Judaism and Humanity: The Messianic Era

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Introduction

The Bible has a singular vision for Jews and humanity. Beginning with the unprecedented declaration in the first chapter of Genesis that all people are created in God's Image (Genesis 1:26–27), the Torah and prophets present a program for Israel and humanity that can bring about a redeemed, harmonious, religious-ethical world.

In previous articles published in *Conversations*, I have discussed the biblical ideas of the Chosen People and of loving the *ger*—the resident alien non-Israelite who dwells in the Land of Israel when Israel has sovereignty.[1] In this article, I summarize the conclusions of those two articles, and then discuss the prophetic messianic ideal of Israel and humanity. Rabbinic interpreters debate the boundaries of what the prophets envision as the ideal relationship between Israel and the nations in the future.

The Chosen People

The Torah begins its narrative with Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, and not with the people or Land of Israel. All people belong to the same family created in God's Image, with equal standing before God. God expects humanity to serve God and observe a basic level of morality, codified in Jewish law as the seven Noahide Laws.

God rejected humanity after the expulsion from Eden, the Flood, and finally the Tower of Babel. God then chose Abraham because Abraham chose God; Abraham taught his children and society about the religious-ethical lifestyle the Torah promotes for humanity.

God's choosing of Israel is an eternal choice, but the relationship is damaged when Israel sins. Israel's exiles represent a separation, not a permanent divorce. God longs for Israel's repentance and

restoration of the ideal relationship between God and Israel. Similarly, God's rejection of humanity with the Tower of Babel is a separation, not a permanent divorce. Non-Israelites who return to Godly behavior can become chosen again. All humanity will be redeemed in the messianic era.

One is chosen when one chooses God. For Jews, that means faithfulness to the God-Israel covenant in the Torah with its commandments. For non-Jews, that means faithfulness to the basic religious-ethical principles of the seven Noahide Laws.

Israel plays a special role as a nation of priests (Exodus 19:6). Israel's priests have a genetic component (descendants of Aaron the Priest), have more commandments than regular Israelites, guard and serve in the Temple, and teach Torah to Israel. So too, Israel is a family within the community of nations, has more commandments than non-Israelites, guards and serves in the Temple, and teaches Torah to the world.

The Torah thereby establishes a particularistic religious system for Israel, while simultaneously promoting love and genuine respect of a diverse religious-ethical humanity.

The Resident Alien

In the Torah (the Written Law), the resident alien in Israel must observe most laws of the Torah, be cared for and loved, and receive equal treatment. The resident alien is exempt from several laws that govern the unique covenantal relationship between God and Israel.
The Oral Law distinguishes between the *ger tzedek* (convert to Judaism) who is bound by all of the Torah's laws and is loved and cared for by Jews, and the *ger toshav* (resident alien) who must accept certain minimal religious-ethical standards to live in Israel.

The Oral Law teaches the core Jewish value of loving converts to Judaism. The Written Law teaches that identical love and inclusion of the resident alien, complete with rights and responsibilities. The Torah commands love, sensitivity, and fair treatment of all decent people living in the Land of Israel. Although we apply the laws of the Oral Law on the halakhic level, it also is critical to internalize the core values of the Written Law to envisage and build the ideal society.

The Messianic Future

We now turn to the focus of this article, prophecies that develop the contours of the ideal future for Israel and humanity. Several passages elicit debate among commentators, who disagree over the precise relationship between Israel and the nations in the ideal future.

Zephaniah 3:9
Nations Accept God

For then I will make the peoples pure of speech (*safah berurah*), so that they all invoke the Lord by name and serve Him with one accord. (Zephaniah 3:9)

After censuring the wicked societies of Israel and its neighbors, Zephaniah proffers a prophecy of consolation. All people will speak a pure speech and serve God in unity. Several commentators interpret the "pure speech" as referring to Hebrew (Rabbi Joseph Kara, Ibn Ezra, Radak). However, most explain that people will serve the one true God (Rambam *Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:4, Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency, Abarbanel, cf. *Berakhot* 57b, Rashi on Deuteronomy 6:4). Abarbanel adds that Zephaniah's prophecy represents the undoing of the Tower of Babel. People no longer will be confused of language nor retreat from God. Instead, religious and social unity will prevail. Both of these components remedy the rupture from the Tower of Babel, making this dual interpretation of Zephaniah's prophecy particularly apt.[2]

Isaiah 2:2–4
Nations Join Israel in the Temple

In the days to come, the Mount of the Lord's House shall stand firm above the mountains and tower above the hills; and all the nations shall gaze on it with joy. And the many peoples shall go and say: "Come, let us go up to the Mount of the Lord, to the House of the God of Jacob; that He may instruct us in His ways, and that we may walk in His paths." For instruction shall come forth from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. Thus He will judge among the nations and arbitrate for the many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks: Nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war. (Isaiah 2:2–4)

In this celebrated prophecy, Isaiah envisions world peace in the context of universal worship of God. All humanity will serve God and will be welcome to the Temple. Yehezkel Kaufmann (1889–1963, Hebrew University) adds that this vision also serves as an antidote to the Tower of Babel.[3] Jerusalem represents the ideal metropolitan center, which attracts people to serve God.

We may add that the prophets generally do not enjoin Israel to actively proselytize throughout the world. Rather, they must build an ideal society and through that model inspire humanity. This picture aligns with God's exhortation in Deuteronomy:

See, I have imparted to you laws and rules, as the Lord my God has commanded me, for you to abide by in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. Observe them faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples, who on hearing of all these laws will say, "Surely, that great nation is a wise and discerning people." For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand as is the Lord our God whenever we call upon Him? Or what great nation has laws and rules as perfect as all this Teaching that I set before you this day? (Deuteronomy 4:5–8)

Isaiah 56:3–7
Nations Join Israel in the Temple

Let not the foreigner say, who has attached himself to the Lord, “The Lord will keep me apart from His people”; and let not the eunuch say, “I am a withered tree.” For thus said the Lord: “As for the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths, who have chosen what I desire and hold fast to My covenant—I will give them, in My House and within My walls, a monument and a name better than sons or daughters. I will give them an everlasting name which shall not perish. As for the foreigners who attach themselves to the Lord, to minister to Him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants—all who keep the Sabbath and do not profane it, and who hold fast to My covenant—I will bring them to My sacred mount and let them rejoice in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices shall be welcome on My altar; for My House shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” (Isaiah 56:3–7)

This prophecy furthers the invitation to all God-fearing people to serve God in the Temple. Evidently, some God-fearing Gentiles felt excluded, so the prophet responds that they indeed have access to the Temple.

Rashi, Radak, and Abarbanel interpret this prophecy as referring to full converts to Judaism (*gerei tzedek*).[4] Ibn Ezra and Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency, however, explain the prophecy as referring to righteous Gentiles. They cite Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the First Temple:

Or if a foreigner who is not of Your people Israel comes from a distant land for the sake of Your name—for they shall hear about Your great name and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm—when he comes to pray toward this House, oh, hear in Your heavenly abode and grant all that the foreigner asks You for. Thus all the peoples of the earth will know Your name and revere You, as does Your people Israel; and they will recognize that Your name is attached to this House that I have built. (I Kings 8:41–43)

Righteous Gentiles always are welcome to serve God in the Temple.

Isaiah 66:18–21
Will Gentiles Serve as Priests in the Temple?

For I [know] their deeds and purposes. [The time] has come to gather all the nations and tongues; they shall come and behold My glory…. And out of all the nations, said the Lord, they shall bring all your brothers on horses, in chariots and drays, on mules and dromedaries, to Jerusalem My holy mountain as an offering to the Lord—just as the Israelites bring an offering in a pure vessel to the House of the Lord. And from them likewise I will take some to be levitical priests, said the Lord. (Isaiah 66:18–21)

Depending on how one understands “from them,” it is possible to read the final verse in this passage as saying that some righteous Gentiles will serve as priests in the Temple. If that is the plain sense of the text, it is unparalleled in the Bible. Generally, the Torah prohibits any non-Aaronides—whether from Israel or the nations—from serving as priests in the Temple.[5]

Classical commentators maintain that this prophecy does not countermand the laws of the Torah. Only Aaronide priests will serve in that capacity in the Temple. They disagree, however, over how to understand this prophecy.

Rashi, Radak, Abarbanel, and Malbim maintain that non-Jews will bring Israelite priests and Levites back from exile with them.[6] Although those priests and Levites had assimilated while in exile, God will accept their repentance and allow them to serve in the Temple.

Alternatively, Rabbi Joseph Kimhi and Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency submit that non-Jews will serve in the Temple by assisting the Aaronide and Levitic priests as the Gibeonites and *netinim* did from the time of Joshua through the Second Temple period:

That day Joshua made [the Gibeonites] hewers of wood and drawers of water—as they still are—for the community and for the altar of the Lord, in the place that He would choose. (Joshua 9:27)

And of the temple servants (*netinim*) whom David and the officers had appointed for the service of the Levites—220 temple servants, all of them listed by name. (Ezra 8:20)

Amos Hakham also interprets the text as referring to non-Jews serving in the Temple, but understands the verses figuratively. Righteous Gentiles will bring offerings in the Temple, and God considers those who sacrifice *as though* they are God's attendants, like priests and Levites.[7]

To summarize the respective readings according to the aforementioned commentators:

1. Rashi: And out of all the nations…they shall bring all your brothers (=Jews)…to Jerusalem My holy mountain as an offering to the Lord…. And from them (=Jews whom the nations brought back who are of priestly and Levitic descent) likewise I will take some to be levitical priests, said the Lord.

2. Rabbi Joseph Kimhi: And out of all the nations…they shall bring all your brothers (=Jews)…to Jerusalem My holy mountain as an offering to the Lord.... And from them (=the non-Jewish nations) likewise I will take some to be levitical priests (=to assist the priests and Levites with attending roles), said the Lord.

3. Amos Hakham: And out of all the nations…they shall bring all your brothers (=Jews)…to Jerusalem My holy mountain as an offering to the Lord.... And from them (=the non-Jewish nations) likewise I will take some to be levitical priests (=I will consider Gentiles who bring sacrifices as though they were priests), said the Lord.

Isaiah 19:18–25

Israel and the Nations are Chosen People When They Serve God

In that day, there shall be several towns in the land of Egypt speaking the language of Canaan and swearing loyalty to the Lord of Hosts; one shall be called Town of Heres. In that day, there shall be an altar to the Lord inside the land of Egypt and a pillar to the Lord at its border…In that day, Israel shall be a third partner with Egypt and Assyria as a blessing on earth; for the Lord of Hosts will bless them, saying, "Blessed be My people Egypt, My handiwork Assyria, and My very own Israel." (Isaiah 19:18–25)

Isaiah prophetically envisions Egypt and (evidently) Assyria accepting God in the future. This is the only place in the Bible where God explicitly refers to a foreign nation as "My nation." All humanity may become chosen by choosing God through proper worship (generally understood as commitment to the seven Noahide Laws).

Several interpreters reject the notion that any other nation can become God's chosen people. For example, Targum Jonathan, Rashi, and Rabbi Isaiah of Trani reinterpret the verse as referring exclusively to Israel's chosenness: Blessed be My nation [Israel whom I chose in] Egypt, and [to whom I showed miracles with] Assyria.

Those who understand the verse as referring to God's choosing Egypt and Assyria generally still give Israel a distinctive advantage. Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Abarbanel explain that all three nations will be chosen by God, but Israel is God's inheritance (*nahalah*), enjoying the longest standing and permanent intimate relationship with God.

Amos Hakham recognizes the equality of the three nations in the verse, but suggests that Israel is mentioned last as the most beloved nation of God (*aharon aharon haviv*).[8] However, the smoothest reading of the verse appears to equate the nations as having chosen status when they embrace God in the future.

Ezekiel 47:21–23
Do Resident Aliens Receive Land in Israel?

This land you shall divide for yourselves among the tribes of Israel. You shall allot it as a heritage for yourselves and for the strangers who reside among you, who have begotten children among you. You shall treat them as Israelite citizens; they shall receive allotments along with you among the tribes of Israel. You shall give the stranger an allotment within the tribe where he resides—declares the Lord God. (Ezekiel 47:21–23)

Ezekiel envisions a renewed map of Israel in his prophecy of redemption in chapters 47–48. All twelve tribes will return to Israel and live west of the Jordan River. The tribal allotments no longer will follow the ancient distribution from the time of Joshua.

One of the striking differences between the original world order in biblical Israel and Ezekiel's prophetic forecast for the ideal future is the allotment of land to *gerim*. As I discussed in my article on the resident alien, all biblical instances of *ger* refer to the resident alien, known in halakha as the *ger toshav*. Therefore, it appears that Ezekiel's prophecy allots land to all decent people who live in Israel in the future.

Because the Torah does not allocate land to the resident alien, *Sifrei Numbers* 10:29 reinterprets Ezekiel's prophecy as referring either to atonement or burial, not to land acquisition.

Several commentators explain that the *ger* in Ezekiel's prophecy is the *ger tzedek*, or righteous convert. In their reading, those who convert to Judaism prior to the messianic era will in fact obtain land in the messianic era (Rashi, Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency, Abarbanel).

The smoothest reading of the verses, however, allocates land for resident aliens in the future.

Joel 3:1

Will Israelites and Non-Israelites Prophesy?

After that, I will pour out My spirit on all flesh (*kol basar*); your sons and daughters shall prophesy; your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. (Joel 3:1–2)

Joel prophesies that in the future, God will pour His spirit on all flesh (*kol basar*). The ensuing words refer to various manifestations of prophetic inspiration. If Joel says that all humanity will prophesy in the future, this would be a unique prophecy in the Bible.

However, Ibn Ezra and Radak observe that Joel refers to *your* sons and daughters. Interpreting the verse as referring to the same group, they maintain that Israelites will prophesy in the future, and Joel does not refer to all humanity.[9] In this reading, Joel's prophecy is parallel to that of Ezekiel:

I will never again hide My face from them, for I will pour out My spirit upon the House of Israel—declares the Lord God. (Ezekiel 39:29)

Abarbanel splits the verse into two components. *Kol basar* in the first half of the verse refers to all humanity, who will recognize and serve God. Abarbanel likens Joel's prophecy to Zephaniah's prophecy discussed earlier that all nations will speak with a pure speech to serve God (Zephaniah 3:9). The second half of the verse refers to Jews, who will attain actual prophecy (*ve-nibbe'u*).

Although Joel's prophecy does not appear to predict universal prophetic revelation, it calls to mind a Midrash which teaches the core value that all worthy human beings may attain prophecy:

> I call to witness the heavens and earth, that whether a Gentile or Jew, man or woman, servant or maidservant; all is according to one's actions, and to that degree divine inspiration rests upon him. (*Tanna Devei Eliyahu* 10)

Conclusion

We have considered prophecies of redemption that illustrate aspects of the future relationship between Israel and righteous Gentiles.

Zephaniah 3:9 envisions a united humanity serving God properly (Rambam, Abarbanel), thereby undoing the damage represented by the Tower of Babel (Abarbanel).

Isaiah 2:2–4 predicts the worldwide recognition and service of God in Jerusalem, the ideal metropolitan center. Israel's living up to its role as a model nation of priests inspires the nations to join them.

Isaiah 56:3–7 combats any discriminatory attitudes Jews might have toward righteous Gentiles. All God-fearing individuals have a place in the future Temple (Ibn Ezra, Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency).

Isaiah 66:18–21 envisages the nations of the world recognizing God's glory, and bringing Jewish exiles with them to Jerusalem and the Temple. Commentators debate whether the passage predicts that Jewish priests and Levites will be allowed to serve in the Temple despite their assimilationist tendencies while in exile (Rashi), whether righteous Gentiles will serve as attendants for the priests and Levites (Rabbi Joseph Kimhi), or whether they will bring sacrifices and God will view them as though they were priests in the Temple (Amos Hakham). It is possible to read the prophecy as referring to righteous Gentiles to actually serve as priests in the Temple. If this is the text's meaning, it would be a unique prophecy in the Bible. It also would contradict laws in the Torah that outlaw all non-Aaronides from encroaching on the Temple space.

Isaiah 19:18–25 foresees a future age when other nations accept God and will resume being chosen nations alongside Israel. Several commentators assume that only Jews can be a chosen people (Targum, Rashi), but others interpret the prophecy to mean that nations that accept God are chosen, and this appears to be the plain sense of the text (Ibn Ezra, Amos Hakham).

Ezekiel 47:21–23 uniquely forecasts that resident aliens will receive land alongside the Jews in the messianic era. Many commentators assume that this prophecy refers to righteous converts to Judaism (Rashi, Abarbanel), but the simple meaning pertains to resident aliens, who will own land in a newly redrawn map of Israel.

Although Joel 3:1–2 initially sounded like a unique prediction of universal prophecy, it appears more likely that the prophecy is limited to Jews (Ibn Ezra, Radak). However, a Midrash (*Tanna Devei Eliyahu* 10) stresses that all worthy people are eligible to receive prophecy.

May we further our own building of a model community, and may we inspire many others to this vision of a united, diverse, God-fearing moral society.

Postscript

Although this study has focused on biblical prophecies, it is appropriate to note the debate in Jewish thought between Rambam and his opponents. Professor Menachem Kellner has written extensively on this subject.[10] Many great Jewish thinkers, including Rabbi Judah Halevi in his *Kuzari*, followed by the Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Shneuer Zalman of Lyady, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the author of the *Zohar*, and others, believe in ontological essentialism. In plain English, these thinkers assert that Jews are essentially distinct and superior to non-Jews. This position leads its adherents to maintain that converts to Judaism are lesser than born Jews, since they were born with inferior souls. Additionally, this viewpoint generally rejects the possibility that non-Jews can attain prophecy.

It must be stressed that there is no biblical precedent for these ideas, nor is there much in classical rabbinic literature to support their contention. Kellner maintains that the degraded state of Jews in many medieval communities promoted this attitude as a means of maintaining self-esteem.

In contrast to this widespread view, Rambam insists that there is no essential difference between Jew and non-Jew. All people must develop their intellect to know God and act morally. God chose Abraham because Abraham chose God, not because of any preexisting metaphysical superiority of Abraham. God gave the Torah to the people of Israel because of that choice, and not as a consequence of any inherent property in the people of Israel.

This outlook leads Rambam to view converts to Judaism as true equals, rather than as inferior people born with lesser souls. After all, the Jewish people began as "converts" as well. Rambam also maintains that in principle, Jews and non-Jews may attain prophetic revelation if they develop themselves properly.

Rambam's stance on these issues dovetails the biblical portrait of Israel's relationship with the nations.

Notes

[1] "'The Chosen People': An Ethical Challenge," *Conversations* 27 (Winter 2017), pp. 38–47. "Love the *Ger*: A Biblical Perspective," *Conversations* 36 (Autumn 2020), pp. 37–46.
[2] See further discussion in Hayyim Angel, "The Tower of Babel: A Case Study in Combining Traditional and Academic Bible Methodologies," in Angel, *Peshat Isn't So Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2014), pp. 201–212.
[3] Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, translated and abridged by Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 294–295, 386–387.
[4] Cf. *Mekhilta Mishpatim* 22; *Exodus Rabbah* 19:4–5; *Tanna Devei Eliyahu* 29; Rambam cites Isaiah 56:3 to demonstrate that there is no difference between born Jews and sincere converts to Judaism (Letter to Obadiah the Proselyte).
[5] Shalom M. Paul (*Mikra LeYisrael: Isaiah 49-66* [Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2008, 575) and Joseph Blenkinsopp (*Anchor Bible: Isaiah 56-66* [New York: Doubleday, 2003], p. 140) maintain that, according to this prophecy, foreigners will in fact be able to serve in the Temple as priests. Given the legal disparity between this interpretation and the rest of the biblical corpus, Blenkinsopp concedes that "These affirmations…must have been highly controversial, and we may be sure that they would not have been acceptable to the temple authorities at any time after the restoration of the Jerusalem cult."
[6] Cf. *Midrash Psalms* 7.
[7] Amos Hakham, *Daat Mikra: Isaiah* vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1984), p. 696.
[8] Amos Hakham, *Daat Mikra: Isaiah* vol. 1 (Jerusalem, Mossad HaRav Kook, 1984), p. 206.
[9] See also Amos Hakham, *Daat Mikra: Twelve Prophets* vol. 1, *Joel* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1990), pp. 17-18; James L. Crenshaw, *Anchor Bible: Joel* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), pp. 164–165.
[10] See especially Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006); *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991). See also his articles, "Chosenness, Not Chauvinism: Maimonides on the Chosen People," in *A People Apart: Chosenness and Ritual in Jewish Philosophical Thought*, ed. Daniel Frank (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), pp. 51–76, 85–89; "On Universalism and Particularism in Judaism," *Da'at* 36 (1996), pp. v–xv; "We Are Not Alone," in *Radical Responsibility: Celebrating the Thought of Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks*, ed. Michael J. Harris, Daniel Rynhold, and Tamra Wright (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2012), pp. 139–154.