

The People Called by God

CHAPTER TWO: THE PEOPLE OF GOD

This resource contains:

UNIT 3: THE SENSE OF “PEOPLE-HOOD” IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

- A. THE LIBERATION AND FORMATION OF A PEOPLE
- B. GOD’S POSSESSION
- C. GOD’S GLORIOUS VICTORY

Introduction

Recent writings dealing with the nature of the church place a strong emphasis on the image of the church as the people of God. It is claimed that insofar as Christ has fulfilled the hopes of the Old Testament people of God, those now gathered around him (whether they be of Jewish or Gentile origin) constitute the "true" people of God. From a Christian perspective the church is called to the mission of the people of God, which had been given first to ancient Israel. This mission indicates not privilege, but accountability, for the church will be judged by how well it fulfills its divine calling.

Daniel J. Harrington¹ observes that the image of the church as the people of God has become popular for very good reasons.

1. It underlines the *continuity* between the Israel of the Old Testament and the church of the New Testament.
2. It preserves a *communal* dimension for the church and avoids an unhealthy overemphasis on leaders and offices.
3. It captures the *historical*, "on-the-move" character of the church and rescues it from lifeless and static thinking.

It is only in 1 Peter 2:10 that the Christian community is decisively and explicitly addressed as the people of God: "now you are God's people." Yet the identification of the church as the people of God is in the background of many New Testament writings. The basic function of this image is to relate the contemporary Christian generation to that historic community--Israel--whose origin stemmed from God's covenant promises and whose pilgrimage has been sustained by God's call. The church is viewed throughout the New Testament as the continuation and consummation of God's covenant community. The image of the people

¹ Daniel J. Harrington, **God's People in Christ: New Testament Perspectives on the Church and Judaism** (Fortress Press, 1980), p. 1.

of God is the earliest and perhaps the most inclusive image of the church in the Old and New Testaments.

The New Testament takes up and elaborates the Old Testament concept of a "chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people," in applying it to the church and its calling to "show forth the praises of him who has called it out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; cf. Ex. 19:6). Thus the people of the new covenant are linked with the people of the "old." Both are chosen to serve in their turn as agents of God's purposes for humanity as a whole.

Paul broadened the image to universal dimensions without losing sight of the fact that it specifies a temporal, historical reality. He applied to the church, some of whose members were Gentiles and some of whose members were Jewish, the words of Yahweh originally spoken in Hosea to Israel:

*Those who were not my people I
will call 'my people,'
and her who was not beloved I
will call 'beloved.'
And in the very place where it was
said to them, 'You are not my people,'
there they shall be called children
of the living God.*

Rom. 9:24-26

A people without national boundaries, a common language, or a single ethnic identity is a peculiar sort of people. It is the church of Jesus Christ.

Probably in light of its Hebraic ethnic associations, the image faded from prominence after Christianity became a largely Gentile phenomenon. It has been rediscovered in twentieth-century understandings of the church as a result of the impact of biblical studies and a recognition of the close connection between Israel and the church. Within the Roman Catholic Church, the second Vatican Council utilized

this image as a primary description of the nature of the Christian community.

The value of this image is the distinctive way it places the church in the setting of the long story of God's dealings with God's chosen people. To apply this image to the Christian community is to assert enduring solidarity with the Israel whose journey with God is described in the Law and the Prophets. Early Christians did not date the beginnings of God's people from Jesus' birth or ministry, from the Last Supper or the resurrection, or even from the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost. The origins of the Christian church are to be found in covenant-making activity of God in the times of Abraham and Moses.

We will explore the image of the church as the people of God in two parts:

The Sense of "People-hood" in Ancient Israel. Old Testament texts that illustrate the divinely initiated, historical, and covenantal character of Israel's relationship with Yahweh.

Exodus 6:1-8

Deuteronomy 7:6-9

Isaiah 42:5-9

The New People of God in Jesus Christ. New Testament texts which speak of the "new" people of God who represent the fulfillment of the Old Testament people of God on the basis of the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:11-22

1 Peter 2:9-10

The Sense of “People-hood” in Ancient Israel

Texts: Exodus 6:1-8
Deuteronomy 7:6-9
Isaiah 42:5-9

The early Christian community understood itself in terms of what we call the Old Testament. The scriptures of the people of Israel provided an interpretation of the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ and of the community gathered around him. Yet the event of Jesus Christ (his life, death, and resurrection) also radically influenced their interpretation of the meaning and importance of the Old Testament for their life together. Therefore, in order to provide an appropriate perspective for your understanding of Christian community, it is important to consider the understanding of the people of God to be found within the Old Testament.

The biblical revelation as a whole affirms that God's saving purpose is executed through the calling of a particular people, one tribe among all the tribes of the earth. In the Bible, the people of God is at no time conceived of as a voluntary association of those who have agreed with one another in accepting and carrying out certain convictions about God. It is thought of as something which has been brought into being by the mighty acts of God. This activity springs from God's pure grace, and precedes any human understanding or acceptance of its implications.

While Israel was a slave people, sunk in degrading bondage and without faith or hope, God stretched forth his hand to redeem them. God brought them out of slavery and set them in the land which God had chosen for them. At Mount Sinai they are brought face to face with the God who has done this, and they are invited to understand and accept its meanings:

You have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then you shall be a peculiar treasure unto me from among all

peoples: for all the earth is mine: and you shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation (Exodus 19:4-6).

And the people answered together and said: "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do."

Faith and obedience are required of this nation, yet these are clearly always and only a response to what has already been done by God. *Their* attitudes and actions do not constitute them as the people of God. Indeed, it is very clear from the narratives that the people in fact, were a stiff-necked and unbelieving nation. God's way of salvation is not by enabling a number of individuals to grasp the truth either by mystical union, or by intellectual inquiry, or by being given one universal and unchanging revelation in code or book. God's way is by calling out a people for God's possession. And God calls this people so that they may be in community with God and sent forth to accomplish God's purposes.

Thus the Old Testament relates for us a very remarkable story. God, it tells us, freely directs special attention to one small people--a people of no particular importance in the great general history of the world. God calls this people, chooses, delivers, and endows them with many gifts of God's presence and favor.

But God also judges and punishes this people more than any other people upon earth. The prophet Amos, speaking in the name of God makes the following declaration: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2). Thus we are reminded that being the chosen people of God carries with it special responsibilities as well as unique privileges.

A. THE LIBERATION AND FORMATION OF A PEOPLE

Exodus 6:1-8

It was probably during the reign of Ramesses II (ca. 1290-1224 B.C.) that a band of Hebrew slaves slipped from their bondage in Egypt and experienced a miraculous escape from the Pharaoh's army at the Sea. They attributed their rescue to the saving grace of their God "Yahweh." These Hebrews were probably aware of a prehistory in the form of ancestral stories. Yet their birth as a people was understood to have occurred within a chain of events beginning with their exodus from Egypt, their wandering in the wilderness, and culminating in their settlement in the land of the Canaanites. This theme--Israel being called into being as a people through God's deliverance from slavery in Egypt--is the most universally present theme of Hebrew scripture.² Indeed, over the long history of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Exodus event has played a key role in the self-definition and self-understanding of those communities who base their identity on the God of the Bible.

The entire history of community in the Bible points to "the God who creates out of nothing, delivers the enslaved, defends the vulnerable, nurtures the weak and enlists in a universal promise of shalom all those responsive to the divine call."³ Thus God's rescue, the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from bondage, is not an isolated incident intended simply for their well-being. This deliverance is part of the historical process of God's dynamic self-revelation. The God of the Exodus is a creative liberator who is seeking the salvation of all humanity. For the people of Israel, this is not a God removed from the down-to-earth political and cultural struggles of human persons, but a God involved in the day-to-day life of God's people. They know that their very existence depends wholly on the merciful acts by which God gives them an identity and a history. When they were nothing at all, Yahweh opened up new vistas

² Paul Hanson, **The People Called**, p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

before them; God offered them the fullness of life in relation to the Lord of all reality.⁴

This encounter with God the rescuer, the liberator and redeemer, shapes the self-understanding of the people in response to God's gracious act of salvation. Israel was called into existence as a people when it was called forth from bondage. Through this deliverance Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6) dedicated to God's redemptive purpose.

Read Exodus 6:1-8 and answer the following questions. Again, in order to facilitate the formation of a learning community, work with one other person by considering and answering the question together.

1. How does God identify God's self? How does our contemporary understanding of God relate to God's self-identification in this text?

2. What, according to this text, is it that makes the Israelites God's people?

3. Does the contemporary church need or expect deliverance? If yes, deliverance from what? To what?

4. How would the statement "I will take you for my people, and I will be your God," relate to your congregation's self-understanding?

⁴ Brother John of Taizé, **The Pilgrim God: A Biblical Journey** (Washington, D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1985), p. 31.

B. GOD'S POSSESSION

Deuteronomy 7:6-9

Perhaps no text better summarizes Israel's peculiar consciousness of itself as a people than this passage from Deuteronomy. The issue here is the source of Israel's status as God's people.

Throughout the Old Testament, Israel's picture of itself is unflatteringly honest with little hesitation about describing the sins of its heroes and its sins as a people. Its election--selection as God's people--is a vocational or missional one in that Israel must serve the Lord of the covenant. Israel's calling is to be a witnessing community manifesting the rule of God in its corporate existence. The notion of a people selected by God is never a claim to superiority but rather a call to service. Remember, this people God judges and "smites" more than any other people upon earth (cf. Amos 3:2). The interrelation of election and mission entails the consequence that those elected are held accountable to God for serving God's purposes.

In the book of Deuteronomy a typical announcement of God's choice of a people is immediately followed by a call for humility. This does not resolve the question of why this one people has been chosen. What it does do is shift our attention to the mystery of God's love. In guarding the hearts of the people from sinful pride, the writer of Deuteronomy reminds them that Israel was called into existence solely by the gracious act of God. To this divine act Israel contributed nothing, neither unique beauty, nor numerical advantage, nor moral character, nor special power to assist in its deliverance. To the contrary, these people were present in the world as the fewest and lowest of all peoples. "One source of motivation alone explained Israel's deliverance from bondage to freedom: God's love and God's faithfulness to the promises made to Israel's ancestors."⁵

⁵ Paul Hanson, **The People Called**, p. 173.

Read Deuteronomy 7:6-9 and answer the following questions, working with one other person.

1. What is it that makes this people "holy"?
2. What are the marks of God as God? (vs. 8-9)
3. What is the nature of the relationship between God and God's people?
4. What does this biblical "call to humility" (vv. 7-9) have to say to your congregation?

C. GOD'S GLORIOUS VICTORY

Isaiah 42:5-9

Chapters 40-50 of Israel are termed "Second Isaiah" by the biblical scholars. These chapters reflect the Babylonian exile of Israel, some four centuries or more after the deliverance from Egypt and Israelite settlement in Canaan. This exile is commonly dated to 540 B.C., just as the Babylonian empire was about to collapse in the face of rising Persian power. The destruction of Jerusalem, the burning of the temple, the loss of nationhood, and exile into a foreign land had shaken the faith of Israel to its foundations: "The Lord has forgotten me, my Lord has forgotten me" (Isaiah 49:14).

Into this situation of hopelessness and despair, the prophet of Second Isaiah speaks a new word: the good news of salvation, the announcement of an impending liberation. Yahweh was about to return to the people to deliver them from their bondage, to lead them back to Zion, and to rebuild Jerusalem. The confidence of Second Isaiah in the impact and truthfulness of his message rested, once again, not in any belief in the goodness or power of the people, but on a profound understanding of the majesty, righteousness, and compassion of Yahweh.

Second Isaiah recognizes and builds upon God's mighty deeds in the history of the Israelites. Yet for Second Isaiah all this history pales before the even greater marvels that God is in the process of accomplishing *now*: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing" (Isaiah 43:18-19a). The prophet urges his readers not to remain attached to a bygone era or to a nostalgia for "the good old days." In a time of prosperity the pitfall for Israel was to settle down comfortably in the "good life," to substitute an arrogant self-assurance for confidence in the Lord. The temptation of the Exile was different, but equally great: to sink into nostalgia or despair, and simply to forget the promises of Yahweh.⁶

⁶ Brother John of Taizé, **The Pilgrim God**, 130-131.

There are at least two ways to relate to the past: (1) to believe that everything that God has to give has been given, or (2) to believe that the God who fulfilled God's promises in the past will continue to give and fulfil promises. The buoyant and hope-filled poetry of Second Isaiah is definitely within the second alternative. He calls into question the power and authority of the people's definitions of reality formed under Babylonian influence, primarily because these definitions challenge the power and mercy of Israel's God.

The prophet appeals to the old memories and affirmations of the people. He does so by constructing poetic scenarios of an alternative reality outside the control of the Babylonian empire. These fresh alternatives are intended to reshape the communal imagination, to liberate the Jewish exiles to think differently, act differently, speak differently, and sing differently. The promise is powerfully expressed as a word that transforms the self-understanding of the Hebrew people which has been formed through the experience of the exile.⁷

A people, having experienced the most devastating of human experiences, was able to face the future with hope and confidence because they were lifted from their brokenness by a God whose boundless compassion expressed itself in complete forgiveness and unconditional acceptance....Like the original community of redeemed slaves, the exilic community was to realize that it was embraced by divine grace. Preceding and following its own participation in God's drama was the ever present, all-sufficient grace of the righteous, compassionate Deliverer.⁸

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, "Second Isaiah: An Evangelical Reading of Communal Experience," in **Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah**, Christopher R. Seitz, ed. (Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 71-90.

⁸ Paul Hanson, **The People Called**, p. 240.

