

THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF A SERVANT-NATION

by Hugh J. Schonfield

The history of Israel as given in the Bible is notable for its two-fold character. On the one side, we have a record of personalities, events, and political fortunes, and on the other the growth and development of a spiritual ideal with which those fortunes are intimately associated. It is a religio—political narrative, which sets out the divine calling and training of a people for a redemptive mission among the nations, a singular and amazing concept in its unfoldment.

It begins with the figure of Abram the Wanderer, the man who obeyed an instruction to forsake the civilisation of the Babylonian land, and who was told in revelation "I will make thee a great nation....and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed."¹ Here already is something different from the contemporary notion of nationhood, something far removed from lust for conquest and tribal egoism. A nation is to come into being in which all others are to be blessed. Here in this simple idea of a nation-benefactor we have the plan in embryo, which later on, in the Song of Moses the statesman prophet, is more elaborately and poetically expressed:

When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance,
When He separated the sons of men,
He set the bounds of the people
According to the number of the children of Israel.
For the Lord's portion is His people;
Jacob is the lot of His inheritance.²

Part of the sense of this passage is easy to follow. In dividing up the goodly heritage of earth among the nations God reserved the people of Israel as His own share. The dedication to God of the firstborn and the first-fruits of worldly substance as a token that all things come from His bounty is one of the oldest religious practices. Here it is claimed that God has accepted one nation from among the nations as a kind of first-fruits. It might be put in another way, that Israel is the ground rent which the nations pay to God for their tenure of the earth.

The figure of Israel as the firstborn, which occurs frequently in the Old Testament, has this implication, and signifies the setting apart of this people for the Divine service.

The heathen seer Balaam, looking down from the heights upon the tents of Israel pitched in their mystical order about the Tabernacle of Meeting, cried:

How shall I curse, whom God has not cursed?
Or how shall I defy, whom the Lord hath not defied?
From the top of the rocks I see him,
And from the hills I behold him,
Lo, the people shall dwell alone,
And shall not be reckoned among the nations.
Who can count the dust of Jacob,
And the number of the fourth part of Israel?
Let me die the death of the righteous,
And let my last end be like his.³

The singularity of the function of Israel is here strikingly described - "a people dwelling

1 Gen. 12,2-3

2 Deut. 32,8-9

3 Num. 23,8-10

alone, not reckoned among the nations." God declared to them through Moses: "Now, therefore, if ye will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then shall ye be unto Me a special possession from among all peoples - for all the earth is Mine - and ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation."⁴

The convocation at Sinai, and the giving of the Law, had as its stated object the preparation of this people for a vocation which they could only dimly realise. "Ye shall be holy unto Me: for I the Lord am holy, and have served you from other people, that ye should be Mine."⁵

The Servant-Nation remains a nation. "Thus saith the Lord which giveth the sun for a light by day, and the ordinances of the moon and of the stars, for a light by night ... If those ordinances depart from before Me, saith the Lord, then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before Me for ever. Thus saith the Lord If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all they have done, saith the Lord".⁶ The nation that was designed to be a holy nation shall yet be so in fact. "Ye shall be named the priests of the Lord's men shall call you the ministers of our God."⁷

But there is indicated also a new development of the nation. "The Lord God which gathereth the outcasts of Israel, saith, Yet I will gather others to him, beside those that are gathered unto him."⁸ Not only Israelites by race, but Israelites by faith, will form the holy nation and priestly kingdom. "I will send those that escape of them to the nations .. that have not heard My fame, neither have seen My glory; and they shall declare My glory among the nations ... And I will also take of them for priests and for Levites, saith the Lord."⁹

Here in these post-exilic prophecies the Servant-Nation first begins to assume a non-character. The composition of the nation is expanded to include an influx of Gentiles.

This second phase of the plan was historicised in the manifestation of Christ and the Church.

Messiah, or Christ, was originally a title used of anyone appointed by God to carry out a special mission, but particularly in a ritual sense of prophets, priests and kings. Because of the mission of Israel the title could be applied collectively to the Servant-Nations and when many in Israel defaulted it came to be applied to the ideal Israelites who should one day appear and combine the three offices. For at least two centuries before the commencement of the New Testament era the figure of the Messiah was shadowy and vague, and individuals might read into the Messianic Hope what they most desired according to their own sympathies or the need of the hour; but in the broad sense the Hope was construed to mean that "there shall come out of Zion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob."¹⁰ In the Messiah the pyramid of faith and obedience to the Divine mandate would reach its apex through a progressive narrowing down of the effective membership of the holy nation. He would be at once the chief corner stone of the Old Covenant and the foundation stone of the New. From his advent the pyramid, inverted, would begin to broaden again by the continued accession of the faithful of all nations until it regained its full dimensions. Through Christ Christhood would be shared

4 Ex. 19,5-6

5 Lev. 20, 26

6 Isa. 61,6.

7 Isa. 56,8.

8 Isa. 66,19-20.

9 Rom. 2,26 on Isa. 59,20-21

10 Rom. 8,29

by all the holy nations Israel would become the Messianic People. The Messiah must be the great proof to justify God's way with men, the evidential experiment that however many times repeated will invariably give the same results is to be "firstborn among the brethren."¹¹ His individual personality, multiplied by the shedding abroad of his spirit, is to produce a collective embodiment of itself-the body of Christ. In this way the proposition of a Servant-Nation would be practically demonstrated.

The teaching of Jesus followed that of John the Baptist in emphasising that the accident of birth which made a man a racial descendant of Abraham did not make him a spiritual descendant. Living evidence of a spiritual and humane outlook, as well as identification with the Servant-Nation purpose, is what counts. The Israelite indeed is known by his guilelessness. Many would receive Israelite status who were not of Israelite stock, and many born Israelites would forfeit their status. The parable of the wicked husbandmen ends with the significant warnings

"Therefore say I unto you, the Dominion of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."¹²

It is still a nation, and still Israel, through which the plan will be accomplished, but its citizens will be of many races.

The apostles, therefore, rightly held and proclaimed that the Church, the called out of all nations, is that very same Israel which was descended from Abraham, which was redeemed from Egypt, which was given the law, and for which in the end the Messiah had died. The Church was no new creation, no afterthought. There was no break in the continuity of God's relations with His people. But there was a new forward impulse, a new building up.

The economy of Israel in the wilderness plainly appears as a microcosm, where within the camp the twelve tribes answer to the nations, the priestly tribe to Israel, and the Holy of Holies to the Divine Spirit indwelling Israel. This interpretation is confirmed by the ordinances governing the priestly tribe of Levi. Called out and sanctified from the other tribes it demonstrated the place of Israel in the world of nations.

When the commandment was given "to take the sum of all the congregation of Israel"¹³ the tribe of Levi was specifically omitted from this census. Levi was not to be numbered: it was appointed to the ministry of the Tabernacle, and its encampment was to be about the Tabernacle - a tribe dwelling alone, not reckoned among the other tribes.

In the same way as Israel in the wider context so the Levites were separated to be God's special possession. "The Lord spake unto Moses, saying, And I, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of all the firstborn...among the children of Israel: therefore the Levites shall be mine; because all the firstborn are Mine."¹⁴ The Levitic tribe was dedicated solely to the Divine service: it was supra-territorial, and required to bless the people in God's name under the covenant with Abraham Israel was to bless all nations. "At that time the Lord separated the tribe of Levi...to stand before the Lord to minister unto Him, and to bless in His name, unto this day. Wherefore Levi hath no part nor inheritance with his brethren; the Lord is his inheritance according as the Lord thy God promised him."¹⁵

The description which the Pentateuch gives of the encampment of Israel again makes it

11 Matt. 21,43.

12 Joel 2,28-32.

13 Num. 1,2

14 Num. 3,12-13

15 Deut. 10, 8-9

clear that we are looking at a scale model of the world economy. Central in the scheme is the Tabernacle of Meeting, for the spiritual power must be central in any durable world order. In close association with the Tabernacle, and mediating the will of God to the surrounding tribes, are the holy Levites — the exterritorial tribe. "The children of Israel shall pitch their tents every man by his own camp, and every man by his own standard, throughout their hosts. But the Levites shall pitch round about the Tabernacle of Testimony, that there be no wrath upon the congregation of Israel."¹⁶ The twelve tribes themselves are disposed in world quarter groups of three, north, south, east and west of the Tabernacle,"¹⁷ an arrangement which enables us more fully to comprehend the meaning of the words :-

When the Most High divided to the Nations their inheritance,
When He separated the sons of men,
He set the bounds of the people
According to the number of the children of Israel.

Thus the concept of a Servant-Nation is plainly set forth in the Book of Moses, and the theme is continued in the writings of the prophets, especially Isaiah. "Thou, Israel, art My servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham My friend. Thou whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called thee from the chief men thereof, and said unto thee, Thou art My servant; I have chosen thee, and not cast thee away."¹⁸ The purpose of the choice is still the same, the blessing of the nations, and the realisation of the ideal world order.

"Behold my servant, whom I uphold; Mine elect, in whom My soul delighteth; I have put My spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the nations...He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait for his law."¹⁹

The failure of Israel to fulfill its mission was not held to have relieved of its mission. The Servant-Nation must pass through the refining fires of judgment to its reconsecration, and the making of a new covenant more intimate and binding than the old to secure the great ends always in view. "Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which My covenant they brake...But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel. After these days saith the Lord, I will put My law in their inward parts, and I write in their hearts... for I will forgive their and I will remember their sin no more."²⁰

a new recruiting. And for a large number of those who became a part of Israel were formerly Gentiles. There was a mystery here, that required revelation; but there was no novelty. The development had been foreseen and anticipated by the prophets. The Spirit that had gone forth had been in accordance with the prophecy of Joel.²¹ The introduction of Gentiles had been foretold by Amos.²² The apostles often spoke of the Church in their references to Israel in olden times,²³ and in writing to Christians, they were careful to call

16 Num. 1, 52-53

17 Isa. 41, 8-9

18 Isa. 42, 1-4

19 Jer. 31, 31-34

20 Jer. 31, 35-37

21 Amos 9,11 (2)

22 eb, 2, 12

23 I Cor. 10,1

Israel's ancestors "our fathers."²⁴

Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles, was particularly anxious to establish the status of his converts, and he employed every kind of argument to prove his case that the believing Gentile is a true Israelite. He writes much of the mystery that had been revealed, "that Gentiles should be fellow-heirs (with the natural Israelites) and of the same body, and partakers of God's promise in Christ by the gospel."²⁵ And having become Israelites these converts have been "chosen," adopted as sons of God," "accepted in the beloved."²⁶ To this they have been predestined.²⁷ "Wherefore," he tells them, "remember that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh... were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise... but now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ...who hath made both (Jew and non-Jew) one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us."²⁸

The converted Gentile being an Israelite²⁹ must also be of the seed of Abraham. The father of the faithful is "our father",³⁰ and the nation of faith is the "Israel of God".³¹ As Christians, all of this calling are the Servant-Nations Ye are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a purchased people...which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God.³² They are admonished to have their conversion honest among the nations to whom they no longer belong.³³

From all that Paul had contended on behalf of the Gentiles, it might be inferred, however, that the new Israelites had altogether superseded the old, and he is at pains therefore to dispel this illusion. He points to the faithful remnant of the natural Israel as proof that there has been no break, only a widening of opportunity which has enabled Gentiles to enter the nation through an incapacity of part of that nation to fulfil its functions; and he warns the newly naturalised Israelites to beware of boastfulness. The Church of the New Covenant is in a less secure position than the Church of the Old Covenant, for having received more light it has a greater responsibility, and its status is of grace not of right. In the course of the intervening centuries that warning has gone largely unheeded, with the consequence that the Christian Church today is no longer the Servant-Nation as it was of yore, though once again there is a faithful remnant.

The so-called Church now consists of a number of religious denominations, and is not a nation at all. To be true to their calling, as set out in the Bible, all persons on becoming Christians ought to surrender their former nationality and cease to be British, French, German, or whatever they were before. It would be impossible to be an Englishman, Frenchman, or German, and a Christian at the same time. Those desiring to enter the Church should be rightly informed of what they are undertaking, that they have thrown in their lot with another people and nation with a special mission and task in the world, and that this step cancels all previous allegiances. Nothing of this sort in fact takes place, and Christians may freely kill each other in the name of loyalties which are none of their concern.

24 Eph. 3, 5 6.

25 Eph. 1,4-6

26 Rom; 8,4 17, 29 31

27 Eph. 2,8 22.

28 Gal.3,7-9 26 29

29 Rom. 4,1.

30 Gal 6,16

31 I Peter 2, 9 10

32 I Peter 2,12

33 Rom. 11, 4

Glimmerings of this truth have at last begun to penetrate into a fractional part of the Christian consciousness,³⁴ but it appears unlikely to become a general conviction. As a result a third phase in the history of the Servant-Nation has been required, and a second reconstitution has been initiated and is now in progress. Where once the door of the Servant-Nation was opened for the entrance of men and women of other races, now it is further opened to men and women of other religions. Not only Jews and Christians, but those of other Faiths, may enrol in the Servant-Nation, provided they accept the unchanging conditions, to relinquish all claims upon them which are inconsistent with their function of being a distinct and separate nation dedicated to the ministry of mediation and world service.

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³⁴ See for instance W.A. Wisser't Hooft, "The Wretchedness, and greatness of the Church" Ch.1