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THE PARTICULAR AND THE UNIVERSAL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Elmer A. Martens

The subject — ethnicity and faith — if transposed into another key is the subject of the “particular” and the “universal.” An ethnic group, whether Jewish, Armenian or Mennonite, is a “particular.” Faith, especially the Christian faith, lays out a “universal” claim, since the faith is for all peoples, namely for the totality of the ethnic particulars. Ethnicity serves to root the faith; it is with the mission dimension that a problem emerges.

At the center of history stands the scandal of the particular: how is one person, Jesus, a Jew from Judah, through his life and more especially through his death, able to make a universal claim? Nor is this a New Testament phenomenon only. The same problem is embedded in the Old Testament. How is Israel, for the most part an ethnic grouping with a God-given message, to communicate the message to “outsiders?” The tension continues to our own day. How are Mennonites, defined as an ethnic body, to deal with a faith which springs the bounds of any ethnic borders, including of course Mennonite borders?

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The Bible gives us both historical perspective and theological guidance. From it one can set out the data that can orient us. That data I wish to organize around two headings: marriage and faith, and ministry and faith. While the Israelite story as part of *Heilsgeschichte* is on a plane different from the Mennonite story, the ethnic component of Israel's story can serve as a window through which to see our problem.

Marriage and Faith

If we take Abraham as a starting point, we are at once in the setting of a family group with ethnic characteristics. Indeed, the faith is deposited, or rather planted, in an ethnic vessel. The catch phrase, "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" is an intergenerational designation for God. The belief in Yahweh is rooted, following Gen. 1-11, in a clan (*beth ab*), with all the promise and all the liabilities of an ethnic unit. The promise is the ready-made unit of the household for the practice of Yahweh worship and the teaching of the faith — even cross-generationally. The liability is that the Yahweh faith will be identified with family.

Ethnic mixing through inter-marriage can therefore be a blessing or a curse. Clearly the blessing is the potential for additions to the faith community. But the danger is that the pure faith, nurtured in the family and clan will be diluted. Abraham safeguards clan and faith solidarity by arranging for his son Isaac to have a wife from within the ethnic group. A wife from the surrounding Canaanites is out of the question (Gen. 24:3).

The second generation, however, did not share the conviction of tribal purity. At age 40 Esau married Judith and Basemath, both Hittite women. The sequel reads: "These were a bitter disappointment to Isaac and Rebekah" (Gen. 26:35 JB). Rebekah complained to Isaac, "I'm disgusted with living because of these Hittite women. If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living" (Gen. 27:46 NIV). The tension, if it was cultural, was also more, as Isaac's explanation of his command to Jacob, "Do not marry a Canaanite woman" (Gen. 28:1ff NEB), makes clear. It was somehow bound up with the patriarchal promise.

Joseph, Abraham's great-grandson, married Asenath, an

Egyptian (Gen. 41:45). And Moses married Zipporah, a Midianite woman, and later, so it seems, an Ethiopian woman — a fact which brought him the displeasure of at least his brother Aaron and his sister Miriam (Num. 12:1). Nor did others in Israel preserve an unsullied ethnic lineage. The two sons of Elimelech and Naomi took daughters from the Moabites: Orpah and Ruth. In memorable fashion Ruth, a notable adherent to the Yahweh faith, testified, “Your people will be my people and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16).

Marriages outside the Hebrew ethnic group became an issue repeatedly, largely because of the danger of “religious” contamination. “The Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods” (Jud. 3:5). Such action had been forbidden (Exod. 34:15-16).

The issue of inter-marriage surfaced again after the return from the exile. In Ezra’s time, the small Judah and Benjaminite colonies were purged. In a renewal movement amidst confession of sin, fasting and prayer, Ezra announced to an especially-called convocation, “You have been unfaithful; you have married foreign women, adding to Israel’s guilt” (Ezra 10:10). Ezra called for separation from the foreign wives. The list of priests who had married foreign women, and whose marriages were dissolved, extends to 26 verses (Ezra 10:18-44). The verbal root used for the “mixed” marriages is the same as that used to describe the “mixed” multitude that came with the Israelites out of Egypt (Exod. 12:38). So there is an inversion, as Paul Hanson notes (Hanson, 299-300). The mixed multitude at the Exodus was absorbed into Israel; the mixed marriages in Ezra’s time were not.

Similarly, in Nehemiah’s reform foreigners were excluded from the community (13:3). Like Ezra, this reformer rebuked those who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. The danger of infection from pagan religion was real. Solomon’s slide down the slippery slope of apostasy could be traced to his flirtations with foreign women. So, as a temporary measure such drastic actions by Ezra and Nehemiah may have been justified, but as a permanent policy such actions vitiated the concept of a non-ethnic based covenant community.

The note of inclusion must be heard alongside the note of exclusion, for foreign women did indeed become part of the

Israelite fabric. The book of Ruth, so critical scholarship holds, was a tract written to protest actions by Ezra and Nehemiah. The book, according to these scholars, returns to the earlier view whereby non-ethnics were embraced. Our Lord's genealogy in Matthew includes two other non-Jewish ethnic women: Tamar and Rahab (Matt. 1:3,5). And the reason for this must be clearly stated: the definition of "The People of God" is not an ethnic definition. God's people are the Hebrews, but not exclusively Hebrews, nor even all the Hebrews. His is the offer: "I will be a God for you, and you shall be my people," and whoever voluntarily responds to that offer, whether an Egyptian or a Moabite, becomes a member of the family. So, yes, the ethnic identity is clearly important, as the genealogies in Matthew as well as in Chronicles, make clear. But God also springs the ethnic boundary, for the criterion for the community of faith is not racial or ethnic.

The "glue" that gives cohesion to the faith community, Hanson observes, is the "triadic notion:" worship, righteousness and compassion. Righteousness is a standard way of regulating life under God; compassion is a quality of tenderness that infuses the concern for justice; and worship is the joint response to a saving God, who is the sole Lord and Israel's ultimate reference point (Hanson, 70-78). The cohesion for the people of God, despite the advantage of the ethnic, is decidedly theological.

Ministry and Faith

The tension between an ethnic identity and a faith identity which exists within the family can also be traced under the broad rubric of ministry. Once more we can begin with Abraham and note that the community of faith in that household, while ethnic at its nucleus, was not ethnically delimited. Hagar, the slave woman, was an Egyptian, and Eliezer, the trusted servant whom Abraham nominated to the Lord to be his heir, was from Damascus.

The later faith community, despite its strong ethnic nucleus, was not confined to the "ethnically pure" even at the exodus. The Scripture observes that a mixed multitude accompanied Israel out of Egypt (Exod. 12:38). These were invited to be part of the covenant people through circumcision. Instructions about festivals, for example, included the alien, (*ger*),

and the sojourner (Duet. 14:29; 16:11, 13). Caleb, who played such an important part in the survey of the land and its later conquest, was not an Israelite, but a Kenizzite (Num. 32:12), as also was Othniel (Judg. 1:13). For that matter, both Caleb and Othniel seemed spiritually superior to the native Israelites.

The prophetic vision of what was yet to be was singularly spelled out by Isaiah in his announcements about Egypt. There will come an occasion when God will make himself known to the Egyptians, and "in that day they will acknowledge the Lord" (Isa. 19:23). God's response will be to bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt *my people*, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance" (Isa. 19:25).

Isaiah emphasizes that the boundaries for God's people are not to be ethnically drawn. "Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people'" (Isa. 56:3). Indeed, "Foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him, to love the name of the Lord, and to worship him . . . these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Isa. 56:6-7 NIV).

Beyond the emphatic inclusion of non-Hebrews in the people of God is the announcement that non-Hebrews will be the religious leaders. In this, Isaiah's prophecy, given the ethnic mentality of exclusivism, is surely bold. God's glory will be proclaimed among the nations (66:19), and these Gentiles, along with the Jewish remnant, will be headed for Jerusalem, God's mountain. Then "I will select some of them [i.e., the Gentiles] also to be priests and Levites" says the Lord (Isa. 66:21) (Achtmeier, 148). If one recalls how exercised Israel was to have a legitimate order of priests, then this vision clearly bursts all pre-conceptions of what is "legitimate." Non-Jews will be part of the religious leadership!

The faith community, while still a "particular," is now definitely not an ethnic particular. Its leadership is not chosen ethnically. The ministry of this community, both by its composition and its leadership, springs all ethnic definitions, even though it owes its life to an ethnically-oriented origin.

Conclusion

From this historical/theological survey several conclusions bear in upon our current discussion of ethnicity and faith.

1) Our discussions of the problem ought not to be approached as though in the history of Christianity there has emerged a new problem. Faith and ethnicity compare to the two threads of the double helix in the DNA molecule. This molecule controls the life of the cell; similarly faith and ethnicity control community life. The two threads are distinguishable but quite inseparable. The problem of their relationship is an old problem.

2) There is cause to celebrate the ethnic. We will do ourselves harm if we disparage the ethnic heritage. The ethnic unit of the family, and then the tribe, became the carrier of the Hebrew faith. God is a great sociologist. The ethnic is important. At one level we can compare the Israelite and the Mennonite. We can salute the strength of the ethnic ethos. God has set the peoples of the world in a rich mosaic of ethnic groups. There is no need to denigrate the ethnic roots nor even the ethnic fruit. Only, the ethnic, as one of the two strands, must not be identified with the faith. And for that matter, the ethnic is clearly subordinate to the theological in importance. The trajectory in the Old Testament is to de-emphasize the ethnic in favor of the theological.

3) There must be readiness to spring the boundaries of the ethnic. A vehicle can cease to be a vehicle. It would not do to dispose of the ethnic, as though like a used automobile it can now be junked. But one must sit rather lightly on the ethnic coach, recognizing that as a means of transport for the faith, it is of much less importance than the content. The ethnic cannot so tightly be gripped that it, rather than the gospel, becomes the good to which we cling. So in addition to the plea to celebrate the ethnic there is the plea to spring the boundaries of the ethnic.

4) The springing of those boundaries has two thresholds. The first, for us, is that of welcoming peoples other than German/Russians into the family. Whereas in pockets of the Mennonite Brethren constituency that move still gives some difficulty, and assimilation is not smooth, there are numerous examples, especially in our urban churches, where this thresh-

old is not a problem. By God's grace, others than only German/Russians have been incorporated into the Mennonite Brethren Church. The second threshold is that of an incorporation of non-German/Russians into the leadership, both of the local church and the conference. Here the Mennonite Brethren record is not satisfying. However, if we recognize the direction which the gospel takes us in the structuring of community, and if those of the ethnic nucleus are prepared to release their claims to power, then we shall be able also to cross the second threshold, that of leadership. But let us freely admit that in crossing this threshold we need help.

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