

## Davis, '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. Many of those flooding into our country are Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Hindus. A sovereign God has literally brought the mission fields<sup>[92]</sup> 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. 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 its ugly head. Witness the violence of Bosnia, Liberia, Chechnya, and Rwanda. Arthur Schlesinger 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[93] 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? 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 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, 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. For the purposes of this paper we will limit ourselves to[94] the OT, 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. Though not explicitly found in Scripture, these concepts, as we hope to prove, seem to be biblically based. 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. 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: "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." [95]

## 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." 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. This is<sup>[96]</sup> 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" of mankind. The Scriptures do not explicitly deal with this issue, but this writer believes the predominant evidence is that Adam, having been formed from the soil (Gen 2:7, 13), 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. 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. Thus color variation no doubt existed before the Tower of<sup>[97]</sup> 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.

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*.

## The Sons of Noah

Genesis 9, 10, and 11 contain 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<sup>[98]</sup> today. 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 genes 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.” Sadly, even some fundamentalists and evangelicals have blindly taught this theory. The curse-of-Ham theory stems from a complete misunderstanding of Genesis 9:20–27, which is the story of Noah’s drunkenness and[99] his sons’ response. Genesis says Ham “saw” 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). Here, then, God is giving the nation of Israel a theological basis for the later conquest of the Canaanites. The Canaanites were first subjugated by Joshua (Josh 9:27; 16:10; etc.) and later by Solomon (1 Kgs 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 24).[100]

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. 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, 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 funda-[101] mental unity. This is, after all, a genealogy—it is about who is related to whom. 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) and the thirty from Ham (10:6–20) and the twenty-six from Shem (10:21–31) add up (significantly?) to 70 “peoples.” In general, the Japhethites 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. People of color were evidently the[102] 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. True, God was judging their pride and **[103]** their self-made unity, 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 OT 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. 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. So it seems the Abrahamic blessing is intended by God to reach even to fairly small groupings of people. That is seen even more clearly in the **[104]** 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.” 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 NT 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.

Abraham was chosen of Jehovah for a purpose—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 **[105]** 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 Israel's 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") 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 priests," 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.[106]

### 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" (v. 6). 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" (v. 7). 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 OT, 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 OT 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.

### Protection of "Aliens"

Careful instructions and provisions were given to Israel concerning treatment of and attitudes toward the "resident alien" (Hebrew *ger*). The Mosaic legislation on this theme is frequent (see[107] Lev 19:18, 33, 34; Deut 10:14–19; Exod 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. 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 OT 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 OT injunctions to treat the immigrant with mercy. Numerous other Pentateuchal regulations extended worship privileges to aliens equally with the Israelites.[108] Jeremiah and Ezekiel also contain admonitions to "do no wrong to the alien." Israel is warned about this matter more than thirty-six times in the OT. Taken together, these passages confirm that during the OT 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 (1 Kgs 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. In the progressive unfolding of God's Messianic plan, the Davidic covenant is second in importance only to the Abrahamic covenant and is the next expansion of it. Although Yahweh refuses David's request to build a house (i.e., [109] a temple) for the ark of the covenant, he does give David 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 B.C.? 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. Significantly, in the Davidic promise there are important allusions to Genesis 12:1–3, which suggest that "what God has in store for David is a *reiteration*, if not a *partial fulfillment*, of what was promised to Abraham." Thus the Davidic covenant is intimately linked with God's "blessing" (saving) purposes for all mankind through Abraham. [110]

Ultimately Yahweh's rule over the nations will be through the coming Davidic king who will function as his vice regent.

There is abundant OT witness to God's sovereignty over the destiny and destinations of the "nations." 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." 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 (Exod 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 (Isa 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 peo-[111] ples). We will overview a few of the key passages in Isaiah focusing especially on the beloved Suffering Servant sections of the book (chap. 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 52:10 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" (52:13) with the result that "he [will] sprinkle [or "startle"] many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him ..." (52:15). 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.

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[112] 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. 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). 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, [113] 22–23). 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 ...'" (Isa 43:10; see also 44:8).

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*. Furthermore this assigned task of being and bringing "light to the Gentiles" has both present 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 (Isa 11:10). Zion will have an amazing drawing power: "all nations will stream to it" (Isa 2:2). Ultimately this will be in fulfillment of Yahweh's promises to the patriarchs (cf. Isa 2:3—"the house of the God of Jacob"). The [114] nations will make their journey to Jerusalem at the end time in order to learn about Yahweh and his ways (Isa 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 of Israel (Isa 56:6–7: "there *will I bring* to my holy mountain"). 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 (vv. 1–9). An evident fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises, the nations will stream into the city bringing their wealth (vv. 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 OT expectation.

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 lands to proclaim God's glory (66:19). [115]

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 OT.

## The Nations in the Other OT Prophets

Israel’s mission to the “nations” (ethnic peoples) is also an underlying theme in other OT prophets. 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). 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 **[116]** 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 the OT is encapsulated in the Psalms. In the Psalter the nations are represented as the great mass of humanity in rebellion against God (Ps 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, 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 has always been 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 OT, 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.**[117]**

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 Mount 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 (e.g., "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: *ammim*, which is the plural form of *am* ("people"). "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 plural**[118]** (cf. also 96:13). The exhortation for God's people to witness to the other peoples on earth becomes very clear.

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 OT teaching on ethnicity and seek to make some concluding missiological observations.

## Theological Principles Summarized

We have learned that in the OT 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 OT revelation.**[119]**

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 himself or itself above others. This dynamic principle of the creational unity of the human race, with its consequent implications, is vividly stated later in the NT 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 OT 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.

Second, *the diversification of peoples is good*. The whole creation witnesses to the fact that God enjoys diversity, and different[120] 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 God's 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 NT (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. Second, belonging to an ethnic group is for people's well being. Authentic living is found only in corporate connectedness. God believes in the value of groups—family, clan, tribe, and[121] ethnic peoples. The need to belong to a group is deeply ingrained in our human nature as created by God. The OT 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 indicate its 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. 1 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<sup>[122]</sup> 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 and 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 OT 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 (Isa 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 (Isa 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 of Eden, 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 (2 Sam 7). Consistently, in the OT 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" (Hag 2:7).

Sixth, *God's purpose for all nations includes a future eschatological kingdom.* He is always portrayed as the *God of hope*. The OT 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 (Isa 2:2–4; 60–62; cf. Mic 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 OT expectation of **[123]** the coming Davidic king and the establishment of his kingdom, which is said to be eternal (2 Sam 7:13). It appears that this coming kingdom will be twofold: on earth and yet also eternal in the new heavens and earth (Isa 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 also 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 OT 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 OT. 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; Isa 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; Isa 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; Isa 34:1).

This OT 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 (Isa 48:9–11). The OT 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 (Isa 43:6–7). He called Israel and did numerous acts of power through her for his glory (Exod 14:4; Ps 106:7–8; Jer 13:11; Ezek 20:14; 36:22–23, 32; 1 Sam 12:20–22; 2 Sam 7:23; 1 Kgs 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 NT, 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 [124] 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 worshipping at his throne!

### Missiological Implications from an OT Biblical Ethnicity

Our study of the OT 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.**[125]**
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 who are 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. Twisting the Scriptures to uphold a supposed ethnic superiority or cultural elitism and deifying 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.**[127]**