ALL THE CLANS, ALL THE PEOPLES
By Richard Showalter

"Now the Lord said to Abram, Go forth . . . and in you all the families (*mispahot*) of the earth shall be   blessed." (Gen. l2:l, 3 NASB)

The term *mispahot* in Genesis l2:3 has been variously rendered by Hebrew translators. The Septuagint translates it *phulai* (families, clans, peoples (1).) Traditionally, standard English Bibles have read "families" (2). More recently, it has been translated "tribes" (Jerusalem Bible) and "peoples" (Today's English Version, New International Version). Some exegetes have suggested reading it "communities (3)." How are we to understand the precise meaning of this significant term in the "bottom line" of the Abrahamic promise?

The missionary heart of God is nowhere more clearly revealed than in this great commission of the Old Testament and its essential reiteration in Matthew 28:l9,20 (4). In both cases the commission is echoed again and again in scripture (5). In both cases the shadow of the cross falls across the lives of those who obey, falls in decisive separation from familial and national loyalties which trammel and bind the witness. Abram was called out from hearth and home; the disciples later were told to "hate" father and mother for the sake of Christ. But nonetheless, both were promised a larger family as they obeyed: for Abram, descendants as the dust of the earth (Gen. l3:l6); for the disciples, parents and houses and lands (Mark l0:29,30). In both cases, too, the commission's object was the whole earth.

Yet it is characteristic of the Lord that He does not give the promise as a mere generality. The precise word of blessing is for "all the *mispahot* (Heb.)" of the earth. Who are they? Can we define a social unit which sharpens for us the object of the promise? Does that definition reveal more clearly the path and the destiny of the blessing?

Contextual Definition
A careful contextual examination of the term in the Old Testament (300 usages) shows the following:

(l) *Mispaha* (sing.) is most commonly used to describe a subdivision of a tribe or larger people-group (6). This is clearly indicated in the tribal enumerations of Numbers 26 and the land divisions of Joshua l3 and l5.

(2) The most precise definition comes from Joshua 7:l4 and I Samuel l0:20, 2l. Here it is a social group smaller than a tribe but larger than a household. When Achan sinned, the Israelites were reviewed first by tribe, then by *mispaha*, then by household. This precise usage may be assumed to underlie even the broader references to a whole tribe or people. (For example, *mispaha* clearly refers to the whole tribe of Dan in Judges l3:2. However, on closer comparison, we discover that in the detailed tribal enumeration of Numbers 26, Dan was composed of a single *mispaha*, in contrast to the other tribes. Consequently, for Dan the tribe and the *mispaha* are probably synonymous.) In these instances we would translate "clan."

(3) It is used loosely on a few occasions to refer to a whole tribe or a whole people. Clear examples of this usage are Amos 3:l,2 and Jeremiah 8:3.

(4) Other uses are metaphorical or by analogy with these basic meanings, and are not important for understanding the promise of Genesis l2:3 (7).

Lexicography and Reiterations of the Promises
Hebrew lexicographers support the general features of this analysis. Gesenius gives the primary English meaning as "clan" (8). Koehler and Kittel give both "family" and "clan" (9). All recognize the fact of a reference to a tribal or people subdivision (l0).

Another route for determining the meaning of *mispahot* in Genesis l2:3 is to compare reiterations of the promise (ll). In this case, we discover that three passages (of five total) read *goyim* (nations, peoples) instead of *mispahot*. The Hebrew *goyim* is roughly equivalent to the Greek *ethne* of Matthew 28:l9 (l2). This interchange between *mispahot* and *goyim* in five passages containing the same promise provides good support for the TEV/NIV rendering "all the peoples" in Genesis l2:3 (l3).

|Numerical Description of the Clan|
What, we may ask, would a Hebrew *mispaha* actually look like? Following the enumeration of Numbers 26, we find that there were approximately sixty *mispahot* in Israel at that time (l4). This produces an average size per clan of l0,000 men aged twenty years and older. By extrapolation, the actual size of a clan including women and children would then average at least 40,000 people at the time of the Conquest (l5). Outside the extended family, it would function as the arena for identity, social and political connection, religious life, marriage, etc.

|Contemporary Discussions|
Contemporary discussions of "all the nations, peoples" center largely around the meanings of *goyim* (Heb.) and *ethne* (Greek). In Old Testament scholarship, Speiser has analyzed the meanings of *goy* (sing, "nation") and *'am* (sing., "people"), and concluded that *goy* is nearer the modern concept of nation (because a territorial base is needed), and that *'am* is nearer the concept of people-group (l6). He is undoubtedly correct. However, this must be understood in the context of civilization in which *modern* nationalism was entirely unknown, and in which a nation with a territorial base was actually a functioning people-group (i.e., linked by blood and culture as well as politics). Thus Speiser concludes by affirming that Israel was both *'am* and *goy*. The interchange of *mispahot* and *goyim* in the Genesis reiterations of the promise further substantiates the "people-focus" of the blessing, since the "clan" carries strong overtones of consanguinity (l7).

In New Testament scholarship, one debate concerns the religious meaning of *ethne*, and a second discussion concerns its sociological meaning.

The first debate poses the question, does *ethne* refer to all nations including the Jews, or does it refer to the Gentiles only (l8)? The evidence is not one-sided. *Ethne* is frequently used to denote the surrounding Gentile nations (excluding the Jews) in both Old and New Testament. But it is not always so used; sometimes it clearly includes both Jews and Gentiles (l9). On either interpretation, however, the effect of the commission is to underscore the universality of the gospel (20). Neither interpretation is affected by our consideration of Genesis l2:3.

The second debate, a sociological inquiry, is more closely related to our examination of *mispaha*/goy in the Old Testament promise. It poses the question, does *ethne* in Matthew 28:l9

imply an evangelistic approach to peoples as peoples, or does it refer simply to all people in general? It focuses especially on the issue of homogeneous units in evangelism. Walter Liefeld and David Hesselgrave have cautioned against reading an entire missiological methodology into *ethne* (2l). Hesselgrave summarizes the discussion by pointing out that his reading of the great commission ~allows~ for a particular methodology (e.g., approaching peoples as peoples, rather than as individuals), but does not *require* it (22). To substantiate this caution, Liefeld and Hesselgrave point out that Greek words other than *ethne* would have been used in the great commission if the intent had been to focus on "ethnic groups (23)."

For this, the Old Testament commission is illuminating. We have observed there the use of both *mispaha/phule* (with perhaps stronger ethnic overtones) and *goyim/ethne* (with stronger "national" overtones). *Mispaha* is clearly a specific "people-word," denoting as it does a clan, used interchangeably with *goy*. The point is not so much that Genesis l2:3 and Matthew 28:l9 *require* a certain methodology by the use of this language, but rather that they *assume* a social reality which structures the mode of communication and blessing for all people and all peoples.

|**Summary**|
Since the ancient notion of national identity is related to consanguinity and common culture, we find the *mispahot* (clans) and the *goyim* (peoples, nations) of the Genesis commission to be particular, yet inclusive, references to mankind in all its subdivisions. We find this underscored in the meanings and usages of the words. In general, the *goyim* are larger subdivisions and the *mispahot* are smaller. A free, but not misleading, sociological translation might be "peoples" (*goyim*, *mispahot*) and "subcultures" (*mispahot*).

Thus the overarching impact of the promise to bless "all the clans/nations" of the earth can be stated: through you the peoples of the earth will be blessed, even to the individual subcultures. The promise is for each of those subdivisions of mankind in which people find their identity.

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(l) Cf. Karl L. Schmidt on *ethnos* in Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. II (ed./trans. Geoffrey Bromiley), Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, l964, p. 369. On the definition of *ethnos*: "This word, which is common in Greek from the very first, probably comes from *ethnos*, and means 'mass' or 'host' or 'multitude' bound by the same manners, customs or other distinctive features. In most cases *ethnos* is used of men in the sense of a *people*." He describes *phule* as "people as a national unity of common descent." Both words are used by the Septuagint in the "bottom line" of the Abrahamic commission, in different scriptures.
(2) King James Version, Revised Standard Version, New English Bible, New American Standard Bible.
(3) James Muilenberg, "Abraham and the Nations," *Interpretation* l9, (l965), pp. 385-398. E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., l964, p. 86.   (4) Cp. G. Ernest Wright, "The Old Testament Basis of the Christian Mission," *The Theology of the Christian Mission* (ed. Gerald Anderson), New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., l96l, p. l8. Wright and others (cf. Driver, von Rad, Zimmerli) argue against a reductionist and nontheological interpretation of Gen. l2:l-3. It is our conclusion that the two commissions are essentially one. The promise (*epangelion*) to Abram is the gospel (*euangelion*) to the world. The Sender is the same, the command is the same, the mission is the same. The promise is Christ; the gospel is Christ. The Lord says go for the sake of the world.

(5) The first: Genesis 18:18, 22:18, 26:4, 28:14, 15. The second: Mark 16:15, Luke 24:47, John 20:21, Acts 1:8.

(6) Exodus 6, Numbers 26, Joshua 13, 15.

(7) Cf. Brown, Driver, Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Gesenius), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907, pp. 1046, 1047. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1951, p. 579.

(8) Brown, Driver, Briggs, *ibid*., p. 1046.

(9) Koehler, *ibid*., p. 579. Kittel, *op. cit*., pp. 369ff.

(10) Cf. especially Speiser, *op. cit.,* p. 86.

(11) Genesis 12:3, 18:18, 22:18, 26:4, 28:14, 15.

(12) Cf. Kittel, *op. cit*., pp. 369ff.

(13) The passages are all redactions of J, for those who follow the documentary hypothesis.

(14) Precise enumeration is difficult, due to overlap and subdivision. In some cases, a *mispaha* is further subdivided into additional *mispahot* above the household level, apparently due to larger populations or to social dissimilation. Joseph had 12 clans, Benjamin 7, Gad 7, Judah 5, etc.

(15) A growing comprehension of the *mispahot* of Israel may also yield clues to the political and religious structure of the nation. For example, the "elders" are apparently heads of *mispahot* (Exodus 12:21).

(16) E. A. Speiser, "'People' and 'Nation' of Israel", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79, (1960), pp. 157-163.

(17) Cf. Koehler, *op. cit*., p. 579; Brown, Driver, Briggs, *op. cit.,* pp. 1046, 1047.

(18) Cf. Peter O'Brien, "The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20: A Missionary Mandate or Not?" *The Reformed Theological Review* 35, (Sept.-Dec., 1976), pp. 66-78. Also John P. Meier, "Nations or Gentiles in Matthew 28:19," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39, (Jan., 1977) pp. 99-102, in debate with Hare and Harrington, "Make Disciples of All the Gentiles," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 37 (1975), pp. 359-369.

(19) Cf. Kittel, *op. cit.,* articles by both Bertram and Schmidt, esp. pp. 369ff.

(20) In the first case, the gospel is being extended to the Gentiles from a Jewish base, where many have rejected it. In the second case, the gospel includes the Gentiles ~along with~ the Jews. The debate concerns the overall interpretation of Matthew, but does not touch on the universality of the commission.

(21) Walter L. Liefeld, "Theology of Church Growth," in *Theology and Mission: Papers Given at Trinity Consultation No. 1,* (David Hesselgrave, ed.), Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1978. David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-culturally:A Guide for Home and Foreign Missions*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1980, pp. 47, 48. Also David J. Hesselgrave, "Confusion Concerning the Great Commission," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 15:4, October, 1979, p. 200.

(22) David J. Hesselgrave, letter to the editor, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 16:4, October, 1980, p. 245. Cf. also Tesunao Yamamori and David Hesselgrave in letter and response, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly,* 16:1, January, 1980, p. 50. Compare C. Peter Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981, p. 54.

(23) In addition to Liefeld and Hesselgrave, see C. Gordon Olson, "What about People-Movement Conversion?" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 15:3, July, 1979, p. 136. Also note Karl Barth, "An Exegetical Study of Matthew 28:16-20," *The Theology of the Christian Mission* (Gerald Anderson, ed.), New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1961, p. 64. "Not the nations as such are made disciples. This interpretation once infested missionary thinking and was connected with the painful fantasies of the German Christians. It is worthless." Barth is here concerned with the structure of Christian community, while the church growth writers focus more on Christian communication. The two foci are not exclusive, but complementary, if understood correctly.

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