

FACTFILE: RELIGIOUS STUDIES

COVENANT AND ELECTION



Covenant and Election

A New Direction: This theme explores different types of covenant in the Old Testament in their literary-theological context, and begins to trace the influence of these covenants in the development of biblical traditions. The goal is to probe the concept of election to see how exclusive or embracing it might be. As part of this, the nature of conditional (or bilateral) and unconditional (or unilateral) covenants is considered.

Covenant – Introduction and Overview:

The covenant God made with Israel at Sinai (Exodus 19–24) forms the central and defining theological affirmation of the Old Testament. In its broadest sweep, it affirms that the God of all creation has made an abiding commitment of fidelity to a chosen people, Israel: this commitment is grounded in divine resolve to be in the relationship; through that enduring commitment of fidelity, Israel is marked for all time as the elect people of God, and God is marked for all time as the God of Israel. This bilateral commitment (of God to people, and people to God, with requirements to be adhered to) asserts that the Bible is fundamentally about a God in relationship: not a God in isolated splendour. This relatedness is both interesting and troublesome in the context of faith: if God is specially related to one group of chosen people, what is God's relationship to other people, and indeed the universe? In addition to this bilateral covenant, God also makes unilateral covenant commitments to Abraham, Noah and David: the bilateral and the unilateral complement one another, and while the bilateral covenant is primary, both types are essential to Israel's concept of covenantal fidelity. The most authoritative traditions in the Old Testament are focused on

remembering the meeting at Sinai which resulted in the covenant. While the act of making and renewing covenant has a number of characteristic features, three in particular can be identified:

1. God announces directly to Israel the defining commands and conditions of the covenant: these are the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17). The commands are absolute and seek to bring every part of Israel's life under God's rule and into conformity with God's will and purpose. These commandments clarify the ground for Israel's relationship to God and pertain particularly to the community of faith.
2. Israel swears an oath of fidelity and is for all times bound in obedience to these terms of the relationship (see Exodus 24:3, 7).
3. Sanctions make clear that obedience to these commands is the necessary condition of life and well-being (see Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28). Where the commands are violated, a curse will make life miserable and unbearable for the community. The harshness of the curses indicates that obedience is a life or death matter as the Sinai covenant is shaped in rigorously conditional terms.

This founding Sinai covenant was no doubt periodically renewed in the life of Israel. In part this would have been done so that in each new generation the children of the covenant renewed vows, accepted commands and submitted to covenantal sanctions, for this commitment to God defined Israel in each succeeding generation. But note how, while renewed in each generation, the Sinai covenant was the

burden borne by the great prophets of Israel (Hosea, Amos, Jeremiah): as the Bible now stands, Israel so profoundly violated the covenant that it was believed by some to have been terminated. The judgment that disobedience brings disaster from God is a characteristic way in which the Old Testament understands the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE and the ensuing exile. So, because it is harshly conditional, the covenant serves to interpret Israel's life and to keep its various experiences within the framework of this relationship.

God's relationship with Israel through the Sinai covenant is decisive for the Old Testament. But two other aspects of covenant also figure prominently. Firstly, while the Sinai covenant pertains particularly to Israel, in Genesis 9:8-17 the covenant after the flood is made with "all flesh"—that is, with all nations and even with non-human creation. Moreover, this covenant is unconditional in its unilateral guarantee for the future well-being of the world. Thus, the God who commits to Israel is the God who commits to the well-being of creation. This powerful affirmation becomes an important resource for ecological concerns and for an ethic of the care of the earth. Secondly, just as God makes the covenant of creation larger in scope than the covenant with Israel, so God also makes covenant in smaller scope, especially with key persons in Israel's memory. Thus, at the outset, God makes a covenant with Abraham, the father of Israel's faith, thereby guaranteeing to Israel for all time the land of promise that is one dimension of God's fidelity (Gen. 15:7-21). The promise to Abraham, remembered through the generations, may be related to the promise made to David and to David's family for all time to come (2nd Sam. 7:1-16). Note, furthermore, that God's commitment to Abraham-David is unconditional: it is a free, unqualified promise. These individual promissory covenants are perhaps best understood as subsets of Sinai. In any case, the evidence points to a rich interpretive field around the questions of conditional and unconditional, bilateral and unilateral, as texts can be identified for each: these were issues that Israel pondered and struggled with.

In historic perspective, the various covenants (at Sinai, and with Abraham and David) were profoundly threatened by the events surrounding 587 BCE, in which Israel discerned that God had abandoned it, given up on the covenant, and abrogated God's promised fidelity. The crisis, however, gave rise to new theological insight, for something fresh and imaginative had to be said about God's covenant commitments to Israel and about Israel's reliance on and response to God.

Finally, Israel did not believe the covenant had been terminated, and so needed to find other ways to affirm it. Three responses can be noted:

1. Israel spoke of God's "everlasting covenant" that could not be broken or ultimately violated by disobedience (Gen. 9:16; 17:7-19; Isa. 55:3; Ezek. 37:26). This affirmation is that God's love for Israel is unilateral, does not depend on Israel's obedience, and therefore can be relied upon in every circumstance, including that of exile: remarkably, these statements are characteristically made in texts judged by scholars to be from the exile; that is, Israel's deepest affirmation of God's trustworthiness is made in the midst of Israel's greatest trauma.
2. Israel could not, even with its great confidence in God, deny the profound experience of loss, displacement and absence that could only result from God's abandonment. For that reason Israel acknowledged brief abandonment by God in exile, insisting that the absence was just momentary and did not signify termination of the covenant (see Isa. 54:7-8): absence of God from the life of Israel, while powerful, is not termination but eclipse.
3. More radically, Israel in exile can entertain the thought that the covenant is broken beyond repair because of Israel's disobedience: yet that broken relationship will be a relationship renewed (see Jer. 31:31-34), precisely because God wills to continue the connection to Israel. Note that this new covenant is with Israel, and does not represent a rejection of Israel, as interpreted by parts of the Christian tradition.

As a crucial theological concept in Israel, covenant cannot be reduced to a single understanding or formulation: it is, rather, a rich and plural concept, giving rise to interesting questions.

The Centrality of Sinai: When Israel arrives at Sinai in the narrative of the book of Exodus, a new, extended, complex tradition begins, featuring

- (a) the making of covenant between God and Israel, and
- (b) the issuance of the commands of God that become the condition and substance of the covenant. It is not possible to know anything about the history or geographical location of Sinai, but it is possible to notice that in all its complexity, the Sinai tradition extends through the book of Leviticus, ending at

Numbers 10:10, when Israel departs the mountain. The reason the material is so complex is that over time the tradition of commands sought to extend the rule of God over every aspect of life, personal and public, civic and cultic. Thus, the completed literature contains many layers and voices, twists and turns. It should be stressed that this tradition is at the core of Judaism, which is constituted by obedience to God's Torah/Law.

In this extended tradition of command, the most important materials are in Exodus 19–24, commonly known as the “Sinai periscope.” This material is perhaps the earliest in the tradition of commandment and is certainly normative for what follows. These chapters include a preparation for the meeting with God on the mountain (19:10–25), the proclamation of the Ten Commandments (20:1–17), the acceptance of Moses as the mediator of Torah/Law (20:18–21), and a concluding narrative of covenant making, in which Israel takes an oath of allegiance to God (chapter 24). The proclamation of commands and the oath of allegiance are the defining elements of the covenant that bind Israel to God in obedience. While it is not possible to establish the early date of the Decalogue, it may be said that this catalogue of commands is the most elemental of all God's Torah/Law requirements. In a sense, all other commands are interpretations of these ten.

The Importance of the Decalogue: The Ten Commandments constitute the basis and reference point for all Old Testament thinking about ethics. The fact that the commandments are situated in the covenant-making process of Mt. Sinai indicates that they are to be understood as stipulations for the covenant Israel has made with God: God has pledged to be the guardian and protector of Israel, and under these terms that relationship can flourish. Ultimately, whatever the complex history of the formation and completion of the Ten Commandments, they are presented as God's own utterance to Israel on the mountain in the context of a theophany (Exodus 19:16–25), after which Israel, in fear, asks Moses to be a mediator. This passage is, thus, God's only direct utterance to Israel. Moreover, with the exception of Exodus 20:8–11, 12, the commands are in the apodictic (“Thou shalt not”) form: they are absolute and without qualification and do not even entertain the prospect of punishment for disobedience; they are completely non-negotiable as they are given to Israel.

Given the introductory formula of verse 2 with reference to the Exodus, the commands are to be

understood in the context of Israel's emancipation from Egypt and purport to offer the guidelines for an alternative community that is completely contrasted to that of Pharaoh. They preclude idolatry and guard the well-being of the neighbour against exploitation; as a consequence, they sanction and envision a communitarian ethic that moves in an egalitarian direction. As these commands provide for a covenantal, neighbourly ethic, they also provide a barrier against the social chaos that ensues from unbridled acquisitiveness grounded in a focus on only the self (i.e., without reference to God or neighbour).

The importance of the Ten Commandments is underlined by the fact that (a) they are reiterated in Deuteronomy 5:6–21, with variations of emphases, and (b) appealed to by the prophets as part of their condemnation of Israel (see Hos. 4:2 and Jer. 7:9, both of which obviously appeal to and are informed by the list of ten commands).

Abraham and the Covenant of Promise:

In reading Genesis 12–50, and particularly 12–36, it is evident that a large amount of material has been brought together without smoothing out all of the disjunctions in the original sources and stories. But it is also evident that a larger interpretive intentionality is at work. Thus it is clear that the primary theological idea around which all of this disparate material has been gathered is the theme of promise from God to the ancestors of Israel. By the traditioning process this theme of promise has been woven into and related to texts that in an earlier form may not have been directly connected to it. Claus Westermann proposes that the theme of promise was originally situated in Genesis 18:1–15, to which the idea of promise is intrinsic: if it is removed the plot is destroyed. This initial promise may well simply have been about a child to be born, especially a son in a patriarchal society, without the special circumstances of Abraham and Sarah. That theme of a promised son and therefore heir has come to dominate various stories within the overall narrative: through these narratives the impression is given that in each generation a son and heir is given by God only belatedly to a barren mother when all human resources have been exhausted (21:1–7; 25:21–26; 30:22–24). It should be noted that the promise is not a generic good feeling or sense of optimism about the future: it is instead a specific utterance of God that is remembered by Israel.

Although, as noted, the theme of promise may originally have been intrinsic only to some of the

shorter narratives in their most elemental forms, it has been mobilized by the tradition to become much more powerful and influential: to such a degree that it now governs the entire narrative. The clearest example of a formal use of promise is in Genesis 12:1–3, the beginning point of the ancestral story. Abraham is abruptly addressed by God, first of all in an imperative mandating Abraham's departure from all that is familiar and secure. In the very same initial sentence the imperative shades into a promise concerning "the land that I will show you." The ancestral narrative is preoccupied with the land of promise, a piece of territory to which this family is entitled by the utterance of God. The subsequent anxiety about a son and heir that recurs in different generations is in order that the promise of land may be kept alive, for without an heir in each generation the promise is nullified (see 15:1–6). So the basic narrative tension that pushes these chapters forward is between promise and fulfilment: God has promised progeny and land, but it is not clear how an elderly and barren Abraham and Sarah will generate progeny, nor is it clear how the land will become theirs.

The promise continues in 12:2, specifying that Abraham and his family will reach socio-political prominence, a promise subsequently taken to be fulfilled in the achievements of David and Solomon. The promise concludes in verse 3 with the stunning assurance that Israel's very existence will be a blessing to "all the families of the earth." In other words, Israel's existence in the world is a means and source of well-being for other nations. From this beginning point, the other nations are always on the horizon of Israel, as they are upon the horizon of the God of Israel. This cluster of promises becomes the basis and principle for all that follows in the narrative account of the life of Israel. It may indeed be argued that this divine promissory speech, characterizing the biblical God as a future-generating, future-opening, future-governing God, is a core theme of the entire Bible.

Three comments can be made about the importance of the promissory covenant made with Abraham:

1. Many scholars see that the initial promise of God to Abraham in 12:1–3 functions as a hinge and connecting point to bring together the history of the nations in Genesis 1–11 and the history of Israel in all that follows. The texts that constitute Genesis 1–11 testify to a deep alienation of the nations from God: what is called "the fall" places the nations under "curse" (see 3:17–19; 4:11–12) and therefore subject to God's negating
2. In the formation of the Bible, this narrative of promise has been drawn into relation with a very different tradition: one (drawn from the Sinai covenant, Deuteronomy and the literature derived from it) that focuses on the commandments and is concerned to make the claim that Israel is given the land of promise (in the book of Joshua) and must govern it (in the book of Judges) according to the requirements of the commandments. Ultimately, this historical tradition reflects on how the land will be forfeited by Israel when Israel is disobedient to the demands of Torah/Law. This tradition is concerned with being obedient in order to hold the land. However, in the full tradition, including the covenant of promise with Abraham, the Sinai/Deuteronomistic focus on conditionality is in tension with the unconditional ancestral promise of land.
3. The ancestral narratives receive little attention in the literature that is commonly dated to the monarchical period when the pre-exilic prophets were active. But then the Abraham tradition re-emerges in the literature of the exile in a pronounced way. It is clear that after the demanding tradition of the Torah/Law linked to Moses had led to a theological interpretation of the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, the community of ancient Israel turned from the rigorous conditionality of Moses and the Sinai covenant to the free promise of God made at the outset to Abraham and Sarah. Thus the exilic community found in the memory of that promise a basis for hope when the claim of Torah/Law obedience was no longer adequate. This promise, now rearticulated, provided a general assurance that God was still at work on behalf of the displaced community to guarantee a future of well-being. More particularly, the promise was important to a displaced, deported community in its conviction that it was still entitled to the land (which it did not presently possess). It was affirmed that sooner or later, in God's good time, God would keep the promise and Israel would be restored to the land of promise, not because of merit or obedience, but because God was faithful

to God's own promise that permeated Israel's life and faith from the beginning.

So, in all three literatures,

- (a) the account of the curse of the nations in Genesis 1–11,
- (b) the Deuteronomic reflection on the land in relation to the Torah/Law, and
- (c) the exilic recovery of promise, the promissory covenant with Abraham is of decisive significance.

The Flood Narrative and the Covenant with Noah:

The story of the flood, culminating in the covenant with Noah, occupies a large amount of space in Genesis 1–11 and a key theological position within that material. In essence and a nutshell, it is possible to argue that the flood narrative articulates the primary claims of Israel's faith and that the covenant with Noah indicates the breadth of God's concern for the world.

1. The theological premise of the flood narrative is God's speech of judgment consisting of an indictment of a failed creation (6:5, 11, 12) and a divine judgment whereby God resolves to "blot out" all creation (6:6–7) and "make an end of all flesh" (6:13). The release of the mighty floodwaters is a function of the divine resolve to terminate. The waters are the forces of chaos (see 1:2) that in this narrative function as obedient tools of God's negative intention. Thus the narrative begins as a conventional account of judgment enacted.
2. The speech of judgment and its ensuing enactment are, however, decisively disrupted by God's notice of Noah, who stands in God's favour (6:8) and is rescued because of Noah's righteousness (6:9). Noah and his family constitute a decisive exception to the general destruction. In this way, the identification of the righteous remnant becomes a decisive qualification in the general destruction. The chaotic waters are eased and withdrawn as "God remembers Noah" (8:1).
3. God's willingness to nullify the threat of the flood and to re-establish well-being in the earth as God's creation arises from the presence of Noah. As a consequence, God promises to "never again curse the ground" (8:21); indeed that curbing of negation is matched by a positive guarantee of the rhythms of creation (8:22). It should be noted carefully that the turn from divine judgment to divine assurance is not accomplished by any human repentance or resolve; the inclination of the human heart as "evil" at the outset (6:5) continues to be "evil" at the end (8:21). Nothing has changed in the inclination of humanity. All that has changed—and changed decisively—is God's resolve to remain the faithful creator in spite of the condition of creation: in the end, God is shown to be more fully gracious and positively inclined towards the earth.
4. The second conclusion to the flood narrative in 9:8–17 also revolves around God's promise that "never again" will a flood destroy the earth. The rainbow, as a reminder to God, assures creation of God's "everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth" (9:16). Important implications flow from this: the natural environment is secured in covenant with human and natural creatures; the covenant with Noah restores and secures the creation for the benefit of all its creatures, animal and human; human treatment of the natural world, therefore, is not only a matter of its attitude towards creation, but also how humankind hears and receives the promise, which it shares with the animal world. It should also be observed that the nations are part of the created order, part of the blessing of God in the completion of creation. The restoration of the creation after the flood also involves the restoration of humanity as part of that creation and the renewal of the blessing (8:17; 9:1, 7) through the lineage of Noah (9:19). So the establishment of a covenant with Noah is the establishment of covenant with all of humankind. Through repetition this point is underlined and emphasized: the universal covenant with humankind as a way of perpetuating and maintaining the creation incorporates the nations, of which Israel is a single part.
5. At a quirky but significant level the covenant with Noah permits human beings to move from vegetarianism to eating meat. As the flood story closes at the beginning of chapter 9, God reiterates the basic command to humanity that was first articulated in the creation story of Genesis 1: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." But, looking closely at what follows each command, it has been noticed that whereas in Genesis 1 God stipulates plants and fruit as food for humanity (1:29), in the flood story God allows the eating of animals (9:2) for the first time. It seems clear that humanity was originally created to be vegetarian, and to refrain from violence

against God's other creatures. The permission of meat after the flood appears to be a concession to the essentially violent nature of humanity. And by disallowing the eating of the blood along with the meat (9:4), the story lays the basis for later practices of animal sacrifice, in which the blood had to be poured out and returned to the earth as a sign of atonement for killing the animal.

It is impossible to overstate how crucial Noah is for the dramatic development of the opening of the book of Genesis and the wider biblical narrative. In the end, however, the decisive and most interesting character is not Noah but the God of Israel, who freshly embraces creation. In its present location, the flood narrative is essentially another creation story because of the way in which God reorders the world away from chaos, just as happened in chapter 1. The flood narrative is thus a key text for emphasizing the deep tension and problematic contradiction between the recalcitrance of creation and the ultimate good-will of the Creator. The flood story culminates in covenant recognition that God's faithful commitment to creation and to human community has prevailed, thus assuring that the world has a future. The genealogies before and after the flood narrative indicate the continuity that survives even through the chaotic disruption. While the story of the world as God's creation is momentarily disrupted by the waters of chaos that disruption does not and cannot prevail against the intention of God to maintain humanity (see Isa. 54:9–10 for how Israel appropriates this promise for itself during exile). The flood narrative draws attention to the interface of God's good sovereignty and the sustained recalcitrance of creation that resists the purpose of God and in a recurring way places the world in danger.

Covenant, Prophecy...and Recalcitrance:

In the period before the destruction of the northern kingdom in 721 BCE and the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE a leitmotif in the biblical literature is of prophets condemning the people for departing from the terms of the Sinai/Mosaic covenant and calling them back to its requirements in the face of recalcitrance.

In the call of Isaiah (Isa. 6:1–13) this recalcitrance is pictured in a particularly intriguing and graphic way. This unit of text may be divided into two parts: the commissioning (vv.1–8) and the message entrusted to the prophet by the heavenly government of God (vv.9–13). The message constitutes a focal point and epitome

for the message of the entire book of Isaiah. The prophetic message is that "this people" (Judah and Jerusalem) should "not comprehend," "not understand," "not look," "not listen," "not comprehend." It is the decree of God's government that Israel should have all its senses dulled and numbed. All of the organs of perception—heart, eyes, ears—must fail. The reason is: if the people notice, they will turn; and if they turn, they will be healed. But God's intent is negative: God wills an unhealed people. This is a counter-message—countering official religious assumptions that God always wills good. The shock of the message is enough to evoke a questioning protest from the prophet: "How long?" (v.11). The answer from God is given immediately, without hesitation or qualification: until termination. This is an Israelite future of nullification, a ceasing to be in the world: the burden of the oracle is that God has given up on this beloved people and will no longer protect them.

The nullification is ameliorated only with the enigmatic statement at the end of verse 13: it comprises three words, the meaning of which is not clear—something about holy seed from stump, something about the impossibility of new life from deep failure. It is possible to take this defining oracle simply as harsh judgment. But if it is taken in the context of the entire book of Isaiah it is placed in a long-term vision concerning the deep loss of Jerusalem *and* its fragile restoration. The first part of the book highlights the devastating loss of the centre of Israelite faith: Jerusalem and its temple; the most trusted place; the very place God's vision of presence is given to Isaiah. The last line of verse 13 hints at hope beyond loss, but only with an enigmatic trace of assurance: the predominant focus for eighth century Isaiah is nullification. At this point in Israel's history, the overwhelming impression is created that the purposes of God are at work in the midst of severe human obduracy: there is no ready turning and no easy healing for healing is not readily available and turning is too demanding; there is no easy faith, no cheap grace, no good word that gives assurance to those hoping for a quick and comfortable religious experience.

Whatever the personal dimension of the call of Isaiah in terms of either a direct, emotional experience of God or, alternatively, an experience that is cultic in nature, the call narrative is a highly stylized, intentionally structured literary unit: it is often understood as a classic outline of right worship, which is sequenced as (a) praise (vv.1–4); (b) confession (v.5); (c) forgiveness (vv.6–7); and (d) commissioning to a prophetic vocation

(v.8). It should be understood that the prophetic authorization pertains not only to the person of Isaiah but also to the entire book of Isaiah in which this account is embedded: thus the narrative account claims continuing prophetic authority long after the prophetic personality has departed the historical scene.

A Lack of Covenant Brings a Lot of Woes:

The nature of the society to which Isaiah is called to prophesy judgment is encapsulated in Isaiah 5:8–30. This material consists of six woes (vv.8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22) followed by two prophetic sentences (vv.24, 25). The form of utterance expresses anticipated mourning for those who are sure to die for their unacceptable behaviour. In the woe sayings, there is not even any direct deathly intervention from God: it is as though the behaviour condemned itself and carried the verdict of death.

The first woe (vv.8–10) is an anticipated lament for those who will come to grief for an inequitable economic order in which those who are prosperous, aggressive and greedy eventually confiscate and possess the houses and fields of their more vulnerable neighbours (see also Isa. 3:14b–15). Note that the combination of “houses-fields” may be linked to the warning against coveting in the tenth commandment. In prophetic perspective this warning does not refer to specific acts of greed but to a general economic policy and practice whereby big landowners are able to buy up and crowd out small farmers. This economic procedure, which destroyed the neighbourly fabric of the community, appears to have been widespread in eighth century Judah and was regarded by the prophets as a grave violation of covenantal Yahwism. The severe and solemn response of God to this betrayal of Mosaic neighbourliness is twofold (vv.9–10): it is anticipated that many large and beautiful houses—emblems of rapacious economic policy—will be desolate, perhaps left so by invading armies (see Amos 3:15); it is further anticipated that the devastation that leaves houses desolate will also leave the land damaged so that it will be unproductive. In this way the threat of God matches the affront: the big, avaricious landowners intended to become rich and prosperous at the expense of their neighbours, but their own actions and policies will leave their homes wrecked and the productivity of the land diminished.

The second woe is the most extensive of the series and the most ominously implemented (vv.11–17). On the surface the action condemned is strong drink, but the real concern is not alcohol: it is,

rather, self-indulgence and self-absorption (see Amos 6:4–6 for a parallel condemnation). The accumulation and concentration of land, produce and wealth considered in the first woe engenders inordinate self-regard and self-indulgence: such ill-gotten and extravagantly used wealth tends to desensitize. This behaviour disregards God and neighbour, and is viewed as injustice by the prophet: the rich see and care only for themselves. The outcome of systemic injustice will be exile: deportation and displacement. The most securely situated will be disrupted and displaced. The exile will drive the nobles to hunger and the multitudes to thirst: all classes of society will suffer when the elemental infrastructure of society fails. For a second time the consequence is a direct inversion of the affront. In verse 8, the affront is many houses and the consequence is devastated homes (v.9); in verse 11, the affront is self-indulgent feast and the consequence is hunger and thirst (v.13). The link between affront and consequence stresses that in the understanding of the prophets there are ethical requirements derived from the commandments woven into the processes of society. They must be honoured because the prophets insist that destructive acts and policies cannot be undertaken without accountability and consequences.

The harsh anticipation of verse 13 is reiterated and intensified in verses 14–15. The poet imagines a huge, gaping black hole in reality: the black hole of death. Jerusalem—its nobles and its multitudes—will be swallowed up, devoured, and wiped out of the historical process. The list of the condemned is given twice, the second time in reverse order: “nobility—multitude—throng; people—everyone—haughty.” The first and last elements in the enumeration are the privileged, who are the special target of this threat (note how in Isa. 3:16–26 the “haughty” are identified with the wives of the wealthy and graphically condemned). The troubles come upon Jerusalem because the city imagines itself autonomous from God and God’s ways mediated through the commandments.

In terse fashion verses 18–23 offer four woes identifying the causes of the coming judgment and subsequent grief in Jerusalem. The first of these woes contrasts the actual conduct of Jerusalem (v.18) with its arrogant theological thinking (v.19), exposing the hypocrisy and self-deception in the contradiction between deed and word. The actions condemned are generic and non-specific, incorporated in the terms “iniquity, falsehood, sin” (v.18). The prophet uses the image of a bundle of sins all tied up, ready to be carried or put on a cart,

as a peasant might transport produce: Jerusalem has a full load of sin. The speech of Judah is filled with eagerness and expectancy, wanting to know God's intention (v.19). It is as though Judah is so shameless that it is unaware that it can only receive judgment from God. It assumes, in the fashion of Davidic theology, that what "the Holy One of Israel" intends will be welcome and positive; but judgment is the reality. Thus the woe is for a community so preoccupied with itself that it is completely unaware of the exposed and dangerous situation it has created for itself in relation to the reality of God (see Amos 5:18–20 for another example of an ill-advised welcome of God).

The brief woe of verse 20 states a series of three distortions, suggesting that Jerusalem has completely lost its powers of discernment, presumably because it is so self-indulgent that it can no longer see reality beyond its own short-term benefit. The distortions may arise from a lack of any covenantal reference point, resulting in confusion, or they may be deliberate deception done to obscure what is really going on. However this is understood, the woe ultimately certifies that manipulation and deception that cover over exploitative brutality will come to a harsh and sorry end.

The next woe in this set of four briefly warns against autonomy, an approach to living in which wisdom and various types of technical know-how are exercised without any larger reference point: that is, without reference to the covenantal requirements of God (v.21).

Finally, in verses 22–23 the poetry returns to the self-indulgence of drinking. As in the previous reference (in v. 11) the issue is not alcohol but the consequences of such self-indulgence. The issue is the distortion of public order, the collapse of an equitable judicial system whereby the courts will rule in favour of those who exploit others for a price; conversely, the innocent—the vulnerable, weak—have no chance of justice from the courts. Isaiah understands that the disappearance of a reliable judiciary precipitates the complete collapse of a viable human community.

The effect of these six woes is cumulative: they present a society that has lost its centre, its reference, its focus, its purpose, its chance for well-being—its relationship to covenantal standards and obligations. Thus the woes are followed by two abrupt, significant, harsh prophetic "therefores" (vv.24, 25) voicing God's negative resolve. In the first (v.24) the indictment is that Israel has rejected

Gods Torah/Law, the norm and guide for social order. This rejection is tantamount to rejecting God, for in Israel God is never available apart from Torah/Law. The consequence of such a rejection is given in a series of metaphors—fire, rot, dust—all of which indicate failure and nullification: at this stage, while the end is certain how it will come is vague and poetic. The second "therefore" (v.25) becomes explicit: God will actively intervene with anger and an outstretched hand; that is, with direct, forcible engagement associated with images of death.

Then, in verses 26–30 the threat becomes even more specific. This threat is not supernatural; rather, it is political, military, concretely savage; it is invasion by a massive foreign army that God "will raise" (v.26). The purpose of the poetry is to make the threat awesome and deeply unsettling by portraying the un-named invader as powerfully and impressively as possible. It is "a nation far away" that comes "swiftly and speedily" (not at all what Jerusalem had expected when it asked for God's plan to come with speed and haste in v.19). But the coming nation is part of God's plan: a plan to overthrow the Holy City. The enemy is strong, well-equipped, irresistible, determined: it is like a relentless lion that will carry off (into exile), leaving only ruin and devastation (see also Amos 3:12). After the onslaught the land will be in darkness and distress: it will be utterly failed, hopeless, resourceless, lifeless, abandoned. Thus the listener is invited to contemplate a vision of an ominous, eerie city, so very different from the city Isaiah knew of self-indulgence, deception and uncaring insensitivity. The "nation from afar," God's instrument, is un-named: in the context of eighth century Isaiah, that nation is surely Assyria, the first significant geo-military threat to Jerusalem; in the longer view of the book of Isaiah, the threat is Babylon, which eventually destroyed the city as Assyria never could. Ultimately, as scripture the poetry asserts that within the historical process, even God's elect people are not safe, not protected, when their life departs from God's intention as expressed in Torah/Law and regulated by the Ten Commandments.

The opening of the book of Isaiah is constituted by a sustained rhetoric of condemnation and threat, interrupted only by the restorative visions of 2:1–4 and 4:2–6: more that is positive will come later but at this stage the emphasis is on the coming loss and the disconcerting recognition that God's way in the world is harshly demanding. By the end of chapter 5 a profound sense of gathering darkness, diminishing hope and impending doom has been created: then comes the call narrative of Isaiah.

The *Riḇ*—A Lawsuit in a Courtroom Drama:

In Hebrew the word *riḇ* (pronounced *reeve*) means a lawsuit brought by one party against another. German scholar Hermann Gunkel is commonly acknowledged as the person who first noticed the use of this type of speech by the pre-exilic prophets. According to him the language, imagery and form of these oracles are derived from the proceedings of the civil lawsuit as conducted in ancient Israel. In these prophetic lawsuits, Israel is cast in the role of the defendant, while God acts as prosecutor-plaintiff and, ultimately, judge. In the way the prophets present the lawsuit there is often a sense of courtroom drama.

So Isaiah 3:13–15 uses the formal language of the courtroom: God, as prosecutor-plaintiff and judge brings a case against Judah; but notice that the case does not name all of the inhabitants of Judah as defendants; instead, the accusation is filed against “elders and princes”—those in roles of leadership, influence and power. Thus Isaiah discerns that the distortion of social relations is not in the first instance caused by all citizens, but principally by policy makers who establish a framework that benefits them at the expense of their fellow citizens. The charge is direct: “You”—not everyone—but “You” have confiscated vineyards and houses. The seizure has not necessarily been violent, but may well have been accomplished through the inexorable workings of economic processes governed by rules that deliberately favoured some at the expense of others. In verse 15 note how the first line concerns “my people” while the second parallels this with “the poor”: in this instance, it is the poor who are said to be God’s people; God is especially allied with the poor as their legal representative and advocate against the leadership class.

Significantly, the book of Isaiah opens as a courtroom drama: 1:2–3 consist of a summons to heaven and earth to act as witnesses to the case about to begin (v.2a; based on Deut. 32:1; see also Micah 6:1–2), an affirmation of God’s generous attentiveness (v.2b), and a legal indictment of unresponsive, recalcitrant Israel (v.3). The case concerns the breakdown in relationship between God and God’s people: it is one of disruption, alienation and contradiction and God calls cosmic witnesses to see the mess that has become of it. In God’s initial submission to the court, God asserts no blame on the part of the divine. Indeed, God has been a caring, attentive parent who has brought Israel to adulthood. The two verbs “reared” and “brought up” suggest nurture that helped a small, weak, vulnerable child to strong viability.

The verbs serve to acquit God of any wrongdoing in the relationship. By contrast, Israel is completely responsible for the disruption through having “rebelled,” a term of active resistance. In verse 3, God’s relationship to Israel is pictured like the owner of an ox or donkey: the animal is completely dependent, and the owner completely reliable. The animal unreservedly trusts the owner, even though such animals are not particularly intelligent or discerning: but an ox or donkey knows instinctively that survival depends on trusting the master. Israel, by contrast, refuses this most elemental relationship of trust upon which everything depends: unlike a knowing donkey or a trusting ox, Israel will starve to death by rejecting its master. Having dramatically captured the attention of the court at the start of the case, the rest of Isaiah 1 goes into more specific detail of the charge-sheet: the depth of Israel’s sin; the distortion of worship; the level of injustice; the corruption of the judicial system; the coming judgment.

Note that the idea of a courtroom, in which different sides of a case are heard, creates a framework for adjudicating between the different claims of the various covenants, and in particular exploring the radically different emphases on inclusion and exclusion. So, for example, in the post-exilic context, Nehemiah and Ezra understood the requirements of covenant renewal to be deeply hostile to foreigners, whereas Third Isaiah (see especially 56:1–8) is radically open to embrace the “other.” It is like they are different witnesses in a case and the listeners are members of the jury.

Ezra and Nehemiah’s Hard-line Covenant

Renewal: The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are presented as two distinct pieces of literature in modern Bibles, but in the longer traditions of both Hebrew and Greek they are treated as one, together dealing with the formation of Judaism in the Persian period after the exile. A great deal of scholarly attention has been devoted to historical issues. In general, the historicity of the leaders and their movements is granted, though much remains unclear. Nehemiah, who comes across as a self-promoting entrepreneur, is commonly dated around 444 BCE and credited as the driving force in rebuilding the city of Jerusalem, with Persian legitimization and financial support. Ezra, the self-effacing teacher of Torah/Law, is commonly dated around 458 BCE and is viewed as the one who reconstitutes Judaism as a community committed to Torah/Law obedience.

Enjoying the full backing of Persia, Ezra undertakes radical reforms designed to preserve the “holy seed” of Israel that has “not separated” from the “peoples of the land” but has “mixed” with them (Ezra 9:1–4). Consequently, Ezra instigates a remarkable and costly reform programme by requiring Jewish men to send away “foreign women” whom they had married; note that these marriages in their own contexts had not been perceived as at all problematical. Thus the Ezra movement is one of Torah/Law purification: it is exclusionary, not only towards non-Jews, but also towards other Jews (those who remained in the land during the exile) who were regarded as less Jewish than the small group of returnees (known as the *golah*, from the Hebrew for “dispersed/diaspora”) who presented themselves as the real Jews, best qualified in pure Torah/Law obedience.

Nehemiah’s work is congruent with that of Ezra (see Neh. 13:4–31). Nehemiah 8 describes the reading of the Torah/Law and Nehemiah 9 records the confession of sin that follows it as the people realize how far short of its standards they have fallen (see also Ezra 9 on the prayer of confession). These two religious events provide the context for the powerful act of covenant making in Nehemiah 9:38–10:39 whereby Israel is reconstituted as a community of intentional obedience to God’s Torah/Law. Together with Ezra, the religious-ideological advocacy of Nehemiah insists on the singular legitimacy of a small community of Babylonian returnees as the only authentic Jews, a claim based on pedigree and sustained by practices of purity from which the other, “inferior” Jews were excluded in principle.

The reform package of Ezra and Nehemiah was enacted with immense authority that readily terminated marriages and disrupted families for the sake of a particular religious passion rooted in a particular notion of Israel as “holy seed”: a community with a pure blood-line. This exclusionary propensity is deeply shocking to many in the modern world. In feminist criticism, the Ezra-Nehemiah approach has been viewed as a heavy-handed patriarchal initiative that regarded women as threats to faith and to the social order, a threat that had to be controlled or eliminated. But note also how anthropologist and biblical scholar Mary Douglas has argued that this type of intense religious passion may be understood as a response to a community feeling under threat; and communities in danger perceive purity as the great antidote when there is the possibility that communal identity may not survive at all. While

there may be validity in this, Fernando Belo has shown that purity is not the only issue in the Torah/Law that might have been taken as the overarching principle of reform: he suggests debt as an alternative agenda of comparable importance (the debt issue is touched on in Nehemiah 5 but not in a way that is definitional for the reform movement, preoccupied as it is with purity). However, it is possible, and perhaps likely, that this option was not pursued because the returning group was composed of well-to-do families who were very aware of social status and social standing, and benefited from the system as it was, especially through the close relationship with the Persian authorities. In part at least, the purity agenda was a mechanism for those who regarded themselves as superior Jews to maintain economic advantage, authority and power over others.

Isaiah and Prophetic Inclusion: Isaiah 56:1–8 also deals with the question of who should be included in the reconstituted community of Judaism. Although the Torah/Law emphasis of verses 1–2 agrees with the insistence of Ezra and Nehemiah, what follows in Isaiah 56 moves in a completely different direction. Whereas Ezra-Nehemiah insists on communal purity that some regard as close to ethnic cleansing, Isaiah envisions inclusion and the embrace of difference. The debate turned on the inclusion of foreigners and eunuchs who sought membership in Judaism but feared rejection. The key verb “exclude/separate” (v.3) is stated in an intense form; it was the governing word in the emerging Judaism of Ezra and Nehemiah for the kind of ordering that would get everything and everyone sorted out and in the right place to avoid disorder, confusion and impurity. As a concept, it moves strongly in an exclusivist direction: its use in Isaiah 56:3 implies that both foreigners and eunuchs anticipated rejection from the community.

The basis for such rejection was apparently found in the Torah/Law provision excluding those with mutilated sexual organs and those from “illicit” marriages (Deut. 23:1–2). Thus the Torah/Law envisioned a restricted and quite exclusive community of purity, and reformers like Ezra and Nehemiah proposed to reinstitute and continue that mandate. In a remarkable way, Isaiah voices a counter-proposal that directly, perhaps intentionally, flies in the face of the old Torah/Law provision: note very carefully that all of these positions are scriptural—Deuteronomy, Ezra, Nehemiah, Isaiah—and are in deep tension; the Bible does not speak with one voice (in this instance anyway); there is no easy proof-texting. Indeed, one

German scholar, Herbert Donner, takes the opening verses of Isaiah 56 as an abrogation of the Torah/Law teaching about these two categories of people: eunuchs and foreign spouses. In this way, this visionary oracle of Isaiah challenges and subverts the Deuteronomic Torah/Law provision.

Eunuchs who kept the covenant and practiced Sabbath were to be included in the community of faith: the specific teaching of Deuteronomy 23:1 is nullified on the grounds that eunuchs should in general be adherents of Torah/Law covenant and should specifically practice Sabbath, a provision required of every Jew and an intensely important discipline in the post-exilic community, which marked obedient Jews as distinctive. To those who meet these requirements, God promises a memorial and an everlasting name, an assurance of not being cut off: the community of Judaism is to be one that remembers, cherishes and preserves the name and identity of those otherwise neglected and nullified in an uncaring world.

As the eunuchs in verses 3–5 are a contested category for inclusion in the emerging community of Torah/Law obedience, so foreigners are a second parallel category. The same Torah/Law traditions that excluded eunuchs also insisted that at least some foreigners had to be excluded (see Deut. 23:2–8). As the post-exilic community of Jews became more attentive to its ethnic constitution, the likelihood of excluding “outsiders” was sure to grow, and did under Ezra and Nehemiah. Isaiah, however, will no more give in to the exclusion of foreigners than to the exclusion of eunuchs, and resists what would have been the easier, more popular option. The two requirements for inclusion of eunuchs in verse 5 are reiterated for foreigners in verse 6a, but prior to those Isaiah suggests that foreigners can also be deeply drawn to the standards of God: and they are welcome for all of this is God’s doing; God is the recruiter and the welcome committee. At the deepest level, foreigners are welcome because God intends that God’s holy mountain and house of prayer (v.7) to be for all people who want to join, all who obey. Thus, Isaiah’s oracle intends to overcome every fearful limitation that is thinkable, that constitutes a human response of defensiveness, every boundary not grounded in God’s own ultimate purposes: the outcome is a mandate to open faith to those traditionally excluded and regarded as outsiders.

The ground for such radical inclusivity is given in the summary oracle of verse 8, now introduced with a special formula so that the urging to inclusion is understood as from God. Three times in the verse,

the verb “gather” is used: “who gathers...I will gather... those already gathered.” The term refers to an end of exile and addresses the “outcasts,” the ones expelled. The verb, in context, defines God’s most characteristic activity: God is an exile-ender who intends homecoming for all peoples; a homecoming to Torah/Law, to community, to communion with God.

There are other texts of radical inclusivity in the book of Isaiah. In chapter 19, during the course of a series of oracles beginning “On that day,” the second (v.18) affirms arch-enemy Egypt. There will be “swearing allegiance to God”: some in Egypt will embrace Yahwism. This might refer to communities of diaspora Jews, which followed God in unorthodox ways, such as the Jewish community in Elephantine. But the following oracles suggest a conversion of Egyptians, who are ready to abandon their own religious commitments. So, in Isaiah 19:19, the longest of these prose oracles, it is extraordinary and clear that the prophet anticipates Egyptians embracing the God of Israel, in a conversion to a new faith. Note, that in a remarkable way, the experience of the Egyptians is presented in terms of the language of exodus, in which God will ultimately heal Egypt.

Then, in 19:23 Egypt and Assyria, the two super-powers of the eighth century BCE that vied for control of the region are envisaged as worshipping together. The word translated “worship” can also be translated “serve” and characteristically refers to Israel serving/worshipping God: here the inference is that Israel’s enemies are being drawn into the sphere of Yahweh’s service and worship. This sense of Egypt, Assyria and Israel all being related to God culminates in the last of this series of oracles (v.24) in one of the grandest, most daring hopes of the entire Bible. The speaker knows the map of the Fertile Crescent well: Israel is squeezed between the southern super-power, Egypt, and the northern super-power, Assyria. The region is saturated with war, blood, hostility, intrigue. Moreover, the speaker well knows all about Israel’s claim to be God’s beloved and elect people. Yet in an extraordinary claim the oracle takes the three names God characteristically calls Israel—“my people,” “the work of my hands,” “my heritage”—and redeploys them: Israel’s long-standing enemies, Assyria and Egypt, are renamed and redefined according to these names reserved exclusively for Israel. By this astonishing renaming, traditional enemies are identified as fellow members of the covenant. The outcome is an ecumenical vision in which former enemies are drawn into commonality. It should be observed, however, that such ecumenism inevitably

requires relinquishing a sense of primacy, privilege and exclusiveness: Egypt and Assyria find their place in God's intentions as Israel opens its sense of election to its adversaries. Ultimately the vision intimates that God cherishes, welcomes, delivers and heals all peoples: it is the world that turns out to be God's chosen people.

Amos reaches a similar conclusion through reference to the exodus in a context in which Israel felt assured and complacent on account of its sense of election. In Amos 9:7, through a series of questions, the prophet provocatively emphasizes that Israel's God has other peoples to whom God attends in powerful, intervening ways—and sometimes these peoples include Israel's long-standing enemies. So, having indicated that Ethiopian Cushites are an important to God as elect Israelites, God acknowledges enacting exodus for Israel, but immediately goes on to insist that God has also enacted exodus for Philistines and Arameans (to "bring up" refers to exodus). According to this radical view, God's exodus type activity can happen in different places, many of which are beyond the purview of Israel's orthodoxy: in this way Israel's exclusivist ideology and theology are subverted. When Amos finishes his questioning, Israel is left without its conviction that it monopolizes God and is disabused of its self-congratulatory self-confidence. Amos does not deny Israel's self-identity as a people of the exodus: he denies that Israel is the only exodus people. In doing so, he punctures Israel's sense of being God's elect people, as it understood that term in a narrow and exclusive way.

Concept Deepening—Reflection on Election:

The concept of election is a traditional way of expressing the conviction that God has chosen Israel to be God's special people in the world and has singularly committed God's own future to Israel's well-being. This conviction is the pervasive, governing premise of faith in the Old Testament: the premise asserts that God is irrevocably linked to Israel and that Israel in its life and future is inalienably connected to God's character and purpose. Several Old Testament traditions express this conviction:

- Of Abraham a tradition says, "I have chosen him" (Gen. 18:19).
- In the Exodus tradition, Israel is God's "firstborn son" (Exod. 4:22).
- At Sinai Israel is, "my treasured possession out of all the peoples" (Exod. 19:5; see also Deut. 7:6–8).

- In an older poem, Israel is God's "own portion... allotted share...the apple of God's eye" (Deut. 32:9–10).

Israel's special status as God's chosen people evidently carries with it a deep, non-negotiable requirement to live in obedience to God by adhering to the Torah/Law. God chose Israel as God's own treasured people from all the peoples of the earth in order that Israel should conform to God's will: in this way the wonder of election is closely connected to the reality of Torah/Law commandments. The God who loves Israel is the God who will be sovereign in Israel's life; on this basis, the eighth and seventh century BCE prophets regularly speak of punishment arising because of disobedience (see Amos 3:2). Indeed, a case can be made that the disaster of the sixth century—the destruction of Jerusalem and the exilic deportation—is a massive rejection of Israel as God's chosen people, although it should be noted that the traditions themselves disagree about the depth of that rejection. Furthermore, at the deepest level, prophetic voices during the exile (especially Isaiah's) reconfirm that Israel is still God's chosen people, a status that ultimately endures the deep disruption (see Isa. 41: 8–10; 44:1–2).

This defining conviction of Israel as chosen lives in tension with awareness, also present in the text, that the God of Israel is the creator of heaven and earth, and therefore the God of many peoples. In traditional understanding, the purpose of the Noah covenant is to articulate this universal claim for God (Gen. 9:8–17). The text of the Old Testament is put together to affirm at one and the same time both the wide extent of God's rule and God's particular commitment to Israel, although different texts tilt the tension in different ways. In Genesis 12:1–3, God's promise to Abraham provides that through Abraham all peoples will be blessed, so that even in this act of particular commitment, others are in view. As noted, Amos 9:7 indicates that God does exodus for many peoples—including Israel's enemies—alongside Israel's exodus. In Isaiah 42:6–7 and 49:6, Israel is to be "a light to the nations." As observed, Isaiah 19:23–25 envisions a coming time when God will have a plurality of chosen peoples and Israel will have no monopoly on that status. Thus the text hints many times that God has other peoples with their own stories of being chosen.

Covenant, Election and Other Aspects of Human Experience:

The concepts of covenant and election connect to the ideas in the other aspects of human experience in a rich and significant number of ways:

- Using the religious texts studied, which demonstrate a plurality of views, a discussion can be opened on their interpretation and more generally how to handle the Bible when it speaks in different voices that cannot be harmonized; this should include the issue of fundamentalism, including claims such as “the Bible teaches,” and how different biblical traditions can be handled; this leads to consideration of hermeneutics.
- The perennial issue of religious exclusivity and inclusivity can be explored through these texts, some of which move in one direction while some move in the opposite; both are in the Bible; this may be used as the basis for examination of exclusion in the modern church, how this is justified and whether this takes account of everything the Bible says.
- Philosophically the “scandal of particularity” intrinsic to a theology of election is an affront to the concept of “universal reason” applicable to every situation; but in exploring the relationship between religion and politics, it can be discussed how politically oriented Liberation Theology, rooted in the idea of God’s preferential option for poor, takes the concept of election in a new direction; it may be assessed to see what support is provided for it by the Bible, and from the perspective of whether it is valid for religion to be involved in politics.
- The political-religious impact of the idea of a chosen people can be traced in Zionism and its claim to “greater Israel,” the notion of “manifest destiny” in the United States, and the impact of apartheid in South Africa; the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, grounded in the idea of the elect, may also be examined for its influence in Northern Ireland, and in wider European history.
- If it is true that texts like Ezra and Nehemiah are exclusionary and tend towards what some see as ethnic cleansing, the issue of how far governments should monitor the use of such texts may be explored; should a text be allowed just because it claims a religious basis and if so on what basis?
- It may, alternatively, be argued and demonstrated that ancient texts, such as the covenant with Noah, have a role to play in the modern ecological and environmental movement.

