

Trinity College Cambridge  
Sunday 7 October 2012

**God and Israel**  
**The Founding of Israel: Jacob**  
Genesis 28: 10–17  
John 1: 47–51

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Gen. 28:17

And Jacob was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place!  
this is none other but the house of God, and this the gate of heaven.

‘The founding of Israel’ could signify a talk on events in the Middle East in 1948–9. Only with the subtitle ‘Jacob’ do you see that you may be plunged into the book of Genesis. Here Jacob dominates the entire second part, from chapter 25, when his mother Rebekah, conceiving the twins Esau and Jacob, is told ‘Two nations are in thy womb’ — the saying later adapted by Disraeli to give us ‘one nation’ politics — to chapter 50, when Jacob’s mortal remains are carried up from Egypt to be buried in the tomb of Abraham his grandfather and Isaac his father at Hebron, south of Bethlehem, in what will become the land of his son Judah.

Yet the initial thought of Israel as a contemporary state and nation is still to the point. Israel is the name that was won by Jacob when he wrestled with the angel, who told him ‘Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel’ (Genesis 32: 28); but it is also the name of the nation which he embodies and generates, and of the land where his descendants live. His son Judah’s name likewise passes to the land of Judah, the southern part of this land, and is later used for the whole, so that the adjective meaning Judahite, Judaeon gains the broader sense ‘Jewish’ and, as transferred in the Middle Ages to English, becomes the English word ‘Jew’.

At present Israel is a national name in three senses. It is the name of a state and territory in the Middle East. More broadly, it is the name of the whole Jewish people, including those in the state of Israel together with the Jewish populations scattered throughout the world in a dispersion or diaspora, to use the biblical terms. In this broader sense Israel includes some people of non-Jewish origin who have come under the wings of the God of Israel as proselytes.

And then, thirdly, it is a name used of itself by the Christian church, which descends historically from Jews and proselytes in Roman Judaea and the diaspora of the eastern Roman provinces, and which treasures the library of biblical books which were honoured among Jews at the time of Christian origins, and now form our Old Testament. Gentiles, non-Jews, who received baptism in the church were (and still are) thought of as entering the Israelite inheritance like proselytes, as you can hear in the Epistle to the Ephesians: you *were* ‘aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of

promise, having no hope' ... but now 'you are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints' — with Israel — 'and members of the household of God' (Ephesians 2: 12, 19).

You can sense this feeling of the church as in continuity with Israel especially when the church is assembled for divine service. The eucharist with its language of offering and sacrifice recalls the offering of sacrifice, praise and thanksgiving in the assembly of Israel in the temple courts at Jerusalem, and at mattins and evensong, as here this evening, we make our own the psalms of ancient Israel and their descendants the canticles, in their depth and beauty.

The Christian church then is a kind of nationality, and together with the Jewish community it offers an instance of the persistence of something that can be called a sense of nationality continuously from ancient times to the present, despite the new associations acquired by the term 'nation' in the nineteenth century. Nationality has been called the result of a perpetual plebiscite, an ongoing decision by a group to think of itself as a nation and to interpret its history accordingly. In the case of the church, its decision to go on thinking of itself as Israel, with a kind of Israelite nationality, was confirmed especially in the second, third, and fourth centuries. Various internal movements to discard the Old Testament as inferior or even contrary to the New then attracted many, including someone of the stature of St Augustine in his youth, but they did not succeed. The argument still recurs, but perhaps it requires too restricted a view of the Old Testament to be fully convincing. At any rate, the Old Testament continued to be loved and revered among the sacred books of the church, and thereby the church continued to affirm its continuity with Israel. These old books had from the start been too closely bound up with Christian tenets and teaching to be easily set aside, but they also had intrinsic attractions: the fascination of their narratives, the grace and splendour of their poetry, the pithy wisdom of their proverbs, the ardour of their zeal for righteousness and the divine commandments, and the warmth of their love for the most high God. This term's evening sermon programme is perhaps an invitation to rediscover these things.

Within these books the story of Jacob has a commanding place. Members of the Jewish community and the Christian church, the two communities which are historically continuous with old Israel, look back to it to rediscover what may be called the essence of Israel. The legend of Jacob was probably shaped into the form we know in the time of the old Israelite kings and then in connection with the lively memory of them which persisted under foreign rule, say from the seventh to the fifth centuries before Christ. This situation would suit for instance the prominence given in Genesis to Judah, the ancestor of David and of the royal dynasty in Jerusalem. This is the narrative of a founding not only because Jacob wins the name Israel, but because his twelve sons become the twelve patriarchs, the forefathers of the twelve tribes which bear their names. Before he dies Jacob foretells their future one by one, and blesses them — so 'Judah is a lion's whelp', 'Joseph is a fruitful bough', 'Benjamin is a ravaging wolf'; and the narrator adds with satisfaction: 'all these are the twelve tribes of Israel' (Genesis 49: 28).

Here we see clearly for the first time in Genesis the classical form of the nation of Israel, that of a twelve-tribe union, a form which was still influential even after most of the tribes had become unknown; so the New Testament notes that our Lord sprang from Judah (Hebrews 7: 14), continues the idea that the Messiah is 'the lion of the tribe of Judah'

(Revelation 5: 5), and expects a new Jerusalem built for the twelve tribes (Revelation 21: 12). St Paul comparably takes care to say that he is from the tribe of Benjamin (Romans 11: 1). The concept of a union of twelve probably lies behind the choice of twelve apostles — the nucleus, as it were, of an Israel within Israel, an Israel as it was meant to be. This fits with other hints at an Israelite aspect of Christ's thought, brought out in places including to-night's Second Lesson from St John, where Nathanael is saluted as an Israelite in whom is no guile (John 1: 47), and Christ himself is hailed as king of Israel. These thoughts of a contrast between Israel as it seems to be and Israel as it is called to be come out again in St Paul, for example in his phrase 'the Israel of God' (Galatians 6: 16).

In each case, probably, these thoughts have roots in the story of Jacob. On one side he is the relentless competitor; he and his twin brother Esau represent Israel and Edom, always at war (Edom is later understood as Rome). Already in the womb Jacob's hand is on Esau's heel, and with his mother's help he, the younger twin, cheats his old father into thinking he is Esau, and so cheats Esau out of his father's blessing — the story is marked by the narrator's striking sympathy for the tears of Esau. Jacob only meets his come-uppance when he encounters his still tougher uncle Laban, and is in turn cheated into marrying the daughter of Laban whom he does not love (Leah), in place of the one he does love (Rachel), and into serving Laban for years for wages which are constantly being reduced — but even then God blesses him so that he prospers.

Yet there is also another side of Jacob. He has an almost mystical awareness of the divine. This comes out when the lonely boy on his journey lies down, as we heard, among the rocks and crags and dreams of the ladder leading up to heaven. He wakes to say How dreadful is this place — none other than the gate of heaven — tonight's text, which suggests his desire to seek the face of God. With this sketch of fear and inspiration amid wild scenery we seem for a moment to be in the world of the Romantic poets, and we are in fact touching an aspect of humanity which concerns them when we note this other side of Jacob. His desire comes to fruition during another journey by night, when his competitiveness reaches its final test and purification as he wrestles with an unknown, the angel of God — who, before Jacob limps away, gives him the name Israel. 'I have seen God', says Jacob, 'and my life is preserved' (Genesis 32: 30–31). It was this side of Jacob which caused the name Israel to be interpreted by some Jews in the time of Christ as itself meaning 'The one who sees God'.

This was the sense of the name 'Israel' which has often been in the minds of those looking for essential Israel, Israel as it is called to be. 'Truly God is loving unto Israel', says the psalmist as his words came to be understood '— even unto such as are of a clean heart' (Psalm 73: 1). 'Blessed are the pure in heart', says the Sermon on the Mount, 'for they shall see God' — they will fulfil the true calling of Israel (Matthew 5: 8). When Israelites are indeed without guile, to return to our chapter from St John, they will see a new kind of Jacob's ladder — the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man, the Christ, who indeed represents the Israel that Jacob was called to be. As members of the church we are called like Israel to seek the face of God, simply and without guile, in the love of God and neighbour.