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A Biblical Theology of Nationhood: Some Light on the Scottish Independence Question

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INTRODUCTION

Let me be absolutely clear on one thing from the outset: *the Bible does not speak directly to the question of Scottish independence.* There is no conclusive biblical argument in favour of Scotland becoming an independent nation nor is there any theologically-authoritative standard that conclusively justifies remaining a part of the United Kingdom. To that end, this is an issue where Christians will, quite legitimately, continue to take differing views. A temptation for all who hold the Bible as an authoritative standard for life and practice is that we make it speak in ways which it does not. As Vanhoozer comments:

> [T]he text is at the mercy of the reader's whim... Readers always seem to have the last word. They can ignore it, skip over, read into, and at the limit, close texts. Texts may look intelligent, says Socrates, but when you ask them a question they either preserve a solemn silence or else 'always say the same thing'... [W]hat is to stop the reader from projecting his or her own voice into the mute text? Can the text ever have an independent say?[2]

You may well ask, then, what is the point of such an article? If Vanhoozer is correct, and he clearly is, why ask the Bible a question that it patently does not seek to answer ('solemn silence')? Equally, what stops this article

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1 I include my academic affiliation here as a matter of normal practice. However, I should be clear that—as always—the views expressed in any of my published writings are mine and mine alone.

2 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), 164. The pun in the last line of this quote is, of course, entirely unintended!

from becoming nothing more than a personal rant ('always saying the same thing')?[3]

The essence of this reflective paper is rooted in the belief that, even where the Bible does not speak *directly* to an issue, it can still communicate formative general principles that may be applied to a particular setting. Such is the tone of this paper (formative observations from Scripture) and, therefore, it is important to begin with a statement of methodological clarity. The points raised below reflect those general principles that strike me as being relevant to any consideration of the topic at hand. Therefore, this list is far from exhaustive and is inevitably 'tainted' by all of the personal presuppositions and perspectives that shape who I am.[4] Obviously, another person tasked with the same aim, would most likely arrive at a different set of formative principles that, in turn, could lead the reader to an entirely different set of conclusions. So, in short, this is my honest attempt to weigh up and consider some principles from Scripture that seem to me to be relevant for Christians considering how they will vote in 2014.

In considering this theme at the request of SETS, four principles strike me as being of marked significance for the Christian considering the question of Scotland's potential independence from the UK:

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[3] At this point it is probably worth mentioning that this article is the written form of a presentation made to the annual conference of the Scottish Evangelical Theological Society in 2012. The topic was suggested by the conference organisers and that request is the genesis of these deliberations.

[4] Full disclosure would involve a biography that would surely bore even family members to tears. However, some aspects of the influences that have shaped me (and thus this paper) include the following. (1) I am Scottish, born and bred. (2) I have lived 'overseas' for many years (Poland, USA and England). (3) I am not affiliated in any way to any particular political party, although those who know me will be quick to point out a generic centre-left leaning worldview. (4) I am a scholar of the Bible and, particularly, the Old Testament and hold a high view of the authority of Scripture (whatever that may mean!). I recognise that these factors of my life experience have all shaped the reflections of this paper. I equally recognise that I am a product of a secularised, Western education and that I am shaped by these influences. However, listing formative texts, thinkers, and intellectual influences would be a task that exceeds the bounds of my self-awareness. I should add that I am acutely aware of the thankless nature of my task! I suspect that those on both sides of this debate will conclude that I do not go far enough in one direction or the other. This is not the appropriate setting for a Luther-like 'Here I stand—I can do no other!', however, I can say that this is the extent of my present thinking on the matter.

1. The direction of the biblical narrative is towards inclusion;

2. Our 'choice' of earthly kingdom should always be the one that best reflects the heavenly Kingdom of which we are a part;

3. There is no place for cultural arrogance in the Kingdom of God;

4. All political and social choices should be shaped by missional thinking.

As mentioned above, this list is not exhaustive but it seems that these are principles that should be formative in the shaping of our political perspectives with regard to the independence question. Let me unpack these in some more detail.

1. THE DIRECTION OF THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE IS TOWARDS INCLUSION

There is an implicit narrative in the text of Scripture that moves from the particular to the universal and points to an overarching theme of expansion and inclusion in the Bible. This is seen first in the Edenic command to fill the earth (Gen. 1:28) and continues in the metanarrative of salvation history that begins with the call of Abram (Gen. 12:1–3) and continues through to the Gospels, Acts and Revelation. If, as is often argued, we are to view the Garden of Eden as a type of sanctuary, then the call to 'fill the earth' is actually a call to expand that space of encounter with God throughout the whole earth by way of the spreading presence of God's people.[5] This theme points towards expansion and, by dint of geographic spread, the inclusion of others. Adam and Eve are privy to special relationship with God in that place and their call is to extend that Edenic-type space for the inclusion of more people in this type of relationship with God.[6]

That which is hinted at in Genesis 1 becomes much more explicit in Genesis 12:1–3. Abram and his family are chosen by God and tasked with

[5] See, for example, William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Biblical and Theological Classics Library 12; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), and Lifsa Schachter, 'The Garden of Eden as God's First Sanctuary', *JBQ* 41, no. 2 (2013), 73–77.

[6] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2006), p. 415; Gregory K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (New Studies in Biblical Theology; Nottingham: IVP, 2004).

bringing blessing to 'all the families of the earth'. Again the imagery is of the choice of the particular with the ultimate intent of incorporating a much broader community of people. Abram, the father of Israel, is called into covenant relationship with God, but for the explicit purpose of bringing blessing not just to himself and his people but also to 'all the families of the earth'. The theme is expansive and, from the outset of the redemptive history that begins here, it points to the breaking down of barriers of geography, race, language and social setting.[7]

This passage is relevant to our discussion in two ways. Firstly, diversity of culture is acknowledged here and, clearly, that diversity is valued by God (as reflected in his desire to bring blessing to the smallest of people groups throughout the earth). Secondly, the passage begins a narrative that points to the inclusion of others into an ever-expanding community of God's people. Clearly, the latter in no way denies the former. However, as this theme is developed throughout the Scriptures it is apparent that questions of national and cultural identity, while not subsumed into a singular, monolithic 'Christian' identity, are deemed secondary in importance compared to belonging to the community of God's people.

The inclusive nature of the salvation-history metanarrative becomes a prominent theme in the Old Testament and it is one that challenges many of the insular and separatist tendencies of Israel as a nation. The call of Abraham was intended for the blessing of the nations (Gen. 12:1–3). Equally, the call and formation of Israel also had a more universal purpose designed to impact all of humanity. Israel's foundational encounter with Yahweh at the foot of Mount Sinai makes this clear (Ex. 19:5-6). Israel is both 'treasured possession' (*segullah*) and also 'kingdom of priests' (*mamleket kohanim*). The first descriptive points to Israel's special relationship with God and the second indicates the nation's intermediary function between God and all the other peoples of the earth. The 'sons of Israel' have become a nation but they are reminded from the outset of the inherent value of all peoples in God's eyes and of their function in drawing other peoples into the worshipping community.

As this story develops it becomes apparent that Israel singularly failed in this task. Israel came to view their status as 'treasured possession' with an attitude of national, ethnic and cultural elitism. Their status as the covenant people separated them from every (in their eyes, lesser) nation on earth. Israel's national identity was never meant to be viewed as a cause for pride and many texts of the Prophets and Writings subvert all such

[7] The use of 'families of the earth' points to a blessing that reaches every layer of society.

ideologies.[8] One of the clearest examples of this is found in Psalm 87, where it is declared that:

> [4] Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon;
> behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Cush—
> 'This one was born there,' they say.
> [5] And of Zion it shall be said, 'This one and that one were born in her';
> for the Most High himself will establish her.
> [6] The LORD records as he registers the peoples,
> 'This one was born there.' (ESV)

The poem points to a process of inclusion of peoples within the covenant community and a declaration of their belonging together. The peoples do not stop being from Egypt (Rahab), Babylon, Philistia (etc.) but their primary identity ('This one was born there') is as members of the covenant community through the divine declaration that they too are children of Zion.[9] Christopher J. H. Wright comments:

> The most radical part of the OT vision is yet to come. The nations will come to share the very identity of Israel itself. God's people will burst the boundaries of ethnicity and geography. The very name 'Israel' will be extended and redefined.[10]

This expansive theme finds its fulfilment in the book of Acts and the history of the church, with peoples from all sorts of national and ethnic backgrounds ultimately joining the community of faith and being declared 'children of Zion'.[11]

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8 This critique is played out quite clearly, for example, in Isaiah 1–2.

9 John Goldingay, *Psalms: Volume 2, Psalms 42-89* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, 2; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), pp. 640–1.

10 Wright, *The Mission of God*, p. 489.

11 The theme of expansion and inclusion is, of course, continued very clearly throughout the whole of the New Testament. This is seen, for example, in Matthew's Great Commission where 'all nations' are to be discipled; Luke's inclusion theme celebrates the removal of all barriers (social status, ethnicity, gender, nationality, etc.); the great gospel expansions of Acts ('Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, ends of the earth',Acts 1:8) highlight both geographic spread and the inclusion of peoples; and the presence of nations and kings of the nations in the New Jerusalem of John's Revelation (Rev. 21–22) points to the ultimate fulfilment of Yahweh's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12. There can be no doubt that the expansions that were foretold in the Old Testament begin to find their fruition in the New.

This deliberation speaks to the question at hand in two ways. Firstly, God delights in the peoples and nations of the world.[12] Therefore, one might argue that Scottish identity is also valuable in the eyes of God and that this identity may best be marked by political independence. Secondly, however, it must be acknowledged that the unmistakeable trajectory of the central narrative of Scripture seems to point to the *removal of barriers* created by nationality, race or culture.[13] To that end, any movement towards independence must be carefully assessed by Christians in order to ensure that their political intentions are in no way motivated by the type of national, ethnic and cultural arrogance that is so roundly condemned in both the Old and New Testaments. If the clear trajectory of salvation history is towards the removal of such barriers then, surely, the covenant community should only ever set about recreating barriers if they have a very clear justification for doing so.

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[12] Some would make much of the (apparently obvious) intertextual connection between the Babel account of Genesis 11 and Pentecost in Acts 2. The correlation is taken to show that God delights in cultural diversity and that the negative effects of the origins of nationhood at Babel are redeemed at Pentecost, thus (somehow) redeeming national identity and justifying separatism/political independence. While agreeing completely with the general premise—God does delight in cultural and national diversity and we see this elsewhere in Scripture (e.g. Ps. 87, Rev. 5)—the conclusion falls for one clear reason. *In Luke's mind, 'the nations' are not really present at Pentecost.*

Despite the geographic spread represented and the multilingual origins of those present in Jerusalem at Pentecost, in Luke's narrative we are dealing with (no more than) the spread of the gospel in Jerusalem. We are not even dealing with Judea yet, let alone the nations. Acts 1:8 functions as a structural marker for the development of Luke's narrative in Acts and the gospel does not reach 'the nations' until Peter visits the house of Cornelius in Acts 10 and Barnabas and Saul are set apart to reach the nations in Acts 13. The Pentecost account speaks to the beginnings of the redemption *of the Jewish people* (Acts 2:5, 11) in all of the places to which they had spread. However, by and large, Luke is here writing about a single ethnic grouping, Israel (although converts to Judaism are included and they would not be ethnically Jewish). There is a universalising element to the Pentecost account but it reflects geographic spread rather than the spread of the gospel to the nations. That being the case, it is difficult to see how the Babel/Pentecost connection provides strong biblical warrant for nationalism (even taking the best sense of that word).

[13] Is this not the background to two of the Apostle Paul's most profound and explicit deliberations on the Gospel message, namely, the letters to the Romans and the Galatians?

2. THE HEAVENLY KINGDOM AND HUMAN KINGDOMS

Every time we pray, 'Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven', we are, of course, praying for radical societal transformation. We may not be aware of that as we murmur our way through the Lord's prayer, but we are. For God's will to be done *on earth as it is in heaven* means that the world in which we live would have to be drastically altered. Many aspects of our society fall far short of the divine will as it is perfectly played out in heaven. Injustice and corruption are rife in our world and, societally, we fall far short of God's holy will and purpose on all sorts of levels. So the Lord's prayer is actually a heart cry for radical transformation in our human, earthly realm.

The Christian faces daily a sense of duality in terms of kingdom allegiance. We are, clearly, citizens of a heavenly realm and our ultimate sense of belonging lies elsewhere than here (John 15:18*ff*.; Phil. 3:20; 1 Pet. 1:17, 2:9-10, etc.). Yet, at the same time, the community of faith is charged with the task of *fully engaging* with the world around about us (John 17:6-20; Matt. 5:13-16; Matt. 6:10 etc.). The expectation of just society is, perhaps most clearly explicated in the lengthy central section of the book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 12–26 the ten commandments are unpacked and applied in detail to the societal realm for the time when Israel would become a 'landed' people.[14] Clearly, the central concern of this passage is the just running of Israelite society. Deuteronomy makes it clear that the social order of the nation should always reflect the priorities of God that were given in the 'ten words'. McConville comments:

> In this covenant, religion and politics are one. Israel fulfils its political obligations by virtue of its loyalty to Yahweh, which has an integral social dimension. There is not only a theology of the gift of the land, but a vision, sketched in laws, of how the land should be held. The laws bring the concept of the rule of Yahweh down to particular instances.[15]

While many of the laws of Deuteronomy 12–26 are specific to the civil and ceremonial setting of Israel, Deuteronomy continues to be a formative text for the community of faith. Although many of the details of these laws are not *directly* relevant to contemporary Scotland, the overarching idea of a justly ordered society, that is shaped by the priorities of God,

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[14] Georg Braulik, 'The Sequence of the Laws in Deuteronomy 12–26 and in the Decalogue,' in *A Song of Power and the Power of Song: Essays on the Book of Deuteronomy*, ed. by D. L. Christensen (SBTS vol. 3; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1993), pp. 313–35.

[15] J. Gordon McConville, *Deuteronomy* (AOTC; Leicester: Apollos, 2002), p. 34.

should still characterise the Christian community's societal expectations today.[16] To that end—even in this secularised world, where the voice of Scripture is far removed from the public realm—Christians should be concerned about, and campaigning for, a just society that is reflective of biblical ethics and norms.

It appears to me that a proper concern for civil society should be a central driver in the Christian's thinking when it comes to the independence vote next year. The reality is that our political structures markedly influence our social practice. To that end, *one of* the central drivers in any decision for or against Scottish independence should be a concern for Kingdom priorities to be reflected in the earthly realm. The thinking Christian must, of course, weigh political, economic and cultural factors but only alongside this idea of just society. One political forum may better reflect the priorities of God in daily reality than another and this should be carefully considered as part of the decision-making process.[17]

3. NO PLACE FOR CULTURAL ARROGANCE

In many ways this is a subset of the first point made above but it is a question that must be considered explicitly as part of the independence debate. It is a clear and undeniable principle of the Bible—both Old and New Testaments—that there is no place for cultural arrogance in the divine economy.

Deuteronomy 7 and 9 make it absolutely clear that Israel was not chosen because it was bigger, better or more righteous than the other nations (Deut. 7:6–8; 9:4–6). Israel was chosen out of love for their forefathers and for the purpose of outworking Yahweh's glory among the nations. The doctrine of election offers absolutely no scope for any sense of superiority.[18] The same message is later relayed to the people by way of the Prophets. Isaiah 1 and Jeremiah 7, for example, make it clear that Israel has no grounds to boast because of the badges of covenant or the trappings of election. Land, city, temple and king are all gifts of God's

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16 S. Dean McBride, 'Polity of the Covenant People: The Book of Deuteronomy,' in *A Song of Power and the Power of Song: Essays on the Book of Deuteronomy*, ed. by D. L. Christensen (SBTS, 3; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1993), pp. 62–77.

17 It may of course be a reality, however, that the influence of the secular in the political realm is such that neither Westminster nor Holyrood offer a better take on 'just society', in which case other considerations will properly shape any decision made.

18 Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy* (NIBCOT; Peabody, MA/Carlisle: Hendrickson/Paternoster, 1996), pp. 115–16.

hesed and none of them provides any grounds for an attitude of cultural superiority.[19]

If anything, the gospel's abhorrence of cultural arrogance is heightened in the New Testament. In many of Paul's writings to the embryonic Church attitudes of cultural superiority are the targets that are held firmly in his sights. There is a sense in which unity across ethnic, national and cultural divides comes to be seen as an emblematic proof of the outworking of the power of the gospel message in human reality. Perhaps the clearest example of this type of challenge is seen in Paul's confrontation of Peter in Galatians 2–3. Peter is rebuked for allowing cultural separation to creep back into his social praxis within the church setting. The theme statement of this passage is, of course: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28). Romans 2 deals with similar issues: Jewish Christians have no grounds to boast because of their possession of the Torah or because they were the original recipients of the covenant and neither do Gentile Christians have cause to boast because they were chosen and engrafted into the covenant community at a time when Israel had largely turned its back on the gospel message. Whatever our human status or situation might be, clearly, there is never any biblical warrant for an attitude of superiority. Equally, unity across any and all human and societal divides is the clear concomitant effect of the gospel. Since unity is central to the effects of the gospel, an attitude that seeks to create or re-create barriers is, in some sense, anti-gospel.

An important *caveat* needs to be applied, of course. The NT passages mentioned above address *the unity of the Christian community and not political union*. Nations are notional entities and, in many parts of the world, there has been a constant sense of flux in terms of nationhood and national identity (e.g. the many changes in Central and Eastern Europe over the last century). Therefore, the process of breaking down all barriers *within the church* can and should continue regardless of Scotland's political status. So we cannot apply these passages in a simplistic manner and simply assume that the Union is, in some sense, more biblical than the dissolution of the Union would be. That is not my point. The United Kingdom is no more inherently commendable than an independent Scotland would be—the Bible is entirely neutral with regard to either entity.

However, the line of application that is relevant to our discussion is the question of cultural arrogance. Clearly, the Bible is focussed on the breaking down of all barriers and the creation of a new, transnational,

[19] See, for example, J. Andrew Dearman, *Jeremiah, Lamentations* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), pp. 95–104.

multi-ethnic, intergenerational, community of mixed gender and social status. This is what the church is meant to be and this will be both a light and a challenge to any and all who would observe the inner workings of the church within this world. Therefore, the practice of separation and the recreation of barriers is something that should be somewhat counter-cultural to the Christian community. As mentioned above, there may be justifiable reason to do so in terms of the formation of a just society. However, any Christian approaching this topic (from either side of the debate) must ensure that their motivations are correct and that there is no hint of cultural or national superiority in the desire for independence or maintaining the union.[20]

4. MISSIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

The fourth, and final, premise that strikes me as being pertinent to this discussion is the consideration of the missional implications of either choice in the independence referendum. Mission is central to the life of the church because it is derived from the very nature of God. As a people we participate in the *missio Dei*, the mission of God.[21] Our participation in outreach reflects the fact that God reaches out to humanity through creation, revelation and, most clearly, through Jesus. Mission should always be a primary concern in every significant decision that the thinking Christian makes. It should be but, unfortunately, all too often this is not the case.

The essential question for the Church in Scotland is this: will an independent Scotland offer better opportunities for outreach than those that exist at present? Or, conversely, will our ability to influence our land with the gospel be curtailed in an independent Scotland? Or, the middle ground, will everything remain more or less the same whether we stay or go? Each individual will answer that question from their own reading of the policies coming out of both Holyrood and Westminster and from the statements of the political leaders in each parliament. It may be impossible to come to a definitive conclusion but it is vital that missional concerns should shape our thinking as a body of God's people in our decision making processes.

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[20] So the nationalist must ask him/herself the question: Is there any sense in which I am in favour of independence simply because I don't like the English? If so, then the motivation is wrong. Equally, the unionist should never be motivated by any sense of superiority based on their Britishness. Cultural arrogance in either direction is patently unbiblical and anti-gospel.

[21] Wright, *The Mission of God*, pp. 75–188.

The centrality of mission to the biblical narrative is clear and the concept of mission seems both to affirm and to minimise the importance of national identity. The discrete voices of both Old and New Testaments create a dual picture of the missional task. The OT seems to describe mission as a largely 'centripetal' entity. Israel is to live such an attractive life in accordance with the Torah that it draws the nations in to the core to find out more about this Yahweh who is so close to his people and who rules his people so justly (Deut. 4:5-8).[22] This idea of mission as attraction is affirmed by the images of the inpouring of the nations to Zion in the Prophets, in texts like Isaiah 2, Micah 4, and Zephaniah 3. As indicated in the call of Abraham, God's heart is for all nations and his intent in calling a specific nation to himself was always that the other nations should be reached through that process. In this sense the identity of every people group is affirmed as important in God's eyes. Scots are important to God—as are the English and Somalis and Syrians and every other people group on this earth. So, on one level, mission affirms nations as significant in God's economy.

However, the flip side of the mission coin is the centrifugal mission that is so significant in the New Testament. Centrifugal mission tends to be the way in which mission is classically understood—going and making disciples. These are two aspects of the same entity and each are vital to the contemporary mission efforts of the Church. The interesting thing about centrifugal mission is that national identity seems to be downplayed amongst the transnational spread of the gospel message. Acts 11 is a good example of this tendency. We read there that 'men of Cyprus and Cyrene' effectively planted the church in Antioch. They shared a common language with the Antiochian people and so we have North Africans and Cypriots planting a church in Syria. National identity does not disappear—they remained 'men of Cyprus and Cyrene'—but certainly national identity is secondary to the task of mission.

This seems to be generally reflective of the way in which the New Testament approaches the idea of nations and nationhood. Clearly, God delights in the diversity of multiple nations and people groups and languages, as is seen so beautifully in the book of Revelation (Rev. 5, for example) and yet national identity is of secondary importance to the

[22] The missional implications of Israel's failure to act as a witness to the surrounding nations by way of obedience to the Torah (centripetal mission) is highlighted especially in Ezekiel's prophecy. It is interesting to note the repeated theme of this prophecy, namely, that Yahweh's name was 'profaned among the nations' because Israel failed to live a Word-based, attractive, community life together (see Ezekiel 20 and 36, in particular). This again emphasises the significance of mission to Israel's identity and purpose.

spread of the gospel of Jesus and the oneness of the people of God. From my experience in Scotland and abroad, there seems to me to be a real sense in which nationality is an increasing irrelevance for missionally-minded communities of faith. Again, in and of itself, this observation neither affirms nor denies the appropriateness or otherwise of Scottish independence. However, such observations should at least shape our thinking as Christians. The advancement of the Kingdom of God must be the most important motivation in every decision that we make, including the way in which we vote in next year's referendum.

CONCLUSION

So we end as we began, with the reminder that the Bible does not address the question of Scottish independence. Nations simply 'are' in the Bible. They are a brute fact—neither specially affirmed nor critiqued. The important thing for our purposes is that Christians should think biblically about the decision to be made next September, rather than allowing our choice in this vital decision to be shaped by other priorities and agendas. The observations of this paper are simply that: observations. These are no more than personal reflections derived from my hearing of the Bible's voice. I fully appreciate that others will read the Scriptures differently and will want to formulate an alternate set of guiding principles in their approach to the question of Scottish independence. I gladly leave them to do so. Nonetheless, it is my hope that these brief comments will in some way, however modestly, help the Christian community in Scotland to reflect biblically on the decision at hand.