
The Gospel and Race

The ethnic groups of the OT world

- ❖ Asiatics or Semites (including the Israelites)
 - ❖ One of the things that is clear—Israelite conceptions about the need to maintain boundaries between themselves and other Semitic peoples (e.g. Canaanites; Amorites) were presented in the Torah, but weren't rigidly maintained until after the Exile.
 - ❖ As a result, while one can talk about Semites as a group, there is a great deal of movement within the group, including the Israelites themselves.

The ethnic groups of the OT world

- ❖ Asiatics or Semites (including the Israelites)
- ❖ One line of demarcation from other groups is language.
 - ❖ Two main family groups: East Semitic represented by Akkadian; West Semitic includes Hebrew, Arabic, and other languages.
 - ❖ West Semitic languages also include all of Israel's neighbors: Canaanite, Moabite, Aramaic, Amorite, etc.
- ❖ Israel's patriarchs came out of Mesopotamia, likely spoke one of the West Semitic languages, looked like their neighbors, and represented a mix of western Mesopotamian, Canaanite, and even Egyptian biological features.

The ethnic groups of the OT world

❖ Cushites

- ❖ The term represents a continuous civilization that stretched along the banks of the Nile, south of Egypt, stream of Nile's cataracts, in what is now modern Sudan.
- ❖ It is sometimes referred to by other names: Nubia, Wawat, Cush (Kush), Meroe, and Ethiopia.
- ❖ Cush is different from modern day Ethiopia. Starting in the 4th century, BC, Greeks referred to all peoples south of Egypt as “Ethiopian” (lit. burnt faces). Most of these would have been Cushites.



The ethnic groups of the OT world

- ❖ Cushites
 - ❖ Cushites were black African people with classic “Negroid” features. They are consistently presented that way in Egyptian art and described that way in ancient literature (especially Greek literature).
 - ❖ See Jeremiah 13:23: proverbial identification by 6th century BC.
 - ❖ They were often hired out as mercenaries, useful especially with the bow, and regular cultural and economic interchange with Egyptians.



EGYPT PAINTING 2ND-1ST MILL.BCE
A Nubian and an Asiatic prisoner fettered at the elbows.
Painted soles of two sandals. New Kingdom (1554-1080
BCE), Egypt. Drovetti Collection

The ethnic groups of the OT world

- ❖ Egyptians
 - ❖ Ancient Egyptians were likely a mixture of both black African and Asiatic elements.
 - ❖ That fits the historical evidence:
 - ❖ Egypt had a constant influx of different ethnic groups, either by conquest or being conquered.
 - ❖ Egyptian history of intermarriage between local residents and incoming groups (e.g. Joseph in Genesis 41:45)
 - ❖ Also fits the biblical picture of Genesis 10.
- ❖ Ancient Egyptian art typically pictures Egyptians as brown-skinned.



Paintings from the **tomb** of Nebamun (c. 1350 BCE)

The ethnic groups of the OT world

- ❖ Indo-Europeans (e.g. Hittites; Philistines)
 - ❖ In appearance, they would be the closest to “Caucasian” in the Bible.
 - ❖ Philistines: most scholars place their origin in the Aegean Sea region—the costal areas and islands between eastern Greece and western modern-day Turkey
 - ❖ Toward the end of the 13th century BC, upheaval in their native region led some to migrant to the Eastern Mediterranean area along the costal plain of Palestine. The Egyptians called them “the sea peoples.”
 - ❖ A major difference between the Philistines and the Semitic peoples (not just the Israelites, but others also) and even the Egyptians was the practice of circumcision.
 - ❖ Hittites: a major Indo-European group that migrated into modern-day Turkey around 2000 BC and ruled the area until 1190 BC when their empire collapsed.
 - ❖ Toward the end of their empire, they migrated to modern-day Syria where they would opposed Egyptian interest in the Palestinian region. They would come into contact with Israel during the early monarchy.

The ethnic groups of the OT world

- ❖ Why is this important?
 - ❖ It helps us to pay attention to the ethnic and racial (and even color) diversity that is found in the Bible itself.
 - ❖ It helps us not to read the Bible as though everyone looks like us.
 - ❖ It helps to reshape our understanding of how “race,” “ethnicity,” and “color” played out in the OT world.

Genesis 1-12

- ❖ All humanity created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28)
- ❖ The fountainhead of humanity not identifiable by race or ethnicity—Adam and Eve represent all races in themselves.
- ❖ Every human being shares the same ancestry (cf. Acts 17:26)—hence, we share the same “blood”
- ❖ Every human being bears God’s image (cf. Psalm 8)
- ❖ Hence, racism or ethnocentrism—which presumes that one’s race or ethnicity is superior to another—is a denial that all people have been created in the image of God.

Step back a minute

- ❖ Not only is every race contained in Adam and so created in the image of God; every race is contained in Adam and so experiences the effects of the fall (Genesis 3)
- ❖ Adam and Eve were the fountainhead of humanity; and that fountainhead was poisoned at the beginning affecting all people and every people.
- ❖ Hence, no race or ethnicity is more sinful than another.

Genesis 1-12

- ❖ The “curse of Ham” (Genesis 9:18-29)
 - ❖ This text has been wrongly used throughout history to justify the oppression of Africans and African-Americans.
 - ❖ Notice that technically this is not “the curse of Ham,” but “the curse of Canaan.”
 - ❖ This is a prophetic curse against Israel’s future enemy, which points toward Israel’s domination of the region.
 - ❖ The sin that led to the curse was apparently sexual in orientation (cf. Leviticus 18:1-5)
 - ❖ While the Canaanites are “ethnically” related to Israel (i.e. Semitic), they are accounted as part of the sons of Ham (9:25).
 - ❖ Hence, the curse doesn’t have anything to do with black peoples (i.e., those peoples descending from the Cushites) at all.

Genesis 1-12

- ❖ The table of the nations (Genesis 10)
 - ❖ This is a highly stylized “table”—seventy names, places, tribes that account for the diversity of the world has known by Israel.
 - ❖ “The central organizing feature of the breakdown of nations in Genesis 10 is not based on physical descent, but rather related to territorial or geopolitical affiliations” (Hays, *From Every People*, 59).
 - ❖ The main focus is on the descendants of Ham, which represent the majority of Israel’s enemies: Egypt, Canaan, Babylon and Assyria (i.e. Cush).
- ❖ There is a summary statement that proves key for understand the way the Bible views all of this: “in their lands, each with his own language, by their clans, in their nations” (10:5, 20, 31).

Genesis 1-12

- ❖ The division of the nations (Genesis 11)
 - ❖ It appears that the peoples remained together and migrated east to “Shinar” (which explains how Cush, associated with Africa, could father Nimrod, associated with Mesopotamia) (11:1-2; cf. 10:8-12).
 - ❖ It also appears that some generations passed before “the division” (10:25).
 - ❖ The rebellion was connected to remaining together and not fulfilling God’s renewed creation mandate (11:4; cf. 9:1).
 - ❖ The judgment was actually gracious; it scattered the peoples to “fill the earth” and “multiply” (11:8).

Genesis 1-12

- ❖ God's grace for the nations (Genesis 12:1-3)
 - ❖ God's call and blessing to Abraham connects to his larger purpose to bless all his created peoples (cf. 10:5):
 - ❖ "Go from your *country*" (land / territory)
 - ❖ "I will make you a great *nation*"
 - ❖ "In you all the *families* of the earth will be blessed" (clans; 10:5, 20, 31 and 10:18, 32).
 - ❖ How is God going to deal with the problem of sin so that his world (temple) will be covered by and reflecting his image (people)? By blessing the nations through Abraham.
- ❖ Jesus: son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1); through faith in Jesus, we are sons of Abraham too (Galatians 3:7-9)

The Rest of the Pentateuch

- ❖ One of the questions then that develops throughout the OT is: how does this Abrahamic promise play out?
- ❖ Are there signs, even in the OT, that God is blessing the peoples through Abraham and his descendants?
- ❖ Is there inclusion for others outside of Abraham's family in the people of God?

The Rest of the Pentateuch

- ❖ Who marries into Abraham's family?
- ❖ Judah marries Canaanite women and has children with his daughter-in-law Tamar, also a Canaanite (Genesis 38:1-2, 27-30; Matt 1:3)
- ❖ Joseph marries an Egyptian; his two sons through her become two significant tribes in Israel (Genesis 41:45, 50-52)
- ❖ Descendants from the "sons of Ham" are included in the people of God through intermarriage with the Patriarchs.

The Rest of the Pentateuch

- ❖ Moses's wives
 - ❖ We know from Exodus 2:15-22 that Moses marries Zipporah.
 - ❖ She is a Midianite, a Semitic cousin of the Israelites descended through Midian, a son born to Abraham through his wife Keturah (Gen 25:1-2).
 - ❖ As an aside to this, she is also the daughter of a priest who worships Baal—so Joseph married into a family that worshipped a false Egyptian god; Moses into a false Canaanite god!
 - ❖ Though a Midianite / Semitic, her people apparently did not practice circumcision (4:24-26)
 - ❖ At some point, Moses had sent his wife and sons back to Midian; they are returned to Moses in the wilderness after the Exodus (18:1-6).
 - ❖ The Midianites join the Moabites in trying to prevent Israel from coming to the Promised Land, by leading them into idolatry and sexual immorality; God curses them and instructs Moses to destroy them (Num 25:16-17; 31:1ff)

The Rest of the Pentateuch

- ❖ Moses's wives
 - ❖ Moses's other wife: Numbers 12:1
 - ❖ Remember that “Cushite” (repeated twice for emphasis) refers to the peoples south of Egypt; they were black Africans.
 - ❖ There are good reasons to see this as a different wife from Zipporah.
 - ❖ Moses has an interchange with his “brother-in-law” whose identified with his father as “the Midianite” (Numbers 10:29).
 - ❖ While some try to argue from Habakkuk 3:7 that there is a parallel between Cush(an) and Midian, that is not attested anywhere else in either Scripture or ANE literature.

The Rest of the Pentateuch

- ❖ Cush and Egypt, as mentioned last week, had regular interchange throughout this period. It would not have been strange for Moses to know someone from Cush.
- ❖ As we'll see on the next slide, a "mixed group" comes out with Israel on the Exodus; it surely included Cushites, Egyptians, and other groups to be found in Egypt at the time.
- ❖ The most natural reading is to see this as Moses having married a second wife (because Zipporah was dead? Not around anymore?) who was from the historical land of Cush and so was a black African.

The Rest of the Pentateuch

- ❖ Who are the “redeemed” in the Passover / Exodus?
- ❖ Or to put it differently, were those who came out of Egypt in the Exodus only direct descendants of Abraham? Or were there other races / ethnicities who came out and were included in God’s people?
- ❖ Exodus 12:38; cf. 12:43-51 on how these “foreigners” would participate in the Passover going forward—the division was not racial, but religious.

The Rest of the Pentateuch

- ❖ What about prohibitions about marrying foreigners?
- ❖ Deuteronomy 7:1-6 (cf. Exodus 34:15-16; Joshua 23:12-13)
 - ❖ The concern here is not racial / ethnic, but religious. Intermarriage with the Canaanites would “turn your children away from following me to serve other gods” (7:4).
 - ❖ Remember too that while the Canaanites were “sons of Ham,” they were similar to Israelites (“sons of Shem”) in appearance.
- ❖ Compare that with Deuteronomy 21:10-14. When Israel goes to war with “enemies” outside of Canaan, they might married captured women. The issue wasn’t racial, but religious—God was determined not to have Israel follow after the Canaanite gods. (This law also maintained the dignity of captured women; soldiers were not allowed to rape, but had to marry these women.)

The Rest of the Pentateuch

- ❖ Phinehas the priest
 - ❖ Exodus 6:25: in tracing the line of Aaron, his son Eleazar marries “one of the daughters of Putiel” (an Egyptian name) “and she bore him Phinehas” (also an Egyptian name).
 - ❖ Phinehas translates as “the Cushite”—a reference to the region south of Egypt that relates to modern Sudan. It is sometimes translated “the Negro.”
 - ❖ “This was a common New Kingdom Egyptian name which ‘connotes either a person with unusually dark skin or a true African’ (Hays, 82).
 - ❖ Likely, then, that Eleazar also married someone from Cush who had migrated to Egypt and joined Israel in the Exodus.
- ❖ Phinehas has a major role to play in Numbers 25 and 31 (also Josh 22):
 - ❖ Numbers 25:6-13: God makes a covenant of peace with him because of his leadership in stopping the idolatry and sexual immorality at Peor (cf Psa 106:28-31).
 - ❖ Numbers 31:6: Moses sent him with the army that destroyed the Midianites

Discussion Questions

- ❖ When you begin to consider the racial and ethnic (and color) diversity in the Bible, in what ways have you tended to read the Bible as though “everyone looks like you”? How does that skew a proper understanding of the Bible and by extension issues related to race and ethnicity?
- ❖ Did you grow up in a church tradition that taught Adam and Eve were white or that “the curse of Ham” involved race or justified the subjection of Africans? How did that shape your understanding of race?
- ❖ Genesis 12:1-3 is one of the most important promises in all the Bible, one that controls the narrative trajectory: how does paying attention to God’s determination that “all the families of the earth will be blessed” help us recognize his mission of redemption for the various racial and ethnic peoples of his world?
- ❖ How does paying attention especially the role of the Cushites in the biblical narrative—and their intermixture with God’s people—help us rethink the way we’ve read the biblical text?