

American Nationalism and Israel's Exceptionalism: A Prophetic Critique

By Colin Hoover

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Dr. Jason Bemby

Emmanuel Christian Seminary at Milligan

Introduction

At a rally in Houston, TX on October 22, 2018, United States President Donald J. Trump proclaimed with pride, “You know what I am? I’m a nationalist, O.K.? I’m a nationalist. Nationalist!”¹ As Peter Baker of the *New York Times* notes, “Typically, the term “nationalist” is employed by the United States government to describe political figures and forces in other countries that sometimes represent a threat.”² The term has developed a much different connotation within the United States, however. Baker goes on to say, “When used domestically, it is a word often tainted with the whiff of extremism, not least because a variant of it, white nationalist, describes racist leaders and groups.”³ And yet, in 2018, the president of the United States “has adopted the label as a badge of honor.”⁴

Trump’s claim to the nationalist title is not surprising, given the rhetoric of his 2016 presidential campaign, replete with sexist, racist, Islamophobic, and xenophobic language. His campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” envisioned a time in which America was “great,” implying that the greatness of America, what we can call “American Exceptionalism,” is under attack and must be protected. According to Jonathan Foster, “American exceptionalism is the belief that the United States, its people, and its institutions are politically and culturally exceptional in the world.”⁵ The idea of American nationalism and American exceptionalism are

¹ Peter Baker, “‘Use That Word!’: Trump Embraces the ‘Nationalist’ Label,” *The New York Times*, October 24, 2018, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/23/us/politics/nationalist-president-trump.html>.

² Baker, “‘Use That Word!’”.

³ Baker, “‘Use That Word!’”.

⁴ Baker, “‘Use That Word!’”.

⁵ Jonathan Foster, “American Exceptionalism, Roots Of,” In *Imperialism and Expansionism in American History: A Social, Political, and Cultural Encyclopedia and Document Collection*, Chris J. Magoc and David Bernstein, Ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2016), 246.

intimately related, nearly synonymous. Therefore, the fact that Trump’s rhetoric throughout his campaign and presidency has been one of a return to American exceptionalism, as evidenced by his priority to “America first” language, his proclamation that he is a nationalist is to be expected.

The main concern of this paper, however, is the response to such a claim from a people claiming to be “Christians.” While not surprising, it has been concerning to see widespread evangelical support for Donald Trump over the years. In this paper, I seek to uncover the source of Christian support for American nationalism and exceptionalism. I then look to two texts from the prophetic tradition of Scripture which challenge these notions. Finally, I conclude by looking at how Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. continued the prophetic critique of nationalism and exceptionalism.⁶

The Roots of American Nationalism and Exceptionalism

According to Jonathan Foster:

The intellectual basis of American exceptionalism dates back to early colonial history. Puritans who settled the Massachusetts Bay area in the 17th century believed themselves to be founding a model and thus exceptional settlement of the Christian faith...It was to be, as Puritan leader John Winthrop proclaimed in his sermon ‘Model of Christian Charity,’ as a ‘city on a hill’ for all to gaze upon and emulate.⁷

This history of America as a wilderness destined to be a settlement and model of the Christian faith has informed the Christian American self-understanding for centuries. In his farewell speech from the oval office in 1989 President Ronald Reagan quoted Winthrop directly and went on to say, “in my mind, it was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept,

⁶ For more on how figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. relate to the prophetic tradition see Jason Bemby, *Walking in the Prophetic Tradition: Models of Speaking Truth and Acting in Love for Everyday People* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018).

⁷ Foster, *American Exceptionalism, Roots Of*, 246.

God blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace.”⁸ Andrew Whitehead believes that this history and the desired defense of the Christian identity of America, played a major role in the election of Donald Trump to the presidency. He says, “support for Donald Trump represented a defense of America’s supposed Christian heritage in the eyes of many Americans... We refer to this pervasive set of beliefs and ideals that merge American and Christian group memberships – along with their histories and futures – as Christian nationalism.”⁹ This idea of Christian nationalism was certainly present in Trump’s language during the campaign. As Whitehead notes, “During his candidacy, Trump at times explicitly played to Christian nationalist sentiments by repeating the refrain that the United States is abdicating its Christian heritage.”¹⁰ One such example comes from a speech Trump gave at Liberty University in January of 2016 in which he said, “But we are going to protect Christianity... You look at the different places, and Christianity, it’s under siege... We have to band together... Our country has to do that around Christianity.”¹¹ This idea that Christianity, and the Christian heritage of America, was somehow “under siege” was pervasive in Trump’s campaign rhetoric, which earned him the support of many evangelical leaders and Americans.¹²

⁸ Ronald Reagan, “President’s Farewell Address To The American People,” *Vital Speeches of the Day* 70, no. 17 (June 15, 2004): 517, Emphasis Added. <https://milligan.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=buh&AN=13682444&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁹ Andrew L Whitehead, Samuel L Perry, and Joseph O Baker, “Make America Christian Again: Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election,” *Sociology of Religion* 79, no. 2 (2018): 151, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srx070>.

¹⁰ Whitehead, 151.

¹¹ Whitehead, 151.

¹² Among them Franklin Graham and Liberty University president, Jerry Falwell Jr., who both publicly endorsed Trump during his 2016 Campaign. See <https://www.facebook.com/wpjennajohnson>, “Evangelical Leader Jerry Falwell Jr. Endorses Trump,” Washington Post, accessed February 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/01/26/evangelical-leader-jerry-falwell-jr-endorses-trump/>.

As Whitehead puts it, “The 2016 election was repeatedly labeled as conservative Christians’ ‘last chance’ for citizens to protect America’s religious heritage and win back a chance at securing a Christian future.”¹³

As mentioned above, this notion of a Christian heritage, and the need to protect it, is noted in early Puritanism. Where, though, did the Puritans and others get this notion of American religious exceptionalism? Whitehead claims, “Christian nationalism, however, draws its roots from ‘Old Testament’ parallels between America and Israel, who was commanded to maintain cultural and blood purity, often through war, conquest, and separatism.”¹⁴ For many, America was seen as the “new wilderness” and the early settlers as the “new Israel” inhabiting that wilderness. This created an ideology of exceptionalism, as ideas of manifest destiny defined Americans as God’s chosen people in the world. The basis for these claims largely came from Israel’s identity as God’s chosen, covenantal people, who had a unique relationship with Yahweh.

This history has resulted in a complex and dangerous manifestation of Christian nationalism and exceptionalism among many Christians today. The merging of American and Christian identities have, in some cases, validated the horrors of racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia. I am convinced that Christians ought to turn to the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible and wrestle with the challenges to Israel’s own notions of exceptionalism and see the theological significance of this critique of Israel as a challenge to our own exceptionalism. In the next two sections I look at two texts from the prophetic tradition that I am convinced set forth this very challenge.

¹³ Whitehead, 153.

¹⁴ Whitehead, 150.

Amos 9:7

The superscription in the opening verse of Amos dates the prophetic activity of Amos to the reigns of kings Uzziah in Judah (783-742 B.C.E) and Jeroboam II in Israel (786-746),¹⁵ although some scholars believe the concluding section, beginning with 9:7, to be a postexilic addition.¹⁶ Verse 7, however, can be considered analogous to Amos 3:2 in the sense that scholarship has often isolated it from its context as a characteristic individual saying of the prophet. As Jeremias notes, “Amos 3:2 is “a verse that similarly was considered to be an individual saying with a similar theme (an argument against the popular belief in election as absolute protection from catastrophe).” In any case, Amos 9:7 picks up the theme of Amos’s prophecy as a whole and, as we will see, challenges the peoples’ ideology of exceptionalism before Yahweh.

Walter Brueggemann argues that the source of Israel’s exceptionalism stems from what he calls the emergence of “ethical monotheism” as the normative faith of Israel. He says, “The emergence of ethical monotheism as the “normative faith” of Israel brought with it more than theological implications, but also ideological temptations, namely that the “onlyness” of Yahweh naturally meant the “onlyness” of Israel.¹⁷ He points out two impetuses for this “mono-ideology,” 1) “...the Davidic-Solomonic, royal ideology that insisted upon a close connection between Yahweh and royal Israel as a way of giving theological legitimation to political

¹⁵ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 78.

¹⁶ Jörg Jeremias, *The Book of Amos: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 162.

¹⁷ Brueggemann, *Texts That Linger, Words That Explode: Listening to Prophetic Voices* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 89.

power.”¹⁸ Brueggemann points here to 2 Samuel 7:23-24, where, in a prayer dedicated to the greatness and “onlyness” of Yahweh, David makes a similar claim for the “onlyness” of Israel:

Who is like your people, like Israel? Is there another nation on earth whose God went to redeem it as a people, and to make a name for himself, doing great and awesome things for them, by driving out before his people nations and their gods? And you established your people Israel for yourself to be your people forever; and you, O Lord, became their God. (2 Samuel 7:23-24).¹⁹

Based on this claim, Brueggemann argues, the people of Israel arrived “not only at monotheism but also at mono-ethnism, or mono-people.”²⁰ 2) The second impetus for this “mono-ideology” of Israel, Brueggemann says, comes from the theology of the Deuteronomic tradition. For this, Brueggemann points to the centralization of worship in Deuteronomy. He says, “Just as there is only one Yahweh, so there is only one right place of worship.”²¹ Here again Brueggemann points to a text in which the “onlyness” of Israel in relation to Yahweh is asserted:

See, just as the Lord my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!” For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? (Deut. 4:5-8).

“The subtext of the statement, however,” says Brueggemann, “is that *only Israel* has a God so near, and *only Israel* has a Torah so just, that is, *only Israel* can claim to be peculiarly privileged in the world of the nations.”²² This, Brueggemann argues, is the basis for Israel’s “mono-

¹⁸ Brueggemann, 89.

¹⁹ All scripture quotations are from the NRSV translation.

²⁰ Brueggemann, 90.

²¹ Brueggemann, 91 (see Deut. 12:5-7, 14).

²² Brueggemann, 92.

ideology,” or ideology of exceptionalism, and this is the situation into which Yahweh speaks through the prophet Amos. As Brueggemann says of the Israel and Judah to which Amos speaks, “They believed not only that Yahweh alone is God, but that Israel alone is Yahweh’s people. A consequence of this ideological linkage was that Israel became self-satisfied in its ethics and in its worship, so that its very ‘orthodoxy’ became a warrant for self-indulgence (compare Amos 4:4-5; 6:1-6).”²³ It is to Amos and the words uttered in Amos 9:7 that I now turn.

Amos 9:7 reads:

Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,
O people of Israel? says the Lord.
Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,
and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir? (Amos 9:7).

Yahweh is here speaking to Israel, and in this verse poses two seemingly rhetorical questions. The first question compares Israel to the Ethiopians (Cushites in some translations). “Are you not like the Ethiopians [Cushites] to me, O people of Israel? Says the Lord.” The Cushites, who occupied what is now modern-day Ethiopia, are included presumably due to their geographical and ethnic distance from Israel. As Jeremias notes, “From the perspective of Palestine, the inhabitants of Cush, encompassing geographically modern Ethiopia and the southern Sudan, were the southernmost, most distant, and at the same time – because of their skin color – the strangest people with whom one came into contact.”²⁴ Smith argues that, because the Cushites were the most remote people in Israel’s experience, “reference to them may have been intended as inclusive of all nations.”²⁵ The point here is that Yahweh, in this statement, is equating the

²³ Brueggemann, 92-93.

²⁴ Jeremias, *The Book of Amos*, 164.

²⁵ Billy K. Smith and Frank S. Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 160.

people of Israel with the most remote people in their experience, non-covenantal people, and possibly even all nations. What are we to make of this comparison?

Some have suggested that the question reveals more about Israel's relationship to Yahweh than Yahweh's relationship with the Cushites.²⁶ Brueggemann disagrees. He argues that, when read in the original Hebrew, the comparison can only point to the equality of the Israelites and the Cushites in the eyes of God:

“The question posed is about the likeness, comparability, and similarity of Israel and the Ethiopians (Cushites). The formulation in Hebrew is even more shocking than our usual reading, because ‘Ethiopians’ preceded ‘you’: ‘Are not the Ethiopians like you?’ The question is made more demanding by the indirect object, ‘to me,’ that is, to Yahweh. Now the comparison of Israel and Cush is not territorial or political or ethnic or linguistic. It is Yahwistic: alike to Yahweh.”²⁷

Understood this way, the first question in Amos 9:7 can be nothing other than an indictment on Israel's exceptionalism before Yahweh, and a claim of equity between Israel and other nations and peoples before Yahweh. As Shalom Paul notes, “In the eyes of the sovereign of history, who has absolute sway over all the nations of the world and personally directs their destinies, Israel has no more initial claim to preference than any other people...Even the most inaccessible nation is still under God's surveillance and sovereignty, as is Israel.”²⁸ Similarly, Smith says, “The point is that Israel shared something in common with all nations.”²⁹ Jeremias brings the matter closer to home when he says, “God is the Lord of the world, and not Israel's national deity.”³⁰

²⁶ See James Luther Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 157.

²⁷ Brueggemann, *Texts That Linger, Words That Explode*, 94.

²⁸ Shalom M. Paul, *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 282.

²⁹ Smith, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, 160.

³⁰ Jeremias, *The Book of Amos*, 164.

The second question in Amos 9:7 deserves equal attention. Yahweh asks, “Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?” In this question, Mays points out, the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, a major event in Israel’s history and claims of exceptionalism, is put on an equal footing with the migration of the Philistines and Arameans.³¹ Not only that, but Yahweh also claims responsibility for the exoduses, not only of Israel, but of these two classic enemies of Israel. The implication here is salvific,³² and suggests that Yahweh is involved in the histories of other peoples, not just the Israelites. As Brueggemann notes, “The prophet Amos, by his ideology-shattering rhetorical questions, invites us to imagine that these two traditional enemies of Israel, the Philistines and the Arameans, have a history with Yahweh not unlike Israel’s history with Yahweh, even though that history is not known to Israel.”³³ This is yet another indictment on Israel’s ideology of exceptionalism, as the very event which Israel has viewed as exceptional to their own experience, their deliverance from Egypt at the hands of Yahweh, is exposed as an experience not unique to Israel, for Yahweh has delivered other nations, even Israel’s enemies, from captivity. As Shalom Paul notes, “Just as [Yahweh] evinces no favoritism ethnically or geographically, so [Yahweh] shows no preference historically or politically... The deliverance from Egypt, historically speaking, affords no special assurance or preference for Israel, for it is not unique. It is merely another example of the Lord’s universalistic impartiality.”³⁴ It is important to note, as many commentators do, that the basic fact of God’s involvement in Israel’s

³¹ Mays, *Amos*, 157.

³² See Brueggemann, *Texts That Linger, Words That Explode*, 95.

³³ Brueggemann, 96.

³⁴ Paul, *Amos*, 283.

exodus from Egypt is not challenged in this verse. What is challenged, however, is the exceptional status of Israel to Yahweh based on that experience.³⁵ As Mays notes, “This basic datum of Yahweh’s historical relationship with Israel is neither denied or robbed of emphasis by its expansion to include the Philistines and Aram. What is denied and shattered is a theology based on that datum – that Yahweh’s act in the Exodus established Israel in a special status *vis-à-vis* the other nations.”³⁶ Thus, Israel’s ideology of exceptionalism, which serves as the basis for an ideology of American exceptionalism, is challenged in Amos 9:7. Israel is compared by Yahweh to the Ethiopians, the most remote peoples geographically and experientially from Israel, as well as to the Philistines and Arameans, their most hated and reviled enemies.

Isaiah 19:24-25

The second text in the prophetic tradition that I argue challenges the idea of Israel’s exceptionalism before Yahweh is Isaiah 19:24-25. Contextually, Isa. 19:24-25 concludes a literary unit including vv. 16-25. As Brevard S. Childs notes, “There is general agreement that the authorship of 19:1-15 is different from that of vv. 16-24,”³⁷ and therefore vv. 16-25 make up a separate unit. Otto Kaiser goes as far as to argue that the five oracles of vv. 16-25 constitute five separate additions to the prophecy of judgement against Egypt in vv. 1-15, which has resulted in a decisive change of its import.³⁸

³⁵ See the oracle against Israel in Amos 2:6-16 in which Yahweh threatens Israel for their mistreatment of the poor despite the fact of the exodus.

³⁶ Mays, *Amos*, 158. See also, Paul, *Amos*, 283-84 and Jeremias, *The Book of Amos*, 163.

³⁷ Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*, 1st ed., The Old Testament Library (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 142.

³⁸ Otto Kaiser and אורי קינור, *Isaiah 13-39: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 105, <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy1510/73021949-b.html>.

Isa. 16-25 consists of five oracles, linked by the formula, “in that day,” or “on that day,” a formula common in apocalyptic texts. What is interesting about these oracles for our purposes is the ways in which they seem to progress from a tone of Israel’s exceptionalism to an indictment and challenge on that exceptionalism before Yahweh. The first oracle in vv. 16-17 are more clearly dependent upon vv. 1-15 than the rest of the unit.³⁹ Like the preceding verses, the tone of this oracle is still judgmental in nature, and depicts the Egyptians as trembling with fear and the land of Judah as a “terror to the Egyptians.” Roberts seems to believe that this oracle may be of Isaianic authorship, as he says, “For the prophet, Judah’s security lay in trusting in Yahweh and his promises to Jerusalem and the Davidic dynasty (Isa 7:1-15; 8:1-4; 14:32). Isaiah regarded both Assyria and Egypt as hostile powers (Isa 7:18-19) whom Yahweh would eventually judge...and the Judean king had no business making treaties with either.”⁴⁰ This first oracle certainly seems to support an ideology of Israel’s exceptionalism before Yahweh, but the oracles that follow begin to challenge this notion.

The second oracle in v. 18 speaks of five cities in the land of Egypt that “speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts” (Isa. 19:18). It is unclear whether the oracle refers to Jews who have settled in Egypt and continue to speak the Hebrew language and worship Yahweh, or if it is implying Egyptian converts to Yahwism.⁴¹ The oracle begins to break down the dividing walls between Israel and Egypt, an ancient enemy of the Israelite peoples.

³⁹ J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah: A Commentary*, Hermeneia--a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015). 262.

⁴⁰ Roberts, 263.

⁴¹ See Childs, *Isaiah*, 144; Roberts and Machinist, *First Isaiah*, 263.

The third oracle spans vv. 19-22 and begins to challenge Israel's ideology of exceptionalism further. V. 19 describes "an altar to the Lord in the center of the land of Egypt", a shocking notion when considered in light of the centralized worship of Israel. This oracle also describes the Egyptians crying out to the Lord, reminiscent of Israel's cry while under Egyptian bondage and oppression, and the response from Yahweh of hearing their cries and sending a savior. As Kaiser notes, the oracle of vv. 19-22 "seems to understand the plan of Yahweh differently from v. 17, as a plan of salvation which also includes the Egyptians."⁴² He goes on to say, "For the present apocalyptic writer, Yahweh is the God who listens not only to the lamentations of the people but also to those addressed to him by other nations."⁴³ Yahweh hears and responds not only to the cries of the people of Israel, but also to those of the Egyptians, Israel's oppressors. Childs notes, "What is remarkable is that now the God of Israel will respond to Egypt's cry of deliverance and will send a savior to rescue as he once had done for the oppressed Israelite slaves."⁴⁴ This third oracle begins to challenge Israel's notion of exceptionalism.

The fourth oracle in v. 23 brings another one of Israel's enemies, the Assyrians, into the conversation, and may suggest at the very least active trade relations between the Assyrians and the Egyptians.⁴⁵ It is in the fifth oracle in vv. 24-25, however, that the exceptionalism of Israel comes under full attack:

On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage. (Isaiah 19:24-25).

⁴² Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*, 108.

⁴³ Kaiser, 109.

⁴⁴ Childs, *Isaiah*, 144.

⁴⁵ Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 263-64.

Roberts notes that “The image of Israel as a virtual equivalent to Egypt and Assyria, like them a blessing in the midst of the earth, is quite striking, and the statement that Yahweh of Hosts will bless them all saying, ‘Blessed be my people Egypt, and the work of my hands Assyria, and my inheritance Israel,’ is unparalleled elsewhere in Scripture.”⁴⁶ These verses are striking for obvious reasons. The designation “my people” from Yahweh has, to this point, been reserved for Israel. For Yahweh to refer to Egypt as “my people” is itself a challenge to any notion of Israel’s exceptionalism before Yahweh. It is even more striking when we realize that both Egypt and Assyria, as Childs notes, “traditionally represented Israel’s archenemies and source of oppression,”⁴⁷ and yet they are here the recipients of Yahweh’s divine blessing. “Thus,” says Kaiser, “God’s blessing no longer applies solely to Israel; the nations are also blessed through Israel.”⁴⁸ The implication, as Kaiser again notes, is that “There is no longer a narrowly exclusive hope of salvation which can conceive of the freedom and salvation of Israel *only* when other nations are enslaved and put to shame.”⁴⁹ As in Amos 9:7, the *onlyness* of Israel in the eyes of Yahweh and in Yahweh’s plan of salvation is challenged.

Just as Yahweh’s role in Israel’s exodus is not challenged in Amos 9:7, so the history of Israel as the original recipient of God’s revelation and blessing is not challenged in Isaiah 19:24-25.⁵⁰ What is challenged, however, is the uniqueness of Israel within that blessing. From the very beginning, God’s blessing of Abraham and the Israelite peoples was a call to be a blessing to *all*

⁴⁶ Roberts, 264.

⁴⁷ Childs, *Isaiah*, 145.

⁴⁸ Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*, 111.

⁴⁹ Kaiser, 110. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁰ See Kaiser, 110.

families and *all* nations of the earth, not solely one people or one nation.⁵¹ Any ideology that seeks to promote the exceptionalism of one peoples or nation *vis-à-vis* any other runs contrary to God’s purposes in blessing Israel to be a blessing to the world. Both Amos 9:7 and Isaiah 19:24-25 reveal how the prophetic tradition challenges the notion of Israel’s exceptionalism, and is a reminder that any notion of American nationalism and exceptionalism has been and continues to be challenged by this same prophetic tradition.

MLK’s Prophetic Challenge

On July 12, 1953 Martin Luther King Jr. preached a short, but important sermon in Atlanta, GA entitled “The False God of Nationalism.” He begins by noting that this false god of nationalism has been produced by a long history that has shaped its existence. King, not one to pull punches, says, “Our age is one in which men have turned away from the eternal God of the universe, and decided to worship at the shrine of the god of nationalism.”⁵² King’s words are reminiscent of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, speaking truth and calling God’s people back to the worship of the One True God rather than the worship of false gods, such as the false god of nationalism. He goes on to name the “prophets and preachers” of this “new religion” as he says, “In Germany it was preached by Hitler. In Italy it was preached by Mussolini. And in America it is being preached by the McCarthy's and the Jenners, the advocates of white supremacy, and the America first movements.”⁵³ It is not insignificant for our own time that “America first” was a common slogan during Donald Trump’s presidential campaign and remains a priority for his

⁵¹ See Genesis 12:1-3.

⁵² Martin Luther Jr. King et al., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Volume VI, Advocate of the Social Gospel, September 1948-March 1963* (Berkeley, California ; University of California Press, 2007), 132.

⁵³ King, 132.

administration. President Trump said in his inaugural speech from the steps of the capital building, “From this day forward, it’s going to be only America first.”⁵⁴

Dr. King continues, “One cannot worship this false god of nationalism and the God of Christianity at the same time.”⁵⁵ This false god of nationalism, the “America first” religion, says King, is incompatible with the God of Christianity. It is incompatible with the God who views the Israelites and Ethiopians with equity, who delivered the Philistines and Arameans from their bondage. It is incompatible with the God who blesses Egypt and Assyria along with Israel. It is incompatible, King says, with “the God in whom there is no east nor west.”⁵⁶

Martin Luther King Jr. walked in the prophetic tradition of Amos and Isaiah and died for doing so. He ended his sermon in 1953 with these words: “Today we need prophetic voices willing to cry out against the false god of nationalism...Against the claims of the false god of nationalism we must affirm the supremacy of the eternal God of the universe, the Father of all mankind. This is the God we must worship if we are to sail through the tempestuous seas of confusion to the harbor of peace.”⁵⁷ May we, along with Dr. King, Amos, and Isaiah walk and speak prophetically against the false god of nationalism and exceptionalism that is so prevalent in our world and in our country today.

⁵⁴ David E. Sanger, “With Echoes of the ’30s, Trump Resurrects a Hard-Line Vision of ‘America First’ - The New York Times,” accessed December 5, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/20/us/politics/trump-resurrects-dark-definition-of-america-first-vision.html?module=inline>.

⁵⁵ King, *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Volume VI, Advocate of the Social Gospel, September 1948-March 1963*, 133.

⁵⁶ King, 133.

⁵⁷ King, 133.

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