Nationalism and the Hebrew Bible*

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ABSTRACT. The Hebrew Bible, though generally seen mainly as a religious docu-
ment, has also provided models of secular national identity. A number of biblical
motifs have been revived in modern cultural nationalism: for example, the importance
of moral regeneration, attacks on internal and external enemies of the nation, and the
unification of disparate groups despite geographic dislocation. The Hebrew Bible also
anticipates various forms of conflict in modern national identity: between the
individual and the group, chosenness and egalitarianism, the narrowly national and
the universal. In the two centuries after the invention of printing, the Hebrew Bible in
vernacular translation had a decisive influence on the evolution of nationalism,
particularly in Britain. The Bible was essential in the culture of empires but also,
paradoxically, inspired defeated, suppressed and colonised people to seek freedom. A
number of modern national poets, notably Whitman and the Hebrew poets Bialik and
Greenberg, adopt a free verse neo-prophetic mode of expression. The Hebrew Bible
can, therefore, be read as the archetypal, and most influential, national document from
ancient times to the rise of modern nationalism.

As a dominant driving force in civilisation, the main root of Judaism, Christianity
and Islam, the Hebrew Bible has authored and nourished national identity and
religious-cultural nationalism: in the belief in the chosenness of the nation and its
necessarily moral foundations; its unity across divisions of class, geographic
dislocation and cultural assimilation; fierce criticism of and grievance against its
enemies, internal as well as external; acceptance of guilt for national failings and
defeats, and grief-ridden penitence leading to moral reform; hopes for freedom,
regeneration and the ingathering of exiles; vengeful hatred of oppressors, and
readiness to fight and die for the nation; and also the interconnection of the
personal life with that of the nation.[1] The Hebrew Bible also prefigures
paradoxical conflict in national identity: between the individual and the group,
chosenness and egalitarianism, the narrowly national and the universal.

The Hebrew Bible is the great model of the nation pickled, as it were, in
literature, and preserved to survive defeat, failure and exile. Its vivid stories,

characters, down-to-earth imagery and colloquial rhythms, and its extraordin-
ary range of emotion, became an artistic yardstick for Western literature,
particularly in English and German translation. About half the Hebrew Bible,
from the Five Books of Moses to the Books of Kings, is in prose. The fabulous
tale of the slaves who rebelled, won freedom, created their own laws and sacred
scripture and themselves as a new nation and established their own state, has
had decisive influence on modern nationalism (Walzer 1985). In translation, the
Psalms and the fifteen prophetic books, with their extremes of universal ideals
and militant chauvinism, of liberty and violence, of justice and vengeance, are
the most influential poetry in cultural history. The Hebrew Prophets in
particular have inspired poets as diverse as Blake, Pushkin, Petőfi, Whitman
and Yeats, as well as the neo-prophetic Hebrew poets, Bialik and Greenberg.

   The next few pages sketch out motifs in biblical poetry, mostly the
prophets, which have evidently influenced modern cultural nationalism.

Defeat and biblical nationalism

The power of the Hebrew Bible was in inverse proportion to the political and
military weakness of the people who created it, whose history was one of inner
discord, defeat and exile. Spanning a period of at least 600 years (8th–2nd
centuries BCE), the Hebrew Bible evolved with the crushing defeat and exile
of the two monotheist kingdoms, of Israel in 721 and Judah in 586. Much
modern cultural nationalism, too, comes from the experience of defeat and
humiliation.[2] Jewish survival after defeat was itself an inspiration to later
national movements as was the implied lesson that a national religious culture
could be stronger than political and military force. Consequently, many
modern nations have learned to preserve memories of heroic cultural struggle
after military conquest, strengthening national unity, resolve and distinctive-
ness. The Hebrew prophets were, perhaps, the first to recognise that a weak
nation that remembers its defeats can survive better than a strong nation that
forgets its victories. The memory of defeat festering in the nation's psyche can
be a more powerful stimulant of nationalism than victory. The experience of
defeat, persecution, weakness and chaos can teach a nation to treasure their
opposites as ideals, to be achieved, if not through politics, then through
apocalypse. As a forerunner of dissident national literature with great
sympathy for the defeated and downtrodden, and faith in an ethical power
beyond the temporal, the Hebrew Bible offered consolation and hope in a
world dominated by often-cruel, rapacious empires.

   Missionary Christianity brought the Bible to Africa and South America,
grafting it onto local cultures in the process of establishing colonial rule. The
cultural imperialism represented by the Bible called up deep ambivalence in
Third World countries struggling for independence. The Bible was a tool not
just of colonisation but also of the empowerment of the colonised. The story
of the escape of African slaves from bondage and their struggle for

independence in the Promised Land was a clarion call for liberation, inspiring colonised peoples to do likewise. Many defeated and suppressed peoples embraced this culture not out of identification with the empires that ruled them but, as in the case of European peoples struggling for freedom, with ancient Israel breaking out of slavery. The adoption of biblical faith was a political act: it meant acceptance of a system in which divine rule and messianic hopes are above temporal rule and every human being, created in God's image, is equal in the eyes of God. In the struggle for independence, imperial colonies and ex-colonies could draw on biblical authority in asserting cultural distinctiveness and universality, national self-awareness and self-criticism, and resistance to the oppressor, transforming the legacy of slavery, suffering and hate, as Israel did, into a source of proud collective identity, divine discontent, and hope for a better future.

The hope, ultimately fulfilled to the astonishment of the ancient Israelites, for the fall of tyrannical empires has evidently left its mark on modern nationalism. Apart from ancient Egypt, the hated, persecutory 'Other' in the Hebrew Bible is Mesopotamia, home of the great idolatrous empires, Assyria and Babylonia. Vengeful rage similar to that of the prophet Nahum against Assyria, or Jeremiah against Babylonia, appears in the national culture of defeated peoples, such as the Irish, the Scots, the Greeks, the Poles and the Ukrainians, under the heel of powerful, often ruthless empires. As biblical prophets found, as do modern cultural nationalists, cultural victory can be snatched from political defeat (Aberbach 2003a). Modern nationalist works such as Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* follow the Hebrew Bible as cultural 'victories' over a hated oppressor, ensuring the literary survival of a destroyed world, and the hope of its restoration. In the struggle for independence, national poets, often inspired by the prophets, rage not only against external oppressors, but also against the nation itself, and its traitors, particularly its religious and political leaders. The ideology of self-sacrifice adopted by some modern nationalists can be traced to the Hebrew Bible. Modern national poets – Petőfi, Botev, Plunkett and Pearse, for example – easily find biblical inspiration for martyrdom in the name of the moral integrity of the nation. The Hebrew Bible has the first recorded instances in history of poet-prophets speaking truth to power, risking their lives for an ideal. Amos, for example, was expelled from Samaria, Jeremiah was imprisoned, and Isaiah ben Amoz, according to legend, was executed, as were no doubt many other prophets whose moral teachings threatened the existing order.

The paradox of nationalism and universalism

The Hebrew Bible exemplifies the tension, familiar in modern nationalism, between national identity and universal humanity, the sense of being chosen and special on the one hand and being like everyone else and aiming for similar worldwide goals on the other. Biblical poetry is the poetry of one

nation but also the poetry of many nations. In particular, several dozen sections of biblical prophecy are addressed to 'the nations' (Aberbach 1993). By implication, the message of ethical monotheism applies even to those who do not believe in God. Weber (1961) underlines the universal significance of the Hebrew prophets in suggesting that in some ways they prepared the ground not just for Jewish national identity but for the modern world. The universality of prophetic poetry is apparent in its emphasis on internal, abstract reality in metaphors and religious concepts, the prophets' intense social conscience, their violent opposition to magic and superstition, and their criticism of the status quo, which have no parallel in other surviving ancient Near Eastern texts (Pritchard 1969). The Hebrew Bible has an elective affinity for radical change, social reform, the transformation of an imperfect world through moral ideals and the *imitatio dei*. Political and religious movements which stress the value of social justice and compassion, oppose materialism and the unjust distribution of wealth, object to ritual at the expense of spirituality and to the emphasis on the letter of the law rather than its spirit, belong to a tradition pioneered by the biblical prophets. The prophets were hostile to national distinction as expressed in existing power structures, in monarchy and cultic ritual. In their view, national aspirations are meaningless unless directed by moral ideals based on monotheist faith. Though this faith derives from the land of Israel and the Temple on Mount Zion, it draws the believer away from the confines of the national to look at the world in terms of humanity as a whole. A person's value rests not on his or her being a member of a nation or tribe but on being human. The messianic ideal of the prophets, expressed most famously by Isaiah – 'They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks, nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more' (2:4), this being the inscription on the foundation stone of the United Nations building in New York – is not the assertion but the dissolution of national separation, the harmonising of the babel of conflicting nations, and their unity in common humanity and faith.[3]

The Hebrew Bible, morality and the nation

In the next few pages I will look at some biblical poetry which has influenced modern cultural nationalism through Bible translation in the vernacular. This poetry is dominated by the inseparability of national identity from morality, an idea prevalent in modern cultural nationalism (see Hutchinson 1987, and Hutchinson and Aberbach 1999). The prophetic view of the nation, based on a conception of human beings as 'a little lower than the angels' (Psalms 8:5), is incompatible with modern forms of exclusive racial nationalism. Israel's survival is predicated on conduct. Its identity as a chosen people depends on a conviction of moral inferiority, certainly to the divine ideal and at times to other nations. The blunt humble acceptance of shameful imperfection and incompleteness (which can lead to defeat and exile) can give a nation a moral

aim, a basis for community, and a reason for survival impossible if it believed arrogantly in its perfection and power.

The book of Amos contains some of the earliest written literature to define a concept of national identity – not just of Israel but of all 'chosen' peoples – in purely moral terms. Amos lived in the last days of the Israelite monarchy, shortly before the Assyrian exile in 721 BCE. To Amos, Israel's chosenness depends on moral stature. Otherwise it is no different from other nations:

. . . Are you different from the Ethiopians, children of Israel? For though I took Israel from Egypt I did the same for the Philistines from Cyprus and Aram from Kir! (9:7–8)

To keep its side of the divine covenant and survive as a nation, Israel must paradoxically transcend nationalism and reach for universal values, to fulfil its responsibilities to the poor and the helpless. Israel's chosenness is defined by the privilege of being aware of its failings:

You alone have I known among the families of men: Therefore I will punish you for your sins! (3:2)

The prophets regard the individual and the nation as equally responsible before God. The value of a person and of a nation, and the justification for their continued existence, are measured not by military and political power but by Godly conduct.

What does the Lord want of you? Only to do justice, to love kindness, to go humbly with your God . . . (Micah 6:8)

Defeat, grievance and revenge

Unlike other extant ancient literature, the Hebrew Bible does not censor defeat. Rather, it treats defeat as a divine message delivered by the enemy – mainly Assyria and Babylonia – the 'rod' of God's wrath. Uniquely in ancient literature, defeat in the Hebrew Bible galvanises national consciousness. The destruction of the kingdom of Judah in the early sixth century BCE is traditionally believed to be the background to the Hebrew book of Lamentations, unflinching in its picture of national humiliation and self-blame, of guilt at having 'abandoned' God and desolation at being 'abandoned' by God:

Orphans we became, our mothers – widows. Silver we paid for water . . .
. . . On the waste of mount Zion jackals prowl.
But you, Lord, reign forever!
Why do you forever forget us?
Why do you abandon us?
Return us, O God, to you.
Let us be restored, as we were . . . (5:1–3, 18–21)

Yet defeat cannot always be faced calmly, as the will of God. Memories of defeat and humiliation in biblical poetry are sometimes filled with lust for revenge. The prophets took comfort in an apocalyptic day of judgement and punishment, not only of Israel but also of its hated enemies. Psalm 137, dating

from the late sixth century BCE, describes the captivity in Babylonia and the yearning for Zion and Jerusalem. It ends with a brutal curse at fallen Babylon, which had destroyed Judah and burnt down the Temple in Jerusalem:[4]

By the waters of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. On the branches of the willow trees we hung our harps when our tormentors mocked us, 'Sing us a song of Zion.'
How can we sing a song of the Lord on foreign soil? If I forget you, Jerusalem, let my right arm be paralyzed. Let my tongue stick to my mouth if I do not remember you. O daughter of Babylon, you destroyer: Happy is he who pays you what you've done to us! Happy is he who takes your little ones and smashes them on the rock!

Condemnation and violence

The prophets condemn their own people for moral backsliding, materialism, arrogance and insufficient regard for the sacred values of justice and truth, and for bringing disaster upon the nation. It is not unusual for prophets to attack kings: Nathan condemns David (II Samuel 12-1f.); Elijah, Ahab (I Kings 21-17f.); and Jeremiah fearlessly attacks Jehoiachin for betraying the faith (II Kings 24:9): the king's punishment is to be deported by Nebuchadrezzar to Babylonia. These examples encouraged national identity based on the idea that, unlike human power, truth and justice are absolute, however humble their origins. Monotheism, with its impossible divine standard, could drive human beings to imagine and try to create a better world.

At the same time, the Hebrew Bible is full of violence. Even Isaiah, who paints a roseate picture of a world of peace and harmony, of a messianic future when the wolf will live with the lamb, also imagines the annihilation of Israel's enemies (e.g. Isaiah ch. 11, Micah chs 5–6). The return to the ancestral homeland in the Hebrew Bible (as in *The Odyssey*) is accompanied by violence, which recurs throughout biblical history.

Hope of restoration

The biblical hope for renewal of national political identity and the return of the 'saving remnant' to their land has had incalculable influence on modern nationalism. In the Book of Hosea, the negation of nationhood – 'Not-my-nation' (*Lo-Ammi*, Hosea 2:23) – will be put right when Israel abandons her idolatrous promiscuity, to become again 'My-nation' (*Ammi*). Only then will God abolish war and make a new covenant with all living things. Here again, national realisation is possible only in the sphere of universal moral action:

I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness, in justice, mercy and love. And I will betroth you to me in faith – and you will know God. (Hosea 2:21–22)

But these were dreams of a future time. For the time being, the prophets of the surviving monarchy of Judah were sharply aware that political power does not last. They had the example not just of the fall of the kingdom of Israel and

many other small nations but also the destruction of the Assyrian empire – the most powerful up to that time – in the late seventh century BCE. The total eradication of Assyria from history taught the prophets the need to strengthen national identity to outlast defeat and exile. A small defeated nation could be resurrected – its 'dry bones' could live – if it based its survival on moral ideals. After the fall of Judah and the exile of most of its inhabitants to Babylonia in the early sixth century BCE, Ezekiel predicted national rebirth:

These bones are the people of Israel ... I will bring you back to the land of Israel! (37:11–12)

After the Persian conquest of Babylonia in 539 BCE, the Judean exiles were allowed to return to their land. This is the first known case when a defeated, exiled nation went back to its homeland and rebuilt it. At the time, national revival could be linked to ancient messianic hopes and to apocalyptic visions of Jerusalem not just as a national capital but as a universal one (see Ezekiel 5:5; Zechariah 9:9–10).

Many modern national poets, including Pushkin, Petőfi and Shevchenko, have adopted the voice of the prophet in calling for moral regeneration of their people. They would agree with Petőfi in 'The Poets of the Nineteenth Century' (1847): the task of the prophet-poet is to lead his people to the Promised Land.

The sociology of biblical nationalism

What is the sociological basis of biblical literature as 'national'? The Bible is evidently the first literature aimed not at an elite, nor even just at the nation, including its illiterates and those as yet unborn (cf. Deuteronomy 29:13–14), but also at all nations. No extant literature from the ancient world placed more importance upon social welfare and the responsibility of the better-off toward the poor. The concept of *tzedakah* (meaning both righteousness and charity), which originates in the Hebrew Bible, encouraged national consciousness, though it also pointed Judaism in a universalist direction. Much biblical literature was sung or spoken, and biblical poets included Jeremiah, a priest, and Amos, who describes himself as 'a shepherd and a dresser of sycamore trees' (Amos 7:14). As the biblical works were regarded as sacred long before the canon was fixed, by the beginning of the second century CE, ordinary people (including, presumably, some women) were familiar with them, either in public recitals or speeches, or as part of Temple and, later, synagogue service.[5] Israel's centrality in the ancient trade routes and exile among non-Jews inclined Judaism to cosmopolitanism and the application of abstract ideals such as liberty, love, justice and faith to all nations. The idea of mission, of reaching out to non-believers and their conversion, evidently begins in the Hebrew Bible (see Isaiah 56:3).

Even when it was still a Jewish sect, ancient Christianity had little room for narrow nationalism. While the core of the Hebrew Bible is the birth of a

nation, the core of the Greek Bible is the expectation of universal messianic redemption. The authors of the Greek Bible, written mostly by the start of the second century CE, believed in the imminent Second Coming. The prophecies in the Hebrew Bible would be fulfilled. The messianic age was at hand. Nations would soon be one family of mankind united in faith, as in Isaiah's prophecy. When this did not happen, messianic hopes faded and Christian dogma forced a split with Judaism. The Hebrew Bible, in contrast, does not assume that the world is about to end. Rather, we must make do with this world, the world of peoples or nations (*amim*). As new nations grew and converted to Christianity, the Hebrew Bible rose in importance. It satisfied the instinct for this-worldly national assertion. It expressed the conflict many nations experience between national particularity and a universal ideology of moral values. Above all, it gave the masses a ready-made portable high culture whose beauty, as much as its moral and national content, had ensured its preservation by the Jews and led to its eventual adoption as sacred, even in translation, by a large part of the world's population.

The Church already in the early Christian era took on the identity of the 'true Israel'. Ancient Israel became the model for the evolving nation-state in European culture. The survival of ancient nations that translated the Bible into the vernacular – notably Armenia and Ethiopia around the fifth century (Hastings 1997: 198) – underscored the power of biblical nationalism among non-Jews. The return to the Hebrew Bible in the Renaissance might be seen as the start of modern nationalism (Greenfeld 1992). Bible translation into the vernacular throughout Europe in the century after the invention of printing by Gutenberg in the 1450s – in German, English, French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Finnish, Czech, Hungarian and Polish, among others – became the chief tool of nation building. Elton (1971: 289) has pointed out that, 'Of all the works published, translations of the Bible were the most important, not only in the history of the Reformation but also in the history of languages'. When the Bible was published in the language of the people, a crucial step was taken in the creation of the modern world of nations. It encouraged literacy in a broad cross-section of society, reaching, as Erasmus enthused, 'the farmer, the tailor, the stonemason, prostitutes, pimps, and Turks' (Wright 2001: 199). The ancient Jewish intoxication with vernacular Scripture could now be shared by the European masses. The German translation of Luther, a lecturer in Hebrew at the University of Wittenberg, ran into 377 editions by the time of his death in 1546! (Elton 1971: 289).

Yet the translation and publication of the Bible in the vernacular was at first an act of heresy, a crime like witchcraft punishable by death. Why? One answer is that by making the content of the Bible clear to the common people, translation could undermine traditional Church authority. The Church had treated Scripture as being in its control. It effectively blinded the mostly ignorant common people with Latin and Greek. The Latin Vulgate had supreme authority, but most people could not read or understand it.

As a result, vernacular translations of the Hebrew Bible had consequences far beyond what was imagined at the time. The Reformation idea of 'Scripture alone' without a clerical intermediary implied not just that people should read the Bible on their own and make up their own minds about it, but also that, in principle, they could and should think for themselves (Hill 1994: 414). As a vital part of a humanist education, the Bible was now subject to critical study. Resultant theological debate leading to comparative critical Bible editions helped create a climate for secular scientific investigation, including social studies and theories of nation-building. In this way, the growth of scientific method in the study of ancient Israel encouraged the historical consciousness of nations.

Especially in the age of nationalism during and after the American and French revolutions, nations struggling for independence were often compared with the Jews (even, ironically, when these nations were known for hatred of Jews). Their political system, directly or indirectly, could not help but be influenced by the Bible. The idea of the covenant between God and Israel (e.g. Exodus 19:3–8) might be seen as a theological precursor of constitutional monarchy, the 'consent of the governed', and the free society (Sacks 2002: 134). The Puritans and, later, revolutionaries in America, France, Italy and elsewhere, including Washington, Robespierre and Garibaldi, carried the torch of the prophets. Political revolutionaries brought increasingly secularised ideals of liberty, human rights and equality into the forefront of what was to become Western democracy (Kohn 1946). Even as the 'sea of faith' retreated in the face of secular enlightenment, the ideological influence of the Hebrew Bible persisted in secular forms.

In short, the influence of the Bible on modern nationalism has been overwhelming. Biblical influence was central in the German poetry of Klopstock (notably *The Messiah*, 1748–73), whose conception of the poet was that of prophet, teacher and patriot. Goethe saw the Hebrew Bible not just as the book of one nation but also as the archetype for all nations. In Hungary, translations of the Psalms and Karolyi's Bible translation 'influenced the development of Hungarian literary language for centuries' (Szakaly 1990: 94). Biblical language of the emergence from slavery, prophetic denunciations of the wicked and hopes for freedom not only for Hungary but for the world, are frequent in Petőfi's poetry (Petőfi 1973 and 1974). The Ukrainian poet Shevchenko was deeply influenced by the Hebrew Bible and the alleged similarities between Jews and Ukrainians (Shevchenko 1964:*l*). Biblical influences are plentiful, too, in the poetry of Mickiewicz, whose Polish nationalism has likewise been described as 'Judaic': 'that of a conquered, humiliated and oppressed nation dreaming of resurrection' (Talmon 1967: 96).

In a world of evolving nation-states in which secular culture had not yet taken full hold and *the* Book was still the Bible (and Church attendance was usually mandatory), such influences were perhaps inevitable, found among poets as diverse as Byron, Ibsen and Bialik. Verdi's 'Chorus of Hebrew Slaves' (*Va pensiero*) in the opera *Nabucco* (1842), written two decades before Italy's independence, is a patchwork of biblical texts.[6] In its longing for freedom,

sung by the Israelite captives in Babylon, *Va pensiero* became Italy's unofficial national anthem:

Sing again songs of our homeland, of the past.
We have drunk the cup of sorrow, and repented in bitter tears.
Inspire us, God, with courage to endure to the end.

The Bible and British national identity

The chief influence of the Hebrew Bible on national identity has been through the English language and literature. The scholars who translated the King James Bible (1611) 'forged an enduring link, literary and religious, between the English-speaking peoples of the world' (Churchill 2002: 124). The Bible spread with the British empire, and it should not be forgotten that 'the British ruled over much the largest and most diverse empire the world had ever known. It extended over every one of the world's climatic zones, over every inhabited continent, and across all the world's major religions and civilizations' (Lieven 2000: 89). Perhaps no people, apart from the Jews themselves, have so totally absorbed the Bible as the British.[7] British history is, in a sense, biblical history: long before the Norman conquest of 1066, the Bible was the main unifying force of the different, often warring groups in the British isles. The Anglo-Saxon poem describing the battle of Maldon of 991, for example, is an appeal to the nation to stand firm, as Israel did, against invasion (Hastings 1997: 42). From the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, England was dominated by French-speaking Normans, after which the Bible played a primary role in forging English nationalism, using the newfound power of the English language in a vernacular largely created by translation from the Hebrew. Henry VIII's break with the Church of Rome helped free the Bible from clerical control and gave English Bible translation the royal imprimatur. The English translations of the Hebrew Bible in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, above all, the King James Bible – 'the most influential version of the most influential book in the world, in what is now its most influential language' (MacGregor 1968: 170) – were revolutionary in British (and European) history and in English literature. The Bible was no longer prohibitively expensive, read exclusively by Church-dominated Latin readers. It could now be read by the much larger numbers who knew English and could afford cheap printed editions (Dickens 1970). For these reasons, the English Bible, more than other translations of the Hebrew Bible, stimulated the growth of the vernacular among the general population and of English national identity. Between 1560 and 1611, there were over 100 editions of the Bible in English (including, by 1557, a cheap pocketbook edition) and between 1611 and 1640 about 140 editions of the King James Version (Hastings 1997: 58).

The translations of William Tyndale were milestones in the growth of English vernacular and literary language and English national identity. Before

Tyndale, the English language 'was a poor thing, spoken only by a few in an island off the shelf of Europe, a language unknown in Europe' (Daniell 2003: 249). Latin was the main language of educated men. England lagged behind the Continent as translation into English was prohibited by the Constitutions of Oxford of 1407–9. Tyndale pioneered Bible translation into English, in Cologne and Worms in the 1520s, a heretic in exile from a still-Catholic England. Tyndale took the revolutionary view (in fact, the norm in Judaism) that a ploughman could understand the Bible as well as, if not better than, a bishop. George Steiner sums up Tyndale's importance: 'No translation-act, save Luther's, has been as generative of a whole language' (1996: 49).

Tyndale's assistant, Miles Coverdale, printed the first complete Bible in English (1535), probably in Zurich, dedicated to King Henry VIII. In 1539, a revised version of Coverdale's Bible was printed and put – later, because of its popularity, chained – in every parish church in England. For the first time, large numbers of English readers could respond, as the Jews had done for 2000 years, to the full literary splendor of biblical stories and poetry. Coverdale's translation of the Psalms is the best-known and, to many, best-loved poetry in English as it was incorporated into the *Book of Common Prayer* (first published 1549), which was used each day:[8] 'Even in their obscure moments they have the mellow beauty of some ancient, familiar window with slightly jumbled glass' (Dickens 1970: 185). Most notable English poets between Wyatt and Milton did translations from the Psalms. In this way, the Hebrew Bible largely determined British national identity, not just through its content but also through its language: it gave Shakespeare and all later English writers their chief model of literary excellence.

Many biblical phrases became so assimilated into the English national heritage that their origin was often forgotten. If, for example, you stand at the parting of the ways, in jeopardy of your life, if you play the fool, if you set your house in order, harden your heart, love your neighbor as yourself, or turn the other cheek, you are quoting from the Hebrew Bible translated into English; if you believe the race is not to the swift, or that love is strong as death, or feel like a voice crying in the wilderness, a still small voice, or if you are slow of speech or slow to anger at those who multiply words without knowledge, and full of sour grapes, or do not see eye to eye with your friends, or put your trust in princes, you are using Hebrew expressions; if you believe the leopard cannot change his spots, or that you must cast your bread upon the waters, for to everything there is a season, or that if you sow the wind you reap the whirlwind, and escape by the skin of your teeth, or that if you spare the rod you spoil the child, or that you have punished a scapegoat, you are quoting from the Hebrew. Examples can be multiplied a hundredfold, not just in English but in all the languages into which the Bible was translated.

In a society in which Church and State were one, Protestant Britain learned its history in the light of biblical history and saw itself as virtually the fulfilment of the Bible. Major events in British history – coronations, marriages, wars, deaths, the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, the English Revolution

– were commonly identified with biblical texts, especially the 150 psalms, which were recited once a month. To Tyndale, England and ancient Israel were one: 'As it went with their kings and rulers, so shall it be with ours. As it was with their common people, so shall it be with ours' (Daniell 2003: 237–38). Many English kings were commonly identified with biblical kings, Henry VIII as David, for example, or Edward VI as Josiah (*ibid*.: 208). In particular, the Geneva Bible of 1560 'was the source book for public and personal lives in Britain, and a motor that drove revolution' (*ibid*.: 221). Oliver Cromwell treated the Geneva Bible as a guide in war, revolution and statecraft.[9]

English literature – Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton – is packed with biblical themes and allusions. Particularly in the Elizabethan period, and in the time of the English revolution in the seventeenth century (in some ways a model for later revolutions), the Bible was the chief inspiration of nationalism. In the age of Elizabeth, an English population of under six million bought half a million copies of the Bible (Daniell 2003: xiv). The imperialism of the Elizabethans – the 'ancestor of modern nationalism' (Kermode 1965: 12) – is reflected in their literature, notably Spenser's *The Fairie Queene* (1590, 1596) in which corrupt Catholic Spain and Ireland are set allegorically against the 'true Israel' of the Protestant Church. Spenser is described by Hastings as 'an out-and-out English Protestant nationalist' (1997: 84) and *The Fairy Queene* as 'the quintessence of Elizabethan nationalism', celebrating the union of England and true religion under the sovereignty of Elizabeth; it is 'a work of reconciliation between old Englishness and new Englishness, a closing of ranks between the ''Merrie England'' which Catholics claimed had been lost with the Reformation and the Protestant gospel' (*ibid*.: 82–3). Spenser transforms the war between Protestant England and Catholic Spain into myth, the divine Una, the true universal English Church and its virgin empress, Elizabeth I, opposed to Duessa, the satanic Roman Church. In Book I, after his struggle with moral impurity, the saintly Red Cross Knight – St George the dragon killer, symbol of England, defender and future husband of Una – arrives Moses-like at the top of a holy mountain where he glimpses the heavenly Jerusalem and the likeness of its earthly counterpart, Cleopolis (London):

The new *Hierusalem*, that God has built
For those to dwell in, that are chosen his . . . (X 57)

England's identification with Israel reached its height during the mid seventeenth century Puritan revolution, whose outstanding poet was Milton. The revolution was driven by the religious-nationalist ideology and fervour of the prophets; by self-identification as a chosen people with a divine covenant and messianic hopes, a love of liberty and opposition to overweening monarchic rule. Milton read the Bible in Hebrew. Among Milton's earliest writings were translations of Psalms 114 and 136, which relate Israel's escape from slavery to freedom. The motif of freedom would later become central in Milton's poetry, including *Paradise Lost*, and in his political works supporting Cromwell and the revolution. Milton's English nationalism derives mainly from the Hebrew

Bible and the idea of a 'national community bound by Covenant-bonds to its divine king' (Fisch 1964: 123–4). The last book of *Paradise Lost* includes a prophecy of the birth of the nation of Israel, to which England would be heir.

Though strongest in the seventeenth century, the influence of the Bible on the English language and on British nationalism predominated until the twentieth century. In his translation of the Psalms in 1719, Isaac Watts was moved to replace 'Israel' with 'Great Britain' (Hastings 1997: 62). Burns was taught to read mainly from the Bible. Coleridge, in the *Biographia Literaria* (1817), points out that fine English is less likely to come from scholars, whose style is artificial and burdened with linguistic knowledge, than from those who regularly read the Bible (1975: 190–1) Byron's *Hebrew Melodies* reflect similar identification with the world of the Bible.[10] To Blake, immersed in biblical prophetic imagery, the visionary ideal of England is a 'new Jerusalem':

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.
('Jerusalem', 1804)

Biblical influences saturated Victorian literature and modernists such as James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence and T.S. Eliot (Aberbach 2003c: 145–6).

Modern Jewish nationalism and neo-prophecy

If the Bible in translation could give the English, Americans, Germans, Spanish, Dutch, Scandinavians, Poles, Hungarians, Africans, Latin Americans, etc. a sense of chosenness in their 'new Jerusalem', how much more could the Bible in the original Hebrew stimulate national identity among the Jews. Yet, rabbinic Judaism for the most part facilitated the nationalism of longing, and lost the name of action. Among medieval Hebrew poets, Judah Halevi (*c.* 1075–1140) stands out as a national poet in a more or less modern sense, illustrating the continuing potential power of biblical nationalism among the Jews. Halevi's poems of Zion, written in Muslim Spain, express not only yearning for the land of Israel as it was in the time of Jewish sovereignty but also as it might become in the future (see Carmi 1981: 347). The dream of the lost homeland and hope for national regeneration are consistent motifs in Hebrew poetry from the Bible to modern times. The continuing influence of this poetry was ensured by the inclusion of much of it in the Jewish liturgy.

However, the Christian nations of Europe, which took their national identity as chosen peoples largely from the Bible, adopted the doctrine that they were the elect heir to Judaism. Judaism was now an obsolete fossil, and the Jews could live on purely as a token of the supremacy of the Church, damned in the eyes of God as murderers of the savior, identified with contemptible material existence devoid of spirituality, with no original cultural development of their own, subject to ceaseless hatred and persecution. As

guardians of a crushed religion, the Jews were the most reluctant of European nationalists, among the last to emerge from the world of the Middle Ages and to discover their national identity.

Initially, the growth of universalist secular enlightenment encouraged not Jewish nationalism but political loyalty of Jews to the countries in which they lived. The granting of emancipation to most European Jews in the eighty or so years after the French Revolution and the spread of secular enlightenment, led to their assimilation and upward social mobility. Many assimilated European Jews were happy to concede to their countries of citizenship their albatross identity as a chosen people in exchange for equality and human rights. Nineteenth century European nationalism, however, precipitated anti-Semitism and brought about widespread acceptance of a new doctrine: even conversion to Christianity could not eradicate the wickedness of the Jew, which was in the blood (Wistrich 1992). In these circumstances, political Zionism was forced upon the Jews.

Jewish nationalism, with its inevitable biblical undertones, led to the revival of prophetic poetry in free verse. Chaim Nachman Bialik (1873–1934) and Uri Zvi Greenberg (1896–1981) are the two outstanding neo-biblical poets, politically as well as culturally.[11] Both responded forcefully to anti-Semitism. However, in contrast with their biblical sources, Bialik is uncompromising in his despair, and Greenberg in his violent militancy. Both are concerned less with prophetic ideals than with Jewish survival. Yet like the prophets, Bialik established his credentials not through praise but condemnation. In a poem quoting the Book of Amos, 'Prophet, run away' (*Hoze, lekh brakh*, 1908), he declares:

My axe-like word strikes to damn,
I never was a yes man.
(Bialik 2004: 132)

Bialik's most notable neo-prophetic poems, or 'poems of wrath', date from 1903–6, responding to widespread pogroms in Russia and expressing the despair that drove the national movement.

In particular, Bialik's *In the City of Slaughter* (*Be-Ir ha-Haregah*), written in 1903 after the pogrom in Kishinev in southern Russia, had a volcanic effect on Jewish nationalism. The poet visited the town shortly after the pogrom and describes it in gory detail. But instead of condemning the perpetrators, he attacks the Jews. The descendants of the heroic Maccabees were cowards, he claims: they hid like mice. (In fact, some of them did fight back, but Bialik does not mention this.) The poem is revolutionary in treating the Jews not as an ethnic group living in Russia but as a nation in its own right. Bialik's diatribe, majestically worthy of the prophet Isaiah, speaks in the spirit of a nation which no longer aims at assimilation but accepts in despair that it is different, and is hated. Later that year this poem helped inspire one of the first instances of organised Jewish military resistance since the Bar Kokhba revolt, in the Gomel pogrom.

Smith's description of Bialik as writing of a 'Davidic cultural and political renaissance' (1999: 82) is perhaps even more true of Greenberg. Bialik

ideologically was a disciple of the philosopher Ahad Ha'am, who believed in a secular cultural form of Jewish nationalism, built on traditional Judaism. It is Greenberg who writes of the realisation of messianic longing through restoration of the so-called Jewish 'kingdom'. For this reason, Greenberg was condemned and his poetry neglected by the Israeli literary establishment, which is predominantly secular, liberal and generally unsympathetic to exclusivist nationalism. No modern Hebrew poet – perhaps no poet in any literature – has so passionately identified himself as a reincarnation of a biblical prophet as Greenberg. For Greenberg even more than Blake, the biblical celestial Jerusalem can be created on earth. Like a modern Jeremiah, Greenberg uses poetry to inspire national rebirth, holding up his personal biography as a symbol of the life of the people. The poem 'With My God, the Blacksmith' (*Im Eli ha-Napach*, 1927) illustrates the poet's total identification with the divine calling of the prophet:

Like prophetic chapters my life burns
    in total revelation,
my body a metal mass for smelting.
My God the blacksmith hammers me:
every past wound opens in me,
spits fire shut in my bones.
(Greenberg 1990: I 124)

The first half of Greenberg's life was a unique personal journey, which he came to regard as symbolic of the collective transformation of the Jewish people: from orthodox Hasid to Yiddish expressionist to poet of World War I to Palestinian Hebrew poet, the fiercest, most ardent and original poetic spokesman for Jewish religious-nationalist chosenness. The two great emotional poles of Greenberg's work were Jew-hatred and the re-establishment of a Jewish state. Greenberg saw his poetry not as art but as God-given prophecy meant to influence events and ultimately bring about Messianic salvation.[12]

Uprooted from his Hasidic home in Polish Galicia and conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian army in 1915, Greenberg, then eighteen, was thrust into the Serbian front on the Sava river, where he witnessed grotesque horrors which never left him – the lifeless bodies of comrades dangling upside down on the barbed wire fences. Toward the war's end, Greenberg deserted. In Lemberg during the pogrom of November 1918, he and his family were captured by Polish anti-Semites and lined up against a wall in a mock execution. Greenberg never forgot this nor the ordeals which he suffered during the war. In the poem 'Radiance' (*Hizdaharut*, 1926), he alludes to the fate that was almost his:

Miraculously I survived the grasp of *goyim*.
May father's God be blessed!
I'm not lying in Slav earth, a Jew cut to pieces,
eaten by worms.
(Greenberg 1990: I 85)

His grim view of Jewish history was largely formed by the time he arrived in Palestine in December 1923. Long before the Holocaust, he wrote powerful

valedictions to centuries of Jewish life in Europe. In *Earthly Jerusalem* (*Yerushalayim shel Matah*, 1924), he describes his generation in the biblical language of trial by ordeal (Numbers 5:11f.) and crucifixion, driven to nationalism by anti-Semitism:

Forced to leave all valuables, we dressed for exile,
slung satchel on shoulder.
We sang like new recruits in an army barefoot
on Mediterranean sands.

We were forced to go.
The earth screamed under our feet, rattling our beds.
Mouldy bread sickened us to death.
Adulteress water turned us green with terror.
Everywhere we looked we were nailed to the cross
    agony filled our lives . . . (*ibid.*: 66)

To Greenberg, only national regeneration could save Europe's Jews. In the 1920s and 1930s, he celebrated the growth of the Jewish settlement in British Palestine. In common with other Palestinian Hebrew poets of the period (many of whom, including Bialik, Shlonsky and Shin Shalom, former Hasidim), he adhered to the 'religion of labor' taught by the labor socialist philosopher, A.D. Gordon. In 'Radiance', the poet is an incandescent vessel of messianic song, and the land of Israel is depicted in prayer, its geography the phylacteries, and the thirty-six righteous men of Jewish legend in the kibbutzim:

Jerusalem – *tefillin shel rosh*, the Emek – *shel yad*!
Lamed vavin in all kibbutzim,
    divine grandeur of all who suffer for the Kingdom!
Sinai smoking over father's shoulder in Poland,
face twilight-red . . . at times wax-like!
Candles in the seven-branched candelabrum mother lights
such Jerusalemite radiance: our Jerusalem!
Is this my light's source? –
Answer me, God of my father in Zion!
(*ibid.*: 85)

   Greenberg wrote for Jews alone, not for those whom he regarded as murderous despicable *goyim*. Their culture, though magnificent in some respects, hid deep-rooted barbarity. His ultra-nationalism hardened with Arab opposition to Jewish nationalism. The anti-Jewish Arab pogroms of 1929 drove Greenberg to join the right-wing Revisionists, led by Jabotinsky, where he became a leading figure. He was convinced of an eternal hostility between Jews and non-Jews and indeed of Jewish racial superiority. He advocated the creation through force of a powerful Jewish state extending from the Nile to the Euphrates as the only way to overcome Jewish power-lessness and to defeat the rapacious anti-Semitic beast.
   In despair, Greenberg watched in the late 1930s as the nations whose languages and religious cultures owed most to the Hebrew Bible brought the European Jews to the brink of extermination: Germany, by making Europe a

lethal trap; and the United States and Britain, master of the largest empire in history – including the Jewish National Home in the Land of Israel – by keeping the gates of immigration closed.

For several years, Greenberg was stunned into silence by the Holocaust, which included the murder of his parents. He joined the Jewish underground, the Irgun, with the aim of forcing the British out of Palestine and saving some of the European Jews. Between the end of the war in 1945 and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 (when he became a member of Knesset in Begin's Herut party) he wrote a series of dirges collected in *Streets of the River* (*Rechovot Ha-Nahar*, 1951), including savage invectives against the Christian world:

The snow has melted there again . . .
   murderers turn back to farmers.
Out they go to plough, in the fields of my dead!
If the ploughtooth rolls out from under the furrow
      a skeleton, mine,
the ploughman will have no fear or sorrow.
He'll smile . . . He knows it . . . for the blow of his tool
      he'll see again.
(Greenberg 1992: VI 67)

Greenberg also lashed out at those Jews who failed to return earlier to their homeland:

Now – our bodies made holy in their blood
rot there, the inheritance of worms,
house and vessels bathed in holiness
of Sabbath and festivals,
song of deep longing, the flap of the Shekhinah's wings –
the inheritance of *goyim*: for in their land
we built houses and synagogues and dug graves
not in Jerusalem
Jerusalem of rock of gold
Allelai Amen.
(*ibid.*: V 64)

In Greenberg's eyes, the Holocaust proved that the gentile world, in Europe at any rate, consisted mostly of murderers, collaborators and indifferent onlookers. The surviving Jews had no choice but to arm themselves to fight. His dirges (*kinot*) for the Holocaust victims, collected in *Streets of the River*, perhaps more than any other single literary work, convey the force of Jewish national grief and rage in response to genocide. In these poems, Greenberg transcended his role as a poet of the far-right and emerged as a prophetic spokesman for the Jewish people as a whole.

In a sense, Hebrew nationalism comes full circle with Greenberg. For Greenberg revives a dormant biblical national militancy in the original Hebrew that for hundreds of years had been largely the province of rising European nations in vernacular languages that had been decisively influenced by translations from the Bible. The European Jews had tried futilely to become assimilated into these nations, but had encountered hatred, persecu-

tion, and ultimately genocide. Greenberg's prophetic poetry consequently despairs of Europe, asserting instead a revived Jewish nationalism, based ironically on the same literary heritage that inspired European nationalism, but in the original Hebrew. It demonstrates the power of the Bible as a living, if mostly unacknowledged, force in modern political, social and cultural life.

Notes

1 Smith (1991: 50) sums up the importance of the Hebrew Bible in the growth of nationalism: The profound consequences of the concept of a chosen people, and the passionate attachment to sacred languages and scriptures proved to be an enduring legacy for many peoples from late antiquity to modern times, sustaining their sense of uniqueness and nurturing their hopes of regeneration. (See also Grosby 1991 and 1999; Novak 1995; Smith 1998 and 2003.)
On England and America as 'chosen peoples', see Longley (2002). For fuller accounts of national aspects of biblical literature, with bibliography, see Aberbach (1993) and Grosby (1999). On the influence of the Bible on English, see Hill (1994) and Daniell (2003). Also see Colley (1992). Since Tyndale's translation, there have been about 900 translations of the Bible into English (Daniell 2003: 134). For a comprehensive dictionary of biblical motifs in English literature, see Jeffrey (1992); broad selections of English literature influenced by the Bible are given by Jasper and Prickett (1999) and Atwan and Wieder (2000). Translations from the Hebrew in this article are by David Aberbach.
2 According to Kedourie (1960), modern nationalism starts with Germany's defeat by Napoleon at Jena in 1806. Kedourie, however, does not recognise that defeat characterises certain forms of pre-modern nationalism, notably that in the Hebrew Bible.
3 Whitman's poetry is particularly striking in its allusions to universalist prophetic ideals:
Each of us inevitable,
Each of us limitless – each of us with his or her right upon the earth,
Each of us allow'd the eternal purports of the earth,
Each of us here as divinely as any is here. ('*Salut au Monde*')
Whitman, imitating the style of the King James Bible, created what he called a 'New Bible' in an age in which the Bible was still overwhelmingly the determining book of American identity (Perry 1969: 96).
4 Later poets, including Byron, Shevchenko, Ibsen, and Bialik, have been particularly drawn to Psalm 137, with its combination of longing, humiliation, idealisation of the homeland in exile, and lust for revenge.
5 The Hebrew synagogue service, whose origins date from the biblical period, includes many selected readings from biblical poetry, which have helped keep Jewish national identity alive in literary-religious form.
6 Biblical references in *Va Pensiero* include: Psalms 48:5, 137:2–3; Isaiah 22:4, 51:17; and Song of Songs 8:14. The British national anthem is similarly indebted to the Bible: for example, 'God save the King' is found for the first time as a salute to Saul, first king of Israel (1 Samuel 10:24); and 'O Lord our God arise/Scatter his/her enemies' comes from Numbers 10:35.
7 The Welsh in particular came to identify themselves with ancient Israel: 'The Welsh myth of election pictured the community as the lost tribes of Israel, a latterday chosen people' (Smith 1999: 136–7). The translation of the Bible into Welsh in 1563 rejuvenated Welsh national consciousness. The decision of John Knox and the Scottish reformers to adopt the English Geneva Bible of 1560 and the King James Version of 1611 and not translate the Bible into Scots was an important factor in weakening the Scots language and Scottish national identity, leading to increasing cultural and political union with England.
8 The Psalms are so well-known that in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* they appear not in the section on the Hebrew Bible but under *The Book of Common Prayer*, and there are more quotations there from the Psalms than from any other book, including *Hamlet*.

9 After the battle of Dunbar in 1650, Cromwell interrupted his pursuit of the Scots to sing Psalm 117: 'Fortunately,' Hill observes, 'it is the shortest in the book' (1994: 356).
10 On Byron's use of biblical sources, see Slater (1952).
11 On Bialik, see Aberbach (1988) and Bialik (2004); on Greenberg, see Aberbach (2003b).
12 For an account of Greenberg's rejection of aestheticism, which he associated with Hellenism, in the context of the history of the Greek – Jewish relationship, see Leoussi and Aberbach (2002).

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