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Israelites and Canaanites, Christians and Jews: Studies in Self-Definition

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My concern is with the phenomenon of self-definition, and particularly with the self-definition of one group over against another group. I shall consider two test-cases, one ancient and the other modern, the self-definition of Ancient Israel in relation to the Canaanites as evidenced in the Hebrew Bible, and the self-definition of Christians in relation to Jews in the Christian experience of reading the Hebrew Bible as Old Testament.[1]

Self and Other in Ancient Israel

I begin with the distinction between Israel and Canaan as presented in the Bible. This case illustrates how complex can be the mixture of reality and fantasy in the self-definition of a nation. Some words from the book of Deuteronomy:

'You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom

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> you shall dispossess served their gods, upon the high mountains and upon the hills and under every green tree; you shall tear down their altars, and dash in pieces their pillars, and burn their Asherim with fire; you shall hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy their name out of that place.' (Deut. 12.2–3)

Israel presented herself as being distinctive, a people set apart. This emphasis marks the biblical story from Genesis 12 onwards; in the call of Abram, Israel is effectively called to be a people, 'I will make of you a great nation' (Gen. 12.2). The story of Jacob and Esau is all about Israelite identity over against others. Jacob represents Israel; through his craftiness, he triumphs over Esau, who represents the enemy Edom (See especially Genesis 27). Even though Israel was aware of having closer ties with some neighbours (like the Edomites) than with others, this often serves, as in this case, only to increase the passion with which she differentiates herself from them. No opportunity is missed in the narratives of Genesis to score points against Israel's rivals! At least one such case is found even before the account of Abram's call. I refer to the strange story in Gen. 9.20 ff, where Noah's son Ham, father of Canaan, sees the drunken Noah's nakedness, and this provokes a curse, not upon Ham, but upon his son, Canaan: 'Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers' (Gen. 9.25).

The account of Israel's bondage in Egypt and her subsequent Exodus are strongly marked by a self-consciousness of being different from the Egyptians. Israel has to leave Egypt in order to find her real identity with her God in the wilderness and the wilderness is presented as a kind of cultural vacuum. But the emphasis on separation is most obvious in the account of the invasion of Canaan under Joshua and the subsequent establishment of an Israelite homeland in Palestine. The picture which is presented is that of Israel coming in from outside to claim (as her God-given heritage) the land which had been promised to her forefathers. The native Canaanites are put to the sword and strong institutional barriers are erected to maintain purity and separation from any remnant. This struggle for ethnic and cultic purity continues in the work of the Prophets, such as Elijah and Hosea, who call on Israel to reject totally the ways and influence of all things Canaanite.

But this familiar picture is very far from being the plain truth. It is not to be denied that later on, during and after the Exile, a real distinctiveness becomes well established (Israel marked by 'badges' of identity, such as circumcision and sabbath observance), but how far back in history does this distinctiveness really go?

Historical study has revealed that Israel borrowed a huge amount from her neighbours, especially the Canaanites. Monarchy, prophecy,

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the sacrificial system, the liturgical calendar—all of these, to one degree or another, were owed to the Canaanites. If Canaan and Israel really were culturally distinct, as the Bible implies, one would expect the evidence of Palestinian archaeology to witness to a clear cultural shift, from Canaanite to Israelite, in about 1200, the period when Israel is supposed to have occupied the land. But this we do not find. Culturally the Israelites appear distinctive in few if any significant ways. The familiar claims of the Bible begin to look decidedly suspect.

But it is not just that the Israelites borrowed a lot from the Canaanites. Some scholars believe that the Israelites actually were themselves mostly Canaanites! As long ago as 1962 a very radical theory was put forward. G.E. Mendenhall[2] argued that Israel had, for the most part, not come in from outside Palestine but was rather an indigenous group, effectively the product of a proletarian revolution against Canaanite feudalism. This bold theory was not widely accepted at the time but over the years, and especially through the more nuanced presentation of N.K. Gottwald,[3] it has gained wide acceptance. Indeed, many today would say that at least a significant element of what became Israel were indigenous Canaanites. Such a position makes it easier to account for the cultural continuity and the lack of archaeological evidence of a clear break. It also helps us explain stories like that of the Gibeonites, in Joshua 9. In this story, the inhabitants of the Canaanite town of Gibeon trick the Israelites into thinking that they have come from a very far country. Taken in by this, the Israelites agree to make a covenant or treaty with these Canaanites. This is one of a number of places in the biblical account where we glimpse a more complex social reality than is acknowledged in the now dominant story of Israel's invasion from outside Canaan.

It is above all (though not exclusively) in the hands of those we call the Deuteronomists that the emphasis on separation becomes normative, as is well illustrated in the words from Deuteronomy 12 quoted earlier. This rigorous party of reformers, closely allied, it seems, with the prophetic movement, rose to particular prominence under King Josiah in the late seventh century. Their special literary style and their ideology of separateness have left their stamp on many parts of the Hebrew Bible. Indeed some have argued that this is the most characteristic perspective in the Hebrew canon as a whole.

But why all the urgent protesting of distinctiveness on Israel's part? Surely it is precisely because Israel stands in so many ways in *continuity* with its cultural environment that the need is felt to make such sharp distinctions. Israel, vulnerable and insecure about its identity, insists upon a wholly separate origin, indeed a foundation in divine election.

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There is a sense in which we could describe this as a 'mythology' of Israel's origins—and it is hardly surprising that the concerns are very different from those which would characterize an ethnographic study of the origins of Israel. Israel's self-understanding and her perception of her Canaanite neighbours become polarized. Canaan becomes like a mirror image of Israel, with Israel holding all the positive qualities and Canaan all the negative. Thus Israel defines itself at the expense of the Canaanites, onto whom are projected all of the things which are not 'owned' and integrated within the identity of Israel. The Canaanites are idolatrous, sensual, dissolute. Israel typifies the antithesis of all these features—monotheistic, pure, self-disciplined. I do not intend here to rule out theological considerations, in a reductionist way—rather, my concern is to suggest that there are powerful psychological dynamics at work as well.

How widespread was this Israelite self-identification? It may well be that at the popular level, right down to the Exile in the sixth century, life went on among most Israelites in a remarkably Canaanite way. Certainly the archaeological record (difficult though it is to interpret) would seem to suggest this, and even as late as the time of Jeremiah Israelites are presented as making offerings to goddesses (e.g. Jer. 44.17: 'We will burn incense to the queen of heaven, and pour out libations to her, as we used to'). It would seem that the Deuteronomistic movement represents just one, perhaps rather élitist, viewpoint (albeit the dominant one) in a complex situation. Most of the evidence is lost to us, since the victors (in matters ideological as well as military) have the last word; but enough clues survive to suggest that the full picture would have been a richly varied one. Such clues throw into relief orthodox Israel's definition of herself as distinctive and homogeneous, the perspective which now dominates the final form of the scriptures.[4]

Christian Self and Jewish Other

The term 'Hebrew Bible' has been used up to this point. The reason for this is that I have been trying to speak of ancient Israel and its writings—so far as is possible—on their own terms. However, as Christians we read the Jewish scriptures in the context of the Christian Bible—we encounter them not as Hebrew Bible but as Old Testament. Our reading context is provided by the community of the Church, and within this context (though not, I believe, outside it) the body of literature we are discussing is rightly called the Old Testament.[5]

But this introduces a new version of the question of self and other—the question of the Christian self and the Jewish other. I am concerned here not with the emergence of early Christianity,[6] but rather with

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Christian reading of the Old Testament today. Christianity has understood itself as a fulfilment of the promises to ancient Israel, particularly with regard to the coming of the Messiah and the Kingdom of God. Classically, the Gospel of Matthew, for example, has repeated refrains such as 'All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet' (Matt. 1.22). Texts such as the famous Emmanuel one in Isaiah 7 came to be understood simply as predictions of Jesus, and very plain predictions at that. There was an implicit assumption behind this—that the Jews must have been wilfully blind and hard of heart to reject a Messiah so clearly announced in their own scriptures. The Dominican friar, Lucas Grollenburg has tellingly argued that such Christian assumptions are nothing less than antisemitic.[7]

The Christian claim to fulfil Judaism amounts to a claim to supercede Judaism. This has meant that Christianity has defined itself at the expense of Judaism. The headings in some older English Bibles are a real eye-opener. Passages in the Psalms or the Prophets which hold out assurances of divine favour are often headed 'God's promises to his Church', whereas passages which are full of condemnations will often be headed 'God's judgement upon his sinful people, the Jews'. Here we see Christian self-definition at work, and it is very much at the expense of Judaism.

There are unmistakable parallels between ancient Israel's definition of itself in relation to the Canaanites and Christianity's definition of itself in relation to Judaism. In so far as Christianity defines itself at the expense of Judaism, Judaism is, of course, by definition, incomplete, unfulfilled. To sustain this judgement a stereotype has been created. Judaism is legalistic and casuistical, lacking a sense of the need of God's grace. In earlier times, especially at the popular level, Christians went further—Jews were all but demonized, accused of child sacrifice and other atrocities. It is interesting to reflect psychologically upon such phenomena—do they represent, in part at least, a projection onto Judaism of the things which are not 'owned' and integrated within the identity of the Church? Throughout the centuries, Christians have charged the Jews with the ultimate sin of 'deicide', killing God himself—what might this say about the failure of Christians to acknowledge their own sins? Recently Jewish writers such as Hyam Maccoby and Howard Jacobson have explored such themes,[8] but so have Christians too, among them Rosemary Radford Ruether and A. Roy Eckardt.[9] This is far from just an intellectual matter. We should not underestimate the role played by 'supersessionist' forms of Christian doctrine (together with a complex range of other factors) in the shaping of the antisemitism which has claimed millions of Jewish lives in the

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course of the twentieth century. If Christianity has superseded Judaism, then—so the ugly logic has gone—Jews ought not still to be around.

The challenge such questions pose to Christian self-understanding is far reaching. Must Christianity, if it is to have any distinctive identity, always define itself at the expense of a Jewish 'other'? Is antisemitism intrinsic to the process of Christian self-definition? These are weighty questions, which I shall not presume to answer here. My purpose is rather to argue that such issues begin to raise their heads as soon as we appropriate the Jewish scriptures and read them as 'Old Testament'. I said earlier that within the Christian context it is proper to read the Hebrew Bible as Old Testament. But is this not too sanguine a comment, when viewed in the context of the dark history of Jewish-Christian relations? The work of Emmanuel Levinas too is directly relevant here, with its profound challenge to accept the radical otherness of the 'other'.[10] Does Christian reading of the Old Testament amount to an improper assimilation, a colonization, a failure to accept the alterity, the radical otherness, of the Hebrew Bible?[11]

In his Aquinas Lecture for 1993, 'Seeking Others in their Otherness', Julius Lipner spoke of the need to develop a 'constructive empathy' for the 'other'.[12] He did so, moreover, precisely in the context of interfaith dialogue. I shall not claim that his model addresses, still less answers, all of the issues just raised (the Jewish/Christian encounter *is*, of course, a unique one, raising many special questions). Nevertheless, Lipner's contribution is most suggestive. He speaks of the need to find an escape from two horns of a dilemma. We must, on the one hand, resist the temptation to assimilate the other to our own meanings and values, so that, rather than engaging with the other in its alterity, we deface the other by misconstruction, reducing him or her to a sort of crypto-ego (the lesson of Levinas). On the other hand, there is the danger that the other recedes into inaccessibility, into impenetrable alterity. In the absence of any universal or common bridging signifiers, the gulf between the self and the other can then seem unbridgeable.

Lipner addresses this problem at what he calls the basic level of our existence as human. He affirms an inherent capacity which each human being has to enter imaginatively into the world of the other, even (to some degree) to assume the perspective of the other. On this basis, we need not succumb to ideologies positing absolute barriers to understanding between human beings. Thus it is that Lipner issues a call to engage in a process of 'constructive empathy', whereby we may access the other *qua other* in a manner that is not intrusive and which can lead to relationships of true reciprocity, avoiding both horns of the dilemma outlined above. This is a bold, some might say unduly

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optimistic, appeal, but it is one which seems to me worthy of commitment, in spite of the intellectual difficulties which attend it.

The challenge to take Judaism really seriously in its otherness, its alterity, is a profound one, which goes to the very heart of Christian self-understanding. What would it mean to engage in genuine 'constructive empathy' for the Jewish 'other', in a way which really does avoid both poles of Lipner's dilemma, and thereby resists defacing the Jewish 'other' by misconstruction and assimilation? This is particularly difficult. For as Christians we have traditionally appropriated the story of ancient Israel as *our own* story. We have believed that the Christian reading of that story as Old Testament in relation to a New Testament constitutes part of our '*self*', an integral part of our identity as Christians. Dare we explore what it might mean to define Christianity in ways which resist doing so at the expense of contemporary Judaism, which resist colonizing the Jewish scriptures and robbing them of their otherness?

In his essay 'Evangelisation and the other: response and responsibility',[13] Michael Barnes speaks of encountering the truth of God in the other. Echoing words of Emmanuel Levinas, he writes that 'the mystery of God lies in the face of the other', and again, 'Otherness must be taken with full seriousness and not reduced to an extension of what is known'. I contend that we are challenged to risk letting go of familiar assumptions about the relationship of Judaism to Christianity, to risk the unknowing of all that we think we know of the relationship between the New Testament and the Old. To adapt some words of Michael Barnes, we must leave our position of control and power and face the frightening otherness of the Jewish stranger, in the faithful conviction that here is God. If we dare risk this, we shall encounter the confusion and disorientation—but ultimately perhaps also the blessing which came to Jacob as he wrestled through the night with the mysterious 'other' beside the river Jabbok.

> He said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking'. But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me'. And he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said: 'Jacob'. And he said, 'Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed'. Then Jacob asked him, 'Tell me, I pray, your name'. But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. (Gen. 32.26–29).

1 My discussion of self-definition will be seen to draw upon a number of influences, including psychological language of projection and denial, Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of alterity, and the discussion of the 'parting of the ways' between Judaism and Christianity by Jacob Neusner and others.

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2 G.E. Mendenhall, 'The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine', *The Biblical Archaeologist* 25 (1962), 66–87; reprinted in *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader* 3 (1970), 100–120.

3 N.K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1979/London: SCM Press, 1980).

4 Whilst a strong tendency to dichotomy in self-definition does tend to characterize much of the Hebrew Bible, this is, of course, not the whole story. There are, even within what we might call the mainstream of scripture, more universalist perspectives (cf. Ruth, Jonah, Isaiah 40–55), and indeed we should not ignore those voices which speak of a unified and harmonious vision of nature and of the nations, as persuasively presented by Robert Murray in his important book *The Cosmic Covenant* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1992); cf. 'The Relationship of Creatures within the Cosmic Covenant', *The Month* Second New Series Vol. 23, No. 11 (November 1990), 425–432.

5 For a lively discussion of the use of the terms 'Old Testament' and ' Hebrew Bible', see the recent articles by John Sawyer and Walter Moberly in the journal *Theology*: J.F.A. Sawyer, 'Combating Prejudices about the Bible and Judaism' (July/August 1991), 269–278; R.W.L. Moberly, '"Old Testament" and "New Testament": The Propriety of the Terms for Christian Theology' (January/February 1992), 26–32.

6 On this, see Deborah Sawyer's article in this same issue of *New Blackfriars*.

7 L. Grollenburg, *Unexpected Messiah or How the Bible Can be Misleading* (London: SCM Press, 1988),127–167.

8 For example, H. Maccoby, *Judas Iscariot and the Myth of Jewish Evil* (London: Peter Halban, 1992).

9 For example, R.R. Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: the Theological Roots of Antisemitism* (New York: Seabury, 1974).

10 For an accessible and useful collection, see Sean Hand (ed.), *A Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); see also Gerard Loughlin's article in this same issue of *New Blackfriars*.

11 Serious grappling with such questions will have profound implications. There are, of course, many ways of responding to such a challenge. For one brief attempt, see my 'A Tale of Two Sisters: Judaism and Christianity', *Theology* Vol. 96, No. 773 (September/October 1993), 384–390.

12 J. Lipner, 'Seeking Others in their Otherness', *New Blackfriars* Vol. 74, No. 869 (March 1993), 152–165. (It should be noted that Lipner here takes a rather less sympathetic view of the contribution of George Lindbeck than I do in the article mentioned in the previous note.)

13 M. Barnes, 'Evangelisation and the other: response and responsibility', *The Month* Second New Series, Vol. 25, No. 12 (December 1992), 479–484.

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