BIBLICAL LITERATURE AND THE EMERGENCE OF ANCIENT JEWISH NATIONALISM

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In all the controversy surrounding the relationship between ‘biblical’ Israel and whatever historical entities actually existed in Iron Age Palestine, much more attention has been paid to origins than to outcomes. Whether the Israel of the biblical histories was entirely real or entirely invented, the fact remains that the idea of this Israel persisted, and came to underpin a Jewish identity which had strong political aspirations to self-determination. While neighbouring countries all vanished into history’s stockpot, there were Jews who continued to view themselves as a distinct community, and who defied all political realities in their expectation of future independence from the rule of other peoples. To the modern eye, there is nothing very remarkable about the assertion and preservation of identity by communities that have lost, or never attained, such political independence. In the ancient world, however, this phenomenon is extremely unusual, and deserves more scholarly attention than it has received.

The key difference between the ancient and modern worlds, in this respect, is the modern prevalence of nationalist ideas. As historians now generally agree, the very concept of ‘national identity’ is no older than a few centuries, and the self-understanding of ancient communities was generally structured in quite different ways. If the terms ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ refer, then, to concepts which have arisen only in response to particular needs and changes in the modern world, they would seem to have no place in discussions of the ancient Levant. Nearly thirty years ago, George Mendenhall correspondingly declared, ‘Nationalism, like racism, is for all practical purposes a nonexistent operational concept in ancient history.’

More recent scholars have followed his example, and, although the term ‘nation’ is still bandied about in

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a loose way, the idea of nationalism as such has received little consideration in biblical studies. Even those scholars who are most keen to portray Israel as an ideological or intellectual construct deprecate the use of such terms: ‘The concepts of self-identity and self-understanding that belong to the European nation states,’ remarks Thomas Thompson, ‘demand too different a view of sovereignty to have a place in antiquity’.  

It is certainly true that the modern world has given rise to many ideas that would never have occurred to the peoples of antiquity. However, the modern origins of modern nationalism do not exclude the possibility of separate ancient origins for ancient nationalism. Superficially, at least, the self-understanding and aspirations of early Judaism seem to reflect ideas very like those of modern nationalism, and, at the very least, to justify comparison with that phenomenon. More is at stake here than simple terminology. Although it would be too much to claim that the origins and mechanisms of modern nationalism are fully understood, the extensive research done in this area does open up new and interesting approaches to understanding the reasons why Jewish self-identity evolved in such an unusual way.

To explore those approaches, it is useful to begin by defining terms. However, in asking whether the concept of Israel established by the biblical texts was in any way ‘nationalistic’ in the modern sense, we rapidly run up against the problems that have beset all attempts to define that sense. Eric Hobsbawm, noting the difficulties, cites Walter Bagehot’s remark, ‘We know what it is

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2 Thomas L. Thompson, *The Bible in History: How Writers Create a Past* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1999), p. 379. The retrojection of modern nationalist perspectives is also implicitly criticised in Keith Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (London: Routledge, 1996), although Whitelam is more concerned that this process has been one-sided in Palestine, excluding a ‘national’ history for the Palestinian Arabs. Among the ‘radicals’, Niels Lemche has paid most attention to the topic, especially in his recent *The Israelites in History and Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998). Here, like Whitelam, he is most concerned with the unthinking imposition of modern assumptions about identity (see especially pp. 8-21, 165).

3 In his article on ‘Nationalism’, in Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (eds.), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3rd edn, 1996), pp. 1027-1028, Antony Spawforth denies the general existence of nationalism in the ancient world where ‘there was rarely a tradition of political unity even among ethnic groups sharing a common culture’; he does, however, single out the Jews and the indigenous Egyptians of the Ptolemaic period as important exceptions.
when you do not ask us, but we cannot very quickly explain or define it'.

Most discussions of the term ‘nationalism’, though, concur broadly with Gellner’s claim, ‘Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.’

This description, of course, leaves the term ‘national’ itself undefined, and Gellner goes on to suggest that ‘nationality’ is contingent upon, on the one hand a shared culture, and on the other simply a recognition by individuals that they belong to the same nation.

Gellner’s first point clearly begs many questions about the definition of culture itself, and about the degree to which ‘fellow nationals’ are required to share the same culture. To illustrate the problem, we need look no further than Great Britain, where British nationalism in the last century was able to embrace such varied characters as London bankers, Northumbrian fishwives, and Welsh shepherds. In the improbable event of three such characters ever meeting, it is unlikely that they would have found much in common, even had each been able to understand what the others were saying. Since many modern nations have been forged successfully from groups which lacked common ancestry, history and even language, ‘shared culture’ is at best a very vague concept.

Gellner’s second point, however, dovetails with a rather separate strand of the modern discussion, which highlights the importance of mutual recognition and rests on Benedict Anderson’s influential description of the nation as an ‘imagined community’. ‘It is imagined,’ Anderson explains, ‘because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’. To this basic description he adds...

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the qualifications that the nation is imagined as limited, sharing the world with other nations and not aspiring to include all people, and that it is imagined as sovereign; finally, the nation is imagined as a community of equal comrades, whatever its actual social inequalities. ‘Ultimately,’ Anderson remarks, ‘it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings’. 9

On such an analysis, nationality is essentially ‘all in the head’, and nations do not occur naturally, but are artefacts. 10 In this respect they are comparable to ‘ethnic’ groups that, in Thomas Eriksen’s words, ‘consider themselves and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive’. 11 Indeed, we might say that ethnicity and nationalism are two sides of the same coin: both are constructs, imputing affinities and differences which need not be objectively measurable; the most obvious difference between them lies in the aspiration of a nation to sovereignty, and so it is possible, indeed common, for nations to consist of different ethnic groups. 12

The relevance of these ideas to discussions of Israelite identity should be apparent. In the absence of any obvious reason to view Israel as a distinct group on linguistic or other ‘objective’ grounds, Israelite ethnicity would seem to lie in the perception of the Jew-

9 Anderson, Imagined Communities, p. 7.
10 In the light of recent discussions about the agenda of some biblical literature, it is important to note that nations are rarely just created and imposed by individuals or groups with an agenda: the artefactual character of nations, in Anderson’s sense, lies in the image of community created by each member of that community collectively and in their own mind.
12 The distinction between ‘national’ and ‘ethnic’ is complicated, and the situation is not helped by the often rather loose uses of both. If nationalism is anything more than ‘ethnicity with attitude’—and most scholars agree that it is—then the assertion of a right to sovereignty is probably the best visible mark of differentiation; see Eriksen, Ethnicity and Nationalism, p. 6. We might also note that individuals tend to have a single national identity, but may have several ethnic ‘identities’ based on context (e.g., ‘black’, ‘African’, and ‘Hutu’ could all be used by the same person). Despite their resemblance in other respects, it is not clear that ethnicity and nationalism are shaped by the same factors. For the problem of defining ‘ethnicity’ (a term which is even more modern than ‘nationalism’) see, conveniently, J. Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (eds.), Ethnicity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 3-16. Ethnicity is not the same as ‘race’, which is itself commonly now taken to be yet another largely artificial construct.
ish community that it is different from other peoples, and that it transcends political boundaries. Reverting to Gellner’s idea of a political principle, we might also legitimately suggest that this perception involves a sort of nationalism. There probably never was a time when the historical Israel or Judah occupied the biblical boundaries to the exclusion of other peoples, and if Israel was ever a single political unit, it was only so for a short period in the distant past: biblical literature, from Deuteronomy onwards at least, though, expresses an aspiration to political unity and exclusive occupation of that area.

In this respect, the Israel of the Bible and of the post-exilic period stands out as quite different from most other ancient cultures. Jonathon Hall’s recent work on ethnic identity in Greece, for instance, emphasises the extent to which Greek identity was based primarily on myths of origin rather than on objective differences, although attempts were sometimes made to highlight local distinctiveness through physical and cultural manifestations. Appeals for help addressed by one city-state to another may have been based sometimes on a claim to shared ethnicity, and Thucydides suggests that it was also used on occasion as an excuse for political or military intervention. The city-state itself, though, remained the prime focus for loyalty; there was no suggestion that political control or organisation should correspond to ethnic boundaries. Equally, Greeks were able to forge a shared identity as Hellenes, particularly in the face of the Persian threat, but this did not lead to any attempt at Greek unification. Our information on the city-states of the Levant is limited but seems broadly in line with this picture of Greece and we certainly have no evi-

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13 Although he muddies the waters by apparently using the terms ‘nationality’ and ‘ethnicity’ interchangeably, Lemche has given an interesting outline of the biblical understanding of Israelite identity, set against Herodotus’ definition of ethnicity; see The Israelites in History and Tradition, pp. 107-17.

14 That is not, of course, to say that the perception of Israelite unity has no historical basis; it is quite possible that the two kingdoms genuinely did emerge from the ‘Israel’ mentioned by Merneptah (whatever that may have been). The historical facts of the matter, though, are not a sufficient explanation for the continuance or emergence of the perception; many peoples regard themselves as one nation despite different historical origins, or as separate nations despite shared origins, and this shift can happen very quickly.


dence for any pan-Canaanite political movement.\footnote{It is difficult to interpret biblical or other references to various peoples in Palestine, and even the definition of a ‘Canaanite’ is notoriously elusive; see N. Lemche, The Canaanites and Their Land: The Tradition of the Canaanites (JSOTSup, 110; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991). The Amarna letters make it very clear, though, that the city-states operated without any general appeal to perceived ‘ethnic’ affiliations, and the relationship between ethnic groups and political entities may have been similar to that found in Greece.} The biblical conceptualisation of Israel, then, seems to introduce a sense of identity very different from that which prevailed in the ancient city-states and most of the ancient world.\footnote{It is difficult, of course, to assess ideas in some neighbouring countries, like Moab and Edom, and it is possible that the Jews were not unique in this respect.}

Although this very old concept of Israel is hardly a product of the modern nationalist mindset,\footnote{Whitelam, in The Invention of Ancient Israel, may have a point when he criticises the projection of modern Zionist ideas back on to ancient Israel: the Zionist movement is surely a product of modern nationalism and, in a negative way, modern anti-semitism. However, Whitelam does not seem to recognise that biblical literature itself is concerned with sovereignty in the land.} there is surely a strong case for suggesting that it represents something very similar. Only if we insist that nationalism must be modern by definition, indeed, can we reasonably deny that the self-understanding of biblical Israel fits quite well into most modern understandings of a ‘nation’, or that the biblical aspirations, later manifested in Jewish political movements of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, seem ‘nationalistic’.

The terminology, though, is not really important. My point is not simply that we should feel free to speak of this Israel as a ‘nation’—although there seems no good reason to bar the term. Rather, the most significant implication is surely that we may be able to shed some light on the development of this concept by considering the factors which gave rise to the comparable phenomenon of modern nationalism. Modern historians, after all, are asking many of the same questions about the ways in which disparate individuals and groups come to perceive themselves as a distinct community with the right to self-governance. If their answers are varied, and far from conclusive, they do at least open up a number of interesting possibilities, and provide many potential analogies.

Nationalists themselves tend to view nations as having an ancient, almost primeval existence, while acknowledging that they
need to reach a point of self-recognition before asserting their national character. Hobsbawm, again, cites Karl Renner, who was writing in 1899:

Once a certain degree of European development has been reached, the linguistic and cultural communities of peoples, having silently matured throughout the centuries, emerge from the world of passive existence as peoples. They become conscious of themselves as a force with a historical destiny. They demand control over the state, as the highest available instrument of power, and strive for their political self-determination.\(^{20}\)

One consequence of this idea is, of course, the tendency to project the boundaries of modern nation states backward on to quite different political units, so that Alfred, for example, becomes a king of England in the popular imagining, rather than of Wessex. Correspondingly, the political division of nations comes to be viewed as a temporary aberration: so the unification of Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall was widely regarded as natural and inevitable, even though a united Germany had existed for less than a lifetime before the division into East and West, and even though there were more than 350 separate German states only a few hundred years before.\(^ {21}\) It is, equally, a testament to the power of such ideas that it seems hard now to envisage a world in which England could be part of the same state as areas of France, or in which an English king could speak only German.

Such instances lend weight to the idea that, against the nationalist view, the actual circumstances of the past may have very little to do with the current self-perception of a nation, and that nationalism does not so much derive from history as subsume it. If so, then we need to seek other explanations for the emergence of nationalism, and this is the point at which controversy enters discussions of the modern phenomenon, with various different dates and causes suggested. Broadly speaking, the period of the Industrial Revolution and the American War of Independence is usually taken to be a key turning-point, with social and political re-alignments giving rise to the need for new senses of identity.


\(^{21}\) The modern desire for German unification in fact seems to go back to the period of French domination in the early nineteenth century, although it was by no means universally held at that time, and probably did not move beyond the intellectual classes of a few states before about 1840. There is a useful recent outline of German nationalism’s early development in William Carr, *The Origins of the Wars of German Unification* (London: Longman, 1991).
It has also been argued, however, that the roots of the new nationalism can be traced back before these events, to political developments in the late medieval period. 22 The precise circumstances are unimportant here, though, and it is possible to distil a general claim that nationalism arose or was cultivated as a replacement for ideas of identity, community and sovereignty which were no longer adequate or appropriate. It was in the first instance, then, a response to new circumstances rather than an attempt to change a stable situation.

It seems clear also that the emergence of nationalism was dependent upon some means of showing people that they belonged to a distinct nation. Here a number of writers have stressed the significance of the written word and of the printing press. Anderson points out that by 1500 CE there were already some 20 million printed volumes available in Europe (around one for every five people), and Linda Colley, writing about eighteenth century Britain, notes that the various British almanacs sold more than half a million copies each year. 23 Although universal literacy was still far from being established, the printed word permitted the dissemination of information and ideas on a vast scale. As Anderson remarks moreover, books offered a visible common culture to readers and a clearer separation of dialects into languages.

Particular books could also play a significant role in the establishment of national identity. In a famous essay, Hugh Trevor-Roper points out that the publication of Ossian’s epic poetry in the 1760’s and of a supposed sixteenth century text on clan tartans in 1829 were important components in the establishment of a distinctive modern Scottish identity. 24 Within seventy years, the

22 It is possible to point to, say, the Tudor promotion of a distinctive ‘English’ character in the medieval period. See, e.g., Edwin Jones, The English Nation: The Great Myth (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1998). However, the nation-state was far from achieving dominance as a political model at that time, and Hendrik Spruyt, The Sovereign State and its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), has recently shown that it was far from being an inevitable successor to the old feudal system. It may be more realistic to view the Middle Ages as a period during which certain foundations were laid for later nationalism.


24 Hugh Trevor-Roper, ‘The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland’, in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 15-42. It should be noted that this article is a little mischievous and has not wholly endeared itself to Scottish historians.
highland Scots, initially regarded as scruffy Irish immigrants, came to be feted as the last remnant of a glorious ancient civilisation, and the lowland Scots, who had hitherto despised them, were queuing up to fix their place in the highland clan system and to buy their traditional ancient costume. Both books, as it happens, were patent forgeries, while the ancient costume relied on the philibeg kilt, designed around 1730 by an Englishman, and on tartan cloths first imported from Flanders in the sixteenth century. None of that is really important, though, beside the very obvious power of such books to shape and legitimise a sense of identity, even when it is not their primary purpose to do so.

Put in very general terms, then, descriptions of modern nationalism see it as the formation of new identities, often transcending rather than replacing established ideas of ethnicity, in the face of changing political circumstances. This process of formation relies on a perception of shared culture, which is itself facilitated by the dissemination of literature. Such literature can contribute specific ideas of national history or identity but may just provoke consciousness of a culture shared with other readers.

These considerations are obviously relevant to the development of ideas about Israel. Some of the biblical writers do present the past from a national or ethnic perspective, with the emergence of Israel, for instance, inherent in the stories of the patriarchs. For the pre-exilic period, such a presentation is comprehensible in terms of religious or political ideology. It is much harder to see why, though, the same ideas are carried over into whatever proportion of the literature is exilic or post-exilic. Most conquered peoples and cities seemingly ceased to exist as concepts when they ceased to exist as political entities, and aspirations to sovereignty were not normally attached to ideas of identity which transcended the political unit. The survival of individuals after the destruction of Jerusalem, therefore, does not in itself explain why their descendants continued to hope for its political restoration; likewise, if there was a united monarchy in the tenth century, its existence does not alone explain why people yearned for a united Israel many centuries later. Studies of modern nationalism suggest that such ideas, and the concept of community which lies behind them, require some means of telling people that they belong together, and that this past is their heritage.

I have already mentioned that some scholars see the spread of literature as central to spreading this sense of community in more
recent times. Even without printing, though, vernacular literature enables the dissemination of ideas and culture in an efficient and authoritative way. We find in the Bible itself, in fact, a very strong interest in the written word, both as a source of authority and as a means of preservation and distribution. This is sometimes clear in the prophetic literature, as when Jeremiah’s prophecies are to be written on a scroll for delivery to the king (Jer. 36), or when Ezekiel not only writes prophecy, but receives written words from God (Ezek. 2:8–3:3). More fundamentally, of course, the Law is written on tablets by God in Exodus 32 and Deuteronomy 10: the covenant is based on written texts. Similarly, Deuteronomy is very self-consciously a book of law (see for example, 28:58), and is most probably supposed to be not only the book read and copied by Joshua at Mount Ebal (Josh. 8), but also the book found by Josiah’s officials and used as the basis for his reforms (2 Kgs 22). When a need is found for supplementary laws, to regulate the new institution of kingship, these too are written down (1 Sam. 10:25). In this respect, then, the Israelites are portrayed as a ‘people of the book’ long before there was a Bible.25

This is surely important, even if it is only a Deuteronomic or Deuteronomistic retrojection. For these influential writers and their successors, Israel is united by its obligations to obey those written laws, which are to be read to the whole people every seven years, according to Deuteronomy 31, and which are said to have been read to them not only by Moses, Joshua and Josiah, but also later by Ezra (Neh. 8). That the biblical writers consider books important is surely confirmed, moreover, by the very fact that they have chosen to write them. On even the latest reasonable datings of the Pentateuchal sources and the Deuteronomistic history Israel has one of the earliest written accounts of any people’s past, without any obvious known precedent in the ancient Near East.26 These biblical authors, then, not only take the written character of Israel’s law very seriously, but add to it a written account of

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25 The role of scripture in biblical literature has been discussed most recently by Moshe Halbertal, in People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 11-44. See also M. Fishbane, Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

26 This is not the place to examine the origins and possible precedents of the historical books. Suffice it to say that, while there are, of course, historical and mythological accounts of particular events or lives, nothing comparable to the ‘national’ histories of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomistic History or Chronicles has yet been found.
Israel’s origins and history, probably inventing a new genre in order to do so.

While writing and literature have an important part to play in some other ancient religions, none come close to the preoccupation with written authority which characterises Judaism from this early stage.27 The texts which assert the importance of writing from Sinai onward, moreover, are themselves rapidly granted authority. Indeed, we might say that Deuteronomy validates itself by identification with the written Law of the covenant. It is not easy to associate this with any sort of oral tradition.28 In the case of the historical books, the issue is more complicated. We may observe, however, not only that these works themselves often support the idea of written law, but that their main themes are expressed principally through structural and editorial features. No single story in the patriarchal narratives can represent the function of the whole as an account of Israel’s origins and God’s promises, any more than individual narratives in the Deuteronomistic History or Chronicles can be said to present those works’ analyses of Israelite history. While all these texts may draw on oral tradition, therefore, the picture of Israel which they construct is quintessentially textual.29

Judaism of the post-exilic period has a concept of Israel that bears little resemblance to the political realities of either its present or its recent past, and it also places a strong emphasis on the authority of written texts which delimit the nature of Israel and its duties. Both characteristics are highly unusual, possibly unique


28 Goody, The Logic of Writing, p. 39, puts it neatly: ‘The Bible does not represent the writing down of an oral religion so much as the creation of a literate one’.

29 It is worth emphasising at this point the very profound difference between oral and written discourse in many ancient and modern societies. For example, Andrew Shryock, in Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), describes the reluctance of Bedouin tribesmen in Jordan to assist in the compilation of a written history in which the competing traditions would have to be resolved authoritatively. He observes also that written Jordanian histories tend to play down tribal history altogether, in favour of emphasising the ruling dynasty’s descent from the Prophet and the place of Jordan among the Arab nations. Such examples show that written history can have a role quite different from that of oral tradition, even in modern societies with relatively high rates of literacy.
in the ancient world, and it seems eminently plausible that the two should be related, with the texts providing the basis for the concept of Israel. Those individuals who felt themselves to be part of ‘Israel’, rather than just Judahites or citizens of the Persian empire, may have done so principally because of the existing biblical accounts, with their authoritative declaration of identity and their role as a focal point for religious ideas.

Just as literature seems to have played a role in shaping modern national identities during periods of political re-alignment, so authoritative, ‘scriptural’ literature may have offered an identity to people deprived of their familiar structures of state. It does not really matter whether those texts were based on historical fact or were as spurious as Ossian. The point, rather, is that this sense of community, so out of step with political and geographical realities that it could unite people hundreds of miles apart and without a country of their own, must have been fostered by something. Given both the apparently strong interest of this community in texts, and the lessons of modern nationalism, the ‘biblical’ literature of the time is surely the strongest candidate. With the emphasis on such texts giving rise to the creation of new books, moreover, the process may have become self-perpetuating.

This does leave the question of dissemination. Even allowing that books may have been read publicly, a method of promulgation which is later preserved, perhaps, in the synagogues, it seems unlikely that there could have been wide access to the biblical literature. Issues of literacy aside, the mass production of books was no easy matter before the introduction of printing. We may be wrong, however, to suppose that there was a need for distribution on a very large scale. At whatever date the texts fostered a sense of nationhood, they may have done so initially within only a small section of society, most probably in the upper classes: Ezra-Nehemiah makes it fairly explicit that the sense of Israelite identity was not shared by all the people of the land after the Return.30

I have argued that the unusual development of a national ‘Israelite’ identity may have been facilitated by the very existence of authoritative literature. If this literature included works like Deut-

30 Modern nationalist movements are often perceived to begin within the upper strata of societies, where intellectual influences may be strongest, so an origin for Israelite nationalism in the literate elite would be a further parallel. See, e.g., Smith, National Identity, p. 73.
eronomy, furthermore, then the very concept of a united Israel was already in place, and ripe for adoption. This might raise a chicken-and-egg question: how could the literature present nationalist concepts if the rise of Israelite nationalism was dependent on some of that literature existing already? This problem only exists, though, if we assume that the early texts were themselves genuinely nationalist, and that seems improbable.\textsuperscript{31} We have no reason to believe that writers would invent or consciously promote an idea of nationhood in a world which had no ‘nations.’ More probably, the presentation of a unified Israel in, say, Deuteronomy, was originally linked to specific political or religious objectives—a claim to northern territory after 721 BCE, perhaps. There are many parallels to the formulation of ethnic history in response to such needs.\textsuperscript{32} The existence of such works, though, with their claim to authority and depictions of an ancient, unified Israel, gave the Jews something which other peoples did not have when their political institutions were destroyed and their old identities lost.

In a rush to deny the claim of modern nationalism to be ancient, scholars have, perhaps, too readily overlooked the nationalist aspects of Israelite identity: in its claims to territory and its political aspirations, as well as its strong consciousness of an ethnic bond, post-exilic Judaism bears a very strong resemblance to the modern ‘nation.’ Such nations depend upon a sense of primary community that goes beyond locality and established political structures, and it is this sense which is generally absent in the ancient world. The Jews, for some reason, placed a high premium on the written word, and possessed texts which authoritatively set

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\textsuperscript{31} It is possible, of course, that none of the texts which we have are early, pre-exilic works, and that it is lost predecessors which formed the basis for nationalist ideas; I prefer, though, to view some of the key biblical texts, most notably Deuteronomy, as pre-exilic.

\textsuperscript{32} Scotland again provides an example in the Declaration of Arbroath, a letter addressed to the Pope in 1320, which asserts the ancient distinctiveness and freedom of the Scottish people, who had travelled from the Black Sea via Spain, to conquer the territory of Scotland under divine protection. The declaration was a reaction against English claims, and followed a lengthy battle of wits during which both sides wildly fabricated ancient history to prove their assertions. For a fascinating recent study, see Edward J. Cowan, ‘Identity, Freedom and the Declaration of Arbroath’, in D. Brown, R.J. Finlay and M. Lynch (eds.), \textit{Image and Identity: The Making and Re-making of Scotland Through the Ages} (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1998). The obvious influence of biblical narratives on the Scottish claims, incidentally, points up the often neglected role of the biblical Israel in itself shaping modern identities.
out the rights, duties and history of the people. Whatever other factors were involved, it seems likely that these texts provided an identity around which national consciousness could crystallize, and a common culture which engendered a sense of common community. In this way they played a role comparable to that of books and pamphlets in the rise of modern nationalism.

Abstract

The post-exilic concept of Israel can usefully be understood as analogous to the modern concept of a nation, and the conclusions of modern nationalist studies applied to the study of its emergence. By providing an account of the past and authoritative delineations of the community, the existing biblical texts may have provided the focus for a new sense of identity, whatever their original purpose and relationship with historical events.