



# The Bible and Racism

## SESSION 1

| *Does the Bible justify or resist racism? Or both?*

### Introduction

Does the Bible support or oppose racism? In United States history, the answer to this question is both yes and no. White supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan have used biblical texts as weapons to promote hatred against racial minority groups. In some Christian traditions, the Bible's message of liberation is a resource for the promotion of civil rights and freedom for all peoples. In fact, biblical themes were central to the message of the civil rights movements in the 1960s. Thus, the Bible has played a role in both promoting and dismantling racism. It has been a proof text for groups who sought to reinforce white privilege, and it has been a rich resource of empowerment for communities struggling for liberation.

This essay will address issues of racism in the Bible, or the extent to which race is a factor within the biblical texts themselves. It will explore themes that exist within the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament and will include a discussion of the cultural perspectives assumed within the biblical world. The second session examines the use of the Bible within communities, particularly in the U.S. context. It will provide an overview



Bible and Sword © Pei Lin

White supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan have used biblical texts as weapons to promote hatred against racial minority groups.

of critical issues of biblical interpretation on the topic of racism and will provide frameworks from which communities can make informed decisions about this important topic.

### Is There Racism in the Bible?

Most scholars agree that the concept of race, as currently defined in the United States, does not correspond neatly with the ways that ancient peoples understood themselves. Patterns of group inclusion and exclusion do figure prominently in Bible. Moreover, similar social

#### RACISM STUDY PACK

This study is part of the Thoughtful Christian Racism Study Pack. The list below is the suggested order of the study pack, although you may study it in any order your group chooses.

- Why Is it So Difficult to Talk About Racism?
- Racism 101
- The Bible and Racism
- A History of Racism in the United States
- White Privilege
- Is Affirmative Action Still Needed?
- Do Segregated Churches Imply Racism?

dynamics exist in the biblical world that overlap significantly with modern racial tensions. Race is the designation of a group of peoples based on an inherited set of phenotypical or physically identifiable traits (for example, skin color). Modern understandings of this concept emerged during the Enlightenment, coinciding with Western imperialism. As European empires expanded, they sought to classify the peoples that they encountered. Hence, the idea of race is deeply rooted in colonialism. By definition, racism occurs when a particular group exerts its sense of superiority over others on account of racial difference. Therefore, racism is defined not merely as prejudice—when one race is intolerant of another—but is also related intrinsically to power, that is, the ability of a group to exercise its sense of racial dominance over others.

## [Racism = Race Prejudice + Power]

There are two points of discontinuity with this definition of racism and the biblical world. First, the modern notion of racism is intimately connected to developments within the last few centuries in the West, though race as a concept certainly existed earlier. Modern U.S. racism would have been an unfamiliar concept to the biblical authors. Second, ancient Israel, because of its small size and lack of power in the ancient Near East, could not have enforced its sense of superiority over other groups in a way that would resemble contemporary racism. Ancient Israel was always a small vassal state, which was caught in the struggles of large empires such as Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. Like all social groups, the Israelites had beliefs that reflected their own culturally limited and even ethnocentric worldview. They exhibited prejudice against other nations, but they were fairly powerless to exert their sense of group superiority in an empire-wide fashion.

Early Christianity, as well, was a minority religion during its crucial point of formation in the early centuries of the Common Era. It is not until Christianity finds broader acceptance within the Roman Empire that the Bible becomes a significant source for shaping sociocultural norms in the West. Within the context of empire, biblical themes of group superiority, which were originally generated by historically particular and geographically specific minority groups, begin to take on a more ominous tone. The language of a divinely

chosen people, for example, looks much different when situated within the context of a small, colonized state or religious sect than when this belief constitutes the ideology of an empire that intends to subjugate other nations because God is on its side.

## Ethnic and National Identity in the Biblical World

Within the Bible, cultural difference is not identified primarily through physical traits. The more dominant categories were ethnicity and religious difference. Ethnicity is tied to a group's common cultural understanding based primarily in national origin. Ethnic groups tend to have shared understandings of the world and history. Factors such as social customs and cultural norms inform these perspectives. When biblical scholars talk about the emergence of Israel in the hill country of Canaan during the late second millennium BCE, they tend to focus on issues related to the rise of a small nation that emerged originally from a confederation of tribes. National identity certainly played a role in ancient Israel's self-understanding, even though the term "nation" does not correspond precisely with the contemporary notion of nation-states, which is a product of historical developments in Europe during the eighteenth century.

The Table of Nations in Genesis 10 and the list of groups in Canaan (Deut. 7:1) point to an awareness of other nations and peoples. In the prophetic materials, the Lord's judgment is proclaimed not only on Judah and Israel but also upon the surrounding nations (Jer. 46–51 and Amos 1:1–2:3). On the surface level, the biblical texts differentiate sharply between Israelites and these foreign "others," especially those who dwelt in the land of ancient Canaan. However, biblical scholars and archaeologists have determined that the ancient Israelites were virtually indistinguishable from Canaanites. Data from archaeological artifacts and material culture support this fact. Moreover, biblical scholars have shown that the traditions within the Hebrew Bible have parallels with religious and mythological texts from this region. In fact, according to one theory of Israel's emergence, the Israelites were originally a loose confederation of tribes who were made up primarily of disenfranchised Canaanites. Therefore, the sharp cultural differentiation between Israelites and Canaanites in the biblical material is a social construction.



Within the Bible, cultural difference is not identified primarily through physical traits. The more dominant categories were ethnicity and religious difference. Ethnicity is tied to a group's common cultural understanding based primarily in national origin.

Within the Bible itself, Israel is portrayed as a culturally distinct people, who are set apart from the other "nations" (in Hebrew, *goyim*). They were not to worship like these peoples, nor were they to make treaties or intermarry with them (Deut. 7:2–3). This language suggests that the primary way that the biblical authors understood social difference was through religious beliefs and an assumed set of cultural norms.

Historical realities following the Babylonian exile informed the ideas that we find in the Bible regarding Israel and its relationship to others. Most of the biblical traditions took shape or were substantially edited within the postexilic period during the Persian Empire (late sixth and fifth centuries BCE). When the exiles returned after 538 BCE, their presence in the land was contested. These repatriating groups signaled their collective identity through sharp differentiation from the "people of the land." Hence, the biblical theme of Israel's cultural distinctiveness carries with it a particular meaning in this period. Postexilic realities also help to understand the strong tone found in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah against foreign intermarriage (Ezra 10 and Neh. 13:23–31). However, the books of Ruth and Jonah, which were also written at this time, provide a counter-perspective to the xenophobic tones of Ezra-Nehemiah since they contain more positive images of foreigners. Ruth is a Moabite who becomes the grandmother of King David; and the inhabitants of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, repent and obey the Lord, unlike Jonah, the Israelite prophet. Even

in these cases, however, it is clear that foreign peoples are not faithful on their own merits, but are good insofar as they resemble faithful Israelites.

Within the New Testament, themes of a culturally distinct people persist. Even though the Gospel writers characterize Jesus as someone who disrupts existing social boundaries (Luke 5:30; 7:34) and challenges the religious status quo (Matt. 23:13–26; Mark 7:1–13), it is clear that the early Christians considered themselves to be uniquely situated in the world. Even in the case of Jesus, traditions exist that betray his sense of ethnic superiority. The account of the Syrophenician (Mark 7:24–30) or Canaanite (Matt. 15:21–28) woman provides a poignant example. In this story, a woman comes to Jesus, asking him to heal her daughter who is tormented by an evil spirit. Jesus asserts that his mission is to Israel, and that it would not be right for him to give the children's food to "the dogs." His juxtaposition of the term "children," to characterize his own privileged group, and the ethnic slur "dogs," to designate foreigners, is a shocking example of the culturally specific character of Jesus' perspective.

Though Christianity sought to extend its vision of the world to include other peoples and nations (Acts 1:8), it is clear that a culturally specific lens provided the filter for its followers' worldview. The early Christians, like other Jewish groups, maintained their identity by dividing the world into two parts—God's elect and the other nations, also known as Gentiles. In the New Testament, the Greek word for these other peoples is *ethne*, the plural form of *ethnos*, where we get the word "ethnicity." Hence, both the First and Second Testaments share the characteristic of having a worldview that assumes a culturally and religiously distinct core of people, who differentiate themselves from other "foreign" groups, and who have a divinely chosen role to play in the world. These chosen peoples within the Bible emerge from particular social contexts. They are minority presences within much larger societies or empires.

## Thematic Trajectories of Racism in the Bible

Though the modern concept of racism does not exist in the Bible itself, the preceding discussion has suggested that there are certain ideas within the biblical material and world that resonate with contemporary social

dynamics. There are trajectories that lend themselves to later interpretations that both seek to justify and resist racism. What follows is a brief sample of these themes.

## Trajectories of Continuity with Racism

**Chosen people/promised land.** The books of Joshua and Judges depict in different ways the theme of a chosen people who are called to possess a promised land. This divinely sanctioned commission includes the extermination of the previous inhabitants (see also Exod. 23:27–33; Num. 33:51–56; and Deut. 7:1–11). A key Hebrew word in this theme is *herem*, which connotes a holy thing or something dedicated to the Lord. In the case of the conquest narratives, *herem* includes the dedication of Israel's enemies and their possessions to complete destruction. This theme and its violent connotations are grounded in the central biblical idea of covenant, and hence, represent a critical way to understand God's relationship to God's people. A divinely sanctioned conquest lends itself to the possibility of racism in at least three ways: (1) the notion of a chosen people reinforces a group's sense of cultural superiority over others; (2) those who are not chosen are considered a threat to the purity of the "in" group; and (3) cultural difference is managed through the violent conquest of foreigners.

**Separation from foreign others.** The theme of separating from foreigners takes various forms in the biblical text. It is especially prominent in the postexilic period, when groups of exiles sought to return to the land. When groups migrate, the need for clear social boundaries and identity markers becomes stronger. It is within this context that we find the impulse within the books of Ezra and Nehemiah to separate from foreigners, especially through the prohibition against intermarriage (Ezra 10 and Neh. 13). Foreign women are seen to be particularly threatening to the identity of the returning exilic community. Thus, these texts not only label non-Israelites as cultural others, but they produce structures that target foreign women as particularly dangerous. Similar themes are present in the traditions about Solomon and his foreign wives (1 Kgs. 11:1–8).

**The Lord's judgment on the nations.** In the prophetic materials, God's judgment is often directed at the surrounding nations. Amos 1–2 uses the Lord's judgment of the nations as a rhetorical strategy to anticipate the message against Judah and Israel. Jeremiah 46–51 also

contains a series of oracles against the nations. Theologically, God's wrath is intimately connected to the theme of justice. From the perspective of the biblical authors, the Lord's judgment against other nations provides a just resolution to problems in the world order. This theme universalizes the perspective of a particular group and subsumes the destiny of the world's peoples under Israel's God, who is seen as the sovereign of the earth.

**Light/darkness.** Another prominent theme within the biblical text relates to the symbolic idea of light overcoming darkness. In Genesis 1, God creates an ordered world out of chaos. The movement in this creation story proceeds from chaos to order, from darkness to light. This theme is also prominent in the New Testament, where it takes on connotations of enlightenment and characterizes the perspective of those who know God's salvation (John 3:19–21; Rom. 13:12; Eph. 5:8–14). This biblical metaphor, which also has strong connections with the seasons of Advent and Easter in the Christian liturgical year, implies that darkness is bad and light is good. Light overcomes darkness, and followers of the light are supposed to actively resist the darkness. In the U.S. context, where race relations are constructed primarily within a black/white binary, this theme contributes to configurations of meaning that support the privileging of white over black, light over darkness.

## Trajectories of Discontinuity with Racism

**Blessing to the nations.** There are ideas within covenant that relativize trajectories of racial or ethnic superiority. The promises to Abraham, for example, include not only the assurance of land and progeny but also the outcome that Abraham and his descendants will be a blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:3). Similarly, in the exilic period, Deutero-Isaiah proclaims that the once conquered people of God will be a "light to the nations" (Isa. 42:6; 49:6). In this grand vision, the prophet declares that Israel's redemption will pave a way for all peoples so that the Lord's "salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (49:6). Israel's primary role is one of a servant, whose task in the world is to be an example to the other nations.

**The stranger in your midst.** In the legal material of the Hebrew Bible, there is the strong charge to take care of the "stranger" (in Hebrew, *ger*) who lives in Israel (Deut. 10:17–19; Lev. 19:33–34). Moreover, the biblical language

states that Israelites are to “love” this resident foreigner who is among them, for “you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deut. 10:19). These passages not only encourage charity toward the *ger*, but they demand a sympathetic disposition, in which Israel actually identifies itself with the foreign “other” who is among them.

**Jesus’ social boundary crossing.** Though the Gospels depict Jesus in his cultural specificity, they also consistently characterize him as someone who challenges oppressive social structures. Jesus challenges the boundaries that serve to protect the privilege of the social elite. He encourages his followers to identify with the poor, he associates with the marginalized in society, and he challenges the ruling elite to practice justice. This aspect of Jesus’ life and ministry has been influential for liberation and feminist theologians. The fight against social evils such as racism requires those who are willing to challenge existing boundaries of social convenience. Thus, Jesus serves as an example of how followers may align themselves with the oppressed of society, the marginalized whom God privileges.

**There is no longer Jew or Greek.** Finally, Paul’s writings show an awareness of the culturally specific context

of the Christian message, even as it seeks to envision a new humanity that is more inclusive. In Galatians 3:28, he proclaims that in Christ, people are no longer “Jew or Greek.” Paul’s words point toward a radical openness. However, immediately following this well-known verse, he goes on to say that this vision of humanity points to the inclusion of all peoples into the promises of Abraham (3:29). Hence, Paul’s vision retains elements of his own specific Jewish worldview and theology. In practice, Paul asks his followers to keep their own ethnic particularity—Jews should remain Jews, and Gentiles should stay Gentiles. His manifesto in Galatians, however, points to a common shared identity in Christ. This Pauline theme has the potential to value the diversity that is represented in the human family while pointing to elements of unity that provide common ground for people of all races and ethnicities.

## About the Writer

*Frank M. Yamada is the director of the Center of Asian American Ministries and associate professor of Hebrew Bible at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois. He is author of Configurations of Rape in the Hebrew Bible: A Literary Analysis of Three Rape Narratives and an editor for The Peoples’ Bible, a cross-cultural study Bible from Fortress Press.*