The Old Testament and the Unity of the People of God
Finlayson Memorial Lecture, 2011

David J. Reimer

The University of Edinburgh, New College, Mound Place, Edinburgh EH1 2LX
david.reimer@ed.ac.uk

INTRODUCTION[1]

Now there arose a new lecturer which knew not Finlayson (cf. Exod. 1:8)! It is a privilege to have been invited to deliver this year's Finlayson Memorial Lecture, but unlike last year's lecturer, I cannot speak from personal experience of his life and ministry. However, with Tom Houston's fond recollections still ringing in my ears, I set about finding out what I could. As it happens, David Wright authored the entry on Roderick Alexander Finlayson in the Oxford *DNB*.[2] Beyond giving biographical facts and details of his career, he goes on to describe him as a man in whom 'a richly devotional theology enlisted the services of a mastery of language, a wit that was variously mischievous and mordant, shrewd insight into characters and events, and a gift for the one-liner. (Examples are still traded freely on the mention of his name.)' Sadly, David declined to give any particular example in that formal article. Donald Macleod was not so reticent in his reflections on the Finlayson years in the Free Church College.[3]

> He had a reputation for merciless wit. I well remember his approaching me after one of my own more passionate pulpit performances and remarking, 'There's a lady over there asking if it was Gaelic or English you were preaching!' (p. 235)

---

1 In addition to the discussion this paper received at the Finlayson Lecture, I'm grateful for the stimulus received during its early gestation from the postgraduate OT reading group in Edinburgh, and later reflection at the OT Research Seminar at the University of Durham.

2 D. F. Wright, 'Finlayson, Roderick Alexander (1895–1989)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/66408> [accessed 3 May 2011].

3 Donald Macleod, 'The Free Church College 1900-1970', in *Disruption to Diversity: Edinburgh Divinity 1846-1996*, ed. by David F. Wright and Gary D. Badcock (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), pp. 221-37; Finlayson features on pp. 234-7.

Macleod also discussed Finlayson's considerable intellectual achievement, and used as a parade example Finlayson's fine piece on inspiration.[4] That in turn prompted a reflection on Finlayson's later publishing history, or more precisely, its lack. He poses the question as to why—with nearly thirty more years of productive life ahead—Finlayson 'never again produced anything of the quality of this essay'. Macleod's brief, speculative ruminations in an attempt to solve the riddle turn on the very issue to which this SETS conference is dedicated: the difficulties of internecine strife within the camp.[5] Perhaps, then, Finlayson would have reason to be pleased that SETS is tacking the topic in this conference.

In fact, the Old Testament has been at the centre of some of the most bitter controversies within the church in the past two hundred years. A lecture with my title could easily be shaped around this observation, as the OT in particular has proved contentious for Christian interpreters. More than research on the synoptic gospels, it was pentateuchal studies that most deeply marked out the territory of 'critical' biblical scholarship between 'liberals' and 'conservatives'. In Scotland the name of William Robertson Smith (1846-94) is indelibly linked with the trauma this conflict brought, the year 1881 marking his dismissal from his Aberdeen chair.[6] That OT studies continues to occupy this potentially fractious role up to our own day is demonstrated by the sad case (no matter which 'side' one is on) of the 'discontinuation' of Peter Enns as Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Hermeneutics at Westminster Theological Seminary in 2008, only three years after expressing thanks for the privilege of being 'part of such a solidly faithful group that does not shy away from some difficult yet basic questions' in the very publication that occasioned the

---

4 R. A. Finlayson, 'Contemporary Ideas of Inspiration', in *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, ed. by C. F.H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), pp. 221-34.

5 Ibid., p. 237. There is a small conundrum here: the publication which Macleod cites as 'wounding' Finlayson appeared in 1954, while his article on inspiration appeared in 1959.

6 For a sympathetic account, see J. Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century: England and Germany* (London: SPCK, 1984), pp. 275-81. Note in particular Rogerson's characterization of Robertson Smith's *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church*, 2nd edn (London and Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1892), first published in 1881: 'It is difficult to think of a book that has so profoundly combined critical insights with a *type* of Evangelical belief...' (p. 276; italics added). For the wider context, see A. C. Cheyne, 'The Bible and Change in the Nineteenth Century', in *The Bible in Scottish Life and Literature*, ed. by David F. Wright (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1988), pp. 192-207.

breach.[7] The dangerous activity in which both Robertson Smith and Enns indulged, it seems, was that of trying to let the Old Testament 'speak for itself'.[8]

Rather than follow the theme of the Old Testament as a battle ground for believers, however, we will ourselves run the risk that Robertson Smith, Enns, and many others have taken and ask: what does the OT ('itself!') have to say about the nature of the unity of God's people? In order to do this, I explore on first, and briefly, at the language of 'unity' in biblical Hebrew. What does it mean by the term? Second, two key texts in which the language of 'unity' and 'oneness' comes to the fore provide the vehicle for reflecting on our theme. These also shed some light on a question that might at first blush appear to be self-evident: what in the OT corresponds to the 'people of God' element in my title? This aspect continues to grow in importance for a third aspect of my theme. What is the nature of communal boundaries in the OT, within which any 'unity' might be found and expressed? At best we can only hope to trace a thread through the Hebrew Bible, and lightly sketch the chief features of the theme. This does not even have the character of 'survey'—it is much more a matter of noticing only a few signposts. I hope this will nonetheless allow for some concluding reflections that will be suggestive for the believing community today.

I. LANGUAGE

Very briefly, I want to make some potentially jarring observations on the language the Hebrew Bible uses for 'unity'. The key term is *yaḥad* which bears a superficial resemblance to the Hebrew for 'one', *ʾeḥād*. The connection (as with the English 'unity' and 'one') inclines our thinking fairly quickly towards 'one-ness' or 'singularity', and that is of course a natural connection to make. It comes as a bit of a surprise, then, to discover that the intuitive link one could make in Biblical Hebrew from *ʾeḥād* ('one') to *yaḥad* ('unity') is in fact contested and widely rejected as an *etymological* connection.[9] This is not to say that there is no relation of any kind

---

[7] Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2005), p. 9.

[8] For this phrase, or one like it, see e.g. Robertson Smith, *The Old Testament*, p. 18; Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, p. 15.

[9] For the following, cf. H.-J. Fabry, 'יָחַד *yāḥaḏ*', in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. by G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, 15 vols (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 6, pp. 40-48; concurring for the most part with J. C. de Moor, 'Lexical Remarks Concerning yaḥad and yaḥdaw', VT 7 (1957), 350-5; G. Sauer, 'אֶחָד *ʾeḥād* one', in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testa-*

between them, only that there are more complexities here than we might first suspect.

And, of course, semantics is not simply a matter of etymology. However, translations of *yaḥad* are sometimes constrained by the notion of 'singleness', 'unit-ness'. In Biblical Hebrew, our most central term appears to be more accurately rendered by notions of 'togetherness'. For example, Deut 33:5:

> Thus the LORD became king in Jeshurun, when the heads of the people were gathered, all the tribes of Israel together [*yaḥad šibṭê yiśrāʾel*].

Here, it is not a matter of being gathered 'as one' (as it is glossed in the NLT)—Biblical Hebrew can state that very clearly, as we will see in a moment—but simply of being 'brought together', expressing a 'totality' (cf. *HALOT, q.v.*). Indeed, I can only find one occasion in the Hebrew Bible when the related term, *yaḥdāw*, and *ʾeḥād* appear together, and in that case the latter is expressly used to further qualify the former.[10] Anyone with even passing familiarity with the Dead Sea Scrolls will be aware that the term is frequently used for the 'community' in those writings—and it is given thus as the initial headword of the *HALOT* entry (for the two substantive = nominal uses in the HB: Deut 33:5 and 1 Chr 12:18).[11] Even if this usage is unattested (or only very weakly) in the Hebrew Bible, one can see Shlomo Morag's account of its attractiveness to the Qumran community 'since it echoed the sociologically most significant semantic features that they aspired to achieve in their community life'.[12]

Terminology, then, is a useful way into the wider problem of what is meant by 'unity' in the Hebrew Bible: it very quickly nuances the discussion from simply thinking in terms of 'one-ness' and moves towards

---

ment, ed. by E. Jenni and C. Westermann, 3 vols (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 1, pp. 78-80 takes a contrasting position.

10 Cf. Joshua 9:2, where the kings come 'together' to fight against Israel 'with one accord' (*peh ʾeḥād*, literally 'a single mouth').

11 It is widely noted, however, that nowhere in the Hebrew Bible does the term bear the meaning found so distinctively within the DSS; cf. Shlomo Morag, 'On Some Concepts in the in the World of Qumran: Polysemy and Semantic Development', in *Diggers at the Well: Proceedings of a Third International Symposium on the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Ben Sira*, ed. by T. Muraoka and J. F. Elwolde, STJD, 36 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000), pp. 178-92 (see p. 180); unless, that is, the usage in 1 Chron. 12:17 [Heb. v. 18] should be admitted as the solitary example.

12 Ibid., p. 180. Morag enumerates these aspirations as: 'togetherness', separateness, uniqueness, and excellence.

'togetherness' and ultimately community—however, both terms feature in the 'key texts' which follow. There is, of course, a further question that has gone begging so far: what do we mean by 'the people of God'? To whom are we referring? The descendents of Abraham? Israel? Israel *and* Judah? The 'assembly' (Heb. *qāhāl*)? every member of the 'community', however defined? (Cf., e.g., the language of 'native and sojourner' under one law: Ex. 12:19; Lev. 16:29; Num. 15:29-30; cf. Josh. 8:33.) We shall touch on this question at a number of points in the discussion which follows.

II. KEY TEXTS

Psalm 133. When considering texts in which 'unity' features prominently, then Psalm 133 (the next-to-last of the Psalms of Ascent) must have pride of place. It reads:

> [1] Behold, how good and pleasant it is
> when brothers dwell in unity [*gam yaḥad*]!
> [2] It is like the precious oil on the head,
> running down on the beard,
> on the beard of Aaron,
> running down on the collar of his robes!
> [3] It is like the dew of Hermon,
> which falls on the mountains of Zion!
> For there the LORD has commanded the blessing,
> life forevermore [*'ad hā'ôlām*].

This well-known psalm seems to compare the surpassing goodness of 'unity' among brothers with oil and dew, culminating in the divine promise of life 'for evermore'. What contours does this key text give to the concept of 'unity'? Clearly this is a brief poem, but rich and suggestive place to elucidate our theme.[13]

How good and pleasant it is when meanings are not contested, one might add! What is intended by the 'unity of brothers' here? is it the peaceful family hearth, so domestic harmony? my neighbour, so commu-

[13] In addition to the commentaries, see the helpful studies by: A. Berlin, 'On the Interpretation of Psalm 133', in *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, ed. by E. R. Follis, JSOTSS, 40 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), pp. 141-7; T. Booij, 'Psalm 133: "Behold, How Good and How Pleasant"', *Biblica*, 83 (2002), 258-67; F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, 'Psalm 133: A (Close) Reading', *JHS*, 8/20 (2008), 2-30; James Luther Mays, 'There the Blessing: An Exposition of Psalm 133', in *A God So Near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller*, ed. by B. A. Strawn and N. R. Bowen (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), pp. 79-90.

nity concord? or is something much larger in mind—kingdoms? perhaps political alliances, as some suggest? The language of the psalm works at each of those levels, and as Dobbs-Allsopp notes, how we understand the kinship term here 'will depend on the specific context' from which we hear the psalm.[14] The very lack of specificity on this level gives this evocative psalm an even greater expansiveness of vision than we might first have seen.

How do the metaphors of 'oil' and 'dew' illuminate the nature of 'unity'—getting along like 'oil and water'? Once again, given a moment's reflection these seemingly unrelated (and unmixable!) terms we can see how they both resonate with and complement each other. Anointing oil which drenches, and dew which cascades: astonishing abundance! And while the former refreshes the person, the latter 'anoints' nature itself. The structure of the metaphors should also be noted, a feature highlighted by Adele Berlin.[15] It is not simply that (or, not at all that) fraternal unity is itself like fine oil on the one hand, and abundant dew on the other. Rather, the two metaphors are reciprocally reinforcing. Berlin argued that, in conjunction with the use of 'Hermon' and 'Zion', the dual metaphors promoted the political 'unification of the country' (p. 145)—but this does note easily follow. A more compelling conjunction can be seen. This oil and dew are like each other (we could translate: 'as with precious oil ... so to with the dew of Hermon...'), and between them they bind together human society and the natural order. What takes place in the realm on the level of personal relationships is integrally related to the proper functioning of the created order itself.[16]

We can see now how the poem's opening line in praise of 'unity', and the closing line—the LORD's 'commanded blessing'—correspond to each other, and hold together these effusive reciprocal metaphors for the cosmic effect of unity in creation and community alike. Should we need an indication of what significance the 'unity of the people of God' might hold, we need look no farther than this. However, if Psalm 133 displays the cosmic/communal significance of 'unity', it tells us little about how it is achieved, or what it looks like in practical terms.

---

[14] Dobbs-Allsopp, 'Psalm 133', p. 7 and n. 21.

[15] Berlin, 'On the interpretation', p. 144. On the syntax, cf. GKC § 161c; Joüon-Muraoka, § 174i. The shared 'which runs down upon' (*šeyyōrēd ʿal-*, vv. 2, 3), obscured in many translations, further contributes to this effect.

[16] As for the questions: Why Aaron? Why (Mount) Hermon and Zion? I pass over these except to note the significance of each for representing a point of 'meeting' for God and people in person and place.

Ezekiel 37:15-28. One of the confusing aspects of Old Testament terminology for those embarking on historically-orientated study is the conundrum of how to refer to 'Israel'. 'Israel' is, of course, the name given to the patriarch Jacob (Gen. 32:28 [Heb. v. 29]), and subsequently borne by the nation of which he was the ancestor. After the division of the kingdoms following the reign of Solomon, however, 'Israel proper' is the northern kingdom, and 'Judah' is the southern kingdom, and the period of the 'united monarchy' under Saul, David, and Solomon looks very much like a blip. Still, the notion that 'ideal Israel' comprises both north and south tends to dominant popular usage and obscures the scenario found in vast swathes of the biblical text.[17] The biblical writers themselves were, of course, quite alive to the issue, and the question of the nature of the relationship between these politically, socially, even linguistically distinct entities arises repeatedly.

It did not cease to be a problem after the fall of the northern kingdom to the Assyrians, for 'ideal Israel' still was considered to be comprised of the twelve tribes, not just the remaining two (Judah and Benjamin). Berlin's reading of Psalm 133 noted above, although rejected, clearly inhabits and attempts to address this particular problem. Even if that particular example was found wanting, there are many that are quite explicit. So, for example, the prophet Jeremiah looks forward to the day when 'the house of Judah shall join the house of Israel, and together they shall come from the land of the north to the land that I gave your fathers for a heritage' (Jer. 3:18).[18]

One of the most pointed statements of this aspiration is found in the work of Jeremiah's younger contemporary, Ezekiel. Ezekiel 37 is well known for its vision of the valley of dry bones, but it is the record of Ezekiel's symbolic action with the 'two sticks' which is of interest to us. It appears at one of the major 'seams' in the book of Ezekiel—preparing the way for the substantial concluding vision of chapters 40-48—and forges a strong link between unity and 'oneness'.

The 'action' which Ezekiel is required to perform is much simpler than those in the earlier part of the book. Two sticks are to be inscribed

---

[17] Of course, usage of the term 'Israel' is yet more variegated than this. See, conveniently, P. R. Davies, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'*, JSOTS, 148 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), pp. 49-51, who lists ten ('at least') distinct senses. On the broader theme, see still Part Two on 'The Concept of Israel' in H.G.M. Williamson, *Israel in the Books of Chronicles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

[18] Cf. also Jer. 50:4-5; and the further elaboration of the broad theme of restoration for both Israel ('Ephraim') and Judah in Jeremiah 30-31. This one of the points of contact between Jeremiah and Hosea; see Hosea 1:11 (Heb. 2:2).

with the names of Judah and 'Joseph', identified further as 'Ephraim', and then to be clutched in one fist, 'that they may become one in your hand' (37:17b). In response to the (inevitable) question from his audience as to what he is doing, he is to announce the divine intent to rejoin the tribes of the north to Judah, and so to gather the northern exiles back to their land and 'make them one nation in the land', with one king over them. This oracular promise is further elaborated in terms of David as shepherd-king (v. 24) ruling them on their ancestral land. (Recall that Ezekiel is among the Babylonians exiles as this sign-act and explanation are delivered.) They shall now live faithfully with 'my sanctuary in their midst forevermore' (v. 26). The concluding insistently repeated refrain that God will be in their midst anticipates the import of the concluding vision sequence (chs. 40-48) as well as the last words of the book which assign as Jerusalem's new name, 'The LORD is there' (48:35b).

The pericope begins with a political orientation, but transcends such a categorization rapidly as it proceeds.[19] Daniel Block accounts for the various 'tensions' present in the text (notably its shifting perspective repetitions) by noting the phases through which it moves. It begins with the literal joining of sticks in Ezekiel's hand (vv. 15-17), the metaphorical (but real!) union of nations by God's hand (vv. 18-22), their further moral and political union (vv. 23-25), culminating an a (re-)new(-ed) covenantal relationship with himself (vv. 26-28).

This passage offers (at least) three ways of carrying forward our considerations launched in Ps 133. (1) The Hebrew for 'one' is used insistently in this passage (*ʾeḥād*, 'one', not *yaḥad*, 'unity'). It is used eight times in the initial cluster of verses, reaching a crescendo in v. 17; the Hebrew can be only awkwardly translated to display all four occurrences: 'join them *one* to *one* into *one* stick, that they may become *ones* in your hand').[20] *ʾeḥād* appears at each 'level' of the passage: in Ezekiel's literal actions (vv. 16-17), in the announcement of divine intent (v. 19), in the political explanation (v. 22), and in the moral explanation (v. 24). If we look for a rationale for this within the passage, the most fundamental reason for this reunification is found in the 'covenant formula' of v. 23, 'they shall be my people, and I will be their God'.[21] In some way, the presence of 'two nations ... two

[19] Cf. Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 394-5.

[20] For 'ones', Heb. *ʾăḥādîm*, cf. Block, Ezekiel 25-48: 'The form reflects simultaneously the unity and composite nature of the wood' (p. 396).

[21] Cf. For a thorough exploration of this formula in the Hebrew Bible, see Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, trans. by M. Kohl (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998).

kingdoms' (v. 22) constitutes an anomaly at least, more likely an offense. This God has one people.

(2) This reunification is a *divine* initiative—fitting for the consistent and insistent 'theocentricity' of the book of Ezekiel. Of course, the constituting of this people of promise was itself a divine initiative. Its rupture, post-Solomon, was again a human spoiling of God's intent (1 Kings 12—although even that separation is claimed by God as God's own responsibility, 1 Kings 12:24). The divide between them had lasted centuries, had been marked by a fair share of hostility and military conflict. And now Ezekiel announces God's intention to bring back the missing northerners (v. 21). I wonder if we can sense how astonishing this must have seemed: the division of the kingdoms lay almost four hundred years in the past, the destruction and deportation at the hands of the Assyrians about 150 years earlier. Perhaps the hints of resurrection that conclude the 'dry bones' vision provide a further clue for seeing here a re-creative work possible for no one but God alone.

(3) This in turn prompts the observation that re-unification of the two houses (Israel and Judah) is achieved in spite of obstacles. Such factors—the 'opposite' of 'unity', one could say—merit reflection as well. Ezekiel is more concerned with the nature of the future hope than an analysis of the problems that led to the division. But the characteristic (in Ezekiel) call for rejection of idolatry and commitment to purity (v. 23) signal the decisive factor which split the people of God in two. Failure to maintain the appropriate regard for Israel's God led to the cataclysm that ruptured the community. No wonder the healing of that breach must be a work of God's own hand.

We noted a moment ago the passage's covenantal conclusion, but there is something more to observe here. V. 26 links the 'covenant of peace' found in Ezekiel 24:25 with the 'everlasting covenant' found earlier in Ezekiel 16:60. The latter gave prominence to the restored political order before God, the former a utopian and beatific natural order. Just as with Psalm 133, then, the effects of the unity of the people of God have an impact within both the social and the cosmic realms.

Two key texts, then, one highlighting 'unity', the other 'one-ness', but with deep resonances between them. The Ezekiel text in particular in its healing trajectory tacitly assumed unity's opposite: division. For a community to be 'unified' implies some boundary formation within which that unity is expressed, but outside of which membership is not possible. There are insiders; there must be outsiders.

III. BOUNDARIES: INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS

Joshua 22. One sometimes gets the impression that there are those abroad in the church today who might think that the OT is more or less irrelevant. I can think of few more timely and topical narratives to illuminate the issues that confront us and suggestive of prospects for dealing with them than Joshua 22.[22] It might not, however, be the most familiar of OT stories to many of us. That is unfortunate, for this story concerns manner in which the bonds of community are tested, threatened, and come precipitously near breaking point—but repaired. It thus offers another vantage point from which to see a biblical reflection on 'the unity of the people of God'. It is, moreover, a narrative of nuance: it affirms that the 'unity of the people of God' is a fragile thing. Indeed, those very 'obstacles' discerned in the 'theocentric' prophetic oracle of Ezekiel may be found in this story of the potential fragmentation of the community as well. But it further affirms (does it?) that being a unified community is not a reductive concept, but that it has space (literally) for going different directions.

We need, first, briefly to set the scene. In the closing stages of the book of Joshua, the hard work of winning the land of promise has come to fruition (21:43-45). The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the 'half-tribe' of Manasseh had negotiated a settlement on the far side of the Jordan, on the condition that their fighting men continued with the rest of the tribes to carry out the campaigns in the land of promise itself (Josh. 1:12-18). Now that there is 'rest on every side' (21:44), they are free to return, and they do. However, on their return they build 'an altar of great size' (22:10), and word of it gets back to the rest of the Israelites gathered at Shiloh (v. 12). The report immediately draws a response of anger and overt hostility for this steep descent into rebellion against the LORD. A deputation goes to confront them with their open and gross disobedience (vv. 13-20); although no threats are uttered, the examples of apostasy given point to the catastrophic results that are sure to follow. In turn, the people of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh are horrified that their actions have been so misconstrued (vv. 22-23):

> The Mighty One, God, the LORD! The Mighty One, God, the LORD! He knows; and let Israel itself know! If it was in rebellion or in breach of faith against the LORD, do not spare us today for building an altar to turn away from following

[22] In addition to the commentaries, cf. E. Assis, '"For it shall be a witness between us": A Literary Reading of Josh 22', *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 18 (2004), 208-31; idem, 'The Position and Function of Jos 22 in the Book of Joshua', *ZAW* 116 (2004), 528-41; B. E. Organ, 'Pursuing Phineas: A Synchronic Reading', *CBQ* 63 (2001), 203-18.

> the LORD. Or if we did so to offer burnt offerings or grain offerings or peace offerings on it, may the LORD himself take vengeance.

Clearly they understand what has been implicit in the speech of their comrades! But it has very much been a misunderstanding. The altar was built (vv. 26-27)

> 'not for burnt offering, nor for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you, and between our generations after us, that we do perform the service of the LORD in his presence with our burnt offerings and sacrifices and peace offerings, so your children will not say to our children in time to come, "You have no portion in the LORD."'

No less a personage than Phineas (more of him in a moment) speaks on behalf of the rest of the community, accepting the explanation and declaring, 'Today we know that the LORD is in the midst of us...' (v. 31). And peace prevails.

The apparent 'openness' hinted at above is, then, formed within the crucible of danger, and against a backdrop of death. Even so, there is much more going on here than meets the eye, and we must pause to take note of some inner-biblical resonances of which this story serves as the nexus, as both sides appeal both explicitly and implicitly to what we might call scriptural tradition.[23] On the side of the Israelites as a whole, the tragic and violent escapade involving Moabite women and Baal of Peor leading to a plague stopped only by the zeal of Phineas in pinning an Israelite man and Moabite woman to the ground with his spear (Numbers 25) is the parade example of the trauma they are desperate to avoid. Less overt is the statement that Achan (Joshua 7) 'did not perish alone for his iniquity' (22:20). Auld points out the surprising fact that in only one other place in the Hebrew Bible does this precise language occur, that in Numbers 16:22, where the spectre of the destruction of the whole community for the sin of 'one man' imperils the nation. In the counter-speech by the trans-Jordanian tribes, distinct illusions are embedded (again surprisingly), to Psalms 50 and 44. The former speaks to the common place of those whether to the east or the west before God, and which further calls for an obedience beyond sacrifice. Psalm 44 (esp. vv. 20-21 [Heb. 21-22]), on the other hand, call on the God who sees the secrets of the heart to recognize pure worship in his people.

The presence of Phineas (vv. 13, 30-31) is only the leading cue that maintenance of 'unity' is not the primary mission or *desideratum*: rather,

[23] Here following the compelling and perceptive analysis of Graeme Auld, 'Pluralism Where Least Expected? Joshua 22 in Biblical Context', *ExpT*, 122 (2011), 374-79.

whatever precise shape the 'unity' of God's people takes, it is intended to ensure the continuity of community between God and people, rather than people and people. The final conclusion to the story portrays something much more than equilibrium restored. A resolution is achieved which is more life-affirming and God-centered (!) than merely arriving at an 'understanding'.[24] 'Unity' is seen to have a deadly enemy—and that 'enemy' is not fragmentation, or difference. It is idolatry, rebellion against the God of Israel. More important than the relationship of the tribal groupings with each other is their common standing before God.

Permeable boundaries? Implicit in the trajectory sketched above is the notion—a rather obvious one—that if there is to be 'unity' in 'community' there will be those inside ... and those outside. The demarcation of boundaries is one of the huge issues raised poignantly in the narrative of Joshua 22. It is not, of course, the only text in the OT to do so.

Once one begins to register directly this aspect of the question (who is 'in'? who is 'out'? why? and how do we know?), the texts can proliferate. The difficulty at this point is working out how to delimit them, and then relate the various texts to each other in meaningful ways. Here is the briefest beginnings of such a list:

- Leviticus 19:18 with its command to 'love your neighbour' is one of the two 'great' commandments; but how should it be related to 19:33-34 on the 'strangers' among God's people? and how does that relationship bear on our theme?

- Similarly, Deuteronomy 23:1-9 (the boundaries of the very pericope here strike me as a bit fluid) sets down legislation for maintenance of the boundaries of the community; yet these find a prophetic counterpart—and counterbalance—in Isaiah 56. Again, how is this canonical 'tension' to be understood? How permeable are the boundaries which define God's people?

- The roots of the 'two houses united' theme in Ezekiel 37 (above) can be traced back into earlier prophetic texts: e.g., Hosea 2:2 (EVV 1:11); Micah 2:12-13; Jeremiah 32:36-41 (cf. 50:4-5). Moving 'forward' through these texts, the '*future* hope' orientation of the theme stands out with increasing clarity, as does the ever-broadening scope for

[24] It seems to me this resolution takes place in terms of a (re-)affirmation of shared focus, rather than in terms of 'compromise' as Auld depicts it ('Pluralism', p. 379).

the inclusiveness of the new community: Zephaniah 3:9; Zechariah 2:10-17 (EVV 2:6-13; cf. 8:9-13, 20-23).

- The last-mentioned text (Zechariah 8) raises quite directly (8:12) the related concept of 'shalom'. At what level does this closely related notion need to be integrated into my more focussed reflections on 'unity' *per se*?

TRAJECTORIES FOR THE 'PEOPLE OF GOD'

How do these reflections on the 'OT people of God', i.e. Israel, inform the nature of the unity of the 'NT people of God', i.e., the Church? It is important at the outset to note that we should not simply equate OT 'Israel' with NT 'church'. At the same time, having explored the *praise* of unity via Psalm 133, the *imperative* of unity via Ezekiel 37, and the *peril* to unity via Joshua 22, we are in a position to observe certain aspects of an OT perspective on the unity of 'God's people'.

First, it is abundantly clear that 'unity' in the Hebrew Bible is not 'uniformity' or numeric oneness (although that registers at a certain level). 'Unity' rather consists in a common orientation and access to the God of Israel. A few relevant sentences from O'Donovan's *The Desire of the Nations* bear on this theme: [25]:

> To speak of a 'gathering' church ... is to speak of a community which, for all the permeability of its skin, has a sharply defined core. To gather is to make a centripetal movement; it is altogether different from merely milling around or associating. The church that gathers must have defined the central point to which it gathers. The apostolic confession of Jesus ... is the confession that defines the church as such ([Matt.] 16:16-19)....
>
> We should never allow ourselves to speak of a 'contrast' or 'tension' between unity and diversity. Diversity is the historical content of unity, the material in which the unity becomes concrete. ... Were it not diverse [the church] could never represent the world; did it not represent the world, it could not embody catholic unity but only sectarian division.

When parts of the community differ, let it be clear what is at stake: not the 'unity' of God's people, but the joint *focus of their attention*. What imperils that attentive relationship is a deadly peril. We can be grateful that the latter day Phineas does not carry a literal spear—and that there was

[25] *The Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), pp. 176-7, drawn from ch. 5, 'The Church', which O'Donovan treats initially in terms of being a 'gathered community'.

one was pierced by the spear, else we would all deserve to be at the sharp end of business with Phineas. Meanwhile, the vision of the reconstituted, ideal Israel at the end of Ezekiel does not obliterate 'tribal' divisions, but rather sets out a programme *both* for their right relationship *and* for their mutual access to the presence of God.

Second, this unity is not a human achievement. Rather the people of God are constituted by God, and so too their unity resides in him. This comes out especially from our reading of Ezekiel 37, but that text is joined by many others in the OT. One passage which could well repay further reflection for our theme is found in Malachi 2, but verse 10 will suffice for the moment: 'Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?' Here the creative action of the one God is the basis for a repudiation of communal failure. A broken and fragmented community is anathema given the unity of the God who made it.

A third aspect arguably arises in all three of our key texts: the status of the society of God's people has a direct bearing on the natural order. Again, this is a theme which is woven throughout the Hebrew Bible, but all too readily passed over. 'Unity' is expressed not just in person-to-person relations, nor yet in God-to-people relations, but in the triadic connection of God-people-world ('world' here as 'natural order'). The Bible begins with fragmented human society spoiling the world God made; the Christian Bible ends with a new city, a new heaven, and a new earth. This may not provide a basis for a superficial dash towards 'green theology', but it might suggest that the interest shown in the environment by an organization like TEARfund, for example, is not simply a modern 'politically correct' fashion accessory. When the people of God live rightly, the world God created flourishes.

Finally, for this paper, we can also see that 'unity' is aspirational. It is, in the evocative Psalm 133, a matter not only of appreciation, but also of yearning. Ezekiel continues to look forward to a reality and the fulfillment of a promise which did not arrive in his day. Which inclines us to ask again in light of this study, how does the OT regard the unity of the people of God? Is it credal? confessional? Is it, perhaps, tribal? And could it be—at least in this still fallen and broken world—more like 'solidarity' than 'singularity'? So that Jesus' prayer (for *our* 'unity', that 'just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us', John 17:21) is only partially realized here and now? But someday. . . .

Paul Hanson, in one of the few substantive works devoted to the question of the nature of the 'people of God', sums up our theme well. He writes in terms of 'community' simply put rather than 'unity', but the two come together:

> [F]orms of community arise as a people, peering into the heart of life and seeking to align itself with God, who is ceaselessly active to create fellowship where there is alienation, to reconcile where there is enmity, to redeem where there is bondage, adopt those structures of community that best equip it to incarnate God's purpose in its own life.[26]

[26] Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 3.