

## **Bible Interpretations that Bring Forth Extremist Fundamentalism**

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### ABSTRACT

The American fundamentalism that is currently at issue is thought to result from a hermeneutic that superimposes on each other ethnic Israel's Exodus from Egypt and America's nation-building. That is to say, Israel's election and mission are taken to be America's election and mission, and can be seen as guiding the nation toward "wars of aggression" that could be called a modern version of "the Zealots" who were seamlessly linked to the Old Testament. This fundamentalism-based tendency in a nation is at odds with the missional principle of "the Kingdom of God" to which the Lord Jesus points us.

### IN THE BEGINNING...

Christian Fundamentalism was born, in late-19<sup>th</sup> century to early- 20<sup>th</sup> century America, out of a sense of crisis over the distortion of Christian faith by modernistic streams of thought such as liberal theology, Biblical criticism and the theory of evolution, and was aiming to counter these by defending orthodox, conservative Christian positions. However, those contents and positions have metamorphosed along with the progress of history and now show a great diversity of movements.

As is generally known, fundamentalism is a religious movement born of a desire to return to a religious point of origin. It follows that this fundamentalistic movement could possibly arise in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and several other religions. As a rule, it is said that monotheism tends to produce this fundamentalism. And in this post-modern day, there is a movement that levels harsh criticism at Christian Fundamentalism, saying that only polytheism will bring peace to the world. However, herein is a "landmine" in confusing original Christian Fundamentalism with the fundamentalism that is viewed as problematic today. It follows that there is a need to distinguish between them. Thus, within this short essay, the one that is problematic today, and is generally called "Christian Fundamentalism," I am calling "extremist fundamentalism" to distinguish it from original Fundamentalism.

[Translator's note: I am also distinguishing them with capitalization, as above, except in titles of writings.]

The line of argument I henceforth take up makes clear that behind the several problems caused by the extremist fundamentalism in America at issue today are ethnocentric and slanted hermeneutics surrounding the interpretation of the Bible. I want to consider this problem especially from perspectives about God's "election" and "the mission of the ethnic group."

[Translator's note: Most Scripture quotations below are translated with NASB wording, though some are ESV.]

## I. THE “ELECTION” OF ETHNIC ISRAEL AND CLAIMS OF EXTREMIST FUNDAMENTALISTS

The starting point of ethnic Israel’s claim that it is the chosen people is Abraham, from whom they trace their ancestry. He moves his dwelling from Ur of the Chaldees to Canaan, in obedience to God’s call. At the time of that departure, God promises,

“I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you; I will make your name great. You will be the foundation of a blessing. Whoever blesses you, I will bless; whoever curses you I will curse. All the families of the earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:2~3).

Indeed, just as He said, God gave Isaac to aged Abraham and Sarah, his wife. God brought forth from Isaac, Jacob; from Jacob, the patriarchs of the twelve tribes. However, since Canaan was stricken by famine, they unavoidably moved to Egypt, were treated favorably on account of Joseph, who in the providence of God had become the premier, and they grew in number in Egypt. However, Egypt was not the land promised to Abraham in God’s covenant with him. Here is where the Exodus events are brought about.

In fact, the interpretation of these Exodus events of Israel comes to have great meaning from the theological perspective of American nation-building. That is to say, this Exodus of Israel was interpreted as tied to the events, in 1620, when a group called the Pilgrim Fathers embarked from the continent of Europe on the Mayflower and arrived at “a new continent.” As is generally known, the motive that caused the Pilgrim Fathers to migrate was based on a religious mission “to make a new heaven and earth according to Puritanism in contrast to the corrupt Christendom of Europe.” This has become the foundation of American nation-building. They understood their migration from the continent of Europe to the new continent and the Exodus events of ethnic Israel, which had Abraham as its ancestor, as superimposed on each other. Today even moreso, the radical fundamentalists stand in this hermeneutic and are moving that pilgrimage forward. That is to say, it is a hermeneutic that says America indeed is the chosen people. From this the understanding emerges that America is the great nation, blessed by God, that its name has been made great, and it will be the foundation of blessing. Furthermore, those who bless America, God will bless; those who curse America, God will curse. This brings into bold relief a nationalistic ideal that can be deemed truly arrogant, which says that all other nations are to be blessed through America. Certainly it ostensibly extols the missional spirit of the “making a new heaven and earth in accord with Puritanism,” but along the way it has morphed into an ideology of a giant nation that rules the world.

Maki Tahara, reporter for the Tokyo Shimbun, said in a 2005 New Year’s Interview:

The nation of America feels a sense of Anglo-Saxon ideological superiority. In 1898 America is (sic) fighting in the Spanish American War. That was a war with Spain over the Philippine Islands; the Filipinos were at that time already 90% Christian. Nonetheless, McKinley, the president at that time said, ‘America needs to rule the Philippines in order to educate, elevate, civilize and Christianize the Filipinos.’

Indeed he proceeded to justify a war of aggression in the name of Christianization. It is probable that behind such thinking was a model drawn from ethnic Israel’s military activities in the Conquest of Canaan, in which Israel upon entering the nation (sic) of Canaan, proceeded to occupy Palestine; we can seek the footprints of this [model] being tied to [their] own nation to justify military activities.

However, the New Testament defines the true descendants of Abraham as being so according to faith. That is to say, “Abraham, ‘it is written, “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Therefore, be sure it is those who are of faith that are the sons of Abraham. The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham *saying*, ‘All the nations shall be blessed in you.’ In this way those who are of faith, are blessed with Abraham, the believer” (Galatians 3:6~9). Paul again declares, “They are not all Israel who are *descended* from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham’s descendants, but: ‘Through Isaac your descendants will be named.’ That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants” (Romans 9:6~8). That is to say, the persons who believe in Jesus Christ are declared to be those called as the new Israel, as vessels of God’s mercy. Therefore, it is hermeneutically problematic to understand America as the descendants of Abraham, as chosen Israel.

Now then, there is one other passage that is weighty in making clear the identity of ethnic Israel. That is what was spoken by God, when Israel, having exited Egypt, entered the Wilderness of Sinai: “Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5~6 (sic)).

What I wish to focus on here is that ethnic Israel is a people that lives in covenant relationship to God, as “a nation of priests,” “a holy people.” “A nation of priests,” when said in connection with the Abrahamic covenant, means to carry out the role of a mediator who makes intercession for sin, and who prays for peace with God, on behalf of all the families [of the earth], in order to become the foundation of blessing. Again, “a holy people” means, as one linked to God, to not only point to the “holiness” of God, but to testify about God by holy living. If extremist fundamentalists take to themselves the title of the chosen people, they must become mediators for the world, and intercessors to God. However, as ethnic Israel was unable to carry out this role, they also are not carrying out this calling.

Peter declares: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” making clear that Christians indeed are the people of God.

## II. THE LIFESTYLE OF EXTREMIST FUNDAMENTALISTS THAT FOLLOWS FROM “THE ZEALOTS”

According to Numbers 25, the people of Israel who exited Egypt began playing the harlot with the daughters of Moab in Shittim, and because of that a plague came upon them, and twenty-four thousand people fell victim. This disaster was stopped by Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest. He took on Yahweh’s indignation as his own, and killed the troublemaking man and woman by skewering them with a spear.

As a result, Yahweh bestowed on him a covenant of peace, promising that his descendants after him would be priests forever. In Numbers 25:13 it is written: “...because he was jealous (=zealous) for his God, and made atonement for the sons of Israel;” his act was commended. This zealous act of Phinehas is mentioned in Psalm 106:28~31 as having contributed to the purging of the people who had run after idolatry.

It is said that, indeed, from the fountainhead of this zealous act, was later born the “Zealot Party.” The name of this faction is a word that denotes jealousy and zeal; even within Judaism, this sect was made up of those who were especially exclusionary and adhered to nationalism. They were certainly zealous for Yahweh, the only God; while boycotting other gods, they put their lives on the line to fight for the political independence of their nation. As for the lineage of the current-day extremist fundamentalists in America, one can see a lifestyle linked, if the background is sought in the Old Testament, to Phinehas the priest; furthermore, if in the time of Jesus, to the Zealots.

At this point I’d like to touch on one more event that links to the Zealots. It is an event that intertwines with the life of Elijah, the prophet. Elijah, who was active in the time of the Northern Kingdom’s notorious King Ahab, was a prophet who made a frontal assault on the Baal worship established by Ahab’s wife, Jezebel. The text of 1 Kings 18 records the climax of that conflict [or “apex of his career”]. Elijah had a showdown on the summit of Mt. Carmel with 450 prophets of Baal. Though it was a religious battle in which numerically he stood absolutely no chance of winning, by prayer Elijah was able to call down “fire from heaven” and win a great victory. As a result the people of Israel turned back to Yahweh, and the religion of Yahweh, which had been endangered, weathered a crisis. The victorious Elijah commanded the people, “Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.” The people “seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there” (1 Kings 18:40).

Indeed this incident is also claimed to be a fountainhead of the aforementioned “Zealot Party.” In present-day terminology, it could be called a large-scale massacre of the adherents of another religion. If the many wars promoted by the extremist fundamentalists to this day, in seeking legitimacy, find relevance in the Zealots, the radical sect of Judaism, and trace further back to the Old Testament prophets, this event of Elijah’s carries heavy meaning.

Now then, let us here consider Melchizedek, a priest who is in complete contrast to Phinehas. He is the first priest to appear in the Old Testament. He was called Melchizedek, King of Salem, and is introduced as a priest of the Most High God (Genesis 14:18). Abraham, having succeeded in rescuing his nephew, Lot, sends a tenth of all [the spoil] to Melchizedek the priest. In Hebrews 7:1~3, this Melchizedek is presented as a “king of peace” and a “perpetual priest.” Furthermore, the writer of Hebrews declares him to be “like the Son of God,” and a type of the priesthood of Christ. Probably, the writer of Hebrews, regarding the office of the first earthly priest to appear in the Bible, had a conviction that it was fulfilled by the atoning work of Christ, seeing that it was what ultimately brought about true peace. Certainly Christ, taking the sins of all mankind upon his own body, established peace between God and man.

Is not this lineage, which begins with Melchizedek and continues on to Christ, the true ideal in which ethnic Israel, as a nation of priests, should have walked? However, the actual Israel, unfortunately, was unable to carry out such a calling. They, rather than interceding for the world, pursued the interests of their own nation. To that end they became a decadent people, not even averse to mass slaughter; they disregarded their duty to be “a holy people.” Indeed, does not the path that the extremist fundamentalists are now following seem to be, unfortunately, not the “Melchizedek/Christ Line” of intercession, but the “Phinehas/Elijah Line” of carnage?

Takakazu (Koichi?) Mori, Professor of Theology at Doshisha University in “‘Religious Nation’: Can America Conquer Fundamentalism?” ( Gendai Shisou (i.e. Modern Thought), October 2002 Issue—Special Feature: Know America) wrote the following about immediately-post 9/11 America:

Immediately after 9/11, stars and stripes banners were everywhere in American society. Coming face to face with a hitherto unknown national crisis, the American people instinctively felt a need to band together under the stars and stripes banner.

Along with the stars and stripes banner, something [else] rapidly spread throughout American society immediately after 9/11. It was the words, “God Bless America,” and the patriotic song of the same name. The composer was Irving Berlin, the composer of “White Christmas.” This song [“God Bless America”], written in 1938, is better loved than the official national anthem, and could be called the second national anthem:

God bless America,  
land that I love.  
Stand beside her, and guide her  
through the night with a light from above.  
From the mountains, to the prairies, to the ocean white with foam,  
God bless America, my home sweet home.  
God bless America, my home sweet home.

[Translator’s note: A literal back-translation reads as follows:

God, bless America  
this ground that I love.  
Stand beside America, guide America  
with light from above, even amid a dark night.  
From the mountain ranges, through the great plains, to the vast ocean.  
God, bless America, my beloved homeland.  
God, bless America, my beloved homeland.]

On the very night of 9/11, on the steps in front of the Capitol close to a hundred Congresspersons gathered and, hand in hand, sang “God Bless America.” That scene was broadcast by television nationwide.

Truly this scene is the essence of patriotism, causing one to feel the zeal of the Zealots. The fact is that during such a craze, soldiers were dispatched to Iraq; great volumes of armaments have been used for murder.

### III. THE KINGS OF THE MONARCHIAL PERIOD, THE ESCHATOLOGY OF THE PROPHETS, AND EXTREMIST FUNDAMENTALISTS

The Monarchy of Israel that began with Saul really began to blossom with David and Solomon. For them battle with foreign nations, for purposes of expanding their domain or for

defense of their nation, was an unavoidable issue. Expansion of military power, together with murder in battle increased in awfulness.

Though after Solomon the nation was split north and south, in the Southern Kingdom, Judah, there were religious reformations under good kings. Kings such as Asa, Jehoshaphat, Uzziah, Hezekiah, Josiah et. al., in order to repair the temple or to wipe out Baal worship, broke down Baal's altars. There were times when Baal worshipers were murdered. In the Northern Kingdom, cruel records have been left to us of how, under Jehu, 70 sons of Ahab were murdered, and the household of Ahab was wiped out .

Now then, for the kings of the monarchial period, whether called "good king" or "bad king," their wars were "holy wars," girded with religious coloring. Even if a battle looked like a political conflict on the surface, the shadows were always imbued with religious conflict, and therein a high volume of murders took place. Nor was that all; both Northern and Southern Kingdoms were threatened by foreign powers, and they were threatened by daily-increasing fear of being wiped out.

On the one hand, the writing prophets, that followed Elijah and Elisha, set their focus on the ethics of the people's religious life, and did not desire bloody battles like Elijah's. They believed that God's righteousness would be revealed at the end of the world, and entrusting themselves to that work of God, did not stoop to shed blood with their own hands. Rather, they waited in hope for the true peace brought about by the Messiah who would appear at the end of the world.

That is to say, the prophets prophesied the destruction of their own countries by Assyria or Babylonia, and continued to warn. At the same time, they turned their eyes to the Messiah-King who would bring true peace on the earth, and earnestly desired His arrival. Isaiah declared that when Messiah would arrive and establish His kingdom, "They will hammer their swords into plowshares and their swords into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they learn war" (Isaiah 2:4), thereby expounding the fact that Messiah alone will be the bringer of true peace on earth.

His prophecy will be fulfilled by that Christ who was crucified, descended into hell, rose from the dead and will come again. Christ alone will be the One who will bring about the true peace that every earthly king has failed to achieve, and who will establish His rule. However, it appears that extremist fundamentalists are trying to follow in the ways of the kings of the Kingdom of Israel. There only destruction by military force, that paints blood upon blood, and insatiable expansion of power are intended. They expect that, by such means, the Kingdom will be established on earth.

What lies behind this? That is the Battle of Har Mageddon described in The Apocalypse [Revelation] of John, in the New Testament. At one time, under the Reagan Administration, this Har Mageddon of the Apocalypse of John, written in the New Testament, was tied to the last battle of the world, and its inevitability was believed without a doubt. They saw the Soviet Union as "the Evil Empire" and promoted a massive buildup of nuclear arms. Again, the thinking that led President Bush to declare such countries as Iraq and North Korea an "Axis of Evil" could be called a resurrection of the Reagan Era. Such eschatological views were suggested by extremist fundamentalism, which has tended to gain the adherence of many people because of 9/11.

However, Jesus, just before he went to the cross, said to Peter who, in an attempt to defend Him, had taken a sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, "Put your

sword back into its place; for all who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matthew 2:52~53), rejecting the notion of taking the sword to establish the Kingdom of God. Not only so, but to Pilates face, Jesus declared, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would fight, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm" (John 18:36). Thus, it is meaningless for extremist fundamentalists, in order to be victorious in the Battle of Har Mageddon, to prepare and enhance nuclear arms. That is because it is Christ that will be victorious.

#### FINALLY

While we have examined the passages of Scripture that appear to support extremist fundamentalism, Jesus, who came as the Messiah, neither walked in nor endorsed the way of priest, Phinehas, who became the fountainhead of the Zealot Party, nor of the prophet, Elijah, who used weapons to murder opponents. He made His triumphal entry as a meek King and, though He did cleanse the temple, He barely debated His opponents, much less slaughter them. Rather, He proffered His life for them and, upon the cross, prayed that His enemies might be forgiven. The Lord Jesus went along the path of the priest, Melchizedek, and as the Messiah indicated by the writing prophets, walked even further as the true King, who surrendered Himself as a sacrificial victim to bring about reformation of hearts.

Since such is the lifestyle of Jesus, we must reinterpret the Old Testament. Certainly the Old Testament recounts bloody incidents like those mentioned above.

However, such have to be reinterpreted by the New Testament, and do not provide any foundation for justifying the many murderous acts being done in our day. We must see the Old Testament afresh in the light of Christ who came as the Messiah, and proffered His own life to complete the atonement. This rethinking of the Old Testament is the very key to seeing through extremist fundamentalism. Since extremist fundamentalism frequently ignores the New Testament and attempts to do interpretation tied directly to the Old Testament, may it not be losing sight of the true meaning?

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