The Fruits without the Roots? Postmodern Group-Identity in the Light of Biblical Anthropology

Jaap Doedens
Pápa Reformed Theological Seminary, Hungary
jaapdoedens@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4451-3871

Abstract: The origins of modern western societies are indubitably rooted in Judeo-Christian values that generated a unique form of civilization over the course of almost two-thousand years. These values have as their core-belief that humans are created in the image of God. This notion deeply influenced views on human identity and on human rights. Since the rise of modernity, these religious roots of the western world-view have eroded gradually as a consequence of secularization. While society increasingly became cut off from its own roots, the fruits of the former world-view were still accepted as desirable. However, emerging post-modernity appears to be in the process of not only losing the roots, but also rejecting the fruits of Judeo-Christian values. As a consequence, human identity is evermore perceived as consisting of – often conflicting – group-identities. The aim of this study is to discover whether biblical anthropology can shed light on the functions of groups within a given society. Being aware of the fact that the way how ancient Israel dealt with minority groups and how this is reflected within the Hebrew Bible is not automatically applicable for present-day societies, we still might be able to glean insights for our present world. In order to attain such, this study first analyzes shortly the post-modern societal situation pertaining to group-identities. Subsequently, the focus will be on how Israel's self-understanding as "chosen people" is approached critically by some parts within the Old Testament. Following that, the study concentrates on how concrete social and religious minority groups were viewed: the sojourners, the poor, the slaves. Within this approach also the "sons of the prophets" and the Rechabites will be reviewed. The study suggests that the Christian church might have an own alternative narrative within a postmodern world by emphasizing that identity should have a transcendent side, by seeing that the individual is the proper level of identity, and by proclaiming that individuals are called to function with responsibility within communities.

Keywords: minority groups in the Old Testament, sojourners, slaves, the poor, "sons of the prophets," Rechabites, biblical anthropology, modernism, postmodernism, group identity

1. Roots and Fruits

One can hardly deny that the origins of modern western society are deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian values. This generated a unique form of civilization over the course of almost two millennia. Judeo-Christian roots provided concrete fruits as to how humans were viewed within created reality in religious, sociological, and juridical respect. This value-system has as its core-belief the conviction that humans are created in the image of God.

Hence, this notion formed – both consciously and unconsciously – views on human identity. Since the rise of modernity, these religious roots of the western world-view have eroded constantly as a consequence of secularization. While society, thus, gradually became cut off from its own roots, the fruits of its world-view of origin were still accepted as desirable.[1] However, emerging postmodernity appears to have even lost not only the *roots*, but also wants to get rid of the *fruits* of the Judeo-Christian value-system. Human identity has been steadily and stealthily forced into a perceived group-identity mainly based on race and gender, overarched by the notion of victimhood. The aim of this study is to discover whether biblical anthropology can shed light on what is the function of groups within society and whether the Christian church might have an own alternative and attractive narrative without the necessity to immediately conform to the latest fashions in world-views.

2. The Current Situation

When we take a look at some of the overarching lines within church history, it appears that the church, during almost all her existence has attempted to throw light on the socio-cultural situation in which Christians found themselves. This is, of course, an honorable endeavor, yet not without its own dangers. Since, after all, there always lurks the danger of going somewhat or totally along with the mainstream of a culture. Whereas the *"ichthys"*[2] that is alive should swim against the stream.

Thus, many bad things can be said about the church in general and about Christians in particular. They even may be true. Either partly or totally. Yet, it were these strange new communities in the Greco-Roman society, that were perceived as endangering the social coherence of civil society, that actually were providing a new bond for connecting people.[3] Not based anymore on rigid loyalty to the Emperor for whom you had to sacrifice yourself, but on the loving loyalty to a heavenly Lord who sacrificed himself for them. Few people were caring for the poor in the Roman Empire. But Christians did. Few people were willing to care for sick people. Yet Christians cared. An outbreak of the plague in the Roman Empire usually made the rich and healthy people to run for the hills. Who would be so foolish as to stay and nurse the sick and bury the dead? There were those crazy Christians – and many of them paid with their lives.

And slowly but steadily these small communities that considered themselves to be a kind of "intersections" between heaven and earth, changed society. I know – some call

---

1   Credits for the wordplay on "roots" and "fruits" go to N.T. Wright, who used it – if I remember well – in one of his lectures.

2   The Greek word "ἰχθύς," ("fish") and its depiction became an ancient Christian symbol, based on the acrostic "Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ Ὑιὸς Σωτήρ" ("Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior").

3   For a detailed analysis of the theological place of Christianity within the religious world of the Roman Empire, see N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 4; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 2013) 1330–1353.

the Constantinian shift the original sin of the church. After all, from then on, followers of the Messiah were no longer persecuted, and for many people it became expedient to pose as Christians. Yet what should the poor church have said or done differently? "Please, Emperor, be so kind as to continue to persecute us, and please do not become a Christian"?[4] This view that the church from then on could do nothing else than obey its political masters is plainly wrong.[5] Quite the opposite, the church showed that she was able to speak truth to power, which is one of the activities of the Holy Spirit inside the church,[6] as illustrated by the famous case of Bishop Ambrose forcing Emperor Theodosius to do penance after his massacre in Thessalonica.[7] What was less obvious in this political and cultural shift, was that Christianity had succeeded in sensitizing society for the poor, the sick, and the handicapped.

This concern for people in need was based on the biblical notion that humans are created in the image of God. This theological notion implied that in the sight of God all humans are equal. And the church tried to implement that. At least in theory. But often in practice as well, although the implementation might not have always been perfect. Nevertheless, this attitude to humanity became so much embedded in western culture that it became – as it were subconsciously – part of the approach of governments and secular social institutions. However, with the gradual change towards postmodernism, other kinds of groups came into view. Currently, the emphasis is put on groups based on either gender or skin-color. Interestingly, these groups center themselves around immutable biological traits. This, in itself, is not so shocking, as it consists of a new form of a very old phenomenon, namely tribalism. Moreover, it leads to a new kind of victim mentality, giving "advantages" to people who belong to a group that is seen as being discriminated against. These groups even call themselves "communities" as if sharing biological traits automatically will lead to a feeling of belonging together. They are called identity-groups, which might be a paradoxical designation, as if identity hinges solely on these rather trivial traits. Even more victim-points can be scored, if one belongs at the same time within several of these discriminated minorities, which is called intersectionalism.[8] E.g. someone possibly can – let's say – be a black-trans-woman, which places such a person automatically

---

4   Cf. N.T. Wright, "The Truth of the Gospel and Christian Living," M.J. Borg – N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus. Two Visions* (New York: HarperCollins 1999) 219–220.

5   Cf. N.T. Wright, "God and Caesar, Then and Now," *The Character of Wisdom. Essays in Honour of Wesley Carr* (eds. S. Lowe – M. Percy) (London: Routledge 2016) 166–167.

6   See John 16:8, the Spirit, when he comes, "will convict (ἐλέγξει) the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment (ἐλέγξει τὸν κόσμον περὶ ἁμαρτίας καὶ περὶ δικαιοσύνης καὶ περὶ κρίσεως)".

7   See e.g. S. Doležal, "Rethinking a Massacre: What Really Happened in Thessalonica and Milan in 390?," *Eirene* 50/1–2 (2014) 89–107.

8   Currently, the intersectional approach is not solely a colloquially fashionable term, but is also present in biblical scholarship, see e.g. M.J. Smith – J.Y. Choi (eds.), *Minoritized Women Reading Race and Ethnicity. Intersectional Approaches to Constructed Identity and Early Christian Texts* (Feminist Studies and Sacred Texts; Lanham, MD: Lexington 2020). To me, it seems, however, that such intersectional terminology, e.g. "white supremacists," "minoritizing," "ethnicizing," "deforming effects of whiteness," "the patriarchy" and the like are read into the ancient texts. Moreover, most of these terms are neologisms and their value or truth can be disputed. As a result, this intersectional approach in biblical scholarship gives to me the impression of an echo chamber, not much allowing

in three different identity-groups at the same time. The shocking part in all these post-modern versions of tribalism is that this is in fact a form of cultural regression, because a *grosso modo* Judeo-Christian value-system was actually the *victory over tribalism*. After all, the Judeo-Christian worldview locates someone's identity not in being part of a group, but in having permission to see oneself as a unique person, created in the image of God. This uniqueness of all of us in relation to the Creator-God leads to being responsible, in the literal sense as well, meaning that with our existence we are challenged to *respond* to the God who is our Creator and Redeemer.

Thus, we can state that the current situation of emphasizing group-identity has its roots in Judaism and Christianity. After all, it was through Christianity that societies learnt to pay attention to everyone who was oppressed. Yet at the same time, it is a *deviation* from Judaism and Christianity, as a result of wanting to leave God out of the equation. This easily leads to postmodern forms of tribalism, something that Christianity intended to abolish.

It is, therefore, interesting to pay attention to how the Old and the New Testaments handle peoples' belonging to a group or different groups. Of course with the disclaimer that a biblical *description* not automatically equals a *prescription*; in other words, we cannot jump carelessly from a biblical *is* to a present-day *ought*. Yet with that important warning in mind, the way how the place of minority groups is reflected upon within biblical literature may give insightful views that may help us to come to grips with comparable issues within our own societies.

3. The Old and New Testaments on Groups and Group-Identity

3.1.   The Chosen People

Superficially viewed, one would expect especially the Hebrew Bible to be a perfect candidate for promoting and sustaining group-identity, moreover a group-identity of the rather privileged kind. After all, the Israelites could consider themselves to be the chosen people, thus being different from all others. However, it may be a doubtful honor to be singled out to form the vanguard in a battle with enemies. Add to that the fact that to be chosen by no other than *God* implies you will be judged according to divinely high standards of righteousness. Therefore, in hindsight, being God's chosen people is perhaps a privilege, yet not the most enviable one.[9] In other words, the word "privilege" has to rhyme with the word "responsibility."

Seen from a biblical-theological viewpoint, Israel's election is nowhere grounded in their moral superiority or whatever other excellence. The book of Deuteronomy makes

---

in a word from outside the adopted stance that almost every relationship in society is power-driven. Yet this should remind us that any scholarly system runs the risk to become deaf for correction.

9   Being elected can also lead to isolation, not only of a people, but also of the individual. See H.W. Wolff, *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments* (Munich: Kaiser 1973) 316–320.

clear that Israel's election is solely based on God's love and on God's being faithful to his promise made to the patriarchs.[10] Thus, according to the theology of Deuteronomy, this "elected group" finds its identity *outside* of the group's boundaries, namely in the God who chose them. As soon as this group collectively forgets its *externally rooted identity*, it changes into nothing more than a run-of-the-mill nation. In the same vein, some of the Old Testament prophets make shockingly clear that God can as well choose other nations. There is no inherent difference between peoples, as Amos emphasizes, "'Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, people of Israel?' declares[11] YHWH." Moreover, the prophet audaciously employs Exodus-language to convey God's message: "Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt" – so far so biblical, but then he continues with "and the Philistines from Caphtor[12] and the Arameans from Kir?"[13] The book of Jonah apparently has the same message, relating how the archenemy Nineveh repents, hoping that God will have compassion and turn away[14] from his plans.[15]

Amos's prophecy obviously implies that many in the Northern Kingdom connected their identity to being a member of the chosen people. In light of the prosperous economic circumstances and the relatively calm geopolitical situation under King Jeroboam II, this attitude is perhaps understandable. Yet soon there will loom high the shadow of the Assyrian Empire with its kings Tiglath-Pileser III, Shalmaneser V, and Sargon II. In these seemingly comfortable circumstances, Amos's prophecy intends to wake up his listeners from this dangerous dream. After all, as soon as the relation with YHWH and righteous behavior are left behind, such appeal to being the chosen people as a group-identity becomes an empty shell.

Much like Amos in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, so Jeremiah, years later, fought against a similar attitude in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The inhabitants of Jerusalem apparently were convinced that they would suffer no harm, because their capital had God himself present in its midst. As a consequence, they would be protected against all harm. Yet Jeremiah has to declare that they deceived themselves by their saying repeatedly, "This is the temple of YHWH, the temple of YHWH, the temple of YHWH."[16] This kind of trust as if a sacred building automatically contains God's presence is completely misplaced. To prove his point, Jeremiah announces that the sanctuary will be destroyed, just as once the Tabernacle in Siloh was destroyed.[17] This dire prediction was enough for the priests and the cult-prophets to seize Jeremiah and to pronounce a death threat against him.[18] Before

---

10   Deut 7:7–8.
11   Here, the prophetic formula "נְאֻם־יְהוָה" is used.
12   Cf. Deut 2:23; Jer 47:4.
13   Amos 9:7.
14   Interestingly, the language of "conversion" is used here for God, "יָשׁוּב וְנִחַם הָאֱלֹהִים". Cf. Jer 26:3.
15   Jonah 3:6–9.
16   Jer 7:4.
17   Jer 7:12–14; 26:6.
18   Jer 26:7–15. Jeremiah is only saved by the elders who remember that the prophet Micah also prophesied against the temple, without this being a reason, back then, for King Hezekiah to condemn him to death,

long, the prophet Ezekiel has a vision in which he sees that God's throne is a mobile throne. He sees how God is moving out of the sanctuary in Jerusalem, leaving the temple as nothing more than an empty building. Idolatry, immorality, and social injustice corrode the essence of being elected.

It, thus, becomes obvious that election is rooted in God's love and in his faithfulness. This election elicits humans to act accordingly. As soon as these roots of the covenant bear no fruits, any appeal to a "group-identity" becomes futile. In other words, being God's chosen people finds its identity only in the relationship with God and in the fulfilment of how God intends to guarantee life. Looking for identity in the group of the elected itself, is like trying to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps or attempting to moor a ship by throwing its anchor into its own cargo hold.

We should also pay attention to the fact that the Old Testament encompasses passages conveying that membership of God's chosen people was not an exclusive right, connected to genetic descent.[19] Non-Israelites were also allowed to participate in Israel, on condition that they kept the rules.[20] The Torah, thus, seems not to bother that much about "blood" or descent. It was only in post-exilic times that group-identity appears to have become more strictly maintained.[21] Yet this change in behavior most probably must be viewed against the backdrop of the exile. Factually, the exile never properly ended, since many Jews stayed in the diaspora. The pressure to assimilate must have been relatively high in Hellenistic times, which strengthened for some of the groups among Israel the need to emphasize their ethnic identity. However, the flipside of the coin of strictly observing the rules of the Torah as identity-markers, was that Jewish identity was also met with contempt or even hatred in the Greco-Roman empire.[22]

It is, therefore, too easy to see Israel's view on being chosen by God as solely privilege-based. Israel as a people was not completely sealed off for newcomers. Moreover, according to the above-mentioned theological approaches from the book of Deuteronomy and the messages of the prophets Amos, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, being elected was neither self-evident nor solely located in genetic descent, let alone based on the presence of YHWH's

---

Jer 26:16–19. However, a contemporary of Jeremiah, called Uriah, prophesied in a similar way, subsequently received death threats from King Jehoiakim, became afraid, fled to Egypt, where he was fetched by soldiers of Jehoiakim, who brought him back to Jerusalem where he was put to death.

19   It should also be noted that Israel was genetically connected to its neighbors in many ways, see e.g. L. Köhler, *Der hebräische Mensch. Eine Skizze* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1980) 5–6.

20   According to Lev 24:22, the same laws applied to native Israelites and sojourners in their midst. Sojourners were also allowed to participate in the celebration of Pesach, if they kept the rules for this religious festival, Num 9:14.

21   E.g. Ezra sending away pagan spouses, Ezra 10:10–44. The rules of the Qumran sect may also fall into this category, see 1QS, F. García Martínez – E.J.C. Tigchelaar (eds.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls. Study Edition* (Leiden: Brill 2005) I, 68–99. Cf. 1Q28a, *ibidem*, 98–103.

22   This happened despite the fact that for outsiders in antiquity it was not always obvious who was a Jew and who was not. See S.J.D. Cohen, "'Those Who Say They Are Jews and Are Not': How Do You Know a Jew in Antiquity When You See One?," *Diasporas in Antiquity* (eds. S.J.D. Cohen – E.S. Frerichs) (Brown Judaic Studies 288; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1993) 1–46.

temple in Jerusalem. It was always meant to be a *relational* category, having its roots in God's love and faithfulness. As soon as being elected was severed from faithfulness to God's covenant and from social justice, the whole responsibility of being chosen turned against them.

3.2. Minority Groups

Among Old Testament Israel were several groups that can be considered as minority-groups. The main distinctions for these groups were either social or religious, or a combination of both. The poor, the non-native sojourners, and the slaves among Israel occur as separate categories of concern in the Hebrew Bible. These were socially discernable groups, and often the poor and the strangers are mentioned together. It is possible that also the so-called "sons of the prophets" were not mainly a religiously, but a socially distinct group as well. A probably mainly religiously distinct group were the so-called Rechabites. How does the Old Testament deal with these minorities?

3.3. The Sojourners

The semi-assimilated stranger in Israel (גֵּר) received explicit legal protection.[23] They usually lived permanently among Israel, without completely integrating. Being such a "sojourner" was not necessarily a permanent state, as the biblical narratives give examples of these strangers becoming full members of the Israelite community.[24] However, one can imagine that as long as these foreigners stayed more or less separated, their position as "aliens" must have been more vulnerable, as they depended on the goodwill of the locals, hence the protecting prescriptions in the Torah.[25] As long as these "strangers" were not in any sense hostile, they were not only tolerated, but also positively protected. These laws are unique within the Ancient Near Eastern cultures; so far, no parallels have been found outside of Israel.[26]

---

23 The Old Testament makes a difference between the semi-assimilated "sojourner" (גֵּר, also called "תּוֹשָׁב," "dweller, resident" in some texts) and the non-assimilated "stranger" (זָר; נָכְרִי / נֵכָר), who was often seen as being hostile and whose ethics and culture had to be avoided, or were enemies from foreign countries, see e.g. Ezek 11:9 "וְנָתַתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּיַד־זָרִים," cf. 28:7.10; 30:12; 31:12; 39:23. Cf. P. Jenei, "Strategies of Stranger Inclusion in the Narrative Traditions of Joshua–Judges: The Cases of Rahab's Household, the Kenites and the Gibeonites," *OTE* 32/1 (2019) 128–131. The semi-assimilated strangers were, much as the second-class citizens, not exempt from possible conscription for forced labor, see P. Jenei, "Subjugating and Exploiting the Second-Class Population of the Ancient Israelite State: The Case of Forced Labour (מַס) in Light of the Population Economy of Ancient Israel," *JNSL* 45/1 (2019) 64–65.

24 See e.g. Jenei, "Strategies of Stranger Inclusion."

25 It is forbidden to oppress strangers, they must rest from labor like all of Israel on the Sabbath, they are allowed to live from leftovers on the fields and from a three-yearly tithe of the harvest of the Israelites, they can participate in religious festivals, see Exod 22:20; 23:9; Deut 14:29; 16:11.14; 23:8; 24:14.17.19–21; 26:11–13. There are also situations in which actions towards sojourners are less strict, e.g. when it is forbidden to sell the meat of an animal that died by itself to Israelites, yet it may be sold to strangers, see Deut 14:21. Interestingly, even the visionary geographical division of the "new Israel" in Ezek 47:13–23 pays attention to the rights of strangers, see Ezek 47:22–23.

26 Protection for the widow, the orphan, and the poor are not uncommon in the Ancient Near East; the inclusion of the "sojourner" into this group is only found in the Old Testament, see Jenei, "Strategies of Stranger Inclusion," 134–135.

Even based on the biblical narratives we can conclude that the position of strangers outside of Israel was always a precarious one. We can think of Abraham sojourning in Egypt,[27] or Lot residing in Sodom.[28] Moreover, even spending time in another environment among fellow-countrymen was not always safe, as the end of the book of Judges testifies in the narrative about the Levite and his concubine.[29]

We can be tempted to praise the New Testament for outbidding the Old Testament in making clear that we should not only have love for vulnerable groups in society, but even for our enemies.[30] However, love for enemies is not completely strange to the Old Testament. Its Wisdom literature instructs us to feed a hungry enemy.[31] Not only Wisdom literature with its possibility of drawing an ideal that is too far from everyday reality, but also Old Testament narrative literature applies this same principle. The Elisha narratives mention how the prophet advised the king to give bread and water to captured Syrian soldiers and then release them.[32]

The most interesting for our theme of group-identity is, however, the *motivation* behind these laws. The prescriptions in the Torah forbidding the oppression of strangers are motivated by the fact that Israel should remember that they had first-hand experience of what it is to live as a stranger in another culture.[33] The other reason mentioned in the narrative of Gen 20:11 by Abraham when defending his white lie of his wife being his sister is, "I thought there is surely no fear of God in this place,[34] and thus they might kill me because of my wife." Within a situation of brutal social Darwinism, "fear of God" is the main factor behind ethical behavior towards strangers.[35] In any event, the group identity of the "strangers" and their being worthy of protection is located not within the group itself, but in the relational element, both the relation of their being fellow-humans and in the relation towards God whom they should "fear."

---

27   Gen 12:10–20. Similar narratives are told about Abraham and Isaac dwelling in Gerar, Gen 20:1–18; 26:1–11.

28   Gen 19:1–11.

29   Judg 19:10–30. The narrative explicitly relates that the protagonists decided to spend the night not in Jebus, which was a city of non-Israelites, but in the Israelite Gibeah (19:10). The narrator probably suggests between the lines that their spending the night among foreigners might have been safer than among their own kinsfolk, thus emphasizing with the book's returning refrain how low Israel had sunk in those days when "there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." (Judg 21:25, cf. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1).

30   Matt 5:43–48.

31   Prov 25:21–22, "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat. And if your enemy is thirsty, give him water to drink. Because this is how you place burning charcoals on his head; and YHWH will reward you." This proverb is quoted by the apostle Paul in Rom 12:20, "ἀλλ᾽ ἐὰν πεινᾷ ὁ ἐχθρός σου, ψώμιζε αὐτόν· ἐὰν διψᾷ, πότιζε αὐτόν· τοῦτο γὰρ ποιῶν ἄνθρακας πυρὸς σωρεύσεις ἐπὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ."

32   2 Kgs 6:8–23. Cf. Rom 12:21, "μὴ νικῶ ὑπὸ τοῦ κακοῦ ἀλλὰ νίκα ἐν τῷ ἀγαθῷ τὸ κακόν."

33   See Exod 22:20; 23:9; Lev 19:33–34; Deut 10:19; 23:8.

34   Gen 20:11, "אֵין־יִרְאַת אֱלֹהִים בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה."

35   Cf. Deut 10:19–20, where the command to fear God is given right after the instruction to love sojourners.

3.4. The Poor and the Slaves

In the Old Testament, there are many passages about the protection of poor people or slaves. Who happened to be poor was reminded that whatever they experienced, God would not forget them.[36] Moreover, the Torah provided a plethora of laws aiming at social justice for the poor,[37] and a humane treatment of slaves, something that was unique in the Ancient Near East.[38] The fact that these laws were not always applied becomes manifest through the exhortations of the prophets.[39]

Neither the Old Testament, nor the New Testament strives to terminate poverty or to abolish slavery. The biblical authors accept that certain circumstances are too complex to solve at a given moment, and that forms of inequality[40] always will exist.[41] Abolishing slavery would have been something comparable to fighting for the abolition of the use of electricity or money in the modern world. That is why the apostle Paul accepts the fact of slavery, but at the same time declares slaves and their owners to be equal for God.[42] In the long run, his approach, combined with his letter to Philemon with the concrete request to give the runaway slave Onesimus his freedom, formed a ticking bomb under the institution of slavery in the western world. Moreover, the same scriptures also abundantly emphasize that everyone is obliged to soften the fate of anyone who is in dire straits.[43] The Early Church maintained that attitude in its care for the poor.[44]

Again, the incentive to care for the poor and for a humane treatment of slaves[45] in the Old Testament is based upon the fact that Israel has to remember that they had been in bondage in Egypt; it is only thanks to the love of their God that they are free. This collective memory of slavery and poverty must open their hearts towards poor people among them.[46] In the New Testament, this readiness to help the poor is underlined by the fact

---

36　E.g. Ps 9:12; 10:12.

37　E.g. Exod 23:3; Lev 19:9–10; 23:22; Deut 10:17–19; 14:28–29; 15:7–11. Apart from warnings not to oppress the poor and to be impartial in legal cases, the poor had certain privileges: they were allowed to glean in the fields and vineyards, while the owner was obliged to leave something of the harvest and the fruits for the poor and the sojourner (Lev 19:9–10; 23:22; Deut 24:19, cf. Ruth 2–3). They also had rights to sabbatical fruits (Exod 23:10–11; Lev 25:6). The tithe of the third year was for the poor and needy (Deut 14:28–29; 26:12–14). They were allowed – as everyone else – to pluck from vineyard or grain field, but only proportionally: plucking by hand and not collecting in any bucket or vessel (Deut 23:25; cf. Luke 6:1). For an overview, see C.U. Wolf, "Poor," *IDB* III, 843–44.

38　See I. Mendelsohn, "Slavery in the OT," *IDB* IV, 383–391.

39　See, *inter alia*, Isa 1:23; Ezek 16:49; 22:7; Amos 2:6–7; 4:1; Mic 2:2; Mal 3:5.

40　Within the church, equality is, however, one of the goals to be attained, see 2 Cor 8:13–15.

41　See Deut 15:11; Matt 26:11; par. Mark 14:7; John 12:8.

42　See e.g. Ef 6:5–9; Col 3:22–4:1; 1 Tim 6:1–2; cf. 1 Pet 2:18.

43　High expectations were put on the Messianic king, see Ps 22:26; 72:2.4; Prov 29:14.

44　See e.g. Acts 2:45; 4:34: 11:29; Gal 2:10; Jas 2:1–7. In 2 Cor 8–9, the apostle Paul writes amply about the collection (already mentioned in his earlier letter, 1 Cor 16:1–3) for the Jerusalem church with its many poor members, meanwhile masterly avoiding the word "money."

45　See, *inter alia*, Exod 21:1–11.20–21.26–27. Jer 34:8–22 emphasizes that God took the obliged manumission of slaves seriously.

46　See e.g. Deut 5:15; 16:12.

that the Messiah became poor for humans in order to make them rich.[47] In the New Testament, too, the instruction to do good deeds is not restricted merely to actions towards fellow-Christians, but reaches out to all.[48] Viewed biblically, care for the poor is rooted not in something inherent to that group, but in something transcending the group, namely the relationship to God.[49] Thus, honoring the poor is honoring God.[50]

3.5.   The "Sons of the Prophets" and the Rechabites

There are two other groups to be considered in ancient Israel, both of them have a religious and a social aspect to them, namely the so called "sons of the prophets" (בְּנֵי־הַנְּבִיאִים)[51] and the Rechabites.

The expression "sons of the prophets" is obviously not referring to physical descent, as if these persons were in a literal way the children of a prophet. The Hebrew Bible usually refers to them as a group, and apparently, some of them were living together under the guidance of a prophet who was their leader.[52] Therefore, the exegetical consensus is that they were a kind of "prophetic guild" or perhaps a "prophetic school."[53] In any event, they seem to have been a different group than the cult-prophets connected to a temple or a royal court.[54] The expression "sons of the prophets" only occurs in the books of Kings and within the context of the so-called Elijah and Elisha cycles.[55] Notably, these "sons of the prophets" appear to have been living in relative poverty.[56] This might seem logical: Who dedicates his life to prayer, prophecy, and theology has little time left to work for a living, and consequently will be as poor as a church mouse. Yet what if it was the other way around? They may have been people who had become debt-slaves, who had lost their property and their

---

47   See 2 Cor 8:9.

48   See Gal 6:10, "Ἄρα οὖν ὡς καιρὸν ἔχομεν, ἐργαζώμεθα τὸ ἀγαθὸν πρὸς πάντας, μάλιστα δὲ πρὸς τοὺς οἰκείους τῆς πίστεως."

49   The Document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on biblical anthropology typifies the care for any disenfranchised group as an act of solidarity among humans, see Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man? A Journey Through Biblical Anthropology* (trans. F. O'Fearghail – A. Graffy) (London: Darton, Longman & Todd 2021) 244–247. As such, the concept of solidarity is useful, since it generates a possible dialogue between the Judeo-Christian traditions and other worldviews. However, arguing merely from solidarity as a requirement in inter-human relationships runs the risk of leaving out the added value of the biblical tradition embedding this requirement in the relationship with God as Creator and Savior.

50   Cf. Matt 25:44–45.

51   See 2 Kgs 2:3; 4:1.38; 5:22; 6:1.

52   See 2 Kgs 6:1, mentioning the "sons of the prophets" living under the charge of the prophet Elisha.

53   See B.D. Napier, "Sons of prophets," *IDB* IV, 426.

54   See e.g. 1 Kgs 18:4.19; 22:6; 2 Kgs 23:2; Jer 26:7–8.11.

55   1 Kgs 20:35 is placed within the Elijah-Elisha cycles, although there is no textual indication that the "certain man from among the 'sons of the prophets'" is in any way connected to a group of prophets around Elijah or Elisha. All the other occurrences are, as regards content, connected to Elisha, see 2 Kgs 2:3.5.7.15; 4:1.38; 5:22; 6:1; 9:1. The only occurrence in the singular is in Amos 7:14, where Amos states: "I am not a prophet, nor am I a 'son of a prophet'(בֶּן־נָבִיא)." This double reference may indicate that the expression "son of a prophet" most probably must be understood as "member of a prophetic group," otherwise Amos would have phrased a tautology.

56   Cf. 2 Kgs 4:1–7.38–44; 5:22; 6:1–7.

land. In order to solve their problems, they turned to a leader-prophet, and formed a kind of communities, living together, helping each other.[57] We cannot know for sure, but this picture fits well into the social situation of the mid-ninth century BCE. In that case, the "sons of the prophets" were mainly a social category and formed a living accusation against a social order that had abandoned the laws of the Torah and did not heed prophetic exhortations.

The other socially and religiously distinguishable group were the so-called Rechabites. The book of Jeremiah is practically the only source of information about them.[58] They had a nomadic lifestyle among sedentary Israel. Moreover, they consumed no alcohol. They considered a certain Jonadab ben Rechab[59] as the founder of the group, who is known from the book of Kings as a fervent fighter for Jahwism and supporter of Jehu's coup against the Omride dynasty.[60] Among Israel, there was no pressure to follow these stricter rules for life, yet they received prophetic praise because they even kept the precepts of their ancestor, a mere human being, while the other Israelites did not obey the commandments of their God.[61]

Even these groups at the intersection of the religious and the social dimensions are not rooted only within these groups themselves. The "sons of the prophets" may have organized themselves around a prophet who acted as their leader, because in this way they took recourse to the God of the prophet. The Rechabites may have been conservative in maintaining a nomadic lifestyle, which partly may have originated from their belief in YHWH. As a group, they were tolerated, even praiseworthy, yet no one was obliged to join their movement.

Looking back to how Israel dealt with groups, either privileged or disenfranchised, a picture arises in which groups in one way or another had a religious dimension to them. This means that members of a given group never received their identity merely through belonging to one or more social groups, but always through their relationship to God who created them in his own image. As soon as anyone would try to find an identity immanently as part of a minority-group without this transcendent connection to the Creator, the group itself will almost inevitably risk to become a substitute religion. As a consequence, this fragile identity must be defended at all costs.

---

57   Cf. H. Schulte, "The End of the Omride Dynasty: Social-Ethical Observations on the Subject of Power and Violence," *Semeia* 66 (1994) 140–141.

58   See Jer 35.

59   The question remains why they are called Rechabites, when Jonadab was the founder of the group. A clue may be found in 1 Chr 2:55, where three families are mentioned belonging to the tribe of the Kenites, "who came from Hammath, the father of the house of Rechab." This may imply that the "house of Rechab" (cf. Jer 35:2–3) was already an existing tribe among the Kenites. The Kenites were a semi-nomadic tribe, living at the borders of Canaan. According to some scholars, they were the original worshipers of YHWH, which may explain the fact that Jonadab was a zealous supporter of Jehu's extermination of the Baal cult. See M.H. Pope, "Rechab," *IDB* IV, 14–16.

60   See 2 Kgs 10:15–27.

61   Jer 35:12–19.

4. Group Identity in Postmodern Societies

Social groups and their designations within the Hebrew Bible are notoriously difficult to describe in modern sophisticated anthropological terminology and models.[62] Let alone by applying to these groups in the Ancient Near East a modern concept of "identity."[63] Ancient Israelites probably would have been baffled when asked what their identity was. Nevertheless, it is not impossible to approach the ancient text of the Bible with a modern concept, as long as we do not put an equal mark between then and now. Thus, if we try to get an impression about social groups mentioned in the Old Testament and about what their identity was based upon, a rather clear picture arises. In all cases their – what we nowadays would call – "identity" was embedded *externally*, and never in the group itself. These groups, often minorities, deserved to be reckoned with based upon their relationship to YHWH who created and delivered them.

Postmodern identity policies, however, seem to base a group's identity *within itself*. This leads to paradoxical situations. Interestingly, postmodern group identities are often based on skin color, sex, or gender; traits that are biologically-based immutable characteristics. Of course, social constructivism sees any of these traits usually as a social construct, in which for example skin color is described as "whiteness" or "blackness" and refers rather to a state of mind or to adherence to certain political ideologies than to biology.[64] This implies that according to social constructivism, any person can identify as anything, independent from biological facts. To my mind, this makes little sense, except in a Wonderland where Humpty Dumpties randomly make words to mean what they choose them to mean.[65] This, however, does not alter the fact that in postmodern group-identity victimhood plays the leading role. Paradoxically, such an identity group has to fight for the abolition of that what makes its members victims. Yet at the same time, in order for the group to keep the privileges offered by being a victim, its victimhood must be continued. This is why victimhood *proclaims* need for change, but has no incentive for *real* change. It is all "rights" and no "responsibilities." Such internally opposite directions inevitably must lead to resentment. A resentment that all too easily can escalate into violence.

Even seen empirically, it seems that humans always have to *believe* in something. As soon as the connection to God is severed, emptiness and boredom fills the human

---

62   See e.g. J.W. Rogerson, *Anthropology and the Old Testament* (Growing Points in Theology; Oxford: Blackwell 1978) 86–101.

63   Even for the church fathers and for medieval theologians, the word "*identitas*" would have meant simply "sameness" and not so much more. See e.g. P. Thom, *The Logic of the Trinity. Augustine to Ockham* (New York: Fordham University Press 2012) 67, 213, 227.

64   Hence, paradoxical political statements on social media addressing a person with dark skin color who disagrees with a given political stance in words like, "You are not black!" or "You are the black face of white supremacy!"

65   See L. Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass. And What Alice Found There* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications 1999) 57.

spirit. The *horror vacui* of the human mind instantly refills itself with surrogate religion.[66] The New Testament "rule" for this process is aptly expressed as, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's." This implies that anything offered to Caesar – or whatever earthly phenomenon – that only ought to be offered to God, makes a god out of "Caesar."[67] The Old Testament "rule" about the consequences of creation's deification is even more alarming. Namely, idolatry turns humans made in God's image into *sub-human* beings. The Psalms give a vivid description of this rule, when describing idols of silver and gold. They have mouths, but do not speak;[68] eyes, but do not see; ears, but do not hear; hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk.[69] And then follows the appalling consequence: "Those who make them, will become like them, just as anyone who trusts in them."[70] Having a mouth, but not any longer being able to speak truth. Having eyes, but turning away from the suffering of fellow-humans. Having ears, but not hearing cries for help. Having hands, but being powerless or not willing to help. Having feet, but walking away from those in need. Idolatry eats away our humanity. Exactly because of the fact that God does not need a man-made image, for God has already his image representing him in his creation.[71]

5. New Routes for the Church in Uncharted Postmodern Territory

So, what can be the role of the church in this uncharted postmodern territory? The Christian church – in many of its flavors – seems to be keen to please the surrounding culture by buying into postmodern views on group-identity. It is laudable that Christians want to be relevant. However, embracing postmodern cultural narratives makes the church just one of the many social movements and will obscure precisely that what gives the church its added value. Our current situation is quite similar to what Jesus observed: "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence and violent men claim it for themselves."[72] In other words, people leaped onto the band-wagon of the gospel

---

66   As already observed by John Calvin (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion* [trans. H. Beveridge] [New York: Pacific Publishing Studio 2011] I.11.8) in his famous phrase, "the human mind is, so to say, a perpetual factory of idols (*hominis ingenium perpetuam, ut ita loquar, esse idolorum fabricam*)." The Latin quotation is from the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*, see J.-W. Baum – E. Cunitz – E.W.E. Reuss (eds.), *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia* (Corpus Reformatorum 30; Braunschweig: Schwetschke 1864) II, 80.

67   Matt 22:21.

68   These remarks are the more interesting when considering that the Israelites most probably must have known about the Babylonian ritual of the "opening of the mouth" or the "washing of the mouth" of a cult statue; the procedure by which the image was thought to become the real presence of a deity, see M. Dick, "The Mesopotamian 'Washing of the Mouth' (*mīs pî*) or 'Opening of the Mouth' (*pīt pî*) Ritual. (4.32A–C)," *The Context of Scripture*. IV. *Supplements* (ed. K.L. Younger) (Leiden: Brill 2016) 133–144.

69   Ps 115:3–7; 135:15–17.

70   Ps 115:8; 135:18.

71   Gen 1:26–27. There is much exegetical debate about what exactly is the meaning of the expression "image of God," but representing God by mirroring his rule to creation is obviously an important characteristic.

72   Matt 11:12.

and insisted that the kingdom of God would come in the way *they* envisaged. I think we can agree that some ideologies concentrating on group-identities have real compassion. Yet, why should the church leap onto the band-wagon of any ideology, if the church has to offer much more value?

Which is this added value in a postmodern world of identity policies? Much can be said about this, but for now, I will only point to three main themes, based on what we saw represented in the above-mentioned biblical texts.

First, any identity needs a transcendent relationship. When identity is only based on itself, it easily can develop into self-worship and become an idol. Both the Old and the New Testaments suggest that what we would call group-identity has its roots in a relationship to God as Creator and Redeemer.

Second, the proper level of identity is ultimately the individual, and not the group. This is rooted in the unique characteristics and talents of every single human being. Moreover, according to the Old and New Testaments, human responsibility is *personal* responsibility.[73] This means that people cannot be punished for the sins of their ancestors or evil committed by their offspring.

And third, individuals are called to function as part of a community. Since the resurrection of the Messiah and the coming of the Spirit, humans worldwide are invited into a community that is the avant-garde within this old world of a coming new world where heaven and earth will intersect again.

This should be the alternative narrative of the church. As soon as Christianity entirely buys into the postmodern identity policies, chances are that it not only will lose its own identity, but also stops being attractive in a world of ideologies in which there are only other groups to hate, but no God and no neighbor to love.

Bibliography

Baum, J.-W. – Cunitz, E. – Reuss, E.W.E. (eds.), *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia* (Corpus Reformatorum 30; Braunschweig: Schwetschke 1864) II.

Buttrick, G.A. (ed.), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon 1962) III–IV.

Calvin, J., *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. H. Beveridge) (New York: Pacific Publishing Studio 2011).

Carroll, L., *Through the Looking-Glass. And What Alice Found There* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications 1999).

Cohen, S.J.D., "'Those Who Say They Are Jews and Are Not': How Do You Know a Jew in Antiquity When You See One?," *Diasporas in Antiquity* (eds. S.J.D. Cohen – E.S. Frerichs) (Brown Judaic Studies 288; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1993) 1–46.

Dick, M., "The Mesopotamian 'Washing of the Mouth' (mīs pī) or 'Opening of the Mouth' (pīt pī) Ritual. (4.32A–C)," *The Context of Scripture*. IV. *Supplements* (ed. K.L. Younger) (Leiden: Brill 2016) 133–144.

---

[73]   This is a unique contribution of the Old Testament within the collective societies of the Ancient Near East, see e.g. Deut 24:16; 2 Kgs 14:6; Ezek 18; cf. 2 Cor 5:10.

Doležal, S., "Rethinking a Massacre: What Really Happened in Thessalonica and Milan in 390?," *Eirene* 50/1–2 (2014) 89–107.

García Martínez, F. – Tigchelaar, E.J.C. (eds.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls. Study Edition* (Leiden: Brill 2005) I.

Jenei, P., "Strategies of Stranger Inclusion in the Narrative Traditions of Joshua–Judges: The Cases of Rahab's Household, the Kenites and the Gibeonites," *Old Testament Essays* 32/1 (2019) 127–154.

Jenei, P., "Subjugating and Exploiting the Second-Class Population of the Ancient Israelite State: The Case of Forced Labour (מַס) in Light of the Population Economy of Ancient Israel," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 45/1 (2019) 57–72.

Köhler, L., *Der hebräische Mensch. Eine Skizze* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1980).

Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man? A Journey Through Biblical Anthropology* (trans. F. O'Fearghail – A. Graffy) (London: Darton, Longman & Todd 2021).

Rogerson, J.W., *Anthropology and the Old Testament* (Growing Points in Theology; Oxford: Blackwell 1978).

Schulte, H., "The End of the Omride Dynasty: Social-Ethical Observations on the Subject of Power and Violence," *Semeia* 66 (1994) 133–148.

Smith, M.J. – Choi, J.Y. (eds.), *Minoritized Women Reading Race and Ethnicity. Intersectional Approaches to Constructed Identity and Early Christian Texts* (Feminist Studies and Sacred Texts; Lanham, MD: Lexington 2020).

Thom, P., *The Logic of the Trinity. Augustine to Ockham* (New York: Fordham University Press 2012).

Wolff, H.W., *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments* (Munich: Kaiser 1973).

Wright, N.T., „The Truth of the Gospel and Christian Living," M.J. Borg – N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus. Two Visions* (New York: HarperCollins 1999) 207–228.

Wright, N.T., *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 4; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 2013).

Wright, N.T., "God and Caesar, Then and Now," *The Character of Wisdom. Essays in Honour of Wesley Carr* (eds. S. Lowe – M. Percy) (London: Routledge 2016) 157–172.