

MISSION TO THE NATIONS: A BIBLICAL WORD STUDY OF ETHNOS

■ The use of the word *ethnos* in the Bible provides a clear foundation and rationale for the frontier missions movement today. The very plan of God seems to be intimately linked to the diversity of peoples and their inclusion in his eternal kingdom.

By Hans M. Weerstra

The clearest and best meaning of *ethnos* (biblical nation) is found in Acts 17:26. The *pan ethnos anthropon* i.e., "of every nation of men," means a group of individuals or people bound together by the same manners, customs and other common distinguishing features. This gives the term the sense of a people or people group. *Ethne* is the plural, and would mean peoples or people groups. Notice that the apostle Paul affirms that God made the *ethne* from one source, and that He made them to live on all the face of the earth. God even determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, or the land or place they should live, for the purpose that they should seek and find God, since "He is not far from each one of us" (vs. 27).

Old Testament Background

The Old Testament concept of *ethnos/ethne* (from the LXX, or the Greek translation of the Old Testament) in essence is as follows:

First of all we see God as being King of all the peoples, of all the *ethne* of the earth. (Jer. 10:6,7; Ps. 22:28; Ps. 47:7,8; compare Rev. 15:3). What is important to note is that God Himself formed the *ethne*. God has not formed one single indiscriminate mass of humanity, but rather a complex and varied mosaic of separate distinct nations, or family of nations, of different people groups (*ethne*) that differ significantly in custom, manners, lineage and language, including distinctions regarding the land they occupy. All of this is by God's creative design.

Notwithstanding, the story of the tower of Babel, the people who rebelled against God made a plan to resist this

divine order of things (Genesis 11). They wanted to make a name for themselves, rather than trust God. But it is important to note that these rebels were people who had already been formed as distinct nations. At the tower of Babel we see God's intervention not to form them into nations, as much as to reestablish the order of the division of nations He had previously determined. At the tower of Babel God was in effect confirming the division of the nations and strengthening it by introducing diversity of languages. George Bertram says: "In Deut. 32:8 the division of the world into nations is by divine order and not a punishment for human sin." (*Theological dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. II page 367.)

At this point we need to look at Acts 17:26 where the apostle Paul seems to allude to this passage in Deuteronomy 32:8. We can see that the division of humanity into distinct peoples is by God's creation order, due to His gracious blessing of His goodness. Hence the formation of distinct nations as people groups on the face of the earth is not a result of God's curse or of God's judgement on sin and rebellion (as frequently misunderstood), but must be seen as a blessing of God's creation and gracious design, an expression of His image and glory on the face of the earth.

We must admit that the term in later Judaism became increasingly absorbed into a rather technical term our English Bibles translate as "Gentiles", i.e., a term describing non-Jewish individuals as such. It also was used in Judaism in a disparaging sense conveying a negative judgment from a Jewish standpoint. Bertram states: "Yet even in the Old

Testament this (negative) judgment has no final validity in face of the promise of salvation to all peoples" (*TDNT* Vol. II page 369). We might add that it not only had "no final validity," but that it never had an essential validity at all anywhere in the Old Testament, since the negative concept of the term was rooted in an erroneous understanding of the Jews as God's people vis-a-vis the nations. It had always been God's intentions in the Old Testament economy to bless the nations and peoples of the earth through the agency of Israel as God's redeemed covenant people.

Therefore in spite of Israel's misconception and disparaging attitudes toward non-Jewish people and people groups, (i.e. the Gentiles), the term was never fully absorbed into this non-descript technical usage. The reason was that God Himself had designed the division of the peoples of the earth and had promised salvation to all the nations, *panta ta ethne*, fulfilling His mission to all the peoples of the earth.

Synonyms of *ethnos/ethne*

Synonyms of *ethnos/ethne* are as follows:

- a) *phule*, a people having a common descent such as a tribe, clan or family group.
- b) *laos*, a people in a more political sense, having a common history and constitution.
- c) *glossa*, a people in a linguistic sense, a language group.

However, *ethnos* is the most general term of the three and in the singular always means a people group in an ethnographic sense denoting a group of people with common affinity and way of life. In Rev. 5:9, 7:9, 11:9, 13:7, and 14:6 we find all four used together as

synonyms. We should also note that the singular *ethnos* is never used for an individual. It never refers to a single individual Gentile. The singular *ethnos* is always used to describe a people group, frequently referring to Israel as a nation or people group.

Nations as Gentiles

There are some 100 passages in the NT in which the plural *ethne* is used as people in general, as individuals distinct from Jews (even including people distinct from Christians). When used in this sense the Bible translates the term as Gentiles. Some outstanding passages are the following:

a. Matt. 6:32: Jesus tells His disciples not to pray as the *ethne* do. The parallel passage in Luke (12:30) adds *panta ta ethne tou kosmos*—"as the nations of the world" seek after these things.

b. Another example is where Jesus told His disciples not to go into the *ethne* nor to go to the Samaritans but only to go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel who have no Shepherd (Matt. 10:5,6)

c. Another passage is Matt. 20:19 (Mark 10:33, 24; and Luke 18:32) where the evangelist describes how Jesus is to be delivered up or handed over to the *ethne*, who will make fun of him, insult him and spit on him, they will whip him and kill him, but three days later he will rise to life.

d. The apostle Paul in Acts 14:16 says that in the past God allowed all the *ethne* to proceed or go along their own ways, yet not leaving himself without a witness among them.

e. In Eph. 2:11-12 the focus is the *ethne* in the flesh, those who are called the uncircumcision by those who are called circumcision in the flesh made by hands, that the *ethne* were at that time without a Messiah alienated from Israel, strangers of the covenant of promise, not having hope and without God in the world, who now in Christ have come near by the blood of Christ, who broke down the wall of partition and the enmity, in order to reconcile them in one Body of God through the cross. The object of this passage are the *ethne*.

f. In I Cor. 1:22, 23 Paul says that the message of the cross is offensive to the Jews and non-sense to the *ethne*, but for those whom God has called, both Jews and *ethne*, this message is Christ, the power of God and wisdom of God.

g. In Eph. 4:17 the Christians are

exhorted and warned not to live like the *ethne*, whose thoughts are worthless and whose minds are darkened.

h. Paul says in Rom.11:14: "I speak now to you *ethne*. As long as I am apostle to the *ethne*, I will take pride in my work". Also in Eph. 3:1 Paul says: "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you *ethne*." Here the term obviously includes Christians.

A cursory study of the above passages concerning the plural *ethne* reveals the following:

1) Neither the Lord nor the apostles used the term in a disparaging sense. Even though this was the case in later developments of Judaism, which as we have seen was based on an erroneous conception of Israel's role concerning the nations, yet nowhere do we find this to be the case with the Lord's usage of the term, nor that of the apostles anywhere in the New Testament.

2) In all the passages being considered the non-descript or technical usage of Gentiles does not contradict the singular and more basic sense of peoples or people groups. For instance in Matt. 6:32 and Luke 12:30 Jesus tells His disciples not to pray as the *ethne* do, adding in the Lucan passage that *panta ta ethne tou kosmos*—"all the nations of the world" seek after these things. Notice that the more basic concept of the term as a people group makes just as much sense, perhaps even better sense, in that the disciples should not pray as the peoples of the world do, who are of the world, who do not know God because they belong to an evil worldly system. In other words, they are not to pray as the people of the nations, as people of people groups who are still of the world, who do not know God. Also the term in the Matt. 10:5-6 passage has a distinct people group flavor in view of the fact that it is used in conjunction with the Samaritans who definitely were considered to be a distinct group people. The term maintains the same basic people group concept; distinct from the Jewish people, and later on even distinct from God's new people, i.e. the Spiritual Israel.

Missiological conclusions

As a result of this word study, we should be able to see the basic meaning of the biblical term "nation/nations" and draw some profound missiological

conclusion. The biblical term *ethnos/ethne* (translated either as nation/nations or Gentiles in our English Bibles) clearly reveals that in the singular usage of the term as well as the underlying meaning in the Greek Scriptures (New Testament and the LXX) lies the idea of people group or groups as well as people or individuals from those people groups. This precise meaning will help us get a clearer understanding regarding world evangelization as well as help us see God's heart to the world seen in terms of nations or people groups, as well as helps shed insight into the essence of the Great Commission passages in the Scriptures. Our Lord's commission was and is to disciple *panta ta ethne* (Matt. 28:19 and 24;14 and others). But what does it mean to disciple (to make disciples of) all the *ethne* of the earth, (as well as to baptize and teach them to observe the Lord's commandments) with this new understanding?

On the basis of the our study we can draw the following conclusions:

1. Specifically because of the adjective *panta*, in the Great Commission passages, and more importantly because of the Lord's all inclusive authority "in heaven and on earth," all the peoples of the world are in view and become the object of the mission imperative. All the *ethne* on the face of the earth are to be discipled, not one excluded. Because of Christ's victory over sin and death by virtue of which all authority has been given unto Him everywhere, in all the inhabited world, Christ is fully the Lord and King of all the *ethne*, of all the peoples of the earth. We must see its Old Testament background, as linking back to the Old Testament scene where God was/is proclaimed and worshiped as King over all the nations and peoples of the earth.

2. The singular and pervasive meaning of *ethnos/ethne* throughout the Greek Scriptures is that of a people or people group, each of which is bound together by common customs, lineage, language and even the land the peoples occupy. The implication is that the Lord commissioned His Church to make disciples of (or among) all the peoples of the earth. The Lord is not commanding mass evangelism in general, indiscriminate of the ethnographic cultural and language heritage of the people to be discipled or evangelized. The focus of the imperative of the Lord's commis-

sion is on making disciples of and among all the peoples of the earth. The *ethne* are the object of the imperative, hence peoples or people groups need to be disciplined, not just evangelizing individuals indiscriminate of their cultures. Certainly the implication is that individuals from people groups are involved and need to become disciples of Jesus by hearing and accepting the Gospel, both by being baptized in His name and being taught to obey Him. However, we must see that this needs to occur in terms of and in the context of the people groups to which individual men and women belong. We must remember that the *ethne* are distinct peoples of the earth, and they are such by God's design as His creation order. He formed them all as distinct peoples of the earth. As such they need to be disciplined. To them, as people groups, the Gospel of the Kingdom needs to be proclaimed, for a testimony unto them. Only at that point, when this has been completed will the end come. (Matt. 24:14) All along it has been God's plan through the ages to bless all the peoples of the earth with salvation and grace in Christ the seed of Abraham. Not until all the *ethne* are disciplined in terms of their language and cultural features, even including "the boundaries of their habitation, "will they seek after God and will they find Him", or will they be able to find Him.

3. In addition to the above meanings, the *ethne* in Scripture also have a sense of differentiation, of "us vs. them." As we have seen the *ethne* frequently refers to people of all the nations of the earth who are non-Jewish people, of nations who are outside of the commonwealth of Israel. They are the Gentiles. In the Old Testament this secondary meaning referred to all those people and people groups who were not part of God's chosen covenant people Israel. In the New Testament it receives a new meaning and refers not only to all those people and people groups who are non-Jews, but especially of those who are outside the spiritual house of Israel, who do not belong to the Body of Christ, i.e., the heathen.

Hence an additional meaning of the Great Commission (not a contradictory

one) comes into view. As the Lord's followers we need to disciple all the people groups (men and women of all the peoples of the earth) who are not yet part of God's spiritual Israel, who are outside of the Body of Christ, who still have no believers or community of disciples in their people groups. Hence the *ethne*, in the sense of the Gentiles, of

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In Summary

To sum up, we can say with certainty that the object of the Lord's imperative to disciple all the nations, *panta ta ethne* (as well as baptizing and teaching them) means that we need to disciple people of all the peoples on the face of the earth. Another way of stating the same thing is that we need to make disciples of each people group, of men and women of every people and cultural group, in the world. The priority of our focus should always be to disciple those people in people groups who still remain outside of the commonwealth of Spiritual Israel, among whom the Church of Christ has not yet been established, among whom Christ is not known, among those who have not been told, among those who

have not heard. (Rom. 15:20,21)

The task of making disciples of all the *ethne* always needs to occur in terms of the distinguishing features of each people group, including their language and cultural heritage, and even in terms of the boundaries of their habitations, since God has formed them and determined this by His creative and benevolent design. Truly He has and does continue to rule as Lord and King with full authority over each and every people. Ever since the entrance of sin God has desired their salvation. For this reason He blessed Abraham so that in him and through his seed all the *ethne* would be blessed in knowing Him and being related to Him. For the same reason our Lord mandated us to disciple all the nations, *panta ta ethne*, in His name and by His Spirit for His great and ultimate glory. As we gain greater understanding in

God's mission to the nations may we be found faithful and obedient to the task and complete it even by the year 2000! Let us pray that by the end of this second millennium the Church of Jesus Christ will be firmly planted in every people group, in all the nations, *panta ta ethne*, for the glory of God! So may it be! ■

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