



# Bible Student's Notebook™

## *The Herald of His Grace*

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Volume 23  
Issue 564

## "The People" in Contrast to "the Nations"

### A Preliminary Examination of the Word "People"

Part 1 of 3

by — Charles H. Welch (1880-1967)

It has become a matter of common knowledge among those who understand something of *dispensational truth* to speak of "the people of Israel" – a phrase that appears some dozen times in Scripture – as a most important factor in the outworking of the purpose of the ages, and especially in connection with the interpretation of prophecy.



We speak of those periods in history when "the people of Israel" were scattered from their land, or temporarily dominated by a foreign power, as "lo-ammi" periods, periods when Israel was reckoned "not My People" by the Lord. This influence of the presence of Israel is seen most noticeably in the New Testament. Up to the end of the Acts, Israel is viewed as a people before God; *at the end of the Acts they are dismissed as a people*, and with them was temporarily suspended the hope of Israel, the promises made to the fathers, together with any anticipatory enjoyment of blessings under the New Covenant that had been introduced.

The absence of this people since Acts 28 and throughout the present dispensation necessitates a new revelation, and this is given in those epistles known as *The Prison Epistles*. Those who see that, since Acts 28, Israel has become "lo-ammi," will not be moved by the attempts of expositors and preachers who stress the words "Armageddon" and "Wars and rumors of wars" as having any fulfillment in the present time,

for they know that the prophetic clock stopped at the end of the Acts, even as it did in days past when Israel's position as a nation before God was in suspense.

If this principle of *right division* referred to as "lo-ammi" is sound, a closer examination of the usage of the word "people" in the Scriptures should confirm it.

Moreover, the study of such an important word will be useful and a blessing, quite apart from any peculiar application we may make of the truth discovered. We believe that an examination of the teaching and usage in Scripture of this word "people" will reveal how intimately it is related to a great part of God's purpose, and will not only provide a key to unlock prophecy, but will demonstrate more fully the peculiar calling of *the administration of the secret*, if only by the marked absence of the reference to the "people" from the prison ministry of Paul.

#### THE HEBREW AND GREEK WORDS FOR "PEOPLE"

Before considering the way in which the word "people" enters into the record of the ages, let us become acquainted with the original words that are employed. The *Authorized Version* translates 13 words by the one word "people." ▶

The following words occur in the *Hebrew Scriptures*:

- (1) *Ish* – a man, an individual (II Samuel 20:13);
- (2) *Ummim*, *Ummoth* – a company of men and women mutually supporting one another, a society of people (Numbers 25:15; Psalm 117:1);
- (3) *Enosh* – a frail, mortal man (Jonah 3:5);
- (4) *Bene* – sons of (Genesis 29:1; Leviticus 20:17);
- (5) *Goi* – a corporate body (from the word *gavah*, “a body,” a society or a body of men). A nation or people (Joshua 3:17). Used of Israel, but mostly translated “*Gentile*,” “*heathen*” or “*nation*”;
- (6) *Leom* – a gathering of people, a nation (Genesis 25:23; Psalm 2:1);
- (7) *Edah* – a congregation (Leviticus 10:6);
- (8) *Am* – a people (Genesis 11:6);
- (9) *Ereb* – a mingled people (Jeremiah 25:20).

The following words occur in the *Greek Scriptures*:

- (10) *Demos* – the people as a municipality; the public, from whence comes our word democracy (Acts 19:30);
- (11) *Ethnos* – a multitude living together. Is used of a swarm of bees. Usually refers to the Gentile nations (Romans 10:19);
- (12) *Ochlos* – a crowd (Matthew 7:28);
- (13) *Laos* – a people, tribe or nation; all those of the same stock or language (Matthew 1:21).

Of these thirteen words, “*am*” in the Hebrew and “*laos*” in the Greek, are the ones that demand our attention.

“*Am*” is the word that enters into the phrase “*lo-am-mi*,” and “*laos*” is used in the *Septuagint* more than 1500 times to translate the Hebrew “*am*,” and is only rarely used to translate “*goi*” or “*leom*.”

The Hebrew word “*am*” is derived from a root that means *to collect* or *to gather*. It can be used of animals and insects as well as of men, for example:

*The ants are a people not strong* (Proverbs 30:25).

*The conies are but a feeble folk* (:26).

As a particle it means “*with*” or “*together*,” and in the form “*amith*” it means a “*neighbor*” (Leviticus 6:2) or “*fellow*” (Zechariah 3:7). “Nearness” is persistent in all of its variations. Gesenius says that this root is very widely extended both in the Phoenicio-Shemitic, and in the Indo-Germanic languages. So we have *cum* and *con* in the Latin, and *sun* in the Greek, beside many other similar words in modern languages which have the basic meaning of nearness or “*togetherness*,” an example being our own English word “*same*.”

The first occurrence of “*am*” is in Genesis 11:6 where it is asserted that “*the people is one*.” Again in Genesis 34:16, 22 we get this idea of coming together to form *one people*:

*We will dwell with you, and we will become one people.*

The reference to being gathered to one’s people that is so often used of death in the Scriptures further emphasizes this idea of *oneness*.

## THE USE OF “PEOPLE” IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURE

### The “People” in the Book of Genesis

Continuing our study of the use of the word “*am*,” people, with its occurrences in Genesis, we observe that it occurs 33 times (once translated “*folk*”). Of this number of occurrences, the first refers to the “*whole earth*” before any *distinctive* “*people*” were called into being, and this passage naturally comes *before* the call of Abraham, and is found in Genesis 11:6:

*The children of men ... the people is one, and they have all one language* (Genesis 11:5-6).

No distinctive intention can be observed in the second occurrence, namely in Genesis 14:16, for the reference is to the company belonging to Lot, "Abram's brother's son" and so no greater distinctiveness is intended.

The third occurrence, however, is in an *entirely different* category. It occurs in conjunction with the rite of circumcision, a rite which gave its name to *the people of Israel* who are thus denominated, and consequently in time the appellation "*the Uncircumcision*" became a term of reproach to indicate the Nations of the earth as *distinct* from "*the Nation*" – Israel.

After giving the ordinance of circumcision to Abraham as a "token" of the covenant made by God with him, the Lord said concerning every one of Abraham's seed who were not circumcised,

*That soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken My covenant (Genesis 17:14).*

Here therefore, we have a people *marked* with an unnatural sign, a people who carried with them a symbolic *repudiation* of the flesh, and a "sign" that they rested in the promise of God as Abraham did, who, when he was as good as dead,

*Against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations; according to that which was spoken, "So shall thy seed be" (Romans 4:18).*

Therefore, in Genesis 17:14 we have the first reference to this *distinctive* "people," a people in covenant relationship with the God of Abraham, and bearing in their flesh this "token."

Our purpose here is not the exposition of all that circumcision involves, but merely to set before the reader this most important fact: that the word "people" assumes its *distinctive* meaning at the time of the introduction of this symbolic rite.

In the opening verses of Genesis 17, a very special indication of the Lord's purpose is given by the change of Abraham's name. Originally he was called "Abram," a name meaning "high father" and one that was common among his people, but at this juncture the Lord confirms His promise saying, "I will multi-

ply thee exceedingly;" adding,

*As for Me, behold, My covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee (:4-5).*

After the institution of the "token" of circumcision, the Lord speaks of "Sarah." Her name too is changed; originally it was "Sarai."

To Abraham it had been said,

*Kings shall come out of thee (:6)*

So now of Sarah it was spoken,

*I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her; yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her (:16).*

The word "people" is plural, and should be translated "peoples." Here we have a promise concerning "nations" and "peoples" which, while including the one nation and the one people, is not exclusively referring to Israel.

The full title of the Lord in connection with this covenant is "The God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob," and it is to Jacob that the next promise is made referring to the "people." ▶



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Upon leaving home to go to Padan-aram, Isaac blessed Jacob with the words,

*God Almighty bless thee, and make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, that thou mayest be a multitude of people; and give thee the blessing of Abraham (28:3-4).*

Ishmael, though a son of Abraham, is passed by; Esau, though a son of Isaac, is passed by; Jacob is the chosen medium through which the promised seed must come, and he was to become “a multitude of people.”

Jacob remembered this promise when at last he travelled down to Egypt to look on the face of his son Joseph, and to see Joseph’s two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh (48:3-4), and as no reference to Israel as a “people” is found in the intervening chapters, the examination of the expression “a multitude of nations” can be conducted from Genesis 48 quite as well as from the chapter where the expression originally occurs.

It is not easy to understand the choice of this word “multitude” by the translators, for the Hebrew substantive *qahal* has a distinct and recognized meaning, and while it occurs 123 times in the Hebrew Scriptures it is rendered “multitude” only three, leaving “assembly,” “company” or “congregation” to translate the remainder.

That the *Septuagint* translators understood the word in its primary sense is evident, for in both passages (28:3; 48:4) they use the word “synagogue.” Coupled

with these references we can include the words spoken at Bethel where the word translated “multitude” is rendered “company”:

*A nation and a company of nations shall be of thee (35:11).*

There is need for care in examining the references, because in the near context, and the blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh of Jacob, the *Authorized Version* uses the word “multitude” again:

*Let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth (48:16);*

*His seed shall become a multitude of nations (48:19).*

Three different Hebrew words are translated “multitude” in this chapter. In :4 it is *qahal* (a congregation), in :16 it is *rob* (abundance), and in :19 it is *melo* (fullness).

Each word has its own significance and this is hidden by using the word “multitude” in each case. We must not digress further, however, but return to 48:4 to complete our examination of the expression “multitude of people.”

First we observe that the word “people” is plural, and should be rendered “peoples.” This therefore cannot refer exclusively to one nation, but a gathering or company of nations or peoples.

Then there is the word *qahal*. The primary mean-



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ing of the verb is “to call together” and gives us the title *koheleth*, translated “preacher” (Ecclesiastes 1:1), and hence gives us the title of the book “Ecclesiastes,” for the word *ekklesia* means “a called-out company.” Hence also Stephen could speak of “*The church [ecclesia] which was in the wilderness*” (Acts 7:38).

The promise to Jacob was that he should not only be the father of “*the people of Israel*,” but more was intended as the apostle reveals in Galatians 3:8, for the initial promise made to Abraham is evangelical in its meaning:

*The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, “In thee shall all nations be blessed.”*

The “*multitude*” of peoples include the Gentiles [nations] saved during the period of the Acts of the Apostles. The nation of Israel was to be the focus and gathering point of a called-out company of nations or peoples, but not in the sense that is often made of this passage by *British-Israel* teachers. Not nations *as such*, whether Britain or America, but peoples “*justified by faith*” are in view.

The last reference to “*people*” in Genesis that has a bearing on our subject reveals that Judah was chosen for the royal line, and that to One bearing the scepter of the house of Judah should the “*gathering of the peoples be*” (49:10). It would be a natural inference from the *superficial* reading of this passage to reckon that the “*gathering*” of the “*peoples*” was but the logical outcome of the “*assembly or congregation*” of the peoples already considered. This, however, is *not* the

case. There are but two occurrences of the Hebrew word *yiqqehah*, and in the second reference, Proverbs 30:17, it is translated by the word “*obey*.” There is an Arabic word, however, which is a cognate and this means, “to obey readily and cheerfully.”

*The Companion Bible* associates this obedience with the “*Lawgiver*,” as the note on 49:10 shows:

- a The Sceptre shall not depart from Judah.
- b Nor a Lawgiver from his seed.
- a Until He, Shiloh, come (whose right it is, Ezekiel 21:27).
- b And (until) to Him (the Lawgiver, shall be) the obedience of the peoples.

“*The obedience of faith*” made known unto “*all nations*” is incipient in this early prophecy, and is included in the secret that was silenced until made known through the early ministry of Paul (Romans 16:25-27).

We have seen from the references to a “*people*” or to “*peoples*” in Genesis that: Israel was the nation of which Abraham was the father; Israel was the people marked by circumcision; and the “*peoples*” blessed through them fulfilled the initial promise made to Abraham that,

*In thee and in thy seed shall all families of the earth be blessed.*

These observations prepare us for the discovery that, in the history and goal of this “*people*,” we have a most important factor in the outworking of the purpose of the ages. ►

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## The “People” in the Book of Exodus

Genesis is the seed-plot, not only of the remaining revelation of Scripture, but of the “people” whose fortunes and destiny we are considering. As a “people” they do not exist in Genesis. The fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have come before us, and the narrative ends with the entry into Egypt of the descendants of Jacob.

With this feature the book of Exodus opens:

*Now these are the names of the children of Israel, which came into Egypt ... seventy souls: for Joseph was in Egypt already (1:1-5).*

Israel was fruitful and increased abundantly, and multiplied and waxed exceedingly mighty; and the land was filled with them. This increase was the first thing necessary for constituting them a “people” as the words of Pharaoh make plain:

*Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we (1:9).*

Rigorous methods were adopted to restrain this fruitful people, but in vain:

*The more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew (1:12).*

Now arising out of this affliction comes the first recognition by the Lord that this people are His people:

*I have surely seen the affliction of My people ... bring forth My people the children of Israel out of Egypt (3:7-10).*

Over and over again is this title reiterated in the ears of Pharaoh – “My people.”

God remembered His covenant that He had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and now revealed that by redemption from the bondage of Egypt, He was about to take them to Himself “for a people” (6:7).

In the opening verses of Exodus 6 we have the gathering up of the promises made to the fathers, making the “taking” of Israel for a people coincident with redemption. The structure is as follows:

- A I am the Lord (:2)
- B Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (:3)
- C The land promised (:4)
- D Bondage (:5)
- D Redemption (:6,7)
- C Promise of the land confirmed (:8)
- B Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (:8)
- A I am the Lord (:8)

After the Passover and the deliverance, Israel gathers at the foot of Mount Sinai, and there an *added* covenant is introduced with special blessings or curses in its terms:

*(to be continued)*



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#### Scripture Version

(Unless otherwise noted all Scripture quotations are taken from the *Bible Student's Version*).

- CV: Concordant Literal Version  
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 DT: Dabhar Translation  
 FF: Ferrar Fenton Bible  
 KJV: King James Version  
 RE: Rotterdam's Emphasized Bible  
 WT: Weymouth Translation  
 YLT: Young's Literal Translation

#### Reference Sources

- AA: Analytical Analysis (Welch)  
 BDB: Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon  
 CB: Companion Bible Notes & Appendixes (Bullinger)  
 CC: Concordant Commentary (Knoch)  
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Concordance (Knoch)

- CL: A Critical Lexicon and Concordance (Bullinger)  
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 SEC: Strong's Exhaustive Concordance  
 TGL: Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon  
 UR: Unsearchable Riches  
 VED: Vine's Expository Dictionary  
 YAC: Young's Analytical Concordance

#### Reference Notations

- cf.* – compare  
*e.g.* – for example  
*et al.* – and others  
*etc.* – et cetera (and so on)  
*ff.* – and the following  
*i.e.*, – that is

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