

# The Table of Nations: The “Also Peoples”<sup>1</sup>

Kenneth A. Mathews

**Kenneth A. Mathews** is Professor of Divinity at Beeson Divinity School, Samford University. Dr. Mathews is also adjunct professor of Old Testament at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has written numerous articles and two books, including volume one on Genesis in the New American Commentary series. He is now working on volume two.

## Introduction

On November 7, 2000 Alabama’s citizens cast their votes for the forty-third President of the United States, electing George W. Bush the first president of the new century. That vote, however, was not the only significant ballot, and maybe not the most important, made by the people of Alabama. Although only symbolic in action, the passage of Amendment 2 to the Alabama Constitution of 1901 repealed the obsolete ban of interracial marriage, signaling the end of another vestige of legal racial segregation that had marked every aspect of life in the deep South for three centuries.<sup>2</sup> The law was not enforceable, since it contradicted the fourteenth amendment of the United States Constitution, but the Alabama Constitution remained the last state constitution to have this prohibition on the books.

During the era of racial slavery, apologists for the status quo often appealed to the Bible, including Genesis, as their religious and cultural authority. Unfortunately, they misunderstand Genesis 10:1-32, popularly known as the “Table of Nations.” Also, the prelude to the Table of Nations (9:20-29), describing Noah’s curse against his grandson Canaan and his blessing on Shem, became a perverted commentary on the inferior status of the black African peoples, “the lowest of slaves shall he [Canaan] be” (9:25), and their descendants. That the curse meant Ham’s descendants were inferior as a race and forever stigmatized by dark skin color was an interpretation known as

early as Jewish midrash: “Ham and a dog had sexual relations in the ark. Therefore Ham came forth dusky, and the dog, for his part, has sexual relations in public” (*Gen. Rab.* 36.5). F. A. Ross (1796-1883) argued in his *Slavery Ordained of God* (1857) that there was an inherent correlation between the geographical distribution of the races and their relative cultural standing (Gen 10:1-32). By coupling his interpretation of Genesis and A. H. Guyot’s *Earth and Man* (1849), in which Guyot sought to explain a people’s physical environment and their social and moral development, Ross contended that the peoples south of the equator were ethnically inferior to those located in Asia (Shem) and Europe (Japheth). The topography itself conveys the superior features of the Europeans: “That Europe, indented by the sea on every side, with its varied scenery, and climate, and Northern influences makes the varied intellect, the versatile power and life and action, of the masterman of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

Racial segregationists during the civil rights movement of the twentieth century often appealed to Acts 17:26, which relies on the Table of Nations, when asserting the permanent separation of the races: “From one man he [God] made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.” Christian interpreters who advocated segregation maintained that the *true* unity that all Christians have is their spiritual oneness

in Christ, but racial amalgamation contradicted the ordinance of God that established the separation of the races.<sup>4</sup> By neglecting this creation ordinance, racial integration opposed the wisdom of Providence.

Although the vast majority of interpreters today reject bizarre racial interpretations of passages (e.g., Gen 4:11; 9:25; 10:1-32), occasionally a hint emerges that in biblical times there were pure racial entities, especially the Israelites. As the argument goes, the Jews, by maintaining a pure race, preserved a pure religion. In this essay we will show that ancient peoples were no more pure in race than modern communities and that race as commonly defined today was not of special interest to ancient peoples, nor to the Hebrews. Also, we will examine why the Bible prohibits some kinds of integration between the Hebrews and outsiders, such as intermarriage. Finally, we will comment on the inclusiveness of God's redemptive plan for the ages as manifested by Israel and the church.

### **The Table of Nations and Israel**

Since some segregationists believed the division of the nations in chs. 10-11 showed that God intended for the races to remain separate, we will look at the character of the Table of Nations. Before doing so, we will comment on the bewildering terms that contemporary discourse employs when discussing ethnic groups.<sup>5</sup>

The terms "race" and "ethnic" are often used synonymously today, but each holds a different nuance. In the case of "race" we are speaking of inherited physical traits that characterize peoples, such as cranial shape, facial features, and skin color. "Ethnic" (*ethnos*) or "people group" identifies an affiliated people who share

history, traditions, and culture, such as familial descent, language, and religious and social customs. "People" (*am*) is the common term used by God in referring to the Israelites; with the possessive forms (e.g., *'ammi*, "my people") the expression captures the personal, relational aspect of Yahweh and Israel, the covenant community (e.g., Exod 3:7).<sup>6</sup> W. von Sodom comments that Israel alone in the ancient Near East developed a word for itself that conveyed "unequivocally" that it was a people.<sup>7</sup> "Israel" understood itself as a people identified and bound by their devotion to God, not foremostly by territory, language, or even common derivation. They primarily perceived a "nation" (*goy*) as a political term, describing a geopolitical state in a specific locale whose citizenship consists of interconnected communities.<sup>8</sup>

Peoples of the ancient Near East perceived family derivation, shared history, traditions, and customs as the primary means of distinguishing ethnic groups. "Race" as we think of it was not important for ancient peoples, including the Hebrews, and rarely appears in ancient texts or the Bible (e.g., Jer 13:23). Typically, the Hebrews, like the peoples of the ancient Near East, identified foreigners in terms of their language, locale, religion, or customs (e.g., Num 21:29; Isa 33:19; Amos 1:5).

### **The Table of Nations**

First, the Table of Nations employs an eclectic standard for establishing the relationships it describes, providing varied sorts of information, by listing "clans," "languages," "territories," and "nations" (10:5, 20, 31, 32; cf. v. 18).<sup>9</sup> Individuals' names (e.g., Nimrod [10:8], Peleg [10:25]), territorial entities (e.g., Canaan, Mizraim,

10:6), and tribes and nations (e.g., Kittim [10:4], Jebusites [10:16]) appear. "Sidon the firstborn," for example, is ambiguous, perhaps referring to a person or to the Phoenician city by the Sea (10:15,19). The expressions "father of" (*yalad*, e.g., 10:8, 13, 15) and "sons of" (*b<sup>e</sup>ne*, e.g., 10:1,2) are familial terms that may be used metaphorically to signify peoples or places affiliated by political and economic ties (cf. 1 Chr 2:51, "Salma the father of Bethlehem"). An example of a family term commonly substituted for a political tie is "daughters" (*b<sup>e</sup>not*) which describes villages that encompassed and depended on an urban center (NIV's "surrounding settlements," Num 21:25; Josh 15:45; 1 Chr 2:23; Neh 11:25).

Second, the Table of Nations exhibits a form of genealogy popular in Genesis, known as "branched" or "segmented" (e.g., Cainites, 4:17-24). The branched genealogical pattern includes the names of more than one descendant for each generation cited. The Table arranges the names into three sections according to the number of Noah's sons (9:18-19): Japheth (vv. 2-5), Ham (vv. 6-20), and Shem (vv. 21-31). The "linear" type of genealogy presents only one name per generation, e.g., the Sethites (5:1-32) and the Shemites (11:10-26).

In the case of Shem, both forms of genealogy occur, providing an illustration of each type (10:21-31; 11:10-26). The former occasion is branched in accord with the practice in Genesis of listing the non-elect offspring, e.g., the sons of Joktan (10:26-30). The second Shemite genealogy is linear, corresponding to Genesis' feature of identifying the chosen lineage by this pattern, e.g., Peleg (11:16). The two Shemite genealogies encompass the Tower of Babel account (11:1-9). The lit-

erary effect of this arrangement implies that the chosen Shemite lineage (11:10-26), resulting in the family of Abraham (11:26), is the response of divine grace to the Tower of Babel's tumult. By creating a nation with Abraham, Yahweh provided the means for blessing the nations (12:3b; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14).

Third, the collection of names is ethnogeographic in emphasis,<sup>10</sup> establishing the broad geographical domains of the groups that make up each branch. The Japhethites, peoples who were most remote to Israel's history, were primarily located in Asia Minor and Europe. Egypt, Mesopotamian locations, and parts of Arabia were Hamitic descendants, and the Shemites included parts of Mesopotamia and Arabia, and the region of Syria. The Hamite and Shemite peoples, who receive more attention in the Table, had frequent contact with the Israelites in their history. From the perspective of the Israelites emerging from the wilderness, this blueprint of the surrounding populations prepared them for their future role as a burgeoning member of the community of peoples.

Fourth, the seventy names listed in the Table are representative of all nations, not a comprehensive list (cf. 10:5, "From these [named Japhethites] the maritime peoples spread out"). The count of seventy as a multiple of seven and ten indicates completeness, suggesting that the list symbolized all nations. Although Israel's ancestor "Eber" appears in the list (10:21; 11:14-17), the absence of Israel shows that the biblical author assumed its existence and penned the Table from the standpoint of Israel (cf. 46:27; Deut 32:8).

Fifth, the chief purpose of the Table of Nations was to explain in theological terms the common origin of the nations,

all of whom were derived from Noah's three sons (9:18-19; 10:1). Noah in effect was the "new Adam" (cf. 9:20), whose sons received creation's promissory blessing anew (1:28) as humanity entered into the restored creation: "Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth'" (9:1; cf. 9:7). God did not abandon his creation purposes despite human sin and graciously continued his provision for all humanity by establishing a universal covenant (9:1-17). As in the case of the first Adam (3:6-7, 10-11), the new Adam trespassed by misusing the fruit of the land (drunkenness) and experienced the shame of nakedness, resulting in strife among his descendants (9:20-27). Yet, Noah's moral descent served only as the backdrop to the author's greater interest, recounting the curse and blessing that Noah uttered in response to his sons' contradictory behaviors. Ham injured his father's honor and impugned his parental authority by publicly ridiculing Noah's nakedness (9:22). Public nakedness was an especially shameful condition for a person in ancient cultures (cf. 2 Sam 10:4; Hab 2:15). Such an affront against one's parent ultimately transgressed the authority of Yahweh who bestowed a derived authority to parents, for the premise that underlies the first table of the Ten Words was the unrivaled supremacy of Yahweh (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16; cf. Gen 49:3-4; Deut 21:18-21). In contrast to Ham's reaction, his brothers Shem and Japheth took elaborate steps to restore their father's honor without offense (9:23). Noah based his curse and blessing on the conduct of his three sons toward his distinct authority. Precisely why the curse was directed against Ham's son Canaan instead of Ham is a recurring

dispute in the history of interpretation. The answer probably lies in the typical Hebrew mindset toward family solidarity, which assumes the son's conformity to his father's conduct (e.g., Exod 20:5-6). This expectation held true, for the licentious behavior of the Hamitic descendants of Canaan stamped their culture as one of the most deviant (e.g., Lev 18:24-30; 20:22-24; Deut 12:31; 18:9-12; 20:18).

Sixth, as the preamble to the Table of Nations, the Noahic curse and blessing (9:20-27) introduced a moral factor, a theological reading of the Table that provided Israel a moral compass when it entered the land of Canaan. Casting the Table of Nations as a theological commentary did not vitiate the historical reliability of the Table's presentation that exhibits real, complex interconnections among the nations.<sup>11</sup> By referring to this moral factor, we do not mean that the author believed that the nations had inherent moral traits. We do not find in the Pentateuch, for example, any affirmation of the inherent virtue of Israel versus "also peoples." If anything, Deuteronomy's theology of election demotes the nation, making it clear that one's behavior was not the basis for Yahweh's favor (Deut 7:1, 6-9, 17; 9:1, 4-5; 11:23). When Israel followed the immoral conduct of their neighbors, they would meet the same ends as their Canaanite predecessors (e.g., Deut 8:20; 18:9-12; 28:15, 37; cf. Lev 18:28). The measure of Israel's people was their spiritual condition before God (e.g., Deut 10:16; 30:6, 11-14). Whenever the Hebrews wrongly considered themselves insulated from moral judgment by virtue of their status, Yahweh roundly condemned the notion (e.g., Jer 7:8-17; Mal 2:9), for he did not show partiality based on ethnicity nor did he tolerate partiality (e.g., Deut 10:17):

“Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites?” declares the LORD” (Amos 9:7).

To conclude that the purpose of the Table was to prove the racial superiority of the Shemite peoples over the Hamite sadly misconstrues the intention of the passage. That the archenemies of Israel, such as Egypt, Assyria, and Canaan, appear in the Table evidences their inclusion in the divine blessing of the Noahic covenant (9:1, 17). Within the confines of the Table itself, we have discovered that there is no allusion to Israel’s superiority over the “also peoples.” The Babel incident that preceded the dissemination of the nations (11:1-9) impacted all nations who emerged from the plain of Shinar. By means of the creation of a new people (Abraham), God would secure salvation for all of the “also peoples” (12:3b; 22:18; 28:14; cf. Gal 3:8).

### “Abraham the Hebrew”

Although common usage today equates the term “Hebrew” with “Jew” (cf. Acts 6:1; 2 Cor 11:22; Phil 3:5), the use of the term in the Old Testament is complex. We have observed that according to the patriarchal promises Abraham was the nexus of the insiders, the “chosen people,” and the outsiders, the “also peoples.” His genealogy shows that he was the offspring of Mesopotamian parentage, whom we may identify anachronistically for our purposes as Gentile (non-Hebrew), and he was the father of a new people, the Hebrews. Abraham is the first person identified as a “Hebrew” (*‘ibri*) in Scripture (Gen 14:13), here by the narrator, who distinguishes him from his ally, “Mamre the Amorite.” “Eber” (*‘eber*), whose name may be the source for the term “Hebrew,” appears in the Table of

Nations as the ancestor to many Semitic speaking peoples (10:21,25), including Abraham (11:16; 1 Chr 1:18-19). The precise etymological history of the term “Hebrew” (*‘ibri*) is uncertain. If it is not simply a word play on the name Eber, making Abraham an “Eberite,” it may have been originally related to the word group ‘-b-r, meaning “to cross over (from the other side),” from which “Eber” (*‘eber*) too is possibly derived (cf. *‘eber*, “the other side,” e.g., Josh 24:3). The LXX reflects this interpretation of the name in its translation of “Abram the Hebrew” (14:13): Abram *tō peratē*, “Abram the one who crossed over,” alluding to the migration of the patriarchs.<sup>12</sup>

The term “Hebrew” in the Old Testament usually, if not always (possible exceptions, cf. Exod 21:2-11; 1 Sam 13:3, 6-7; 14:21; 29:3), refers to an ethnic group, one that can be differentiated from others by affiliation (e.g., 43:32; Exod 1:15-16, 19; 2:11). The word is typically used by non-Israelites, such as the Egyptians (e.g., 39:14, 17; Exod 1:16, 19; 2:6) and the Philistines (e.g., 1 Sam 4:6, 9; 14:11), naming members of the pre-Israelite family of Abraham or members of the nation of Israel. On some occasions, an Israelite employed the term in reference to fellow Hebrews (Exod 2:7, 13), and Joseph made use of it when identifying his homeland (e.g., “the land of the Hebrews,” 40:15). Jonah is the only person in the Old Testament who identified himself directly as a “Hebrew” (1:9), though he did so in conversation with non-Israelites and primarily in terms of Israel’s religion (“and I worship Yahweh,” 1:9). This association of the Hebrews with Yahweh is reminiscent of the appellation for Yahweh in Exodus who is frequently identified as “the God of the Hebrews” (Exod 3:18;

7:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3). “Hebrew” as a language was later equated with “Judahite,” the language of Jerusalem’s residents (2 Kgs 18:26; 2 Chr 32:18; Isa 36:11, 13). In the eschatological “day of the LORD,” the Egyptians will evidence their loyalty to Yahweh by adopting the “language of Canaan” (Isa 19:18), i.e., Hebrew (or Canaanite dialect). The apostle Paul, too, used “Hebrew” as an ethnic or language designation (2 Cor 11:22; Phil 3:5; cf. Acts 6:1).

Still, “Hebrew” (*‘ibri*) may have been a social designation at times in the Bible, not solely an ethnic one. Some biblical passages imply a social use of the term “Hebrews,” where the referents appear to be differentiated from the Israelites (e.g., 1 Sam 13:3, 6-7; 14:21; 29:3). Also, the preponderance of the term “Hebrew” occurs in those passages in Genesis 39-50 and Exodus 1-15 where the pre-Israelites are slaves (cf. Exod 21:2-11).<sup>13</sup> N. Na’aman has suggested that the biblical authors’ use of “Hebrew” shows that the word underwent a change in meaning from a social function to primarily an ethnic term.<sup>14</sup> The basis for this explanation resides in the identification of the similar-sounding word *Habiru/Apiru*, a term indicating social status. The *Habiru* are mentioned in many texts from the second millennium BC that are widely distributed among the chief urban centers of Mesopotamia, Syria, Canaan, and Egypt. They were migrants who for varied reasons, such as poverty and war, had become displaced from their birthplace, traveled to a new setting, and eventually assimilated in their new country or circumstances. The *Habiru* became resourceful as mercenary soldiers. For the most part, the *Habiru* were troublemakers for local rulers, and as a consequence the

term was often used in a derisive sense. A modern example of this is the term “minority,” which has become in some circles a pejorative expression, designating those who are deemed socially inferior.

When we consider that the incursion of the Israelites in Canaan took place generally during the same era, the similarity of the words “Hebrew” (*‘ibri*) and *Habiru*, and the disruption in Canaan that the Israelites achieved, it is tempting to equate them. There are, however, too many differences to posit that “Hebrew” referred to social status alone, especially since “Hebrew” is primarily an ethnic designation for Israelite. E. Merrill posits that the similarities between the two possibly led to some confusion by non-Israelites, such as the Philistines and Egyptians. The behavior of some Israelite figures, especially David, who led a mercenary band, contributed to this impression. Also, the evidence from the book of Samuel shows that the Philistines referred to the “Hebrews” in a demeaning way. Merrill adds that the *Habiru* may well have been assimilated into the new Israelite presence in Canaan as the Hebrews controlled much of the central highlands.<sup>15</sup> The earlier uses of “Hebrew” for Abraham and Joseph reflect some of the same social features, such as their alien status. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that “Hebrew” had an ethnic meaning on those same occasions.

In sum, “Hebrew” was primarily an ethnic designation, though it occasionally may have had social implications.

### **Israel and the “Also Peoples”**

The cumulative evidence from the Bible, ancient texts, and archaeological recoveries produce a surprising picture of the place the Hebrews occupied in their

world. The precise ethnic identity of Israel was muddled by the manifold connections the people had with their neighbors. F. Crüsemann shows how the genealogies in Genesis, when taken in their entirety, provide for a system unknown in any other genealogy attested among ancient or modern peoples.<sup>16</sup> The system includes interdependencies among individuals and whole ethnic groups, even the whole of the human family. Indeed the term “human *family*” shows the implication of the Genesis genealogies—all individuals regardless of their ethnic differences remain invariably interconnected as one united family. From the perspective of the Genesis genealogies, all are ultimately kin by virtue of one common parent, whether he is Adam or Noah.

Also, Crüsemann observes that the genealogies of Genesis possess a complex differentiation *within* groups. Although differentiation is paramount in the patriarchal narratives (e.g., Israel/Esau), important differentiation also occurs in the Table of Nations. We have observed already that an important divergence takes place between the sibling lines of Joktan and Peleg, both offspring of Eber (10:25). Although both are Shemites and Eberites, the Joktanites are not in the ancestral line leading directly to the birth of Abraham. Yet, on account of the interconnectedness provided by the genealogical system of the Table, the Joktanites and Abrahamites also had an ancestral linkage. When we consider the peoples that arose from the differentiation within the Terah clan and the Abraham family, we discover a far-reaching range of entanglements that produced some peoples closely related to Israel (e.g., Esau/Edom) and others remotely related (e.g.,

Canaanites).

Such complicated connections make the idea of “races” irrelevant from the perspective of Genesis’ genealogies. Textual evidence from the ancient Near East and the Bible indicate that people groups commonly commingled. According to K. Kamp and N. Yoffee, the traditional criteria of shared language, territory, and ecological acculturation used by anthropologists for differentiating ethnic groups, are not as reliable as once assumed, making it difficult to discern confidently ethnic identities on the basis of material remains and textual data.<sup>17</sup> Ethnoarchaeological studies conclude that in a complex society like those of the urban centers in the ancient Near East, “cultural plurality” dominated and a “pure culture” did not exist.

Though differences in language were recognized (e.g., Neh 13:24; Est 1:22), ancient societies themselves did not perceive language as the primary indicator of national identity. D. Block, in his analysis of language as a kinship factor in designating ethnic groups, found that language by itself could not serve as a certain pointer toward ethnic divergence.<sup>18</sup> Genesis 31:45-49 exhibits different languages spoken by Laban (Aramaic) and Jacob (Hebrew), although they descended from brothers (Abraham, Nahor) who only two generations earlier had migrated into the Paddan Aram region (11:26-32; 22:23; 24:15; 28:2, 5). Geography more than kinship in this case dictated the language adopted by each branch of the family. The modern term “Semitic” cannot refer to ethnicity but only to the languages of the Semitic-speaking peoples.<sup>19</sup> The Elamites who were not a Semitic-speaking people were descended from Shem (10:22). The lan-

guage of Hebrew in the Semitic constellation of tongues corresponds closely to the language of their archivals, the Canaanites.

Also, the material cultures that the Canaanites and Hebrews produced in the Middle to Late Bronze Ages were not substantively different. The classic problem faced by archaeologists when reconstructing the periods of the patriarchs and Israel's entry into Canaan is discerning a differentiation in the material culture of the Hebrews from the indigenous Canaanites. D. Edelman's study of the Palestinian evidence concludes, "Modern ethnographic studies have indicated the complexity of the formation and maintenance of ethnic identification and inability to predict markers on the basis of practices of various living groups or cultures."<sup>20</sup> Solely on the basis of remains, apart from the biblical record, one could conclude that "[t]he evidence from language, costume, coiffure, and material remains suggest that the early Israelites were a rural subset of Canaanite culture and largely indistinguishable from Tranjordanian rural cultures as well."<sup>21</sup> Yet, despite these shared features of language and material culture, Canaanites and Hebrews represented separate lines, according to the Table of Nations.

On the other hand, we may look at the example of the Joktanites and Pelegites who, as Shemites, derived from the common ancestor Eber (10:25). Peleg's branch produced the Terah clan (11:14-17), whereas the Joktan line produced peoples primarily occupying the southern peninsula of Arabia (10:26-20). Thus, the Table of Nations presents people groups, such as the Joktanites, who were distant from the Hebrews in almost every way, yet by their lineal connection were closer in descent to Israelites than the Canaanites.

Thus while language, cultural practices, religion, and politics are factors in differentiation, no one element is the controlling constituent that clarifies the complexities of ancient ethnic divergences.

### **The Constitution of Israel**

As for the identity of the Israelites who emerged from Egypt, they included a "mixed multitude" (*'ereb rab*, Exod 12:38,48; cf. Neh 13:3; Jer 25:24), indicating a mixed number of people groups who were slaves alongside the Hebrews in Egypt (Num 11:14). Throughout Israel's long history there was a mingling of diverse ethnic groups.<sup>22</sup> We already noted that the ancestors of Israel included Aramean kinship, e.g., "my father was a wandering Aramean" (Deut 26:5). Although the brothers Abram and Nahor had the same father, the lineage of Nahor who resided at Haran in Paddan Aram was called "Aramean," not Hebrew, due to location or language. The biblical narrator identified Bethuel, the son of Nahor, and Laban his son as "Arameans" (25:20; 28:5); this Aramean stock of the Terah clan provided the wives for the patriarchs Isaac (Rebekah) and his son Jacob (Leah, Rachel) who bore the progenitors of the twelve tribes of national Israel.

Yet, the Bible indicates that individuals and people groups who became members of the Israelite community could retain an ethnic identity (e.g., Beerothites, 2 Sam 4:2-3). The Bible's historians noted this as an important feature when they referenced "outsiders" who had become "insiders." They viewed them as members of Israel but not always fully assimilated, since their ethnic roots were remembered. Full assimilation presumably occurred in later generations (e.g.,



Kenites, Judg 1:16), though in some cases many generations later (e.g., Ammonites, Moabites, Deut 23:3; Gibeonites, Josh 9:27; 2 Sam 21:2). Rahab, the Jericho prostitute and her family (Josh 6:25; cf. Heb 11:31; James 2:25), and “Ruth the Moabitess,” who professed her faith in Naomi’s God (Ruth 1:16-17), illustrate ethnic incorporation of individuals. The Calebites, the descendants of the celebrated Caleb who had urged Israel to enter the land (Num 13:30), were ethnically Kenizzites (<Kenaz, e.g., Num 32:12; cf. Gen 15:19) whose root was originally an Edomite clan (Gen 36:15). The Calebites, who were geographically (at Hebron) and genealogically (by Perez) related to the tribe of Judah, assimilated to the tribe during the monarchy, though they retained some distinctiveness (e.g., Num 13:6; Josh 15:13; 1 Sam 25:3; 30:14; 1 Chr 4:13-15).<sup>23</sup> The Gibeonites, identified ethnically as Hivites (Josh 9:7) and Amorites (2 Sam 21:2), obtained a protected place among the Israelites (albeit by deception), and their chief city became a Levitical city (Josh 9:3-10:14 with 2 Sam 21:1-4, 9; Josh 18:25; 21:17). Despite the Gibeonite incorporation, the Israelites remembered their treachery and refused to acknowledge their original membership in Israel (2 Sam 21:2). Alliances by marriage or political treaty reached their zenith with Solomon’s new policies of internationalization (1 Kgs 11:4-8).

We may now ask the question that is intrinsic to the diversity that we have suggested for the ethnic makeup of ancient Israel: what formed and sustained this new people? There existed a distinctive people known as “Israel” who more or less survived for two hundred years before there was a central authority (monarchy) that forced socio-economic depen-

dencies among groups. Moreover, after the demise of the state and the chief religious institution, the temple, and the displacement of the nuclear populace, this people maintained their distinctive identity and heritage. F. Frick answers this question not as a theologian, but as a social scientist of ancient Israel, when he says, “The mechanism that maintained social solidarity and law and order in the village and inter-village level, and made possible multi-community groupings may very well have been a unifying religious ideology.”<sup>24</sup> Echoing the viewpoint of the biblical authors, we may affirm that the principal constituent of ancient Israel was the revelation of God at Sinai that shaped and unified all those who submitted to Yahweh. We may say further that what gave class structure attachment in Israel was not essentially a social mechanism. N. Lemche continues: “Class solidarity has to do with obeying the word of God, with keeping and especially studying the law. It is not primarily a social program; it is a religious program. It is about solidarity within a religious group, ‘Israel,’ not something coming out of the never-never land of ancient Israel.”<sup>25</sup>

### The “Alien” in Israel

The most notable incidence of admission of foreigners is Israel’s tolerance toward the resident “sojourner” or “alien” (*ger-gur*, “to sojourn”). The number of Hebrew terms and specialized nuances conveying the semantic field of a person of foreign extraction indicate the importance attached to the identity and proper place of the non-native in ancient Israel. These included the “temporary resident” (*toshab*, e.g., 23:4; Exod 12:45), the “hired worker” (*sakir*, e.g., Exod 12:45; 22:14), the

“foreigner” (*nokri*, e.g., Deut 14:21), and the “stranger” (*zar*, e.g., Isa 61:5). The *ger* (“alien”) was a resident who had migrated from outside the land, hence having no property of his own.<sup>26</sup> Although aliens were counted as part of “all Israel” (Josh 8:33,35), they were also regularly differentiated from the “native-born” (*ezrah*) Israelite (e.g., Exod 12:19; Lev 16:29) or “brother” (*’ah*, e.g., Deut 24:14).

The explanation for Israel’s favorable treatment of aliens is historical and theological (e.g., Exod 22:21; 23:9; Deut 10:19). Israel’s forefathers were aliens in Canaan (e.g., 21:23; 23:4; 35:27; Exod 6:4; Deut 26:5; 1 Chr 29:15), including Moses (Exod 2:22), and Israel experienced the same status in Egypt (e.g., 15:13; Lev 19:34; Deut 23:7[8]). Also, as tenants in Canaan, the Israelites were aliens in Yahweh’s eyes, for the land was solely his possession (Lev 25:23). In the Mosaic law, protections provided for aliens (who were often numbered among the poor) recognized their special situation and met their needs of refuge and welfare (e.g., Lev 19:10, 33-34; 25:35; Deut 1:16; 10:18; 14:29; 24:14, 17, 19; 27:19). Nevertheless, aliens could eventually obtain property and wealth, even own a native-born Israelite (e.g., 23:4; Lev 25:47). An escaped slave, presumably an alien to Israel (e.g., Lev 25:44-46), received sanctuary without fear of return (Deut 23:15).

The idea that there was “one law” pertaining to both the native Israelite and the alien in some matters, such as the proper observance of Passover, shows the far-reaching acceptance that aliens received (e.g., Exod 12:49; Lev 17:8, 10, 13; 20:2; 22:18; 24:22; Num 9:14; 15:15-16, 29; 19:10). They could participate in sacrifices and offerings, observing the same obligations as the native-born citizen (e.g., 16:29-34;

Lev 17:8-16; 22:18-25; Num 15:2-30). Yet, there were mandatory laws for the native Israelite that were not binding upon aliens (e.g., Deut 14:21). J. Milgrom differentiates between the *prohibitive* laws that safeguarded community purity and the *performative* laws that did not bear directly on maintaining the sanctity of the land, recognized in the law as the dwelling place of Yahweh.<sup>27</sup> Since aliens as well as native Israelites may have offended the holiness of God by profaning the land through impurities, aliens observed laws of prohibition (e.g., blasphemy, Lev 24:16; also 18:24-30; 20:1-5; Num 19:10-13). Yet, those laws that are performative, such as the festival laws, were not obligatory for the alien who declined participation. Should aliens decide to join in the celebration, they must abide by the prescribed regulations for all participants.

### **The Universality of the Worship of Yahweh**

J. Levenson astutely shows that the equally viable biblical doctrine of the particularity of God’s revelation to national Israel does not contradict the universality of God, by which we mean an availability of God to all peoples. He remarks, “It is possible to be a faithful and responsible worshiper of YHWH (the proper name of the name of God of Israel) without being an Israelite.”<sup>28</sup> Israel neither originated nor circumscribed the worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel. Genesis reveals that the worship of God by the divine name Yahweh occurred in primordial times (4:26). That “Israel” is not named among the Table of Nations (in fact, the appellative does not occur until Jacob [=Israel, 32:28]) shows that the nation was not primordial. Moreover, unlike the ancient cities of the Gentiles

(e.g., Babylon), Israel's inception was not in heaven or by a divine construction.<sup>29</sup> The biblical account of creation and human origin established the oneness of human identity and value (1:26-28).

Since the primordial past, as we see in the example of the prediluvian Noah, men and women have known and worshiped the God of all the earth (18:25; Isa 54:5). Melchizedek illustrates a Canaanite priest-king who worshiped Yahweh (14:22) independently of the Hebrew patriarchs (14:18-20), though probably under the name *El Elyon* ("God Almighty"). That the Canaanite priest blessed Abraham and this father of Israel presented his tithe to him demonstrates the legitimacy of Melchizedek's priestly order as authentically Yahwistic in the eyes of Israel (cf. Ps 110:4; Heb 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:1-17). Job, too, was an authentic adherent to Yahweh, although he was a non-Israelite. Regardless of the date of authorship, the account of Job presents a culture comparable to the patriarchal era before the existence of Israel. The setting is thoroughly Gentile, and Job is identified as a man who "feared God" (1:1). This appellative, "one who fears God," may describe a Gentile who observed a high ethical standard, a kind of universal morality (e.g., Gen 20:11). It became the popular designation of Gentiles who adopted monotheism and exhibited moral conduct but who were not fully Jewish proselytes by circumcision (e.g., Acts 10:22; 13:16, 26; cf. proselytes, Acts 2:10; 6:5; 13:43). That Job worshipped God by the covenant name, "Yahweh," is not only the narrator's view but also is found (though seldom) in the speeches of Job (1:21; 12:9).

## Israel for the Nations

Yet, the election of Israel favored one nation over others. God is known forever as the "God of Israel" or the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Nevertheless, that the separating of Abraham antedated the founding of national Israel conveys that the purpose of Israel's position had its roots in the era before Sinai and the wilderness. Levenson comments that "biblical election was instrumental," setting Israel's particularity in the broad landscape of divine universality.<sup>30</sup> The purposes of choosing the man Abraham and his family, whose descendants formed Israel, involved revealing the one true God to the nations and transforming the nations into true worshipers of Yahweh. Israel like its ancestors performed a mediatorial role, "a kingdom of priests" (Exod 19:5-7; cf. 1 Pet 2:9), functioning as "witnesses" to the Gentiles (e.g., Isa 43:10, 12; 44:8). Moreover, what truly distinguished Israel was not its sense of uniqueness, for other nations considered themselves divinely destined for world domination, rather Israel's claim to peculiarity was the uniqueness of Israel's God.<sup>31</sup>

In Isaiah 43:10 the ideas of witness and servanthood reinforce the mutually related roles of the nation. Isaiah's "servant" theme underscores Israel's purpose of enlightening the nations to the way of Yahweh (e.g., 42:1, 4; 51:4). But Israel cannot achieve this high calling, for it failed to practice what was right and just according to its founding purpose (Isa 42:19; cf. Gen 18:19). Hence one from among Israel, the ideal servant, must achieve their destiny on their behalf, bringing the way of Yahweh as the "light to the Gentiles" (Isa 42:6; 49:6; 52:13, 15; 53:11-12; 60:1; cf. Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47; 26:23). By this means all

nations will know Yahweh whose rule will be universal, eternal, and marked by justice and peace (e.g., Mic 42:1-4; Zech 2:11). Isaiah depicts the cosmopolitan character of this kingdom in universalistic terms, including all nations and tongues, when he describes Jewish emissaries who enlist the Gentiles to glorify Yahweh (66:18-21). In this portrait we discover the same discrimination we have observed throughout the Old Testament's theology of Israel and the nations: the particulars of Jerusalem's temple and the universals of the nations. Yet, Jerusalem's temple has no legitimacy, unless it is a "house of prayer for all nations" (Isa 56:7; cf. Mark 11:17 pars.; Rev 21:24). Although the basis for the recognition of Israel over other peoples should not be denied, there is no evidence that authentic Yahwism ever claimed Israel was inherently superior in character (Exod 32:9; Deut 9:4-6, 13; 10:16; Jer 7:26). The differentiation of Israel rests in its role among the nations, not merely in the fact of its differentiation.

### **Endogamy and Religious Fidelity**

Because of Israel's role as mediator of the "way of the LORD" (Gen 18:19; Exod 19:6; cf. 1 Pet 2:9) to the nations, this people practiced a limited policy of discrimination between Israelite and non-Israelite, for intermarriage normally resulted in pluralism. It was not absolute, for we will find that given the amalgamation of peoples in Israel intermarriage became a tolerable institution in those cases when the non-Israelite submitted to Yahweh. The chief motivation for marriage within one's family (endogamy) among the Hebrews was the preservation of the family commitment to the God of their father. The first clear case of this practice was Abraham's insistence on

obtaining a wife for Isaac from his brother's household (Nahor) living in Haran (ch. 24). He imposed on his servant an oath, obligating him in the sternest terms to avoid selecting a wife from the daughters of Canaan (24:3). The biblical writer sets the request in the broad frame of the call and blessing that Abraham received from Yahweh (24:1, 7). The same aversion to Canaanite entanglement motivated the admonition by Isaac and Rebekah for Jacob to return to Paddan Aram when seeking a wife (28:1, 6). Rebekah condemned Esau's marriage to Hittite wives and insisted that Jacob avoid the "women of this land" (27:46). Isaac's adamant instructions can only be explained by his desire to perpetuate his father's practice. That the chief concern of intermarriage involved religious fidelity is also evident from the aftermath of Dinah's rape by the Hivite prince, Shechem (Genesis 34). Dinah's brothers insisted that Shechem and his whole clan undergo circumcision before entering marriage with them (vv. 14-17). Circumcision was hardly an inherited racial trait among Hebrew males! During the Mosaic period, this practice of endogamy had the effect of expanding the family circle, yet called for limitations in the custom, protecting the morality of the family (e.g., Lev 18:6; 20:19).

The impending entrance of Israel into Canaan required additional directives, establishing firm regulations regarding marriage to outsiders. The specific cause for prohibiting intermarriage in the legislation itself was the overpowering enticement of religious plurality that such marriages entailed (e.g., Exod 34:16; Deut 7:4-5; Judg 3:5-6). The chief example was the idolatry practiced by Solomon, whose marriages led to his downfall (1 Kgs 11:1-

13). Mosaic legislation restricted access to the assembly of Yahweh for individuals who were descended from mixed marriages, even down to the tenth generation (Deut 23:2). Presumably by ten generations the memory of foreign influences would no longer apply. Deuteronomy made exceptions for Edomites, because of the close relationship of the twins Esau and Jacob, and for Egyptians because of their historic accommodation of the Hebrews when Jacob's family descended into Egypt (Deut 23:7; cf. 2:4-6). Although Esau was initially hostile toward Jacob, upon his return from Paddan Aram the brothers reconciled and Esau welcomed him (Gen 33:4, 11-16). In both these instances, the original connection of the nation with Jacob explained Israel's favorable attitude. Strict regulations applied to Ammonites and Moabites, since they had refused to show hospitality to Israel upon its ascent from Egypt, and the hiring of Balaam by the Moabite king, Barak (Deut 23:3-6; cf. 2:9, 19). Such interaction between Israel and the nations illustrated the promissory blessing, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse" (12:3ab).

Scholars often note a development in the attitude of the Israelites toward foreigners. The patriarchs did not exhibit reluctance to enter into treaty with the Canaanites (e.g., 21:27-32), whereas the Israelites refused except under special circumstances (Deut 7:2; Joshua 9; 11:19; 1 Kgs 5:12). By the postexilic period, Ezra and Nehemiah prohibited any intermarriage with non-Jews, fearing Judah's return to the evil practices of the Gentiles (Ezra 9:1-15; 10:10-11; Neh 10:30; 13:23-28). By commingling with non-Israelites their forefathers had fallen into idolatry, leading to the nation's destruction and

exile. Their refusal to sanction intermarriage, however, was only one of many reforms instituted by Ezra and Nehemiah. Their desire was to reestablish the Mosaic administration among the postexilic community, so as to forestall any compromise of their religious heritage.

### **Conclusion: Diversity and Unity**

The unity of humanity is grounded in the innate dignity of all persons created in the image of God (1:26-28). By the descent of all peoples from the sons of Noah (10:1-32), the Bible likewise declares the solidarity of the human order through our common parentage (cp. 5:1-32). The birth of the nations was not a curse, for unlike the "ground" at Eden (3:17; 5:29; cf. 4:11; 8:21) there is no declaration of divine "curse" at Babel (11:1,9). Rather, the confusion of tongues that led to differentiated people groups interrupted the autonomy that the unified humanity had sought (11:4-6). This unity, achieved through independence of God ("a name for ourselves," 11:4), was not a unity that was intrinsic but was extrinsic to the created order of life. The Babelites feared dissemination and established a social state to assure the centripetal character of one people, refusing to "fill the earth" (1:28; 9:1). The divine blessing for humanity entailed innumerable progeny that populated the whole of the earth, extending its dominion over all creatures (1:28; 9:1-3, 7).

Differentiation was deemed "good" for humanity at creation, entailing both male and female (1:27). Moreover, distinctions were part of the created order at every level, both between the heavenly and terrestrial spheres (days one through four) and the living creatures (days five and six)—all considered "very good" (1:31).

By dispersing the Babelites who founded the nations, Yahweh acted benevolently toward human life and made it possible for humanity, despite its sinful condition, to realize the blessing ordained by God. The promise to bless Abraham with a “great nation” and a “great name” provided for the continuation of blessing meant for “all peoples” (12:2-3). The eschatological kingdom enshrines the same features: a unified humanity, yet a constellation of diverse peoples. The prophets depict such an era when both Israelites and “aliens” join in the restored land (Isa 14:1; Ezek 47:22), a “blessing on the earth” (Isa 19:25).

The formation of this eschatological community that transcended national borders was the chief assignment of the early church, “making disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19; cf. Acts 1:8; 8:1). Pentecost marked the first significant step toward realizing this ideal kingdom. The gathered peoples “from every nation under heaven” heard the kingdom of God preached in their native tongues after the disciples were baptized by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-11). This work of the Spirit culminates in the worship of the Lamb at whose throne are “every nation, tribe, people, and language” (Rev 7:9; cf. 5:9). It is to this end that we as the Church must strive, not just welcoming but fervently gathering in all peoples: “Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full’” (Luke 14:23).

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>For this expression, we have adapted the term of R. Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 133 (Sheffield:

Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 144-145, who refers to the descendants of the forsaken sons of the Hebrew patriarchs as the “also sons” (e.g., Ishmaelites, Edomites). We are expanding its reference to all those people groups who are outside Jacob-Israel.

<sup>2</sup>Section 102 reads, “The legislature shall never pass any law to authorize or legalize any marriage between any white person and a negro, or descendant of a negro.” See State Attorney General Bill Pryor’s commentary in *The Birmingham News*, October 1, 2000, section C, pp. 4, 6.

<sup>3</sup>F. A. Ross, *Slavery Ordained of God* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1857) 50-51; also, I. L. Brookes, *A Defence of the South Against the Reproaches and Incroachments of the North: in Which Slavery is Shown to be an Institution of God Intended to Form the Basis of the Best Social State and the Only Safeguard to the Permanence of a Republican Government* (Hamburg, SC: Printed at the Republican Office, 1850) 8-9.

<sup>4</sup>T. R. Ingram, *Essays on Segregation* (Houston: St. Thomas Press, 1960); also G. T. Gillespie, *A Christian View on Segregation* (Winona, MS: Association of the Citizens’ Council, 1954), who is rebutted by C. E. Tilson, *Segregation and the Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1958) 9, 20.

<sup>5</sup>For this discussion, see especially D. J. Wiseman, “Introduction: Peoples and Nations,” *Peoples of Old Testament Times*, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973) xv-xxi.

<sup>6</sup>E. A. Speiser, “‘People’ and ‘Nation’ of Israel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79 (1960) 157-163.

<sup>7</sup>W. von Sodom, *The Ancient Orient: An Introduction to the Study of the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 14.

- <sup>8</sup>See D. I. Block, "Nations/Nationality," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 4:966-972.
- <sup>9</sup>For detailed discussion of the character of the Table, see A. Ross, "The Table of Nations in Genesis 10—Its Structure," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (1980) 340-353, and K. Mathews, *Genesis 1—11:26*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996) 431-439.
- <sup>10</sup>Wiseman, "Introduction," xviii.
- <sup>11</sup>Contra, e.g., the comment of C. H. Felder, "Rather than an objective historical account of genealogies, the table of nations in Genesis 10 is a theologically motivated catalogue of people. . . the theological presuppositions of a particular ethnic group displace any concern for objective historiography and ethnography." C. H. Felder, "Racial Motifs in the Biblical Narratives," *Voices from the Margin*, ed. R. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991) 179.
- <sup>12</sup>*Gen. Rab.* 42.8 includes the same two etymological possibilities for "Hebrew."
- <sup>13</sup>See N. Lemche, "Hebrew," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 3:95.
- <sup>14</sup>N. Na'aman, "Habiru and Hebrews: The Transfer of a Social Term to the Literary Sphere," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 45 (1986) 271-288.
- <sup>15</sup>E. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 100-108.
- <sup>16</sup>F. Crüsemann, "Human Solidarity and Ethnic Identity," *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. M. Brett (Leiden: Brill, 1996) 57-76.
- <sup>17</sup>K. Kemp and N. Yoffee, "Ethnicity in Ancient Western Asia During the Early Second Millennium B.C.: Archaeological Assessments and Ethnoarchaeological Perspectives," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 237 (1980) 85-99.
- <sup>18</sup>D. Block, "The Role of Language in Ancient Israelite Perceptions of National Identity," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984) 321-340.
- <sup>19</sup>S. Moscati, ed., *An Introduction to the Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1969) 4.
- <sup>20</sup>D. Edelman, "Ethnicity and Early Israel," *Ethnicity and the Bible*, 55.
- <sup>21</sup>L. Stager, "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel," *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. M. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 137.
- <sup>22</sup>E.g., "your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite" (Ezek 16:3, 45). For the metaphorical and historical significance of this expression, see D. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel Chapters 1-24*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 508.
- <sup>23</sup>For more, see M. Fretz and R. Panitz, "Caleb," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1:809-810.
- <sup>24</sup>F. Frick, "Religion and Socio-Political Structure in Early Israel: An Ethno-Archaeological Approach," *Social Science Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, ed. C. Carter and C. Meyers (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996) 448-470, quote p. 465.
- <sup>25</sup>N. P. Lemche, "The Relevance of Working with the Concept of Class in the Study of Israelite Society in the Iron Age," *Concepts of Class in Ancient Israel*, USF Studies in the History of Judaism 201, ed. M. Sneed (Atlanta: Scholars, 1999) 97-98.
- <sup>26</sup>For discussion of these terms, see R. Rendtorff, "The *Gēr* in the Priestly Laws of the Pentateuch," *Ethnicity and the Bible*, 77-87; D. I. Block, "Sojourner," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4:561-564.
- <sup>27</sup>J. Milgrom, *Numbers*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990) 398-402.
- <sup>28</sup>J. Levenson, "The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism," *Ethnicity and the Bible*, 143-169; the quote from p. 148.
- <sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 147.
- <sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 155.
- <sup>31</sup>H. and H. A. Frankfort, "Conclusion: The Emancipation of Thought from Myth," *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, ed. Frankfort et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977) 330-331.

