

DISPERSION, DIVERSITY AND BEYOND: Exploring the Roots of Mission and Migration in Genesis 1-12

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ABSTRACT

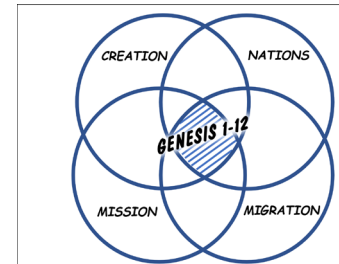
This paper is an attempt to explore the nexus of the themes of creation and the nations, and mission and migration in the first half of the book of Genesis. It seeks to discuss God's creative and redemptive purposes in the multiplication and spread of "nations" to the ends of the earth, and closes with a summary of the culmination of those purposes at the Lord's return.

INTRODUCTION

Human history is not an individual story. It is a corporate story originating at the very dawn of human existence of *groups* of people large and small, bound together by the commonalities of geography, ethnicity, language, religion, common experience and a shared heritage. *Together* they have lived and died, loved and fought, flourished and failed. The human story has always been a corporate story. It is however not only a corporate story. It is also, quite literally, a moving story, characterized from beginning to end by the ebb and flow of constant migration and movement. "History in its broadest aspect", says Ellsworth Huntington, "is a record of man's migration from one environment to another".¹ Surely no telling of the human tale would be complete without serious reflection on the dynamics of dispersion that have scattered countless corporate expressions of humanity to the farthest reaches of the globe.

And yet, human history is also more than just a corporate story or a chronicle of migration on a macro scale. It is a divine story; a story of God's intentional engagement with mankind uniquely made in His image. While this engagement clearly involves men and women at the individual level, it is also clear from Scripture that it extends to mankind's corporate experience. Wherever human community has multiplied and flourished, God's image has in some way been expressed and reflected. And wherever those communities have moved, God's image has gone with them. From the creation to the eschaton, and in the sweep of human history between these two points, the God of the universe has invested His creative and redemptive energies in the multiplication and movement of "tribes, tongues, and nations" (Rev. 5:9).

The purpose of this paper to briefly explore the Biblical roots of God's missional purposes in the development of nations and His involvement in their spread over the face of the earth. It is in essence a thumbnail theology of migration. The discussion will necessarily limit itself to broad Biblical contours of the subject drawn from the perspective of the first half of the book of Genesis. It is here that the nexus of creation and nations, migration and mission finds its Biblical foundation. We will first examine the theme of the nations in creation, and then follow this with discussion



of how the fall and the entrance of sin impinged upon their divinely intended development and dispersal. We will summarize God's redemptive response to this at the time of the flood and the tower of Babel, and how those stories shape the dynamics of migration in primeval Biblical history. Finally we will look briefly at God's missional agenda for the nations as it emerges in the Abrahamic covenant, briefly noting how this redemptive impetus is carried over to the New Testament and brought to its consummation at the end of the present age.

For the purposes of this paper, we will refer to the corporate expression of people groups in history as "nations". Much theological ink has been spilt over the precise meanings and usage of the Biblical Hebrew and Greek words for nation/s and their related terms (*i.e. people/s; kindred/s etc.*). However it is not within the scope of this paper to debate these issues. The assumption of this writer is that the Hebrew and Greek words encompassing the concept of nation and peoplehood in the Bible describe large social groupings that share the following (though not necessarily all) characteristics: a descriptive name, shared ethnicity, shared culture and history (real or mythical), shared language or dialect, common territory and religion, and shared leadership structures.² As such, our use of the term nation/s refers to more (or often less) than the commonly understood, politically defined nation-states that populate our world maps today. By nation/s we mean large social groups who perceive



1. Ellsworth Huntington, "Quotes About Migration" in . <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/migration> (Accessed May 6, 2014).

2. Mark Vanderwerf, *A Missiological Examination of National Identity in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, (an unpublished dissertation submitted to the faculty of Western Seminary, Portland, Oregon, 2008), 298. Following writers such as Wright, Block, Hays and Piper, Vanderwerf argues convincingly that Biblical terms for nation / people largely refer to distinctive ethnicities rather than to a generic "Gentile" identity.

themselves to be bound together by one or more of the characteristics listed above. While a nation may well be defined by geo-political boundaries, it may just as easily be dispersed across many boundaries. Thus nations may be overlapping entities. For example, one may see himself as a member of the Kurdish “nation”, and yet be a citizen of the modern nation of Iraq, Iran or Turkey. The apostle Paul was a member of the world Jewish community, and yet simultaneously was a citizen of Rome. Thus the term “nation” as used in this paper, and in both the Old and New Testaments, has a certain fluidity to it.

THE NATIONS IN CREATION

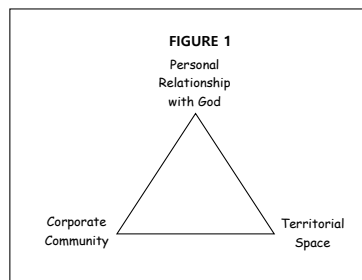
God’s dealings with the nations in the initial creation account involve both a creative pattern and a creative purpose. We shall describe them in turn.

A Creative Pattern

The creative hand of God in the development of the nations is marked by an initial pattern that gives way to a global pattern, both of which speak of divine intention. The nations do not appear in God’s telling of human history by accident or afterthought. They are shaped by His design and purpose from the very start.

- An Initial Pattern

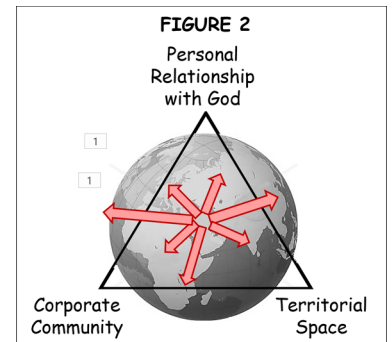
Three elements relevant to the theme of the nations characterize the creation of humankind at the creation. They provide a pattern that from the very start fundamentally shapes and defines the corporate expression of the ever-growing human story. (c. figure 1) Purposefully made in God’s image, human experience was to be marked first by corporate community. Human beings were created to reflect God’s glory and character, not just as individuals but in social groups. Secondly, these corporate entities were to be characterized by personal and intimate relationship with God and by His familial presence in their midst. God’s engagement with humankind was to be utterly relational at both the personal and the corporate levels. Thirdly, the stage for all of this was to be a wonderful planet called earth that was to provide “home” for God’s people. To put it simply, corporate humanity were to be God’s peoples, reflecting and enjoying God’s presence; and living in God’s places (i.e. the earth that God would give to them).³



Each of these elements was experienced in preliminary seed form at the beginning of human history. Thus Adam and Eve formed the seed of the first community (Gen.2:18-25), reflecting God’s image in its corporate form. Together this fledgling community walked with God in the garden in the cool of the day, fulfilling His wish that human community should live in personal relationship with Him (Gen.3:8). And together Adam and Eve were given charge of tending an initial patch of the planet called the Garden of Eden (Gen.2:15).

- A Global Pattern

Genesis 1:28 implies that this creation pattern was to characterize the subsequent unfolding of human history. Essentially a catalyst for all that was to come, the initial pattern was to become a global pattern. (c. figure 2)



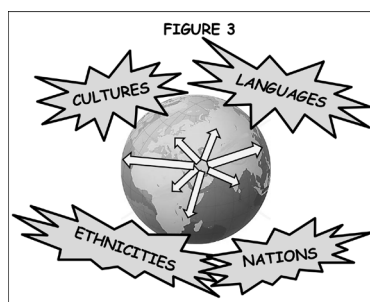
“And God blessed (Adam and Eve), and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it ...’”

In this verse God lends His personal blessing to the world’s first couple, underlining His personal relationship with them. He then follows this by immediately telling them to multiply and fill the earth, commands that imply the multiplication of communities that will ultimately spread from the Garden to the entire globe. That this blessing and command was programmatic in nature is buttressed by the fact that it is repeated almost word for word in Genesis 9:1, where Noah and his family, like Adam and Eve, play the role of progenitors of the human race after the decimation of the Genesis flood. The twice-given command implies two things concerning God’s intention in spreading mankind around the globe.

First it implies that mankind, as the bearer of God’s image, is meant to be a dispersed image. God’s intention from the beginning of human history was to reproduce His image by multiplying communities of people who would spread that image over the entire face of the globe. This tells us that the dynamic and experience of migration is not recent. It is in fact as old as human history. Human communities were to disperse and fill the earth with corporate reflections of God’s glorious image. One wonders how the trajectory of such a movement may have looked over the passage of years. By what path did the corporate expressions of the imago Dei in mankind come to be reflected (broken and tainted by sin as they later were) in the

3. I am indebted to my reading of the work of both Chris Wright and Elmer Martens for this three-fold paradigm. See Chris Wright, *Living As The People Of God*, Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1992; Elmer Martens, *God’s Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* 4th Ed.; Wipf & Stock, 2015.

farthest corners of South America, the high plateaus of Tibet, the jungles of central Africa and the far-flung islands of the South Pacific? The Biblical record will give us some hints as to the impetus behind this, but the relevant point here is that the global spread of “community made in God’s image” was part of the Divine intention from the very beginning. The legacy of God’s image in corporate mankind was to be characterized by migration and to be established in every part of the inhabitable earth.



Secondly, the commands of Genesis 1:28 and 9:1 imply that God’s corporate image in humanity was not simply to be dispersed. It was to be diverse (c. figure 3). Mankind was not intended to remain one generic homogeneous unit. Cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity were all to be part of the so-called “game plan” as human communities spread across the face of the globe. While the Genesis commands in view do not state this explicitly, such diversity is implied in the geographic spread of people over long periods of time. Speaking of the Tower of Babel, a subject to which we will return, Dr. Vinoth Ramachandran of Sri Lanka states,

The scattering of the peoples ... brings about ... an original intention of God for the human race (1:28ff): ... the diversification of human cultures (for cultures are different responses to different environments)⁴. (Italics mine)

Thus as human communities spread and migrated to vastly differing parts of the globe, they would naturally develop different living strategies, physical characteristics and distinct vocabularies – all of which would reflect the multi-variations of weather, topography, flora and fauna that they would find as the globe was increasingly explored and settled. Multi-culturalism and ethnic diversity would have been the logical development of global human dispersal and migration. The development of distinctive “nations” then is a logical and implicit extension of these Genesis commands.

That this was God’s intention from the start is clearly seen from Paul’s discourse to the Athenians in Acts 17:26,27.

He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God ... and find Him. (NASV)

Here, what is implicit in Genesis is made explicit

4. Vinoth Ramachandra, *God’s That Fail* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996) 133.

in Acts. God’s hand is behind the making of the nations, and encompasses both their total span (“... every nation...”) and their total spread (“...to live on all the face of the earth...”). The nations, in all their diversity, are clearly of God’s making and design. He builds the potential of distinctive people-hoods into the very “DNA” of mankind’s social fabric. Thus God’s activity and interest in the development of nations and their spread to the ends of the earth is not simply a response to mere accidents of history or even to man’s fall into sin. The origin of peoples and nations is not “in spite of” God’s plan, but “because of” God’s plan. As Chris Wright puts it,

National distinctives ... are part of the kaleidoscopic diversity of creation at the human level, analogous to the wonderful prodigality of biodiversity at every other level of God’s creation.⁵

Clearly human diversity was always a part of God’s larger creation plan. What is intriguing is that, despite the interjection of sin into the earliest chapters of the human story, these “national” distinctives are seemingly not done away within its last chapters at the end of the age.⁶ The apostle John in Revelation 7:9, describing the multitude gathered around God’s throne “which no one could count”, does not simply see a generic mass of individuals at the end of the age. Rather what meets his eye are some from “every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues”. His specific reference to this diversity of humanity would seem to indicate that those distinctions were for him visible and audible realities. If so, human diversity is clearly in the eternal mix of things.⁷ Revelation 21:3 continues this idea as John hears a great voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them and they shall be his peoples (Grk: laoi) (italics mine), and God himself will be with them.” John Piper comments on the use of the plural “peoples” here, concluding that,

... the final goal of God in redemption is not to obliterate the distinctions of the peoples but to gather them all into one diverse but unified assembly of “peoples”.⁸

Thus God’s creative plan for mankind was not only the dispersion of the human community across the face of the globe, but a diversification of that community of the course of time into multiplying national, ethnic and linguistic identities.

5. Chris Wright, *The Mission of God*, 456.

6. By “the end of the age”, I refer to the *parousia* of Christ and the reestablishment of God’s eternal kingdom over the universe.

7. Note: the question of whether human diversity in the new age will extend to our sexuality does not appear to me clearly addressed in Scripture. The oft-cited passage in Mark 12:25 certainly does not rule out human diversity at this level. What is in view in this verse is the institution of human marriage as we know it, rather than the diversity of sexuality.

8. John Piper, *Let The Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1993) p. 200.

A Creative Purpose

What was God's creative purpose in fostering this process of corporate dispersion and diversification? The fact that mankind was created in the "image of God" implies divine intent in such a process. Made in God's image, mankind was created to reflect the character and the glory of the God who made it. As humankind multiplied and migrated, dispersing and diversifying in the process, God's image and glory would by extension have been reflected in the cultures, nations and peoples that resulted, as well as in the places they settled. One catches something of the spirit of this in the Psalmist's exhortation. "Praise the Lord, all nations! Extol him, all peoples" (Psalm 117:1). "Declare His glory among the nations; his marvelous works among all peoples" (Psalm 96:3). The corporate expressions of God's image in humanity were to reflect, display and declare God's infinite glory and beauty among all peoples.

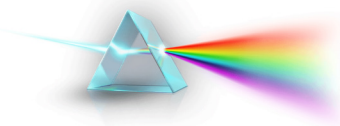
I suggest that this implies at least three matters of missiological importance. For one, it implies that the reflected image of God was never intended to be the exclusive domain of one nation or people. God's purposes to extend His glory through the dispersion and diversification of His created image ultimately cut across the exclusivity of ethno-centrism and racism. Reflecting His glory and image was a privilege and honor intended to be shared by all nations. If God's purposes for the nations, rooted in creation, extend through the present to the eschaton, then we can assume that is still true today. The potential and privilege of reflecting God's glorious image extends to the Cherokee Indian, the Masai of Kenya, the Han Chinese and the Sinhala of Sri Lanka, as much as to the Jewish seed of Abraham.

Secondly this implies that no one culture, nation or people were (and are) capable of fully reflecting God's image and glory. This may well be in fact, one of the reasons

God allowed diversity to be built into the human mosaic in the first place. Because

God's glory is infinite, it stands to reason that His image would be best reflected in a multiplication of human cultures, languages and peoples. Like a prism that reflects and displays the many-colored spectrum of pure light, the expanding complex of human society with its increasing social, linguistic and ethnic distinctives, was intended to refract and display the infinite diversity and "color" of the God who is pure light (I John 1:5).

This would imply thirdly that, while no one culture or nation is capable of fully reflecting God's image, *every* language, people group or nation has some God-given capacity to reflect His glory in ways that are unique and distinctive. As Roger Hedlund, quoting Michael Novak says, "each culture is able to manifest some



characteristics of God but ... none can express all."⁹

While one hesitates to cast vague stereotypes on "nations" (in whatever form they take ... social, linguistic, ethnic, geographic etc.), we know that national identities are often perceived and defined in terms of shared characteristics. (for example, Northern European "cool-headedness"; Japanese orderliness; African rhythm; Latin enthusiasm; Chinese industriousness). In addition, every nation expresses itself in terms of such things as its idiom, food, leadership structures, categories, music, art, literature, oral traditions etc. The perception of such shared traits and expressions has tragically often been hijacked and pressed into the service of racism, economic exploitation, xenophobic nationalism and the worst forms of ethno-centrism. Yet, is it possible that underneath the damage of man's sin and rebellion against God, national characteristics and cultural expressions such as these represent some of the "colors" of God's glory embedded, inherent and latent in the cultures and nations of our world? Is it possible that beneath the demonic overlay of man's fallenness and pride, God's image and glory could have the potential of being uniquely expressed in the rhythms of the Congo, the graciousness of the Thai, the individualism of the Australian, the quick smile of the Tibetan, the jazz of New Orleans, the curries of South Asia or the skirl of the Scottish bagpipe? Can we not sense the latent traces of God's glory in such things? Are we not told in John's description of the new Jerusalem at the dawn of the new age that "the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it", and that "they shall bring the glory and honor of the nations into it" (Revelation 21:24,26)?¹⁰ Does this not imply that every "nation" has the potential to make its own unique contribution to the reflected glory of God?

If this is so, then every nation and every culture has a validity that is not only rooted in creation at the beginning of time, but has at least the potential of finding its fullest and purest expression in the eschaton at the end of time. It also implies that the fullest and richest expression of the multi-faceted, multi-colored beauty and glory of God's image is reserved for the day when it will be reflected in the praise and worship of "every tribe, tongue and nation" (Revelation 7:9). It will be a day when the God who "made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26) will be glorified and displayed in the nations He has made. It is a day no nation in history can afford to miss!

THE NATIONS AND THE FALL

The question remains of course. Where and how does the entrance of sin into the complex of human

9. Roger Hedlund, *God and the Nations: a Biblical Theology of Mission in the Asian Context*, (New Delhi, India: ISPCK, 1997) 15.

10. Note: That the "glory and the honor of the nations" mentioned in these verses is a glory reflected and derived from the glory of God would seem to be implied by the immediately preceding verse 23 that speaks of the glory of God making superfluous other sources of "glory" such as the sun or the moon.

culture and society fit in? Thus far we have spoken of God's pattern and purpose for the nations in creation, and what this implies for the dawn of the new age. A full reading of the apostle Paul's words in Acts 17:26 and 27 however, suggest more than a hint of trouble between the two terminal points of creation and consummation. While verse 26 speaks of God's creatorship of the nations, and His involvement in their histories, verse 27 lets us know that God's purposes for the nations now include His desire that they should "seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him ...". We suggested earlier that God's creative pattern for community envisaged the fundamental experience of developing and growing in personal relationship with Him. Clearly in Acts 17:27 Paul suggests that something has happened to disrupt this ideal. The words "seek", "grope" and "find" clearly imply a sense of lostness in the relationship between the nations and their Creator, and in regard to the ultimate purposes for which they had been created. They also imply God's desire to see this relationship and purpose rediscovered and reestablished. Genesis 3-11 underlines this concern in the telling of the human story subsequent to creation. We shall look at that story and its implications in three different stages: the fall and the flood, the table of nations, and the tower of Babel.

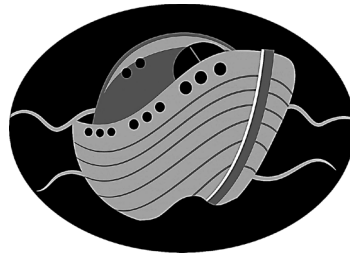
The Fall And The Flood

The reason for the break in relationship between God and the nations is of course not far to find. Genesis 3 tells us of the tragic entrance of sin into the human story. Adam and Eve, now laden with the results of sin, bequeath this inheritance to subsequent history. What happens to individual man will now affect his corporate expressions. The three-fold creation paradigm that was meant to characterize the unfolding of human history (c. above), while not destroyed, is irrevocably marred. (c. figure 4) Cain and Able set the pace as the world's first son murders the world's second son (Genesis 4:3-8) and matters steadily deteriorate from there. The nations that were intended to fill the earth with unique and corporate expressions of the image and glory of God will now grow into broken if not grotesque caricatures of what God intended them to be. Genesis 5 gives us a thumbnail sketch of primeval human history up to the course of Noah's flood. It is indeed a story of multiplying communities (Gen.6:1), but communities that are in chaotic disarray (6:1-5). Genesis 6:5 puts it in blunt and superlative language.

"Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of

man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." (Genesis 6:5 NASV; italics mine).

It is a terrible "report card" indeed! Sadly the earth, rather than being a scene of corporate mankind's loving stewardship and care, becomes a stage for unparalleled corporate wickedness and evil. Unsurprisingly, this strains to the breaking point



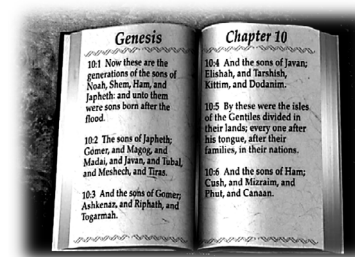
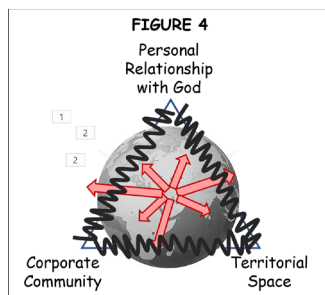
God's relationship with those created to bear His image. The tragic story reveals a God whose relationship with the communities of mankind is now characterized, not by personal presence and relationship, but by the words "strive", "sorry" and "grieved". His spirit will not "strive with man forever" (6:3). He is "sorry that He (has) made man on earth" and is "grieved in His heart" (6:6). It is interesting that God's response to mankind's brokenness and rebellion is not just one of anger or rage. (Nor is it a callous "better luck next time".) The words used speak of deep personal anguish and heartache. It is clear that the corporate rebellion of man-made-in-God's-image touches God personally at the core of His heart, and it is in "grief" that He responds with a flood that sheers the human community down to the slenderest of threads.

Yet God is still committed to His creative purposes for the nations. With the preservation of Noah and his three sons and their families, God reissues the original command given to Adam and Eve to "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." (Gen.9:1), along with all the national/ethnic implications that come with it. Migration and dispersion, along with the consequent multiplication and social diversity that will come with it are still the order of the day. That the command to Noah and his sons had such implications becomes clear in the following chapter (Genesis 10) commonly described as the "Table of Nations".

The Table Of Nations

In this chapter are traced the immediate descendants of the three sons of Noah, whose seventy resultant families and clans become the forbears of the world's developing nations in embryonic form.

Vanderwerf, quoting James Scott says Genesis 10 is the "fundamental passage which supplies the basis for world geography and ethnography, both in the Old



Testament and in later Jewish writing."¹¹ He goes on to quote Block's comments on Genesis 10, saying that the passage ...

represents the only extant ancient Near Eastern attempt to explain, on a level approaching the theoretical, the existence of the nations and their relationships to one another from a human perspective.¹²

As such, chapter 10 becomes the ancient world's first version of a socio-ethno-geographic data-base. But it is more than just a "data-base". The relationship between the command given to Noah and his sons "to be fruitful and fill the earth" in Genesis 9, and resulting seedbed of nations in chapter 10 is clear. Chapter 10 is the result of God's command and blessing in chapter 9. The nations have God's "fingerprints" on them, and His intentions for them remain in place. As Verkuyl comments on this passage,

"The nations are not mere decorations incidental to the real drama between God and man; rather, the nations are ... part of the drama itself".¹³

Thus it is here that the initial framework for the diversification of the human community and its dispersement and migration to the ends of the earth are found. Surprisingly however, this process is not the default result of a naturally evolving human history that we might have expected. While a casual reading of Genesis 10 alone might lead us to believe this, dispersement and diversification is in fact a process that requires nothing less than the personal intervention of God Himself. That scene is set for us in Genesis chapter 11 in the narrative of the tower of Babel.¹⁴

The Tower Of Babel

Following the flood in Genesis 9, God reissues His command to mankind to multiply and fill the earth. Clearly dispersion and its consequent diversity are still on the divine agenda. However, what we discover in chapter 11, is that while the rebellion and arrogance of fallen man has resulted in his near-decimation at the time of the flood, the "spirit" of rebellion and arrogance of man has survived the flood quite handily in the hearts of Noah's immediate descendants. The contagion is alive and well and rapidly manifests itself in the emerging halls of corporate human power ... where dispersion and diversity are clearly not on the human agenda.

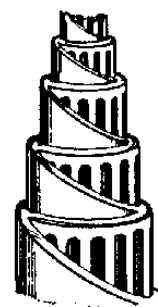
Firstly, the nascent human community that emerges from the flood, having been commanded to "fill the

earth", determines that they will not in fact engage in migration. Rather than dispersing, the community as a whole (cf. 11:1 "the whole earth") settles on the plains of Shinar (Genesis 11:2). Not content to merely settle, they are proactive, putting their stakes in and building a city that will be capped by a "tower whose top will reach into heaven" (11:4). What is intriguing is the explicit two-fold purpose Babel's builders give for this massive building project. Its purpose is firstly in order that "we may make for ourselves a name" (11:4), an implied attempt to arrogantly carve out a corporate identity for mankind independent of the God whose name and image they were created to reflect. This of course is nothing more than a corporate extension of the serpent's first deceptive offer to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:2-7). It is deeply challenging to realize how energetically the spirit of Babel continues to build its towers in our day unabated.

The second purpose of Babel's builders is expressed by their words "... lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth" (11:4). This declaration was in clear contravention of the commands given to both sets of the progenitors of the human race to multiply and fill the earth (Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28, and Noah and his sons in 9:1). Rather than taking God's image (cracked and broken as it was) to the ends of the globe, they opt for stubborn settledness, proactively taking measures to ensure that this does not happen. Their corporate "Let us" in verse 4 indicates a clear decision to move against the God-given "grain" of global dispersion and migration. Humankind it seems, is corporately determined to head the wrong direction! Rather than disperse and display God's image by going "out" over the face of the earth, they seek to restrain and replace God's image by going "up" into heaven.

Diversification too, we have said, was part of God's agenda for the nations. We have argued that the diversification of humanity into "nations" would have been the natural development of its gradual dispersal around the world over time (c. above). We have also argued that this diversification was entirely part of the will and plan of a God who intended to display His glory uniquely within multiplying and diversifying cultures, languages and peoples. The Babel narrative however, reveals that in this matter as well, God's multi-national agenda was not being fulfilled. Genesis 11:1 clearly states that at this time "the whole earth used the same language and the same words". One can assume then that corporate humanity at this point was limited to one mono-cultural expression. God, in His "tour" of the building project (vs.5) says so Himself.

The Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and



11. Vanderwerf, 269.

12. *ibid.*, 270.

13. Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction*, (Grand Rapids MI, Eerdmans Publishing 1978), http://www.corvallisperspectives.com/2011/What_files/Lesson_2.pdf#page=38, accessed May 11, 2011.

14. Note: it is commonly understood that the account of Babel in Genesis 11 chronologically precedes the Table of Nations in Genesis 10, thus putting the multiplication of nations in Genesis 10 in context.

they all have the same language.” (Genesis 11:6) (italics mine)

Man’s refusal to disperse simply ensured that the natural process of diversification would not take place. It is also ensured that any diversification of the corporate expression of God’s image would be limited. God’s image, painted on the canvas of human community (with the brokenness of sin now “clogging the brush”), would be restricted to the pale of Shinar and at best be painted in mono-cultural “grayscale” rather than in multi-cultural “color”.

What is God’s response to this? What is His response to a people endowed with His image (cracked though it is), who refuse to disperse and “fill the earth”, and whose actions limit the diffusion of God’s image throughout that world in multiplying nations and cultures? Thankfully He doesn’t throw His hands up in despair! “The plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations!” (Psalm 33:11). God has purposed to have an earth filled with nations, cultures and languages that reflect His beauty and glory in ALL its diversity – and He will have it, no matter what man may say or do.

In Babel’s case God’s immediate response then is to “short-circuit” the city’s communications system. Babel’s corporate “Let us” in verse 4 is met by God’s corporate “Let us” in verse 7.

“Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. (Gen.11:7-8 NASV, italics mine)

Deus vult! “God wills it”. Apparently, if diversification would not result from dispersion, God was not beyond accomplishing His purposes by reversing the process. Dispersion would now result from diversification as God gave the human community a crash course in “glossalia”. In giving humankind the gift of multiple languages, God accomplishes by His sovereign will in a moment, what would normally have taken hundreds of years, and in the process also effects His purposes to fill the earth with His image.¹⁵ Ramachandran, quoted earlier, captures the same spirit when he says,

The scattering of the peoples also brings about, though in a now fallen world, an original intention of God for the human race: the management of the earth and the diversification of human cultures.¹⁶ (italics mine)

Thus God is seen proactively intervening in the

15. Note. While it has been common to see God’s actions at Babel purely as a judgment upon humankind, it seems apparent in the light of what we have argued, that His actions encompassed both judgment and grace: judgment in stopping man’s upward attempts to replace God’s name with theirs, and grace in facilitating man’s outward responsibility to take God’s diverse image to the ends of the earth.

16. Vinoth Ramachandran, 133.

gathered “settledness” of primeval human community on the plains of Shinar, and compelling it to scatter across the face of the globe. Clearly His intentions for the dispersal and diversification of mankind are as old as human history. And so from Babel the great migration began – a migration that would not end until communities of man in all their variant strains would take the latent image of God they carried to every inhabitable corner of the earth. How long that took, and by what paths and circumstances of history it was accomplished we cannot be sure. But we can be sure of one thing, that God was in the process!

This in turn suggests a matter of some missiological interest. The idea that God Himself was behind the gradual world-wide dispersion of humankind implies that God has been involved in the development and movements of nations and peoples throughout history. Indeed Babel was just a catalyst for God’s continuing investment in global dispersion. As missiologists, we need to read history through the spectacles of the God who was sovereignly directing the world’s affairs behind the scenes. Wider Scriptural support for this is not difficult to muster. A number of intriguing Biblical passages suggest that this was indeed so. Long before Paul’s words to this effect in Acts 17:26-27, Moses lets us know in Deuteronomy 32:8 that the “inheritance” of nations, “the boundaries of the peoples” and the “(separation) of the sons of man” have been given and set in place by “the Most High”. Passages such as Deuteronomy 2:10-12 and 20-23 inform us that the ebb and flow of the peoples that defined the territorial maps of Moses’ day were under God’s control.¹⁷ To quote Wright:

Not only is the same language used as for Israel’s settlement, but the comparison is explicitly drawn: other nations had conquered and settled “just as Israel did in the land the LORD gave them as their possession” (Dt.2:12).¹⁸

The prophet Amos goes on to make a similar point, reminding Israel that while they were in a unique covenantal relationship with YHWH, they were by no means the only nation in whose histories God had been involved. In Amos 9 God reminds His covenant people not only of His involvement in their early migratory history in Egypt, but of His involvement in the movements and migrations of other peoples at the time as well.¹⁹

“Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites?” declares the Lord. “Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir? (Amos 9:7 NIV).

Apparently God was as actively involved in

17. Chris Wright, *The Mission of God*, (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2006) 464.

18. Ibid.

19. E. Wan and T. Rubesh. *Wandering Jews and Scattered Sri Lankans*, (Institute of Diaspora Studies – U.S., Western Seminary, Portland, Oregon, 2016), 20.

superintending the migrations of Philistines, Arameans and presumably Cushites as He was in Israel's migration from Egypt. His initial involvement in the movement of peoples and nations in Genesis continued to be worked out in the broader context of subsequent Old Testament history and continues to this day. Alex Motyer's comment on this is insightful:

...the Lord is alike the Agent in every national history, every racial migration. In this regard it is no more a privilege to be an Israelite than to be a Hottentot. One Lord rules all, appointing the place they shall leave, the distance they shall move and the spot where they shall settle.²⁰

And so, behind the ebb and flow of the world's vast swirl of people on the move lie the gracious purposes of a God who loves that world and whose mission is nothing less than the ultimate restoration of His glory and His kingdom over the face of the globe. As human history moves toward that terminus, the swell of modern migration is neither accidental or incidental. It comes by divine design. God is stirring the pot. This implies that as missiologists today, we must view the nations in which God has called us to minister, as communities (and places) where God has already been at work – long before we ever got there! As we serve in these nations, God's creative intentions, His eschatological purposes, and His historical involvement in between those two polar points of history need to be a part of our message. Can we see God's hand behind the movement of peoples across Central Asia to the Bering Straits and thence to the Western hemisphere? Can we see His hand in the multiplication of indigenous cultures as they crossed those straits and eventually filtered down to the tip of South America? Can we see His hand in bringing explorers such as Leif Erikson or Christopher Columbus to the "new world"? ... or Prince Vijaya to the shores of Sri Lanka?²¹ Can we see His hand in the incredible migrations of peoples and nations around the globe today?²² The imprint of God's ways with the nations in Genesis leads us to believe that indeed we can!

THE NATIONS AND THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

The nations are clearly a major focus of God's creative focus and intentions in Genesis 1-11. The narrative

20. J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Amos, The Bible Speaks Today* (Downer's Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974), 196-97.

21. Note: Prince Vijaya is considered the first king of Sri Lanka, believed to have arrived from India in the mid-sixth century BC. He is commonly considered the founder of the Sinhala race which is the majority ethnic group on the island today. His story is chronicled in the *Mahavamsa*, an ancient Pali text relating the early history of Sri Lanka.

22. Though written from a secularist perspective, Jared Diamond's Pulitzer prize-winning book *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (1997 Random House) offers a fascinating attempt to trace the spread of a variety of civilizations and their respective power throughout the course of human history. We wait with anticipation to hear the full and final version of the story of migration in the day when we shall no longer "see through a glass darkly" (I Corinthians 13:12).

leaves us in chapter 11 with the initial dispersing and diversification of embryonic peoples, ethnicities and languages over the face of the globe, each of them bearing the latent image and glory of God in a unique though preliminary way. The fact remains however that the entrance of sin in Genesis 3 has irrevocably marred that image. If the eschaton is to see the fulfillment of God's creative purposes for the peoples He has made, it will require nothing less than God's redemptive intervention to repair the damage of the fall and make it happen. To put it simplistically, the rest of the Biblical narrative, taking us from the fall to the eschaton, describe for us that divine intervention. The bulk of the Bible then becomes essentially the story of God's redemptive mission to win His world back, to restore His glory to a broken planet (c. Habakkuk 2:14), and to redeem and restore the nations He has made, healing their wounds and enabling them to be all that they were originally intended to be. The balance of the book of Genesis (from chapter 12 on) gives us the first chapters in that redemptive story. The crux of the story however is the giving of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Abraham's Call And Covenant

God's redemptive "counterattack" begins in earnest with the calling of Abram, a citizen of one of the ancient Near East's premier urban centers named Ur. At this point, God shifts His focus from a "wide angle" perspective encompassing the global nations, to a "telephoto" perspective focusing on one man and his wife Sarah. As with Adam and Eve, and Noah and his family, they become progenitors of the plans God has for the nations; the difference being that while the former served as catalysts of God's creative plans, Abram and Sarah become catalysts for God's redemptive plans.

This wealthy urbanite and his wife are asked by God to leave their home in Ur in exchange for what amounted to a "blank check" or an open-ended promise. In short Abram and Sara become migrants, migrants no less to a destination and an identity unknown to them. Cast in the image of the archetypal migrant, they leave their national, linguistic, religious identities behind (for that is what leaving Ur would have entailed for them). God does not tell them in advance with what He will replace the resulting vacuum. The only social label that eventually attaches itself to this "passport-less" and "visa-less" couple is the term "Hebrew" (cf. Genesis 14:13) - a term arguably associated with the Semitic word *h'abiru* that was used as a general designation for wandering, nomadic minorities who generally populated the outer fringes of many typical ancient near-eastern nations.²³ Thus, effectively stripped of much if not most of their previous national cultural identity and baggage, God brings Abram and Sarah

23. See Ted Rubesh, *Hebrews and Wandering Arameans: Exploring the Roots of the Jewish Diaspora*, (*Colombo Theological Seminary Journal*, 13.2, 2010) for further discussion of the relation between the terms *habiru* and "Hebrew".

to the land of Canaan, where He begins to forge with them a brand new nation and people, a new corporate identity that will eventually serve as His agent to reach the nations.



These purposes are made explicit to Abram, now called Abraham, in a formal covenant that God makes with him (Genesis 12,15); a covenant whose terms are repeated and reconfirmed several times in the lives of Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob.²⁴ While volumes have been written on the subject of the Abrahamic covenant, we limit ourselves here to two primary observations that relate to our theme.



The first observation is that the general specifications of the Abrahamic covenant follow the pattern that characterized God's intentions for mankind at creation. That pattern envisaged humankind experiencing life in corporate communities, doing so within a territorial space, and enjoying a personal relationship and experience with the God who made them. The Abrahamic covenant, in its own vocabulary, reiterates each of those initial purposes, applying in one micro-narrative (Abraham's story ... and later by extension Israel's story), what God had originally intended to be experienced in the meta-narrative of human history. To Abraham God promises a community and a nation (a "holy nation"). This new people will be given a territorial space (a "holy land"), and they will be distinguished from all other peoples by the fact that they will live in personal covenant relationship with God (a "holy covenant"). As Wright says,

God's relation to Israel in their land was a deliberate reflection of his relation to mankind on the earth, or rather a redemptive response to the fracturing of his original creative purpose.²⁵

24. Note: it is the writer's view that the Old Testament covenants all essentially build on the same paradigm of purpose. Thus while the Abrahamic covenant was given specifically to him, the Mosaic and Davidic covenants (for example) are in principle essentially explanations, applications and expansions of the original covenant.

25. Chris Wright, *Living As The People Of God*, (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1992) 88.

(c. figure 5)

Thus Abraham and the nation God would bring from him, were to be a story written in "small letters", reflecting the larger story God had intended to write in "big letters" at creation.

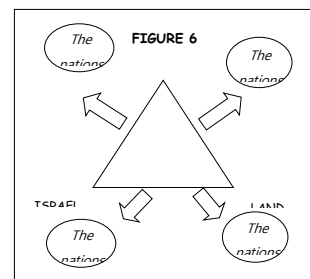
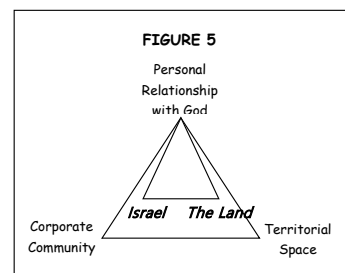
Stories however, are meant to be read. This brings up the question of the "readership" God had in mind for His Abrahamic micro-narrative.

In sovereignly shaping the story, did God have a wider international "readership" in view? Were His creative concerns for the nations still alive? Or did God's promises to Abraham and the future nation of Israel signify a vastly reduced (if not exclusive) interest in one nation? Was Old Testament Israel (and by extension, the church as the New Testament people of God) to be the limit of God's redemptive concerns for the nations? Time and again, the terms of God's covenant with Abraham, repeated to His descendants in various forms, answer this question with an emphatic "no"!

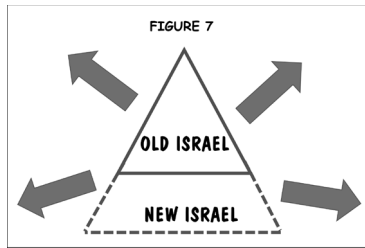
This brings us to our second observation on the Abrahamic covenant; namely that its terms clearly had God's redemptive agenda for the nations written into its DNA. This had not been lost is the "downsizing" and was unmistakably underscored by the fact that virtually every time the covenant terms were given and refreshed, the bottom line was

that it was to be by means of this one especially chosen nation that God would reach all the nations. Israel was not simply to function as God's "model" national project. She was to be His "pilot project" ... preparing a way by which one day, every "nation, tribe and tongue" would be healed and restored to the delights and blessings of a relationship with their Maker. Abraham and Israel, in short, were not chosen for their own sakes. They were chosen for the sake of the nations. What God intended to do for Israel as His prototype, He intended to do for every nation. God's chosen nation was to serve as both model and agent for those purposes.(c. figure 6)

The balance of the Old Testament story lets us know that God's model and agent was taken through many severe and painful twists of plot. Through the unfolding of the story it seems at times that God's agent of remedy created more problems than it resolved. But as Scripture's meta-narrative bursts into the New Testament era, God's redemptive passion for



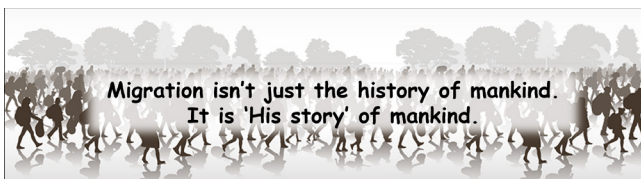
the nations has not dimmed. Into the mix steps none other than the Messiah, God incarnate Himself. Under the inexhaustible impetus of the Messiah's



crucifixion and resurrection, and the impartation of God's Holy Spirit to representative nations gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost, a "new Israel" is formed from a stump of the old. (c. figure 7) Echoing the commands given to Adam and Eve, and to Noah and his sons it is commissioned to multiply and "migrate" to the ends of the earth, taking with it this time, the good news of God's coming kingdom to every nation (Matthew 28:19). Significant or not, it is fascinating that the diversification/dispersal pattern first played out at the tower of Babel is mirrored in the experience of the freshly commissioned church in the early chapters of the book of Acts. Sovereignly equipped at Pentecost with a catalytic and diverse range of linguistic gifts to communicate that good news to "the nations" in Acts 2, the church (not unlike Babel of old, still firmly entrenched in Jerusalem) is then scattered in Acts 8 and dispersed to regions beyond (note the use of same English translation "scattered" in both Genesis 11:9 and Acts 8:1). At both Babel and Jerusalem, the strategy seems to have paid off.

CONCLUSION

God's heart for the nations is as old as the dawn of time. So too has been His engagement with the commensurate movement of peoples across the face of the globe through the ages. Stirred and superintended by His divine and beneficent purposes, migration has been woven into both God's creative and redemptive plans from the start. From the Garden of Eden, through the tragedy of the fall, the devastation of the flood, the dispersion at the tower of Babel, the call of Abraham and the resulting formation of the nation of Israel, God's purpose to fill the earth with corporate expressions of His glory and image never wavered. Migration is not just the history of mankind. It is His story of mankind. Rooted in the first chapters of Genesis, God's concern and purposes for the nations have continued to shape the human story from past to present.



The good news of the kingdom is that this concern is also anchored in the final chapters of the human story. Indeed one of the clearest harbingers of the end of the

present age and the commencement of the new is in fact that "the gospel shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all nations ... and then the end shall come" (Matthew 24:14 emphasis mine). This is an essential part of the Gospel we preach. Paul's confidence that the God "who began a good work in you, will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6), is as applicable to His work among nations as it is to His work among individuals. The book of Revelation makes this abundantly clear. It is here at the end of the age that the nations have come full circle. Here we are treated to the breathtaking vista of the multitude which no man can number, gathered in worship around the throne of God, and composed of the most incredible human diversity of "tribes, tongues and nations" the world will ever have seen (Revelation 7:9). It is here that the migrating multitudes of history will have the opportunity of finally arriving home to wander no more; home to the new Jerusalem that will make its dwelling place forever on an earth redeemed and renewed by the return of King Jesus. It is here that every worthy contribution of our peoples and languages, every glory of our corporate cultural expressions, all divinely shaped through the processes of multiplication and migration, will finally be cleansed and fully reflect in all their beauty the multi-faceted image of the God who made them (Revelation 21:24,26). Thus will mission come to an end. And so too will migration.

What hope this presents for our world's migrating millions. And what prospects for today's evangelists and missionaries who have in the Gospel of the coming kingdom a platform of incredible hope and vision for the nations they have been called to serve!! May that hope and vision go beyond the despair of our newspaper headlines. The just we are told, shall "live by faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). May our hope for the future be rooted and impelled by our confidence in God's creative passion "in the beginning", and by His glorious promises for the future, and by His redemptive commitment between those two terminal points to see His glory extended and reflected in every nation on the face of the earth. We have every reason to be confident, for the promise of the ultimate Giver and Keeper of these promises assures us the day

"... for the earth WILL be filled with ... the glory of God as the waters cover the sea."
 (Hab. 2:14)

is surely coming when "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14 NIV).

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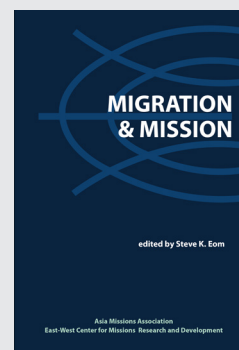
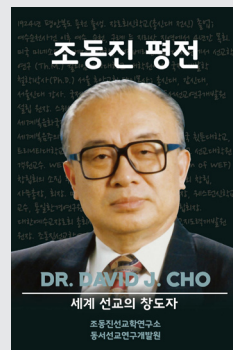
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