

# Introduction

Giorgio Agamben writes,

In the Bible, the concept of a “people” is . . . divided between *am* and *goy* (plural *goyim*). *Am* is Israel, the elected people, with whom Yahweh formed a *berit*, a pact; the *goyim* are the other peoples. The Septuagint translates *am* with *laos* and *goyim* with *ethnē*. (A fundamental chapter in the semantic history of the term “people” thus begins here and should be traced up to the contemporary usage of the adjective *ethnic* in the syntagma *ethnic conflict*.)<sup>1</sup>

Peoples have not always been what peoples now are. Peoplehood has a history. With the rise of the nation-state in recent centuries, “the people” has emerged as the most determinative form of human community. And as Agamben indicates, this ideological emergence is part of a biblical history and discourse.

By “most determinative” I mean the primary basis for killing. What or who belongs to the people of reference in the form of the modern nation-state must be protected and is the measure of life. What or who threatens the people of reference is killable and is the measure of death. The differentiation underlying modern peoplehood, therefore, is not simply a matter of who is killed and who is protected. It is the

1. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 47, emphasis his.

measure of life and death. It is a matter of which lives are nourished and which lives are passed over, if not actively starved or hunted down, both across the border of the body politic and throughout its teeming complex. In fact, the differentiation I am describing *is* the border of which territorial borders are only derivative, a distinction that constitutes and polices “we the people.” Thus, to belong to the people of reference, that is, to be citizen, is to enjoy certain “rights.” To belong to some other people is to enjoy such “rights” more conditionally, depending on what it implies for the people of reference. Then there is the plight of those nation-stateless persons, who don’t belong to any people at all.

But there are citizens and then there are citizens, just as there are immigrants and then there are immigrants. It is harder for some citizens to go to a good school than it is for others, just as it is easier for the same citizens to go to jail. It is much more difficult to immigrate to the United States from Latin America or Africa than from Western or Northern Europe. Thus, the political difference that constitutes “the people” as distinct from others ramifies both internally and externally, exposing the operation of at least one, more fundamental difference, which Agamben identifies above with the term “ethnic.” Yet, however occult the “ethnic” constitution of “the people,” peoplehood has come to be the decisive imaginary for negotiating human difference in modernity, that is, for negotiating the difference between life and death, from military and police violence, to the contours of political economy, to the most mundane interaction among neighbors.

All this seems remote from the Bible. But it is among the aims of this book to show that it is not, that the modern drama of peoplehood is, as Agamben observes above, a biblical development. In chapter 3, I demonstrate that modern peoplehood has been a colonialist and countercolonialist Protestant appropriation of the one true God’s

election of Israel according to the Bible. As Christendom broke up in the colonialist scramble for dominance and Christian aristocracies sought antimonarchical bases of political order, Euro-American projects of peoplehood competed with one another to be the new and true Israel, and resistance movements in their colonies often mimicked them in opposition to colonial rule. Thus, the Christian supersessionism at work in Christendom leading up to modernity provided a key language, conceptuality, and optic for the imagination of modern peoplehood and the production of peoples. Modern political order has therefore been made with a development of Christian supersessionism—the declared displacement of an old Israel by a new Israel, and it is with that development that it remains burdened.

As Protestantism grew more protestant, the category of religion emerged, and it did so as a problem.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, with religion appeared something supposedly nonreligious and less problematic, culled from the disintegrating structures of Christendom: what is now known as “we the people.” Distilled from “the people of God,” this modern, “nonreligious” peoplehood became more determinative than what was conceived as “religious association,” as evidenced by the readiness with which persons and communities of the same religious association have exploited and killed one another in the name of their respective “peoples.” Meanwhile, religion became the small province of sentimentality, personal piety, and the afterlife, to put matters rather cynically. Supposedly distinct from politics, modern religion has been understood to shape the material existence of “the people” only obliquely. Nevertheless, a particular understanding of the election of Israel remains the operative basis of modern peoplehood.<sup>3</sup>

2. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

The modern distinction between religion and politics was anticipated by a premodern fissure in Christian theological ethics, dividing the calling of Christians into two: one determined by the episcopal structures of the church, the other by the monarchical structures of territorial governance, both imagined and operated by Christians. With the modern progression of this fissure, Christians are supposed to live one way as religious beings and another as political beings. In the realm of the personal and the soul, Christians are to be guided by the light of Jesus. In the realm of the political and the body, Christians must follow other, more realistic lights, Scripture ready and waiting to offer support.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Christianity has been able to prop up a most violent political existence with its putative prioritization of the spiritual over the material.

John Howard Yoder responded to the modern dualism of religion and politics by theologically debunking the distinction. He argued that to be Christian is to be called to follow Jesus politically *as a people*; the church is a political community in its own right. The church can therefore not allow any peoplehood other than its own to determine the way it lives. This is to follow the nonviolent politics of Jesus rather than the violent politics of Constantinian and other gentile orders of community, not least the modern peoplehood of the nation-state.

Yoder did not overlook the connection between Constantinian political order and Christian understandings of “Israel,” although he did not perceive some of its most important ramifications. He recognized that the New Testament has been particularly vulnerable to distortion insofar as Jesus has been shorn from the people of Israel,

3. Cf. “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.” (Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985], 36).

4. John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), 125–39.

that is, as he has ceased to be known as a Jew. The nonviolent politics of Jesus that is innocent of the false dichotomy of religion and politics is, Yoder argues, simply the Jewish way to live. Constantinian Christianity is therefore precisely that “Christian” existence that has refused to be Jewish.

While Yoder’s compelling Christian account of peoplehood goes a long way toward articulating a politics faithful to the God of Israel—and that is my reason for choosing him as a principal interlocutor—I argue in this book that his account cannot adequately subvert and resist the violence of the modern imaginary and discourse of peoplehood. Instead, it plays into some of its central tendencies. Yoder argues that the true people of God are those faithful to the love of God revealed in Torah and finally in Jesus the Messiah. Those who are not, those who refuse this Jewish way of life, do not count as the people of God in any meaningful sense. This understanding of the constitution of the people, I submit, is inadequate to the witness of Scripture and captive to the modern discourse of peoplehood.

According to the Bible, the people of the one true God, which is always Israel, is not self-constituted. It is not constituted by Israel’s faithfulness to the exclusion of its unfaithfulness, but by God’s faithfully holding Israelite faithfulness and unfaithfulness together with hope and forgiveness. The people of Israel is constituted, in other words, by God’s election, which is fulfilled in the Messiah who is the elect one. Moreover, it is precisely God’s election that makes Israel a people of peace and a peacemaking people.<sup>5</sup>

This last claim of course flies in the face of superficial readings of the Bible and recent understandings of election, a notion at once repugnant and ubiquitous in modernity. The idea that God has

5. Because of the oneness of the people of God, I have usually treated “the people” as a collective singular noun calling for singular verbs and singular demonstrative pronouns, despite the awkwardness of this mode of expression.

chosen only one people to be God's people seems the essence of unfairness and a recipe for violent aggression with impunity, hardly the basis of peace. Yet, at the same time, nothing is deemed more sacrosanct than the existence of the people of the modern nation-state, and this sacrosanctity by definition attends the political order of "our" people and not the enemy's. Thus, the same claim that a certain people is sacrosanct by something tantamount to God's election is both despised and worshiped: despised when abstract, conventionally religious, or made by enemies; worshiped when embodied as "we the people."

For understandable reasons, then, Yoder virtually ignores God's election of Israel in an effort to describe a nonviolent, Judeo-Christian peoplehood accountable to God's revelation in Torah and Jesus. But in so doing he neglects two important considerations: 1) the situation of his account in the streams of the modern discourse of peoplehood, and 2) the key christological reality of Jesus' solidarity with the people of God in its sin. This solidarity, rather than Jesus' supposedly disowning the violent, "false" members of God's people, makes the cross the culmination of God's election of Israel and the way to the resurrection of the dead for the whole world by the Spirit, that is, the way to peace. Thus, Jesus' solidarity with all of God's chosen people even in its sin,<sup>6</sup> what I call *the catholicity of Jesus* as the elect one, has dramatic implications for the politics of the Christian life, particularly as the church lives in the divisive currents of modern peoplehood.

Neglecting the catholicity of Jesus and the modern discourse of peoplehood in which his account operates, Yoder has appropriated in ethical terms the modern Western imaginary of political difference, which is predicated on a certain supersessionist concept of God's

6. This solidarity is itself God's electing, as Karl Barth argues (see chapter 4 below).

election of Israel. According to this imaginary a people is purely and timelessly itself by its own (voluntary) agency and vis-à-vis other peoples. It is endowed with criteria and/or processes for discerning and policing its totalized political self, of which its representatives (or at least some of them) enjoy a complete view. In other words, the people is deemed able to decide who is and who is not the people, who belongs and who does not, who must be preserved and who can be disowned (e.g., killed). Thus, Yoder has refused one form of modern self-election for another, and any self-election opposes God's unconditional and irrevocable election of Israel as it is narrated and observed in Christian Scripture.

The concern of this book as a whole, then, is to provide a Christian account of what it means to be the people of God amidst the warring "peoples" of our time, particularly as peoplehood is determined by the election of Israel and revealed in Christ. In providing such an account, I aim not to relativize the Christian nonviolence of Yoder's understanding but to deepen it in pursuit of peace. The election of Israel cannot be reduced to Israel's self-understanding, written out of the story of the people of God, or conceived as an unfortunate liability to be outgrown. It is a matter of God's own activity and is basic to the testimony of the Bible and to the way things are. According to Scripture, the election of Israel is the revelation of the one God and as such the way of the oneness of creation.

While the entire book can be understood as an appreciative revision of Yoder's Christian account of peoplehood, his account will be the focus of only the first chapter, "The Gospel of a People." I wish not to offer a cheap critique of Yoder but one that builds patiently on his insight, which I find deeply compelling. Accordingly, in the first chapter, I offer an exposition of Yoder's account of the politics of the Christian life and his analysis of the anti-Jewish way in which the Christian church has tended to articulate its story,

its self, and the gospel. Chapter 2, “The Jewishness of Christian Peoplehood: Yoder’s Misstep,” then offers a consideration of the theological program of Yoder’s account and an initial critique in light of God’s election of Israel, followed by an adumbration of the arguments of subsequent chapters in relation to the modern discourse of peoplehood. Throughout the book, I engage Yoder not only as an influential Christian voice but a compelling representative of the modern tendency to “decide” between who is the true people and who is not, a tendency that has littered the talk of Christians and non-Christians alike for some time.

Chapter 3, “Israel’ and the Modern Discourse of Peoplehood,” may have surprised the reader without this introduction. I did not plan to write it when mapping out the dissertation on which this book is based. But after engaging Yoder’s account of peoplehood, I was impressed with what I perceived as his debt to modern ways of imagining “the people” and wondered about the contours and dimensions of that imaginary. I had no idea that “Israel,” much less the election of Israel, had provided such a crucial trope in the modern discourse of peoplehood. As I awakened to that fact, I realized that the scope of my and the reader’s concern with that modern discourse must range far beyond Yoder’s debt to it and that an analysis of it deserved an entire chapter. I also determined that this analysis should follow my treatment of Yoder so that the reader has an idea of the sort of theological account that it exposes as problematic. This runs the risk of convoluting the argument of the book as a whole, but I think it is worth the risk. The reader is advised to consider my exposition of Yoder’s account not as a simple commendation but a sympathetic restatement of a representative understanding of peoplehood with a view to the constructive criticism and alternative developed in chapters 2–7. If the reader finds herself persuaded by Yoder’s account as I present it in chapter 1, I shall have done my job.

The election of Israel, it turns out, lies deep in the grammar of the modern discourse of peoplehood, so that we need to better understand the theopolitical air that Yoder and the rest of us in Western modernity have been breathing. Drawing on political philosophers such as Étienne Balibar and Americanist Sacvan Bercovitch, I have found myself making staggering claims in chapter 3 about the function of Christian supersessionist understandings of the election of Israel in the colonialist construction of what is now known as race and its modern child of nationalism. Ignoring the Christian theological contribution to these colonialist developments cripples (among other things) attempts to articulate both Christian resistance and alternatives to the violence of modern peoplehood. Thus, in the third chapter, I offer the reader a summary analysis of the modern discourse of peoplehood, focusing on its Jewish foil and its fictive ethnicity of “new Israel.” I then illustrate and extend my analysis in the terrain of particularly influential modern projects of peoplehood, lingering long over the case of the People of the United States. My rationale for that is that the People of the United States constitutes perhaps the most compelling illustration of the claims of my analysis and has been the most powerful political discursive machine of peoplehood for some time. It is the peoplehood that the church must confront, especially in the United States, and it likely claims most of my readers as its own.

The claims of chapter 3 raise the stakes significantly for the Christian question of what it means to be the people of the God of Israel, placing the question at the heart of the geopolitical forces that have shaped the modern world, one horrific ramification of which was the Shoah. In the course of my research for this book, I soon learned that these stakes were not lost on Karl Barth. When envisioning the book, I had planned to turn to Barth simply as a corrective to Yoder and the wide tendency he represents. But after

completing chapter 3, I found that Barth's account of the election of the community in *CD 2/2* has implications much more substantial and far-reaching than I had anticipated. That account is therefore the subject of chapter 4, "The Politics of the Election of Israel: Help from Karl Barth."

Chapter 4 and its complement, chapter 5, "The History of the Election of Israel in the Flesh: God's Story of Hope," illustrates the approach of the entire book, namely, to address the urgent theopolitical question of peoplehood rather than merely rehearse the views of secondary writers. I am concerned not only to criticize others but also to offer somewhat developed alternatives. Just as I exposit Yoder's Christian account of peoplehood and then begin to build critically upon it in chapters 1–3, so, in chapters 4–5, I exposit Barth's account of peoplehood and then develop a derivative account of my own that attempts to draw on Barth's insights and address his shortcomings.

Barth is my other chief interlocutor besides Yoder because he rightly makes God's election of Israel central to both the self-revelation of God and what it means to be the people of God while confronting head-on the violence of anti-Jewish, modern peoplehood. Barth shows that the people of God does not choose its own existence (against Yoder) and is not a natural phenomenon. But while Barth's account helpfully provides a sort of idealist grammar of election, it falls prey to some of the modernist tendencies evident in Yoder (and some of the other dangers of philosophical idealism). Specifically, it cannot name or tell the historical course of the electing activity of God in the flesh that constitutes Israel as the people of God. It can offer only formal christological poles that are supposedly always pulling Israel's existence dialectically toward its fullness in Christ. This is impatient with the contingency and moral ambiguity of Israel in the flesh and promotes corresponding political impatience. Barth is

unable to answer the question that must be answered, namely, “Who is Israel according to God’s election in the flesh?”

The question, “Who is the people of God?” has typically invited not the telling of a history in the flesh but the construction of a border between a true and false people of God or between a natural and adopted people of God. Constructing such borders is precisely that—our construction, an imposition that attempts to resolve the ambiguity of the flesh of the people. It is not a way forward through the modern discourse of peoplehood but a way of remaining captive to its vicious cycles. Whereas Yoder does not perceive this, Barth does perceive it and begins to address it. But I contend that he cannot finally overcome this tendency. So, in chapter 5, I move beyond Barth to give an answer to the question, “Who is Israel according to God’s election in the flesh?” In doing so, I dispose of what has become a standard answer to that (or a similar) question in many quarters, one which is really no answer at all and an accretion of the modern discourse of peoplehood, namely, that Israel proper is ethnic Israel.

My consideration of biblical texts in chapter 5 is limited to the Tanakh/Old Testament. My intent in doing so is not to claim that one must read the Tanakh independently of or theologically prior to the New Testament. That cannot be done and should not be attempted by Christians. But it is the eclipse of the witness of the Tanakh by the prejudice of certain poor readings of the New Testament that has allowed Christians to draw a border between a true and false people of God and to relativize the flesh of Israel and therefore of Jesus. So while my consideration of certain texts from the Tanakh anticipates my readings of Matthew and Romans in chapters 6 and 7, I have postponed those New Testament readings in hopes that they be adequately disciplined by patient consideration of the Law and the Prophets as presented in chapter 5. Thus, in chapter 5, I articulate God’s election of Israel according to the Tanakh as a living,

ongoing historical activity of God from before the foundation of the world rather than a dead decree enclosed in a God alien to time. My account exposes the canonical texture of Israel in the flesh ignored by well-established readings of the New Testament (and of the Old in light of the New) on the question of the identity of the people of God, showing how these modern exegetical developments have been rushed along by the modern discourse of peoplehood.

I might have begun the whole book with chapters 6 and 7, respectively “The Election of Israel according to the First Gospel” and “The Election of Israel according to the First Letter.” This is where all the key theopolitical moves of the constructive argument are made. I might have made the naïve claim to draw the argument of the book directly from such a close reading of biblical texts. But such claims ignore the living situation of biblical exegesis, and more importantly, the role of biblical scholarship itself in the production of the modern discourse of peoplehood and its corresponding geopolitical developments. Were I to begin the book with the content of chapters 6 and 7, I fear that the reader would not appreciate what biblical exegesis is up against and would expect an approach to exegesis that is itself theopolitically problematic. I hope that my saving it for the last two chapters as the substantiation and development of the preceding argument, especially of chapters 4–5, enables the reader to perceive the care that the subject matter of chapter 3 has forced me to exercise when reading the New Testament. The order of the chapters, therefore, may not be systematically material to the argument of the book. It reflects to some extent the course of my own learning, even though I of course began with working understandings of the biblical texts in question. But the order of the chapters also strikes me as a fitting presentation given my concern 1) to build primarily and critically on Yoder and Barth in that order, 2) to engage the modern discourse of peoplehood as a biblically

determined discourse, and 3) to stake my claims finally on the words of Scripture.