

NATIONS IN THE ETERNAL STATE

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Introduction

Significance of this Study

Most Christians rarely contemplate whether there will be nations in the eternal state. In fact, some think it is unfruitful to even try to muse whether nations exist in eternity. After all, this topic seems to be of little significance to our present lives. However, the idea of “nations” is seen throughout the entire Bible from the very beginning to the very end. The word “nation” can be defined as a group of people that is formed on the basis of political or social interests or kinship. Generally, the word refers to Gentiles, but at times it can also refer to the Jewish people.¹ Understanding God’s purpose for “nations,” especially in the eternal state, will provide implications that are far-reaching.

The term “nations” is mentioned extensively throughout the Bible, especially in regard to the end times. In fact, the Bible has sixty passages that speak about “nations” during the end times. Iniquity, distress, and perplexity will come to the nations (Matthew 24:12; Luke 21:25). Multitudes of nations will be saved during the great tribulation (Revelation 7:9, 14), and war, famine, pestilence, and earthquakes will threaten the existence of all the nations at the same time (Matthew 24:7, 22). The “beast” ruler will be given satanic power to rule over all the nations (Revelation 13:7), and then all the nations will gather at Armageddon (Zechariah 14:2; Revelation 16:13–16). Finally, Jesus Christ will return in judgment (Revelation 19:11–21) and

¹ W. A. Elwell, & B. J. Beitzel. *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988.), 1527.

the redeemed nations will enter into His kingdom and serve Him into eternity (Daniel 7:14; Revelation 21:24–26).²

Scope of this Study

Given the length of this paper, this writer will not be able to dive deeply into every argument or verse referring to “nations” in the end times. In fact, we will not even be able to go through the chronology of events that is going to take place for the nations. The purpose of this study is to provide a brief survey on the *function* and *purpose* of nations throughout scripture. This will be followed with a study on certain key passages that will help in understanding whether “nations” will exist in the eternal state and how they will function. Then, a spiritual vision model will be analyzed to understand how it has affected the notion of “nations” in prophecy. Finally, the implications of nations in the eternal state will be drawn out. The presence of “nations” in the eternal state ultimately shows the existence of Israel in this period. This truth also greatly damages the covenantal view of Scripture which insists that the nation Israel has no future role in the plan of God.

Purpose of Nations throughout the Scriptures

Nations in the Old Testament

The concept of “nations” first appears in Genesis 11 with the episode of the Tower of Babel, where God judges mankind for its pride and wickedness. However, as the Old Testament revelation progresses so does the understanding of the purpose for nations. With undoubtedly deliberate intent, the final book of the Bible comes to its climax with the picture of the nations

² W. Evans & S.M. Coder. *The Great Doctrines of the Bible*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974.), 307.

purged of all their sin and walking in the light of God, bringing their wealth and splendor into the city of God, and contributing glory and honor to the Lamb of God.³

Soon after the episode of Babel, the purpose of nations is crystallized with Abraham. God's covenant to Abraham was twofold. First, God would specifically bless Abraham's offspring, Israel. And secondly, all the nations of the earth would be blessed through Israel (Gen 12:3). This means that all the nations of the world would be blessed as a result of their interaction with Israel. This covenant that God makes with Abraham manifests itself throughout the historical narrative of Israel within the Old Testament. Abraham was chosen by God for a purpose—he was *blessed to be a blessing*. This principle of divine election for universal service is stated five times in Genesis to stress God's concern for all peoples. God's choice of Abraham, though initially exclusive, was for the sake of a maximally inclusive end. Election was to serve all the nations in mission.⁴

After Abraham finally has an offspring in Isaac, the narrative continues to the time of Israel in Egypt. When God delivers Israel from Egypt into the wilderness He gives them His Law and His expectation for them as His "chosen" nation. In Deuteronomy, the "nations" are described by the Hebrew word *goy* and appear in Deuteronomy 4:6-8. Israel was distinguished from the nations by having a superior revelation of God's law. Deuteronomy 4:34 further describes Israel as a "nation from the midst of the nations," emphasizing the unique nature and function of Israel from the rest of the nations. In the curse section of Deuteronomy, a "punishing" nation (Assyria) was predicted as an instrument of God's judgment upon Israel if

³ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 454.

⁴ Ken Davis, "Building a Biblical Theology of Ethnicity for Global Mission." *Journal of Ministry and Theology Volume 7* (2003): 104.

Israel disobeyed God's law.⁵ There are clearly positive and negative stipulations correlated to how well Israel will be able to fulfill its mission as a witness nation to the other nations. As the narrative continues in Joshua, it becomes clear that Israel did not fulfill its function as a witness to all the other nations.

In Joshua there is evidence of God blessing Israel by the giving of Canaan with its possessions. Israel achieved great status in the community of nations as Israel defeated other nations and established its national identity.⁶ However, as the narrative continues, Israel was judged repeatedly because of its disobedience to God. When one seeks to understand Israel's purpose and function as "light" to the other nations, the question arises concerning what the purpose and function was for the *other* nations besides Israel.

The "nations" were the context from which the Lord chose Israel and before whom He established Israel as His treasured and holy people. With the goal of setting Israel above all other nations, God granted Israel extraordinary prosperity as well as political hegemony over the others. However, as God Himself expressed so forcefully in Exodus 19:5, this status and role would be contingent on their fidelity to Him, demonstrated in obedience to the covenant stipulations (Deuteronomy 28:1).⁷ Therefore, the nations would be the context in which this contract would be *witnessed* between God and Israel.

Isaiah used the words "light to the nations" to describe the mission for Israel in Isaiah 42 and 49. Despite her insignificant size (7:6–7) and her moral discredits (9:1–24), God assigned

⁵ R. B. Zuck. *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991.), 71.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷ Daniel I. Block, "The Privilege of Calling: The Mosaic Paradigm for Missions (Deut. 26:16-19)." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162, no. 648 (October 2005): 403.

Israel a status above “all the nations which He has made.”⁸ This again reemphasizes the purpose of Israel in the Old Testament as well as the other nations’ function in *witnessing* God’s actions with Israel. The summons to the nations as witnesses to God’s covenant with Israel is reiterated in Jeremiah 6:18-19 and Amos 3:9. The nations were not just summoned to witness the making or breaking of the covenant, but they were also to observe Israel living by the covenant as well. In fact, God’s wisdom was to be displayed to the nations in the social life of Israel and Israel was to be a major motivation for the other nations to also obey God’s law. So the nations were not only invited to watch all the wonderful things God did for Israel, they were also supposed to be able to see the responsive righteousness of Israel living within the terms of the covenant. The nations were to view *God’s people* living in *God’s ways*.⁹ The other nations were also to be witnesses of God’s restoration of Israel, just as they were witnesses of God’s restorative deliverance from exile. Ezekiel 36:24-28 includes promises of ingathering, cleansing, a new heart, a new spirit, resettlement and covenant blessing for the purpose of displaying God’s glory to all the nations in the end times.¹⁰

One theologian summarized the Old Testament as such: “The Kingdom of God (through Israel) on earth, its inception, progress, conduct, and consummation in glory is the one theme of Old Testament prophecy.”¹¹ After understanding the “big picture” of the function of Israel and the other nations within the Old Testament, there occurs a shift in the New Testament which provides clarity in understanding the function of “nations” in the eternal state.

⁸ Ibid., 398.

⁹ Wright, *Mission of God*, 470.

¹⁰ Ibid., 472.

¹¹ Nathaniel West. *The Thousand Years in Both Testaments*. (Fincastle, VA: Scripture Truth Book Company, 1950.), 4.

Nations in the New Testament

In the New Testament, the function of nations changed from witnessing Israel as the recipient of God's grace to becoming the recipient of grace themselves. The function of Israel changed as well from being the "witness" nation to becoming the nation that needed to be "witnessed" to in the end times. This shift occurred when the Jews rejected their Messiah and God implemented a new church age. Just as the Israelites were called to live lives of distinctive ethical holiness in the sight of the nations, so too the church was summoned to live in remembrance that they were being watched and needed to behave in ways that commended the gospel. Although God's redemptive plan with Israel was not made obsolete with the church, the new church age in the New Testament delayed the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel until the end times.¹² The idea that the Christian mission was an abandonment of the Jews is demonstrably false. The Great Commission directed the disciples to "all the nations", including the Jews who rejected their Messiah.¹³ The "church age" simply adds in color to the picture of God's purpose for Israel as well as the other nations.

The nations are benefiting from the blessing that God had brought to Israel in the Old Testament. The Abrahamic Covenant becomes administered to Gentiles, through Christ, as Paul so clearly points out in Galatians 3:14. This is where the function for the Gentile nations is understood more fully. In the Old Testament, the nations were coming to Israel in order to worship. However, in the New Testament a shift occurred where the nations become the

¹² Wright, *Mission of God*, 523.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 529.

recipients of the Great Commission, meaning that the purpose for the redeemed community was to go out *to the* nations, instead of having the nations come to them.¹⁴

The book of Revelation displays the accomplishment of God's original purpose for Israel and the other nations through the fulfillment of His covenants being displayed among His people. Revelation 21–22 combines imagery from all the covenants of Scripture. The fulfillment of the Noahic Covenant is seen through the vision of a new creation, a new heavens and a new earth after judgment. The fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant is seen through the ingathering and blessing of “all nations” from every tongue and language. The fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant is seen through the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, and in the identity of Jesus as the Lion of Judah and Root of David. Finally, the fulfillment of the New Covenant is seen through the culmination in the redemption of “all nations” being accomplished by the blood of the Lamb who was slain.¹⁵

After surveying the Old and New Testament for understanding the function and purpose for Israel and the nations, it becomes necessary to look at key passages regarding the potential function for Israel and the other nations in the eternal state. It is through the analysis of certain key passages that the purpose for the nations in the eternal state becomes apparent and the continuity of nations is also clearly implied.

¹⁴ Ibid., 523.

¹⁵ Wright, *Mission of God*, 356.

Key Passages on Nations in the End Times

Isaiah 2:1-4

Isaiah prophesied about God's future universal reign in the end times. The main focus in this text is upon Israel's glorious function as a "lighthouse to the nations for truth and peace." This text is referring to the future age and provides the backdrop in seeing the continuity of not only Israel's function in the end times, but also the function of other nations. The word "mountain" is in the emphatic position which stresses the exclusive nature of this mountain and the one ruling on it.¹⁶ Within this text there is a collage of Zion themes that is also seen throughout the book of Isaiah. Jerusalem is repeatedly seen as the cosmic center of the world with the temple as the epicenter. Along with this theme is the convergence of Gentiles in Jerusalem as either pilgrims or participants of the final days in Jerusalem.¹⁷

In verse 2, the word "established" becomes a key word in understanding this prophecy. The first move towards restoring order will be the temple being "established" in Zion. And just as the devastation will apply to "all the land", as seen in Isaiah 1, so too will the blessings from the temple be given to "all nations and peoples" as well.¹⁸ This text is a bit peculiar because it follows the prediction of Zion's destruction in Isaiah 1. However, it is important to note that this text refers to how Israel will be restored to its original function as a "light to the nations" *after* its destruction. This adds insight in seeing how this text points towards the nation's function in the end times because the nations will flock to Zion for the purpose of serving God, *after* its

¹⁶ John N. Oswalt. *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, NICOT. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986.), 118.

¹⁷ Joseph Blenkinsopp. *Isaiah: 1-39, The Anchor Bible*. (New York: Random House, 2000.), 191.

¹⁸ J. D. W. Watts. *Isaiah 1-33: Vol. 24*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2005.), 47.

judgment.¹⁹ Some take this passage to refer to the millennial age while others take it to refer to the eternal state. Most commentators take the position that this text is referring to the millennial age where there will be peace between the nations following Israel's restoration at the second coming of Jesus.²⁰ This text alone does not clearly show nations to exist in the eternal state, nor their function. However, this text does establish Israel's function in the millennial kingdom as well as the nation's function in witnessing Israel being the "light" of God.

Isaiah 45:18-23

With Isaiah 45 God assures His people that He will indeed rebuild Judah, Jerusalem, and His temple after its destruction. He also prophesies about using Cyrus as an instrument to display God's unique character among the nations. In 45:9-13, there are prophecies about the coming of Cyrus. He will vindicate Israel as God's people in the eyes of the pagan nations subdued by Cyrus. Later in 45:18-25, God offers a final challenge to the nations and offers them salvation which also entails their submission to His sovereign rule.²¹

With verse 21, **אל צדיק** shows that Yahweh is presenting himself as the only God, the one who predicts the future accurately and claims the right to choose Cyrus for His purpose. That this choice is legitimate will be shown through the salvation achieved for Israel. Yahweh is "Savior" as well as the righteous master of history's forces.²² Cyrus offers salvation to the borderlands of Palestine in verse 22. The salvation he offers is restoration of a measure of political order and

¹⁹ John Calvin. *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah*. Translated by the Reverend William Pringle. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1947.), 93.

²⁰ West, *Thousand Years*, 316.

²¹ Geoffrey W. Grogan, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Proverbs-Isaiah*, ed. Tremper Longman II & David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 753.

²² J. D. W. Watts., *Isaiah 34-66: Vol.25*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2005), 707.

prosperity, protection from vandals and bandits, and a share in the imperial peace exchanged for tribute.²³ However, as the narratives in Isaiah have shown, the only person who can give true restoration of political order and prosperity to the nations is Yahweh Himself. This is why the command to “return to me” in verse 22 implies the objectivity of God’s redemptive provision, to which the people are called to react in penitence. This objective work is so wonderful that the whole universe, once called to witness God’s indictment of his people’s sin (Isaiah 1:2), is now called on to share their exuberant joy at his redemption.²⁴

With Isaiah 45:23 Yahweh’s function among the nations is revealed. Whereas Isaiah 2 shows the purpose for Israel in the end times, Isaiah 45:23 shows the purpose for Yahweh in the end times in regard to the nations. Yahweh invites all the nations of the earth to share the salvation He alone can grant them. He even swears by “Himself” to show the certainty of this prophecy. Yahweh’s will to save the nations is affirmed with no less vigor than His will to save Israel. That which proceeds from His mouth is “righteousness.” This shows that Yahweh’s word is not only true but it achieves the condition of righteousness. Righteousness is not fully achieved until every man acknowledges that Yahweh alone is God.²⁵ It is clear that this prophecy was not fulfilled with the first coming of Christ because Paul quotes Isaiah 45:23 in Philippians 2:10 to show that every “knee” *will* bow and every “tongue” *will* confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, if all the “nations” *will* submit to Christ one day this must happen either in the millennial kingdom or the eternal state since it is not a reality today. The role of Israel in regard to the nations has been prophesied in Isaiah 2, and the role of Yahweh has

²³ Ibid., 707.

²⁴ Grogan, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 752.

²⁵ John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1968), 21.

been prophesied in Isaiah 45; however, it becomes necessary to see Christ's role in regard to the nations in the end times.

Isaiah 49:1-7

Isaiah 49:1-13 is focused on the calling and ministry of the Servant. Here the servant's nature, character, and function are reiterated and reinforced. However, there is debate over whether the "servant" refers to Israel, Jesus Christ, or both.²⁶ This passage belongs to and concludes the act in which the nations are present (Isaiah 34:1–49:4) in the prophecies of Isaiah.

Verse 1 focuses on the message addressed to the ends of the earth. The message is one of redemption that Israel will be able to shout to the world. Verse 2 answers the question, "what is the servant called to do?" The servant will accomplish God's will by a revelation of God's word.²⁷ It is important to note that Israel was presented in Isaiah 42:18-20 as the deaf and blind servant of the Lord, but Isaiah 44:21-23 says that God will show His glory in Israel his "servant". Here in Isaiah 49:3 that promise is reiterated once again.²⁸ However, Israel responds in 49:4 with feelings of disappointment that their position has been eroded. Yahweh has protected Israel in exile but He has shown no signs of allowing her to re-conquer Palestine as Moses, Joshua, and David did. She still yearns for that role. Instead she feels neglect and lack of support, which make further labor useless. In verses 1-4, the "servant" presents himself as a disappointed servant. However, in 49:5 the "servant" claims his right and asserts his task to rescue Jacob/Israel.²⁹

²⁶ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 288.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 290.

²⁸ Grogan, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 777.

²⁹ J. D. W. Watts, *Word Biblical Commentary: Isaiah 34-66*, 728.

Isaiah 49:1–4 addresses the gathered nations in the manner that is customary from chapter 34 up until this point. The speaker is “Servant” Israel, who has been a frequent subject of what has gone before. Isa 49:5–12, however, does not address the nations any longer but is now focused upon Yahweh’s “servant.” Yahweh’s servant has been commissioned to “bring Jacob back.” Verse five is marked by **וְעַתָּה**, “but now,” which signifies a change of speaker from “servant” Israel to Yahweh’s servant.³⁰ The scene of the prophecy changes as well from the nations to Jerusalem where the inhabitants react to the failures of the initiatives to return and for Cyrus to restore the city.³¹

Verse 5 spells out the mission of the “Servant.” The Servant is to restore Israel. The Servant is to be a “light to the nations” which alludes back to Israel’s purpose in Isaiah 2. By restoring Israel, the Servant also functions in being a “light to the nations”. This happens because the Servant has reinstated Israel to its original mission of being the “light” and by restoring them after their judgment. Yahweh’s servant also will be “as a light for the nations”. The “Israel” that was restored by Cyrus was just a fragment, but the “tribes of Jacob” in this prophecy designates that the restored Israel will not be a fragment, but all of Israel.³² Isaiah 49:6 is quoted by Paul in Acts 26:23 to show that the “servant” in Isaiah 49:5-12 is referring to Christ.³³ Therefore, this prophecy is showing that although Israel failed in its mission to be the “light to the nations”, Christ will restore “all” of Israel to its original function and will also be a “light of the nations” for the purpose of bringing salvation to all the nations. This was not accomplished with the first coming of Christ because the Jews rejected Christ.

³⁰ Ibid., 736.

³¹ Ibid., 733.

³² John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, 106.

³³ Grogan, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 457.

When the Jews rejected Christ at His first coming, the result of this rejection was the delay of the inauguration of Yahweh's reign as prophesied in Isaiah 45. As a result of the rejection of the Messianic Kingdom, the offer was rescinded or taken away from that particular Jewish generation. From a human perspective the Messianic Kingdom was postponed. From the divine perspective, this rejection was part of God's plan and the means by which the Messiah would die to provide the atonement and by which the gospel would extend to the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:1–13). The Messianic Kingdom will be reoffered to the Jewish generation of the Tribulation which will accept it.³⁴

Isaiah 49:1-7 shows that after Christ's second coming there will be a distinction between Israel, Christ, and the nations. Isaiah 49:1-4 shows Israel's "failure" and distress in fulfilling its mission as the "light" to the nations. However, in verse 5 Christ is introduced as Yahweh's "true" Servant who will restore Israel to its original function as the "light of the nations" and the nations will witness Israel's success in fulfilling their mission in the future although they have failed miserably in the past. Isaiah 2 established Israel's role as being the "light of the nations" in the end times. Isaiah 45 established that Yahweh will establish Himself as the only true God amongst the nations in the end times. And finally, Isaiah 49 showed that Christ will be the one to restore Israel as Yahweh's Servant and join them in being a light to the nations by giving redemption to all other nations. Many theologians take these passages to refer to the millennial kingdom; therefore, the question still remains whether this will continue on into the eternal state. Does the interaction between Israel, Yahweh, Christ, and the nations continue from the millennial kingdom into the eternal state? In order to answer this question, prophecies from Daniel and Revelation must be harmonized with the Isaiah prophecies.

³⁴ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, "Israelology Part 2 of 6" *Chafer Theological Journal Volume 5* (July 1999): 35.

Daniel 7:13-14

Daniel 7 is within the context of a vision given to Daniel to prophesy about God's future kingdom. Whereas the prophecies from Isaiah show the function of Israel and other nations in the millennial age, this prophecy shows the *nature* of the kingdom into the eternal state. The vision prophesies about four great kingdoms that will eventually be overtaken by an "everlasting" kingdom. The four successive pagan kingdoms are represented by four monstrous beasts, while the everlasting kingdom is represented by a human being known as the "son of man".³⁵ At first, this title seems to be ambiguous in regard to whom it refers to, but it becomes apparent that this title is referring to Jesus Christ. Jesus quotes Daniel 7:13 during his trial with the Sanhedrin to confirm that He is the "son of man." Therefore, we know that Jesus is the "son of man" who is the future king of this everlasting kingdom that will rule over all the other nations. But what is the nature of this future kingdom?

Many think that the eternal state will be a spiritual kingdom with no physical continuity from this earth. Although the kingdom of God is spiritual in nature, there still exists continuity between this physical earth and the future kingdom. The four pagan empires mentioned in the vision were all *earthly* kingdoms. Therefore, the dominion of the "son of man" is not a dominion over a different realm but over the same realm, the earthly realm.³⁶ It is a common mistake to spiritualize the eternal Kingdom of God. Daniel 7 shows that the coming reign of Jesus will take place on *earth*. It is also clear that this is not referring solely to the millennial kingdom because it is an "everlasting" kingdom. It will directly and exclusively replace the corrupt reigns of prior

³⁵ Louis F. Hartman & Alexander A. Lella, *The Book of Daniel*, The Anchor Bible. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company Incorporated, 1978.), 218.

³⁶ Randy Alcorn. *Heaven*. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004.), 229.

kings of the earth, but it will be physical in its very nature as well.³⁷ It seems a bit inconsistent for a vision to use pictures of earthly kingdoms followed by a picture of a purely “spiritual” kingdom. Since there is continuity within the vision, there should also be continuity in its fulfillment as well. Since Christ’s kingdom is a physical kingdom and nations exist in the millennial kingdom, the next logical step is to see whether there is a continuity of nations between the millennial kingdom and the eternal *physical* kingdom. Therefore, Revelation becomes the main area to make the connection of “nations” from the millennial kingdom with the eternal state.

Revelations 5:6-9

In Revelation 5, John receives a vision of heaven and a picture of the “lamb” upon His throne. With 5:6-9, the angelic beings along with twenty four elders burst forth into a song of praise for the “lamb”. This is the first of three songs that are sung for the Lamb. The other two songs are sung by the angels and all creatures. Here, the Lamb deserves jubilant praise because He triumphed over Satan by dying for the redeemed that consists of people from every tribe, language, people, and nation.³⁸

The message of the song is summed up with the first word, “worthy.” The Lamb is “worthy” of praise because He was slain and redeemed people through His blood. The implication for “nations” comes when looking at the *recipients* of this redemption. In this song, there are representatives of every nationality without distinction of race, geographical location,

³⁷ Ibid., 230.

³⁸ Simon J. Kistemaker. *Revelation*, New Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001.), 210.

or political persuasion.³⁹ This “lamb” purchased people from every “tribe,” “tongue,” “people,” and “nation.” The word “tribe” carries the idea of having the same descent. It is a group belonging to the same clan and united by family lineage. The word “tongue” refers to the people speaking the same language and the word “people” is the idea of the same race or ethnicity. It is with the last word “nation”, where all of the previous three words are encompassed. Therefore, the distinction that would be made between “nations” right now is also seen in this heavenly song. John’s vision extends beyond his own immediate horizon to include the entire world. All the people listed in this song are the ones whom the gospel is going to reach after this vision is given.⁴⁰

This song does not imply redemption for “all peoples without exception”, but instead it implies “all peoples without distinction.” The general consensus is that this phrase is to be traced back to the almost identical expression repeated in Daniel which referred to the inhabitants of the whole world.⁴¹ Some will understand “redemption without *distinction*” to mean that there will be no distinction among people in the eternal state. However, the mentioning of “nations” in this song provides a basis on which continuity can be seen with the distinctions between current nations as well as distinctions between the nations in the millennial kingdom (Isaiah 2) and in the eternal state. The prophecy in Isaiah 2 is understood to be referring to the millennial age; however, this vision occurs in heaven for the *completed* work of redemption by the “lamb.” Therefore, if people from *every* nation will be saved, this means that these nations will also be saved from the judgment that will occur *after* the end of the millennial age. Verse 10 shows that

³⁹ Robert Thomas. *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992.), 401.

⁴⁰ George Eldon Ladd. *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972.), 91.

⁴¹ G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek text* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999.), 359.

the recipients of this redemption *will* be made into *a* kingdom, pointing to a unified, yet diversified community of believers. This vision that John receives is occurring in heaven so there is some ambiguity on whether this is a song referring to Jesus before or after the millennial reign. When Revelation 21:24-26 is seen with this passage, it becomes clear that the “nations” mentioned in this song are “nations” in the eternal state.

Revelation 21:24-26

Revelation 21 occurs *after* the millennial kingdom and gives a picture of the new heavens and the new earth. The specific text of Revelation 21:24-26 describes the New Jerusalem. This picture of the coming of nations and kings to Jerusalem was foreshadowed in the Old Testament. There is some parallel between Isaiah 60:3 and this text because both texts refer to Israel and the gathering of the Gentile nations. However, earlier in Revelation, “nations” referred to the pagan and rebellious people who trampled Jerusalem. They then meet their end with Christ’s second coming and their eternal punishment at the Great White Throne. Therefore, it becomes important to discern whether the “nations” in this text are referring to the remnant of the unregenerate or the regenerated nations in the eternal state.

These are many options for understanding the word “nations” in this text. In fact, the different commentaries that this writer perused did not provide any definitive answer. It seems most likely that these nations are the ones who follow the Lamb and resist the beast. As a result these nations enter in the blessing of the new creation and are renewed with the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth. Therefore, in this text, Jerusalem becomes the “Christocratic” center of the future and the object of attraction for the world.⁴²

⁴² West, *A Thousand Years*, 314.

There have been others, however, who have taken this text to refer to the millennial Jerusalem during the millennial kingdom. They would argue that it would not be possible for redeemed people to live with unregenerate nations during the eternal state. However, this text does not imply that the nations here are unregenerate. Instead, it is better understood that the “nations” are redeemed as well and the eternal state will consist of every nation and tribe and people and tongue who will not lose their national identity.⁴³ It seems highly unlikely that this text would refer back to the millennial period after John described the sequence of events that follow the millennium. The final confirmation that the “nations” here are referring to redeemed nations is that the term is sometimes used for redeemed people, not just for unregenerate pagans. The “nations” here is best identified with Revelation 5:9 and 7:9 as those who were “bought...from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” This connects with the picture from Revelation 5:9 where the song of praise for the “lamb” is centered on the redemption of “nations”. This means that the “nations” in Revelation 21 are referring to the same “nations” described in Revelation 5, which points to the eternal state *after* the millennial kingdom. Here the “nations” are finally made into a “kingdom” and the plan of God is finally fulfilled through Israel’s function as the “light to the nations”. The “nations” here are confirmed as the redeemed nations in Revelation 22:5 with the phrase saying “forever and ever” to show that these nations and kings will exist for eternity.⁴⁴

Implications of Nations in the Eternal State

Spiritual Vision Model vs. New Creation Model

⁴³ Ladd, *Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 284.

⁴⁴ Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, 1097.

According to Bruce Waltke, “Amillennialism emphasize that the present age is the last stretch of historical time with the correlative truth that there is no second chance for anyone, that Christ’s consummate glory is in his church, that Christ authoritatively rules the nations today, and that social change must come now. Amillennialism differs from dispensational premillennialists in their hermeneutics by calling for a spiritual interpretation of kingdom promises over against a literalistic interpretation of them.”⁴⁵ But what reason is there to take a “spiritual” interpretation of kingdom promises instead of a “literalistic” interpretation? If there are passages that clearly teach a physical and political blessing for Israel, then why interpret them purely in a spiritual sense? If there are “nations” existing in the eternal state, then why interpret them as “spiritual” nations as some have done? The differences have to do with one’s hermeneutics. And one of the main issues within hermeneutics is the spiritual vision model versus the new creation model.

There are many theologians of the amillennial, as well as the post millennial camp, that would adopt a “spiritual vision” model concerning the new heavens and the new earth. They would implicate that the future kingdom will be a “spiritual kingdom” and hence the function of Israel becomes obsolete. The spiritual vision model of eternity emphasizes biblical texts promising that believers will see God or receive full knowledge in the future state of blessing. The way theologians have described this draws on both biblical themes as well as cultural ideas common to the classical philosophical tradition. The three ways in which this philosophical tradition has contributed is first through the basic contrast between spirit and matter. Secondly, it has affected the identification of spirit with mind or intellect. Lastly, it has affected the belief that

⁴⁵ Bruce K. Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspective on the Relationship between the Old and New Testament*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988), 272.

eternal perfection entails the absence of change. Blaising writes that “central to all three of these is the classical tradition’s notion of an ontological hierarchy in which spirit is located at the top of descending order of being. Elemental matter occupies the lowest place”.⁴⁶ This means that the “spiritual” supersedes the “material” and that heaven is the highest level of ontological reality. Therefore, heaven must be composed of purely “spiritual” matter rather than the base “matter of life. Heaven is the non-earthly, spiritual place where “spiritual beings” engage in “spiritual activity”. In sum, heaven is the “unbroken, unchanging contemplation of the infinite reality of God”.⁴⁷

In contrast, the new creation model draws on biblical texts that speak of a future everlasting kingdom, of a new earth and the renewal of life on it, of bodily resurrection, of social and even political concourse among the redeemed. The new creation model expects that the ontological order and scope of eternal life is essentially continuous with that of present earthly life except for the absence of sin and death.⁴⁸ The spiritual vision model separates and contrasts the realms of spiritual and physical reality and understands the final state of blessing in terms of the former alone. The new creation model rejects the dichotomy that is crucial to the spiritual vision model and sees eternal life in a holistic spiritual and material sense.⁴⁹ A person’s views on Israel and the nations in the eternal state will be significantly affected by the model of eschatology he adheres to. If “nations” are considered to be unspiritual then the spiritual vision model will consider ethnicity, Israel, and nations to be obsolete. In fact, it may even be considered “sinful” or “racist” to believe that Israel still holds its function as the “light to the

⁴⁶ Craig A. Blaising, “Premillennialism” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 161.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 163.

nations” even into the eternal state. However, if one believes in the new creation model, then there will be no reason to reject the idea of ethnicity, nations, and Israel existing and functioning in the eternal state. The rejection of Israel and other nations within the eternal state have to do more with one’s hermeneutics than one’s exegesis. It has to do with the hierarchy of placing “spiritual” matters above “physical” matters. Therefore, the spiritual vision model may be one of the driving forces in rejecting the presence of Israel and the nations in the eternal state.

Implications of Nations against a Spiritual Vision Model

After examining certain key passages, it becomes apparent that “nations” and “Israel” still exist in the eternal state. God’s creation is earthly but it is not “worldly” and this is where the “spiritual vision model” goes too far with its dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual. The products of fallen human culture are often worldly but culture and nations are not automatically “sinful” or “worldly.” Our physical bodies are under sin now but they will be glorified. Why wouldn’t the current nations also show continuity into the eternal state just as our bodies will? Revelation 11:15 says that the “kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever.” It doesn’t say that Christ will destroy this world’s kingdoms. It doesn’t even say he’ll replace this world’s kingdom. No, the kingdom of this world will actually become the Kingdom of Christ. God’ won’t obliterate earthly kingdoms but will transform them into his own.⁵⁰

The implications for the continuity of nations in the eternal state are monumental because this shows the continuity in God’s plan for creation. Not only will there be a continuity of nations in the millennial kingdom, as seen with Isaiah, but this continuity will continue on into

⁵⁰ Alcorn, *Heaven*, 212.

the eternal state as seen with the different passages from Revelation. However, many commentators blatantly “reinterpret” Revelation 21:24-27 to fit a spiritual vision model. Kiddle writes in his commentary that the “nations” are the redeemed who belong “spiritually” but not racially to specific nations. He also writes that the kings are the martyrs who joined in with the church which would necessitate that the nations and kings became “homogenous” with the church, in his opinion.⁵¹ However, why does being a part of the “church” take away the notion of literal nations and kings? Kistemaker ends his section by saying the following: “When John mentions city, nations, kings, gates, day, night, glory, and honor, he uses figurative language. His symbolism implies that the New Jerusalem encompasses the new heaven and the new earth.”⁵² Kistemaker writes off the detailed scene of the New Jerusalem as “symbolic” in order to support the notion that John is simply describing the universal nature of the new heavens and new earth. He implies that nothing “specific” should be taken away from Revelation 21, but this passage should just be understood in general and figurative terms.

With a clear understanding of certain key passages, a physical view of the new creation as well as a literal view of “nations” and “kings” in the eternal state should be adopted. However, if the eternal state is to be understood with physical dimensions for the “nations” then the question of *the* nation comes to the scene. What about Israel? It is obvious that the Old Testament recorded the history of *the* nation God chose as a “light” to the other nations. Therefore, if other nations still exist in the millennial kingdom and eternal state, why wouldn’t Israel also exist? The existence of other “nations” *necessitates* the existence of the Israel because the other nations existed to *witness* Israel as the epicenter and lighthouse of God’s glory. The

⁵¹ Martin Kiddle. *The Revelation of St. John*, The Moffatt New Testament Commentary. (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1940.), 439.

⁵² Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 575.

presence of “nations” in the eternal state damages the argument that the church replaces Israel. The church cannot replace Israel in the millennial kingdom because Isaiah clearly prophesies that Christ will restore Israel to bring salvation to the nations for the glory of Yahweh. The prophecies in Isaiah speak of Israel’s function as the “light of the nations” after they receive judgment from Yahweh for their disobedience. However, Yahweh is faithful in bringing about the prophecies because of His own character. Also, the church cannot replace Israel in the eternal state because Revelation shows the existence of “nations” and “kings”. Although some may try to write off the “nations” as being the church that still does not take away the distinction that is made between nations in the eternal state. If there are different “nations” and “kings” then the “nation” of Israel must still exist. If the nations were the audience from which Israel’s relationship with Yahweh was to perform, then it would make little sense to have the audience in heaven without the main actor.

Implications of Nations in the Eternal State for Today

The Bible’s portrait of the nations is not a melting pot but a salad bowl. The new creation will preserve the rich diversity of the original creation, but is purged of the sin-laden effects of the Fall.⁵³ What was meant originally as a curse in Babel will turn into a picture of blessing and a display of God’s glory in the eternal state. People of all nations will do in the eternal state what should have occurred throughout history—“call upon the name of the LORD”.⁵⁴ If it is understood that God’s unaltered plan for His people from creation was to exercise dominion over the earth, it shouldn’t surprise us to find out that on the New Earth nations still exist and kings

⁵³ Wright, *Mission of God*, 456.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 527.

come into the New Jerusalem to exercise dominion over creation.⁵⁵ However, what are the implications of nations for today? How are we to live in light of knowing that nations exist in the eternal state?

The first implication is that *the human race is one*. All the diverse peoples of earth belong to one family. God's singular act of creating male and female progenitors of all peoples is foundational to our theology (Gen 1–2). All mankind is made in God's image and created by Him for His glory. Although Israel may be the “witness” nation in the Old Testament, there is no individual “nation” that is superior over the others. The New Testament attests to the importance of the other “nations” besides Israel in God's agenda to reach all the nations through the church. As Galatians 3:28 states, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”⁵⁶ God *will* bring His people together according to His plan as seen in Revelation.

The second implication is that *the diversity of nations is not sinful*. God's purpose is that a plurality of peoples would populate the planet. He never intended people to be monochrome and uniform, either as individuals or groups. The human race is one, yet many, which demonstrates God's providence in displaying heavenly worship through unity and diversity. As Revelation 5 displays, there is a purpose to the diversity of nations and that is to show God's glory through the worship of the lamb.

The third and final implication is that hope remains for the unbelieving nations to one day worship the true God. It may appear that the “nations” are judged throughout the Old Testament for their unbelief. However, there is long anticipated and certain hope for the nations to express

⁵⁵ Alcorn, *Heaven*, 209.

⁵⁶ *New American Standard Bible : 1995 update*. Galatians 3:28.

true worship throughout the Old Testament. First, there are outright *promises* that the nations will one day worship the true God (Ps 2:8, Isa 49:6). Second, there are confident *prayers* that God would be praised and honored among the nations (Ps 67:1–5; 72:11). Finally, there are striking *exhortations* to the people of God to declare his glory among the nations (Ps 9:11; 96:3; 105:1; Isa 12:4). Surprisingly, even pagan peoples are exhorted to be honoring and praising the Lord God (Ps 47:1; 66:8; 96:7, 10; 117:1; Isa 34:1).⁵⁷ In fact Philippians 2:10 quotes from Isaiah 45:23 to continue this expected hope for *all* nations to one day bow before Jesus: “...at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”⁵⁸ This should affect our motivation for evangelism knowing that God *will* bring about universal worship amongst the nations by restoring Israel to its function as the “light of the nations” in the millennial kingdom and eternal state. Therefore, as the church, we are to function similarly to Israel in the Old Testament, but going out *to the nations* so that they will “bow” before Christ and “confess” him as Lord. Knowing that the “nations” will worship Christ should motivate us to evangelize knowing that our work is not done in vain.

Conclusion

The Bible does not imply that ethnic or national diversity is in itself sinful or the product of the Fall. Rather, nations are simply there as a given part of the human race. God’s rule over the nations is simply a function of the fact that He created them in the first place.⁵⁹ From Babel, the nations were “scattered” into the entire world, but in the eternal state the nations are

⁵⁷ Ken Davis, “Building a Biblical Theology of Ethnicity for Global Mission”, 123.

⁵⁸ *New American Standard Bible : 1995 update*. (Philippians 2:10-11).

⁵⁹ Wright, *Mission of God*, 456.

“gathered” to Jerusalem and reunited.⁶⁰ After briefly surveying the purpose of Israel and the nations in the Old and New Testament, it is clear that Israel is the center of God’s covenant with mankind in general. Israel is the focus in the Old Testament and it is the vehicle in which God chose to bless the other nations. However, in the New Testament it appears as if God embellishes His redemptive plan by establishing the church. The “church age” adds insight to the understanding of Israel as *the* nation pointing to God by having the church complete Israel’s function until the millennial kingdom. However, the inverse of roles between Israel and the Gentile nations does not alter the original plan of Israel as the “lighthouse” of God. In fact, the inversion of roles just adds to the beauty of God’s multi-faceted redemptive plan from the creation of “nations”. It is with the New Testament that many people assume that God is “done” with Israel and that the church has replaced Israel. However, key passages show that both Israel and other *nations* will exist in the millennial kingdom as well as the eternal state. In fact, there is continuity with not only the physical nature of Israel and nations, but also the *purpose* of Israel and the other nations. Israel will finally fulfill its purpose of being the center of worship for the world and the nations will finally fulfill their purpose by submitting and bringing “glory and honor” to the lamb. The Bible continually crescendos the outworking of God’s original purpose for Israel and the “nations” with its final culmination being experienced in the eternal state.

God never made a “mistake” with Israel nor did he ever change His plan from the beginning. The episode of Babel just gave a platform in which God could paint a fuller picture of His grace. In the eternal state, it becomes clear that every single person who is redeemed in the kingdom is there by *grace*. Israel may have failed in fulfilling its commission in the Old Testament, but Israel will succeed in the eternal state. In fact, the church may “fail” in her

⁶⁰ West, *A Thousand Years*, 315.

commission in the current age, but it will exist in the eternal state. The point is that whether it is Israel or the church functioning as the witness for God, only God is able to complete His mission and it is only by His grace that Israel, the church, and nations can exist in the eternal state. The disobedience of Israel and other nations just heightens the beauty of God's mercy and grace to let the nations continue in the eternal state. That is why the song of the redeemed is to proclaim the lamb to be "worthy" of praise because every *nation*, including Israel, received forgiveness in order to enter into the everlasting kingdom of God. The topic of "nations" may seem insignificant, but it is the paintbrush that God has used in history and in the eternal state to display the picture of His glory and honor. It is refreshing to see that God continues to stay faithful to His plan and that Israel, as well as all the other nations, will live forever as a distinct, yet unified community in heaven.

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