privilege of only one people on earth – Israel – to be known as 'the nation called by the name of YHWH'. Now, declares the prophet, this identity will be available to people of 'all nations.' How more included could you get?

The nations who stood under God's judgment with Israel in chapters 1 and 2, now stand under God's blessing with Israel in these closing verses. The very concept of 'Israel' has been stretched to include them in the key designation, 'called by my name'.

**Isaiah 44:1-5**, is another unusual text in speaking of individuals, rather than nations as wholes. The context is God's promise to Israel in exile that they will not wither and die out there. On the contrary, God has plans of future growth for his people, under the irrigating and fertilizing power of his Spirit. Within that vision, the prophet describes individual conversions to YHWH.<sup>52</sup>

One will say, 'I belong to the LORD;  
another will call himself by the name of Jacob;

<sup>51</sup> The LXX reads *adam* instead of *Edom* (the Heb. Consonants are the same), and thus takes it as 'remnant of humankind'. This is an understandable and possibly correct reading, and would fit with the universal note of 'all the nations'. It is certainly the form of the text that is used by James in Acts 15:17.

<sup>52</sup> Some take Isaiah 44:5 as referring, not to foreigners, but to apostate Israelites returning to the fold in repentance and renewed allegiance. This is possible, but seems to strain the text. Strictly speaking no native-born Israelite needed to say what the speakers in this verse affirm. So it makes much more sense, in my view, to regard the words as being spoken by non-Israelites who chose to identify themselves with YHWH and his people through the use of these formulae.

still another will write on his hand, 'The LORD's',  
and will take the name Israel.

Isaiah 44:5

So the growth of Israel will not just be biological (as the predominant imagery evokes), but also by extension and conversion. Foreigners will join Israel, by the double act of identifying themselves with YHWH and with YHWH's people – Israel. There is no belonging to one without the other, but membership is clearly open to those who choose it. Being called by God's name, then, is both an eschatological vision for the *nations* (as in Amos), but it is also a personal choice and action for the *individual*. A biblical theology of mission, of course, comfortably includes both.

### Joined with God's people

**Zechariah 2:10-11** comes in the midst of a vision of encouragement to the post-exilic people of Jerusalem. In contrast to the programme initiated by Nehemiah, this prophet says that the city will not need walls, partly because its influx of new inhabitants will be so many, and partly because God himself will be a wall of fire around them (2:3-5). Their enemies who had plundered them will themselves be defeated and plundered (2:8-9). Then the King will come home to dwell once more among his people.

'Shout and be glad O Daughter of Zion. For look, here I am coming, and I will reside in the midst of you,' declares the LORD. 'Many nations will join themselves to YHWH in that day. And they will be for me for a people. And I will reside in the midst of you.'

Zechariah 2:10-11 (Heb. 2:14-15 my translation)

So the prophet's message for the nations was not one of destructive judgment only, but beyond that, of inclusion in God's people. And the prophet's message for Israel was not one of exclusive favouritism at the hand of God, but of an expansion that would include not only their own returning exiles, but also people of 'many nations'.

The repeated line 'I will reside in the midst of you' is important, both in content and position. It is the word *sakan*, strongly associated with God's taking up residence in the tabernacle and then the temple. The related noun is *sekinah* – the tabernacling presence of God among his people. So the first use of the phrase in verse 10 is a word of hope to the post-exilic community, in line with the visions of Ezekiel, that God would return to Zion to take up residence once again in the city and temple he had so grievously left. But the second identical use comes after the prediction of the influx of the nations to join themselves to YHWH. And this repetition seals the affirmation of inclusion that has already been signalled in other ways.

First, the nations will join themselves *to YHWH* – not merely to Israel. In other words, they do not join merely as subordinates of Israel, in some second-class citizenship. No, they will belong to YHWH just as Israel does (as we saw in Psalm 47).

Secondly, they will enjoy exactly the same covenantal relationship with YHWH that Israel does. The expression 'they will be for me for a people', is precisely the language of the covenant, with its roots going back to Sinai, hitherto applied only to Israel. Significantly, although the nations are plural (as is the verb 'they will be'), the predicate is singular - 'a *people*'. This is not 'Israel plus the nations', but 'the nations as Israel' – one people belonging to God.

And so, when the phrase 'I will reside in the midst' is repeated after the predicted joining of the nations, it significantly does not change the final suffix to 'in the midst of *them*', but retains '*you*' - the 2<sup>nd</sup> person feminine singular of the original reference to Zion. 'You', Zion, remain the dwelling place of God, but 'you' are no longer going to be merely a community of returned Jewish exiles. 'You', Zion, will become a multi-national community of people from many nations, all of whom will belong to YHWH, and therefore be rightly counted as belonging to Israel. God himself will dwell in the midst of 'you' – Zion of the nations (cf. Psalm 87). The identity and membership of Israel have thus been radically re-drawn by YHWH himself. It is no longer 'Zion *and* the nations', but 'Zion inclusive of the nations'.

**Zechariah 9:7** shows the extent to which such a vision could be taken, within the contemporary international political scene of the day. Zechariah 9 begins with a whistle-stop tour of the map of west Asian countries, from north to south, beginning in the heights of Syria

and ending in the Gaza strip (9:1-6). Everything under the flight-path of the prophet's vision is placed under the searching eye and imminent judgment of YHWH.

But then, a sudden surprising word of hope intrudes in relation to the Philistines – *the Philistines*, of all people!

I will take the blood from their mouths, the forbidden food from between their teeth. And the remnant, even it will belong to our God. And it will be like a clan in Judah, and Ekron will be like the Jebusites.

Zechariah 9:7 (my translation)

Again we find that judgment (in v. 6) is not God's final word for the nations, not even for a nation that had been such an inveterate enemy of Israel from time immemorial. Rather, they can be purged and cleansed of pagan practices. And, just like Israel itself after the purging fires of God's judgment, *a remnant will belong to 'our God'* – i.e., a remnant of the Philistines will belong to the God of Israel.

So the same hope is held out to the Philistines as to rebellious Israel – the hope of a faithful remnant. To this language of covenant inclusion ('belonging to our God') is added the language of economic inclusion in the land and social structure of Israel (remember our point in Isaiah 56, that land and kinship were essential elements of Israelite identity and covenant inclusion in the Old Testament). The Philistines would become a clan of Judah (!), incorporated in the same way that the Jebusites, the original inhabitants of Canaanite Jerusalem, had been incorporated by David into his new kingdom.

Here is a remarkable word, then, showing the extent to which hope of the general inclusion of the nations within the identity of Israel could be dressed in the very particular garb of contemporary international politics – making it all the more sharply defined. If there is hope for the *Philistines*, there is hope for anybody. If God plans to include Philistines within Israel as part of a people 'belonging to our God', who can be excluded?

We need to pause for breath. As we look back over the road we have trodden in this chapter, we must acknowledge the sheer scale of the vistas it has opened up for us. Admittedly, we have collated texts from a wide variety of canonical sources, and have not sought to labour their historical, literary or social contexts. However, the scope and volume of the textual witness we have heard is surely impressive. The variety of date and canonical location also makes its own point. From early texts through to the post-exilic period we find evidence of a settled conviction in Israel about the relationship between their God and the rest of the nations of the world. Here is an element in the core worldview that shaped the life and thought of this people – as firmly embedded, if not as prominently paraded, as the other fundamental aspects of their understanding of themselves, their God and their world.

We have seen that the pillars of Israel's worldview included their *election* by YHWH in Abraham, their *redemption* at the exodus, the *covenant* relationship in which they stood with this God, and the *ethical* response of holiness in life and worship that this relationship demanded. All of these things they believed to be true of themselves in a unique way that did *not* apply to other nations. And yet, they also knew that their redeemer God was also the creator of the whole universe, *including* all other nations. So they articulated a theological perspective on those nations that has robust coherence, blending historical realism (the current exclusion of the nations from the experience of Israel), with astonishing eschatological optimism (the ultimate inclusion of the nations in everything that Israel believed about themselves).

According to this broad viewpoint, all nations of the world were created by YHWH, stand under his government in their historical affairs, are accountable to him morally, and especially for the doing of justice. Like Israel, however, all nations have fallen short of the glory of God and stand in the same default position – under God's judgment. That judgment will come, as surely on the nations as it fell on Israel. But beyond judgment there is hope, for there is always hope with the God of Israel.

So just as the remnant of Israel experienced the miraculous and restorative grace of God in their own historical return from the grave of exile, so ultimately the remnant of the nations will turn to the only saving God, YHWH. Rejecting all false gods, they will join Israel in bringing their worship to YHWH alone. And as they do so, God himself will bind them into covenant relationship, such that the distinction between Israel and the nations will eventually be dissolved in a multi-national community belonging to YHWH and living in a relationship of blessing with him, in fulfilment of the great covenantal initiative established through the promise to Abraham. The distinctiveness of Israel from the nations within their Old Testament

history was essential to the mission of God. But the mission of God was that the distinction would ultimately be dissolved as the nations flowed into unity and identity with Israel. Only the New Testament gospel would show how that *could* happen. And only New Testament mission would show how it *did*, and will continue to, happen until their ingathering is complete.