In the Nick of Time

People of God: The People of Israel
Kevin T. Bauder

In the Bible, a people or nation is fundamentally an ethnic unit. Its solidarity stems from the fact that all individuals in the nation (with rare exceptions) are descended from a common ancestor. Ammonites come from Benammi. Moabites come from Moab. Assyrians come from Asshur. Even when a people no longer remembers its specific ancestor, the sense of ethnic solidarity remains.

This is not to say, however, that all individuals who can trace their lineage to a common ancestor are necessarily a people. Abraham and Isaac both had two sons, but in neither case did their descendants comprise a single people. Jacob had twelve sons, but these sons and their immediate families did not by themselves constitute a people. When Jacob and his household went down into Egypt, they were a family but not a nation.

When did the family of Jacob become the nation of Israel? This question cannot be answered in terms of numbers alone, as if 100 Israelites remained a family but 100,000 could constitute a nation. Common descent may be a necessary condition of biblical nationality, but it is not a sufficient condition. Something else has to be added in order to transform a group of related individuals into a people. Something else must take place in order for a large number of related individuals to galvanize them into national awareness. Other factors are essential to becoming a people: usually some combination of a common language, the occupation of territory, submission to a common religion, and, perhaps most importantly, a significant level of national self determination through a national leadership.

With Israel, the critical factors were provided by the events surrounding and following the exodus, and they were explicitly theological. God first referred to Israel as “my people” when He spoke to Moses from the burning bush (Ex. 3:7, 10). When Moses delivered God’s message to Pharaoh, it was “Let my people go” (Ex. 5:1; 8:1 et al.). This declaration was accompanied by divine self-disclosure. At the burning bush, Moses was confronted by God Himself. In response to Moses’ query, God declared His name to be I AM THAT I AM, and He authorized Moses to communicate His name to the children of Israel. He further authorized specific signs and wonders to be performed first before the Israelites and later before Pharaoh.

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from O Praise the Lord, His Deeds Make Known
Paraphrase of Psalm 105; author unknown

To Egypt Israel followed then,
And there grew great and strong,
Until their friends became their foes
And did them grievous wrong.

God sent His servant Moses then,
And Aaron, whom He chose;
Great signs and wonders they displayed
To terrify their foes.

In darkness they were taught to fear
God’s great and holy Name;
On man and best, on vine and field,
His awful judgment came.

He smote the first-born in the land,
The chief of all their strength,
Enriched His people with the spoil
And brought them forth at length.

He led them forth in health and strength,
None weak in all their band,
And Egypt, filled with fear, rejoiced
To see them leave the land.

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God further disclosed Himself through the ten plagues that fell upon Egypt. It was not enough that Israel should be delivered from Egypt. God wanted Pharaoh to know who was doing the delivering. He wanted Pharaoh to know the nature of the God who could rescue His people with such wonders, and in the process Israel also came to know the true and living God.

Israel certainly shared common descent from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. By the time of the exodus, the family of Jacob had grown to include as many as two million individuals. This extended family was transformed into a nation in the context of God’s self-revelation. Divine disclosure had the effect of binding Israel’s national identity to the true and living God. Israel was not just any people or nation. They were the people of God, the ones who were being delivered with a mighty hand by Yahweh in spite of all of Pharaoh’s resistance. Israel never had a national existence that was separated from its identification with the Lord.

The Lord sent His angel to slay all the firstborn of Egypt. The Lord opened a passage through the Red Sea. The Lord overthrew Pharaoh and his chariots. These events were constitutive of Israel’s national identity. Moses’ victory song speaks for the first time to the Lord of Israel as “Your people” whom “You have purchased” (Ex. 15:16).

In later years, Israel would look back upon the exodus as the hour of its national birth. This was certainly the thinking of Asaph in the extended history of Psalm 78 and paean of Psalm 81. Psalm 105 presents the exodus as the climactic fulfillment of God’s covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Psalm 106 is a rehearsal of God’s covenant faithfulness to Israel, and that recitation begins with the exodus. Psalm 114 declares that when Israel went out of Egypt, Judah was God’s sanctuary and Israel was His dominion (vv. 1-2). When Psalm 135 praises God that Israel is the Lord’s “peculiar treasure,” the psalmist again visits the events of the exodus.

Israel became a people in the exodus. The deliverance from Egypt was followed by the provision of water at Marah, the provision of manna, the provision of meat, the water from the rock, and the defeat of Amalek. Then they came to Mount Sinai. Most specially, Israel became a people at Sinai. In later years, God would compare His relationship to Israel with the relationship of a husband to a wife. In that analogy, Sinai must be thought of as the marriage ceremony. At Sinai, God vowed to Israel that He would make them His special treasure among all the peoples. He would make them a kingdom of priests. He would set them apart as a nation. He would do all these things if they kept His covenant (Ex. 19:5-6). The nation responded by vowing, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do” (Ex. 19:8). If one moment must be chosen at which Israel ceased to be merely a collection of related individuals and was convened as a people, this is it.

At Sinai Israel became a people. More specifically, at Sinai Israel became a people of God. From the first moment of its national existence, Israel was God’s special treasure among the nations. Israel was God’s unique people. They belonged to Him and He gave Himself to them in a way that He had never given Himself to any other nation. For Israel to be a people at all was for them to be a people of God.

That expression—people of God—raises further questions. What does it mean to be a people of God? Before this question can be answered in general, it must be answered in the specific instance of Israel. Before the calling of Israel, no nation on earth could be designated as a people of God. To be sure, there had been many saved individuals, but they never constituted a people (in the biblical sense of that term). With Israel we see the first nation called to be a people of God, and in Israel we discover what that expression means. Consequently, our next step must be to explore just what being a people of God meant (or was supposed to mean) to Israel.

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.