No one knows exactly how many thousands of years elapsed between the fall in Genesis 3 and the calling of Abraham in Genesis 12. Because at least some of the genealogies contain gaps, few responsible scholars today are willing to stake themselves to James Ussher’s chronology. Ussher saw about 2,000 years between Eden and Abraham. Even contemporary young-earth creationists would multiply that number, some by several times.

God began saving individuals soon after the fall. The first recorded hero of faith was Abel. Individuals like Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek, and Job appear as bright spots in the history of redemption. In spite of calamities like the flood and the tower of Babel, God was clearly at work in the world. He was saving human beings.

During all those long millennia, however, no nation devoted itself to the worship of the living and true God. Indeed, before the tower of Babel, no individual nations existed. After Babel, the nations as nations devoted themselves to idols. No nation—no people—called upon God or was called by His name.

That changed during the complex of events that began with the calling of Abraham and culminated in the exodus. From Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God raised up the nation Israel. God constituted Israel as a people, and in doing so He constituted them as a people of God. In God’s purpose, Israel was to be God’s own possession among all the nations, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. With the calling of Israel, God committed Himself to a plan that encompassed peoples as well as persons.

God called Israel specifically to be His people. That does not mean, however, that God intended to call Israel exclusively. Should the Almighty be content with the worship of one nation? No, Israel was meant to function in a mediatorial role with other nations (“a kingdom of priests”) and to provide a model that they could emulate in their relationship with Jehovah. God called Israel in order that Israel might draw other nations to Him. God had a global purpose for Israel.
This global purpose is reflected in Psalm 67. One part of this psalm is directed toward Israel, turning the Levitical blessing into a petition and rejoicing in the blessing of God upon Israel (vv 1, 6-7). Much of the Psalm, however, calls upon the nations to praise God in anticipation of His justice. Israel certainly occupies a special place in the world that the psalm describes, but that world also features many peoples that devote themselves to the worship of the true and living God. In other words, God’s purpose was always to have more than one people. God always wanted many peoples. God always wanted His temple to become a house of prayer for all nations (Isa. 56:7).

The eschatological future has to include more than one people of God, for the simple reason that one is never equal to two (or three, four, etc.). If God has one people only, then God’s temple cannot be a house of prayer for all peoples, but only for the one people. It makes no sense to call upon the nations to praise God if those who praise God comprise only one nation. The plurality of the peoples of God is implied by every Old Testament passage that calls upon the Gentiles (i.e., the nations or the peoples) to recognize Jehovah as the true and living God.

One of the most startling passages to emphasize the multiplicity of God’s peoples is found in Isaiah 19. The passage begins with God’s judgment upon Egypt, the long-standing enemy of His people Israel. After the judgment has fallen, however, a startling transformation occurs. There will be an altar to Jehovah in the land of Egypt and a pillar to Jehovah at its border. In other words, Egypt will turn as a nation to the worship of the true and living God. Egypt will cry out to God and God will send a savior and champion to deliver them. He will make Himself known to Egypt and Egypt will know Him. Egypt will even make a vow to Jehovah, perhaps implying some covenant relationship. Because Egypt responds to the Lord’s judgment, the Lord will heal them (Isa. 19:20-22).

Some day, God will reveal Himself to Egypt and Egypt will know God. This ancient and proud nation will dedicate itself to the worship of Jehovah, marking its commitment with altar and pillar. Egypt will experience God’s deliverance and healing, and will respond with a vow. Are not these the very qualities that we have come to expect in a people of God?

The context removes all doubt (Isa. 19:23-25), where, amazingly, Assyria enters the discussion. These were the two great powers that flanked Israel in the ancient world, one located in Africa and the other in Mesopotamia. An obedient Israel, at the crossroads between them, should have displayed for both of these nations the glory of being a people of God. As it happened, God used both Egypt and Assyria to chasten a disobedient, covenant-breaking Israel.

God, however, was not through with Israel. God is not through with Egypt or Assyria, either. Someday, the highway that runs from Egypt to Assyria (through Israel) will be used to facilitate the worship of these two hoary realms. Both nations will forsake their idols and will together give themselves to the worship of the True and Living God. In that day, says Isaiah, Israel will be one of three upon whom the Lord has showered remarkable blessing. God Himself will name them: “Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.”

In the eschatological future, Israel will be restored to full blessing as a people of God. There will always be something special about Israel. Nevertheless, Israel will be joined by Gentile peoples. Egypt, too, will become a people of God, and so will Assyria. Egypt will still be Egypt, not Israel or Assyria. Assyria will still be Assyria, not Egypt or Israel. These three will still be identifiable peoples, with their own ethnicities or nationalities. They will stand together, however, as three peoples 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.