

The People of God

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The biblical topic of the one "people of God" is a fascinating study that begins in the Book of Genesis and continues throughout the Bible. It culminates in the creation of a newly constituted NT people of God called out from among Jew and Gentile alike to be "one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28) or "fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (Eph. 2:19). This newly formed *ekklesia* (church) is nothing less than the fulfillment of God's "plan of the ages" (Eph. 3:11) - the "end-time" goal of that which God has been working out from before the creation of the world "in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:9-11).

F.F. Bruce explains the continuity of this theme of the "people of God" in the light of God's overall plan of salvation:

The Bible's central message is the story of salvation, and throughout both Testaments three strands in this unfolding story can be distinguished: the bringer of salvation, the way of salvation, and the heirs of salvation. This could be reworded in terms of the covenant idea by saying that the central message of the Bible is God's covenant with men, and that the strands are the mediator of the covenant, the basis of the covenant, and the covenant people. God himself is the Savior of his people; it is he who confirms his covenant-mercy with them. The bringer of salvation, the mediator of the covenant, is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The way of salvation, the basis of the covenant, is God's grace, calling forth from his people a response of faith and obedience. The heirs of salvation, the covenant people, are the Israel of God, the church of God.

The continuity of the covenant people from the Old Testament to the New Testament is obscured for the reader of the common English Bible because "church" is an exclusively New Testament word, and he naturally thinks of it as something which began in the New Testament period. But the reader of the Greek Bible was confronted by no new word when he found *ekklesia* in the New Testament; he had already met it in the Septuagint as one of the words used to denote Israel as the "assembly" of the Lord's people. To be sure, it has a new and fuller

meaning in the New Testament. The old covenant people had to die with him in order to rise with him to a new life - a new life in which national restrictions had disappeared. Jesus provides in himself the vital continuity between the old Israel and the new, and his faithful followers were both the righteous remnant of the old and the nucleus of the new. The servant Lord and his servant people bind the two Testaments together (*The Origin of the Bible*, pp. 11-12, Tyndale Pub.).

It should be emphasized that biblically the NT church of the body of Christ is *not* the subject of a special dispensation placed *in between* God's dealings with Israel. Instead, the new covenant people of God stand in direct continuity with the faithful people of the Old Testament. The "mystery" in regards to the church of the body of Christ had to do primarily with the constitution, or make-up, of the new covenant people of God - i.e. one body made up of believers in Christ not only from Jews but also from *Gentiles* on an equal basis - not with the fact that there would be a new covenant *ekklesia*. It is the original Abrahamic covenant of faith, as set forth in Genesis 15, etc. and expounded in Galatians 3 and Romans 4 and 9-11 that marks out the true people of God throughout the Bible, thus providing the continuity between the Old Testament and the New. As Paul states:

"... not all who are descended from [ethnic] Israel are [true] Israel.

Nor because they are his [ethnic] descendants are they all Abraham's [true] children.

In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise [i.e. those who have true faith] who are regarded as Abraham's offspring" (Rom. 9:6-8).

In the OT God called Israel as a nation to be his people of faith and to show forth the fruits of their relationship with him as their God. This was intended to be a witness to the nations of the world of the one true God's love, justice and goodness to his people and, thus, to bring these other nations into the blessings of the people of God. But the infidelity of the people of Israel made this impossible for God to achieve in the circumstances of the Old Testament era. The only solution was for the establishment of a *new* covenant via the work of Christ. The resulting

newly constituted "circumcision" (Phil. 3:1-3) or true "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16) is a people who are now set free, by the Spirit, to worship God in spirit and in truth - thus, fulfilling that which the Father had always desired (John 4:21-24).

The Turning of the Ages

In order to fully appreciate the significance of this subject to us as believers within the new covenant era we must endeavor to understand the Old Testament in *exactly the same way* as the original believers of the first century church interpreted it. In short, we must put ourselves in their "sandals," accept their perspective and interpret the New Testament fulfillment of Old Testament themes according to *their* understanding. In doing so we will be on solid ground, for the apostles' understanding of these matters was not only shaped by the "Christ event" (i.e. Christ's life, death, resurrection, and giving of the Spirit) but also by the risen Christ's own personal explanation of the significance of these events as well as by his continued guidance through the Spirit (Luke 24: 25-27, 44-49; Eph. 3:5-6).

Fundamental to the understanding of the first century church was a unique perspective of history that had its roots in the Jewish conception of history as consisting of two ages. E. Earl Ellis explains this in his book *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (pp. 163-166, Baker):

Jesus and his disciples conceive of history within the framework of two ages: this age and the age to come [e.g. Mt. 12:32; Mk 10:30; Lk. 20:34f; cp. Paul, Eph. 1:21]. This perspective appears to have its background in the Old Testament prophets, who prophesied of 'the last days' and 'the day of the Lord' as the time of an ultimate redemption of God's people and the destruction of their enemies. It becomes more specific in the apocalyptic writers, who underscored ... the doctrine of two ages and the radical difference between the present time and the time to come ...

Platonic and later Gnostic thought anticipate a redemption *from* matter, an escape from time and history at death. The Jewish hope includes a redemption *of* matter within time: the present age, from creation to the coming of the Messiah, is to be succeeded by a future age of peace and righteousness under the reign of God. The New

Testament's modification of [this Jewish view] rests upon the perception that in the mission, death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, the age to come, the kingdom of God, had become present in hidden form in the midst of the present evil age, although its public manifestation awaits the parousia of Jesus. Thus, for Jesus 'the kingdom of God does not culminate a meaningless history, but a planned divine process.' Equally, for the NT writers faith in Jesus means faith in the story of Jesus, the story of God's redemptive activity in the history of Israel that finds its high-point and fulfillment in Jesus.

For this reason the mission and meaning of Jesus can be expressed in the New Testament in terms of a *salvation history* 'consisting of a sequence of events especially chosen by God, taking place within an historical framework' ... The concept is most evident in the way the New Testament relates current and future events to events, persons and institutions in the Old Testament. That relationship is usually set forth as a typological correspondence [and] expresses most clearly the basic attitude of primitive Christianity toward the Old Testament. It is ... a 'spiritual perspective' from which the early Christian community viewed itself.

Gordon Fee further explains this post-Pentecost understanding of the NT church in his commentary on I Corinthians (*The New Int. Com. on the NT, I Corinthians*. p. 459, Eerdmans):

Through his death and resurrection Jesus Christ marks the turning of the ages; the old is on its way out, the new has begun (2 Cor. 5:17). He has set the future irresistibly in motion; and the new people of God, whether Jew or Gentile, bond or free, male or female, who are his by grace alone, are the people of the End, "upon whom the ends of the ages have come" and "toward whom all history has its goal." That is what constitutes the typological element in OT stories; ultimately the whole OT has been pointing toward its eschatological fulfillment in God's new people. And that is why the OT is their book in particular - because it has Christ as its prime actor and final goal. This does not mean that Israel, or its history, was not important in its own right, but that they stand at the beginning of the promises of God that are now finding their fulfillment at the end of the ages ... Christians stand at the end of history, at the time when God is bringing all of the divine purposes into focus and fulfillment in Christ.

It must be emphasized in all of this that the effects of Christ's accomplishments are "once for all." There can be no "going back" under the law or

a future dealing with Israel "according to the flesh" *apart from* this already accomplished reality "in Christ." The new covenant has been established and the one newly constituted people of God has been realized "in Christ." Membership in it is based solely on faith in Christ and the corresponding reception of the Spirit - for both Jew and Gentile alike. For "all (ethnic) Israel" to be saved (Rom. 11:26) they must be brought into this new covenant which Christ has already established. There can be no "undoing" of what Christ has done. All that remains is the final consummation at Christ's return (Eph. 1:9-10).

The New Covenant "People of God"

That the new covenant *ekklesia* (i.e. the post-Pentecost church of the body of Christ) believed itself to be in direct continuity with the Old Testament people of God as those "upon whom the fulfillment of the ages had come" cannot be stressed strongly enough. This truth is seen in the typological correspondence between the OT and the NT and especially in the use of Old Testament "people of God" language to describe the NT people of God. Gordon Fee describes the significance of this terminology in his book *Gospel and Spirit* (pp. 124-130, Hendrickson). I quote at length:

By pursuing the New Testament language for the Christian communities, I hope to demonstrate two realities about them: (a) their strong sense of *continuity* with the people of God under the former covenant, and (b) their basically *corporate* nature.

That the early believers thought in terms of continuity is writ large on nearly every page, in nearly every document. They did not see themselves as the "new people of God," but as the "people of God *newly constituted*." Nowhere is this more clear than in their adopting Old Testament "people of God" language, a language appropriation that is as varied as it is thoroughgoing.

a. *Church (ekklesia)*: Because this word does not appear in the English Old Testament, and because its usage for the "assembly" of the Greek *polis* is generally well known, the Old Testament background for New Testament usage is frequently overlooked. In the Septuagint (LXX) *ekklesia* is regularly used to translate the Hebrew *qahal*, referring most often to the "congregation of Israel," especially when it was gathered for religious purposes. Thus this word in particular was a natural

one for the early believers to bridge the gap as they began to spill over into the Gentile world.

Since the concept of a "gathered people" was primary in Greek and LXX usage, it is arguable that this is what lay behind the earliest Christian usage as well. Thus in its first [chronological] appearance in the New Testament (I Thess 1:1) Paul is probably thinking primarily of the Christian community as a gathered people, constituted "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," who would be listening to the letter as it was read. It is also arguable that its usage throughout the New Testament never gets very far away from this nuance; the *ekklesia* refers first of all to the people in the various cities and towns who gather regularly in the name of the Lord for worship and instruction.

b. *People (laos)*: Although not particularly popular with Greek writers, this is the word chosen by the LXX translators to render the Hebrew *'am*, the word that occurs most often (over 2000 times) to express the special relationship Israel had with Yahweh: Above all else they were Yahweh's "people." ... In most cases it is the collective word that designates the whole people whom God had chosen ... Thus, in Exodus 19:5, in establishing his covenant with them at Sinai, God says (LXX), "You shall be for me a *laos periousios* (special/chosen people) from among the *ethnon* (nations/Gentiles)."

In the New Testament the word occurs most often to refer to the Jewish people of that era. But in many striking passages it is used in its Old Testament sense, especially reflecting the language of Exodus 19:5-6, to refer to people of the new covenant, usually in contexts that include Gentiles. Thus Luke reports James as saying: "How God at first showed his concern by taking from the *ethnon* a *laos* for his name" (Acts 15:14); in 2 Corinthians 6:16 Paul, by way of Old Testament citation, specifically applies "people of God" language to God's new temple, the church; in Titus 2:14 the goal of Christ's saving purpose is "that he might purify for himself a *laos periousios*," while I Peter 2:9-10 combines "people" language from two Old Testament passages (Isa. 43:20/Exod. 19:6/Isa. 43:21), followed by a word play on Hosea 2:25, to designate Gentile Christians as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God," who were formerly "no people" but now "are the people of God." So also the author of Hebrews transfers several Old Testament "people" passages or concepts to the church (2:17; 4:9; 7:27; 13:12).

c. *Covenant (diatheke)*: Although this term does not occur often in the New Testament, it is used in ways that are significant to our topic. The author of Hebrews in particular adopts covenantal language to tie the new to the old, seeing Christ as the fulfillment of Jeremiah's "new covenant" in which God says again, as in the Sinai covenant, "They shall be for me a people" (Heb. 8:7-12; citing Jer. 31:34). Paul also adopts this language to refer to the "new covenant" of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:6; cf. Gal. 4:24). Perhaps even more significantly, as the people joined in common fellowship at the Table of the Lord in the Pauline churches, they did so with these words: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor. 11:25; Luke 22:20). It should be noted that both the language "new covenant" and its close tie with the Spirit and the people of God are seen in terms of continuity with the Old Testament (in this case as fulfillment); thus in the church's earliest worship ... there was the constant reminder of their continuity/discontinuity with the past.

d. *Saints (hoi hagioi)*: Although not frequent in the Old Testament, the designation of Israel as God's "holy people" occurs in the crucial covenantal passage in Exodus 19:5-6, an expression that in later Judaism referred to the elect who were to share in the blessings of the messianic kingdom (Dan. 7:18-27). This is Paul's primary term for God's newly formed, eschatological people ... In all cases it is a designation for the collective people of God, who are to bear his "holy" character and thus to be "set apart" for his purposes. To put that another way, the New Testament knows nothing about individual "saints," only about Christian communities as a whole who take up the Old Testament calling of Israel to be "God's holy people" in the world.

e. *Chosen (eklektos and cognates)*: Closely related to the covenant is the concept of Israel as having been chosen by God, by an act of sheer mercy on his part. In the Old Testament this concept is most often found in verb form, with God as the subject. However, the LXX of Isaiah 43:20-21 uses *eklektos* as a designation for the restored people of God. This usage is picked up in several places in the New Testament (e.g. Mark 13:22; 1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13; Col. 3:12; Eph. 1:4, 11; 1 Pet. 1:2; 2:9). As in the Old Testament, the term refers not to individual election, but to a people who have been chosen by God for his purposes; as one has been incorporated into, and thus belongs to, the chosen people of God, one is in that sense also elect. Likewise in the Old Testament, this language places the ultimate ground of our being in a sovereign and

gracious God, who willed and initiated salvation for his people.

f. *Royal Priesthood*: This term, taken directly from Exodus 19:6, is used in 1 Peter 2:9-10 to refer to the church. I include it here not only because it is further demonstration of continuity, but also because as in the Exodus passage it so clearly refers to the people corporately, not to individual priests or to the priesthood of individual believers. The NT knows nothing of the "priesthood of the believer" as it is popularly conceived, with each person's being his own priest with God ... To the contrary, the NT teaches that the church has a priestly function for the world (1 Pet. 2:9-10); and our role of ministering to one another makes us priests one for another.

g. *The Israel of God*: This unique expression occurs only in Galatians 6:16 in the entire Bible. Nonetheless, in some ways it gathers up much of the NT thinking - especially Paul's - on this matter. All those who live by the "rule" that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, these are "the Israel of God" upon whom God's benediction of *shalom* and mercy now rests. While it is true that Paul does not call the church the "new Israel," such passages as Rom. 2:28-29; 9:6; Philippians 3:3, and this one demonstrate that Paul saw the church as the "true Israel," i.e. as in the true succession of the Old Testament people of God. At the same time it emphasizes that those people are now newly constituted - composed of Jew and Gentile alike and based solely on faith in Christ and the gift of the Spirit.

This comes through nowhere more forcefully than in the argument of Galatians itself, for which this passage serves as the climax. Paul's concern throughout has been to argue that through Christ and the Spirit Gentiles share with believing Jews full privileges in the promises made to Abraham ... They do not need to submit to the regulations of the old covenant in order to be full members of the people of God; indeed, in "belonging to Christ" they are "Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (3:29) ...

Here especially the primary name of God's ancient people has been taken over in the interests of continuity, but now predicated on new terms. The *Israel of God* includes both Jew and Gentile, who by faith in Christ and "adoption" by the Spirit have become Abraham's "free children" and ... inheritors of the promises made to Abraham ...

h. *Further (Non-Old Testament) Images*: The essentially corporate nature of the people of God is

further demonstrated by the various images for the church found in the New Testament: *family*, where God is Father and his people are brothers and sisters (2 Cor. 6:18); the related image of *household*, where the people are members of the household (I Tim. 3:5, 15) and their leaders the Master's servants (I Cor. 4:1-3); *body*, where the emphasis is simultaneously on their unity and diversity (I Cor. 10:17; 12:12-26); God's *temple*, or sanctuary, where by the Spirit they corporately serve as the place of God's dwelling (I Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21-22); God's *commonwealth*, where as citizens of heaven Jew and Gentile alike form a *polis* in exile, awaiting their final homeland (Phil. 3:20-21; Eph. 2:19; I Pet. 1:1, 17).

In sum: By using so much Old Testament language to mark off its identity, the early church saw itself not only as in continuity with the Old Testament people of God, but as in the true succession of that people. One of the essential features of this continuity is the corporate nature of

the people of God. God chose, and made covenant with, not individual Israelites but with a people, who would bear his name and be for his purposes. Although individual Israelites could forfeit their position in Israel, this never affected God's design or purposes with the people as a people. This is true even when the majority failed, and the "people" were reduced to a "remnant." That remnant was still Israel - loved, chosen, and redeemed by God.

This is the thoroughgoing perspective of the New Testament as well, but at the same time Christ's coming and the gift of the eschatological Spirit also marked a new way by which they were constituted. The community is now entered individually through faith in Christ and the reception of the Spirit ... Nonetheless, the church itself is the object of God's saving activity in Christ. God is thus choosing and saving a people for his name.

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