

God Bless America

I. Definition of Nation(s)

Groups formed on the basis of political or social interests or on kinship. Generally, the word "nations" implies peoples of the world other than the Hebrews, although it can also include the Jews.

II. Origins

The book of Genesis attributes to the three sons of Noah the origin of the various "families" or ethnic groups (about 70 in all) who inhabited the eastern Mediterranean regions (Gen 10). The narrative presupposes that each group has its own individual geographical location and language (vs. 5, 20, 31). The story of the tower (ziggurat) of Babel, whose peak was to reach to heaven (chap. 11), explains that ethnic groups were separated by language barriers and scattered geographically so that they might not collaborate on presumptuous ventures.

Paul, in his sermon in Athens, assumes that the various nations had a common origin, just as the writer of Genesis did, and accepts as part of the design of God the fact that nations should be separated by geographical boundaries (Acts 17:26).

The prophet Zephaniah looked forward to the day when God would reverse this state of affairs and cause all the nations to speak one language (Zep 3:9).

The writer of Revelation, in his vision of the new heaven and the new earth, saw these natural boundaries abolished. The nations freely intermingle in the new Jerusalem (Rv 21:22-26).

III. Israel and the Nations

1. The distinction between "Israel" and "the nations" is not clear-cut.

"Israel" evolved from various ethnic groups, and several of "the nations" traced their origins to prominent figures in the Israelite community. Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, lived in Ur of the Chaldees in the delta region of the Tigris-Euphrates valley. With his father he migrated north to Haran, and finally southwest to the land of Canaan (Gn 11:31-12:9). Deuteronomy 26:5 ("a wandering Aramean was my father") suggests Abraham's residence was in the district of Mesopotamia known as Aram-naharaim. When Abraham entered into covenant with God, God gave him the token of the covenant relationship: circumcision. Foreigners purchased as slaves were circumcised, thus including them in the covenant community. When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt into the wilderness, a mixed multitude also went up with them (Ex 12:38), which suggests again that people not biologically related nevertheless identified themselves with the people of Israel.

2. The nation of Israel did not include all of those physically descended from Abraham. The first son of Abraham, Ishmael, had an Egyptian mother and is the ancestor of the Ishmaelites, bedouins who roamed the southern wilderness region (Gn 16).

Of the twin sons born to Isaac and Rebekah, Esau, the firstborn, is the father of the Edomites living in the southeast, traditional enemies of Israel (Gn 25:23; Nm 20:21).

3. Israel's Mission to the Nations.

The emphasis in Scripture on Israel's separation from the nations must not overshadow Israel's mission to the nations.

The promise made by God to Abraham is, "By you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gn 12:3, rsv).

At the completion of Solomon's temple, the king's dedication prayer includes these words: "When a foreigner ... comes and prays toward this house, hear thou in heaven ... that all the people of the earth may know thy name and fear thee, as do thy people Israel" (1 Kgs 8:41-43).

The "Servant of God" in Isaiah's prophecy is to be "a covenant to the people, a light to the nations" (Is 42:6).

When Daniel saw in his vision the "Ancient of Days" delegating a kingdom to the "Son of Man," clearly this was not the kingdom of the Jews but rather a universal kingdom (Dn 7:14).

Zechariah envisages men of all nations joining the Jews as they return to Jerusalem (Zec 8:23).

IV. God and the Nations

Scripture presents negative and positive attitudes toward the nations.

Negative:

The nations inhabiting the territory between the Tigris-Euphrates valley and the Nile River were wicked nations. Therefore, God took away their land and gave it to the descendants of Abraham (Gn 15:16-20).

Incestuous relationships, adultery, homosexuality, and sexual relationships between men and animals characterized the nations and incurred God's displeasure (Lv 18).

The nations indulged in the practice of spiritism, augury, witchcraft, and necromancy, so the Hebrews were instructed to avoid such activities (19:26; 20:6).

The nations worshiped many gods and included in their worship the practice of human sacrifice, often the sacrifice of children—a ritual that God abhors (Lv 20:1-5; 2 Kgs 17:29-34).

The prophet Isaiah spoke scathingly of the craftsman who, taking a branch of a tree, used part of it to kindle a fire and fashioned from the remainder a graven image that he then worshiped (Is 44:12-20).

The Baalim and Ashteroth, fertility gods of the Canaanites, were a constant source of temptation to the people of Israel.

The message repeated throughout Scripture is that for these reasons God would drive out the nations and give their territory to Israel (Ex 34:24; Dt 12:29-31). The prophetic oracles against the nations reinforced this negative attitude (Jer 46-51; Am 1:3-2:3).

Positive:

However, the Scripture also reflects a more positive attitude toward the nations. As revealed in the book of Psalms,

God is not only concerned about Israel; his eyes keep watch over the nations, and all the earth praises and worships him (Ps 66:1-8).

The psalmist prays that God's saving power may be known among all the nations. He affirms that God righteously judges the peoples and guides the nations. All the ends of the earth should fear him (67:7).

The prophet Isaiah declares that the Jerusalem temple is to be a house of prayer for all peoples and that God welcomes the foreigner who comes with sacrifices and offering worship (Is 56:6-8). Isaiah's vision of hope for the latter days pictures people of all nations pouring into Jerusalem to worship the Lord and learn his ways. Instead of nation warring against nation, all will live in peace, ruled by God (2:2-4).

V. The Nations in the New Testament

A. The Gospels

Jesus ministered not only to the Jews but also to the Gentile nations in accordance with ancient prophecy (Mt 4:15-16).

Jesus taught in Galilee, a predominantly non-Jewish area, traveled to Tyre and Sidon (Mk 7:24) and through the Decapolis (v 31).

He ministered to:

A Roman centurion (Lk 7:1-10),

The widow of Nain (Lk 7:11-17),

A Syrophenician woman (Mk 7:26).

People from Idumea came to observe his miracles (Mk 3:8).

The teaching of Jesus was also wide in scope.

The narrative of the great judgment (Mt 25:31-46) depicts all nations gathered before the Son of Man,

And Jesus commissions the apostles to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19).

B. The book of Acts:

Does not overlook the nations' role in the death of Jesus (Acts 4:27)

And their role in opposing the ministry of Paul (26:17),

It nevertheless clearly indicates that the church fulfilled its commission to present the gospel to non-Jewish peoples.

Peter proclaims the message about Jesus to the household of Cornelius, a Roman soldier of the Italian Cohort (ch 10).

Although the early church resisted the fact that non-Jewish peoples might freely receive the gift of the Spirit, they eventually welcomed this conclusion (11:1-8; 15:1-29).

Paul traveled through Cyprus, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy, founding or visiting churches that were predominantly Gentile.

The book of Acts ends dramatically with Paul preaching the gospel in the city of Rome, the heart of the Roman Empire.

C. The Epistles:

Paul understands Jesus to be the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to bless all the nations (Gal 3:14).

Peter sees the nations as onlookers surrounding the church. To them the church must bear faithful witness (1 Pt 2:12).

The writer of Revelation clearly states that the church consists of men "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Rv 5:9, 10; 7:9, 10). In his vision of the new Jerusalem, he sees "the glory and honor of the nations" and peace among men (Rv 21:24-26).

D. Four words

The four words, gentiles, heathen, nations, and people, are found some 760 times in the AV. They represent only one OT Hebrew word and one NT Greek word in the original.

They are distinguished from the Jews and the church, 1 Cor. 10:32.

A political era called "the times of the Gentiles" began when God gave them world rulership, (Dan. 2:38; Jer. 27:6, 7)

These times are to be fulfilled as their end draws near, (Luke 21:24).

Their end will come when Christ sets up His kingdom, (Dan. 2:44; Rev. 11:15).

E. Five principles determine the destiny of the nations:

Their relationship to God, (Psa. 33:12)

Their relationship to the law, (Prov. 14:34)

Their relationship to Satan, (Isa. 14:12, 16)

Their relationship to God's present program, (Acts 15:14)

Their relationship to the people of Israel, (Gen. 12:3)

F. Sixty passages speak of all nations in the time of the end.

For example:

Iniquity, distress, and perplexity will come to them, (Matt. 24:12; Luke 21:25).

Multitudes of Gentiles will be saved during the great tribulation, (Rev. 7:9, 14).

War, famine, pestilence, and earthquakes will threaten the existence of the entire human race, (Matt. 24:7, 22).

A beast ruler will be given satanic power to rule all nations, (Rev. 13:7).

After all nations gather at Armageddon, (Zech. 14:2; Rev. 16:13-16).

Christ will return in judgment, (Rev. 19:11-21).

Righteous Gentiles will enter His kingdom, (Matt. 25:31-34), and serve Him, (Dan. 7:14).

They will continue into eternity, (Rev. 21:24-26).

VI. ONE NATION UNDER GOD (by Rus Walton)

Our very political superstructures stand upon the critical bedrock of cherish biblical principles.

In the beginning ... At the point in God's time when the Constitutional Convention had completed its work ... The lady sidled up to old Ben Franklin. "Well, Dr. Franklin. What have you given us?" "You have a republic, madame. If you can keep it."

There have been other governments before that had gone by that description - that word, "republic."

But those were different.

Different in the origin.

Different in nature. Different in structure.

The best of the past was incorporated into this new and true republic.

The rest - the evil, the excess -- was rejected.

So this new creation stood unique. A system of self-government. By the consent of the governed. And, with union.

A Constitutional Republic with individual liberty, the elected representatives and limited government. A

government with its powers nailed down; fastened and confined to the proper defense of the individual - to his pursuits of life, liberty, property and happiness, those inalienable rights endowed by the Creator.

A republic in which the power to govern was checked and balanced by devices designed to stop the tyrant in his tracks.

The sons of liberty joined to erect four fences around their government, so it could not get out of hand or out of bounds: The Executive, the Legislative, the Judicial, and the Individual. Each was to be a check, or balance, on the other.

After God, the individual came first. Only by his consent could government govern - and then, only to protect his life, liberty and property. Not just his, but all men - equally.

The New Nation: A Republic, Not a Democracy. And so the founding fathers created a republic.

A democracy? Where half + one can squash the rest? Where a fanatical majority can deprive the individual of his rights, his life, his property? Not for these men.

They knew democracy with its excesses, its leveling down-process, its inherit seeds of destruction. They knew Plato's warning that unrestricted democracy must result in a dictatorship.

The very essence of democracy rests in the absolute sovereignty of the majority. Our founding fathers could never accept such tyranny. They recognized only one rightful sovereign over man and nations - not the state, not the majority.

"Each religion has a form of government, and Christianity astonished the world by establishing self-government ... the foundation stone of the United States of America." (Verna M. Hall; Christian History of the Constitution)

But our founding fathers realized the impossibility of maintaining freedom unless those who are "at liberty" are able to exercise self-restraint.

And they gave to this government just enough power to serve. Just enough and no more.

And even then, with all the checks and balances and fences of that constitutional document, it was not until the Bill of Rights was tacked on that the state consented to the union and ratified the federation.

A New Ideal:

Freedom of Religion, Not from Religion.

Christ died - and rose - to make men free. All men, all nations.

Through Christ we are freed from the wages and the death of sin. Eternal freedom.

Free from the ravages of appetite. Internal freedom. If we choose to be.

Free from the savagery of demagogues and kings. External freedom. If we choose to be.

Just as Christ brought us internal freedom (and a rebirth into a new life through Him) so he brought us a new direction for our external freedom (and a new purpose for civil government).

If Christ would die for men, where did Caesar get off forcing men to live - and die - for him?

There! There was the spark, the flame, the beacon light of the American idea. The power of the great American republic. The sense of the Constitution of these United States.

"The concept of a secular state was virtually non-existent in 1776 as well as in 1787, when the Constitution was written, and no less so when the Bill of Rights was adopted. To read the Constitution as the charter for a secular state is to misread history, and to misread it radically. The Constitution was designed to perpetuate a Christian order." (R. J. Rushdoony; The Nature of the American System)

Why then is there, in the main, an absence of any reference to Christianity in the Constitution?

Because the framers of the Constitution did not believe that this was an area of jurisdiction for the federal government. It would not have occurred to them to attempt to re-establish that which the colonists had fought against, namely, religious control and establishment by the central government.

"The freedom of the First Amendment from federal interference is not from religion but for religion in the constituent states." (R. J. Rushdoony; The Nature of the American System)

Separation of church and state? Absolutely!

Divorcement of God from government? Not so!

The American system is the political expression of Christian ideas ... a nation founded upon the rock of religion and rooted in the love of man.

In 1851, when Daniel Webster was reviewing the history of "this great American family," he reaffirmed the need and role of God in government:

"Let the religious element in man's nature be neglected, let him be influenced by no higher motives than by low self-interest, and subjected to no stronger restraint than the limits of civil authority, and he becomes a creature of selfish passion or blind fanaticism."

"On the other hand, the cultivation of the religious sentiment represses licentiousness... inspires respect for law and order, and give strength to the whole social fabric, at the same time that it conducts the human soul upward to the Author of its being."

More than one hundred years after Webster, Charles Malik, one-time Ambassador to the United Nations from Lebanon, put it this way: "The good (in the United States) would never have come into being without the blessing and the power of Jesus Christ... I know how embarrassing this matter is to politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen and cynics: but, whatever these honored men think, the irrefutable truth is that the soul of America is at its best and highest, Christian."

Our laws and our institutions must necessarily be based upon and embody the teachings of The Redeemer of mankind. It is impossible that it should be otherwise; and in this sense and to this extent our civilization and our institutions are empathically Christian... This is a religious people. This is historically true. From the discovery of this continent to the present hour, there is a single voice making this affirmation... we find everywhere a clear recognition of the same truth... These, and many other matters which might be noticed, add a volume of unofficial declarations to the mass of organic utterances that this is a Christian nation.

SUPREME COURT DECISION, 1892.
CHURCH OF THE HOLY TRINITY V. UNITED STATES.

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