



WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

THEME

3

PART

1

Old Testament Witness

SUMMARY

The Old Testament tells the story of the nation Israel and its relationship with God. Israel was called into existence by the Lord who delivered the people from Egypt in the Exodus. The people were chosen by grace to carry out the divine will. God established an enduring relationship with the nation through covenants. Israel variously obeyed and disobeyed these covenants and eventually collapsed as a nation and was carried off to exile in Babylon. Prophets declared that a *remnant* of faithful people would survive, while proclaiming the hope of a future *new covenant* in which all God's promises would be fulfilled.

BASIC BIBLE REFERENCES

Genesis 12:1-3; 15:18
Exodus 5:1; 6:6-7; 19:4-6
Leviticus 26:9-13
Deuteronomy 30:19-20
2 Samuel 7:12-17
Isaiah 55:3
Jeremiah 31:31-34

WORD LIST

Covenant
 Exile
 Grace
 Holiness
 Law
 New Covenant
 Remnant

The God of Israel

In this chapter we begin our study of the church. As you will see, we start with the story of God's ongoing relationship with Israel. That is because the roots of the church reach back to these early times. As we think about the church today, it is important to remember that we are part of the community God has been calling together for centuries.

Hans Küng, a contemporary Christian scholar, has written in his book on the church: "Fundamentally the whole faith of Judaism can be summed up in the single phrase: Yahweh is the God of Israel and Israel is the people of Yahweh."¹ In the Hebrew Scriptures Israel refers to the twelve tribes and their ancestor Jacob.² To be included in *Israel* implies membership in both a nation and a religion. Throughout the Old Testament the term designates the people who were chosen to be united in worshipping Yahweh.³ They are variously called *the people of Israel* (Exodus 11:10), *the children of Israel* (1 Kings 6:13), *the people of the Lord* (Deuteronomy 27:9) and other terms signifying this relationship.

The history of the people of Israel is the story of their relationship with Yahweh, the God who called them into

¹ Hans Küng, *The Church*, translated by Ray and Rosaleen Ockenden (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), p. 116.

² See Genesis 32:28 for the story of how Jacob's name was changed to Israel. The new name may have originally meant "the one who strives with God."

³ Yahweh is one of the primary names for God in the Old Testament. It is written with four Hebrew letters, YHWH, and for that reason is called the Tetragrammaton. In some English translations it is rendered as Jehovah.

existence and established an enduring covenant with the nation. It began with Abraham and Sarah, who were called by God to migrate from Mesopotamia into Canaan. Read **Genesis 12:1-3**. God established a covenant with this couple. Read **Genesis 15:18**. Their promised descendants migrated into Egypt. There they were enslaved until liberated and brought out of the land by Moses in the Exodus. Under Moses they received a legal constitution, a series of laws indicating Israel's obedience to the covenant. These laws presented God's will for all dimensions of the nation's political and religious life. For a sample of the laws in the Covenant Code scan Exodus 20-23. By the covenant agreement the people were united in the worship and service of God.

Israel's story continued through centuries of obedience and disobedience. This history can be viewed theologically as well as in social, political, and military terms. The people were first organized under temporary leaders called judges, then under a monarchy. Military and economic prosperity emerged, followed by military and economic disasters. Eventually, after Solomon's reign, the nation was divided into two kingdoms (922/921 B.C.). Then only the northern tribes were called the nation of Israel. The southern tribes became known as Judah. After the northern kingdom collapsed under an assault by Assyria (722/721 B.C.), the name Israel was transferred to the southern kingdom.

A century and a half later Judah was overrun by Babylon. The leaders of the nation were carried off to exile (587 B.C.) for fifty years. A return to the homeland finally occurred in 539 B.C. In the period after the exile, an increasingly future-oriented expectation arose among the people. It was the hope for a new leader, God's *anointed one*. This hope grew stronger, and was coupled with a longing for the day when God would fulfill the promise to *pour out my spirit on all flesh* (Joel 2:28).⁴ The expectation was that God would reconstitute the twelve tribes and the nation of Israel. Throughout its history the people looked to the God who called them into being and continued to remain faithful to covenant promises.

The People of God

Two major Hebrew words are used to indicate the gathering of people in the Old Testament: *'aydah* and *kahhal*.⁵ The root of *'aydah* means "appoint." The root of *kahhal* means "call." Both are used of many kinds of gatherings. But they also often appear in phrases such as the *congregation* or *assembly* of Israel or of Yahweh. See Exodus 12:3; Deuteronomy 23:2. Israel was a people appointed or called *by* God. The terms take on a technical and theological meaning in identifying a people belonging to God. The people were called into

⁴ The hope for a coming "Messiah" (literally an "anointed one") had a long history in Israel. After the exile it took on a more prominent role in Israel's life. See Theme 2, Part 1 of *The Bible and Theology*.

⁵ Various spellings are used for these words in English. Those adopted here are from Harper's Bible Dictionary (1985).

existence and continually called together to hear God's word. Great moments in Israel's history were marked this way. These included receiving God's law (Deuteronomy 5:22), the dedication of Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 8:14-21), and Ezra's reading of the book of the law (Nehemiah 8:2). At these times, the people gathered in an assembly.

That Israel belonged to God in a special way was clear from its birth as a nation. The Lord chose Israel over against the Egyptians of Pharaoh (Exodus 3:7-11:10). God's message through Moses in Egypt was: *Let my people go!* Read **Exodus 5:1; Exodus 6:6-7**.

The people were reminded of their responsibilities when they received God's law at Mt. Sinai. Read **Exodus 19:4-6**. God promised to be their God, to maintain the covenant with the nation, and to be present with the people. Read **Leviticus 26:9-13**. The nation was to obey the stipulations of the covenant.

The people obeyed because they knew they were God's people, formed and saved by sheer grace. Their obedient response arose from this prior act of God's favor in liberating them from slavery in Egypt. The Ten Commandments to the nation were preceded by the same reminder of God's grace (Exodus 20:2). Israel was not chosen because of anything inherently worthy within the nation. Indeed, its checkered history displayed times of sinfulness and disobedience. Israel became God's people purely by the Lord's free favor. Obedience to the law emerged as a response to this grace.

This identity is foundational to other Old Testament writings. In Deuteronomy ethical dimensions come to the fore. The people of God are to be holy because they were chosen to be God's *treasured possession*. Read Deuteronomy 7:6-11. The pattern was clear—obedience was to be given in grateful recognition of God's loving faithfulness. God fulfilled the covenant as the *people of the Lord* were led in the conquest of the land and were given salvation from oppressors.

Prophets warned Israel that disobedience to the covenant would mean that their name would be changed from *my people* to *not my people* (Hosea 1:9). Using the image of a broken marriage relationship, Hosea warned of the consequences of unfaithfulness. In Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the effects of idolatry and forgetting the covenant for *my people* are spelled out fifty times or more. Even in judgment, however, the prophets retained the image of *the people of God*. In these writings the requirement for holiness continues. And, despite the exile, *the people of God* will continue, for a remnant will be saved and endure. Read **Jeremiah 31:31-34**.

Isaiah uses the picture of *the people of God* to encourage and give hope. In the latter sections of the book repeated promises of restoration and protection are made. Scan Isaiah 43:1-21. It is for the transgressions of *my people* that the Suffering Servant is stricken (Isaiah 53:8). In the glorious future predicted, the people will know God's name and find God's comfort. Read Isaiah 52:6-9. God is shown as Lord of all, the judge and king in Israel, its comforter and redeemer, its security and hope. Other images portray different aspects of this relationship.⁶ All the emotions of intimacy are found in the relationship of God with Israel and Israel with God. They include elements of fear, trust, and seeking the Lord, as well as knowing God's steadfast love.⁷

The union of God and the people of God encompassed Israel completely. In all areas of life God's sustaining love was to be recognized and responded to in obedience. Israel's cause was God's cause. God's cause was the people's cause. Life and blessings were given by God to those chosen, called, and covenanted with through Israel's history. Disobedience led to death. But the "good life" was Israel's potential—when the nation was obedient to the will of God. The choice belonged to the people. Read **Deuteronomy 30:19-20**.

People of the Covenant

Throughout the Old Testament the covenants are a recurring theme. They form the specific focus of God's relationship with Israel. A covenant stood at the nation's foundation. Through Israel's history, a series of further covenants was enacted, and periodically the people renewed their vows of obedience.

Many ancient Near East documents show the widespread practice of people making "agreements" with each other. These took standard forms with discernible parts, and biblical covenants follow these patterns. Some were made between people who mutually committed themselves to each other in various relationships (1 Samuel 18:3). The standard description for God's covenant making activity with people is *God made a covenant*. See **Genesis 15:18** again; Exodus 24:8. The stress in these passages is on God's initiative in establishing the covenant.

For its part, Israel was to *keep* the covenant, *remember* it, and *do* it. Israel's story shows the nation *broke* the covenant and *transgressed* it. See **Jeremiah 31:32** again. The results of unfaithfulness were calamities and disasters instead of the full enjoyment of covenantal

6 See Israel as a *luxuriant vine that yields its fruit* (Hosea 10:1). The house of Israel is a *flock* (Psalms 77:20; 78:52); the *bride* of Yahweh (Jeremiah 2:2); God's *child* (Isaiah 49:15). Israel is God's *treasured possession* (Exodus 19:5).

7 For example, at times Israel is to *fear* God (Deuteronomy 10:12); at other times Israel is told, *Have no fear* (Jeremiah 30:10). The people know they can trust God, but at times do not trust (Deuteronomy 1:32). They know they should seek the Lord but do not always do so (Isaiah 9:13). The people cry to God (Lamentations 2:18) and believe the Lord hears (Psalm 145:19). Above all, Israel knew God's steadfast love (Psalm 98:3; 136:1-26).

blessings (Deuteronomy 27-28). God, on the other hand, displayed constant and utter fidelity to the covenant at all times. Read Jeremiah 33:20-21, 25-26.

As a nation, Israel originated from God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah. God promised a land and descendants to them, and they were commanded to *keep* the covenant which was to be *everlasting* (Genesis 17:7, 9). Circumcision was given as the covenant sign (Genesis 17:11). Abraham's obedience to God's word and promise was not itself a condition of the covenant; it was his response in faith.

After God delivered the people from Egypt, with the promise of the land before them, a covenant was established with the nation at Sinai. Israel was promised that it would become God's *treasured possession out of all the peoples ... a priestly kingdom and a holy nation* (Exodus 19:5-6). This description would be theirs if they obeyed God and kept the covenant. Here was a conditional covenant resting on the people's obedience. The sign ratifying the covenant was a sacrifice and the sprinkling of blood. See Exodus 24:4-8. At various times, this covenant was renewed.⁸ Israel was the covenant community who worshipped and served their Lord.

God later promised King David that his descendants would have an everlasting kingdom. Read 2 Samuel 7:12-17. Messianic hope emerged from this covenant as well as expectations, strong in the post-exilic period, of Israel's restoration and the new order of God's reign. See Isaiah 66:22-23.

New Covenant

Several passages in the prophetic writings anticipate that God will establish a new covenant. Read Jeremiah 31:31-34 again.⁹ God's promises will be fulfilled, even if the nation of Israel as a whole disobeys the conditions of the covenants. So the prophets looked to a *remnant*. Read Isaiah 6:11-13; Micah 5:7. This smaller group would be faithful people who repent, and who, though scattered among the nations, maintain fidelity to the God of Israel. Read Ezekiel 11:16-21. They are promised God's salvation and will declare God's glory among the nations. See Isaiah 46:3-4. *Survivors of the nations* (outside Israel) who recognize God as the true God will also receive this hope (Isaiah 45:20).

In the future, God will gather this remnant and by grace give them a *new covenant* that will include the forgiveness of sin. This promise was intertwined with expectations of the coming Messiah, one from David's line who would preside over an everlasting covenant of

⁸ Deuteronomy 29; Joshua 24.

⁹ Other references are Isaiah 49:6-8; 59:21; Ezekiel 16:60, 62; and 37:26.

peace shared by all nations. Read **Isaiah 55:3**.¹⁰ At the end of the period of the Hebrew scriptures the people of God awaited the fulfillment of God's covenant promises—a fulfillment the Christian church believes has come in Jesus Christ.

FOR FURTHER STUDY AND REFLECTION

Memory Bank

Know where to find these key passages from Part 1:

1. God's Call to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:18)
2. God's promise of a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Research

1. The covenant is a key concept in understanding how God enters into relationships with people. Read an article on "Covenant" in a Bible dictionary.
2. The law of God given to the people of Israel indicated God's will concerning how the people should live. In the Covenant Code in Exodus 20-23 it is preceded by a statement of God's liberating actions on the people's behalf in the Exodus event. Theologically, this meant that "Grace precedes law." Consult articles on "Law" and "Grace" in a theological encyclopedia or textbook and describe the relationship of these terms in your own words.

Reflection

1. Formulate several reasons why it is important to be able to see that the idea of "church" is present in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament.
2. In what ways are God's future promises to Israel, as for example in Isaiah 43:1-21 and 52:6-9, still to be fulfilled?

¹⁰ This promise is also found in Jeremiah 23:5-6; Ezekiel 34:23; Zechariah 8:20-23.