

Building a Biblical Theology of Ethnicity for Global Mission

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What does it mean for the church of Jesus Christ to live and do mission in a multicultural and multiethnic world? As we proceed into the twenty-first century, that is a question which evangelicals must increasingly face. Modern means of communication and the emerging world economy have transformed our world from a set of self-contained tribes and nations into a global city. Our world, our nation, and our communities are rapidly changing around us. Globalization means that immigrants and refugees are bringing their customs and traditions right to our Western doorsteps. More than ever before, the nations are a mosaic of different ethnicities. They are nations within nations.

This is most evident in America. We are now the most ethnically diverse nation in the world with an extraordinary variety of colors, classes, and national origins. The number of immigrants plus their children has risen from 34 million in 1970 to 56 million in 2000, roughly one-fifth of U.S. population. Immigrants are arriving on our shores faster than at any time since 1850 (Jenkins 2002, 25-28). Many of those flooding into our country are Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Hindus.¹ A sovereign God has literally brought the mission fields of the world to our urban centers. By 2056 the majority of Americans will be non-European, non-white. Yet the increasing diversity of our society seems threatening to many.² Similar data could be given for Canada and most of Western Europe.

Two-Thirds World nations are experiencing a similar diversity challenge. Refugees flee to neighboring nations because of civil war, famine and political oppression. Rural tribes relocate to the cities in search of jobs and a better way of life. As people of different ethnic origins, speaking different languages and professing different religions, settle in the same geographic locality and live under the same political sovereignty, the reaction is often xenophobic. Ethnic “cleansing,” tribalism—and even “retribalization”—can raise their ugly head. Witness the violence of Bosnia, Liberia, Chechnya and Rwanda. Arthur Schlesinger (1992, 10) has thoughtfully concluded, “Ethnic and racial conflict, it seems evident, will now replace the conflict of ideologies as the explosive issue of our times.”

Thus the greatest challenge for getting the gospel out in our postmodern world may well be crossing the “distance” of race and ethnicity more so than that of geography and culture. In a time of increased ethnic strife and fragmentation within the human family, how will Christians, both in America and globally, respond? Will we be bewildered cultural bystanders to this multiethnic transformation of our world? Or will we welcome this enormous ethnic mix of nations as a grand opportunity to preach the gospel to all nations? Recognizing the Pentecost nature of current Christian mission, will we seek to create new paradigms for witness and evangelization? Or will we see ourselves threatened and under siege, retreating further into our congregational and missional fortresses?³ Our response, I am convinced, will largely depend on whether we have the courage to develop and implement a truly biblical perspective on ethnicity. The staggering diversity of our postmodern world will continue to overwhelm our theological senses, unless we stop and seek to better understand from Scripture God’s plan and purpose for ethnic diversity. In short, the evangelical church urgently needs to develop a biblical theology of ethnicity. This short paper will attempt to begin to lay out the parameters of such a study.

Believing that the best approach to uncovering biblical teaching on any given theme is to trace the way in which that particular topic progressively unfolds in the corpus of Scripture,⁴ we will seek to use the biblical-theological method to discover how the Divine Author has gradually revealed His purpose and plan for human diversity.⁵ For the purposes of this paper we will limit ourselves to the Old Testament, briefly overviewing the key passages, which will help us, build a theology of ethnicity. Finally, we will seek to synthesize and systematize this biblical revelation, showing its implication to modern mission. Our thesis, which we hope to establish from a careful study of Scripture, is simple: Throughout history, God’s great goal has been to bless all earth’s diverse “peoples” and thereby more fully display His own glory to all.

Before we begin our journey, we need to define our terms. What do we mean by ethnicity or ethnic groups? Both these terms seem to have found a permanent home in the worldview of many missiologists and church leaders today.⁶ Though not explicitly found in Scripture, these concepts, as we hope to prove, seem to be biblically based.⁷ Most would agree that ethnicity defines meaningful and scripturally relevant “people groups” found among humans. In its simplest form an ethnic (or “people”) group is identified by

one or more of the categories of race, religion, and national origin (Gordon 1964, 27-28). Membership is normally determined by birth. Ethnicity is thus related to the concept of one's ancestral background. A helpful working definition is given by Shibutani and Kwan (1965, 47): "An ethnic group consists of those who conceive of themselves as being alike by virtue of their common ancestry, real or fictitious, and who are so regarded by others."⁸

Ethnicity in the "Book of Beginnings"

The Creation Accounts

The creation accounts of Genesis reveal a God who loves and values both unity and diversity. "In the beginning" we are told God created *both* the heavens *and* the earth; *both* the sun to rule the day *and* the earth beneath man's feet; *both* the raging seas *and* the dry land; and *both* male *and* female. Clearly, God's creational design is far from cookie cutter uniformity. In the melodious *mélange* of Genesis 1 the Creator seems to delight in making opposites – "but opposites that complement, not clash, opposites that harmonize not antagonize" (Rhodes 1998, 20). Significantly He pronounces this sacred synthesis of unity in the midst of diversity as "good."

The first three chapters of Genesis also reveal a Triune God who creates mankind in His own image capable of relationships. The three persons of the Godhead commune among themselves ("let us make man") and in turn seek out man's unrequited love. Genesis shows that humanity was created for being in a communion that both reflects and glorifies the triune communion.⁹ This is the biblical and theological foundation for later revelation on interethnic fellowship.

There has been much lively debate in modern times over the origin of all the "races"¹⁰ of mankind. The Scriptures do not explicitly deal with this issue but this writer believes the predominance evidence is that Adam, having been formed from the soil (Gen. 2:7,13),¹¹ was a man of color and, by God's design, genetically capable of producing the three basic races of mankind, solely apart from any climatic or environmental factors.¹² In other words, Adam evidently possessed the dominant genes and Eve possessed the recessive genes that rendered them capable of producing both dark and light-skinned children—

probably within one or two generations.¹³ Thus color variation no doubt existed before the Tower of Babel and the flood. Yet there seems to be no reason to deny that earth's pre-flood inhabitants saw themselves as one race—the human family.¹⁴

The biblical understanding of a unified humanity has its origins in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. The story of mankind from creation to the call of Abraham is sketched in broad universal strokes. One God created one world and one human family. One common problem promptly infected the whole race: the sin problem. For ages, God dealt with the rebellion of the human race as a whole, at one point destroying all mankind in the flood, except Noah and his family. From the beginning, mankind was intended for unity in relationship to the Creator. Clearly in Genesis we have a unified anthropology. Even the name used for the first human being, Adam, also refers to *man*, or *humanity*.¹⁵

The Sons of Noah

Genesis 9, 10 and 11 is the gripping story of the reestablishment of the human race following the universal flood. Moses records the descendants of Noah through his three surviving sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth. Based upon the meaning of the names of Noah's sons, some biblical scholars have suggested that his sons became the fathers of the three primary racial groups we observe today.¹⁶ Far better would be to simply acknowledge that the Book of Genesis attributes to the three sons of Noah the origin of the various "families" or ethnic groups which originally inhabited the eastern Mediterranean regions and eventually spread out across the entire earth. Since Genesis 9:19 states that "from these [three sons] the whole earth was populated," we can be certain that all physical characteristics of the whole human race were present in the genetics of Noah, his sons, and their wives. The Genesis narrative also presupposes that each group had its own geographical location and language.

Slaveholders and segregationists in the past, as well as a few racists in our day, have sought to justify their mistreatment of Blacks by an appeal to the "Hamitic curse."¹⁷ Sadly, even some fundamentalists and evangelicals have blindly taught this theory.¹⁸ The curse of Ham theory stems from a complete misunderstanding of Genesis 9:20-27, which is the story of Noah's drunkenness and his sons'

response. Genesis says Ham “saw”¹⁹ his father’s subsequent nakedness. The implication is that he looked with some sinful thought, if only for a while until informing his brothers. Ham’s sinful disrespect of his father did have consequences but the text clearly states it was Ham’s youngest son, *Canaan, who was cursed, not Ham* (9:25).²⁰ Here, then, God is giving the nation of Israel a theological basis for the later conquest of the Canaanites.²¹ The Canaanites were first subjugated by Joshua (Josh. 9:27; 16:10, etc.) and later by Solomon (I Kings 9:20-21). Noah’s prophecy cannot be used to justify the enslavement or mistreatment of dark skinned peoples today since it was historically fulfilled when the Israelites (descendants of Shem) conquered the native inhabitants of Palestine and made them servants. Because the Canaanites long ago became extinct, the Hamitic curse cannot be properly applied to anyone today. Furthermore, Scripture explicitly states that Ham was not cursed but *was blessed* under God’s covenant made with Noah and his sons (see Gen. 9:1-17 and footnote 20).

The *locus classicus* for any biblical discussion of human diversity and ethnicity is Genesis 10 and 11. The Genesis 10 passage is known as the Table of Nations, and Genesis 11:1-9 is the story of the Tower of Babel. Though there is some uncertainty as to the chronological relationship between these two passages, we do know that both accounts occur after the flood and involve the descendants of Noah (Gen. 10:32).

The Table of Nations

Genesis 10 describes what happened as human beings spread over the earth and shows the development of ethnic identities. This is clearly an ethnographic table. The main features of ethnicity mentioned in our introduction, are all apparent.²² Significantly, in the Genesis 10 genealogy, the following phrase occurs three times: “These are the descendants of ... in their lands, with their own language, by their families, in their nations” (10:5, 20, 31). These statements clearly affirm the value of belonging to an ethnic group that shares the same language and lives together in a defined geographic area. One of God’s gifts to mankind, it seems, is to be included in a particular group of people—this gives a sense of belonging, of identity and security.

In addition to this heterogeneity, it is also significant that the writer speaks positively of the spreading of these descendants into new lands as a mark of obedience to God’s command—first to Adam and Eve, then to Noah—that humanity should “multiply and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28; 9:1). There is *no hint of evil* in this initial development of ethnic identities. Seen in this light, familial, national, and linguistic diversity are not curses of divine wrath but a fulfillment of the blessing of creation. A multiethnic, multinational, multilingual humanity was clearly God’s intention all along. And yet amid this growing diversity of mankind there is still a fundamental unity. This is, after all, a genealogy—it is about who is related to whom.²³ What unites human beings is family.

Delineating in detail the destinations and contributions of the peoples identified in this ethnographic table is beyond the scope of this paper. The fourteen “nations” that came from Japheth (10:2-4) plus the thirty from Ham (10:6-20) and the twenty-six from Shem (10:21-31) add up (significantly?) to 70 “peoples.”²⁴ In general, the Japtethites lived generally north and west of Palestine in Eurasia and were primarily Causasoids, (with fair complexions). The Hamites initially located in southwestern Asia and northeast Africa (and were people of darker colors). The descendants of Shem (called Shemites, later Semites) occupied the area north of the Persian Gulf (and generally had more olive-colored complexions). Caucasians may be surprised to learn that there is solid biblical and anthropological evidence to confirm that the first great civilizations came from the sons of Ham.²⁵ People of color were evidently the founders of the first two great civilizations that appeared on earth—Mesopotamia and Egypt. Genesis tells us clearly that Nimrod, the son of Cush (“a mighty one on the earth”), was the progenitor of two of the greatest cities of antiquity, Nineveh and Babylon, as well as others (Gen. 10:8-12).

The Tower of Babel

The Tower of Babel narrative has often been misunderstood and given a negative interpretation. Some have inferred from it that human differences of language and culture are the result of man’s sin and God’s subsequent judgment. A better way of interpreting the Babel incident is to see the people of the earth attempting to *counteract* what they correctly understood to be God’s purpose in diversifying and scattering

the human race. From the beginning God had been in the process of separating people from one another in order to implement His desire that man should “be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth...” (Gen. 1:28). The post-flood human family, however, still all spoke one language (11:1) and rebelled against God’s plan. They decided to build a city and tower and “make a name” for themselves for one explicit purpose: “lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (11:4). God intervened, not allowing their building program to be completed, accelerating his own decentralization program for mankind. Seeing that a united humanity with one language would have an endless capacity for rebellion, He confused their languages and caused them to be scattered abroad.²⁶ True, God was judging their pride and their self-made unity,²⁷ but the judgment at Babel is not to be seen solely as punishment. In God’s act of scattering humanity, He was also fulfilling His original intention for mankind. The act was preventative as much as punitive. It was designed to prove to earth’s peoples that they could not frustrate His plan for human diversity and pluralism.

The Abrahamic Promise

At Genesis 12 the story narrows down to one family—Abraham and his descendants. Hereafter, the Hebrew people are the focus of the biblical perspective, and other ethnic peoples seem to be on the fringes or out of sight altogether. The Old Testament record, however, will make it clear that this is because God has a special purpose for Abraham and his descendants and that ultimately all the other nations, tribes and people share fully in that purpose. This is first stated at the time of the call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” This promise of a universal blessing to the “peoples” or “families” on earth is repeated four other times in Genesis alone.²⁸ In Genesis 12:3 and 28:14 the Hebrew phrase used for “all the peoples/families” is *kol mishpahot*, which in the Greek Septuagint is rendered *pasai hai phulai*, meaning “all the tribes” in most contexts.²⁹ So it seems the Abrahamic blessing is intended by God to reach even to fairly small groupings of people. That is seen even clearer in the other three repetitions of the Abrahamic covenant promise in Genesis 18:18, 22:18 and 26:4. The corresponding Hebrew phrase in these three passages is *kol goyey* (“all nations” in the NIV), which in the Septuagint is translated *panta ta ethne*, “all the nations.”³⁰ A careful study of the various Hebrew words used

demonstrates that the size and make up of the “peoples” or “nations” referred to in the Abrahamic promise (as well as in the LXX and New Testament counterparts) is not precise. Yet it does seem evident that God’s gift of (salvation) blessing through Abraham’s seed is to be experienced by every size ethnic group, from the smallest people group (clans, tribes) to the greatest nation.³¹

Abraham was chosen of Jehovah for a purpose³² – he was *blessed to be a blessing!* This principle of divine election for universal service is stated five times in Genesis to stress God’s concern for all peoples. God’s choice of Abraham, though initially exclusive, was for the sake of a maximally inclusive end. Election was to serve all the nations in mission! The story of Abraham is really a story about God’s mission to the world. Though God chose one people, He intends salvation to be available to all peoples.

Israel’s Ministry to the Nations in the Torah

National Commissioning

Israel’s particular God-given role among the other “nations” of the earth is revealed more fully in Exodus 19:3-6, which might be called “the preamble to their constitution” (which follows in Exodus 20, the Ten Commandments). Israel is at Mount Sinai and Jehovah is reminding her that she has been redeemed from Egypt/bondage for a particular purpose in His plan:

I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself...out of all nations you will be my treasured possession; for the whole earth is mine. And you shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Three things are significant here. First, God is affirming His ownership and care of all peoples (“the whole earth is mine”). Second, Israel is Yahweh’s special people (“treasured possession”)³³ whom He has chosen “out of all nations.” They are those over whom he has particular sovereignty. Third, Israel’s vocation is to serve the whole world by being a channel of blessing to all the other nations. Two additional titles assigned to Israel are noteworthy. God desired a “kingdom of priest,” a priest-kingdom, a nation composed entirely of priests, ministering to the other nations on His behalf. He also was commissioning them to be “a holy nation,” set apart for His purposes. They were to be “wholly” the Lord’s. As a holy priest-nation they were

to mediate between God and the other ethnic nations (the Gentiles) making them acceptable to God and sharing with them all that God was revealing. They were His representatives to the world's peoples. Here, then, was Israel's ministry and "missionary" calling. Thus, ethnically and morally Exodus 19 expands what it meant to be brought as a people to Yahweh.

Modeling Before All

Israel's mission to the nations is further developed in Deuteronomy 4:5-8. Her life was to give clear evidence of Yahweh's righteous rule over her, and thus to be a model of His lordship over all the people groups of the world. In this passage Yahweh exhorts the nation to carefully obey his commands "for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations." The other nations would be drawn to her, impressed by what they saw and heard in Israel. Seeing that Israel was a "great nation," like no other, the surrounding nations would eventually embrace Israel's great God and renounce their false gods. They would become convinced that, "the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him." In other words, seeing that the Israelites always had access to the Lord in prayer, the nations would give him their sole allegiance. Thus, in the Old Testament, it is clear that the nation of Israel was to be witnessing to the saving purposes of God primarily by experiencing them and living according to them. From early Old Testament revelation it does not appear that their being a nation of priests was ever understood to mean they were to be a nation of active, evangelistic missionaries.³⁴

Protection of "Aliens"

Careful instructions and provisions were given to Israel concerning treatment of and attitudes toward the "resident alien" (Hebrew *ger*³⁵). The Mosaic legislation on this theme is frequent (see Lev. 19:18, 33, 34; Deut. 10:14-19; Ex. 22:21; 12:48; Num, 9:14), driving home the reminder of God's ownership of and concern for (Gentile) ethnic groups. Obviously God loves "minorities" and desires His people to do likewise. The "strangers" in view in the Torah were not just people passing through, but those who seemed to have an intention of staying. They might be immigrants that had come to seek refuge or the

remnant of conquered people. These passages command that any alien residing among the Hebrews was to be treated as a native, without distinction, and that he also was to be loved as one loved himself.³⁶ Significantly, in the Leviticus 19 passage holiness is linked to hospitality. Being holy as God is holy requires the people of God to honor parents, reverence God, keep the Sabbath, refrain from stealing, tell the truth, etc.—*as well as* to treat the immigrants/aliens, the poor, the handicapped, the elderly, the widow, and the orphan with respect and mercy! When harvesting, food was even to be left for the hungry to glean. This is truly an evangelical (biblical) “social gospel” which needs to be recovered in our day! In Old Testament thought moral holiness and social justice are to go hand in hand. To be holy, love your neighbor in practical ways!

These are not the only Old Testament injunctions to treat the immigrant with mercy. Numerous other Pentateuchal regulations extended worship privileges to aliens equally with the Israelites.³⁷ Jeremiah³⁸ and Ezekiel³⁹ also contain admonitions to “do no wrong to the alien.” Israel is warned about this matter more than 36 times in the Old Testament. Taken together, these passages confirm that during the Old Testament era the Lord was extending the offer of salvation to ethnic peoples in addition to Israel. This is also seen in King Solomon’s dedicatory prayer for the temple (I Kings 8:41-43). Significantly, Solomon asks God that the “foreigner, who does not belong to your people Israel ... will hear of your great name and your mighty hand ... when he comes and prays towards the temple” and that “all the peoples of earth may know your name and fear you....” Clearly, foreigners and Gentiles were being encouraged to worship the true and living God, drawn to Him because of the nature, power, and saving qualities of the Name of God. And those of other people groups could expect that He would answer their prayers just as effectively as those from Israelites.

God’s Sovereign Rule Over the Nations

Crucial for an understanding of Yahweh’s plan for earth’s ethnic peoples and His rule over the “nations” is an investigation of the continuation of His promise first made to Eve (Gen. 3:15), then to Shem (Gen. 9:27), then to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; 18:18), Isaac (Gen. 26:4), and Jacob (Gen. 28:14). A detailed

treatment of how these promises reveal God's emerging Messianic plan (the coming "Seed") lies outside the scope of this paper. For the limited purposes of this study we will focus on the fulfillment of God's covenant promises to Abraham with the establishment of the Davidic kingship as seen in 2 Samuel 7.⁴⁰ In the progressive unfolding of God's Messianic plan, the Davidic covenant is second in importance only to the Abrahamic, and is the next expansion of it. Although Yahweh refuses David's request to build a house (i.e. a temple) for the Ark of the Covenant, He does give him a compensating word: God himself promises to build David a "house" (i.e. a dynasty) and an eternal kingship. God says: "I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." (v. 13)—that is, David's house will be established in perpetuity.

How do we reconcile this divine pronouncement with the collapse and apparent dissolution of the Davidic line at the fall of Jerusalem in 587/586 BC? The answer appears to be that while the covenantal promises may be withdrawn from individuals in David's line, the royal (Messianic) line itself will not ultimately fail. From later revelation in both testaments we understand that it will be Jesus of Nazareth who will finally bring to consummation these promises given to the house of David.⁴¹ Significantly, in the Davidic promise there are important allusions to Genesis 12:1-3,⁴² which suggest that "what God has in store for David is a *reiteration*, if not a *partial fulfillment*, of what was promised to Abraham." (Kostenberger and O'Brien 2001, 39, italics theirs). Thus the Davidic covenant is intimately linked with God's "blessing" (saving) purposes for all mankind through Abraham.⁴³ Ultimately Yahweh's rule over the nations will be through the coming Davidic king who will function as His vice regent.⁴⁴

There is abundant Old Testament witness to God's sovereignty over the destiny and destinations of the "nations."⁴⁵ Ethnic identity appears to be an inevitable consequence of God's providence. In fact, Scripture testifies that God oversees the process. Deuteronomy 32:8 states that "when the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples."⁴⁶ A relatively unknown passage gives surprising witness to this underlying theme. Deuteronomy 2:9-12, 19-23 contains what at first seems like obscure notes (which the NIV puts in parentheses) about the movements of nations in the area east of the Jordan River which the Israelites passed through on their way to the Promised Land. A closer look reveals that these two parenthetical sections boldly assert Yahweh's multinational

sovereignty. The same God who declared to Pharaoh that the whole earth belonged to Him (Ex. 9:14, 16,29) had been moving the nations around on the chessboard of history in preparation for Israel's future conquest of the Promised Land. We gather from this, that no nation, no people should ever see itself as a permanent entity. Before God the might and longevity of all nations appear as nothing (Is. 40:15ff).

The Nations in the Prophecy of Isaiah

Many of the prophets of Israel, both before and after the exile, express the global purpose of God's dealing with the nations and Israel. It is, however, the prophet Isaiah who most clearly describes God's future plan for the salvation of the "nations" (ethnic peoples). We will overview a few of the key passages in Isaiah focusing especially on the beloved Suffering Servant sections of the book (Ch. 42-53). Interestingly, the familiar Isaiah 53 prediction of the Messiah's sacrificial suffering and death is set in the context of certain victory and the exaltation of the true God among all the nations of earth. Isaiah 52:10⁴⁷ tells us what God is about to do:

The LORD will bare his holy arm
In the sight of the nations,
And all the ends of the earth will see
The salvation of our God.

Paradoxically, the One who will suffer and die will also be "greatly exalted"⁴⁸ (52:13) with the result that "he [will] sprinkle [or "startle"⁴⁹] many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him..." (53:15). In other words, the highest authorities of the Gentile nations/peoples will stand in awe and wonder, speechless at what is made known to them by the Suffering Servant concerning his humiliation/exaltation.⁵⁰

Immediately after the sufferings described in Isaiah 53 comes a shout of rejoicing and the challenge to take the good news worldwide in mission. Because of the vicarious suffering endured by the Servant, a wonderful thing becomes possible. God's people are now called upon to fulfill their mission to the Gentile nations/people. Like a barren woman who has no children but is about to give birth to many sons, Israel is called upon to build a bigger tabernacle, or tent of dwelling, to make room for all the new additions to the family (54:1-3). God says, "Enlarge the place of your tent...and your descendants will possess nations."

The Servant section of the book of Isaiah (Ch. 42-53) also highlights the global commission of God's two servants. The prophet intermingles prophecies about Israel as God's servant with those about Messiah as His Servant. *Both are to be given to missionary service to the nations.* First, Isaiah describes the Messiah as the Messiah to all the nations.⁵¹ The first "servant song" speaks of God's "chosen one" in whom He delights, and on whom His Spirit rests, bringing "justice to the nations" [Gentiles] (42:1,4). Evidently this is looking forward to the second coming of Christ, when He will rule over a kingdom in which justice prevails throughout the world. The point is, the millennial kingdom is not for Israel only—though Messiah will reign on the throne of David in Jerusalem. All the peoples/nations of the world will experience the righteousness and justice of the Messiah King. His ministry will have worldwide ramifications. Not only will the Servant of Yahweh effect a new covenant with Israel ("a covenant for the people") but it will be "a light for the Gentiles" (42:6).⁵² This universal ministry is further confirmed in the second "servant song." Yahweh again says to His Servant: "I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isa. 49:6). Thus, the nations, who are an integral part of the Servant's calling and ministry, are urged to recognize Him, to render Him homage, and to bring the exiles of His people to Zion (Jerusalem?) with them as they themselves come in pilgrimage (49:7, 12, 18, 22-23).⁵³ Finally, in Isaiah, the whole nation of Israel is also commissioned as a witness to the surrounding nations: "'You are My witnesses,' declares the LORD, 'and My servant whom I have chosen...'" (Is. 43:10; see also 44:8).⁵⁴

A careful study of all the Servant passages leads me to the conclusion that Yahweh intends to use the mediation and ministry of both His Servant Messiah and Israel to bring the message of salvation to the "peoples." And in both cases their missionary ministry to the nations is to be *active not passive*.⁵⁵ Furthermore this assigned task of being and bringing "light to the Gentiles" has both present⁵⁶ and yet future ramifications—it is ongoing and yet awaits consummation in the coming kingdom.

The attraction of nations to Zion and to the God of Israel is a major theme in Isaiah. For example, the Prophet predicts that the nations will make their pilgrimage to Jerusalem at the end time, flocking to the banner of the messianic king (Is. 11:10). Zion will have an amazing drawing power: "all nations will stream

to it” (Is. 2:2). Ultimately this will be in fulfillment of Yahweh’s promises to the patriarchs (cf. Is. 2:3 – “the house of the God of Jacob). The nations will make their journey to Jerusalem at the end time in order to learn about Yahweh and his ways (Is. 2:2-3 cf. Zech. 8:20-23; Mic. 4:1-2). Ultimately, the ingathering of the nations will be the work of God, not, Israel (Isa. 56:6-7 “there *will I bring* to my holy mountain”).⁵⁷ Evidently in the end times there will be an amazing reversal. Isaiah 60 speaks of the nations submitting to Israel (v. 14) and even bringing the scattered children of Israel with them to Jerusalem (vs. 1-9). An evident fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises, the nations will stream into the city bringing their wealth (vs. 11-22). The admonition of God to the heathen peoples found in Isaiah 45:22, “Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth,” will find its fulfillment in this eschatological vision of the new age ushered in by the Messiah. This end-time ingathering of the Gentile nations to Zion is a prominent strand of Old Testament expectation.⁵⁸

The final chapter of Isaiah’s prophecy contains one of the most remarkable missionary messages in the entire Bible. Isaiah 66 seems to point to a future eschatological time when the “nations” will hear the gospel. A faithful remnant (of Israel?) will be Yahweh’s messengers. Those who escape both the persecutions of their enemies and the judgment of God against those enemies (66:16) are sent out to distant lands⁵⁹ to proclaim God’s glory (66:19). From all these places converts (“brothers”) will be brought to the house of the Lord, and He will make some of them priests and Levites (worship leaders?). In the end, “all mankind” (representatives from all ethnic peoples?) will acknowledge the one true God and worship Him (66:20-23). Several things are striking in this final vision. First, the Lord himself is the missionary gathering and rescuing people, both Jews and Gentiles. Second, His ultimate goal is His own glory, that He might be known, honored, and worshipped for who He really is. Third, His mission knows no boundaries, ethnic, national or geographic, for it extends to the whole world. Finally, His harvesting of Gentile converts is seen as fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant (66:22).

In conclusion, the breadth of the Prophet Isaiah’s vision and predictions for earth’s “nations” and “peoples” is unparalleled in the Old Testament.

The Nations in the Other Prophets

Israel's mission to the "nations" (ethnic peoples) is also an underlying theme in other Old Testament prophets.⁶⁰ Typical of the message of the major and minor prophets is that of Jeremiah who is said to be "a prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5). Accordingly, the latter part of his book contains messages of warning and judgment addressed to Egypt (Jer. 46), Philistia (Jer. 47), Moab (Jer. 48), Ammon and Edom (Jer. 49) and Babylon (Jer. 50-51). All this is in addition to the chief burden of the prophet Jeremiah for the unfaithful nation of Judah (Israel). God's ultimate purpose for the nations, to be achieved in part through his Chosen People, is clearly stated: "To you the nations will come from the ends of the earth ..." (Jer. 16:19). Significantly, Jeremiah's message is that in the end the nations will not inevitably face judgment; God promises: "I will restore their fortunes." (Jer. 48:47; 49:6 cf. 12:14-17; 46:26).⁶¹ This is the final hope of the Messianic era.

Taken together the message of the prophets displays an unmistakable universalism. Yahweh is the God of all nations. All will be judged with righteousness and justice. All are called to repentance. All are exhorted to turn to the coming Messiah. The gospel of Messiah's death and resurrection will be proclaimed to all nations. Thus, there is in the prophets a note of both impending judgment and optimistic hope for earth's ethnic peoples.

The Psalms

The place of the peoples/nations within the sovereign and saving purpose of God is a significant issue in the Psalter. Much of what we have already learned from the progressive unfolding of Old Testament is encapsulated in the Psalms. In the Psalter the nations are represented as the great mass of humanity in rebellion against God (Psalm, 2:1-3; 10:16). Yet they are included within God's plan of grace, as He fully intends to "bless" them with His redemptive offer. The nations are repeatedly invited to turn to the Lord and share in the privileges of God's chosen people. Of the numerous references to the world's Gentile nations,⁶² many are to the ultimate reign of God and His Messiah over all the nations in the millennial kingdom. They all display God's great concern and purpose for all earth's ethnic peoples.

Many psalms speak of Israel as God's channel of blessing to the nations and of God's purpose to bring salvation to the nations through them (see Ps. 22:27; 46:10; 66:4; 67:2,3,7; 145:10-12, etc.). Not only does the Psalmist speak of believers making known God's mighty acts, but there also are at least three passages that command Israel to witness to the nations (Ps. 9:11; 93:1-3,9,10; 105:1). As we have seen earlier, the election of Israel was always for service. It is never at odds with God's mission to the nations, but is fundamental to it. The call to the people of God in the Psalms most often is for active (centrifugal) outreach and witnessing. Israel is exhorted to sing (57:9), speak (119:46; 126:2-3), tell (145:11-12); pray (Ps. 67) and proclaim (96:3). Significantly, the praise of God is to precede preaching but both are part of the witness of God's people to the nations.

A frequent emphasis in the Psalms, as elsewhere in the Old Testament, is the eschatological hope of God's Messiah ruling over the nations from Zion (Jerusalem). Evidently, one day Zion will be the center of the worship of Yahweh not only for Israel, but for all nations. The enthronement Psalms (47, 93, 96, 97, 99), for example, all depict Yahweh as king reigning in Zion through his chosen Davidic king (2:47, 89). At this time salvation for the nations will involve their "coming in" to worship God in holiness on Mt. Zion (Ps. 72:8-11; 102:12-22), submitting to his rule over them through his Messiah. It is significant that the Zion psalms often speak of God's covenant to Abraham and David, and the nations sharing in these promises (eg. "the nobles of the earth assemble as the people of the God of Abraham, for the kings belong to God" – Ps. 47:9 cf. 105:5-11).

God's call in the Psalter for all peoples to worship and honor Yahweh, the God of Israel, is unfortunately obscured in some older versions. The King James Version mistranslates one key word: *ammin*, which is the plural form of *am* ("people").⁶³ "Peoples" (a collective plural) usually means the other peoples, or nations, as compared with the people of Israel. So, for example, Psalm 47:1 should be rendered, "Clap your hands, all peoples!" This is obviously addressed to all the ethnic nations, calling upon them to join the people of Israel in worship of the one true God. Another example is Psalm 96:3 which should be translated, "Declare his glory among the *nations* (*goyim*), his marvelous works among all the *peoples*

(*ammim*).” Notably, both Hebrew words are in the plural⁶⁴ (cf. also 96:13). The exhortation for God’s people to witness to the other peoples on earth becomes very clear.⁶⁵

Repeatedly the psalmists call on the ethnic peoples (the *goyim* and/or *ammim*) of all lands and nations to praise, extol, and worship Yahweh (Ps. 47:1; 67:3,5; 100:1; 117:1). Yet this would seem to be impossible if they have never been told of His person and work. Thus the Psalms assume that God’s people Israel will be witnessing their faith to the “nations.” This is why the psalmist/singers often urge the Hebrew people to tell, proclaim and make known the mighty acts of Yahweh (Ps. 9:11; 105:1) and to join together to sing God’s praises among the pagan nations (Ps. 18:49; 57:9; 96:2-3; 108:3).

We must now draw together the various strands of Old Testament teaching on ethnicity and seek to make some concluding missiological observations.

Theological Principles Summarized

We have learned that in the Old Testament Scriptures “nations” are normally what we today would call “ethnic groups” rather than political communities (as implied by the modern understanding of “nation states”). Biblical “nations” are seen to have common names, cultures, homelands, and a sense of solidarity. Various scriptural terms (with overlapping meanings) are used to designate the elastic concept of ethnicity: families/ clans (*mishpatah*), tribes (*sebet*), nations (*goyim*), and peoples (*ammim*). All of these refer roughly to international Gentile peoples.

A fully biblical perspective on ethnic diversity in human society and the church requires that we acknowledge seven theological affirmations rooted in Old Testament revelation.

First, ***the human race is one***. All the diverse peoples of earth belong to one family. God’s singular act of creating male and female progenitors of all peoples is foundational to our theology (Gen. 1-2). Jehovah God is the *God of Creation*. Since He is the creator of humankind we are all His offspring. Since we are His offspring by creation, every human being is our brother and sister. Furthermore, we are all made in His divine image. Being equally created by Him and like Him, we are equal in His sight in worth and dignity, and thus have an equal right to respect and justice. If God has made us all from one set of original

parents, then no individual or “race” may consider itself above others. This dynamic principle of the creational unity of the human race, with its consequent implications, is vividly stated later in the New Testament when Paul proclaims to the racially proud Athenians, “*From one man he made every nation (ethnos) of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth...*” (Acts 17:26ff. cf. also Rom. 2:29-30).

From this Old Testament portrayal of the living God as Creator, Sustainer and Father of all humankind, the prophets often deduce the folly and evil of idolatry. But they could equally well have deduced from it the folly and evil of ethnic pride and racism. For if He is the God of all human beings, this reality will affect our attitude toward them as well as to Him. Ethnocentrism and racism are, after all, just another form of idolatry—of exalting someone else (ourselves or our own ethnic group) above the true God. This truth of unified origin should restrain the temptation to boast in ethnic uniqueness. Interestingly, even secular scholars who do not accept the biblical accounts of creation or the historicity of Adam confirm this truth of the unity of the human race.⁶⁶

Second, *the diversification of peoples is good*. The whole creation witnesses to the fact that God enjoys diversity, and different ethnic groups are but one expression of this divine joy. He is the *God of Variety*. Significantly, in the biblical record both God’s creational diversity and post-flood dispersion of peoples are viewed as “good” not evil. God’s purpose is that a plurality of peoples would populate the planet. He never intended people to be monochrome and uniform, either as individuals or groups. The human race is one, yet many –which demonstrates that *God loves both unity and diversity*.

The Scriptures certainly imply that, biologically speaking, the chromosomes of Adam and Eve must have contained the potential for human diversity now evident. Furthermore, modern-day ethnic peoples have all sprung from the three sons of Noah, divinely dispersed for His purposes after the flood. Thus, human differences, languages—even ethnic peoples—are not to be viewed as the result of man’s sin or God’s judgment. Ethnic identity is rooted in God’s creative design and part of His original purpose. None of the various ethnic groups and “races” of mankind are products of the mark of Cain, or the curse of Ham, or the dispersion of Babel. Certainly, no group is to be seen as ultimately a product of coincidental environmental factors or of a strange diet, or descended from apes or monkeys. This truth that ethnic

groups are God's idea is also confirmed in the New Testament (again Acts 17:26 is a key text: "*he made every nation*").

Why does God desire ethnic diversity? Scripture suggests at least two reasons. First, no one ethnic group could ever adequately express the glory of Almighty God. God is infinite, and in order to mirror his infinity, all kinds of cultures and peoples are needed. Each is capable of illuminating one or more of the attributes of God. None can express all that God wants to be in the world. God is seen and understood better through a multiplicity of cultures than He could be through a monoethnic humanity. The beauty of a diamond consists in the number of facets it has. The greater number of facets, the greater the glory of the individual diamond. Likewise ethnic diversity is meant to express the full glory of God in different ways.⁶⁷ Second, belonging to an ethnic group is for people's well being. Authentic living is only found in corporate connectedness. God believes in the value of groups—family, clan, tribe, and ethnic peoples. The need to belong to a group is deeply ingrained in our human nature as created by God. The Old Testament shows that God values cultural/ethnic heritage and identity because they bring us a sense of belonging and security in a sin-cursed, fragmented world. The meaning and purpose of human life is best worked out in the relational context of collectivities.

Third, *the destiny of "nations" is in God's sovereign control*. Peoples and kingdoms rise and fall under His providence. He is the *God of History*. The living God not only made every "nation" from one man, and made each unique and different, but He also "determined the times set for them, and the exact places where they should live" (Acts 17:26; cf. Deut. 32:8). That is, both the histories and locations of the ethnic nations are in the hand of God. Two conclusions can be drawn from this principle. First, it is clear that, in the long view, no people are a permanent entity. The ethnic "nations" begin, grow, flourish, decline and die like humans. Thus to idolatrously absolutize one's own nation or group (as is often done in nationalism gone awry) is foolhardy. Second, God has sovereign moral purposes in dealing with nations/peoples. For example, repentance can save a nation from God's impending judgment (Jer. 18:7-10; Jonah 3), and one nation can be used of God to punish another for its sin. This is why God permitted Israel to destroy the Canaanites (see Deut. 9:4,5) and later allowed the Assyrians and Babylonians to drive out the

Israelites as punishment for their sin. Yet His use of a nation to fulfill His purposes does not mean their moral superiority. A nation in God's hand may be a "rod of [his] anger" (Isa. 10:5)—but it is always a "bent rod" and subject to his final judgment.

Fourth, ***God is concerned for all nations and all peoples***. He is declared to be their Lord (Deut. 10:17; Dan. 2:47 cf. I Tim. 6:15). Though God specifically selected the nation of Israel to be His covenant people, it was not to favor one above all other nations, but to provide in Israel a channel through which God's grace could reach out to and "bless" all nations. This purpose was made explicit in the call God gave to Abraham: "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." And God's purposes included both the physical and spiritual welfare of the individual peoples. He is surely the *God of Provision*. This is displayed in His ample provision made for the foreigner/alien/immigrant. Strangers in the midst of God's people were to be loved in the name of the triune God, who loves strangers. None were to be excluded from temple worship ("a house of prayer for all peoples"). All were to be embraced and welcomed by the people of God. Holiness and hospitality were both to characterize the covenant people of God in their relationships to those outside the commonwealth of Israel. Though set apart unto Yahweh, the Israelites were to be extending mercy to the needy, loving neighbors and outcasts – because God does. The people of God are always to reflect the character of God.

Fifth, ***God's purpose is to bless all the nations redemptively***. As the *God of Redemption* He intends to bring the peoples the gift of His salvation. This is clearly seen in the Psalms and in Isaiah. The Old Testament reveals a merciful and compassionate God who is on mission to the nations. This God-on-mission, therefore, has chosen and commissioned two Servants to take His message of salvation to earth's ethnic peoples: His servant Israel and His servant Messiah (Is. 42-54). *Israel's vocation*, her role in the divine purpose, was to represent and mediate His mercy and grace to the peoples. As the recipient of divine blessings, the nation was to exalt God in its life and worship, attracting individuals from among the nations, inviting and incorporating them into the covenant family. *Messiah's role* was to be Yahweh's Sent-one, the Suffering Servant, offering his life as a sacrifice for the peoples, satisfying the plan of the Father (Is. 53; Ps. 22).

From the very beginning this salvific plan of God had the central figure of the “Seed” who was to come in the person of the Man of Promise (Gen. 3:15; 9:27; 12:1, etc.). God’s plan was necessitated by the rebellion/ fall of man in the Garden, and the increasing spread of sin, depicted in the narratives following the fall. Yet God remained faithful to His creation, entering into gracious, unconditional covenants with Noah (9:9-13), Abraham (12:1-3, etc.), and later with David (II Sam. 7). Consistently, in the Old Testament record the message of salvation blessing is offered to and aimed universally at all people groups and nations. Redemption from sin and bondage would come—through Yahweh’s selected servants of the promise-plan. This hope of salvation is summed up in the prophets as the “desired [One] of all nations” (Haggai 2:7).

Sixth, *God’s purpose for all nations includes a future eschatological kingdom.* He is always portrayed as the *God of Hope*. The Old Testament is replete with promises and predictions that one day all nations will make pilgrimage to Zion to learn about Yahweh and his ways, bringing their wealth, and joining in His worship (Is. 2:2-4; 60-62; cf. Micah 4:1-5; Ps. 36:8-9; 50:2). Significantly, this ingathering of Gentiles is depicted as an eschatological event, effected by God, not Israel. Linked to this anticipated time are the Old Testament expectation of the coming Davidic king and the establishment of His kingdom, which is said to be eternal (II Sam. 7:13). It appears that this coming kingdom will be two fold: on earth and yet also eternal in the new heavens and earth (Is. 35:1-10; 65:17-18). In the Davidic earthly (millennial?) kingdom, Israel as a nation (a remnant?) is to be reconstituted, restored, and regathered (Ezek. 34:12-15, etc.). In the future age Yahweh himself will not only shepherd his flock, Israel (Ezek. 34:7-24) but initiate a new covenant (Ezek. 36:25-27; Jer. 31:31-34). Then the Gentiles—representatives from all ethnic nations—will be incorporated into the new people of God.

Finally, *God’s passionate desire and purpose is to be worshipped and glorified by all people groups.* Above all else, He is the *God of Glory*. The Old Testament is filled with optimistic and hopeful expectations that Jehovah God will one day be worshipped by people from all the nations of the world. Significantly, this hope is repeatedly expressed in ethnic people group terminology (families, tribes, nations, peoples). This long-anticipated and certain hope of the nations is expressed in several ways in the

Old Testament. First, there are outright *promises* that the nations will one-day worship the true God (Ps. 2:8; 45:17; 47:9; 86:9; 102:15,22; Is. 49:6; 51:5; 52:10; 52:15; 55:5; 56:7; 60:3; 66:18-19, etc.). Second, there are confident *prayers* that God would be praised and honored among the nations (Ps. 67:1-5; 72:11,17, etc.). Finally, there are striking *exhortations* to the people of God to declare His glory among the nations (Ps. 9:11; 96:3; 105:1; Is. 12:4). Surprisingly, even pagan peoples are exhorted to be honoring and praising the Lord God (Ps. 47:1; 66:8; 96:7,10; 117:1; Is. 34:1).

This Old Testament expectation is premised on the reality that God is forever passionate for his own glory. Over and over God reveals that He is zealous to maintain his name and fame among the nations; His glory He will not give to another (Is. 48:9-11). The Old Testament makes clear that God's ultimate goal is to uphold and display the glory of His name to all peoples. He created all peoples for His glory (Is. 43:6-7). He called Israel and did numerous acts of power through her for His glory (Ex. 14:4; Ps. 106:7-8; Jer. 13:11; Ezek. 20:14; 36:22-23,32; I Sam. 12:20-22; II Sam. 7:23; I Kings 19:34; etc.). In fact, God's plan is to *fill* the earth with the *knowledge of his glory* (Hab. 2:14). Thus, even without the fuller and completed revelation of the New Testament, we can boldly assert that God has always been on mission to bring glory to Himself. Clearly His purpose is to bless all the families of the earth and win a worshipping people from "all nations." *The Lord Himself is the missionary* who ultimately gathers and rescues, not simply the dispersed of Israel, but also people from all nations, *so that they may see his glory*. The final goal of mission, then, is the glory of God, that He may be known and honored for who He really is!

In conclusion, a true theology, built from the biblical revelation of God, is needed to fortify us to do mission today in a multiethnic postmodern world. Because He is the God of Creation, we affirm the unity of the human race. Because He is the God of Variety, we affirm the diversity of ethnic cultures. Because He is the God of History, we affirm His sovereignty over all nations. Because He is the God of Provision, we affirm His constant and providential care of the nations. Because He is the God of Redemption, we affirm that His salvation is to be offered to all peoples. Because He is the God of Hope, we

affirm His coming kingdom for all. And because He is the God of Glory, we affirm and celebrate the vision of all nations one day worshiping at His throne!

Missiological Implications from an O.T. Biblical Ethnicity

Our study of the Old Testament biblical revelation has demonstrated that the ethnic nations are a major thrust from beginning to end. There are also many apparent applications for modern day missions. From the above seven foundational theological principles we would humbly propose the following twelve insights. Many more could no doubt be suggested for missiological consideration and implementation.

1. God values our ethnicity, our identity, our heritage—and so can we.
2. Yet ethnic identity cannot wholly define us, nor can it save us.
3. We should accept people from every cultural and ethnic group as our neighbors, treating them with mutual respect and dignity.
4. The people of God must model for our culture what it means to live in unity amid diversity.
5. Believers must pursue ethnic and cultural diversity not because it is politically correct, or because it is the latest theological fad, or even because it is a good conservative or liberal ideal. We should do so because it is integral to both God’s creative and redemptive plan.
6. The Scriptures show no ethnically pure “correct” culture.
7. The good news of Yahweh’s salvation provision is transcultural and transethnic.
8. To properly reflect the character of our God, believers must pursue and embrace those ethnically and culturally different.
9. Ethnic and cultural diversity should not be seen as a nuisance or a hindrance to quick church growth, but as a God-given aid for gospel dissemination.
10. To twist the Scriptures to uphold a supposed ethnic superiority or cultural elitism—as well as to deify one’s own group—are both opposite and sinful extremes because they seek to ethnologize God.
11. The modern day categorization of mankind into four basic “races” (largely based on external features such as skin color) has no basis in Scripture, and therefore should not be used by Christians. A better way of perceiving and describing humanity would be in terms of “peoples” or “people groups.”
12. Because biologically and biblically there is only one race, the human race, “interracial” marriage is a myth. Marriage of peoples of different colors or cultures certainly should not be seen as a violation of biblical principles.

¹ However the claim that American has thus become the most religiously diverse nation in the world is false. The majority of U.S. newcomers are in fact professing Christians and often bring with them an invigorating zeal for evangelism, thus strengthening Christianity in America, not undermining it as some (such as Diane Eck in *A New Religious America*) claim. For substantiation see Philip Jenkins. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

² For proof that America's increasing ethnic diversity seems to be unraveling our cultural and social fabric, consider the words of Tom Sine in his book *Cease Fire: Searching for Sanity in America's Culture Wars*: "People everywhere are building more walls. Skinheads are holding more rallies. Californians passed Proposition 187, denying welfare public education and non-emergency medical aid to illegal aliens. White Howard Beach teenagers used baseball bats on black teenagers . . ." (1995,92). For further sociological evidence of what some see as the potential negative consequences of America's increasing multiculturalism and ethnic diversity, see Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (1992) and Michael Lind (1995).

³ Most Western Christians seem to be somewhat threatened and bewildered at our rapidly changing multiethnic world. This is no doubt so because most of our congregations are still ethnocentric and homogeneous. Evangelicals in particular seem to exhibit much uncertainty over the practicalities of cross-cultural, cross racial and interethnic ministry, in part due to our own dismal record on race relations. In the U.S. we seem to have been impacted as well by our own nation's current divisive debate over race, ethnicity and culture (see footnote #2 above). As a result, most American Christians seem skeptical that multicultural churches can be viable and effective. This pessimism needs to be challenged by a careful study of the Word of God. Otherwise Christian (biblical) idealism will give way to Christian pragmatism on ethnic issues in the church.

⁴ For more on the benefits of using the biblical-theological method in the study of God's unfolding plan of redemption in missions see the introduction to Kostenberger and O'Brien's *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth* (2001, 19-23). On the need for a biblical theology of mission, see Bosch 1993:175-192.

⁵ Since Scripture is ultimately God's inerrant Word we may legitimately expect to find an underlying logic and unity in the totality of biblical revelation on ethnicity. Our assumption is that the God of Scripture always acts coherently and purposefully in history.

⁶ For example Schreck and Barrett (1987, 33) state, "Ethnicity is . . . one of the many forces which shape human social life." Others include "residence, class, caste, career, nationality, leisure, travel, clubs, societies, industrialization, and so on." (1987:16-17). The authors give insightful definitions for "people" and "people groups" that are representative of many missiologists today. (1987:6-7)

⁷ As we shall see, our modern use of "ethnic group" corresponds roughly to the biblical concepts of "nations," "families," and "peoples." Our English term *ethnos* is in fact from the Greek *ethnos* and originally meant a number of people living together as a tribe, a people, a nation or group.

⁸ It should be noted that an ethnic group is to be carefully distinguished from other similar concepts such as nation, race, tribe, social class, minority group, or homogeneous unit. See Peter Wagner's helpful discussion in *Our Kind of People* (1979, 38-40, 61-74). Hutchinson and Smith (1996, 6-7) give six main features of an "ethnic" community: 1) a common proper name; 2) a myth of common ancestry; 3) memories of a common past; 4) elements of a common culture, which normally includes religion, custom or language; 5) a link with a homeland; and 6) a sense of solidarity.

⁹ The ultimate grounding for this pattern of relationship is found within the eternal triune relationships. This is more fully seen in later N.T. revelation, especially in passages like John 17. There we see that the unity of the Spirit, the Father and the Son are eternally distinct yet unified in holy love in one being. In the Godhead there is mutual love, mutual knowing, willing and purposing, mutual glorification. Thus human beings can be personal beings in relationships—first with God and then with one another. This Trinitarian anthropology is the ultimate basis for later N.T. teaching on racial reconciliation.

¹⁰ As we shall see, "races" is not really a biblical term or concept. It would be better to speak of the ethnic groupings of mankind as "nations," "peoples" or "people groups."

¹¹ Some evangelicals, like McKissic and Evans (1994, 99) believe the evidence points to Adam being *formed from African dirt/ground*. Interestingly, many secular scientists today claim that all people go back to one woman, whom they often call African Eve, believing she evolved in Africa. The location of the Garden of Eden, whether in Africa or the Middle East, is not pertinent to our study of ethnicity.

¹² In reference to the highly speculative climatic environmental view, proposed by some tower of Babel theorists, it would take two to three thousand years for the sun to change a race of people to black or for cold weather to turn a large group to white! But genetically it could take only one generation. Which is more believable?!

¹³ This “biblical genetic view” of racial origins is clearly taught and explained by Ken Ham, an Australian creation research scientist in *One Blood: The Biblical Answer to Racism* (1999), a book this author recommends. Ham attributes the medium brown complexion of Adam and Eve to a high level of melanin content in their skin whereas McKissic and Evans (see footnote #11) believe it was due to the soil from which they came. Ham contends, from a scientific perspective, that all humans are basically the *same color* because we all have the same pigment melanin! Some people just have more of that color than others. This, he argues, is why the majority of the world’s population today are medium brown. Another evangelical who evidently holds this biblical genetic view is the Canadian anthropologist, Dr. Arthur Custance, in his highly recommended book, *Noah’s Three Sons* (1975).

¹⁴ Thus the pre-flood and pre-Babel biblical world may have been the only period in history when racial prejudice did not exist!

¹⁵ The Hebrew word *adam* (more correctly *adham*) is not merely a proper name. Even in the Genesis story it is evidently not used as a name until Genesis 4:25. The word is one of several Hebrew words meaning “man” and is the generic term for “human race.” In the vast majority of O.T. usages it refers to male individuals but occasionally can refer to humanity in general (see Ex. 4:11; Num. 12:3; 16:29; Deut. 4:28, etc.). Thus the Old Testament phrase “sons of men” (literally “sons of adam”) simply means “men” or “human beings.” This points to a common Old Testament concern—all of earth’s peoples are one and belong to one God. He is Lord of all nations (see Gen. 9:5-7; Deut. 5:24; 8:3; I Kings 8:38,39; Psa. 8:4; 89:48; 107:8-31; Prov. 12:14; Mic. 6:8, etc.).

¹⁶ According to some, Shem can mean “dusky,” Japheth “fair” and Ham “black.” Thus from Shem came the (non-Hamitic) dusky and olive-colored races, from Japheth came those with lighter complexions, and from Ham came the dark races. The meaning of “Ham”, it is claimed, is supported by evidence from both Hebrew and Arabic that the word “*haman*” means “to be hot” or “to be black.” Some, like McKissic and Evans (102-3) have suggested that Noah visually and prophetically saw these color distinctions in his sons and named them accordingly. Thus “Noah’s sons reflected the complexions that their names indicate.”

¹⁷ Thus Blacks have been said to be “inferior,” “servile” and “cursed” people. Some have even gone so far as to teach that the curse on Ham caused he and his descendants to **become** dark skinned, to have thick lips, a big nose, kinky hair, as well as to be forever assigned to servitude.

¹⁸ For example, C.I. Scofield, author the influential *Scofield Reference Bible* (see his comments on Gen. 9:24-27 in the original 1909 version, p. 16); C.F. Keil and F. Delitzch (in their *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. I, pp. 157-158); Arthur Pink (*Gleanings in Genesis*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1981, p. 125); and Jamieson, Faussett and Brown (*Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961, p. 24). That the “Hamitic Curse” is still held by some today is no doubt due largely to the fact that it has been taught by numerous respected Caucasian scholars whose writings still impact many.

¹⁹ Literally “gazed with satisfaction.” There is no evidence in the text that some perverse activity in addition to seeing Noah’s nakedness, occurred. Perhaps he was glad to see his father’s dignity and authority reduced to such weakness. Evidently he thought his brothers would share his feelings so he eagerly told them. Verse 23 shows they did not but showed their father respect.

²⁰ Why was Canaan cursed? Several reasons have been suggested for the shift from Ham to his son. Some maintain, based on Ex. 20:5, it was simply because of his father's sin (but Ex. 20 restricts such punishment to "those who hate me"). Others believe that Canaan and his descendants were to be punished because they were going to be even worse than Ham (Lev. 18:2,3, 6-30). Probably the best explanation (given by Arthur Custance, Josephus, Carlisle Peterson, Anthony Evans, McKissic, etc.) is that Gen. 9:1 clearly states, "God *blessed* Noah *and his sons*" (including Ham!); thus to have cursed Ham God would have had to violate His previous covenant. I Kings 11:11-13 shows a similar incident: when Solomon violated his covenantal duty towards God, the Kingdom was not taken from him but from his son. God punished Rehoboam instead of Solomon out of respect for His previous covenant. God always remains faithful to His covenants, even when we do not (II Tim. 2:13).

²¹ Significantly the Canaanites were the very people with whom Israel had to do battle shortly after they first heard Moses' reading of this passage.

²² For example, compare Hutchinson and Smith's six characteristics of an ethnic community (listed in footnote 8) with what is seen in Genesis 10. There are common *proper names* for the ethnic groups listed; often the name of an *ancestor* is given; the break in the genealogy to tell the story of Nimrod (10:8-12) is clearly a historical *shared memory*; homeland *territories* are sometimes given (Mizraim/Egypt, Seba, Dedan for example); and after the genealogy of each son the diversity of their *languages* is mentioned (10:5,20,32)—one of the elements of a *common culture*.

²³ Lesslie Newbign (1989, 82), a noted missiologist, writes, "The Bible does not speak about 'humanity' but about 'all the families of the earth' or 'all the nations.' It follows that this mutual relatedness, this dependence of one another, is not merely part of the journey ... but is intrinsic to the goal [of salvation] itself."

²⁴ Seventy is a multiple of 10 and 7, both numbers signifying completeness. This may be symbolic of what was thought to be the number of known nations in that day. Numbers with symbolic significance are common in Genesis.

²⁵ For evidence of the contributions of the Hamitic people from Scripture and ancient history, see Arthur C. Custance's comprehensive and scholarly work, *Noah's Three Sons* (1975). Custance is a Canadian white evangelical and anthropologist whose work has been lauded by the Canadian government. His thesis is that "virtually all the people who in ancient times were the originators and creators of civilization in both the old and new world" were Hamites. He also believes, "Out of Ham have been derived all the so-called colored races—"the yellow," "red," "brown," and "black"—the Mongoloid and the Negroid. Their contribution to human civilization in so far as it has to do with technology has been absolutely unsurpassed." (pp. 13,72; see also 122-123, 152, 201). To his credit, J. Vernon McGhee (1981, 51) also courageously took this position. A white Jewish scholar, Martin Bernal, in *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (1987), also documents this. African American scholar Dr. Charles B. Copher (1993) also seeks to show that Hamites mentioned in the Bible were black and the founders of the great ancient civilizations.

²⁶ Ken Ham (1990,74) suggests that another benefit of the dispersion of Babel was the 'breaking [of] a large interbreeding group [early humanity] into small, inbreeding groups," ensuring "that the resultant groups would have different mixes of genes for various physical features." Thus in a short term there would be certain fixed racial differences. In addition, "the selection pressure of the environment would modify the existing combinations of genes, causing a tendency for characteristics to suit their environment."

²⁷ Many interpreters have focused on the presupposed pride of "making a name for ourselves" (11:4). But even more significant is what evidently *motivated* this need for power and recognition: the fear of being scattered across the earth. In other words, mankind's unifying purpose was self-preservation *on their own terms*. This was not a desire for unity as willed by God (i.e. to be in a covenant relationship with Him (cf. 9:8-11) but a desire for unity which would lead mankind into a fortress mentality, seeking to survive on its own resources. No wonder God saw this as a supreme act of defiance!

²⁸ Gen. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14

²⁹ The Hebrew word *mishpaha* (family) in some contexts can also designate something even smaller than a tribe. For example, in Joshua 7:14 it stands for households (extended families). See the good discussion on these grammatical points in John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!* (1993), pp. 177-84.

³⁰ That *panta ta ethne* is the exact Greek term used in the Matthew account of the Great Commission, seems to further clarify what the target of Christ's commission is: not reaching individuals but people groups. Interestingly, when Peter quotes the Abrahamic promise in Acts 3:25, he uses the Greek phrase *pasai hai patriai* which means "all the families." A *patria* is a people group, which is the subgroup of a tribe or clan.

³¹ Clearly the Old Testament concept of "family" in these frequent contexts does not carry our modern meaning of nuclear family but has the idea of something larger than extended families—something more like "clan." This is seen also in Psa. 22:27 and 96:7 where we find the phrase "all the families of the nations." Both John Piper (1993, 182-4) and Walter Kaiser (2000, 19), after careful analysis of the Hebrew and Greek, agree on this suggested smallness of "people group" in the Old Testament missional plan of God.

³² Abraham was called to leave home for a purpose. That purpose was both to *receive* and *give a blessing*. Kaiser (2000, 18) points out that the initial three blessings promised to Abraham are followed by a purpose clause: "*in order that you may be a blessing*." The term *to bless* occurs 88 times in the book of Genesis alone and 400 times in the Old Testament. For an interesting discussion of the significance of the blessing concept to missions see Stephen A. Rhodes in his fine book: *Where the Nations Meet* (1998, 42-43).

³³ The nation is called "my treasured possession" (*segullah*). The Hebrew word denotes the personal individual treasures of a king, who owned everything in his kingdom in an official way, but had certain things that were cherished privately. God was not relinquishing his claim on any of his peoples. They all belonged to him, and He was concerned for them all. But He needed a special kind of people for a particular purpose.

³⁴ Whether Israel's God-given task of missionary outreach to the nations was to be *centripetal* (inward moving, i.e. they were to be passive witnesses) or *centrifugal* (outward moving, i.e. they were to be actively going to their neighbors with God's salvific message) is a subject of lively debate. To see the arguments for the aggressive, "cross-cultural" or foreign mission viewpoint see Kaiser (2000, 7-74). For the more passive view, see Peters (1972, 21ff) and Goldsworthy (1997, 3-7). Kostenberger and O'Brien (2001, 35) seem to take a mediating position, stating that "Israel related to the nations in two ways: "first, *historically* through incorporation, and then *eschatologically* through ingathering."

³⁵ The commonest Hebrew term for "stranger/alien" is *ger*, translated frequently in the LXX by *proselutos*. In later Judaism, *ger* came to mean proselyte. There is, however, no reason for identifying the Old Testament "strangers" exclusively with proselytes.

³⁶ Jesus underscored this wider interpretation in the parable of the good Samaritan, which was designed to contradict the racial prejudice among the Jews of that day (Lk. 10:30-31). If He had needed any authority, Jesus would no doubt have cited Moses. Significantly Jesus calls any person in need—which would certainly include an "alien in our midst"—a "neighbor."

³⁷ For example, strangers were to enjoy the Sabbath rest (Ex. 20:10; 23:12; Deut. 16:11,14). Along with the native-born Israelites they were commanded not to work on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-30). The implication of this later passage was that both the stranger and the Israelite could be cleansed from their sin on the Day of Atonement. Strangers could participate in fasting as well as feasting (Lev. 17:8, 10, 12, 13; 18:26; 22:18, etc.). In view of the exclusivist nature of Judaism, these open-hearted provisions for strangers are very remarkable. They clearly display God's love for all peoples. And His love for all was to be openly expressed by His people in a very high level of inclusiveness in the religious, legal and economic areas of their everyday life.

³⁸ Jeremiah 22:3

³⁹ Ezekiel 18:7,16

⁴⁰ The Davidic covenant is actually recorded twice—2 Samuel 7 and I Chronicles 17—and a commentary on it is given in Psalm 89 (cf. also Psa. 110:4).

⁴¹ Later prophetic texts (cf. Amos 9:11-15; Is. 11:1-2; Jer. 23:5) also draw a distinction between the present failure of representatives of David's line and a glorious future to be inaugurated by a coming descendant of David.

⁴² For example, in 2 Sam. 7:9 Yahweh says that he will make David's "name great." (cf. Gen. 12:2). Also in 2 Sam. 7:10 He adds that He will "provide a place for my people Israel" (= Promised Land cf. Gen. 15:18 and Deut. 11:24). Finally, David will be given "rest" from his enemies (7:14 = creation rest?)

⁴³ Walter Kaiser also takes the position that there is a very close relationship between the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants—i.e., that what God had earlier given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob He was now continuing through David. Kaiser's argument is based on David's response to God's surprise announcement—"this is the charter for humanity, O Lord Yahweh." (Kaiser's translation of 2 Sam. 7:19) Kaiser feels that this demonstrates that David understood correctly that God's ancient plan would be continuing and would "involve the future of all humanity." (2000, 26-27), i.e. it would involve all the "peoples."

⁴⁴ The New Testament demonstrates that the ultimate fulfillment of the kingly role is Jesus of Nazareth who, as a Son of David, was a Son of Abraham, and also Son of God (Jer. 23:5; 30:9; Zech. 9:9; Matt. 27:11; Lk. 19:38; 23:38; Jn. 1:49)

⁴⁵ God's universal rule over the nations is seen, for example, in passages such as Dan. 4:35; Jer. 18:1-10; 27:1-7; Job 12:23; Psa. 22:27-28; 47:8; 86:9 (cf. Acts 17:26,28), etc. Later in the prophetic writings we also see God's sovereignty in the way Yahweh "uses" the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians as agents of His purposes in history.

⁴⁶ Paul says the same thing in his sermon to the Athenians in Acts 17:26.

⁴⁷ Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is the fourth and longest of the four servant songs, quoted more often in the New Testament than any Old Testament passage. The chapter divisions found in our modern versions are not a part of the originals. Scholars agree that Isaiah 52:10 may be best seen as part of the Isaiah 53 song.

⁴⁸ The terms of 52:13—exalted, extolled, very high—all seem to point to a time when ultimately the Servant will rule over His Kingdom and will receive the international and multinational recognition for the effectiveness of His reign (cf. Phil. 2:9).

⁴⁹ In the Servant's disfigured state (52:14), He will perform a priestly work of cleansing not just of Israel, but of many from other ethnic peoples (cf. Ex. 29:21; Lev. 4:6; 8:11; 14:7; Num. 8:7; 19:18,19; Heb. 9:13).

⁵⁰ When Christ takes His throne (at His final exaltation) human leaders from the "nations" will evidently see the unfolding power and glory and be in awe before the once-despised Servant (cf. Psa. 2). Significantly, Paul applied this principle of Is. 52:15 to his own apostolic mission of preaching the gospel of Christ to the unreached nations (*ethne*)—see Rom. 15:21.

⁵¹ There are four "servant songs" in which the servant is clearly an individual – the Messiah: 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12. He is "Israel" in its ideal form (49:3)

⁵² Isaiah 42:1-6 seems to confirm that the covenant made with Abraham (in which God promised to bless all peoples of the earth through him—Gen. 12:3) will be effected through the ministry of the Servant of Yahweh—both at His first and second advents.

⁵³ Recent Old Testament scholarship has in fact claimed that the role of Jerusalem and her place within the divine plan are themes that bind the prophecy of Isaiah together as a theological unit.

⁵⁴ Walter Kaiser (2000, 56) contends that the Servant is the whole nation of Israel in 12 out of 20 references in Isaiah: 41:8-10; 43:8-13; 43:14-44:5; 44:6-8, 21-23; 44:24-45; 48:1,7, 10-12, 17. He concludes, "...the Servant of the Lord"

is a corporate term that embodies at one and the same time a reference to the One, who is the representative of the whole, and the whole group that belongs to that single whole.”

⁵⁵ For a detailed exegetical study from the “servant songs” of God’s call to Israel to be an *active* witness to the nations – not only in OT times but in the future millennial kingdom—see Walter Kaiser’s fine discussion (2000, 51-63).

⁵⁶ That a believing faithful remnant within Israel was expected to *continue* the work of witnessing to the nations during the present *church age* seems to be evident from Paul’s use of Isa. 49:6 and 42:6 in Acts 13:47 and 26:22 (cf. also Luke 2:32). Also our Lord’s final commission in Acts 1:8 (particularly the expression “to the ends of the earth” which is identical to the Greek rendering of the same phrase in Isaiah 49:6) seems to validate this further. At the same time, the servant songs seem to have future millennial allusions and Israel’s witness at that time as well.

⁵⁷ The spontaneous coming of all nations to the God of Israel is also occasionally seen in the Old Testament (Ps. 68:31; Zech. 8:23). Ultimately, however, this will be because of God’s sovereign, electing, initiating activity.

⁵⁸ See Is. 60:62; Jer. 3:17; Mic. 4:1-5; Ps. 22:27-31; 36:8-9; 50:2; Zech. 2:11; 3:14-17; 8:20-23. In the New Testament we see the continuation and consummation of this OT prophetic theme that in the last days the nations will flock to Zion to present their gifts to God. The climax of this process is seen in John’s vision of heavenly glory in Revelation 21: 24-26 – “The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it ... The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.”

⁵⁹ Missionaries are sent to “Tarshish and Pul and Lud... and tubal and Java, to the coastlands afar off who have not heard My fame nor seen My glory.” Tarshish was possibly in Spain, Pul and Lud in North Africa, Tubal in East Asia Minor, and Javan in Greece. These seem to be representative Gentile populations that will hear of God’s glory through the faithful remnant. These final verses in Isaiah seem to give details of missionary witness during the millennium.

⁶⁰ See for example, Jeremiah 3:17; 33:9; Ezekiel 36:22-23; 38:23; 39:7; Joel 2:28; Amos 9:11-12; Micah 4:1-5; Zechariah 2:11; 8:20-23; 9:10; 14:16-19.

⁶¹ The term “restore” in this context probably has a salvific meaning.

⁶² George Peters (1972, 116) points out that there are about 175 references in the Psalms of a universal note referring to the Gentile nations.

⁶³ The Hebrew word *am* is used more than 1,000 times in the Old Testament and refers to a group of individuals having a corporate identity, as for example, the people of Israel, or the people of Egypt. It is significant that *am* does not occur in the Abrahamic covenant. It is usually translated into Greek as *loas*. In contrast to *goy*, it tends to be used to differentiate the “people” from the officials: kings, priests, prophets, etc. The term *am* is often used in a general sense in the Old Testament to refer to a group of people larger than a tribe (*shebet* or *matteh*), but less numerous than a race. It may refer to a nation, whether a foreign nation or Israel. There are two predominate aspects brought out with *am*: 1) the concept of *relatedness* among a people, and 2) the concept *unity* of a group of people. Thus it is close to our concept of an ethnic group. From: Harris, Archer, and Waltke (1980, 676).

⁶⁴ The Hebrew word *goy* (plural *goyim*) is a close synonym to *am* (and *ammim*) and is harder to define. The basic idea is that of a defined body or group of people. *Goyim* normally refers to the nations, especially the surrounding pagan nations often referred to as “Gentiles” and “heathen.” The term *goy* is used especially to refer to specifically defined political, ethnic or territorial groups of people. Thus when God says to Abraham, “I will make of you a great nation (*goy*)” he means a territorial, identifiable ethnic people (Gen. 12:2; 17:20; 21:18). Interestingly in Ex. 33:13 Moses, referring to Israel, says, “This *goy* (i.e. an ethnic nation) is thy people (*am*).” Thus, *goy* (and *goyim*) are also very close to our modern day concept of an ethnic people group. From: Harris, Archer, and Waltke (1980, 153-54).

⁶⁵ Other verses in which it is important to read “peoples” instead of “people” are Psalm 66:8; 67:2,3; 105:1; 117:1. So understood, the 67th Psalm is clearly a prayer for God to continue to bless his Chosen People for a specific purpose: “that your ways maybe known on earth, your salvation among all nations.”

⁶⁶ For example, the eminent physical anthropologist, Ashley Montagu (1974, 74) states, “Concerning the origin of the living varieties of man we say little more than that there are many reasons for believing that a single stock gave rise to all of them. All varieties of man belong to the same species and have the same remote ancestry. This is a conclusion to which all the relevant evidence of comparative anatomy, palaeontology, serology and genetics points.” As for human blood, apart from the four blood groups and the Rh factor (which are present in all ethnic groups), “the blood of all human beings is in every respect the same.” (p. 307)

⁶⁷ For an insightful discussion of how diversity magnifies the glory of God better than mere unity, see John Piper (1993, 215-18). Piper also gives scriptural support for this concept.

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