

Religion and National Identity

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National identity does not depend on racial heritage, but on cultural factors. The concept of racial purity is an abstraction; it obtains little support from the history of most social units which claim such purity. Even the folk tales or legends that speak of common ancestry may indicate diverse strands which have coalesced to form a single people.

So it was with the Hebrews prior to the Exile. In the Genesis account the figure of Abraham was connected with Akkadian Ur, and a call from God led him to leave everything he knew. A secular interpretation would say that the chieftain of a minor clan was driven from grazing lands which more powerful groups were developing for agriculture. In the history that developed it would be right to say that Abraham and his clan perceived the experience as a call from God.

Genesis goes on to speak of Abraham as a nomad who sought a range for his flocks somewhere in the so-called "fertile crescent" which borders the Arabian desert. One stopping-point was in the Aramaean area of Haran. Thus Ur and Haran represent two distinct strands in the heritage of the Hebrew people. The language of the Bible bears out this diversity. Some aspects of biblical Hebrew show kinship with the eastern Semitic speech of the Akkadians. Others are related to the western Semitic of the Aramaeans. There are two ways of identifying the tense usage of verbs, although the grammarians of biblical Hebrew do not agree on either the terminology that identifies them or the explanation of these linguistic differences.¹

Early Egyptian inscriptions that refer to the *Habiru* or *Apiru* give the impression that they were a loosely

organized Semitic group on the fringe of the land controlled by the Pharaohs and not an ethnic community.² Such cohesion as they possessed derived from a shared need for adequate pasture for their flocks and their commitment to the Mountain God whom they saw as their guide and defender. By joint action they hoped to be strong enough to secure a range of their own. The Exodus story of how a group of enslaved Semites revolted against their Egyptian masters, and contrived to escape and survive in the desert, presents what may be a third strand in the formation of a nation, along with Abraham's nomadic clan and the Hebrew groups. The folk tales that became enshrined in Scripture see this striking liberation as the experience of all the ancestors of the people, although in actual history it seems probable that only a minority of the tribes were involved in that deliverance. The addition of the heirs of this slave revolt strengthened the other nomadic Hebrews sufficiently that they were able to establish themselves in the area that ran from the Lebanon mountains south to the Sinai desert.

The securing of a foothold in what ultimately became their land took place probably in the thirteenth century BC. For more than a hundred years the various tribes formed a loose confederation, but with neither common policy nor collective organization. In a given area groups might join to repel an immediate threat (Judg. 5:14-19). In some instances a foreign group was accepted into such community as existed, as with Caleb and the Kenezites (see Deut. 1:36 and Josh. 14:5-9).

Despite their diverse origins the Hebrews were sometimes capable of united action for mutual protection. The pressure of the Philistines prompted them to organize as a single community, at least for a time. Such unity as they did achieve depended on a shared loyalty to their God Yahweh. The Exodus liberation from Egypt they ascribed to the intervention of their God, and they acknowledged Yahweh as having protected them from pursuit and having led them through the desert to sources

of water and food. This deliverance was made the heritage of all the Hebrew tribes, whether their ancestors had shared in the Exodus event or not. Yahweh defended the people and was their leader in battle. While many of the Hebrews often failed to call upon Yahweh to meet other needs, such as the fertility of the land, they were agreed in claiming protection from the God of their nomadic days.

The distinctive element of this commitment to Yahweh which created a national identity for the Hebrew tribes was the concept of covenant. Yahweh was *their* God and they were *his* people. On God's side the covenant was a promise of protection and care. Yet it was seen as a conditional promise. To enjoy the divine protection the people must show loyalty and obedience (see Deut. 32). The loyalty had to be exclusive, for Yahweh was seen as a jealous God who would allow no rival. Although the Hebrews offered sacrifices of animals and grain in much the same way as neighbouring peoples, Yahweh was seen as having no need of such offerings (Ps. 50:8-13). The real obedience was in a way of life, in the fairness and consideration with which Yahweh's people treated one another, for all of them equally were children of their God (Isa. 63:16). Duty to God and to neighbour could be summarized in the Commandments which proclaimed that no one among God's people was without obligations, and no one without rights. Such a covenant religion served to distinguish the Hebrews from other nations. Covenant observance constantly reminded them that they were the nation Yahweh had chosen.

The degree of loyalty and obedience, as defined by covenant, varied not only among individuals in the same area, but also between different regions of Hebrew settlement. Although the people both in Israel and in Judea continued to maintain a sense of identity, religious differences became intensified when political unity was disrupted. More and more the worship and beliefs of the Northern Kingdom became assimilated with those of

pagan neighbors. While the purity for which the prophets called was far from universal in Judea, the degree of assimilation was less. So when the great empires of the area overran first Israel, and more than a century later Judea, the exiles of the Northern Kingdom and many of the people who were left in the land were absorbed by the cultures of surrounding peoples. In Judea a greater sense of the continuity of their heritage prevented similar absorption.

When exile came to Judea, the exiles continued to remember Zion. They remembered it because their God had put his Name there. Transported to a new culture, they preserved their distinctiveness. The picture of the earliest days of Jewish Diaspora, as in Ezekiel 3:15, is one of self-contained settlements in which some of the people seemed concerned to maintain their distinctive character of religious observance. No doubt the Book of Esther idealizes the character of such Jewish communities, and it does seem that Jeremiah was right in thinking of the exiles as the true hope for the survival of anything that might be regarded as the people of God. Certainly those who were deported were the elite, the natural leaders of the nation, and unlike the picture of the wealthy found in Amos and in Micah they were no longer in a position where they could exploit the peasants of the land. In the new situation created by the Exile oppression occurred at the hands of foreign conquerors. Thus the sort of class conflict described by Micah faded from memory. Even those who fled to Egypt and took Jeremiah with them soon abandoned the syncretistic worship of "the Queen of Heaven" in favor of establishing a Jewish identity. Jewish identity therefore survived and grew stronger as the Persian Empire took the place of the Chaldean and was later followed by the kingdoms of Alexander's successors. During the Hellenistic period the Jewish communities of Egypt were a major element of the total population. While the wisdom of other cultures was appropriated, as in Philo's use of concepts drawn from Plato, the Jewish

philosopher maintained that Moses, by God's revelation, had grasped those same concepts centuries earlier than Plato.³ By the time Rome gained control of the Mediterranean world there were Jewish colonies on the Euphrates and the Nile, in Cyrene and Rome, as well as a score of other cities. There were undoubtedly individual apostasies, but most of the members of these colonies were intensely aware that they were Jewish, and they elaborated for themselves a set of standards for behaviour designed to protect the distinctiveness of their way of life. Their sense of identity as a people was defined by the manner in which they maintained their religious commitment.

The Jews were not the only people whose God or gods had not protected their land from foreign conquest, but they many have been the only people who did not see national overthrow as God's failure. Thanks to the prophets they had been able to interpret enslavement and dispersion as a divine judgment upon disloyalty to their God and the breakdown of their social compact. So they were able to go on thinking of themselves as God's chosen people, whether under Persian, Greek or Roman rule. Moreover, as they observed how their neighbours had lost faith in the old civic or ethnic religions, the Jews came to think of Yahweh as God of the whole earth. Along with this concept of their God as universal and infinite there developed the thought that the very Name was too holy to pronounce.

At the same time the Mediterranean world saw the rise of new religions that were not bound to any place or people, and that offered to their devotees deliverance from fate or from death. The cult of Mithra imported from Iran was popular in the Roman Army. Archaeologists have found traces of its shrines as far apart as Britain and Syria.⁴ A temple was erected on Rome's Palatine Hill in 191 BC for the Phrygian goddess Cybele, and was rebuilt after a fire in AD 3.⁵ In buried Pompeii the shrine that had been kept in best repair at the time of

the volcanic eruption was that of the Egyptian goddess Isis.⁶ Many people also found themselves attracted to Judaism, although few were willing to adopt the dietary and sabbatarian rules that maintained the distinctive character of the Jewish People. Thus it is clear that much of the ancient world was ready to accept a religion that knew no ethnic limitations.

The Apostle Paul, and even disciples of Jesus prior to Paul, addressed themselves to this opportunity. Indeed the life and activity of Jesus himself had suggested a readiness to move beyond the limits of Jewish nationalism (Luke 7:9 and Matt. 8:11). Jesus may be thought of as a Galilean charismatic.⁷ It is also clear that Jesus possessed some scribal type of training.⁸ As a charismatic figure Jesus felt free to associate with the disreputable to whom the Gospels refer as "tax-collectors and sinners."⁹ He was willing also to engage with Samaritans whom the Jews counted as heretics at best, or even as totally outside the fellowship of God's people (John 4:9). Occasionally Jesus even reached out to foreigners, at least to show God's concern for their afflictions (Mark 7:25-30).

Despite such departures from the nationalism that had preserved Jewish identity through six centuries of exile and oppression, Jesus had no thought of abandoning Jewish heritage. He valued the Hebrew Scriptures as authorizing the acts and teachings of his ministry (Luke 16:17). His disciples, even when they began to welcome foreigners into their fellowship without demanding acceptance of Jewish customs, clung to those same Scriptures as the charter stories of their faith. They ascribed to Jesus the function of Israel's expected Messiah; and affirmed that he had brought the ancestral religion to fulfilment.¹⁰ A century later, when distinctively Christian Scriptures had gained an authority among the followers of Jesus quite equal to that of the Hebrew Bible, Marcion's proposal to repudiate the heritage of Judaism was firmly rejected. In time Christians came to call

themselves a "new race" capable of preserving the values of Judaism and indeed of all other nations.¹¹

Thus for the first generation of Christians religion was separated from the concept of national identity. Missionaries did not hesitate to move out beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire; as long as they suffered periodic persecution within the Empire there was no prospect that they would identify themselves culturally with Rome or with any national unit. A change came with Constantine's Edict of Toleration, followed by his calling of the Council of Nicea in AD 325. This fact is reflected in the life of the Christian hymnographer Ephrem. When the Parthians wrested his native city of Nisibis from Roman control, Ephrem and many of his fellow Christians chose to move to Edessa which remained under Roman rule.¹²

Late in the fourth century, as Roman power began to decline, quarrels within the Christian community led to an alignment with various ethnic groups. This development may have begun with the success of Arian missionaries among the Goths who were attacking the Empire. In any case Syrian Christians became Nestorian while those of Egypt became Monophysite. Neither of these "heresies" involved a departure from the Gospel heritage as drastic as the Arian subordination of the Son as a created being. As expressions of Syrian or Coptic distinctiveness from the sort of "white supremacy" maintained in Constantinople and in Rome, these "heretical" teachings were very attractive. Later, with the rise of Islam, a majority of the Syrian and Egyptian people found in the teaching of Muhammad a stronger way of proclaiming their national distinctiveness.

In Europe, however, the sense of common faith continued to have greater importance for several centuries than did nationalism. Unity between the Latin-speaking Christians of the West and those of the East whose theological language was Greek was disrupted as each side claimed to possess the complete truth.¹³ Christendom

overshadowed the fact of being Spanish or German or English.¹⁴ The Islamic conquests of Moors in Spain and of Turks in Greece and the Balkan lands caused the conquered peoples to think of their Christian religion as an expression of their national or cultural identity, but where such threats to the cultural heritage were not present nationalistic feelings developed more slowly. In some degree nationalism may also have been fostered by the triumphalist papacy of Gregory VII and Innocent III which tended to be heavy-handed in its treatment of local leaders and their interests. By the sixteenth century the situation was ripe for the disintegration of Western Christendom along national lines.

Disintegration took place in the Protestant Reformation. With varying degrees of theological distinctiveness several areas renounced the authority of Rome while affirming their own form of Christianity. Other areas proclaimed themselves guardians of the medieval heritage, although some of them pursued aims no less destructive of the idea of Christendom than were those of Protestant states.¹⁵ Without attempting to discuss particular historical events, one may say that from the sixteenth century until the end of the nineteenth-century religion in Europe and in lands settled by Europeans tended more and more to be subservient to nationalism.

Perhaps because of the influence of nationalism this period saw the development of some degree of religious pluralism. In the Netherlands Catholics joined with Protestants in the battle for independence of the Hapsburg Empire, and Jews obtained something like social acceptance. In the Constitution of the United States of America, Congress was forbidden to make a law for the establishment of religion or for prohibiting its free exercise. A common devotion to national interest prompted differing religious groups to achieve peace with one another. Cynics have concluded that Western culture has returned to a sort of civic religion that uses the Bible

The twentieth century has seen the birth of a Christian ecumenism that might hope to make Christianity more independent of the nationalism which has appeared sometimes to have absorbed it. Even the religious struggles of contemporary Ireland seem prompted on one side by a concern for supposed territorial integrity, and on the other by a desire to maintain group privilege; there seems to be little interest in making religious converts. If Christians were to think of themselves as disciples of Christ at least as much as they regard themselves as citizens of some country, this could be a basis for the reconciliation of many conflicts.

As the present century unfolded, other dimensions of ecumenical dialogue developed. It is still true that even for many non-practising Jews their religious heritage is the source of their identity as a people. Following the horror of the Nazi holocaust, Christian ecumenists have felt a need to consider the relation that should exist with what they must see as their parent religion, and so affirm the continued existence of Judaism. To this Jewish leaders, with some exceptions, have made an encouraging response.¹⁶ The Jewish sense of identity as a people, whether in Australia, France, Russia or Israel, may also help Christians to reach beyond national limitations.

The interdependence of a world economy, of which we are becoming increasingly aware, compels yet a further extension of inter-religious dialogue. In lands where Islam is the prevailing religion, or perhaps the only religion tolerated, citizens are inclined to treat their religion and their nationality as inseparable. In India conflicts with Sikhs and with Muslims suggest that some Hindus would claim an exclusive right to be called Indian, and for the minority of Sikhs their religion largely defines their identity. While Japan today provides for religious toleration, much of the national tradition is closely tied to Zen Buddhism. All of us must learn to show respect not only for the national right to exist, but also for the religious validity of people who differ from ourselves.

Ultimately the identity of any people must rest upon a spiritual basis. Apart from such a spiritual basis we are likely to deny common humanity to others. Historically that spiritual basis has been found in a religious faith, and no satisfying substitute for such a faith is in sight. A civic religion that belongs to a single group can provide no such spiritual basis. The prophets of Israel proclaimed that their God was God of all the earth, and any religious basis for identity must possess some universal value. Yet that universal value must go beyond the people whose identity it guarantees. It must be able to serve in this way for many peoples. At the same time, the religion must not tyrannize every other aspect of life. The claims of family, of citizenship, of occupation and of freely chosen association must be given scope. So there must be a secular as well as a religious affirmation of our nationality, but that secular affirmation must not be allowed to obscure the spiritual reality that transcends sheer nationalism.

Notes

1. Compare W.S. Lasor, *Handbook of Biblical Hebrew*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1978), 2:162-165, and J. Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew* (1939; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), pp. 90-92.
2. John Bright, *History of Israel* (1959; London: SCM Press, 1972), pp. 94-95.
3. See S. Sandmel, *Philo of Alexandria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). The work of Ben Sirach also appropriates elements from other cultures.

4. See P. MacKendrick, *The Mute Stones Speak: The Story of Archeology in Italy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1960), p. 263.
5. See A.G. McKay, *Virgil's Italy* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1970), pp. 133-134.
6. MacKendrick, *Mute Stones*, p. 218.
7. See G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (London: Collins, 1973).
8. Nowhere more clearly than Mark 12:13-17; many critics would say the Pharisaic type.
9. An irreverent alternative is "the mafiosi and their molls."
10. Messianic expectation was not universal, but Pharisees and many others held it.
11. The expression "third race" seems first to have been used by Irenaeus.
12. See *Sources Chretiennes*, vol. 137, trans. R. Lavenant, introduction and notes by F. Graffin (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1968).
13. The final schism occurred in 1054.
14. Illustrated in Umberto Eco's well researched novel, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).
15. An illustration is the policy pursued for France by Cardinal Richelieu.

16. See S. Sandmel *We Jews and Jesus*. There is no need to name either Jewish or Christian figures who would reject a dialogue of mutual affirmation.