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Multicultural dimensions of the Bible

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Introduction

With the population of the world becoming increasingly located in urban areas in general, and cities in particular, the issues arising in multicultural contexts are coming to the fore. Speaking personally, after twenty years in pastoral ministry in London, I have been all too aware that the presence of people from many and varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds has brought new challenges and dimensions to church life that have demanded of me further reflection on my approach to ministry. This article aims to provide biblical and theological support for the development of multicultural ministry by exploring the multicultural dimensions of scripture. First, it investigates the multi-ethnic composition of Israel in the Old Testament and its approach towards those of other nations. Second, it explores the context of the New Testament world and the cross-cultural encounters of both Jesus and Paul.

The multicultural nature of Israel in the Old Testament

1. The creation of diversity and the origins of Israel

Before the emergence of Abraham and his family, it is already affirmed in the Bible that the existence of a diversity of people and people groups is intrinsic to the plan and purpose of God. This is reflected in Gen. 1–11, culminating in the Table of Nations in chapter 10 and the scattering of nations in chapter 11. In Gen. 10 we find that seventy nations are the product of Noah's three sons and that these are all offspring of Noah himself, thereby facilitating a sense of common humanity.[1] Horst Preuss points out that according to Gen. 10, 'Israel enjoys vis-à-vis the nations no pre-eminence due to creation, mythology or prehistory'.[2] Claus Westermann concurs with this, stating, 'God is the creator of *all* humankind. God created the whole human race – this statement is spelled out in detail, as it were, by the Table of Nations at the end of the Primal History: the human race,

1 See V. P. Hamilton, *Genesis 1-17* NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 346.

2 H. D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology Vol. II* (Edinburgh: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 285. See also W. Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 102. Also see J. D. Hays, *From every People and Nation* (Leicester: Apollos, 2003), 58-59 for discussion of difficulties with Gen. 10.

which exists today as a multiplicity of nations, is the humanity created by God'.[3]

If Gen. 10 and the Table of Nations represent the fulfilment of the command of God to Noah to be fruitful and increase to fill the earth, the arrogant gathering of the people with one language and the building of the Tower of Babel in Gen. 11 resists obedience to that command and comes as a problem to be resolved.[4] On the one hand the building of the Tower of Babel reflects humanity's pride and is subject to judgement;[5] on the other the scattering of the nations as a consequence represents the assertion of God that diversity is within his purpose. In this vein Bernhard Anderson draws two conclusions from his discussion of this text: first, that God's will for his creation is diversity rather than homogeneity; second, that despite this, human beings 'strive for unity and fear diversity'.[6] Certainly human beings like to be with people with whom they share familiar traits, and to be thrown into a diverse environment can be disorientating. This tension between a diverse humanity that has its source in a creative God, and human beings with their desire to be with others like themselves in a familiar sameness, is one which resonates still today.

This affirmation of diversity is evident in the *ethnic and cultural* origins of Israel. From Gen. 11:28, 31 and 12:1 we find that Abraham was urged by the call of God to migrate from Ur in Mesopotamia via Haran to Canaan. Ur was in the part of the world known today as Iraq. At the time it was dominated by the Sumerians, described as the 'black-headed' ones, believed to refer not only to the colour of their hair but also their skin.[7] They formed a highly civilised society and had a significant cultural and linguistic impact on their world, including Israel. The Old Testament scholar John Bright says of this people group that their 'metal working and gem-cutting reached heights of excellence seldom surpassed.... Trade and cultural contacts reached far and wide.'[8]

There were also Semites and Arameans in the region. The Arameans are of particular interest as it seems that Abraham was predominantly of Aramean origin.[9] He was a pastoralist, as were the Arameans,[10] and the story of Jacob fleeing to Aram shows that Abraham's daughter-in-law was Aramean. However, Bright goes on to say, 'There is no evidence of racial or cultural conflict. We may not doubt that an increasing intermingling of the races took place.'[11] William Schniedewind concurs with this, stating, 'the Aramean states arose from eth-

3 C. Westermann, *Genesis* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 79.
4 G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* WBC (Waco: Word, 1987), 242.
5 Gen. 11:4,7. See Wenham, *Genesis*, 245.
6 B. W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 177.
7 C. H. Felder (ed.), *Stony the Road We Trod* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 154.
8 J. Bright, *A History of Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 35.
9 Deut. 26:5; others on linguistic grounds have suggested that Abraham originates from the Amorites, see Hays, *From every People*, 32.
10 M. Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 192.
11 Bright, *History*, 36.

nically diverse, semi-nomadic peoples'.[12] So whichever ethnic group Abraham emerged from to found the people of Israel, it was out of a multicultural context, dominated by the Sumerians.

The call of God to Abraham to be a blessing to all nations of the world will be examined in the next section of this article, but continuing this investigation into the ethnic origins of Israel leads to consideration of the makeup of Israel on leaving Egypt under the leadership of Moses. They had journeyed to Egypt as a large extended family but emerged from Egypt as a nation. Moreover, they left Egypt having increased the diversity of their ethnic heritage. Joseph was given a new Egyptian name by Pharaoh and a wife named Asenath, who herself was the daughter of an Egyptian priest.[13] Von Rad observes that as a result, 'Joseph has become completely Egyptian',[14] although Hamilton notes that he gave Hebrew names to his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, who later became fathers to two of the tribes of Israel.[15] Gary Usry and Craig Keener point out that this means Israel was subsequently nearly ten percent of Egyptian heritage. The complexion of ancient Egyptians we know from art to be a variety of shades of brown through to black and so we can assert that at least two of the tribes of Israel had significant colouring and a mixed ethnic heritage.[16]

Furthermore, Egypt was not in itself mono-ethnic. In particular it had a close relationship with the Upper Nile, drawing on the Nubian region for workers at every level right down to (and including) slave level. The Nubian people included the Cushites (who were black and negroid in appearance), one of which subsequently married Moses as his second wife.[17] When Israel emerged as a nation desperate to leave Egypt, they did not leave alone. There were other oppressed people who wanted to leave with them.[18] Brueggemann makes the point that 'earliest Israel was not an ethnic community, but a sociological grouping of the marginated [*sic*] who had been liberated from their oppressed socioeconomic status'.[19] It may be that Brueggemann overstates the case in the light of the de-

12 W. M. Schniedewind, 'The rise of the Aramean States', in M. W. Chavalas and K. L. Younger Jr., (eds.), *Mesopotamia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 276.

13 Gen. 41:45.

14 G. von Rad, *Genesis* (London: SCM Press, 1972 [3rd edition]), 379.

15 V. P. Hamilton, *Genesis 18 - 50* NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 512.

16 G. Usry and C. S. Keener, *Black Man's Religion* (Illinois: IVP, 1996), 73.

17 See discussion in D. W. Olsen, *Numbers* Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996), 70-71 regarding differing views on who Moses married and where she came from. I follow P. J. Budd, *Numbers* WBC (Waco: Word, 1984), 136, and take the view that Moses married a Cushite woman and the Cushites came from the Nubian region south of Egypt which was also synonymous with Ethiopia at the time. E. M. Yamauchi, after surveying the archaeological and historical evidence states, 'we should not doubt the possibility of Moses's marriage to a Kushite or Nubian woman' E. M. Yamauchi, *Africa and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 75.

18 Exod. 12:38.

19 W. Brueggemann, 'Exodus', in *The New Interpreter's Bible Vol. 1* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 781. See Hays, *From every People*, 66-67 for further discussion.

tailed instructions for sojourners and foreigners, something we will discuss later, which implies that there was at least some demarcation between those who obviously 'belonged' and those who did not. However, the point remains at this stage of the discussion that the people-group leaving Egypt was broader than merely the biological descendents of Abraham.[20]

This line of argument is further supported by the fact that 'Eleazar, son of Aaron married one of the daughters of Putiel, and she bore him Phinehas'.[21] Phinehas is an Egyptian term used to refer to people from Cush. It literally means 'the Nubian' or 'the Cushite'.[22] Putiel is an Egyptian name too and the likelihood is that one of Aaron's sons married an Egyptian of Nubian origin and bore Phinehas. The Bible later affirms that Phinehas became greatly esteemed in the sight of God, an indication that foreigners who joined with the people of Israel were accepted fully.[23]

2. The embracing of all nations and their future hope

The call of Abraham in Gen. 12 was accompanied with a promise that not only would Abraham and his offspring be blessed by God, but that 'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you'.[24] Having noted above that the diversity of nations was affirmed and reaffirmed by God, here it is explicit that the blessing of all nations on earth is the intention, even as one family, which will become the nation of Israel, is favoured to accomplish this end. The relationship between Israel as the elect people of God, and God's intention for all nations, is presented by Robin Routledge as centripetal universalism and centrifugal universalism.[25] Centripetal universalism refers to those scriptures which refer to the people of other nations being drawn into the people of Israel. An example of this would be Isa. 2:3: 'Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths."'[26] Centrifugal universalism refers to those scriptures which refer to the people of other nations worshipping the God of Israel within their own land. An example of this would be Mal. 1:11: 'My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name.'[27] Brueggemann goes a step further than Routledge in his discussion of the people of other nations. He draws attention to Amos 9:7: '"Are not you Israelites the same to me as Cushites?" declares the Lord. "Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and

20 Hays, *From every People*, 68.
21 Exod. 6:25.
22 J. I. Durham, *Exodus* WBC (Waco: Word Books, 1997), 81.
23 Ps. 106:30.
24 Gen. 12:3.
25 R. Routledge, *Old Testament Theology* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 326–27; see also Preuss, *OT Theology*, 292.
26 See also Isa. 56:8; 60:3, 7, 10–14; Zech. 8:20–23.
27 See also Isa. 19:19–21; 42:6; 49:6; Zeph. 2:11.

the Arameans from Kir?"' He states, 'What happens in this striking assertion is that *Israel's monopoly on Yahweh is broken.* This does not deny that Israel is the primal recipient of Yahweh's powerful, positive intervention; it does, however, deny any exclusive claim.'[28] Brueggemann also draws attention to Isa. 19:24–25: 'In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance"'. He comments,

> It is remarkable that the utterance of Isaiah 19 pertains to the two most despised and perhaps cruellest enemies of Israel...The promise is an invitation to Israel to move beyond itself and its self-serving ideology, to reposition itself in the family of beloved nations, and to re-imagine Yahweh, beyond any self-serving, privileged claim, into the largest possible horizon, as the one who intends well-being for all the nations.[29]

The focus in second Isaiah on the servant of God draws attention to the anticipation of the 'servant' becoming a light to the Gentiles and by so doing becoming the agent of reconciliation between Israel and the other nations (Isa. 42:6, 49:6, and 52:10). Added to this, third Isaiah anticipates the fulfilment of the eschatological hope portraying the nations coming to Mount Zion (Isa. 56:3–8; 60:1–22; 61:5–7). Chris Wright describes this prophetic anticipation as a 'glorious evocation for all the senses of the worship of the nations being brought to YHWH, through the mediation of Israel now functioning, as intended, as God's priesthood for the nations'.[30]

Summarising the argument so far then, the inclusive instinct that resonates from the origins of humanity as described in Genesis through the calling of a particular people group through which and, if Brueggemann is right, alongside which, all nations shall be ultimately blessed under the sovereignty of the God of Israel, is evident here. This affirmation of people of all nations is an important biblical and theological foundation.

3. The assimilation of people of other nations within Israel

Legal provisions for assimilation

As has already been stated, a mixed multitude left Egypt with the people of Israel. The presence of these people is particularly evident in that specific instructions were given as to how they should be accommodated within the newly instituted regulations for the Passover outlined in Exod. 12:43–49. Within these regulations two categories of foreigner are described.[31] The first, in verse 43 is named in the

28 W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press: 1997), 520; his italics.

29 Ibid., 522.

30 C. J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Nottingham: IVP, 2006), 487.

31 J. P. Burnside also notes two other categories, the *toshav,* which is synonymous with *ger,* and the *nokri,* who 'is the foreigner who lives in his own country outside of Israel'. J. P. Burnside, *The Status and Welfare of Immigrants* (Cambridge: The Jubilee Centre,

Hebrew as the *nekhar*. The *nekhar* is the foreigner to Israel 'who resides in the land temporarily, usually for purposes of commerce'.[32] Such a person or people group is not expected to want to settle permanently. The second category of foreigner is referred to in verse 48 in the Hebrew as the *ger*. Nahum Sarna notes, the *ger* in Israel 'enjoyed numerous rights and privileges, such as the benefits of the Sabbath rest, the protection afforded by the cities of refuge, and access to a share of certain tithes and to the produce of the Sabbatical year'.[33] It seems that the *ger* had acquired employment rights, legal rights and welfare benefits. Both the *nekhar* and the *ger* are instructed not to participate in the Passover unless all the males in their household have covenanted with the people of Israel through the rite of circumcision. However, if they do, then 'he may take part like one born in the land' (Exod. 12:48).

Deut. 23 is also of interest here. In verses 3–8 certain nationalities are listed as being unable to 'enter the assembly of the Lord', that is the governing assembly of the Israelites, and therefore unable to represent citizenship.[34] This seems to suggest a tightening of the rules for admission to citizenship and leads to questions regarding when this part of Deuteronomy was written and whether it represents a development over time. Ronald Clements suggests an exilic dating of Deuteronomy in its present form and that it reflects the need for a response to the political and religious crisis of that time.[35] He states, 'what had no doubt earlier been varied and uncoordinated conventions needed to be fixed within a single set of rules'.[36] What is significant here is the listing of those nationalities which are excluded, which implies that others could be included, and this is made explicit regarding the third generation Edomites and Egyptians whose descendents can indeed aspire to full citizenship.[37]

Acquiring citizenship also implies the right to marry. Inter-ethnic marriage in Israel raises difficulties as on the one hand there are notable inter-ethnic marriages such as Moses and the Cushite woman and Boaz and Ruth the Moabite;[38] however, there are also prohibitions. For example in Deut. 7:3, referring to the 'seven nations' inhabiting the land of Canaan, the instruction when the Israelites enter to take possession is clear: 'Do not intermarry with them. Do not give

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2001), 16-17.

32 N. M. Sarna, *Exodus* JPS (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 63.

33 Ibid., 64.

34 J. H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* JPS (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 210.

35 R. E. Clements, 'Deuteronomy' in *NIB* Vol. II (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 280. Note that there is variation amongst scholars regarding the dating of Deuteronomy. P. C. Craigie, *Deuteronomy* NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 24–29 argues for a much earlier date; Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, 289 for a post-exilic date.

36 Ibid., 460.

37 Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 479 suggests that a list such as Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites and Egyptians effectively refers to all foreigners (cf. J. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology Vol. 3* [Downers Grove: IVP, 2009], 510), but that suggestion is undermined by the specific allowance of descendents of Edom and Egypt.

38 Num. 12:1 and Ruth 4:10 respectively.

your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons'. The reason given is that 'they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods'. It seems reasonable to suppose that the prohibition of marrying those of other nations is related to the danger of syncretism. However, more difficult to understand is the occasion when the exiles returned to Judah from Babylon and Ezra led a purge on the foreign women and their children.[39] Jeffrey Tigay comments, 'One of the reasons why Ezra, Nehemiah, and their associates demanded the dissolution of intermarriages is that they saw no other way to comply with the law as they understood it'. He goes on to say,

> There is evidence that some of their contemporaries felt that foreigners could be accepted. In Babylonia, there were foreigners who 'attached themselves to the Lord' and served Him, and the prophet of the exile assured them of acceptance. Eventually, this attitude prevailed and procedures for religious conversion were created.[40]

Tigay sees the response in Ezra and Nehemiah as a generalising of the law in Deut. 23 in response to the circumstances at that time. Matthew Thiessen sees it as a legitimate exclusivist radical approach to this issue stating, 'Israel was the holy seed, all other nations were common seed, and the two were not to be mixed'.[41] It seems likely that there was a variation over time and in response to differing circumstances of the rules of inclusion into the assembly of Israel but that these rules were tightened and enforced during the exilic and post-exilic times.

It becomes clear that despite Israel's vocation to be a witness and a blessing to other nations, there remained a fear of syncretism. This inevitably leads to varying emphases throughout the Old Testament, which warrant further research. For the purposes of the scope of this paper, it will be enough to acknowledge this variance and maintain the principle that despite its desire to maintain its clearly defined boundaries, Israel was still able to facilitate room within its boundaries for those who would identify with its God.

Assimilation on the basis of covenant

Alongside the rules evident in Deut. 23 and Ezra and Nehemiah, there is also evidence in the Old Testament of those who assimilated into Israel on the basis of covenant. By this is meant not something of the same dimension as the Noahaic, Abrahamic or Davidic covenants per se, but rather something rooted in this fundamental covenantal concept but more locally applied. In the book of Joshua, Rahab the prostitute is saved from the destruction of Jericho because of her support of the Israelites.[42] The basis of her salvation is not legal but covenan-

39 Ezra 10.

40 Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 479.

41 M. Thiessen, 'The Function of a Conjunction: Inclusivist or Exclusivist Strategies in Ezra 6:19-21 and Nehemiah 10:29-30?', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 34.1 (2009), 79.

42 Josh. 6:25.

tal. She pleads, 'please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you'.[43] Gordon McConville points out that the specific word she uses, *hesed*, is 'the specific quality of covenantal relationship'.[44] He goes on to assert, 'The standard of being truly "Israel" in Joshua remains covenantal'.[45]

Ruth provides another example whereby a person of another nationality not only assimilates within Israel but in fact marries an Israelite. The basis for this assimilation is the covenant-like commitment of Ruth to Naomi: 'Your people will be my people and your God my God'.[46] The outcome of this commitment of Ruth to Naomi is to be taken in marriage by Boaz; consequently she becomes grandmother to King David. Ruth's nationality as a Moabite is no barrier in this context to this transaction taking place and it reflects assimilation into the Israelite community on the basis of covenant rather than law.

Isa. 56 expresses the reality of a covenant between individual members of other nations and the God of Israel in its affirmation:

> Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people. ...foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him, to love the name of the Lord, and to worship him... these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer... for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'.[47]

Brevard Childs rejects the notion that this chapter emerges out of the context of the tightening of regulations in the postexilic attempt to exclude people of other nations joining with Israel, but rather sees it as an older text representing an earlier, more open tradition. Crucially, however, he views it in the main from an eschatological perspective, prophesying what is still to come.[48]

In this vein Jesus quotes Isa. 56:7 when he overturns the tables in the Court of the Gentiles at the Temple in Jerusalem and refuses to allow any other merchandisers to pass through.[49] James Jones speaks with passion regarding this event:

> I happen to believe that the cleansing of the temple has been misunderstood for centuries. I happen to believe that the cleansing of the temple was not a statement against commercialism but a statement against racism. Jesus said, quoting the Old Testament, 'My house shall be a house of prayer for all races, but you have made it a den of robbers'. Our expositors have concentrated on the 'den of robbers' overlooking the principal point of Jesus' action which was that His house of prayer should be a house of prayer for 'all' races. It's not what they were doing at the temple but where

43 Josh. 2:12.
44 J. G. McConville and S. N. Williams, *Joshua* THOTC (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010), 17.
45 Ibid., 35; McConville also draws attention to the covenant made with the Gibeonites in Josh. 9.
46 Ruth 1:16.
47 Isa. 56:3, 6, 7.
48 B. S. Childs, *Isaiah* OTL (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2001), 457–59.
49 Mark 11:15-17.

they were doing it which was the issue.[50]

In this sense Jesus is signalling continuity with the stream throughout scripture that all the nations will share in the eschatological fulfilment of that which Isaiah foresaw.[51]

The multicultural dimensions of the church in the New Testament

1. The multicultural context of the New Testament world

During the 1st century BC the Romans subdued much of what had been Alexander's Greek empire, yet inherited the Greek culture. The Greco-Roman world, the political context for the New Testament, was predominantly Hellenistic in language and culture, polytheistic in its religion and multi-ethnic in its social constituency.

Faced with the dominance of Greek culture and Roman rule, the Jews living in Palestine tended to become increasingly protective of their own culture and customs. They separated themselves from the prevailing culture yet maintained strong allegiance with Jews living outside of Palestine. This is evident in Acts 2 when Jews from fifteen countries are listed as being among those visiting Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. Even within Palestine the province of Galilee was run under a separate administration from Judea and the Galileans were looked down upon by the Judeans. The more conservative Jewish areas such as Nazareth and Capernaum 'stood in close proximity to largely pagan cities, of which in the first century the new Hellenistic centres of Tiberias and Sepphoris were the chief examples'.[52]

What is also evident is that there were significant numbers of people from different people-groups (Gentiles) living in, or passing through, Palestine at this time. The Ethiopians (Cushites) were the traders between the Roman world and sub-Saharan Africa.[53] Yet they also had goods from their own territory to trade, valuable commodities such as gold, slaves, leopard skins and incense.[54] They were familiar with the region and so in Acts 8:27 the 'Chancellor of the Exchequer' of Ethiopia visits Jerusalem to worship, perhaps while on some diplomatic mission.

North Africans, as they would be described today, also frequented Palestine. They spoke a language akin to ancient Egyptian, which was strange to the ears of the other ethnic groups settled in Palestine. Thus they acquired the name 'Ber-

50 The Rt. Rev. Dr. James Jones, The Bishop of Liverpool, An extract from his lecture 'The Moral of this Story? Jesus' given as the last of four of a series in October 2001 as The London Lectures in Contemporary Christianity.

51 See also L. Williamson Jr., *Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 207.

52 R. T. France, *Matthew* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 6.

53 Hays, *From every People*, 148.

54 Yamauchi, *Africa*, 165.

bers', a derivative of barbarian, a term of contempt used for those of strange speech.[55] There were Greek and Roman settlements in North Africa and they integrated and intermarried and reflected a variety of skin colours, though generally deeper and darker than that which is found in North Africa today. This is because the Arabic movement into this region came some time after the biblical period.[56] Simon, who came from Cyrene in North Africa (Libya today), was compelled by the Roman soldiers to carry the cross of Jesus.[57] Cyreneans also congregated in Antioch after the persecution of the Christians which followed the death of Stephen, and occupied key leadership roles in the life of the early church.[58]

Pictorial interpretations of biblical stories in the UK have often portrayed the characters as if they had the skin colour of western Europeans, perhaps with a beard, long hair and Middle Eastern clothes. Although these pictures demonstrate a self-reflection of western ethnicity and culture into the biblical narrative, and therefore give a distorted image of reality, ancestors of white Westerners do enter the biblical world in around 280BC. Gauls from northern Europe poured into Asia Minor and were able to establish the Roman province of Galatia.[59] This was an area the Apostle Paul had frequented during the expansion of the early church.[60]

2. Cross-cultural encounters in the Gospels

Although Jesus draws together twelve disciples that are Jewish and in so doing reflects a continuity of tradition with the twelve tribes of Israel, in many other ways the gospels reflect Jesus as the Messiah not only for Israel but for the Gentiles too and therefore continue the theme that is evident in the Old Testament of God's blessing for people of all nations. James LaGrand highlights the 'united witness of the four Gospels to the emergent mission to all nations'.[61]

In Matthew's gospel the opening genealogy includes the four 'mothers': Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba.[62] Hays points out that Sarah or Rebekah were respected matriarchs who could have been chosen if Matthew's purpose for including them was to include women. Noting that Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites, Ruth a Moabite, and that Bathsheba had been married to Uriah the Hittite, Hays concludes that, 'The inclusion of these Gentile women in the

55 Col. 3:11: 'Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and is in all.'

56 Hays, *From every People*, 151.

57 Matt. 27:32.

58 Acts 11:20; 13:1.

59 C. McEvedy, *The New Penguin Atlas of Ancient History* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 78.

60 Acts 16:6; Gal. 1:2.

61 J. LaGrand, *The Earliest Christian Mission to 'All Nations' in the Light of Matthew's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999 [2nd edition]), 108.

62 Matt. 1:3, 5, 6.

lineage would have been shocking to most Jewish readers'.[63] France states, 'the four "foreign" women prepare the reader for the coming of non-Israelites to follow Israel's Messiah which will be foreshadowed in the homage of the magi in 2:1–12 and will be a recurrent and increasing theme throughout the gospel until it reaches its climax in the mission to all nations in 28:19'.[64] He also states: 'This new international community will be *his ekklesia* (16:18)'.[65]

In Mark's gospel, most noteworthy is the cleansing of the temple event (Mark 11:15–17, which has been discussed earlier), highlighting Jesus's quote from Isa. 56:7. Mark, alone amongst the gospel writers, includes the phrase 'for all nations' emphasising his interpretation of what Jesus was doing. Lane comments, 'The importance of this would not be lost upon Mark's readers in the predominantly Gentile Church of Rome.'[66]

Luke, in particular, highlights the significance of the gospel being for all nations, Hays noting that he connects his theology firmly to the theme of Abraham and the blessing for all nations.[67] At the presentation of Jesus in the temple Simeon declares him to be, 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel'.[68] Later in Luke's story, Jesus demonstrated such openness to non-Jews by recognising faith in the Roman Centurion whose servant he healed.[69] Wright notes that Jesus uses the Centurion's faith 'as an opportunity to point to the eschatological hope of the ingathering of the nations to the messianic banquet in the kingdom of God'.[70]

In John's gospel, Jesus's reaching out to the Samaritan woman by the well in John 4 stands out. Given the animosity between Jews and Samaritans that is clearly reflected in the text, it is remarkable that Jesus and his disciples spend two days enjoying the hospitality of the Samaritan village,[71] demonstrating Jesus's personal commitment to crossing cultural boundaries. In its context, Jesus's journey in John 2–4 from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria and then up to Galilee to encounter a royal official reflects the theme of Acts 1:8: 'And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth'. Don Carson, commenting on John 4:42 notes: 'It was appropriate that the title "Saviour of the world" should be applied to Jesus in the context of ministry to Samaritans, representing the first cross-cultural evangelism, undertaken by Jesus himself and issuing in a pattern to be followed by the church'.[72]

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63 Hays, *From every People*, 159.

64 France, *Matthew*, 37; for a contrary view suggesting that the inclusion of the four women is unrelated to their foreignness as each proselytised see J. Nolland, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 75–76.

65 Ibid., 1108. See also Nolland, *Matthew*, 1266.

66 Lane, *Mark*, 407.

67 Hays, *From every People*, 161; see Luke 1:54–55, 72–73.

68 Luke 2:30–32.

69 Luke 7:9.

70 Wright, *Mission of God*, 507.

71 John 4:40.

72 D. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* PNTC (Leicester: IVP, 1991), 232.

3. Multicultural dimensions of the early church

The coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 represents the beginning of the establishing of an international church that was anticipated by the Old Testament and the gospels. That the message preached was heard in the native languages of those gathered was a miracle in itself. David Peterson sums it up:

> For one brief moment of time, the divisions in humanity expressed through language difference were overcome... communication actually took place through the diversity of languages represented there. God was expressing his ultimate intention to unite people 'from every tribe and language and people and nation'.[73]

There are allusions in this text to Gen. 11 and the Tower of Babel, referred to above, as here, humanity which had been dispersed by God in a repudiation of their pride and an affirmation of diversity,[74] is now united by a common hearing of the gospel. There is unity (though not uniformity) amidst diversity as the new community of God's people is established. Ethnic and cultural issues tested this unity, so in Acts 6 the Apostles were required to solve the problem of the Hellenistic Jewish widows being neglected in the distribution of food. But the thrust of Acts is the continuing outreach of the gospel to the nations. In Acts 8, the story of the conversion of the eunuch from Ethiopia is recounted. Wright sees significance in the eunuch reading from Isaiah, noting that, 'Luke undoubtedly saw in this event a fulfillment of the promise of God to eunuchs and foreigners in Isa. 56'.[75]

Three further events stand out in Acts as the growing awareness of the multicultural dimensions of the early church takes root: first, Peter's vision recorded in Acts 10:9–23 where it is declared that 'God does not show favouritism but welcomes men from every nation'.[76] Second, the council convened in Jerusalem (Acts 15) to come to a mind on whether circumcision was essential for salvation of Gentiles. Third, the founding of the Philippian church recounted in Acts 16:11-40 of which Johnson observes,

> It is possible to read this section of (Luke's) story as a snippet of the social history of the early empire... we see the multiform, pluralistic, and intensely vibrant life of the Mediterranean world of the first century.[77]

To summarise this reflection on the gospels and early church, it has been shown how Jesus shifted the emphasis towards reaching out to those of other

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73 D. G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* PNTC (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009), 136.

74 See discussion in Hays, *From every Nation*, 164–65 regarding the likeliness of this allusion. Hays concludes, 'It is the overall theme of Genesis 10–12, not just a reversal of the Tower of Babel, that is important to Luke', 165.

75 Wright, *Mission of God*, 516.

76 Acts 10:34-35 following Peterson's suggestion that *dektos* be translated 'welcomes' (Peterson, *Acts*, 335).

77 Johnson, *Acts*, 302.

ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This inevitably led to the early church becoming a multicultural community with all the intercultural issues that arose.

4. Multicultural dimensions in the theology of the Apostle Paul

In Ephesians, Paul writes that Christ's purpose was 'to create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace'.[78] His concern as he is held under house arrest[79] is that the fledgling Christian church would not descend into factions but in fact be united in Christ, in particular that the believers would grasp the magnificent mystery of God that had now been revealed, that the Gentiles had now been drawn into the purposes of God in Christ.[80] In Eph. 2 this theme is unpacked as Paul lays out the situation of the Gentiles being 'excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise'.[81] He alludes to the temple in Jerusalem which had become a symbol of segregation by virtue of the fact that Gentiles could only occupy the outer court. The gateway to the inner courts displayed the sign that Gentiles could not pass on pain of death.[82] But Paul declares, 'For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility'.[83] Paul persists with the theme throughout the letter stating, 'This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Jesus Christ.'[84]

Harold Hoehner, commenting on Eph. 2:15 states, 'It is not that Gentiles become Jews as Gentile proselytes did in pre-NT times nor that Jews become Gentiles, but both become "one new person" or "one new humanity" a third entity.'[85] Holding this tension between allowing ethnic distinctions to be maintained yet stressing a unity in Christ amongst all believers is important in Paul's thought.

Daniel Boyarin, a Jewish, non-Christian, who is a self-confessed critical but sympathetic reader of Paul,[86] takes issue over what he sees as Paul's indifference to ethnic and cultural elements that were important to Jews. He focuses on Gal. 3:28 to argue that through baptism, ethnic and cultural elements are negated, dissolved 'into a single essence in which matters of cultural practice are irrel-

78 Eph. 2:15, *New Revised Standard Version* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989).
79 See Eph. 3:1; 4:1; 6:20.
80 Eph. 1:11, 13.
81 Eph. 2:12.
82 C. S. Keener, 'Some New Testament Invitations to Ethnic Reconciliation', in *Evangelical Quarterly* 75 (2003) 211.
83 Eph. 2:14.
84 Eph. 3:6.
85 H. W. Hoehner, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 378-79. See also D. E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1997), 362. Aune quotes Origen, Justin, Diognetus, and Tertullian amongst the early Christian writers who used this designation.
86 D. Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (London: University of California, 1994), 1.

evant and only faith in Christ is significant'.[87] Charles Cousar challenges Boyarin's argument asking the question, 'Do Paul's letters reflect a concern, deliberate or unintended, for the suppression of ethnic and cultural distinctiveness?'[88] In response to this, Cousar considers three texts: Gal. 3:26–29, 1 Cor. 7:17–20 and Rom. 9–11.

From Gal. 3 Cousar argues that Galatians does not represent a polemic against Jews and hence an attempt to persuade them to discard their cultural practices, but rather is written to a Gentile readership who were being persuaded by some Jewish Christians that they needed to become Jewish.[89] This is reflected in Paul's comment on his disagreement with Peter in Gal. 2 which exposes a very real issue within an emerging multicultural church. Peter, as has been noted above in the comment on Acts 10, had been led by God through a vision to realise that God is impartial and that he himself should not refrain from enjoying the hospitality offered by Gentile believers. However, as Paul states, Peter had drawn back from that position because of the pressure coming from certain Jewish Christians who were seeking to persuade Gentile believers to be circumcised. Paul recalls that he said to Peter, 'You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? We who are Jews by birth and not "Gentile sinners" know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.'[90] Cousar observes,

> When Paul sets Christ over against circumcision in Galatians, he is not denigrating the outward ritual in favour of an inward, spiritual grace. Rather, the Messiah has come, and his coming entails at least two corollaries about the community: It is inclusive of Gentiles in line with the promise made to Abraham... and its primary identity is not the *Torah* but the *Messiah*.[91]

The point is, then, that Jewish cultural elements remain significant for Jews as indeed they had been significant for those who wished to assimilate amongst the Jews in the Old Testament period. Assimilation into Israel required compliance with the demands of the Torah. But things have changed, and as assimilation into the new humanity is now through Christ, not the Torah, then the requirements of the Torah are no longer relevant to non-Jewish believers for them to belong. Paul then does not negate the cultural elements, but rebuffs those who seek to impose their cultural traditions on others.

Paul's argument in 1 Cor. 7:17–20 falls in the midst of a discussion regarding marriage and the situation of those married to unbelievers. It reveals a principle that resists the attempt to add unnecessary regulation to those who believe in

87 Boyarin, *Radical Jew*, 9.
88 C. B. Cousar, 'Paul and Multiculturalism', in *Many Voices One God* , W. Brueggemann and G. W. Stroup (eds.) (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 49.
89 Ibid., 50.
90 Gal. 2:14–15.
91 Cousar, *Paul and Multiculturalism*, 51.

Christ. Paul states, 'each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and God has called him', a statement that is repeated three times (vv. 17, 20 and 24). This is not a moral 'free for all', for Paul himself says, 'Keeping God's commands is what counts'.[92] Rather, as Cousar puts it, 'The call of God does not require a social or ethnic change on the part of the ones called. Jews are to remain Jews, and Gentiles are to remain Gentiles'.[93] However, Cousar illustrates the complexity that arises in multicultural communities, pointing out in reference to 1 Cor. 10:32: 'Paul seems more like a pastoral theologian urging a community of God's people to be sensitive to diversities that exist among them... The health and integrity of the church, in the light of the message of the crucified Christ, becomes determinative.'[94]

The third text that Cousar employs to reject Boyarin's accusation that Paul negates any ethnic particularity is Rom. 9–11. He contends that Paul faced two problems. First, there were Gentile Christians who thought that they could live independently of the Jews. Second, there were Jews who had not recognised Jesus as Messiah.[95] Cousar remains uncommitted over how 'all Israel will be saved' but observes, 'For Paul, the inclusion of the Gentiles, while it created a dislocation for Judaism, was never meant to negate the commitments laid out in 9:4–6 or to signal a supersession of Jews by Christians or to require an ethnically homogenized community.'[96] In his commentary on Galatians Cousar writes, '...the unity [Paul] declares is not one, in the first instance, in which ethnic, social, and sexual differences vanish, but one in which the barriers, the hostility, the chauvinism, and the sense of superiority and inferiority between respective categories are destroyed'.[97]

In responding to Boyarin, Cousar cannot fully satisfy his demands in that Boyarin is seeking religious pluralism (affirmation of his Jewishness aside from Christianity). However, Cousar goes some way to mitigate the complaint of Boyarin by showing that Paul is supportive of ethnic pluralism, not seeking conformity, but recognition and respect, in a context of diversity within the Christian community, a concern of this paper.

This significant aspect of Paul's theology appears in Col. 3:11, 'Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.' Hays points out that although the similarity between this verse and Gal. 3:28 is obvious, in Colossians Paul broadens the scope from just Jew and Gentile into the wider social-cultural-racial sphere. Hays goes on to describe the 'Barbarians' as those 'who did not speak Greek or did not live according to the Greco-Roman cultural norms' and the 'Scythians' as those who epitomised 'all

92 1 Cor. 7:19.
93 Cousar, *Paul and Multiculturalism*, 51.
94 Ibid., 52.
95 Ibid., 52–53.
96 Ibid., 54.
97 C. B. Cousar, *Galatians* Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 86.

the negative elements of the Barbarian'.[98] It is evident that Paul can conceive of no basis for ethnic or social prejudice but did in fact consider that the integration of those of differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds was critical to the advance of the gospel and the development of authentic Christian communities.

Conclusion

This survey of the multicultural dimensions of the Bible demonstrates that the biblical world never existed in a mono-cultural bubble but was always challenged and enriched by the ethnicities of those around or within. It is evident that Israel in the Old Testament was itself multi-ethnic and though often portrayed or imagined to be exclusive, had ways and means to accommodate those who wished to belong. Similarly in the New Testament, the cross-cultural missionary mandate Jesus demonstrated by his actions, and commanded for his disciples, meant that an increasingly multicultural church was an inevitable consequence of this thrust. In this vein it can be seen that the Apostle Paul expended significant pastoral effort to facilitate harmony amongst those from different backgrounds within the church to ensure the mission of the church continued unhindered. It is clear that the multicultural contexts that many of us find ourselves in today are not new but resonate with the everyday experience of the biblical world. Having explored these dimensions of scripture, the ground has been prepared for reflection on these insights and their significance and relevance for ministry in multicultural contexts today. This is something which I hope to develop further in due course.

Abstract

Amidst the contemporary challenge of multicultural ministry in our cities, this article explores the multicultural dimensions of the Bible to prepare a biblical and theological foundation for developing and supporting multicultural ministry. It maps out the multi-ethnic composition of Israel and its means of accommodating those of other ethnic and cultural backgrounds. It considers the multicultural context of the New Testament world and the cross-cultural ministry of both Jesus and Paul. It concludes that there is indeed resonance between the biblical world and the contemporary context and that this exploration prepares the ground for further reflection on the significance and relevance of these dimensions of scripture for multicultural ministry today.

98 Hays, *From every People*, 188.