

WEEK 5 | RACE & ETHNICITY

“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for
God from every tribe and language and people and nation”

– Revelation 5:9

JEW AND GENTILE

One of the most divisive issues in both society and the church today is over the question of race and social justice. Racism, though often portrayed as a modern sin of the west, has in fact plagued humanity in virtually every culture throughout history. Racial hubris would seem to be endemic to our species. Scripture has much to say on the issue, and thus is worth our time exploring.

I. RACE VS. ETHNICITY

At the outset, it must be recognized that the term “race” is used broadly and inconsistently within mainstream culture, making it difficult to identify a succinct definition. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, race “is biological, describing physical traits inherited from your parents.” In contrast, ethnicity is not biological in nature. Rather, ethnicity “is your cultural identity, chosen or learned from your culture and family.” Race then, is viewed more narrowly, and often will be a factor in determining one’s ethnicity.

As one scholar admits, “Defining and determining ethnicity is complex and controversial.”¹ We must recognize that ethnicity is “socially constructed and subjectively perceived.”² That is to say, the criteria used to distinguish between different ethnicities are arbitrary. These criteria may include language, religion, genetics, geographic location, and ancestry, but one is hard pressed to find an objective set that defines an ethnic group in every situation. While race would appear to be more objective because it is based on physical characteristics, it quickly becomes clear that categorizing an individual according to how they look is not all that simple.

While these definitions appear clean cut, the reality is far more complicated. ‘Race’ and ‘ethnicity’ are often used almost synonymously and appear to have a great deal of overlap. Further, in modern society, race and culture have been inextricably linked together, which has in turn virtually erased the distinction between the two terms. In light of this, we will use the terms as synonyms, reflecting how they are commonly understood in society.

¹ J. Daniel Hayes, *From Every People and Nation* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 28

² J.M. Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 19.

II. A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF RACE

The foundation for a Biblical theology of ethnicity begins in the primeval history of Genesis chapters 1-12. Here, we will see that diversity within the human race is, ultimately, a creation of God, and that God intends to bless all of humanity through the chosen seed of Abraham.

Genesis 1

In Genesis 1:26-28 we see that Adam and Eve were created “in the image of God,” something that has been discussed at length in previous lectures. Adam, as the first human being, is installed as the federal head of the human race (c.f. Romans 5:12-21), passes on this image to his offspring (Genesis 5:1-3). What this indicates is that every human being descended from Adam is an image-bearer. Notably, Adam and Eve do not have an identifiable race. “Adam and Eve, as well as Noah, are non-ethnic and non-national. They represent all people, not some people.”³ This has several important implications. First, people of all races can trace their heritage to a common ancestor—Adam. Second, every human being is made in God’s image. J. Daniel Hays writes,

Thus, whether or not one believes that the image was marred or blurred in the fall, it seems clear that humankind was created in the image of God and that remnants of that image, at the very least, still remain, distinguishing humans from animals and the rest of creation. Furthermore, the racially generic Adam represents all of humankind. All people of all races are thus created in the image of God. Blacks, Whites, and peoples of all other races are all created in the image of God. Therefore, the quality that distinguishes humankind from the animals and from the rest of creation is shared by all the races of the earth.

Thus, every human being, no matter their race, is equal in inherent value, worth, and dignity. As John Stott says, “Both the dignity and the equality of human beings are traced in Scripture to our creation.” From the creation narrative, we see there is no foundation for any sort of racism or the idea that one race is superior to another. “In short, racism from the Christian standpoint is a response that violates the equalitarian principle implied in the Biblical doctrine of the *imago dei*.”⁴

Genesis 9

Genesis 9, and specifically the curse of Ham in verses 25-27, has produced a great deal of confusion in regards to race and ethnicity. The context is one of sexual sin. Noah, in a drunken stupor (v. 21), falls asleep naked. His son Ham sees him in this state and, rather than acting to

³ Hayes, *From Every People and Nation*, 48.

⁴ H.S. Smith, *In His Image, But . . . : Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 1972), viii.

cover his father's shame, goes to share the gossip with his two brothers (v. 22). In contrast to Ham's actions, Shem and Japheth act rightly by taking a garment and covering their father without looking upon him (v. 23). When Noah "awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him" (v. 24), he pronounces a curse on Ham and a blessing on Shem and Japheth.

Historically, this curse has been erroneously connected to Black Africa in a variety of ways, none of which have exegetical warrant.⁵ Essentially, it has been argued that Black Africans were descendants of Ham whereas White westerners were descendants of Japheth, so that black servitude to Whites is a continued fulfillment of this curse. In the antebellum South the "curse of Ham" was often used to justify the subjugation and slavery of black people.⁶ Josiah Priest, one of its most vocal proponents, wrote in 1853:

The servitude of the race of Ham, to the latest era of mankind, is necessary to the veracity of God Himself, as by it is fulfilled one of the oldest of the decrees of the Scriptures, namely, that of Noah, which placed the race as servants under other races.

In essence, Priest argued that the integrity of God's word depended on the enslavement of black peoples.

Is this interpretation correct? Reading carefully, we see that the curse on Ham is actually a curse on Ham's descendent, Canaan. Three times, Noah says that Canaan will serve Shem and Japheth (v. 25, 26, 27). This is a prophetic curse on Israel's future enemy, the Canaanites, who the Israelites would be commanded to drive out from the land of promise—in part because the Canaanites were known for sexual sin. Hays writes,

Apparently these Canaanites are aptly cursed in connection with this sexual-related sin because they are also characterized by the same type of sin in other texts within the Pentateuch. See, for example, Leviticus 18:2-23, where sexual sins are identified with the sins of the Canaanites. Note that throughout Leviticus 18 the term 'nakedness' (the same term used of Noah in Genesis 9:22-23) is used consistently as a euphemism for sexual sin. . . . Thus the curse on Canaan does not appear to be pronounced so that Canaan will be punished for Ham's sin. The curse is apparently a prophetic curse against the future enemy of Israel, a descendant of Ham who will be like Ham in this regard.⁷

⁵ See J. Lewis, *A Study of the Interpretation of Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968) and C. P. Copher, "Three Thousand Years of Biblical Interpretation with Reference to Black Peoples," in G. Wilmore (ed.), *African American Religious Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 1989), 105-128.

⁶ For a fuller discussion, see Hays, *From Every People and Nation*, 52-54.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

When seen in this light, it becomes clear that race has nothing to do with the curse. In fact, the Canaanites would have been ethnically close to the Israelites, sharing similarities in language, culture, and physical appearance. The important difference that separated these two people groups was the God—or gods, on the Canaanites part—they worshipped.

Genesis 10

Though the events in Genesis 9 do not and should not have any bearing on how we view race or ethnicity, the characters present are indeed critical to the racial diversity we are familiar with. Genesis chapters 10 and 11 describe the dispersion of mankind across the earth, separating into people groups that would eventually develop distinct cultures and become the different racial or ethnic groups we see today.

Genesis 10 is often called the ‘Table of Nations.’ It describes how all the peoples of the world descended from the three sons of Noah and how these people groups spread geographically, giving rise to the world of the Ancient Near East the Israelite readers would have been familiar with, and ultimately to our world today. The chapter’s contents are complex and difficult to sort through. (The Jewish scholar N. M. Sarna says the chapter is “riddled with difficulties, many of which remain insoluble in the present state of knowledge.”⁸) Scholars have sought to trace the various races present today back to one of these three brothers. Historically, Black Africans were often traced back to Ham because ‘Ham’ sounds similar to an Egyptian word for ‘black.’ However, more recent scholarship has recognized there is no exegetical basis for viewing ‘Ham’ as an Egyptian loanword. Further, and as will become clear, the classification used in Genesis 10 is not based on physical characteristics.

How is the ‘Table of Nations’ organized? Notice that in the concluding summary for each brother’s genealogy, there is a statement indicating groups are organized based on four categories: clans, languages, lands, and nations (Genesis 10:5, 20, 31). Clearly, the criteria used for identifying people groups is far more than physical characteristics; based on these terms, the criteria must also include anthropological, linguistic, cultural, political, and geographical elements. Further, each summary ends with the term “nations” (*goy*), indicating that the principle criteria may well be political and/or national affiliation. In other words, “the breakdown of nations in Genesis 10 is not based on physical descent, but rather related to territorial or geopolitical affiliations.”⁹

The focus of this chapter is not the origin of different races or ethnicities; rather, it was meant to describe how the origin of nations Israelites in the 15th-16th century BC would have recognized. Additionally, “even though much of the chapter remains enigmatic, one central theological point

⁸ N. M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPS Commentary (Philadelphia/Jerusalem: JPS, 1989), 68.

⁹ Hays, *From Every People and Nation*, 59.

of the chapter is clear: the stress on the common origin of all nations.”¹⁰ As seen in Genesis 1, people of every clan, language, land, and nation shares common ancestry tracing back to Noah and, beyond him, to Adam.

Genesis 12

Genesis 12 is a significant chapter. In light of the events of chapter 11—and the flood narrative before that—humanity is clearly dominated by sin and rebellion towards God. If humanity is to be redeemed, God Himself will have to act. In Genesis 12 with the call of Abram, God does just that.

Significant to our study is the emphasis on universal blessing in God’s call and promises to Abram. God promises Abram that a nation will come from him, that he will be blessed, his name will be great, and he will be a blessing (12:2). Then, in verse 3, we see that “in [Abram] all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” The word ‘families’ is the same term used in Genesis 10, where it is rendered ‘clans’ in the ESV. (The NASB is more consistent, translating the term as “families” in both.) In fact, 12:1-3 pick up on other terms used in the table of nations, including ‘country’ and ‘nation.’ The linguistics connections indicate that all the people groups identified in Genesis 10 will share in the blessing given through Abram’s seed.

Though God elects Abram’s and Abram’s descendants to be His chosen people, we can see that, from the very beginning, God’s redemptive plan had all people in mind. Salvation was never meant to be limited to the few; rather, Abram and Israel was meant to be the vehicle through which God’s salvation was introduced to the nations. As Westermann writes, “God’s action proclaimed in the promise to Abraham is not limited to him and his posterity, but reaches its goal only when it includes all of the families of the earth.”¹¹

Exodus 12

In Exodus 12 the newly formed nation of Israel is finally released by a chastened Pharaoh. Moses describes the scene for us, writing,

A mixed multitude also went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds. And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves. The time that the people of Israel lived in Egypt was 430 years. At the end of 430 years, on that very day, all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt.
(Exodus 12:38-41)

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ C. Westermann, *Genesis 12:36: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 152.

Notably, we notice that a “mixed multitude” participates in this exodus from Egypt. In other words, non-Israelites join Israel in leaving Egypt. Exodus 12:40-49 uses two terms to describe these ‘others:’ ‘foreigner’ and ‘stranger’ (c.f. 12:43, 48). These terms both refer to non-Israelites with one distinction—‘strangers’ have accepted the worship of Yahweh, while ‘foreigners’ have not. Thus, ‘strangers’ are allowed to partake of the Passover meal once they have been circumcised (12:48), but “no foreigner shall eat it” (12:43). In fact, non-Israelites who have accepted Yahweh are to be treated “as a native of the land” (12:48), as Israelites regarding religious aspects.

Significantly, this demonstrates that what distinguishes the people of God is not ultimately their race but their worship. Hays sees this as “a partial fulfillment of Yahweh’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3: ‘and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed’. . . Exodus 12:43-49 indicates that participation in the celebration of Yahweh’s great redemptive act was not based on birth or ethnicity, but rather relationship to Yahweh and his covenant.”¹²

Exodus 19

Exodus 19 continues the theme of non-Israelite inclusion by highlighting Israel’s missionary role to the nations. God appears to Israel atop Mount Sinai in a cloud of fire and smoke and thunder. There, He speaks to Israel, highlighting His election and commission of the nation. They are His “treasured possession among all peoples” (19:5). As His chosen people, the nation has a high calling: “you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (19:6). The function of a priest is to mediate—to bridge the gap—between two parties. As God’s priestly kingdom, Israel was to represent Him to the nations that they might come to know and worship Him. Moses elaborates on this role in Deuteronomy 4:5-8 when he writes:

See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. ⁶Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

When Israel was living and functioning as they were called to, they would be a light to the nations, demonstrating the goodness and blessing of Yahweh as a means of drawing the nations to Him. Significant for our study is, again, the emphasis on universal blessing. God chose Israel exclusively as a means of making salvation as inclusive as possible. Redemption was always for the nations, people of all races.

¹² Hays, *From Every People and Nation*, 70.

The Prophets

Though Israel failed in their task to represent God to the world, the prophets declare that God will fulfill His plan to bless the nations through the seed of Abraham and redeem humanity. One common theme of the prophets is the future salvation of the nations through the Messiah. The visions of the prophet Isaiah demonstrate this.

- In Isaiah 2:2-4 we see “all the nations” streaming to the house of the Lord where “many peoples” desire to learn about Yahweh. The just and righteous rule of the Messiah will include judging disputes between peoples of different nations, and war will cease so that all people enjoy peace.
- In Isaiah 19:24-25 we see that even Assyria and Egypt, historic enemies of Israel, will be included in the people of God in the Messianic kingdom.
- In Isaiah 49:1-6 we see that the Servant of the Lord, the Messiah, will be “a light for the nations” and will extend salvation “to the end of the earth.”
- Isaiah 60-66 shows that the reign of the Messiah in a restored Israel will lead to blessing for the nations.

Amos, like Isaiah, affirms the universal blessing of the Messiah reigning as the Davidic King in Amos 9:11-15. Clearly, God’s work of salvation was intended to be for both Jew and Gentile, so that both would be among the people of God.

Matthew 2:1-12

A foretaste of these prophetic visions is seen in the early chapters of Matthew. In Matthew 2:1-12 we see the Magi travel a great distance “from the east” to meet and worship the “king of the Jews.” They demonstrate a familiarity with Old Testament Messianic prophecies, quoting the prophets Micah and Ezekiel when explaining to King Herod how they knew where the promised king would be born (2:5-6). The significance of this scene for our study is seeing how non-Israelite, Gentile wise men come and worship the promised king, again demonstrating that God’s salvation extends beyond any racial barriers.

Matthew 15

Matthew 15 gives us the curious account of the Canaanite woman who approaches Jesus to ask that he would heal her daughter of demon possession. The first thing one notices in this account is the audacity of this woman. She is a gentile, a non-Israelite, approaching a Jewish Rabbi; to say she risked complete rejection would be an understatement. Further, she is described as a Canaanite. The Canaanites were the historical enemies of Israel, the people that God commanded be driven out of the land of promise.

Initially, Jesus ignores the woman's pleas for help, and only responds after prodding by his disciples to send her away because "she is crying out after us" (15:23). He does not send her away, however, indicating there may have been more to his initial action of ignoring her. Instead, he tells her that he was sent "only to the lost sheep of Israel" and that it would be wrong to "take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (15:24, 26). His point is that his mission from the Father is directed to Israel first.

The woman's response is startling. Rather than be deterred, she kneels before him and reminds him that even dogs benefit from the children's meal. In essence, she is saying that even non-Israelites will be blessed by Israel's restoration under the Messiah. She displays a profound understanding of—and faith in—God's prophetic plans given in the Old Testament. Already, she had referred to Jesus as "Lord, Son of David" (15:22), indicating she believed he was the promised Messiah.

Immediately Jesus affirms her great faith and heals her daughter. This scene depicts a partial fulfillment of what God promised through His prophets. His design is still to bless the nations through the seed of Abraham. His redemption still extends to all peoples of all nations—even to Canaanites.

Matthew 28

At the end of the book of Matthew, as Jesus is ascending to heaven to return to his Father, he commissions his disciples to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (28:19). This makes clear that the gospel is a message of hope to all people irrespective of their race or ethnicity. The work of Christ is to be freely offered to everyone, both Jew and Gentile.

Acts 15

Acts 15 depicts for us one of the earliest intramural controversies faced by the early church. The issue was circumcision and whether Gentile converts to Christianity needed to be circumcised in accordance with Mosaic Law. A group of men, Judaizers, "came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved'" (15:1). Paul and Barnabas vehemently contend with these Judaizers; Paul will elaborate in his epistles that salvation is by faith in Christ alone, not by works of the law like circumcision. This was no small debate in the early church. For centuries the Israelites, the chosen people of God, had been distinguished by the practice of circumcision, and it was unclear if and how this should carry over to the church. To sort out these matters, a council was called in Jerusalem where the issue was debated.

"After there had been much debate" (15:7), Peter stands and addresses the council, arguing that God affirmed salvation apart from circumcision when He gave the Gentiles "the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by

faith” (15:8-9). James then quotes from Amos 9:11-12 to demonstrate that God always intended to call Gentiles to Himself, not to become Israelites, but through Israel to become worshippers of Yahweh. With this, the matter was settled. Circumcision was not a prerequisite for salvation, for all “will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (15:11). As has been emphasized throughout, we see once again that God’s redemptive plan is for all people, regardless of race or ethnicity. Salvation by grace is for anyone who puts their faith in Christ. There is no need to be raised in or convert to the right cultural background to qualify.

The Epistles

Several of Paul’s statements in his epistles are worth noting in the way that they demonstrate God’s salvation transcends race or ethnicity:

- Galatians 3:28-29
- Ephesians 2:11-3:6
- Colossians 3:9-11

Note that, in each of these passages, Paul is not erasing racial or ethnic distinctions as though they do not exist. Rather, he is demonstrating that they are of no importance regarding salvation and ones standing before God.

Revelation

The final book of the canon is a book of prophecy foretelling future events. John identifies this book is “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants the things that must soon take place” (1:1). John is commanded to “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches” (1:11). Revelation, then, is a record of the future given to the church to prepare us for what is to come. Part of this future is supranational salvation.

- Revelation 5:9-10 – Shows that members of “every tribe and language and people and nation” are redeemed by the Lamb and are a part of his kingdom.
- Revelation 7:4-9 – Shows salvation of both the tribes of Israel and “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages”
- Revelation 21:3 – Refers to God’s people using the Greek term *laoi*, identifying ethnic diversity on the new earth.
- Revelation 21:24-26 – The nations and their kings will bring their “glory,” their contributions, to the new Jerusalem.

- Revelation 22:2-5 – The tree of life will be “for the healing of the nations” (vs. 2), all of whom will see the face of the lamb (vs. 3) and enjoy his glory and light (vs. 5)

Implications:¹³

1. People of all races are made in the image of God.
2. No people group is superior or inferior to any other.
3. Racism is a heinous sin and violates the personhood of all humanity. Racism often denies personhood and the dignity that all God’s image bearers deserve.
4. Israel is chosen as a nation to restore fallen humanity and bring salvation and restoration to all people groups.
5. This salvation occurs through the ultimate Israelite, Jesus the Messiah, who will restore the nation Israel and bring blessings to the Gentiles.
6. The death of Christ and the establishment of the New Covenant not only means salvation for individuals, but unity among all those who identify with Jesus. True racial unity and harmony is found only in Jesus the Messiah.
7. The church should evidence racial harmony and serve as an example and microcosm to the world of what racial harmony looks like.
8. When Jesus returns He will rule the nations with Israel and Jerusalem as the capital of the kingdom. Blessings to Israel mean blessings for all the nations (see Rom 11:12).
9. In the Eternal State nations and races will exist and harmony among nations and ethnic groups will always exist.
10. Knowing that Jesus has laid the basis for racial harmony and that the future will evidence racial harmony should motivate Christians to evidence such harmony in the church and their individual lives. Live in light of what Jesus has done and what will happen in the millennium and the new earth.
11. May all churches and para-church groups evidence racial harmony and peace in a way that gives glory to Jesus and shows the world where such harmony comes from.
12. The answer to racism is not education alone, it is Jesus.
13. Attempts at racial harmony apart from Jesus are doomed to fail.

¹³ Reproduced from Vlach, “Theology 3 Course Notes,” Fall 2017.