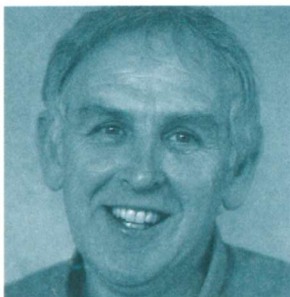


THE BIBLE AND ETHNICITY

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ETHNICITY HAS HAD EXTREMELY BAD PRESS IN THE LAST FEW YEARS. Yugoslavia, Rwanda and, now, the Congo mean that the words that immediately spring to mind when "ethnic" or "ethnicity" is mentioned are "conflict", "genocide", "hatred", and such like. To suggest that ethnicity is not bad is to swim against a strong current of contemporary popular opinion, but that is precisely what this short article sets out to do.

It is a well-known fact that, if we are going to be murdered, the murderer is more likely to be a close member of our family than anyone else. Yet, it is a rare person that condemns the institution of the family because the most terrible crimes occur within it. The institution itself is generally held to be good and the source of the evil that is associated with it is sought elsewhere. The same is true with "ethnicity" or "ethnic identity". The evil associated with ethnicity is not inherent to the "institution" itself.

The conviction that this type of human community is not inherently evil is based on what the Bible says about it and on what happens when the Bible finds a foothold in its life through acceptance of the gospel message, and especially when the Bible is translated into its language.

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT ETHNICITY

There is general agreement among Christians that the early chapters of Genesis set the scene for the great drama of divine redemption that is played out in the rest of the Bible. It is in these chapters that we understand that the earth and everything in it, including human beings, is God's creation. Human beings, both male and female, are unique creations in that they are capable of self-conscious relationship with their creator as well as with each other and other creatures. They are also responsible to God for the development of the potential of the earth. These chapters also teach that monogamous marriages and the family unit are the divinely mandated building blocks of society. However, human rejection of God's authority over their lives leads to human beings being alienated from God, from themselves, from each other and from the earth itself, and other creatures. Sin bred violence and a desire for divine power to the extent that God destroyed the earth in the flood and began again with Noah, his family and the creatures saved with him. As Noah's family multiplied and spread out over the earth ethnic identities or nations came into being (Gen 10). The appearance of ethnicity belongs to the book of origins and is as much a part of the set on which the drama of redemption is played out as the cultural mandate, the family or the fall.

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NOTES

1 For example, Mizraim (Egypt), Seba, Havilah, Dedan.

2 John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, *Ethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp.6–7.

3 Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Dewi Hughes, *Castrating Culture: A Christian Perspective on Ethnic Identity from the Margins* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2001), pp. 80–111.

► Genesis 10, “The Table of Nations”, and 11.1–9, “The Tower of Babel”, tell us the story of ethnicity from the divine perspective. The story of the Tower of Babel is a favoured passage for many Christians who want to rubbish ethnic identity. According to them, the story of the Tower of Babel proves that ethnic diversity is a curse. But what does this say about the redactor of Genesis? He has taken a lot of trouble in Genesis 10 to make a long list of ethnic identities that came into being as a result of the multiplication of human beings on earth without any suggestion that this was a curse on humanity. To the contrary, this spreading out (Gen 10.32b) of human beings over the earth, resulting in the formation of ethnic identities, can be viewed as obedience to God’s original command to fill the earth (Gen 1.28b). Therefore, on the presumption that the redactor of Genesis was not a fool, it is likely that the story of the Tower of Babel is saying something about how sin affects the development of ethnic identity, rather than that ethnic identities as such are a curse on humanity. Scattering and diversity were always part of God’s plan.

The story of the Tower of Babel witnesses to the human propensity to concentrate power to satisfy hubris. The key to the story is the desire for a name that aspires to divinity. To achieve this, those who hold the reigns of power need to impose a cultural uniformity because without it people would not be content to serve the ambitions of the centre of empire. Babel/Babylon is the archetype of imperialistic nationalism, the empire of this world in its opposition to the city of God, the great whole of Revelation that will be brought down in the final judgement. Throughout history diversity has been crucial to limiting its pretensions.

So, what can be gleaned about the characteristics of ethnic identity from Genesis 10? The summaries within each list of the descendants of Noah’s sons (Gen 10.5, 20, 31) and the final summary at the end of the chapter (Gen 10.32) tell us that territory, language and ancestry are all key factors in ethnic identity. These lists also show that an ethnicity is identified by a common name. The names are presented as the names of the ancestor, but in some instances the name of the ancestor has merged with the name of the territory.¹ In verses 8–12 there is a break from listing descendants/ethnic identities to tell the story of Nimrod, the son of Cush. This is a story that had become embedded in the memory of one branch of the Cushites and is typical of the stories that contribute to a sense of ethnic identity.

It is interesting how close the picture of ethnic identity that we have in Genesis 10 is to the way contemporary studies of the subject view it. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith define it as a type of human community that shares most of the following characteristics:

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.
6. A sense of solidarity.²

Genesis 10 has been presented as the key source of biblical understanding of ethnic identity, but it is also the key source for understanding nationhood because the two are synonymous in the Bible. The modern identification of “state” and “nation”, with all its attendant injustice and oppression, is totally absent from the Bible.

The rest of the Bible witnesses to two main themes with reference to ethnic identities/nations:

1. Their appearance, flourishing and demise are part of God’s plan and purpose for humanity (Deut 2.9–12, 19–23; 32.8; Jer 18.1–10; Acts 17.26).
2. The blessing of all ethnic identities/nations is a consistent theme of God’s redemptive purpose from Abraham to Jesus (Gen 18.18; Deut 4.6; Ps 45.17; 47; Is 2.2; 51.5; Hag 2.7; Mt 12.21; 28.19; Lk 24.27; Rom 16.26; Rev 21.24–26).

WHAT THE BIBLE DOES TO ETHNICITY

For the witnesses to the effects of the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost the amazing thing was that “each one heard [the disciples] speaking in his or her own language” (Acts 2.6). Since language is one of the key characteristics of ethnic identity, the miraculous ability to hear about the wonders of God in a host of languages was symbolic of the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham that all the nations would be blessed through his descendants. Ethnic identities are blessed when the wonders of God are presented in an understandable form to their own culture and context.

The first Christian missionaries were well prepared by their context for the international dissemination of the message of Jesus the Messiah. It was mainly Jews of the

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dispersion who spoke the many languages in which the wonders of God were celebrated at Pentecost. They were Jews that became culturally assimilated, but they also preserved their religious distinctiveness. The message of the miracle was that the wonders of the new messianic era were translatable into their adopted identity. They could go home and tell their neighbours about the wonders of God in their own language.

But Christianity is also a literate religion. It inherited a book from the Jews and quickly added one of its own in the first century of its life. We say that the original language of this New Testament is Greek, but the account of the works and words of Jesus that is its core was “translated” from Aramaic. The New Testament itself witnesses to the translatability of the gospel message.

The imperial languages of Greek and Latin were very useful and helped ensure the rapid and strategic spread of the message of Jesus throughout the Roman Empire, but it was clear from the beginning that the message could and ought to be embodied in people’s heart language. This would inevitably lead to Bible translation.

Bible translation began with Syriac in the second century and has carried on every since. The process was given a massive boost by the invention of the printing press and Reformation theology. Today, with the benefit of modern technology, Bible translation continues to grow. Agencies such as Bible Society and Wycliffe Bible Translators continue to play an important role in this respect.

It is very clear historically that accepting the message of the gospel and then having the book containing that message translated has often had a very affirming and uniting impact on ethnic identity. The role of the Bible in stabilising a language and providing a standard for literary development, which in turn enhances a sense of identity, is well documented for a number of nations. Both English and the Welsh are good examples of this process.³

There is also plenty of evidence from the work of contemporary translating agencies that this process is ongoing. The following striking testimony of an elder of a Falam church comes from a Bible Society publication: “We never imagined it possible to have a Bible in our own language. We’d accepted that reading it in other (languages) was good enough for us. But when the Falam Bible was made available we discovered the

wonderful richness of reading God’s word in our own language ... We now realise that the Bible freed us from the ‘slavery’ and domination of other ethnic groups. We have come to realize that we are special, one of the races our God created.”

I suspect that some Christians would be embarrassed by this testimony. For them, heightening a sense of ethnic identity would be seen as an unfortunate result of Bible translation. They may even think that if the Falam could read the Bible in another language that it might have been better for them to have carried on doing so rather than fall prey to “nationalism”. But, is this not what we should expect and rejoice at in the light of the value that is given to ethnic identity/nationhood in the Bible? Rather than cast doubt on the wisdom of translating the Bible into more and more languages we should be thinking and planning how to direct an enhanced sense of ethnic identity into channels that will bring blessing rather than conflict. The little ethnic identities/nations, in God’s economy of the underside, will have vital things to contribute to the life of humanity as a whole. Those Christians who belong to the rich and powerful ethnic identities/nations should count it a privilege to make sure that God’s will is done so that all the ethnic identities/nations will be able to bring their glory and honour into the eternal kingdom (Rev 21.26). ■