



CONVERSION

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

A CHALLENGING ISSUE

- It is commonly assumed, especially by Bible skeptics, that God preferred the Israelites on the basis of their ethnicity. This preference was manifested in their unique covenantal relationship, receiving special revelation, and prohibition against intermarriage or intermingling with other nations.
- While this might be true, in part, it is a misconception to believe that God only loved or cared about the Israelites, or that His choice of them as a special and unique nation was based on ethnicity or moral superiority. The negative implications of such a misconception should be obvious.
- So, what about “the nations” of the Old Testament?

LOVE AND JUDGMENT

- First, the basis for God's love and judgment has always been rooted in His own perfect character. Both mercy and justice reside within God – without any conflict.
- Judgment always came because men and women chose evil, fully knowing right/wrong. The flood, Sodom, the Amalekites, Canaanites, Assyria, etc. Sin comes with consequences (Isaiah 1:16-20, Psalm 125, Deut. 30:15ff).
- Israel was chosen as a special people because of God's incredible faithfulness. He promised this blessing to Abraham and worked to bring it to fruition, in spite of Israel's waywardness (Gen. 17:6-7, 2 Tim. 2:13).
- Even with Israel's place as a holy nation, God still had His eyes upon the Gentiles...

THE ALIEN

- God wanted the Law to impress non-Israelites. His people's behavior would be a reflection of God Himself and positively impact Gentile lives (Deut. 4:5-8).
- God's desire was for Gentile salvation (Gen. 12:3, Isaiah 49:6, 45:20-24, 9:1-7, 2:1-4, Zech. 2:11, Jer. 16:19-21).
- Gentiles who joined Israel and fully embraced God (Ex. 12:48) were given the same rights as other Israelites:
- Passover (Ex. 12:43-49, Num. 9:14), tabernacle sacrifices (Num. 15:13-16), Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29), Jubilee (Lev. 25:6), kept food laws (Lev. 17:12-13).
- Received welfare benefits (Lev. 23:22) and were held accountable to the same laws and legal procedures (Lev. 24:22, 19:33-34).

WHAT ABOUT MARRIAGE?

- Deuteronomy 7:1-5
- People who are hostile to the Bible frequently point to passages like this to show how racist it is. Yet, the issue with the Canaanites was never about their race – it was their morals (Deut. 9:3-6)!
- These were child-sacrificing, idolatrous, materialistic, backward-thinking people who had been shown many generations of patience and mercy and were now being judged. The Israelites were to treat their Canaanite enemies according to their crimes (Lev. 18:24ff).
- Proscribing intermarriage was precautionary. Clearly, exceptions were made when a foreigner made changes to his/her moral/religious life.

WHAT ABOUT MARRIAGE?

- Uriah the Hittite (2 Samuel 11) – The Hittites were one of the nations specifically mentioned in Deuteronomy 7:1, yet he's married to an Israelite woman, serving in David's army, and clearly an unflappable, unimpeachable man.
- Ruth the Moabitess – She not only follows Naomi back to Israel, but genuinely accepts and submits to God (Ruth 1:16-17, 2:12). Yahweh, not Chemosh, is now her personal, covenantal God.
- Ezra 9-10 – In a classic case of modern sensibility missing the point, this story is not about race or ethnicity. In fact, it's the *moral* character of the wives that is the issue. “...According to their abominations...” (verse 1).

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

- Jonah and the sailors – When presented with evidence of the supremacy of God, they seem to fully commit themselves to serving Him (Jon. 1:7-16). Even with scant knowledge, they knew enough and acted (and put God’s prophet to shame).
- Jonah and Nineveh – Clearly, God had incredible love for these non-Israelites (4:11). But to receive any benefits, the people had to make drastic changes. Nothing has changed (John 3:3, Eph. 4:17ff).
- Ruth – Commitment means accepting God’s terms like a one-way ticket. She did not keep Chemosh in her back pocket, or reminisce about the good old days back in Moab. She was “all in,” contrasted with Orpah.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

- Naaman – 2 Kings 5 tells the story of this incredibly powerful Syrian military leader. Even though he was an enemy of Israel, he found grace and healing through the prophet Elisha, after which Naaman fully acknowledged the supremacy and mercy of God.
- If even a mortal enemy of Israel can find grace, anybody can (1 Timothy 1:12ff).
- You must be converted on God's terms (2 Ki. 5:13).
- You must acknowledge God (5:15, Heb. 11:6).
- The “honeymoon period” often ends very soon (5:17-19). We do not get the luxury of basking in a superficial emotional high before reality sinks in and the real work begins (Acts 9:19ff, Mark 5:18-19).