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Racism and the Torah

Racism is the prejudicial belief that certain people are inherently superior or inferior to others strictly because they belong to a certain race, ethnicity, or people group. Often, though not always, the characteristics used to make this distinction are the color of people's skin, the texture of their hair, and the structure of their facial features. Over the centuries, many have supported racism without appealing to Scripture, but those that do use the Bible appeal to no portion more often than the Torah, the five books of Moses. As this study shows, however, their appeal is in vain. When interpreted literally, the Torah consistently demands that those of a different "race" should be treated with the same dignity and even the same love as those of one's own. Under the right circumstances, this principle even applies to Israel's dealings with the Canaanites.

Before defending this thesis, it might be helpful to note that there is an awkward irony to the biblical racist's position. He appeals to the Torah (and other passages), but the Torah (and the rest of the Old Testament) assigns "little interest or importance" to the topic of race. Why would it? The world of the Old Testament was "culturally, socially, and racially homogeneous."¹ Except for the Egyptians, all of the peoples with whom the Israelites dealt were fellow Semites, who shared a common culture and a nearly identical language. In fact, there is only one incident that might be described as "racist" in the entire book of Genesis. It occurs in Genesis 43:32, which reports that "the Egyptians would not eat food with the Hebrews, for that is an

¹ Eugene H. Merrill, "The People of the Old Testament according to Genesis 10," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (1997): 4. See D. J. Wiseman, ed., *Peoples of Old Testament Times* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), xv–xxi.

abomination to the Egyptians.”² Still, this might not be a case of racism since Joseph explains that their prejudice is against shepherds, not people of a certain race (Genesis 46:34). Thus, the world of the Old Testament is a strange place to look for racism. Nevertheless, both racists and their critics claim to find it there.

The Problem

It is commonplace for a certain brand of atheist to ascribe societal ills such as racism to people’s pernicious belief in the existence of a God. In other words, religion causes it. This idea may be rhetorically effective, but neither history nor Scripture supports it. Historically, racism has not been restricted to biblical Christianity or any other religious belief. Atheists have been guilty, too. Of course, Hitler comes immediately to mind, but there are others—people that history still respects. Some accuse Charles Darwin of racism, but his views on race are a matter of continuing debate. This is not true of his cousin, Francis Galton, however. In an 1873 letter to *The Times* (of London), Galton, one of the fathers of eugenics, explicitly labels the Negro race “inferior” and proposed eliminating it entirely through selective breeding:

My proposal is to make the encouragement of the Chinese settlements at one or more suitable places on the East Coast of Africa a par[t] of our national policy, in the belief that the Chinese immigrants would not only maintain their position, but that they would multiply and their descendants supplant the inferior Negro race. I should expect the large part of the African seaboard, now sparsely occupied by lazy, palavering savages living under the nominal sovereignty of the Zanzibar, or Portugal, might in a few years be tenanted by industrious, order loving Chinese.³

² Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations come from the *Holy Bible. New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

³ Francis Galton, “Africa for the Chinese,” *The Times* (London), June 5, 1873, accessed August 7, 2019, <http://galton.org/letters/africa-for-chinese/AfricaForTheChinese.htm>.

If both theists and atheists are guilty of it, racism is not a *religious* problem per se, but a (fallen) human problem. That being said, this human problem has a long history among those who take the Bible seriously, even among dispensationalists.

Sometime between A.D. 300 and 500, the Jewish expository commentary *Genesis Rabba* explained Ham's dark skin and perpetual inferiority using a traditional tale: "Ham and a dog had sexual relations in the ark. Therefore, Ham came forth dusky, and the dog, for his part, has sexual relations in public."⁴ Whether or not this commentator himself should be considered racist, his thought expresses two assumptions adopted others who most certainly are: first, that black Africans are inherently and morally inferior to other people groups, and second, that their inferiority is marked by the color of their skin.

Such thinking was not confined to medieval Jewish scholars; Christians also have accepted it and used arguments based on it to justify the enslavement or repression of people of color. Thus, in 1857, F. A. Ross argued that the slavery of Africans and others of color was ordained by God because the Hamitic peoples from the southern hemisphere are ethnically inferior to those in the northern. (Not surprisingly, he also concludes that Europe is "the masterman of the world.")⁵ From the end of the Civil War through the early days of the civil rights movement, the "African" interpretation of the "Hamitic Curse"⁶ continued to be accepted by many respected evangelicals—including C. I. Schofield, who included it in the 1909 edition of his influential *Schofield Reference Bible*.⁷ Although there may be no connection, Dallas

⁴ *Gen. Rab. 36.5*. The rabbis whose comments make up the *Genesis Rabba* believed the biblical text was inerrant and its every word, meaningful.

⁵ F. A. Ross, *Slavery Ordained of God* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1857): 50–51.

⁶ The Masoretic Text of Genesis, of course, applies the curse to Canaan, Ham's son, not to Ham himself.

⁷ C. I. Schofield, *Schofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, American Branch, 1909), notes on Genesis 9:24–27. In addition, David lists Genesis commentaries by Keil and Delitsch, A. W. Pink, and

Theological Seminary, the school that best championed his theological position, did not begin enrolling African-American students until the late 1960's and early 1970's.⁸ Prejudicial thinking such as this is not only unjust (and unjustified); it also hinders the mission of the church. For example, in 1998, O. Palmer Robertson reported that for several years, Communists in Ethiopia had been pressuring native Christians to abandon their faith since "Christians teach that Africans are an inferior race as a consequences of the curse of Ham." Why then should Ethiopians be open to anything else the Bible has to say?⁹

The Crucial Texts

When people use the Bible to defend their belief that people of color are inherently inferior, they inevitably turn to at least one of the following passages: Genesis 9:18–27 or Genesis 10:1–32. Genesis 9, it is said, teaches that Africans and other peoples of color are under God's curse. Thus, it would be unrealistic and even sinful to treat them as equals. Similarly, they argue that Genesis 10 requires God's people to maintain the separation of the races, lest they fall under the judgment of Babel. If either of these interpretations were correct, Bible believers would be obliged to support segregation if not slavery no matter how offensive the idea may be. When countering this sort of thinking, arguments based on history, sociology, or anthropology just will not do. When the "proof" comes from Scripture, the reproof must come from it, too. Not

Jamieson, Fausett, and Brown—all of which continue to be widely used today (Ken L. Davis, "Building a Biblical Theology of Ethnicity for Global Mission," *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 7 [2003]: 10, n. 22).

⁸ For the past several years, on Martin Luther King Jr. day, President Mark L. Bailey has read an apology for DTS's past failures in dealing with race and reiterated its current commitment to righting the wrongs of the past (<https://www.christianpost.com/news/dallas-theological-seminary-says-its-president-apologizes-for-racism-every-year-after-complaint-from-black-graduate.html>).

⁹ O. Palmer Robertson, "Current Critical Questions Concerning the 'Curse of Ham' (Gen 9:20–27)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41 (1998): 177.

only is the Bible the only source of absolute truth; it is also the only one that such people will listen to.

Context. Before analyzing these texts themselves, however, it is wise to consider how both of them function within the context of the entire first subsection of the book, Genesis 1:1–11:26.¹⁰ In chapters 1–8, from the creation to the flood, there is no reference to God’s chosen people or to any other division of the human race. God deals with man as man. After the flood, the situation changes, but not as much as some believe. For the most part, God still deals with the human race as a unified whole. All of mankind (Noah and his descendants¹¹) have the same responsibilities (Genesis 9:1–7), and are beneficiaries of the same everlasting covenant (9:8–17). Everything that happens in chapters 9 and 10 must be understood against the background of this perspective.

Genesis 9:18–27 in Context. The verses that come immediately before and after Genesis 9:18–27 are particularly significant. Note that the author Moses goes out of his way to present the events of Genesis chapter 9 as a new beginning for the human race, one that parallels the first beginning in chapters 1–3.¹² In both, God blesses mankind and directs them to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Genesis 1:28; 9:1). In both, he gives man dominion over the earth—although the nature of that dominion changes (Genesis 1:28; 9:2). In both, he supplies them with food: in the first, it is vegetables alone (Genesis 1:29); in the second, both vegetables and meat

¹⁰ Ultimately, their interpretation must also be reconciled with the even broader contexts of the complete book of Genesis, the Torah, the Old Testament, and the Bible as a whole. This essay will address the first two, albeit briefly, but analysis of the other contexts are beyond its scope. Suffice it to say that all contexts are in agreement on this issue.

¹¹ Genesis 9:19.

¹² See Warren Gage, *the Gospel of Genesis: Studies in Protology and Eschatology* (Winona Lake, IN: Carpenter, 1984), 9–15; Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 351; Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 127–30.

(Genesis 9:3). Genesis 9:18–27 then continues this parallelism by presenting a new “fall.” As in Genesis 3, this fall involves nakedness (Genesis 9:21–23, cf. 2:25; 3:7) and brings a curse (9:25, cf. 3:14, 17). The two verses that come immediately after Genesis 9:18–27 report the death of Noah and signal the end of the major section (or *tôlê dôt*) that began in Genesis 6:9.¹³ Thus, the “curse of Ham” episode should be understood as the conclusion of the flood narrative, not as an independent text. When both of these contexts are considered, it becomes clear that whatever else is taught in Genesis 9:18–27, its main point is that the flood has not solved the sin problem. Sin and its effects still plague the earth.

While several interpretive difficulties are associated with this episode,¹⁴ only one is relevant to this study: why is the focus on Canaan rather than Ham since it was Ham who “saw the nakedness of his father” (9:22, cf. 9:24). However one resolves this difficulty, it is important to note that Noah did not curse all of Ham’s descendants. If he had, there might be some biblical basis for racial prejudice since Genesis 10:6–20 identifies the Hamites as peoples of Africa and the Middle East.¹⁵ As the text clearly states, no such basis exists; the curse was limited to Canaan and his descendants. As the rest of this study will show, there is no biblical warrant for any broader application.

¹³ This assessment is confirmed by the fact that Genesis 10 begins with “these are the generations,” a construction Moses uses throughout Genesis to mark the beginning of a new section. For examples, see Genesis 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27.

¹⁴ For an extended analysis of these issues (albeit from a reformed, covenant perspective), see O. Palmer Robertson, “Current Critical Questions concerning the ‘Curse of Ham’ (Gen 9:20–27),” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41 (1998): 177–88.

¹⁵ See Yohanan Aharoni, Michael Avi-Jonah, Anson F. Rainey, and Ze’ev Safrai, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 20–21; Eugene H. Merrill, “The Peoples of the Old Testament according to Genesis 10,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (1972): 12.

This, of course, does not explain why the curse was limited to Canaan.¹⁶ The question has serious theological implications: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18:25). Although serious, this question is not relevant to the issue addressed in this study. What is relevant is another question, the one mentioned previously: why is the focus on Canaan? The answer is simple—and contextual. Genesis 9:18–27 sets the stage for the narratives and statutes that follow. The LORD has a purpose and plan for Israel, and the Canaanites play a major part in it. Genesis 10 builds on the foundation laid in Genesis 9,¹⁷ devoting five verses (one-third of the section on Ham) to the Canaanite nations and their location, which is where Abraham finds them two chapters later.¹⁸ When the LORD makes a covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15:12–21, he promises to give the land of the Canaanites to Abraham and his descendants. Later, when those descendants come out of Egypt, the Lord repeatedly renews his promise. He will give them the land of the Canaanites,¹⁹ but first, Israel must drive them out²⁰ and utterly destroy them.²¹

At this point, it is useful to note that contextual interpretation involves more than the paragraphs and episodes that surround the passage under discussion. One must also consider the

¹⁶ Wading into this morass, the author of this study suggests that Noah’s curse (and blessings) anticipates the behavior of Canaan’s future generations just as Jacob’s blessing anticipates the behavior of the tribes descended from his sons in Genesis 49:1–28. In both cases, the behavior of the ancestor portends that of his descendants. Thus, “everything the Canaanites did in their pagan existence was symbolized by the attitude of Ham.” See Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 216–18. The wickedness of the Canaanites will be addressed later in the present study.

¹⁷ Genesis 9:19 reports that the whole earth “scattered” (נִפְצָה, Qal of נִפַּץ); Genesis 11:9 expressed the same thought using a cognate verb: the LORD “scattered them” (פָּרַץ, Hiphil of פָּרַץ) across the whole earth. The effect is to create cohesion, binding the accounts together: “The use of cognate verbs is striking and clearly reflects a desire to join the anticipation of scattering following the flood with its reality after the Babel judgment.” (Merrill, “Table of Nations,” 6. For a more complete analysis of the cohesive factors in this portion of Genesis, see Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis. Part Two: From Noah to Abraham* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964), 142–47.

¹⁸ When Abraham arrives in Canaan, he finds these very nations “in the land” (Genesis 12:9; 13:7).

¹⁹ Exodus 3:8, 17; 13:5, 11; 23:23; Deuteronomy 1:7.

²⁰ Exodus 23:23; 33:2; 34:11; Deuteronomy 7:1; 11:30.

²¹ Numbers 21:1, 3; 33:40; Deuteronomy 20:17.

situational/historical context, that is, the circumstances of the writer and original readers of Genesis. Taking the biblical account at face value, the book of Genesis was written by Moses after the exodus in anticipation of Israel's conquest of Canaan. Under these circumstances, an account such as Genesis 9:18–27 serves a very practical purpose, as Merrill recognizes: “A people poised to undertake the conquest of a land populated by others who had been there for centuries must have compelling historical and theological justification.”²² On the one hand, that justification is based on God's sovereignty. As ruler over all the earth, the LORD and is the real owner of the land. As such, he has the right to give it to whomever he chooses, and he has chosen to bestow it on Abraham and his descendants forever. On the other hand, the conquest (and its stark consequences) constitutes God's just punishment on nations that utterly deserve it.

This means that, understood literally and contextually, Genesis 9:18–27 does not promote (or even tolerate) racism. Davis says it well:

Noah's prophecy cannot be used to justify the enslavement or mistreatment of dark skinned peoples today since it was historically fulfilled when the Israelites (descendants of Shem) conquered the native inhabitants of Palestine and made them servants. Because the Canaanites long ago became extinct, the Hamitic curse cannot be properly applied to anyone today.²³

Genesis 10 in Context. The other crucial passage, Genesis 10, is less central to the biblical racist's argument, but does often appear in arguments for racial segregation. The logic is simple. God has divided (10:5, 32, cf. Deuteronomy 32:8) and disbursed (9:19; 11:9) all of

²² Merrill, “Table of Nations,” 8. According to its opening paragraph, the American Declaration of Independence has essentially same purpose: “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”

²³ Ken L. Davis, “Building a Biblical Theology of Ethnicity for Global Mission,” *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 7 (2003): 99. Robertson makes the same point: “The destruction of the Canaanites under Joshua should be understood as a major fulfillment of this prophecy. But quite obviously it was not a black race or an African community that was involved in the curse” (“Current Critical Questions,” 185).

mankind, differentiating them in four ways²⁴: by race (“according to their families”), by language (“according to their languages”), by geographical region (“in their lands”), and by government (“in their nations”).²⁵ Therefore, it falls to his people to preserve this division.

There is a problem with this logic, however. The premise, of course, is indisputable; the Scriptures expressly state that God rules the nations and has assigned them their regions.²⁶ The problem is with the conclusion. Taken in isolation, the statements in Genesis 10 may *allow* the racist’s conclusion, but *they do not require it*. What the argument lacks is proof that the author (God, Moses, or both) intended this sort of application. Indeed, a close analysis of the content and context of the passage points to a different conclusion—a conclusion diametrically opposed to that of the racist. Many arguments could be offered, but five observations are enough to show that this interpretation is at odds with what the author intended his text to communicate.

First, note that this logic totally ignores the structure of the book of Genesis, in which major divisions are marked by some variant of the statement “these are the generations” (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27, et al.) Thus, the basic discourse unit is not Genesis 10, but Genesis 10:1–11:9—a section that reports the distribution of mankind while focusing on their unity.²⁷ As Matthews observes, the Table of Nations explains “the common origin of the nations, all of whom were derived from Noah’s three sons (9:18–19; 10:1).”²⁸ In other words, all nations have a common origin. Using the text to promote racial disunity ignores that focus.

²⁴ Genesis 10:20, cf. 10:5, 31, and 32.

²⁵ “Some form of independent government was clearly necessary if a people were to exist as a *goy* [“nation”] (*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, s.v. “גוֹי *gôy*,” 2:428).

²⁶ For example, Deuteronomy reports that the LORD who assigned specific territories to Edom (2:5), Moab (2:9), and Ammon (2:19). In the New Testament, Paul makes the same assertion at Athens (Acts 17:26).

²⁷ Waltke, *Genesis*, 163.

²⁸ Kenneth A. Matthews, “The Table of Nations: The ‘Also Peoples,’” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 5 (2001): 44.

Second, Genesis 10 deals with people groups as wholes, not with individual members of those groups. In the Torah, what is said of groups applies to groups; what is said of individuals, applies to individuals. Failing to observe this distinction perverts justice. Thus, a child may not be executed because he belongs to a specific family; “a person shall be put to death for his own sin” (Deuteronomy 24:16). Presumably, the principle also applies to those of different races.

Third, the biblical text here assigns no responsibility to the reader; it focuses exclusively on how God sovereignly accomplished his purpose despite human resistance. As Cassuto concludes, the lesson for Israel (and the modern reader) is that “the settlement of mankind in the world did not occur haphazardly, according to the chance circumstances of greater or less fecundity in one or another family, but took place according to a preconceived Divine plan, the implementation of which proceeded without humanity’s being aware of it.”²⁹ It is difficult to see how this lesson justifies any response other than awe and submission.

Fourth, the chapter reports the distribution of Noah’s descendants, but does not rank them in importance or suggest that any one nation or race is superior or inferior to another. Israel, God’s chosen people, is not mentioned in this list, but later in the Torah, the LORD leaves no doubt that his choice says nothing about them and everything about him:

The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Therefore know that the LORD your God, He *is* God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments (Deuteronomy 7:7–9).

The Torah, including Genesis 10, focuses on the LORD; the biblical racist’s argument, however, focuses on race. The two perspectives are irreconcilable.

²⁹ Cassuto, *Genesis*, 175.

Finally, it seems appropriate to note that as applied, the racist's argument is inherently hypocritical. It deals only with certain aspects of the passage and applies them only to certain people groups. If the text teaches that black people should return to Africa, it also teaches that white people should return to Europe. Of course, no racist ever accepts this implication, and by rejecting it, he abandons any claim to the support of Scripture. Other arguments can be offered to demonstrate that the racist interpretation of Genesis 9 and 10 is hermeneutically untenable, but the ones offered here are more than enough. The text simply does not say what the racist says it says. Neither Genesis 9:18–27 nor 10:1–32 may be legitimately used to justify the subjugation, segregation, or suppression of those of a different race.

The General Teaching

While Genesis 9–11 is often the centerpiece of the biblical racist's argument, the Torah has much more to say about the treatment of non-Israelites—and none of it supports the racist case. The law is the same for the native and the foreigner.

The Torah distinguishes two different kinds of non-Israelite peoples living among God's people: the *nokrî* (נְכַרִי) and the *gēr* (גֵּר).³⁰ The Old Testament itself provides definitions of the *nokrî*. In 1 Kings 8:41, speaking to the LORD, Solomon describes a *nokrî* as a person “who is not of Your people Israel, but has come from a far country.” Similarly, Deuteronomy 17:15 notes that such a one is “not your brother.” The other term, *gēr*, also refers to a foreigner, but there is a significant difference. The *gēr* has a social and legal standing that is denied to the *nokrî*. As De

³⁰ There is also a third kind of non-Israelite, the *tōshāb* (תּוֹשָׁב). His social status is more difficult to define than that of the other two kinds, but it seems to fall somewhere between them: “The status of the *tōshab* was like that of the *ger*, though not exactly the same. He seems less assimilated, socially and religiously (Ex 12:45; cf. Lv 22:10), less firmly rooted in the land and also less independent: he has no house of his own, but is man's *tōshab* (Lv 22:10; 25:6).” (Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, paperback ed. [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965], 1:75–76). Transliterated terms are used in this discussion because there is no consistent translation of them among the various English versions.

Vaux defines him, “the *ger* is essentially a foreigner who lives more or less permanently in the midst of another community, where he is accepted and enjoys certain rights.”³¹ According to Ringgren, the difference is ultimately spiritual. The *gēr* is “receptive to the religion of Yahweh ([Deut.] 29:10 [11]; 31:12)”; the *nokrî* is not.³² Understandably, the Torah has more to say about the receptive aliens³³ than the resistant ones.

Receptive Aliens. In general, the Torah treats *gērîm* in the same way it treats Israelites.³⁴ It assigns them the same religious responsibilities and opportunities. They must keep the same holy days: the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10; 23:12; Deuteronomy 5:14), the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29), and the Feast of Booths (Deuteronomy 16:1, 14). In addition, if they are willing to be circumcised and meet the other ritual requirements, they may participate in the Passover (Exodus 12:19, 47–49; Numbers 9:14). They are to bring the same sacrifices and offerings to the LORD: burnt offerings (Leviticus 17:8; Numbers 15:14–16) as well as votive offerings (Leviticus 22:18–24; Numbers 15:14–16). They are to follow the same procedure to be forgiven for unintentional sins (Numbers 15:26, 29). When they come in contact with a dead body, they are to be purified using the same ashes of a red heifer (Numbers 19:10).

Furthermore, the religious parallels between *gērîm* and Israelites are not restricted to worship responsibilities; like the Israelites, they must maintain holiness in their daily lives. They must not eat blood (Leviticus 17:10, 12) and must properly dispose of the blood of any animal

³¹ De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 1:74.

³² *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, s.v. נכר *nkr*,” 9:426.

³³ The *gēr* has a sentimental place in the Torah since Abraham was a *gēr* in Canaan (Genesis 23:4); Moses, in Midian (Exodus 2:22; 18:3); and the people of Israel as a whole, in Egypt (Genesis 15:13; Exodus 20:21 [H, 20]; 23:8 [H, 9]; Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 23:7). Perhaps most significantly, Leviticus 25:23 indicates that the Israelites will continue to have this status in the Promised Land. The LORD is the actual owner of the land; therefore, the Israelites will be “strangers” (*gērîm*) and “sojourners” (*tôšābîm*) on it.

³⁴ Exodus 12:49; Leviticus 19:34; 24:16, 22; Numbers 9:14; 15:15–16, 29.

they kill (Leviticus 17:13). They must undergo the same purification process after eating meat from an animal that dies naturally or was killed by another animal (Leviticus 17:15). They may not practice any of the sexual perversions that characterize the Canaanites (Leviticus 18:26). They may not offer their children as sacrifices to Molech (Leviticus 20:2). If a *gēr* blasphemes the name of the LORD, he will be stoned to death, just like an Israelite (Leviticus 24:16). And just like an Israelite, if he presumptuously sins against the word of the LORD, he will be cut off from the congregation (Numbers 15:30).

In the courts, the Torah requires that *gērîm* receive the same righteous justice as Israelites do (Deuteronomy 1:16; 24:17). To do otherwise is to disdain the LORD, their God (Leviticus 24:22; Deuteronomy 10:18) and bring his curse upon the land (Deuteronomy 27:19). The *gērîm* enjoy the same legal protections as the Israelites—as shown by their access to the cities of refuge when they have inadvertently become the agent of someone’s death (Numbers 35:15).

In terms of this study, it is perhaps even more significant that the *gērîm* enjoy the same social safety net as the needy of Israel.³⁵ They have the same right to glean (Leviticus 19:10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19–21) and to benefit from the same triennial tithe as the Israelite poor (Deuteronomy 14:29; 26:11–13). According to the Torah, however, Israel’s responsibility goes beyond acts of charity; it also requires that these acts be performed with the proper attitude. Israelites are warned not to oppress or mistreat the *gēr* (Exodus 23:8 [H, 9]; Leviticus 19:33; Deuteronomy 24:14³⁶); they must treat him as one of their own (Leviticus 19:34³⁷). In short,

³⁵ Although it was possible for *gērîm* to acquire great wealth (Leviticus 25:47, cf. Deuteronomy 28:43), “as a rule they were poor, and are grouped with the poor, the widows, and the orphans, all the ‘economically weak’ who were recommended to the Israelites’ charity.” (De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 1: 75).

³⁶ In these verses three different Hebrew verbs for oppression are used, forbidding any and all types of abuse.

³⁷ S. H. Kellogg argues that this principle also applies to *nokrî* slaves (*Studies in Leviticus* [1891; repr. ed., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1988], 510).

They must love him (Deuteronomy 10:18–19). The depth of this commitment is best shown in Leviticus 25:35, which instructs Israel to treat an Israelite who has fallen into poverty with the same beneficent attitude they would show toward a *gēr*!

Of course, the Torah does recognize differences between the *gēr* and the Israelite, but it mentions only two, both of which are easily explained. First, the *gēr* could not retain permanent ownership of an Israelite slave and must allow the slave’s family to redeem him or her (Leviticus 25:47–48). According to the preceding context, Israelites were free to acquire foreign slaves as their permanent property (25:44–46), but they were to consider Israelite slaves to be hired workers until the Year of Jubilee (25:39–41). The justification offered for this distinction is that all Israelites are already the permanent slaves of Yahweh, and thus cannot be owned by anyone else (25:42). This also seems to be the logic governing the status of Israelite slaves owned by a *gēr*. Second, because he was “holy to the LORD,” no Israelite could eat an animal that died of natural causes. The *gēr*, however, did not have that special relationship and could eat it without sin (Deuteronomy 14:21). Neither situation reflects any racial bias. Indeed, the overall teaching of the Torah regarding *gērîm* suggests that De Vaux is correct: “In everyday life there was no barrier between *gerîm* and Israelites.”³⁸

Resistant Aliens. For the most part, the Torah applies the same rule to all residents of the land and does not specifically mention the *nokrî*. In the six times that it does,³⁹ it does so to point out special rules or exceptions that apply only to the resistant alien. The first, Exodus 21:8, does

³⁸ De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 1:75.

³⁹ Exodus 21:8; Deuteronomy 14:21; 15:3; 17:15, 23:20; and 29:24. There is also a seventh use of the term. In Genesis 31:15, Leah and Rachel tell Jacob that their father Laban has come to consider them “foreigners” (נְכַרִּיּוֹת)—now that he has used up all their bridal price. While relevant to the sense of the Hebrew word, this usage is tangential to the topic of this study.

not seem especially relevant to the topic at hand.⁴⁰ The others, however, are directly relevant. Deuteronomy 14:21 distinguishes the Israelite from both the *nokrî* and the *gēr*. Either sort of foreigner may eat the meat of an animal that has died a natural death, but the Israelite may not—not because Israelites are a superior race, but because they have a special relationship with the LORD. They are “a holy people to the LORD your God.”

Deuteronomy 15:1–3 calls for the forgiving of debts every seven years, but not everyone’s debts. As Merrill notes, “This generous policy was applicable only to fellow Israelites . . . The foreigner [*nokrî*], because he was not the recipient of God’s special grace of election and covenant, could not enjoy its benefits.”⁴¹ Here, again, the difference is a matter of relationship, not of race.

Deuteronomy 17:15 sets limits on the kind of person who could become the king of Israel. Positively, he must be a man chosen by the LORD. Negatively, he may not be a *nokrî*, “who is not your brother.” Rather, he must be a native Israelite, “one from among your brethren.” Once more, the issue is relationship (in this case to Israel), not race.⁴²

Deuteronomy 23:20–21 regulates loan practices in the nation. Israelites could not charge interest on a loan to “your brother” (i.e., a fellow countryman), but were free to do so if the loan was to a *nokrî*. Once again, the reason is not a matter of race, but of relationship, first to your brother and second to the LORD your God, who is the source of the nation’s blessing.

⁴⁰ It deals with the case of a Hebrew woman who was sold by her father to become a concubine. If the purchaser rejects her in that role (a clear breach of contract), he must allow her family to purchase her freedom. Under no circumstances could he sell her to a *nokrî* since he had acted in bad faith.

⁴¹ Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 244.

⁴² It may also offer a further protection from the pollution of the ungodly immoral and worship practices associated with the nations surrounding Israel.

Deuteronomy 29:22 [H, 21] is part of Moses' warning of the curse that would accompany Israel's disloyalty to their covenant with the LORD. The warning is stiff: "future generations of Israelites and foreigners (*nokrî*) alike would bear witness to the horrible scene of devastation and abandonment."⁴³ This verse uses *merismus*, a rhetorical technique in which two contrasting parts are used to designate a whole. Here, the parts are Israelites and non-Israelites. The construction makes sense only if Israel ("the coming generation of your children") and the *nokrîm* are parts of the same, larger whole—which in this case is all mankind (or at least the portion that lives in the ancient Near East). Here again, when the Torah recognizes significant differences between Israel and other nations, the differences are a matter not of race, but of relationship.

The Canaanites.⁴⁴ There is, of course, one group that the preceding argument has ignored. The Torah issues very harsh commands concerning the Canaanites. It commands Israel not to make treaties with them. It warns them not to intermarry with them.⁴⁵ Most severe of all, it calls for their utter destruction. Hitler followed a similar policy toward the Jews. Is not the Torah as guilty of racism as Hitler? In a word, the answer is no.

Before condemning God or Scripture, one must consider what the Torah actually says about the coming conquest of Canaan and the destruction of the Canaanites. First, note that the entire program is presented as the work of God, the same God who accomplished the destruction

⁴³ Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 384.

⁴⁴ Much of the following argument represents an amplification of the case made in Donald R. Rouse, "God's Judgment on the Canaanites," *Central Bible Quarterly* 10 (1967): 34–36.

⁴⁵ Contrary to common belief, the Torah did not forbid intermarriage with non-Israelites, just with Canaanites (Deuteronomy 7:3). Moses had an "Ethiopian" (Cushite) wife. When Miriam and Aaron reacted to her, the LORD confronted them about it (Numbers 12:1-15). There is even a regulation governing marriage to a foreign woman taken as a captive in battle (Deuteronomy 21:10–14). Lewsi summarizes the situation well: "If the great concern of the Hebrews was to preserve a pure blood-tie with Father Abraham, this fact is not evidenced in the Scriptures" (Arthur H. Lewis, "Jehovah's International Love," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 15 [1972]: 89).

of Sodom in his righteousness (Genesis 19, cf. 18:25), whose every judgment is right and true (Deuteronomy 32:4). It is his plan, but he will accomplish it with the cooperation of his people. The Angel of the LORD would be leading Israel in the conquest (Exodus 23:20, 23), and the LORD himself would do the destroying (Exodus 23:27–30)—but only if Israel is obedient (Exodus 23:21–22).

Second, note that there are actually three basic commands: to make no covenants with the Canaanites (Exodus 23:32, to serve none of their gods (23:24), and to utterly destroy them (23:23). The main reason given for these commands is the LORD’s desire to protect Israel from the influence of the Canaanites (Exodus 23:24, 33). If Israel were to fall victim to it, they would join them in the same condemnation (Exodus 3:33). On the other hand, Israel was to carry them out as a demonstration of commitment to the covenant relationship they have with the LORD.

As to the LORD’s justice in all of this, four texts make it clear that the Canaanites deserved the punishment they will receive (Exodus 23:20–33; 34:10–17; Deuteronomy 7:1–5; and 20:17–18). God is not acting arbitrarily nor prejudicially. Ultimately, the Canaanites are bringing destruction upon themselves. Their religion is an abomination (Deuteronomy 7:25–26; 20:18). They even offer their children as sacrifices (Deuteronomy 12:31). Their morals are perverse. The Torah devotes two full chapters to the prohibition of their immoral practices (Leviticus 18–19). These include incest, homosexuality, and bestiality—practices so horrific that it causes the LORD to “abhor” (רָקַק) them. Left unchecked, their influence would (and later did⁴⁶) corrupt God’s people (Exodus 23:33; 34:15–16; Deuteronomy 7:4; 20:18). Finally, it is important to note that the LORD gave the Canaanites ample opportunity to repent. Not only did

⁴⁶ Judges 3:5–9 et al.

they have the warning of Noah's curse (Genesis 9:18–27), but they had the example of Abraham (Genesis 12:4–8) and the experience of God's judgment on Sodom, Gomorrah, and the other cities of the plain (Genesis 19)—all a full half-century before Joshua crossed the Jordan.

Thus, the judgment on the Canaanites is a spiritual and moral matter, not a racial one. This conclusion is confirmed by the fact that there are exceptions; some Canaanites escaped judgment with God's blessing. Apparently, if a Canaanite repented of his or her Canaanite ways and religion and trusted in the God of Israel, he or she could become acceptable to God. Certainly, this was true of the Canaanite harlot Rahab (Joshua 2:8–11), who not only escaped the destruction of Jericho, but also married an Israelite and became an ancestor of both David and Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:5). In addition, there are the Gibeonites. After being deceived by them, Joshua spared them also, making them “woodcutters and water carriers for the congregation and for the altar of the LORD (Joshua 9:1–27). Later events seem to show that this arrangement met with the approval of God. When Saul and his house attempted to kill off the Gibeonites, the LORD sent a three-year famine on the land until David made atonement for them (2 Samuel 21:1–14).

The Conclusion

To sum up, the Torah considers all people groups on earth to be variations within one group, the human race. All are descended from Noah (and Adam). It does recognize that there are differences between the various people groups after the flood, but it does not ascribe superiority or inferiority to any of them. The facts and arguments presented in this study show that the racist has no right to look to the Torah for support for his or her position and that the cynic has no right to portray the Bible as a racist book. Taken at face value, the Scriptures treat

all men as qualitatively equal before God. According to Romans 3:23, they are all sinners, hence racism exists.