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Race and Religion in the Hebrew Bible

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Genesis 1–11: the universal worship of the biblical God

The biblical genealogy from the beginnings of humanity to Abraham, the founder of the Jewish people, is less than clear-cut. To begin with, there are two stories of creation, each from a different one of the sources from which the Bible comes. In the first story (1.1–2.4a) humans are created last. An indefinite number of them are created, and at once. Males and females are created simultaneously. Wherever on earth they start from—no location is provided—they are commanded by God to ‘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 air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’ (1.28). From the outset, then, humans occupy or are expected to occupy the whole earth.

In the second story of creation (2.4b–2.25), which cannot be reconciled with the first one, humans are the initial creation. Only one human is created—Adam. He resides in Eden and is expected to remain there forever. He is given dominion over the garden, just as humanity collectively is given dominion over the whole earth in the first story. Eve is then created as his partner. Sex and reproduction are permitted, with all subsequent generations to remain in Eden—until, that is, Adam and Eve sin and get evicted.

Only once the primordial couple are outside Eden do they actually have children—Cain and Abel. One would assume that all humanity thereafter comes from the sons—better, from the son left standing after he has killed his brother. And Cain does indeed beget Enoch, who begets Irad, who begets Mehujael, who begets Methushael, who begets the notorious Lamech.

But immediately upon killing Abel, Cain fears for his life. In response to God’s making him ‘a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth’, he bemoans that ‘I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who finds me will slay me’ (Genesis 4.14). But if Adam and Eve were the first humans and begat only Cain and Abel, from where does the rest of humanity feared by Cain hail? An additional confusion is that Eve, following the murder of Abel, bears Seth,

whose lineage is almost identical with that of his brother Cain! Again, we have different sources.

The Lamech who descends from Seth's line is the father of Noah, who has three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Once the flood subsides and Noah leaves the ark and offers sacrifices to God, God commands him, just as God had commanded all humanity in Genesis 1, to 'be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth' (Genesis 9.1). All humanity comes from Noah's sons and their wives, just as in Genesis 2–5 all humanity comes from Adam and Eve. The world has been destroyed and recreated, so that human life, like life generally, is starting over, albeit not *ex nihilo*. To all humanity is again given dominion over the world, just as in Genesis 1.

Do we yet have a division into races? No. While Cain is 'a tiller of the ground', or a semi-nomad, and Abel 'a keeper of sheep', or a farmer (Genesis 4.2), this division is one of vocation, not of race. Cain does settle 'in the land of Nod, east of Eden' (Genesis 4.16). But geography and race, while often operating in sync, do not automatically do so. Furthermore, Cain's offspring themselves become farmers (see Genesis 4.20). And since Abel dies before marrying, no race can come from him. Hence there is not even a clear-cut vocational divide on which to rest a racial one.

From the three sons of Noah, we are told, 'the whole earth was peopled' (Genesis 9.18). But before the sons disperse, there occurs what American police would call an 'incident': son Ham 'sees' his drunken father naked and fails to cover him up. Ham is then actually cursed by Noah. Yet it is not Ham but his son Canaan who is cursed. Again, we have separate traditions. The curse is the subjugation of future Canaanites to the descendants of both Shem, from whom come Israelites, and Japheth. Both Shem and Japheth, by contrast, to Ham refuse to look at their father naked. For the first time we get a division into at least nations, though still not yet races.

With the succeeding lineage of each of Noah's sons, we get the association of nations with languages.¹ For example, we are told that 'These are the descendants of Japheth in their lands, with their own language, by their families, in their nations' (Genesis 10.5). The same phrasing is used of the descendants of the other two sons. At the same time the groupings are primarily political.

¹ In, especially, the nineteenth century it was above all language, even more than physiognomy, that was the criterion of race. Culture, of which language was the most distinctive aspect, was assumed to be biological and was the mental manifestation of race. Jews were deemed non-Aryans because Hebrew is a Semitic rather than an Indo-European language. In the twentieth century culture came to be severed from biology.

The kingdoms established by each group are what are key.

Despite the association of each group with a distinctive language or set of languages, the succeeding story of the Tower of Babel begins as follows: ‘Now the whole earth had one language and the same words’ (Genesis 11.1). Once more, we have different sources. Seemingly, all humanity gathers and settles ‘upon a plain in the land of Shinar’ (Genesis 11.2) and decides to build both a city and ‘a tower with its top in the heavens’ (Genesis 11.4). Somehow humans already fear dispersion by God, for they seek to build the city and the tower lest they be ‘scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth’ by God (Genesis 11.5). Yet the building of the city and the tower is what *causes* God to halt construction and to disperse the builders: ‘The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech” ’ (Genesis 11.5–7). So God and his fellow divinities scatter humanity ‘over the face of all the earth’ (Genesis 11.8). Geographical separation is assumed to yield linguistic separation.

The Bible then turns to the lineage of Shem, from whom eventually comes Terah, the father of Abram as well as of Nahor and Haran. Haran is the father of Lot, who is thus Abram’s nephew. Terah and his family had been living in Ur of the Chaldeans, in Mesopotamia. For reasons not given, Terah decides to migrate from Ur of the Chaldeans to Canaan. With him come Abram and his wife, Sarai; Nahor and his wife, Milcah; and Lot. (Haran dies before the migration.) Yet when the party reaches a place also named Haran, Terah decides to settle there. Again, no reason is given.

Genesis 12 on: worship of the biblical God by one nation and one race

In Haran, God comes down to Abram and directs him to leave his father’s family and to proceed to a strange, new land ‘that I will show you’. There ‘I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing’ (Genesis 12.2). Abram goes—God’s was one of those offers that could not be refused—and goes with not only Sarai but also Lot. A famine in Canaan obliges them to relocate to Egypt, but eventually they return to Canaan, where they prosper. Feuding between Abram and Lot over

the land leads Lot to move to Sodom, with Abram remaining in Canaan. God renews his promise to make Abram the father of a great nation in Canaan.

Here at last the factors of religion, nationality, and race converge. To backtrack: in Genesis 1–11 everybody worships the same God—the biblical God known as God (P source) or Lord God (J source). Even when there arise divisions into nations, all still worship the same God. And the worldwide equivalent of, if not ten commandments, at least a few, is assumed. Adam and Eve know that they have violated the prohibition against eating from the Tree of Knowledge, and they do not question the justification of their eviction and other punishments. Cain worries that because he has murdered, he is vulnerable to being murdered wherever he goes, though the Bible never makes clear what the provocation to murdering him would be. Still, God protects him with the universally recognized ‘mark of Cain’.

More significant is the establishment by God after the Flood of the so-called Noachite laws, which restore the assumed prior universal prohibition both of murder and of the eating of a slain animal—itsself permitted—with the blood still in it: ‘Only you shall not flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning; of every beast I will require it and of man; of every man’s brother I will require the life of man’ (Genesis 9.4–5). An eye for an eye is declared: ‘Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed’ (Genesis 9.6). To be precise, it is murder and not, say, killing in war that is being barred, but the same is true of the Ten Commandments, which are given to Israelites exclusively.

If from Genesis 1 to 11, the universal worship of the biblical God is assumed, the selection of Abram by God in Genesis 12 assumes the opposite: the same God selects Abram to be the founder of a nation that alone will worship God. Till now not even Abram has worshiped the biblical God.² All other nations now worship their own gods and will continue to do so, and properly. Other nations are expected to acknowledge the biblical God, but as the god of the Israelite nation. They are not expected to worship the Israelite god, any more than Israelites are expected, not to say allowed, to worship their gods.

In the first two of the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, God declares to the Israelites that ‘you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous god’ (Exodus

² In post-biblical Jewish lore there is the story of Abraham’s destroying his own father’s idols, which had been his gods as well.

20.3–5). The actual existence of other gods, not merely the *belief* in their existence, is thus taken for granted, as is the propriety of the worship of them by other nations. Only Israelites are barred from worshipping them.

The Ten Commandments begin with the Israelite God's identification of himself not as the god of all peoples but as the god of Israelites alone: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage' (Exodus 20.2). Where in Genesis 1–2 God is the creator of the world, and where in Genesis 1–11 God is the god of all humanity, from Genesis 12 on through the end of the Hebrew Bible God, while still the creator, is the god of just one nation and therefore just one religion. The world is now assumed to be filled not merely with multiple nations—we get this plurality back in Genesis 1–11—but with multiple religions. Each nation now has its own god or gods.

In the Hebrew Bible conflicts between nations are not merely political but also religious exactly because nationality and religion go hand in hand. Apostasy and treason are coextensive, even identical. When Moses and Aaron first appear before Pharaoh to tell him to free the Israelites from slavery, they back up their political demand with miracles, or 'signs and wonders', so that Pharaoh will recognize the divine power behind them. As God instructs them to do, Moses tells Aaron to throw down his cane, which immediately becomes a snake. But Pharaoh's magicians are able to duplicate the feat, even if Aaron's snake proceeds to 'swallow up' all the Egyptian snakes (Exodus 7.12). Magic here is not sleight of hand. It is not illusory. It is real. And it can only come from a god, not a mere human. Therefore the reality of the Egyptian gods is presupposed. Which nation's god is the stronger is the issue. If Moses and Aaron denied the reality of Pharaoh's gods, there would be no contest. Subsequent feats of Israelite magic, including the first two of the ten plagues, are duplicated by Pharaoh's team.

Even in the contest between Elijah and the priests of Baal (see 1 Kings 18) the reality of Baal, or of the Baalim, is not questioned. True, the priests of Baal cannot get their god to cause the rain to fall and the drought to end. For all their self-mutilation, nothing happens. Elijah, a single priest pitted against hundreds of 'prophets' of Baal, easily manages to get the Israelite God to cause fire, which consumes the sacrifice, and then to cause 'a great rain' (1 Kings 18.45). The Bible is mocking the impotence of Baal, but there would be nothing to mock if the reality of Baal were in doubt.

Just as each nation now has its own religion, so each now has its own morality. The laws that begin with the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20

and that continue through Deuteronomy are for Israelites only. Israelites are required to obey them as part of the *quid pro quo* established by the covenant with God. Some laws do oblige Israelites not to mistreat non-Israelites: ‘You shall not oppress a stranger; you know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt’ (Exodus 23.9). But the laws are still for Israelites only. Admittedly, God’s decision to destroy Sodom and Gemorrah bears on Israel only if the immorality of the cities is considered a future temptation (see Genesis 18.16–19.28).

The covenant with Noah is between God and all future humanity: ‘Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark’ (Genesis 9.9–10). In exchange for not committing murder and not eating killed animals with the blood still in them, God will never again send a worldwide flood (see Genesis 9.1–17).

By contrast, the covenant with Abram is between God and future Israel only: ‘I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves’ (Genesis 12.2–3). Abram, for his part, must leave his family and trek to Canaan and forever obey God. Throughout Abram’s life God renews the covenant, as in ‘On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates ...”’ (Genesis 15.18).

When God commands Abram to circumcise all males, the commandment applies to even his slaves, but it does not apply to anyone outside Israel. While Ishamel is circumcised, only descendants of Abram and Sarai, whose names have in the meantime been changed to Abraham and Sarah, are to be circumcised. The Egyptians also practiced circumcision, but not all other peoples of the ancient Near East did.

From Genesis 12 on, nationality means not only religion but also race. Abraham is chosen to be the biological, not merely the political, founder of a nation. His descendants will constitute the Israelite nation. Therefore religion now becomes identical with not only nationality but also race. Sarah, initially barren, gives her slave girl Hagar to Abraham as a wife, and with her Abraham fathers Ishmael. But Hagar’s status as a slave precludes Ishmael’s serving as Abraham’s heir. Finally, God makes good his hoary promise, and Sarah gives birth to Isaac when she is ninety and Abraham one hundred. Membership in

the Israelite nation is to be through Isaac. A wife for Isaac is chosen not from anyone in Canaan but from Abraham's kin back in Haran. Rebecca, Isaac's bride, is the granddaughter of Nahor, Abraham's uncle, and Milcah.

The name Israel does not arise till later. Just as God changes the names of Abram and Sarai, so he changes the name of Isaac's younger son and heir, Jacob, to Israel (see Genesis 35.10).

From God's selection of Abram on, religion and nationality and race are coextensive, if not identical. To be Israelite, or to use the still later term Jewish, is to be born Jewish. And Jewishness means more than religion. It also means nationality. It is true that some non-Israelites, of whom the greatest example is Abimelech, recognize and fear the power of the Israelite God. As Abimelech says to Abraham, 'God is with you in all that you do; now therefore swear to me here by [your] God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity ...' (Genesis 21.23). But Abimelech does not worship the Israelite God.

There are some biblical books that venture beyond Israel. Wisdom literature is not limited to Judaism. Job, who lives in what is probably Edom, may not even be Jewish. Judaism takes the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 to refer not to any one figure, least of all to Jesus, but to the nation of Israel, which bears responsibility for the rest of the world. Even God's promise to Abram declares, as quoted, that 'by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves'. Still, the bulk of the Hebrew Bible is directed to Jews alone.

Post-biblical and later Judaism

The linkage of religion with nationality with race does not remain forever. Once, especially, the one-time southern kingdom of Judah loses its independence and becomes a province of the Roman Empire, a restored Jewish nation becomes a mere hope, one not realized till 1948. Yet conversions to Judaism become not only possible but, in Roman times, exceedingly popular. It has even been estimated that at one point 10% of the Roman Empire was Jewish—a percentage that did not come primarily from reproduction. Religion was clearly independent of nationality, not to say race.

After the fall of Rome and the division of the Empire into individual countries, Jews could not be citizens of the countries in which they resided, for they were not Christian. They were the equivalent of permanent resident aliens. Only in modern times, beginning with France during the Revolution,

were Jews eligible to become citizens, as they had once been in the Roman Empire (from 212 CE on). With the French Revolution began the Western separation of church and state, which means the privatization of religion. Exactly because religion was now private rather than public, one could consistently be French or British or American in one's citizenship and Jewish in one's religion. Whether or not nationality was still associated with race, it was now wholly severed from religion.

The fullest expression within Judaism of this separation of religion from nationality was the development in the nineteenth century of Reform Judaism. Like most, though not all other, modern movements in Judaism, Reform arose not in France but in Germany. Reform Judaism defined Jewishness as exclusively religious and not at all national, let alone racial.³ The Jewish 'homeland' ceased to be a yearned-for Israel and became one's present home. The opposite of Reform Judaism was Zionism. While there have always been religious as well as secular varieties of Zionism, the dominant modern variety has been secular. Antithetically to Reform Judaism, secular Zionism defines Jewishness as exclusively national and not at all religious.

Since World War II, Jews have defined themselves variously, but in wake of the Nazis, never racially. Sometimes the phrase 'Jewish race' is used, and even by Jews. But the term is not meant strictly, for even the most recalcitrant Jews grant that it is possible both to give up Jewishness and to become Jewish. In the biblical period the options were limited. One could scarcely either give up Jewishness or, ordinarily, become Jewish. One either was born Jewish or was not Jewish. Jewishness was at once one's religion, one's nationality, and one's race.

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³ Ironically, it was also above all in Germany and in the nineteenth century that Jews began to be defined racially, as members of the Semitic race.