

# Is God a Nationalist?

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The title, “Is God a Nationalist?”, is a rhetorical question, of course. We know God isn’t a nationalist. But he is frequently appropriated as such by nationalism’s champions. Writing now in 2022, we are seeing an alarming upsurge in the use of populist and nationalist language in mainstream political discourse in the UK and the USA – countries with which I’m most familiar and which have worked hard to resist the use of such language since 1945 – yet both the UK Brexit vote and the US Trump presidency have kick-started a period of increasingly divisive and polarised social discourse. In secular Western Europe, the current migration crises have contributed heavily to the stoking of radical nationalist discourse, whereas in the USA, the involvement and mobilisation of fundamentalist, socially-conservative Christian thinking has been dominant. And even in the UK, a religious element of nationalism is present, and becomes very relevant in the context of a faith community like ours.

In this article, I’m defining ‘nationalist’ and ‘nationalism’ as the identification and promotion of a nation and its interests, to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations. I’m using the question about God and nationalism as a lens through which to inspect some religion-related assumptions about nationhood, and to explore implications of our traditional approaches to geo-political prophecy interpretation. Our damaged societies and political systems present us with a useful backdrop against which to inspect our use of nationhood and nationalism even within the Christadelphian community. I hope it will prove to be a useful, reflective exercise to focus the harsh glare of this topical spotlight on our own community’s traditional views of nationhood and national destinies.

Does God use borders and countries to generalise between groups of humans, based on their nationality? I don’t think he does. My reading of the New Testament leaves me feeling that Jesus and Paul rejected literal nationhood as an important tool of religious understanding or an important signifier. Christianity, and Bible teaching in general, do not promote nation-focused

thinking or nationalism. Instead, we see the narratives of God and Christianity focused on individuality and universality, both of which are characterised by a rejection (or transcending) of the significance of nationhood. This comes across very clearly in the New Testament, and is quite visible in the Old Testament when we look carefully.

I believe that some traditional Christadelphian discourse around the histories and perceived ‘destinies’ of certain nations are problematic. There’s a risk they can promote misleading ideas and emphases in our current and future world views. While ideas of nationhood exceptionalism can be argued from a quick reading of the text (and have taken hold in various Christian prophecy interpretations and communities including our own), nation-focused thinking tends to dehumanise people (and groups of people). Individual stories can be lost and overshadowed by preoccupation with national stories. We risk taking sides, compromising the objectivity that Jesus appears to require of his followers. For example, our identification with ancient Israel’s story can lead us to overlook its oppressive treatment of the Palestinians today.

There is a deeper danger too. The way we characterise certain nations as key players in a predictable end-times drama can risk leading us into complacent, entitled, and misguided thinking about countries like the UK, US, and Israel. It can also lead us into a corresponding reduction of empathy and compassion for the individual citizens of other countries, especially those which are framed as being in opposition to the ‘chosen’ nations, like Russia or Arab nations.

To caricature end-times apocalyptic prophecy interpretation, it can sometimes feel like a kind of international chess match, with God moving two groups of nations (the heroes and the villains) around the board in order to bring about an international, long-planned checkmate. I feel that focusing (even obsessing) on nation-based thinking can blur and confuse Christian teaching about the ways that we are taught to think about and treat our fellow humans. For example, some of our community’s responses to the war in Ukraine have appeared to emphasise the possibility of a geo-political end-times drama being played out, while down-playing the tragic stories of the individual humans involved.

To be clear, I’m not looking to explore arguments for or against particular prophetic viewpoints, such as being *for* idealist and futurist approaches to prophecy interpretation, or *against* continuous historic approaches. Instead, I’m looking to explore the idea that the traditional interpretations may be over-reliant (even dependent) on ideas of national exceptionalism and Western World Protestant thinking. This might lead us into complacent and

overly simplistic thinking, perhaps even distorted thinking about our place and our role in the world. And this might show up to others as a lack of empathy, compassion, or practical response. I want to offer the view that God is less preoccupied with nationhood, national identity, and national political stories than we tend to be.

There are three sections to the article:

1. A consideration of the origins of and reasons for nationalism, along with the ways that it can cause divisiveness and suffering when it is used and abused by leaders and influencers.
2. Three Bible lessons to illustrate some of the ways that nationhood is considered and treated in Judeo-Christian writing.
3. Summary considerations and prompts to reconsider, or reframe, the ways that nationalistic ideas can enter or take hold in Christian communities.

## Nationhood and Nationalism

Nations are a human invention. They're a social construct, a way that we group and identify ourselves into distinct community groups, membership of which can be defined by law and by naturalisation (by living somewhere for long enough), as well as by pure accident of birth.

There are a number of different elements that make up a 'nation'.

1. There is the regime or controlling government.
2. There are the people themselves, living under democratic, totalitarian, or feudal regimes.
3. There is the story that a nation tells about itself – *to itself* – about its history or its mythology. This story may have some grounding in truth and actual events but, more importantly, this national mythology establishes the idea of the 'ness' of a nation (e.g., defining 'Englishness', or what it means to be an American). The story is a bundle of apparently shared values, emotions, and national identity.
4. Finally, there's the land: the soil, the rock, the water that exist within our national borders.

Think of various countries in relation to these four elements of nationhood. What combination or balance of these elements – regime, people, story, land – do you think of when

you imagine Russia, for example, or the USA? And which of the elements are relevant when we're considering prophetic interpretation?

Let's take the nation of Israel as an example. When many in our community say that we support Israel today, are they saying that we back Israel's political regime and government? I'm guessing not. Or that we support and feel a strong bond with the people of Israel? Somewhat, perhaps. Or are we engaged with the ancient 'story' of Israel which can be seen to evolve from Old Testament physical to New Testament spiritual Israel? Almost certainly. And to what extent does the land of Israel itself have a role in our community's connection with Israel? Well, the land of Israel certainly has a priority place in the context of prophetic interpretation – think of the expectation that Jesus returns to the Mount of Olives, and the setting up a world capital in Jerusalem.

To whatever extent the literal geography of Israel is involved with future apocalyptic events, it is clear that the preoccupation with that patch of land, soil, and rock has been at the root of the constant fighting and national suffering of the Arab-Israeli conflict over the years. We might claim that this intractable problem is prophesied – inevitable – but are Christians too focused on land ownership in this context? Could this preoccupation actually represent a misunderstanding or misapplication of the words and teaching of Jesus, who prioritised the spiritual over the physical, and universality over tribalism?

In their founding stories, the principles of nations are often characterised as heroic or noble – despite the fact that greed and ambition are commonly underlying motivations for the creation (and expansion) of nations – and these nation stories can be hugely powerful. People can get behind a story as a group in a way that a focus on individuality can't replace. Patriotism and nationalism can give people a sense of collective power, both for good and ill. On the one hand, the collective sense of shared stories may motivate mutual care and support for one another. On the other hand, patriotic stories can lead to intoxicating and dangerous ideas that it is acceptable for your own nation to bring harm to other nations. We can come to see a country as benevolent, 'in the right', or even 'chosen by God', and find ourselves condoning and accepting immoral decisions and actions made at the national level.

Nostalgia – a sense of past greatness – is often an important ingredient when collective nationhood identity deteriorates into nationalism. Nick Cohen writes,

*Confident countries are not nostalgic.... The ultimate destination of the politics of nostalgia is a state like Vladimir Putin's Russia, where remorse at the loss of Soviet imperial power and paranoia about western conspiracies sustains a hyper-aggressive and lavishly corrupt dictatorship.*<sup>1</sup>

We are seeing electorates around the world disillusioned by the perceived failures of globalism and free market economics. People who are feeling let down and left behind can find resentment-fuelled refuge in charismatic leaders, who unashamedly appeal to society's uglier instincts of fear, envy, tribalism, racism, and anger to gain power. Daniel Trilling notes this:

*[the] successful effort by the right to link people's sense of [economic] abandonment to the idea that a strong and exclusivist sense of national identity is the answer.*<sup>2</sup>

Populism – turning people against elites who are characterised as corrupt and malevolent – and radical nationalism currently have a strong foothold in the political administrations and social discourse of the UK Conservative and US Republican parties. Donald Trump, master of populist bombast, tweets,

*Stop working soooo hard on being politically correct, which will only bring you down, and continue to fight for our Country. The losers all want what you have, don't give it to them. Be strong & prosper, be weak & die! Stay true...*<sup>3</sup>

Nearly 40 years ago, the Queen was sufficiently disturbed by these tendencies at work in the UK that she appealed against them, saying,

*... the greatest problem in the world today remains the gap between rich and poor countries, and we shall not begin to close this gap until we hear less about nationalism and more about interdependence.*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jun/26/our-politics-of-nostalgia-is-a-sure-sign-of-present-day-decay>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jun/15/race-riots-far-right-britain-stereotypes-nationalist-politics>

<sup>3</sup> Twitter, Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) March 17, 2019

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.royal.uk/christmas-broadcast-1983>

And now, just this year, we look on with sadness and shame at the proposed sending of asylum seekers to Rwanda (performative thought it may be) to stoke culture war anger and reaction by a cynical, populist UK administration.

Nostalgia seems a gentle term to describe the malevolent force underpinning the white supremacist rise. White nationalism's reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement has felt like a kind of a howl into the night, an awakening to a sense of real loss of power. Given the systemic and structural racism that has defined our shared Western histories, white nationalism has reason to be afraid in the face of long-overdue correction. Yet while Western empires and cultures co-opted Christianity, its origins weren't in Europe. Jesus was a brown person, speaking to enslaved peoples, and liberating them with his universalist message.

The idea that *my nation belongs to God and represents God's interests here on earth* is a dangerous belief. It implies that the nation's laws, lifestyle rules, and justice systems are made to align with however narrowly the leadership interprets God's law. And the results are predictably oppressive. We view with horror the fundamentalist totalitarianism of regimes like Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan. But it occurs in the West, too. Even in the USA, fuelled by a cocktail of Trumpist ethno-nationalism and the mobilisation of the Christian right-wing, the current Republican machine has become characterised by the suppression of scientific understanding, limiting voting rights, curbing abortion rights, and counter-intuitive decision-making around gun control and climate change.

Mike Pence, speaking in August 2020, as Vice President of the US, said,

*Let's run the race marked out for us. Let's fix our eyes on Old Glory and all she represents. Let's fix our eyes on this land of heroes and let their courage inspire. And let's fix our eyes on the author and perfecter of our faith and freedom and never forget that where the spirit of the Lord is there is freedom — and that means freedom always wins.*<sup>5</sup>

Wow. Here we see religion and nationalism combined in blatant and alarming ways. This bizarre mash-up of Hebrews 12 and 2 Corinthians 3 sees Jesus replaced and merged with Old Glory – *the US national flag* – to serve as a rallying point and militaristic talisman. It's a dramatic and extreme example, but makes us think. Can this heady mixture of religion and militaristic patriotism creep into the ways that we think about our own nation, or other world nations?

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/08/27/pence-bible-rnc-jesus-flag/>

I think we must admit that elements of exceptionalist thinking occurs in our community's attitudes to Anglo nations such as the UK and USA. It also occurs in our conceptions of the nation of Israel. My challenge to us all is to reexamine our attachment to old assumptions and comfortable traditions in this context, and really consider whether these ideas are right and helpful in our role as ambassadors of Jesus.

## Universalism in the Bible

The first lesson of nationhood in the Bible involves the creating and destroying of difference. It is instructive to contrast the tower of Babel in Genesis with the miracle of Pentecost in Acts. You could think of these contrasting accounts as the Bible bookends of nationhood, the beginning and end of nationalism.

In Genesis 11, a post-flood civilisation develops the technology and the desire to build a great and high tower. But God sabotages their efforts by confusing people with a multiplication of languages, scattering humanity into their separate groups. There's much to explore in the meaning of the Babel story, but at the very least we can take it to illustrate division, difference, language-defined barriers, and separation between peoples.

And then, in brilliant contrast, language is also at the heart of the Acts' Pentecost account, this time of international universality. The gospel message is wonderfully available and accessible to worshippers from all over the world, hearing the apostles' words in their own languages.

Babel scattered and confused us, but Pentecost gathers us together and restores international understanding. The differences that were created to limit humanity's reach are now destroyed. And this theme of the end of nationalism builds throughout Acts. Philip baptizes Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch. Then Peter baptizes a Roman centurion and his entire household, his sense of baffled amazement growing into stunned and overjoyed acceptance of God's international grace. Surely this is the end of national meaning and significance, where Jesus' disciples are seen to join a universalist, spiritual nation.

Willie James Jennings summarises the thrust of Acts, as saying,

*The will of my people, the will of any nation, has to now be made penultimate, next to the ultimate calling of life together with the God of Israel.*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> [https://thebiblefornormalpeople.com/episode-188-willie-james-jennings-the-book-of-acts-the-acts-of-the-spirit/?fl\\_rand\\_seed=1507814876](https://thebiblefornormalpeople.com/episode-188-willie-james-jennings-the-book-of-acts-the-acts-of-the-spirit/?fl_rand_seed=1507814876)

This is a great challenge that is laid down to *all* nations and peoples in this liberating and exhilarating declaration of universalism. We have to divest and de-emphasise our own nationhood 'belonging', in order to move into the domain of God.

The second biblical lesson about nationhood is found in the idea of land ownership. Land ownership seems to be of central importance in the Old Testament, but that changes significantly in the New Testament where it becomes immaterial as a Christian concept or signifier. In John 4, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that God does not need to be worshipped at Jerusalem or on a particular mountain, but wants to be worshipped simply *in spirit and truth*.

And in Hebrews, the contrast between physical Sinai and spiritual Zion is even more pronounced,

*You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire ... But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, to the heavenly Jerusalem.*  
(Heb 12:18,22)

Both passages make clear that the physical mountain, physical Jerusalem, physical land or nation are no longer significant when compared to the spiritual realities.

The third biblical lesson about nationhood centres on identity, particularly that of the Jew and the Greek. Paul makes a bold claim in Galatians,

*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.* (Gal 5:6)

And in Colossians he says,

*Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.* (Col 3:11)

The dissolution of nationhood and nationalism are woven into the text. The Bible is showing that they are to be superseded by internationalism, that a preoccupation with physical land and nation can be replaced by a sense of spiritual and universal belonging, a tribe of all families and nationalities, the one tribe of humanity. Reflecting on this message can help us to think hard about (and perhaps even change) the way we view our place in the world, and how God's kingdom may come to be fully realised.



## Reconsidering Geopolitics

I see two main (and overlapping) narrative purposes of the ‘nation of Israel’ in the Bible:

1. Individuality: to show that God works with individuals, based on their own character and faith. Think of the creation and establishment of Israel, which centres on one man’s faithful response to God’s call, irrespective of bloodline or tribe.
2. Universality: to evoke the contrast between law and grace, between the Levitical priesthood and the Melchizedek priesthood. To reveal that spiritual truths are precious and meaningful in God’s eyes, not land or ethnicity.

At the time of Jesus, Jewish tradition was very much focused on nationhood, but Christianity is not nation-focused. In the Old Testament we see the birth and history of Israel, prophetic announcements against entire nations, a doctrine of racial purity. But behind the apparent favouritism and ‘destiny’ language, we see nuance and teaching that brings us to the idea of ‘spiritual Israel’, which uses physical Israel only as an echo.

The extreme ethnic and religious nationalism exhibited in the instruction of Deuteronomy 7 – to drive out nations and keep separate from them – morphs into Peter’s declaration that spiritual Israel is now the chosen nation and royal priesthood,

*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

*(1Pet 2:9)*

Jesus’ followers are made up of *all* countries – and *none*.

Do we risk over-emphasising the role that individual countries will play in the lead up to Jesus’s return? There was an extraordinary serendipity between the reinstatement of the state of Israel and the writings of Victorian Christians and early Christadelphians. It is natural that 1948 can be seen as an amazing milestone. But might it also be something of a distraction for Christians? Shouldn’t we apply equal focus on, and identification with, the struggles and injustices faced by the Palestinians?

We can be bewitched by geo-political roleplay and our place in it suggested by early Christadelphians, for example where the UK is conceived as the elusive Tarshish. In this (imagined?) cosmic chess match we may find comfort in the lionhearted Caucasian knights of the free protestant world (oddly joined by Saudi Arabia) riding to the rescue of Israel’s king, led by

the Queen of a green and pleasant island. But there are problems with this view. How do we account for the fact that the emerging economies of the 21st century don't seem to have a place in the narrative? Vast centres of Christianity like Africa and China are marginalised. Somehow the old enemies of recent history's Western Empires conveniently occupy the role of villain: Russia, Iran, the EU, Catholicism.

## Look Around

Jesus teaches us to transcend earthly empire, to be agents of social justice and change, and to be immune to the dog whistles of 'national pride', 'nation first', 'keep them out'. So, if we are to transcend empire, is it likely that Jesus himself will come as another imperial aggressor (albeit a truly benevolent one)? Are there alternative views? Could we find encouragement and inspiration in considering more nuanced ways to think about the coming kingdom? I think that the idealist, futurist approaches to Revelation interpretation allow for important and powerful readings, not least an emphasis on the sanctity and meaning of individual lives over geo-political war games and machinations.

The *signs of the times* watchers exhort us to lift up our heads and to stare constantly into the near future. It may be good to be full of anticipation and eager excitement, but there is a risk of dissociating from the *now*. Are we not also (and even more so) taught to look around at the needs of our communities, of our societies?

The idea that we know what will happen in world events is troubling, especially given Jesus' own words that we will *not know* the day or hour. There's certainly a neatness and a sense of comfort from the ideas associated with traditional prophecy interpretation, but I wonder if they may require us to think in ways that compromise Jesus and Paul's message of universality, of an end to nationhood playing a key role in the destiny of the world.

A less nation-focused, more idealist approach certainly introduces more messiness and uncertainty, but I think it could help us to live lives as effective ambassadors for Christ. And still maintain an excited anticipation of the ultimate fulfillment of Jesus' kingdom promises.