In the Bible, a people or nation is an ethnic unit that derives its solidarity largely from common descent. Of course, at one time the entire human race constituted a single people (Gen. 11:6). All humans descended in the first place from Adam, and secondarily from Noah. Before the tower of Babel, no ethnic or national differences existed. According to the Bible, these differences arose after God scattered the human race by confounding their languages. In other words, the division of nations is a result of God’s judgment upon human sin, though at the end of human history God is going to bring great glory out of this division—but more on that later.

As the table of nations in Genesis 10 makes clear, the human race was divided into an array of different peoples. As distinct nations, they were characterized by the different families from which they emerged, the different languages that they spoke, and the different territories that they occupied (Gen. 10:5). Additionally, either before or during the division of nations, humanity was becoming more and more corrupt. The apostle Paul describes this process in Romans 1:19-32. It is not clear exactly when the process reached its nadir. Yet Paul speaks of all three stages in God’s “handing over” (the term is paradidomi, which implies a handing over to judgment) in the aorist indicative, suggesting that, from his point of view, these judgments were already in force. Most likely the judicial “handing over” occurred during the early years of human history, and if the three stages were not complete before the scattering of the human race, they were certainly complete by the time it finished.

The entire process of “giving over” began because humans rejected the true and living God and invented idols. They exchanged the glory of God for the products of their own imaginations, even to the extent of worshipping loathsome things (Rom. 1:21-22). This exchange was the reason that God initiated His judgment upon humanity, meaning that even before the full weight of judicial depravity settled on the human race, human beings were already inveterate idolaters.

Not only individuals but whole nations gave themselves to idolatry. Over time, each nation tended to gravitate toward one or more favored idols. The Egyptians worshipped Ra and Osiris, among others. Canaanites gave...
themselves to Baal and Asherah. The Sidonians called upon Astarte. The Moabites were devoted to Chemosh. The Ammonites were worshippers of the vile god Milcom or Molech.

It seems as if every people had its own god or gods. The worship of their peculiar gods became as much a mark of these nations as their ethnicities or languages. For example, the Moabites (descendants of Lot’s son, Moab) were actually called the “people of Chemosh” (Num. 21:29; Jer. 48:46). To worship a god was to invoke that god’s name and to call it upon one’s self for help and protection. Consequently, when the Moabites called upon the name of Chemosh and sheltered under his name, they became his people. To be the people of a particular god meant that a nation called upon the name of that god and devoted themselves to its worship.

In all the world, however, no nation gave itself to the worship of the one true and living God, Yahweh. To be sure, there were saved individuals. Here and there one finds an Enoch, a Noah, a Job, or a Melchizedek. There were actually called the “people of Chemosh” (Num. 21:29; Jer. 48:46). To worship a god was to invoke that god’s name and to call it upon one’s self for help and protection. Consequently, when the Moabites called upon the name of Chemosh and sheltered under his name, they became his people. To be the people of a particular god meant that a nation called upon the name of that god and devoted themselves to its worship.

When God called Abram, He promised that He would make of Abram a great nation (Gen. 12:2). Indeed, God stated that many nations would come from him (Gen. 17:4-6), though only the descendents of Isaac would receive the covenant (Gen. 17:7-22). Yet the blessing that would come through Abraham would extend to all the nations of the earth (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18). God later renewed this oath with Isaac (Gen. 26:3-5) and with Jacob (Gen. 28:13-15). This promise, repeated to the three patriarchs, became crucial to the later identity of Israel as a nation.

The connection between the promise and Israel’s national identity is made explicit in Deuteronomy 26. There Israelis were taught to confess that their father (Jacob) was a dying Aramean who went down to Egypt as a wanderer with a few people, but who in Egypt became a populous nation. “And the Lord brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders” (Deut. 26:8). This passage draws a direct line from the patriarchs who received the covenant to the divine deliverance that the nation of Israel received.

We have already noted that at the same time Israel was constituted as a people, it was constituted as a people of God. Never before had any nation been identified with the true and living God. Now, however, because Israel had called out to “the Lord God of our fathers,” (Deut. 26:7) and had sheltered under His name, Israel was a people of God. The children of Israel constituted a nation that was identified by its worship of Yahweh.

This calling made Israel different from every other nation. Israel was indeed God’s special treasure among all the nations. As a nation, it was to function in a mediatorial role between God and the other nations: it was to be a kingdom of priests. It was to be set apart to God by obeying His voice and keeping His covenant (Ex. 19:5-6). This was a corporate blessing and identity that was to extend to Israel as a nation.

It is not difficult to find teachers who want to discover some evangelistic mission for Israel in the Old Testament. They would like to see that Israelis were instructed to carry the gospel to the pagan nations around them, winning individuals out of those nations. To be sure, God did sometimes send spokesmen to confront Gentile nations, as Jonah confronted Nineveh. It is a mistake, however, to think that Israelis were supposed to go and witness. On the contrary, Israel as a nation was a witness. Israel’s witness did not depend upon missionary activity, but upon faithfulness to Yahweh’s covenant.

God placed His people Israel right at the crossroads of the world. All of the traffic between Egypt and the other great civilizations had to funnel through the Promised Land. Israel did not have to go to the nations. Instead, the nations would have to come through Israel.

The terms of the Sinai covenant made Israel visibly different from every other people. Israelis were distinct in what they could eat, in what they could wear, in how they could sow their crops, in whom they could marry. Most of all, Israelis were distinct because they were to worship and honor the Lord their God. They were to keep His covenant.

If Israel would truly keep God’s covenant, then God’s blessing would rest conspicuously upon the nation (Deut. 28:1-14). The peoples of the earth, passing through the land of Israel, would have the opportunity to observe a nation separated to the worship of God and enjoying His spectacular blessing. “The Lord shall establish thee an holy people unto himself, as he hath sworn unto thee, if thou shalt keep the commandments of the Lord thy God, and walk in his ways. And all people[s] of the earth shall see that thou art called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of thee” (Deut. 28:9-10). This is what it meant for Israel to be a people of God.

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.