CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Christianity has viewed itself from the very beginning of its existence as the 'New Israel', and so Christians from non-Jewish origins considered themselves at an early stage as members of the covenant of Israel according to the spirit and not the flesh. This 'New Israel' was founded on a universal religious ideal which stood in strict contrast to the Old Testament paradigm of a single holy nation. However, the Old Testament model of a chosen people did not vanish; rather, it was transferred to the New Israel and influenced diverse ethnic and religious groups within the Christian sphere throughout history.

This book seeks to explore the ways in which the Old Testament paradigm of the Elect Nation influenced Byzantium and its history. It endeavours to accomplish two objectives. The first is to argue that the biblical model of the ancient Israelites was a prominent factor in the evolution of Roman-Byzantine national awareness between the seventh and thirteenth centuries. Having established this conceptual basis, the research will pose several key questions related to the political sphere: How did the biblical model affect Byzantine political culture? Who used it, to what end, and for which audience was it intended? Did the biblical model have any influence on Byzantine foreign relations? What were the main changes in the use of the biblical model during this period regarding its content, the context of its use, the political identity of the user and the social character of his audience?

The Question of Byzantine Nationalism in Modern Research and the Approach of the Present Research

Modern historical research contains various attitudes towards Byzantine identities and the nature of its collective awareness. The spectrum moves from

1 Romans 9:2–8; 2:25–29; Ephesians 2:11–22.
2 For the terms Elect Nation and The Old Testament Paradigm of the Elect Nation in the context of the present research see pp. 7–8; for further discussion see the ‘Theoretical Background’ chapter.
3 For the use of the terms nation, national awareness and national identity in the Medieval Byzantine context see the following discussion, pp. 2–5.
Obolensky’s perspective of a Pan-Orthodox East-European commonwealth, to more recent assertions of the existence of a Byzantine ‘Roman’ nationality based upon the Greek language, Orthodoxy and a Roman historical awareness. Kaldellis, the most outright adherent of this view, sees Byzantium as a ‘nation-state’.

Mainstream modern research links Byzantine ‘national’ awareness with the shift of the term ‘Hellenism’ and its derivatives (mainly the adjective ‘Hellene’) after 1204, from the realm of a classical elitist discourse to the realm of national discourse, and asserts that Byzantine nationality, based on the idea of a Greek ethnos, came into a distinct existence only at this point, mainly within the Nicaean and later the Palaeologan court circles.

When historical research ties manifestations of Byzantine ‘Hellenism’ with the emergence of a recognizable modern nationality, the Greek one, it falls into the trap of terminology and its misuse by modern nations, whose aim is to enhance their own historical claims. This, in my opinion, is due to two reasons. First, collective awareness cannot be sufficiently understood and traced by the analysis of adjectives (‘Roman’, ‘Hellene’) and their use. Too many studies have made the use of these adjectives the main focus of their interest. Collective identity is an elaborate structure constructed from elements such as

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5 For the use of the term ‘Nation’ regarding pre nineteenth-century entities, see below a discussion of Adrian Hastings’ analysis of the properties of a nation. See also the discussion of terminology.