

Redemptive Kingdom Diversity

A Biblical Theology of the People of God



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 Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Introduction

Thesis

In this book I provide a survey of one of many biblical themes: the people of God. My specific focus is on the creation and transformation of the people of God and on the redemptive kingdom diversity of the people of God. By *redemptive kingdom diversity*, I mean God's holistic redemption of the entire creation through Jesus's death for diverse Jews and gentiles and through his victorious resurrection from the dead with an eye toward the transformation of sinners and the entire creation.¹ Redemptive kingdom diversity refers to God's work to crush the seed of the serpent by means of the woman's seed, Jesus Christ, so that all the redeemed people of God would live as transformed and Spirit-empowered followers of Christ. The transformed people of God live in a broken world now in both church and society in anticipation of and as signposts of the redemption accomplished by Jesus, a redemption that we taste in part now but that will be fully realized in the new heavens and the new earth. From Genesis to Revelation, we see that God has always intended to restore diverse humanity's vertical relationship with himself, humanity's horizontal relationship with one another, and the entire creation through Jesus, the seed of the woman.

I survey the theme of the people of God from selected texts and selected theological themes from Genesis to Revelation. With regard to the Old Testament, I argue that God specifically created Adam and Eve (the human race) and that from their offspring he chose Abraham and, through him, Israel to be

1. I first heard the phrase *kingdom diversity* from my good friend Walter R. Strickland II. He and Dayton Hartman recently edited a collection of essays on kingdom diversity called *For God So Loved the World: A Blueprint for Kingdom Diversity* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2020). Strickland serves as an assistant professor of theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in North Carolina.

a distinct, holy people and the ones through whom he would universally bless all the families of the earth. Israel was God's chosen people, royal priesthood, and holy nation, and God commissioned them to be a light to the nations by which to draw them to worship Israel's God. God's choice of Abraham and Israel to be a distinct, holy people and the ones through whom he would bring a universal blessing to the world includes the promise to bless the gentiles.

I also argue that God's choice of and work through Abraham and Israel anticipate an ethnically diverse community that God has chosen and redeemed through Jesus Christ, Abraham's offspring and Moses's successor. God's chosen people in Christ are not the alternative people chosen to execute a failed plan that his first people, Israel, were incapable of executing. Instead, God's choice of and plan for Abraham and Israel anticipated and were part of his plan to crush the seed of the serpent by means of the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15). God accomplishes his redemptive plan by fulfilling his promises of redemption to Jews and gentiles through Jesus Christ.²

With regard to the New Testament, I argue that God predestined and chose to redeem by faith some Jews and gentiles from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation to be part of a new multiethnic community, transformed by and redefined in Christ without ethnic boundaries of division. This new multiethnic community in Christ is a distinct and holy community, sealed with the Spirit, and filled with many diverse ethnic communities with different shades of skin, different accents, from different nations, and with different experiences. The people of God are an ethnically diverse group of people chosen to live holy lives in union with one another as exiles in this world. God has chosen them to proclaim his redemptive acts to the nations as they live holy lives in obedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ and with intentional pursuit of Spirit-empowered love for one another. The people of God are a people

2. An analysis of Second Temple literature is outside the purview of this book, which is a biblical theology of the people of God in the Old and New Testaments. However, an analysis of selected Jewish texts would show that similar Old Testament themes regarding Israel's privileges as the elect children of Abraham and their ethnic identity in him are restated, expanded, reappropriated, or revised to emphasize Israel's unique posture as God's chosen people and to help Torah-observant Jews remain faithful to a Jewish way of life in a diasporic or hellenized context. Segments of the Jewish population in certain parts of Second Temple Judaism used their ethnic connection with Abraham and YHWH's election of them to prioritize Jewish identity over gentile identity and to exclude gentiles from participating in life in the age to come (cf. Jubilees), while others allowed for sympathetic gentiles or gentile proselytes to participate in salvation in the age to come (cf. Psalms of Solomon 17–18). For examples, see Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007). For helpful work on soteriology in early Judaism, see Mark Adam Elliott, *The Survivors of Israel: A Reconsideration of the Theology of Pre-Christian Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Daniel M. Gurtner, ed., *This World and the World to Come: Soteriology in Early Judaism*, rev. ed., Library of Second Temple Studies 74 (London: T&T Clark, 2013).

marked by faith in Christ, the cross, the resurrection, the Spirit, their suffering for Christ, their love for one another, and their obedience to the gospel in the context of the church and in society.

This new, transformed multiethnic people of God in Christ does not replace Israel. This community of transformed Jews and gentiles in Christ instead fulfills Old Testament promises about the people of God. God's universal promises of salvation for Jews, gentiles, and the cosmos through the seed of the woman, the seed of Abraham, the seed of David, and through the suffering servant Jesus Christ are fulfilled in this community because of God's redemptive work for them in Christ. In Christ, Jews and gentiles together form a new people of God, the goal to which the Old Testament witness points from as early as Genesis 1–3.

These diverse, chosen, and transformed Jews and gentiles in Christ become God's new multiethnic community with distinct cultural experiences and ethnic particularities. In this diverse people, God fulfills through Christ all his redemptive promises to Abraham to bless him and his offspring because of Jesus's redemption of some from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation, and because God also renews the cosmos via Jesus's cross and resurrection.

Chroniclers of United States history have shown in great detail that a racialized identity (an identity based on a so-called racial hierarchy) is a socially constructed identity. It was created to give racial meaning to groups of people based on racial biases and perceptions because of racialization. Racialization is not based on any real criteria rooted in a biological reality. Both ethnicity and race are social constructs. Ethnicity, however, is rooted in real social distinctions (dialect, geography, customs, values, ideas, behavior, religious practices, culture, etc.). The construction of ethnicity is based on cultural facts and social realities. The construction of race is a biological fiction.³

In Christ, Jews and gentiles are transformed into a new multiethnic community filled with many diverse communities. This community does not lose the ethnic distinctions possessed by the diverse ethnic groups that form it.

3. When I talk about race as a biological fiction and a social construct, I'm referring specifically to the concept of race invented in the new world by colonists and further developed in the US. My assertions here are well known and documented by historians and sociologists of race and religion in America. For examples, see discussions and bibliographies in Mary Beth Swetnam Mathews, *Doctrine and Race: African American Evangelicals and Fundamentalism between the Wars* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2018); Carolyn Renée Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945–1975* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Richard A. Bailey, *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England*, Religion in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Instead, these diverse ethnic communities become a new and transformed multiethnic community as they keep their natural ethnic marks of distinction that are congruent with the gospel of Jesus Christ and as they take on new marks of ethnic distinction (e.g., faith, the Spirit, obedience, suffering for Christ) that prove them as members of this new multiethnic group in Christ. This new-in-Christ multiethnic community fulfills the entire law by loving one another in the power of the Spirit. This new multiethnic community is filled with diverse Jews and gentiles from all over the world who are justified by faith in Christ, transformed by the Spirit, and become members of God's family.

God's election of this new and transformed multiethnic community in Christ is different from his election of Israel in the Old Testament. First, in the New Testament, God chooses Jews and gentiles to be in Christ. God creates this multiethnic Jewish and gentile community by Jesus's death and resurrection and their participation in God's saving action in Christ by faith. Second, every Jew and gentile whom God has chosen in Christ actually receives and experiences all God's redemptive promises given to Abraham and realized in Christ when they hear the gospel and respond to it by faith. This new people of God in Christ transcends and transforms but does not erase the old ethnic identities that once characterized or maybe even formerly defined the members. Natural ethnic identities and racialized identities are still apparent for those who are in Christ and these identities still create sociological advantages or disadvantages in the real world. However, socially constructed identities do not determine spiritual status or privilege in the family of Abraham for those who are the transformed people of God through Christ by the Spirit. God's new chosen people in Christ consists of diverse people from a variety of ethnic groups, social locations, and political affiliations. They have different skin colors, speak different languages, and have different experiences. This new chosen people must pursue love for the people of God in Christ and for their neighbors. In Christ, their ethnic diversity and their different experiences should not be viewed with contempt, as a threat to the gospel, or as a threat to the new community God created in Christ, but it should be recognized as the realization of God's redemptive kingdom diversity in Christ.

Method

This book is concerned with a discussion of biblical texts, from Genesis to Revelation, with an eye toward surveying the theme of the people of God for the purpose of developing a biblical and theological vision for redemptive kingdom diversity for churches, Christian colleges, universities, seminaries,

and for any person or any other organization with ears to hear.⁴ My primary concern is to provide a biblical and theological survey of the people of God from Genesis to Revelation and then offer some basic and practical applications to Christians on how to live as citizens of the kingdom of God as the people of God in this present evil age. This includes living in opposition to the various ways in which racism and ethnic division manifest themselves in the many diverse ethnic groups scattered throughout the world.⁵

4. This book is neither a technical monograph on identity formation in the Bible nor a volume about social identity in the New Testament. There are numerous scholars devoted to questions related to the construction of Christian identity in early Christianity and related matters. Readers interested in such discussions should consult the bibliography in J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016). For scholarship on the formation of early Christian identity, see also the three volumes in the Christianity in the Making series from James D. G. Dunn: *Beginning from Jerusalem*, *Jesus Remembered*, and *Neither Jew nor Greek: A Contested Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003–15). For scholarship on social identity in the book of Amos, see Andrew M. King, *Social Identity and the Book of Amos*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 706 (New York: T&T Clark, 2021). For scholarship on race and early Christianity, see Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Gay L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2002). For scholarship on race in Pauline studies, see Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Love L. Sechrest, *A Former Jew: Paul and the Dialectics of Race*, Library of New Testament Studies 410 (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009). For scholarship on race in antiquity, see also Frank M. Snowden Jr., *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Rebecca F. Kennedy, C. Snyder Roy, and Max L. Goldman, eds., *Race and Ethnicity in the Classical World: An Anthology of Primary Sources in Translation* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2013). For recent scholarship on gentile Christian identity, see Terence L. Donaldson, *Gentile Christian Identity from Cornelius to Constantine: The Nations, the Parting of the Ways, and Roman Imperial Ideology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).

5. There is much scholarship on the meaning of *race*, *racism*, *racial prejudice*, *ethnocentrism*, and *racial discrimination*. This history of these terms is very complex and the subject of much debate among historians and sociologists. In this book, I use the term *racism* to refer to an ideology of racial superiority that creates the social construction of race, an ideology that suggests there is a racial hierarchy within the human race, and an ideology based on a false construction of superior and inferior groups within the human race. Those Europeans who constructed race thought that they were superior to enslaved Africans, so they argued for a racial hierarchy within the one human race. In my view, this ideology of racial superiority relates both to personal transgression against God and humanity and to systemic and structural power. Race is a biological fiction but a social reality. Historically in the New World, those Europeans who constructed race did so to create the idea of White and Black for the purpose of a racial hierarchy of Whites over Blacks in the seventeenth century. In time, because of the power of sin, racism took on a life of its own and now relates to more than White and Black groups. The construction of race and racism also relates to the social currency and social power of Whiteness. When I use the term *Whiteness* in this book, I do not refer to every individual White person who identifies as White today or to those who are racialized as White. That is, I'm not using the term *Whiteness* as a catchall term to refer to every single person who is White.

Readers should understand that this book is not a *biblical theology* in the popular sense, in which I argue for a central and unifying biblical and theo-

I neither mean by Whiteness that all White people have the same cultural experiences because they are White. In my view, White people are not a monolithic group. There are different groups of White people who have different cultural experiences within the group of those who are racialized as White. As is the case with any group, there are diverse groups among members within the same group and further differentiation even within those diverse groups within the same group. Furthermore, I neither use the term *Whiteness* to mean individuals who are White are socially predestined to certain fates because they are White. Once more, I do not use the term *Whiteness* to mean that White people are without personal agency. There are many Whites who make a variety of choices, related to all sorts of issues, as individuals that are different from choices made by others who are also part of the diverse group that is racialized as White. White people are not monolithic. I'm using the term *Whiteness* in at least one way that it has been used historically since its inception—to refer to the social currency and social power that generally has come to those racialized as White. In this sense, the term *Whiteness* refers to the political, economic, social, legal, and theological currency that generally has come to those racialized as White because of the social construct and idea of race and White.

In the New World, for example, in the 1600s, those who were racialized as White were European, some of whom identified as Protestant Christians, and they eventually differentiated themselves from (the so-called other) Africans and from other non-White groups. Laws eventually protected from enslavement these Europeans who were racialized as White and who were Christian. These Africans, along with indigenous peoples, were viewed as heathens without souls, beyond conversion, but Africans were viewed as being more fit for slavery. Eventually, as the construct of White and the currency and power of Whiteness evolved in the story of the New World and the United States, there were disagreements about who actually should be classified as White. But my point here is that, at a very basic level, the social constructs of race and White were human-invented and socially constructed ideas created to establish a racial hierarchy within the human race, with one group at the top (those racialized as White) over non-White groups at the bottom of this hierarchy. The social construction of Whiteness at least historically refers to the social currency, social power, and the benefits generally experienced by those who were racialized as White and who had the benefit of being at the top of that racial hierarchy. These benefits can be seen in slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and their aftermath. Although scholars disagree on different aspects of this history and to what degree this history impacts society today, there are historians and sociologists who argue the effects of the social constructs of race, White, and the currency of Whiteness are still felt today in different aspects of the American project (e.g., the criminal justice system, health care, housing, etc.). There are others who argue that one's "cultural capital" plays a more fundamental role than anything else in one's fate in society (e.g., Thomas Sowell, *Race and Culture: A World View* [New York: Basic Books, 1995]).

There are White people (those who identify as White) and people of other ethnic groups who are unaware of the complex history of the concepts of race, White, and Whiteness. Throughout the book, I try to make it clear when I'm talking about the invention of the categories of race, White, Whiteness, and Blackness versus when I'm simply referring to image-bearers who have group membership within a particular racialized group. Readers must understand that there's a difference between the ideas of race, White, Whiteness, and non-White and the image-bearers that are racialized into these racial and ethnic groups. When I discuss these issues in the book, I do so in an effort to try to discuss the harmful and racist ideas associated with these categories, while also honoring the image of God in those who are racialized to fit into a specific racial group. My goal from the beginning of this book until the end is to show that God's vertical, horizontal, and cosmic redemptive vision for kingdom diversity is grounded in the image of

logical theme in the Bible.⁶ Furthermore, readers should also know in advance that this book is neither about race nor about racism. Rather, this book provides an introductory biblical and theological survey of God's multiethnic and cosmic redemptive kingdom vision for the diverse people of God scattered throughout the world and for the cosmos. The book serves to help God's ethnically diverse people live faithfully together in obedience to him and to

God and in Jesus's death and resurrection so that the people of God would have a better understanding of how to live redemptively as the people of God in light of the ongoing effects of this history on our social locations.

Racism fundamentally exists because of sin; it relates to internal animosity that so-called superior groups have over so-called inferior groups; it is connected to systems of power that so-called superior groups create and have over so-called inferior groups, and it is related to the personal animosity that different groups within the human race have against one another because of the social construction of race. However, since I argue, as a Christian New Testament scholar, that racism exists fundamentally because of sin, racism is a universal problem because sin is a universal problem. This means that groups with or without power can be racist and that racism can be overt or covert, intentional or unintentional, individual or systemic. I also think that both Whites and groups of color can be racist, even though racism manifests itself in diverse groups in diverse ways. In my view, groups can be racist against their own group and also against those outside their group because racism is both a personal transgression against God and man and because racism is connected to power. Both the powerful and the powerless can be, and are, racist. Because of the universal power and problem of sin, the problem of racism is much worse than humans think: it has the potential to exist wherever there are sinners, wherever those sinners create systems and structures to reinforce and uphold their racism, and wherever there is hostility between groups of people based on their ethnic affiliation. Furthermore, racism can also structurally exist when individual racists are no longer involved in those structures if racist people create racist policies and procedures to uphold and sustain structural racism. One basic example is redlining. I discuss structural racism and redlining in chapter 7.

For historical and sociological work on race, racism, and Whiteness, see the content and bibliographies in Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Rebecca Anne Goetz, *The Baptism of Early Virginia: How Christianity Created Race* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*; Swetnam Mathews, *Doctrine and Race*; Donald G. Mathews, *At the Altar of Lynching: Burning Sam Hose in the American South*, Cambridge Studies on the American South (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*; Bailey, *Race and Redemption*; Teresa J. Guess, "The Social Construction of Whiteness: Racism by Intent, Racism by Consequence," *Critical Sociology* 32, no. 4 (2006): 649–73. For work on systemic racism in housing, see Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright, 2017).

6. For recent evangelical biblical theologies by New Testament scholars, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013); G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011); Benjamin L. Gladd, *From Adam and Israel to the Church: A Biblical Theology of the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2019). For a classic biblical theology of the New Testament, see Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Daniel P. Bailey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018; originally published in German in 1997).

his redemptive kingdom vision as they proclaim God's redemptive acts in Christ, love one another, and live as bright lights in a dark world in opposition to the present evil age in the power of the Spirit. Finally, the book serves to motivate the ethnically diverse people of God to live in intentional pursuit of God's vision for redemptive kingdom diversity. I provide a selective analysis of numerous scriptural (hence, *biblical*) texts and theological themes in those texts (hence, *theology*) from Genesis to Revelation to inform my discussion.

1

The People *of* God *in the* Pentateuch

This chapter discusses the people of God in the Pentateuch. I selectively analyze and discuss the ethnic diversity flowing out of the one human race (Adam and Eve), which God created in the garden of Eden as the pinnacle of creation. I do likewise with the unique way in which God formed Israel as his people by setting his covenantal love upon them as a people uniquely chosen to be the ones through whom God would universally crush the seed of the serpent by means of the seed of the woman and fulfill all his redemptive promises to Abraham. In my discussion of the people of God in Exodus through Deuteronomy, I specifically discuss Israel's identity as the people of God.

Genesis

Genesis is the book of beginnings. Chapters 1–11 focus on creation and a global perspective of humanity, and chapters 12–50 focus on one man, Abraham, and his offspring. Genesis is the starting point for a biblical theology of redemptive kingdom diversity.

The Human Race and the Garden

In my view, some of the most important words for a biblical theology of redemptive kingdom diversity appear in Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning,

God created the heavens and the earth.”¹ These words demonstrate that the sovereign God of the entire universe is the one who creates every good thing in his original good creation. In many ways, the Pentateuch focuses on God’s sovereign action to create and choose a people, Israel, to be the means by which he would crush the seed of the serpent via the seed of the woman, and by which he would bless all the families of the earth through the one seed of Abraham (cf. Gen. 3:15; 12:3). Genesis 1–2 begins the Pentateuch story by highlighting that the one God who created everything in the heavens and the earth is the God who would choose Israel as his people, give them the Torah (the law), and bring through them all the universal blessings promised to Abraham. The story of God’s formation of his people Israel begins with a discussion of Israel’s origins from the one human race: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (1:1).

Genesis 1–2 is about God exercising his sovereign power to create something very good. The noun *God* or the phrase *LORD God* occurs approximately forty-three times in Genesis 1–2.² The accent in these chapters is on God’s sovereign and creative power. God creates *everything* in the heavens and on the earth (cf. 1:1; 2:1).

Genesis 1 recounts six days of God’s creative activity. On the sixth day of creation, God creates the pinnacle of his creation: the human race. God says of humans, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (1:26a). Humans are the only part of creation created in the image of God. That God creates humans in his very own image underlines that they are the prize and pinnacle of his creation. While explaining the image of God is a complex task, the text at least connects it to humanity’s God-given authority to have dominion over God’s creation (1:26b). God commands humans, created in his image and after his likeness, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (1:28). That humans are the pinnacle of God’s creation is further highlighted in 1:26–2:25 as the text elaborates on its premise that God created them in his own image.

“God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female, he created them” (1:27). This statement provides the first place in the creation narrative where Genesis states that humans consist of “male” and “female.” Genesis 1:26–27, the first place in the Bible where

1. Unless otherwise indicated, biblical translations in this book are taken from Crossway’s English Standard Version (ESV). My paraphrases of biblical texts are also based on the ESV.

2. I’m only counting the places where Genesis 1–2 explicitly uses the names for God. The text refers to God more than the above number when one considers the personal pronouns that refer to “God” or to the “LORD God.”

humans are mentioned, shows that God is the author of human identity. He creates one human identity with distinct maleness and with distinct femaleness. That is, male and female are members of the one human race. But they are two very different kinds of humans, created in the image of God.

Adam is a man with identifiable marks of maleness. Eve is a woman with identifiable marks of femaleness. Adam is “man” and Eve is “woman.” In the garden of Eden there are no other humans from which to construct social identities based on unreal or racialized (the act of assigning racial features to groups within the human race for the purpose of a racial hierarchy) criteria. Instead, God himself establishes, constructs, and forms human identity by his creative word. Even later, in Genesis 2, when God gives Adam the authority to name “woman,” Adam does so on the basis of God’s established criterion of human identity: God’s own image (1:27). Adam names as woman the one created in God’s image and likeness after Adam’s likeness (1:26–2:25). Her identity flows from God’s already established human criterion in the garden that distinguishes Adam and Eve from other aspects of creation and distinguishes Adam and Eve from one another (cf. 1:3–31). The human race is connected to God’s very own image, not to the many images of criteria established by humans who create their own boundaries and fictions for the purpose of distinguishing themselves from the so-called other.

Maleness and femaleness are distinct and diverse, and yet correspond to one another. God gives them the ability to procreate within the context of a unique relationship and sexual union as man and woman, husband and wife. Both image-bearing man and image-bearing woman are humans (1:27). They also become one flesh as man (husband) and woman (wife) (2:24–25). God gives to the man and woman everything in his good creation to oversee, manage, and rule over (1:28–30; the “you” God speaks to is plural in the Hebrew).

In Genesis 2, the narrative continues to highlight the superiority and priority of humans by recapitulating the creation narrative from chapter 1. However, chapter 2 specifically highlights the primacy of human beings. Everything God creates is good and in fact perfect (1:2–31). But God creates only human beings in his image. The text accentuates this point when it says that God puts the man in the garden of Eden and gives him the command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or he will die (2:5–17). After this warning, God says that it is not good for the man to be alone; thus, he creates a woman who corresponds to the man (2:18–22).

God forms beasts and birds out of the ground and gives the man authority to name every living creature (2:19). God gives man his name, “Adam” (1:26–27), but he gives man/human the authority to name every living creature with whatever names he chooses (2:20). Yet, for Adam (the man), “there was

not found a helper fit for him” (2:20). So the Lord God causes the man (Adam) to sleep, takes a piece of his rib, forms the woman into God’s own image to be a helper suitable for the man, and brings her to the man (2:21–22). Adam expresses the woman’s full humanity by saying that the woman is “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (2:23). The woman has the same ontological human stuff as the man. The man names her “Woman” because God created him and her as fellow image-bearers (1:26–2:25).

Genesis 1–2 emphasizes that God created the entire creation as good. But only human beings were created as God’s image-bearing race of people, without any of our modern racialized social constructions intruding on the human race in the garden of Eden. There was no modern understanding of race, racial hierarchy, or racism in the garden. Racial hierarchy based on unreal criteria occurs after the fall. However, Genesis 1:26–28 asserts that God’s good creation included a diversity of ethnicities to be scattered throughout the world even prior to the fall. This is apparent in God’s command to Adam and Eve before the fall to “be fruitful and to multiply” (1:28; cf. 1:26–27). The fall caused the offspring of Adam and Eve to create sinful boundaries and division within human ethnic diversity, but God’s original good design commands, anticipates, and celebrates ethnic diversity as one aspect of God’s good creation mandate.³

3. Ethnicity in a global context is much older than the modern invention of race in the United States. Yet, ethnicity was still socially constructed after Adam and Eve sinned and were expelled from the garden. Ethnicity is not inherently bad. However, the construct of race historically has worked to establish a racial hierarchy within so-called races of people in the human race and ontological distinctions that were not based on anything real. Before the fall, God beautifully and creatively formed Adam and Eve in his own image as a distinct human race. After the fall, groups of people began to form identities in distinction from other groups before the modern racist category of race entered the human narrative for destructive purposes. Although ethnicity is not inherently problematic, the concept eventually comes to be used as an “insider-outsider” boundary marker to differentiate between groups. The fall takes a good thing (ethnic diversity within the human race) and creates divisions within the human race based on real or perceived cultural distinctions (ethnicity) and eventually based on unreal criteria (race). Scholars and authors have documented well the origins, development, construction, and social impact of race and modern racial reasoning in the New World and the United States and/or their impact on Christian identity in the New World and the United States. For examples, see bibliographies in Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Rebecca Anne Goetz, *The Baptism of Early Virginia: How Christianity Created Race* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); Carolyn Renée Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945–1975* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Mary Beth Swetnam Mathews, *Doctrine and Race: African American Evangelicals and Fundamentalism between the Wars* (Tuscaloosa: Alabama University Press, 2017); Robert Moats Miller, “The Protestant Churches and Lynching, 1919–1939,”

The Fall and Corruption of the Entire Creation

The fall of Adam and Eve in the garden changes everything about God's good creation. After the fall, God curses the entire creation (Gen. 3). Humans and all creation become totally depraved and radically corrupted because of sin, to the point where everyone is conceived in sin (cf. Ps. 51), and everyone actually sins and falls short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Sin now rules and reigns over the entire creation as a tyrannical power (Rom. 6). Humans still are created in God's image, but sin's individual and cosmological, systemic and personal impact has devastated every aspect of God's good creation. Although humans still bear God's image, they now are separated from God and from one another, are at odds with God's original good creation, and the entire cosmos is in absolute disarray because of the universal power of sin.

Genesis 3 begins by asserting that the serpent is "more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made" (3:1). The serpent's craftiness is apparent throughout chapter 3 as he ultimately entices Eve to disobey God's command and Adam joins her (3:1–13). Consequently, God curses the serpent, the woman, the man, and the ground he tilled (3:14–18).

God's judgment affects every aspect of creation. God says in Genesis 3:15a, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring."⁴ Here we see that one aspect of sin's impact on God's original good creation, and of God's judgment of the creation because of sin, is enmity within the human seed/race. Two specific ways this enmity reveals itself in Genesis are in murder (Cain and Abel) (4:1–8) and eventually in linguistic and geographic boundaries (11:1–9). These boundaries often

The Journal of Negro History 42, no. 2 (April 1957): 118–31; Ken Gonzalez-Day, *Lynching in the West: 1850–1935* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb, *Forgotten Dead: The Lynching of Mexicans, 1848–1928* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Donald G. Mathews, *At the Altar of Lynching: Burning Sam Hose in the American South*, Cambridge Studies on the American South (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Richard Bailey, *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England*, Religion in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2007); Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (New York: New York Age, 1892); Wells, *The Light of Truth: Writings of an Anti-Lynching Crusader*, ed. Mia Bay (New York: Penguin, 2014). For primary texts and scholarly discussions of ethnicity and race in antiquity, see Frank Snowden Jr., *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Rebecca F. Kennedy, C. Sydnor Roy, and Max L. Goldman, eds., *Race and Ethnicity in the Classical World: An Anthology of Primary Sources in Translation* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2013); Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

4. Gen. 3:15b will be important later in my discussion of the New Testament.

result in wars and other forms of social oppression between the different groups—for example, Israel’s plight in slavery under the Egyptians (Exod. 1–12) and exile at the hands of the Assyrians and the Babylonians (2 Kings 24–25; 2 Chron. 36).

The Seed of the Woman and the Diverse Human Seed

Adam and Eve are diverse as male and female, with distinct roles and functions in the garden in comparison to other aspects of creation, while sharing in the same ontological human stuff as image-bearers created in God’s very own image (Gen. 1–2). God creates and defines the human race in the creation narrative in Genesis 1–2. Once sin enters creation and devastates every aspect of God’s good creation, humans begin to take on an independent life of their own in rebellion against God and his creation and against his original good design of conciliation and harmony in the garden. For example, Cain murders Abel (Gen. 4:1–8), and humanity tries to make a name for itself (11:1–9).

God identifies diversity or difference within humanity as “good,” even “very good,” in the beginning when he creates a singular human race as a diverse and distinct male and female (Gen. 1:31). Many different kinds of humans flow from the seed of Adam and Eve as they become fruitful and multiply (cf. 5:1–32; 10:1–32) as one, but diverse, human race (*genos* in 11:6 LXX [Septuagint]). This one, but diverse, human race moves about in various lands and territories, living in disobedience to God and in conflict with one another, to the point that God judges creation with a flood and spares only a few (6:1–9:28). After the flood, the peoples of the earth, the descendants of Noah’s sons, are divided. The one diverse human race moves to and fro on the earth and establishes specific social boundaries, has different cultural experiences, and goes to different social locations based on their shared values, customs, geography, and dialects (10:1–31). Being different does not make these diverse values and customs bad, but people begin to use their cultural diversity within the human race to rebel against God and vie for power over those who do not share their ethnic differences (cf. 14:1–12).

In Genesis 11, even after the fall, unity among diversity within humanity is still a good thing. There are different kinds of human beings from diverse family trees who celebrate God’s diverse creativity of different kinds of people (male and female, children and adults, young and old) within one human race (cf. Gen. 5:1–32; 9:18–10:32; 12:1–50:26). However, humanity’s efforts to use unity in diversity as a source of rebellion against God and against his fellow image-bearers is not good. Rebellion against God is the impetus for God to confuse the speech of the already-diverse humans and to scatter them

throughout the earth so that they cannot use their unity to try making a name greater than that of their creator God (11:1–9).

The linguistic confusion reported in Genesis 11 illustrates a very important point about God’s vision for ethnic diversity: God and obedience to God are and must always be central to the identity of humans. The moment humans sin against their God, he brings judgment against his creation (cf. Gen. 3; 6–7; 11:1–9). God creates humans to be his people and to worship him. But sin causes humans to create and construct their identity in their own images because of Adam’s transgression in the garden and because of humanity’s personal complicity in Adam’s transgression, to the point that they rebel against the good vision of their creator.

When Adam and Eve act contrary to God’s original good design for them to live in conciliation with him vertically, with each other horizontally, and with the creation cosmologically, God pronounces judgment on his image-bearers (cf. Gen. 3; 6–7; 11:1–9). This truth is elucidated at the tower of Babel when humanity in its diverse unity seeks to create a name for itself that competes with God. God confuses their speech, inhibits their ability to communicate with one another, and forces them to scatter to different lands and social locations to begin living in cosmological chaos.

The Babel story, in Genesis 11:1–9, tells us how the human race was scattered with different dialects throughout the earth and why: disobedience to God. Unified and diverse humanity attempts to build a *tower* and a *city*, which they want to reach to the *heavens*, in order to make a name for themselves (11:4). This tower could have been a common ziggurat. Ancient people erected ziggurats to praise deities in cities. Certain cities would have also had a deity whom the ancients perceived as the most supreme god. In Genesis 11, the human race appears to have built the tower so that a deity would descend from heaven to earth. However, the one and true God stopped the process and judged the people by confusing their speech and dispersing them because of their idolatry.⁵

This divine dispersion does not happen because ethnic diversity is a bad thing. Differences within the human race do not begin after sin entered creation, after the flood, or after the curse of Babel. Moreover, ethnic differences are not the result of sin. God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply and to “fill the earth” in Eden before the fall (Gen. 1:22). Rather, humans begin to despise ethnic differences within humanity and look upon them with suspicion and contempt because of sin and because of God’s action

5. This paragraph is influenced and shaped by the article “Ziggurats,” in *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, ed. John H. Walton and Craig S. Keener (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 30–31.

against humanity's rebellion after the fall and at the tower of Babel. Babel shows us that when unified difference within humanity pursues idolatry and rebels against God, it can be used for bad purposes. Furthermore, Babel shows that God will not bless or honor people who rebel against him, because he is the source of the entire creation and desires that the entire creation worships him alone in accordance with his divine purposes. Babel reveals that enmity between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman is playing out in very concrete ways in the lives of God's ethnically diverse image-bearers. Cain murders Abel (4:1–8). God judges the diverse and unified human race with a flood (6–7) and then with linguistic confusion because of sin (11:1–9), so that the diverse people within the human race will no longer understand one another's speech.

In the garden and in the ancient world there is absolutely zero conception of the modern construction of race that emerged in the American colonies, continued in the United States, and is rooted in the social constructs of *White*, *Whiteness*, and racial hierarchy.⁶ Modern conversations of ethnicity tend to speak of the differences that exist within particular cultures bound together by a set of values, ideas, dialects or languages, geography, and customs (among other things). These conversations also carefully point out that ethnic difference can exist among people in groups racialized in the same way. For example, Black people are ethnically diverse. African Americans, Africans, Bahamians, Haitians, and Jamaicans (and a host of other ethnicities) are Black. However, these groups have different ethnic experiences within their own groups and with other Blacks outside of their distinct Black group. These differences also vary across religious, tribal, national, geographic, political, and economic boundaries. Yet, in a racialized society in which there is a history of assigning a specific racial meaning because of skin color to human bodies created in the image of God, diverse fellow image-bearers continue to assign racial meaning to and to create boundaries between fellow humans created in the image of God because of skin color. This racialization historically and generally has caused people in society to view and treat specific image-bearers

6. I use the terms *White* and *Whiteness* to refer to social constructs and ideas related to race and power. Historians and scholars have shown that Europeans in the New World constructed the concepts and ideas of race, White, and Whiteness to create social currency for those racialized as White in the New World and to distinguish themselves from enslaved Blacks. For examples, see historical sources cited in the introduction and in this chapter. I do not use the term *Whiteness* to refer to all people with white skin. The point here is that the social constructs of race, White, and Whiteness were human inventions, human constructs of racial hierarchy within the human race, and human ideas. God created one human race with ethnically diverse people. Humans created ideas like race, White, Whiteness, and Blackness for the purpose of a racial hierarchy.

within groups of color (i.e., within non-White groups) as deficient because of the color of their skin.

If the definition of *ethnicity* includes the idea of cultural diversity within the same human race, and if we grant that Adam and Eve were one human race (which counters the modern definition of race, since the modern understanding of race is connected to a racial hierarchy within the human race), then I think there is space to say that it is appropriate for modern readers of ancient texts to think of Adam and Eve as a distinct and diverse human race (a group living in Eden with Edenic values flowing from God's revelation of himself to them), created in God's image as male and female, and distinct from and better than everything else God created. In this definition, the one human race of Adam and Eve could be described more like the modern understanding of ethnicity than the modern understanding of race, because there is no racial hierarchy attached to Adam and Eve (two humans within the human race) based on skin color or other fictive criteria. They had distinct cultural practices as humans; they had a certain set of values revealed to them by God in the garden; they spoke in an understood dialect with one another and with God; they lived in a specific social location (the garden); they had authority over the other things God created; and they had a set of customs or practices that were unique for them as God's image-bearers.⁷

Certain racialized boundaries of our own making have been and continue to be antithetical to the original design of creation. As a result, one aspect of God's act to crush the seed of the serpent through the seed of the woman is to restore everything that Adam and Eve lost in the garden. This restoration includes the vertical relationship between God and humans, the horizontal relationship between diverse humans, and the cosmological relationship between God and the creation and between humans and the cosmos. Ultimately,

7. Diverse humans further express how human identity began to take on a life and agenda of its own after sin entered creation. To be clear, there was from the very beginning a divine unity in difference and diversity among humans in God's original good and sinless creation. God celebrates his divine design of unity among the diversity of male and female humanity (Gen. 1:27). This celebration is apparent when God says that his creation was good (Gen. 1–2). Adam and Eve were part of the same human race with cultural practices that would have been specific to their God-given roles in the garden. One example of a cultural function of the human race was that Adam and Eve could procreate together. Adam could not procreate alone, since prior to Eve there was no one "corresponding to his likeness." Nor could he carry a baby. One difference, therefore, between Adam and Eve was that they could make a baby together, not with the other things God created. The ability of Adam and Eve to procreate with one another was unique to their God-given roles in the garden. Their God-given identities in the garden as the human race created, formed, and endowed by God with gender-specific roles were distinct from every other aspect of creation. Humans were the only creatures created in God's very own image, and humans could procreate only with other humans.

an aim of the redemptive promise of Genesis 3:15 appears to be the reversal of the vertical, horizontal, and cosmological curse, leading to the vertical, horizontal, and cosmological promise of complete blessing and restoration through the seed of the woman (cf. Rev. 21–22).

The People of God and the Abrahamic Blessing

After the episode of the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9), Genesis mentions Shem and his descendants (11:10–26). The book then focuses on Terah, one of Shem’s offspring, and his descendants (11:27–32). The most important person in both Shem’s (11:26) and Terah’s genealogy is Abram (11:27). Abram’s importance in the genealogies is evidenced by the bulk of time Genesis spends discussing him and his offspring (12:1–50:26).

With the introduction of Abram, Genesis shows God’s people being connected to a specific land (Ur of the Chaldeans and Haran) (11:28, 31), a God who speaks directly to Abram (12:1; 17:3), a promise of a future land (12:1; 15:7; 17:8), universal blessing (12:2–3), and many seed/offspring (15:1–5; 17:4–6). The promise of a universal blessing evokes the image of the curse pronouncement and the promise of blessing from Genesis 3:15, where God says that he will crush the seed of the serpent by means of the seed of the woman. In the Abrahamic narrative (Abram is renamed Abraham in 17:5), Genesis shows the promise of seed/offspring becoming more concrete. Abraham’s seed will crush the seed of the serpent through Abraham’s offspring. In Genesis 12:1–50:26, the narrative focuses on God fulfilling his promise to Adam and Eve (3:15) through Abraham and his offspring. There are many bumps along the way (disobedience, temptation, and death). Still, God reiterates his promises to Abraham again and again. God marks Abraham and his offspring as those with faith (15:6) in the one and true God, and whose faith manifests itself by means of God’s covenantal sign of circumcision (17:1–14) and by means of Abraham’s obedience when God commands him to kill Isaac, his promised son (22:1–19).

Once God has given Abraham physical offspring and a piece of land, the narrative shows that the vertical, horizontal, and cosmological restoration promised in Genesis 3:15 have not been fully realized in Abraham’s lifetime, since he dies without seeing the universal blessing promised to him. Isaac’s wife, Rebekah, gives birth to Jacob, who in turn has twelve sons who eventually produce the offspring of the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen. 25–35). God has defined his people by a covenant with Abraham and the mark of circumcision as a sign of those who identify with God’s universal promise of blessing to Abraham (17:1–14). Abraham’s offspring is a circumcised people, bound to

a specific land, bound to a specific God, and named after a patriarch (Jacob/Israel). When the Genesis narrative ends, Abraham is dead, as is his descendant Jacob/Israel,⁸ whose twelve sons are in Egypt, not in the promised land (50:22–26). Before he dies, Jacob/Israel’s son Joseph promises his brothers that God will eventually bring them out of the land of Egypt and back to “the land he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (50:24).

Exodus

In Exodus the story of God’s people continues, through slavery of God’s people in Egypt and God’s gracious deliverance of them. We see that YHWH marks Israel as his people through their association with the patriarch Abraham and his offspring, by his gracious redemption of them through Moses from Egyptian slavery, by the initiation of a covenantal relationship based upon Torah observance, and by their destiny to receive all God’s promises to Abraham and his offspring, not least of which is to inherit a promised land.

The People of God and Redemption from Slavery

The book of Exodus begins by identifying “the sons of Israel” as those who came to Egypt with Jacob (1:1–5). When that generation died and their descendants multiplied greatly (1:6–7), a new pharaoh began to fear that the increased number and strength of the people of Israel would lead to revolt. Pharaoh distinguishes Egyptians from the sons of Israel with an us-versus-them statement: “Behold the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land” (1:9–10). In Genesis, God promised to crush the seed of the serpent by means of the seed of the woman (3:15) and to do so through Abraham and his offspring (12:1–50:26), but as Exodus begins, the descendants of Abraham are enslaved in a foreign land (Exod. 1:8–14).

When Moses, Israel’s deliverer, is born, his mother hides him from the Egyptians and then sets him in a basket among reeds in the Nile, where Pharaoh’s daughter finds him and ultimately takes him as her own son (Exod. 2:1–10). An adult Moses kills an Egyptian who is beating a Hebrew and then

8. In Genesis 32:22–32, Jacob wrestles all night with a “man,” an angel/messenger of the Lord, and in the course of the events, the man changes Jacob’s name to Israel (which means “strives with God”), because, he says, “You have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed” (32:28). God forms his people based on their association with Abraham, his covenant with him, and with his offspring: these are the “people of Israel” (32:32).

flees to Midian to escape Pharaoh's wrath. While there, he comes to the aid of the daughters of the priest of Midian (2:11–17), who report to their father what Moses did, identifying him as an “Egyptian” (2:18–19). There are no explicit contextual clues as to why they identify Moses this way. It seems reasonable to conjecture that Moses told them that he came from Egypt, and they likely think that he is an Egyptian sojourner (and indeed he is). Moses confirms this much after he marries one of the daughters, Zipporah, and then names their son “Gershom” because, he says, “I have been a sojourner [*gēr*] in a foreign land” (2:22).⁹ Yet, Moses was still an Israelite descendant of Abraham—and thus a coparticipant in the covenantal promises of God to Abraham and his offspring.

When God hears the cry of the people of Israel (Exod. 2:23–25), he calls Moses to be their deliverer. In the Exodus narrative, God shapes Moses's identity as part of the people of God at the burning bush by aligning him with his covenantal promises. He reveals himself to Moses as “the God of [his] father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (3:6), whose name is YHWH (3:14). YHWH informs Moses that he has seen the affliction and heard the cries of Israel in Egypt, and he is sending Moses as the means by which he will deliver his people from bondage (3:7–10).

Moses resists, but God promises to be with him and to give Moses a sign of his deliverance of his people: Israel will serve God on “this mountain” after Moses has brought them out of Egypt (3:12). Moses objects, but YHWH convinces him that he will work through him and use his brother, Aaron, as his mouthpiece (3:13–4:17). Moses returns to Jethro, his father-in-law, and asks permission to return to “my brothers in Egypt to see whether they are still alive” (4:18), indicating his connection with the people of God. He is an Egyptian Israelite from the offspring of Abraham, and like Abraham, Moses receives direct revelation from God.

Moses returns to Egypt, where he and Aaron demand that Pharaoh let God's people go, but he refuses (5:1–2). Because of Pharaoh's hardened heart (4:21; 7:3, 13–14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 34–35; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8; cf. 14:17), God brings ten plagues of judgment upon him and his kingdom (7:14–11:10). As promised, God delivers Israel from Egyptian slavery through Moses, destroying Pharaoh and his army in the sea as they pursue the Israelites (12:1–14:30). From there the people will journey to the promised land. There will be spiritual bumps and bruises for the people of God along the way, but their God will fulfill his promises to Abraham and his descendants, redeemed from slavery in Egypt.

9. In the Bible, one's ethnicity is also based on one's geographic location (cf. Acts 18:24).

The People of God and the Gracious Giving of the Torah

A turning point in the Exodus narrative is Israel's arrival at Sinai, where YHWH establishes boundaries for his people. These boundaries relate to Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:9–25) and to the people's living in distinction from the other nations (19:5; 23:20–33). At Sinai, YHWH instructs Israel that they must obey his voice and his commands in order to be his treasured possession (19:5). These remarks add another feature to YHWH's formation of Israel's identity as his people. They are the offspring of Abraham delivered from Egyptian slavery, and now they are a people to whom YHWH graciously gives commands to follow in order to mark them (i.e., consecrate them) as the offspring of Abraham and as YHWH's covenantal people. Their obedience to these commands is necessary to continue their participation in the covenantal relationship established by YHWH (19:5), not in a legalistic sense, but in a covenantal sense. Their obedience to YHWH's voice is integral to their identity as Israelites, the descendants of Abraham. If they obey YHWH's commands, he promises that they will be to him "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:6). Their obedience will grant them the blessing to continue in a covenantal relationship with God, who delivered them from Egyptian slavery, and will set them apart as a people to whom YHWH has given his favor and upon whom he has promised to display the covenantal blessings of Abraham.

The giving of the Torah (the law) in Exodus is when God concretizes on tablets of stone what it means for Israel to be a people wholly devoted to the God of their redemption and salvation and for the nation to have an identity constructed in accordance with YHWH's covenantal love for them (cf. Deut. 7). Israel's identity as God's people is governed and guided by YHWH's Torah. In Exodus 20, YHWH officially gives this Torah to Moses, and the giving of the Torah dominates the narrative from Exodus 20 through the end of Leviticus. The story of Israel as a Torah-observant people continues in Numbers. Then, in Deuteronomy, Moses recapitulates the giving of the law to Israel before he dies and before Joshua leads them into the promised land, so that they would obey and experience the long life in the land that Torah promises.

The People of God and the Blood of the Covenant

Exodus 24 is an important moment for Israel as God's people because it signifies their willing acceptance of YHWH's covenantal stipulations (20:1–23:33). After Moses relays all YHWH's laws to them, Israel responds, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do" (24:3). Moses writes down

all YHWH's words, builds an altar at the bottom of the mountain, and offers sacrifices, putting half of the animals' blood in basins and throwing half against the altar (24:5–6).

Moses then reads the Book of the Covenant, which contained YHWH's laws, and the people repeat, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient" (24:7). Their response shows their agreement with the stipulations of the covenant. They freely enter into this covenant with YHWH and accept his terms for their covenantal relationship with him. Moses then sprinkles blood on the people in order to ratify the covenant, saying, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words" (24:8). YHWH, through Moses, ratifies the covenant with blood, identifying Israel as his covenant people. Israel's identity as God's people is based on his gracious giving of his law to this graciously chosen people.

The People of God and His Presence with His Covenantal People

The ratification of the covenant transitions to a series of covenantal stipulations that focus on building a sanctuary where YHWH would dwell with his people on their journey to the promised land (Exod. 25:1–31:18; 35:1–40:38). The covenantal stipulations given thus far and Israel's agreement with them reveal that Israel's covenantal relationship with YHWH is one marked by love for God and love for neighbor (20:1–23:33). The instructions regarding the tabernacle reveal God's expectations for his people to maintain a covenantal relationship with him and live as his people in distinction from the other nations. YHWH also identifies his people as the ones with whom he dwells through the wilderness and into the promised land via the tabernacle.

YHWH gives specific directions for building the tabernacle, so that he "may dwell in their midst" (Exod. 25:1–9). YHWH commands them to build the ark of the covenant, which would contain the stone tablets of God's testimony (25:10–16). The ark was to be covered with a mercy seat, where YHWH would receive the blood of atonement for the people (25:17–22; Lev. 16:14–15). Other aspects of the tabernacle represent YHWH's covenantal relationship with Israel and his provision for them as he dwells with them in the wilderness, from the priestly garments and the priests' function (Exod. 28:1–29:46) to the sacred anointing oil and incense (30:22–38). The tabernacle provides the way for YHWH to dwell with his people Israel and to be their God.

The People of God and Covenantal Unfaithfulness

At Sinai, Israel's covenantal relationship with YHWH becomes inseparable from their obedience to his law. When he gives the Torah, YHWH establishes

the exclusive worship of him as their priority. He forbids them from committing idolatry (Exod. 20:2–5). Torah prescribes that Israel must be devoted to exclusive love for YHWH above all other gods and by love for their neighbor. YHWH warns the people that he is a “jealous God” and will visit “the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation” of those who hate him and commit idolatry (20:5). However, YHWH promises to show steadfast love to those who love him and keep his commandments (20:6).

Exodus 32 epitomizes YHWH’s warning and blessing in the episode of the golden calf. As Israel waits for Moses at the bottom of Mount Sinai, they become impatient at his delay and urge Aaron to make gods for them to worship. Aaron creates a golden calf from the jewelry that Israel brought to him, and the people declare, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (32:4). Aaron builds an altar and pronounces a cultic feast to be celebrated, and the people worship the calf, celebrating it as their deliverer.

YHWH is furious because Israel has broken the most foundational stipulation of the covenant: exclusive worship of him alone (cf. 20:2). YHWH instructs Moses to go down from Mount Sinai because the people have corrupted themselves by making a golden calf, worshiping it, and offering sacrifices to it. YHWH says he will eradicate the people in his anger because they are “a stiff-necked people” (32:9),¹⁰ and he tells Moses to stop mediating for them so that he can destroy them and then make a great nation through Moses. YHWH is so angry at Israel for breaking the covenant that he is willing to destroy them and start over with Moses, his faithful servant.

Moses pleads with YHWH to show his people mercy, appealing to the covenant with Abraham and his offspring. Moses implores, “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever’” (32:13). YHWH hears Moses’s prayer and relents because of the covenant he made with Abraham and his offspring. However, Israel’s covenantal relationship with their deliverer, YHWH, has changed because the stipulations by which they could maintain their relationship have been shattered. Moses’s next actions symbolize this point.

10. The Hebrew word used to speak of God’s anger is *hārā*. For examples of this word for God’s burning anger that are accompanied by judgment or the threat of judgment, see Exod. 22:24; Num. 11:1, 10; 12:9; 22:22; 25:3; 32:10, 13; Deut. 7:4; 11:17; 29:27; 31:17; Josh. 7:1; 23:16; Judg. 2:14, 20; 3:8; 10:7; 2 Sam. 6:7; 2 Kings 13:3; 1 Chron. 13:10; 2 Chron. 25:15; Job 19:11; Ps. 106:40.

Moses goes down from Sinai with both of the tablets of the testimony in his hands, and when he sees the people's idolatrous worship, his anger burns. He throws down the tablets and they shatter, a symbol that Israel's covenantal relationship with YHWH has been broken (cf. Exod. 24). Their covenantal identity as YHWH's redeemed people was threatened with annihilation. YHWH would have formed a new people, with a new covenantal identity, and with a new covenantal relationship through Moses and his offspring in order to make a great nation through him.

Moses burns the calf, grinds it to powder, pours the powder on the water, and makes the Israelites drink it as a sign of judgment against them. Then he summons the people to take action to rid the community of the evil among them. The sons of Levi gather around Moses, and he urges them to kill brother, companion, and neighbor. They obey Moses, killing about three thousand Israelites—a picture of what YHWH had threatened to do to the entire community because of their idolatry (cf. 32:10).

The slaughtering of the people is a sacrificial act to YHWH whereby Moses ordains the Levites to purify the community so that YHWH would bestow the blessing of restoration, preserving their covenantal identity and covenantal relationship with YHWH (cf. 32:10, 29). Moses even attempts to offer himself as a sacrifice in order to spare Israel from the threat of YHWH's wrath for their sin. YHWH rejects Moses's request to offer himself and instead assures him that he will not blot him out of his book. Rather, YHWH will blot out of his book "whoever has sinned against me" (32:33). This is a reference to YHWH's judgment and to a cutting off of the transgressor—in this case, the people—from their covenantal relationship with YHWH (cf. 32:10, 15–16).

YHWH chooses not to completely destroy the people, instead sending a plague of judgment for their disobedience of the first and most important covenantal stipulation: worship the Lord your God alone. He commands Moses and the people to continue their journey toward the land that he promised to Abraham and his offspring, and he will send an angel before them to drive out the inhabitants of the land of Canaan and give Israel the land. However, YHWH says he will not go with them, because he might consume the "stiff-necked people" with judgment along the way (33:3). YHWH judges his people by refusing to dwell with them or to go before them.

The people lament this news, and Moses again intercedes on behalf of the people, urging YHWH to consider that Israel is "your people" (33:13). Moses pleads that YHWH not let them go to the promised land unless his presence is with them. He argues, "Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?" This is a significant statement about Israel's relationship with YHWH as his people.

Moses emphatically expresses here that YHWH has uniquely created Israel to be his people, and they are “distinct” (33:16). Israel is a people graciously redeemed by YHWH from slavery. YHWH has given Israel a covenantal identity and the law, and he has dwelt in their midst in the tabernacle (cf. Exod. 20–30). YHWH has established with Israel a covenantal relationship because of his promise to Abraham and his offspring.

Other gods dwelt with their patrons in the ancient Near East. Moses emphasizes here that YHWH did not dwell among people this way until he graciously entered into a covenantal relationship with Israel, not even in the days of Adam and Eve, Noah, or the patriarchs. God uniquely entered into this covenantal relationship with Israel. However, if Israel broke the covenant, YHWH promised to wipe them out from the face of the earth (cf. 33:3–5).

YHWH assures Moses, however, that he has in fact found favor in his sight and that he would again show mercy to him and the people. This mercy is envisaged by the renewing of the covenant. In Exodus 34, Moses returns to Mount Sinai at YHWH’s instruction with two more stone tablets. There YHWH proclaims to Moses that he is both a merciful God who forgives iniquities and a righteous God who judges transgressions. Moses asks YHWH to go with the people, and he petitions YHWH to “take us for your inheritance” (34:9). Moses asks YHWH to renew Israel’s covenantal identity and covenantal relationship with him.

YHWH answers Moses’s request and renews the covenant, promising to do more miraculous deeds for Israel than their emancipation from slavery. The Israelites will see YHWH’s favor for them, “for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you” (34:10). YHWH promises to drive out the other nations and instructs that Israel not form a covenant with the other inhabitants of the land. He commands them to destroy the inhabitants of the land, along with their idols and worship sites, urging that they be careful to worship only him (34:13). He gives instructions for Israel’s unique worship of YHWH through festivals and Sabbath observance.

After renewing the covenant with his people, YHWH promises to cast out nations before Israel and to enlarge their borders (34:24). The narrative concludes with YHWH commanding Moses to write these words because they are the words of the covenant he has made with Moses and Israel (34:27). Moses writes on the tablets the Ten Commandments, thus ratifying the renewal of YHWH’s covenantal relationship with Israel.

Exodus 35–40 continues with the construction of the tabernacle according to YHWH’s instructions. As the book ends, YHWH’s presence fills the tabernacle, and he dwells with his people throughout the rest of their journey to the promised land (40:34–38). Israel is God’s people, and their identity is

inseparable from their covenantal relationship with their God, his redemption of them from Egyptian slavery, and his promise to give them all the blessings of Abraham their patriarch.

Leviticus

Leviticus outlines a sacrificial system and holiness code whereby Israel can maintain their covenantal relationship with YHWH. YHWH provides stipulations in his Torah about the appropriate way to worship him, and keeping these stipulations marks Israel's identity as the people of God.

The People of God, the Sacrificial Cult, and Purity

Leviticus begins where Exodus ends: at the tent of meeting. YHWH instructs Moses about sacrifices the people should bring before him, including offerings for sin and purification (1:1–17; 4:1–6:7) and offerings of gratitude (2:1–3:17). In Leviticus 16, YHWH instructs Moses regarding the Day of Atonement, an annual means for Israel to maintain their covenantal relationship with YHWH. Proper maintenance of the sacrificial system detailed in Leviticus is central to this relationship.

YHWH also gives stipulations related to Israel's social life, including the kinds of food they can eat (Lev. 11); purification after childbirth (Lev. 12); dealing with leprosy and bodily discharges (Lev. 13–15); eating blood (17:10–16); maintaining appropriate sexual relationships (18:1–30; 19:20–22; 20:10–21); demonstrating tangible love for neighbors (19:9–18); and abstaining from child sacrifice (20:1–5). YHWH includes stipulations about cultic events, such as acceptable offerings to the Lord (22:17–33), the Sabbath and special feasts (23:1–44), and the Sabbatical Year and Year of Jubilee (25:1–22). Also included are laws regarding the tabernacle, blasphemy, and retribution (24:1–23); redemption of property and persons (25:23–55); and vows and dedication (27:1–34).

These laws are integral to Israel's covenantal relationship with YHWH. However, the laws are *not* legalistic in the sense that YHWH expects Israel to earn his grace or blessing by them. Rather, YHWH graciously gives Israel these laws to identify them as his people, a people headed for a promised land. Their covenantal relationship with YHWH is evident by their obedience to these stipulations. That is, a life of holiness and compliance to YHWH's Torah enables Israel to maintain and preserve their covenantal relationship as YHWH's people.

For example, in Leviticus 19:1–37 and 20:22–26, YHWH grounds the necessity of Israel's covenantal obedience in his personal holiness. YHWH begins

his instructions to Moses in 19:2, saying, “You [the people] shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” They must be in practice what YHWH is: wholly devoted to YHWH. Neither YHWH’s nor his people’s holiness refers simply to pious, individualistic virtue in isolation from community and social interactions. Yes, YHWH’s holiness relates to his personal character of being without ontological blemish, and he expresses his holiness in always doing what is in accordance with his name. However, the veracity of his ontological purity is connected to and only evident by his commitment to himself and to the integrity of his own name as he performs specific acts to manifest his holiness (cf. Exod. 20:2–17). YHWH reveals this in the book of Exodus by asserting that he will bring Israel out of Egypt because he has heard the cries of their affliction and remembered his covenant with Abraham and his offspring (cf. 2:23–15:21), and because he forgives sins and judges iniquities (20:5–6). Indeed, Moses reminds YHWH after Israel committed idolatry with the golden calf that he should not destroy them, because he had made a covenant with Abraham and his offspring (Exod. 32:11–14).

In Leviticus, YHWH’s holiness is expressed by his instructions for the exact ways the people should approach him and the precise reason(s) why they should heed YHWH’s stipulations. The holiness code prescribed by YHWH flows from a God who is wholly devoted to himself (19:2). Thus, if Israel wants to maintain their covenantal status as his people, they must conduct themselves in ways that reflect being wholly devoted to YHWH. At times, this means that YHWH commands Israel to annihilate the other nations that are not wholly devoted to him (see the book of Joshua). Those within Israel who are not wholly committed to YHWH and who are unfaithful to the covenant could also be destroyed, as in the case of Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu (10:1–7). On other occasions, however, YHWH commands Israel to reflect his holiness by loving one another and by treating those inside and outside their community in ways that reflect being wholly devoted to YHWH’s holiness (19:9–18). Since YHWH is holy, Israel too must be holy—that is, wholly devoted to YHWH (19:2).

The People of God and the Blessings and Curses of the Covenant

Israel’s relationship with YHWH is predicated in part upon their obedience to Torah. If they fail to maintain the covenantal stipulations, YHWH promises to cut off his people from a relationship with him. Leviticus 26:1–46 strongly makes this point. YHWH says that Israel must not practice idolatry (v. 1). They must keep Sabbath and honor his sanctuary, the tabernacle (v. 2). Obedience to YHWH will result in a fruitful harvest (vv. 3–5, 9–10)

and peace in the land (vv. 6–8). If they obey, YHWH also promises to dwell in the midst of Israel, to confirm his covenant with them, and to walk among them; YHWH will be Israel’s God and they will be his people if they meet the covenantal stipulations (vv. 11–12).

However, YHWH promises to judge Israel if they spurn his law and refuse to obey all his commands, thereby breaking his covenant (vv. 14–15). He threatens Israel with panic, with a wasting disease that would consume their eyes and make their heart faint, and not to bless their crop but to let their enemies eat it (v. 16). He promises to set his face against Israel and to afflict the people by their enemies; those who hate Israel will rule over them (v. 17).

If these covenantal curses for disobedience fail to provoke Israel to return to their covenantal obligations, YHWH promises even more severe discipline for their sins (vv. 18–20). He threatens to afflict Israel with judgment, to walk against them with his fury, and to drive them out of the land (vv. 21–39). YHWH will identify a disobedient Israel as a people with an uncircumcised heart (v. 41)—that is, a noncovenantal people. He promises to remember his covenant with Abraham and his offspring and to remember them in the land only if they confess their sins (vv. 40–42). He promises neither to destroy them nor to break his covenant with them if they repent when they enter the land of their enemies (v. 44). YHWH promises these things for the sake of his covenant with Abraham and his offspring, so that he would be their God (vv. 45–46).

Numbers

The book of Numbers narrates stages of Israel’s journey to the promised land and presents their covenantal successes and failures on their journey. It also highlights YHWH’s faithfulness to his people and confirms the message of Exodus and Leviticus that Israel’s covenantal relationship as God’s people is based on God’s gracious promise to Abraham and the establishment of his covenant with Israel at Sinai.

The People of God and Priestly Service

In Numbers 1:1–46, YHWH commands Moses to take a census of the people based on tribal affiliation in order to determine those who are eligible to go to war (vv. 2–3). According to YHWH’s instructions, Moses numbers the warriors from eleven of the twelve tribes of Israel, omitting the tribe of Levi because YHWH has appointed them to minister and keep watch over the tabernacle (vv. 47–54). The Levites’ role in Israel demonstrates an important aspect of Israel’s status as God’s people: namely, priestly service.

YHWH prescribes duties for the Levites that include watching over Aaron and ministering on behalf of the entire people at the tabernacle (3:5–9). They are to care for the tabernacle’s interior furnishings, as well as the frame and curtains that comprise the structure (4:1–33). When the people bring their offerings to YHWH for the consecration of the tabernacle, the priests receive them (7:1–88).

YHWH chooses the Levites from all the tribes of Israel as his own for priestly service, accepting them in place of Israel’s firstborn and thereby rendering that they belong to him (3:12). YHWH reminds Moses that on the day he destroyed all the firstborn of Egypt, he set apart his own firstborn in Israel to be wholly devoted to himself (v. 13). Israel is YHWH’s chosen people to whom he will give the promised land, but the Levites are his chosen tribe to act as YHWH’s priests in service at the tabernacle on behalf of the people. Israel’s identity as the people of God is connected to the priestly service of the sons of Levi.

The People of God and Moses’s Cushite Wife

In Numbers 12, Miriam and Aaron, Moses’s sister and brother, speak against Moses because of his Cushite wife (v. 1). The Septuagint says they speak against Moses “because of his Ethiopian wife” (*heneken tēs gynaikos tēs Aithiopissēs*) and that they grumble “because he took an Ethiopian wife” (*hēn elaben Mōysēs hoti gynaika Aithiopissan elaben*). One can presume that this Cushite woman follows Israel’s God, but she is not a descendant of Jacob, delivered from Egyptian slavery, daughter of one circumcised on the eighth day in accordance with the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17) and the Levitical law (Lev. 12:3). Nor was she part of the people to whom YHWH gave the law at Sinai. The issue in the text seems to have absolutely nothing to do with skin color, for Moses likely has dark skin. Rather, the problem that Miriam and Aaron have with Moses’s wife is that she is a Cushite, not an Israelite.

They believe Moses’s actions compromise YHWH’s covenantal commitment to Israel and violate Israel’s covenantal responsibility and covenantal identity (cf. Exod. 24). Thus they question whether YHWH speaks to Moses only (Num. 12:2). YHWH rebukes them and summons Miriam and Aaron to the tent of meeting, where he informs them that he speaks to prophets among them in visions or dreams, but that he speaks “mouth to mouth” (12:8) with Moses. Moses alone beholds the form of YHWH. YHWH asks Miriam and Aaron why, then, they are not afraid to speak against his servant Moses. YHWH is angry and curses Miriam with leprosy. Aaron sees Miriam’s leprosy, repents, and pleads with Moses to ask YHWH to show him mercy. Moses cries out to YHWH, asking him to heal Miriam.