

The Mixed Multitude

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At the time of the Exodus, did God offer certain Gentiles the chance to be part of national Israel? Did some take Him up on the offer and become woven into the "chosen people"? The surprising answers should sound a loud warning to all in the Israel of God today.

Pay heed, Paul warns us, to the events surrounding the Exodus and the subsequent wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel. "All these things," he assures us, serve "as examples, . . . written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come" (I Corinthians 10:11). In verses 6-10, Paul catalogs their sins: "lust after evil things," idolatry, "sexual immorality," "tempt[ing] Christ," murmuring.

God records one such example of their sins in Numbers 11, where the "mixed multitude who were among [the children of Israel] yielded to intense craving" (verse 4). God sent quail aplenty—and "struck the people with a very great plague" (verse 33).

The mixed multitude is mysterious by reason of its obscurity. God's Word does not say much directly about these folk, except for a passing reference here and there. One is in Exodus 12:37-38: "Then the children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children. A mixed multitude went up with them also."

Who these people were, where they came from, why they joined the Israelites, what happened to them—God's Word specifically answers none of these questions. As we will see, however, what God does say about them speaks volumes about the extent—and limits—of His grace. Their story provides an excellent Old Testament lesson of His mercy as well as His judgment.

Partakers of Grace

Exodus 12:38 tells us the "mixed multitude went up with" the children of Israel. These folk fell in step with God's army as it marched out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses. For how long? Their presence during the quail incident, cited above, indicates that these peoples were still with the Israelites *at least* one year after the first Passover. That means that the mixed multitude was present at Mount Sinai, some fifty days after the Red Sea crossing. This means *they were present at the giving of the Law!*

Whoever they were, the peoples of the mixed multitude were much more than just witnesses of God's strength. Even the unbelieving Egyptians witnessed that! The mixed multitude *partook* of God's grace, experienced it *with* the children of Israel. Whoever they were, these people were fellow-travelers with Israel for a time, experiencing with them the power of God as He pulled them "out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 4:20; see also I Kings 8:51; Jeremiah 11:4).

Both Israel and the mixed multitude experienced His might as He destroyed the most powerful nation on earth at that time. They both experienced deliverance from the Egyptians at the Red Sea. They both experienced the shaking of Sinai as God thundered the Ten Commandments. They both ate the

manna and drank water from the Rock! They both were baptized in the Red Sea (see I Corinthians 10: 1-4).

The folk God calls the "mixed multitude" were partakers with Israel! But who were they?

What's in a Name?

The general term God uses to describe these folk tells us they were *mixed*, and they were *many*. Apparently not part of a single "family grown great," as the Moabites or Canaanites were, they bear no family or national appellation. Yet, as vague as the term *mixed multitude* appears, a careful analysis yields an abundance of information.

Multitude. The Hebrew word for *multitude* is *rab* meaning "great," "many," or "large." *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* claims that *rab*, whether referring to people or things, "represents plurality in numbers or amount." In Exodus 5:5: Pharaoh, speaking to Moses and Aaron, alludes to the population of Israel by calling them *rab*, "many." So, the mixed multitude was large, perhaps consisting of thousands or millions of individuals.

Mixed. The Hebrew word translated *mixed*, *gehrev*, appears only 11 times in God's Word. Twice the translators rendered *gehrev* as *mixed* (Exodus 12:38; Nehemiah 13:3). In its other nine appearances, however, we get the strongest indication of its meaning. All nine of these instances are in Leviticus 13:48-59, where God gives Moses and Aaron His law concerning leprosy.

Notice Leviticus 13:47-48:

Also, if a garment has a leprous plague in it, whether it is a woolen garment or a linen garment, whether it is in the warp or woof of linen or wool, whether in leather or in anything made of leather.

Both *mixed* of Exodus 12:38 and *woof* of Leviticus 13:48 are translations of *gehrev*.

But how different are the subjects of Exodus 12 and Leviticus 13! The former text concerns the Exodus, the seminal historic event of national Israel. The latter deals with a law concerning leprosy. What could *mixed* and *woof* have in common?

Answering that question requires that we look first at *woof* in the context of its sister word, *warp*. *Warp* and *woof* are weaving terms:

Warp refers to the lengthwise threads in a woven article; they are the threads that hang *down* in a loom, running parallel to the bolt of cloth being created.

Woof (also called the *filling*) refers to the threads that crisscross the warp, running at right angles—perpendicular—to them; they interlace among the warp, over and under, over and under.

By extension, *woof* has come to mean "a basic or essential element or material," according to the dictionary. Clearly, both warp *and* woof are important to the integrity and strength of a garment. A

bolt of cloth lacking either warp *or* woof simply will not "hang together." The warp and the woof complement each other. Properly united, they form a strong fabric, for example, a carpet, which can take the rough-and-tumble wear of years.

Weaving a Coat of Many Colors

The connection between *woof* of Leviticus 13 and *mixed* of Exodus 12 now becomes clear. In Leviticus 13, *gehrev* refers to the woof or filler of a woven *cloth*: in Exodus 12, *gehrev* refers to people. **God is speaking by way of analogy.** He develops that comparison in Exodus 12:48-49:

And when a stranger sojourns with you and wants to keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as a native of the land. For no uncircumcised person shall eat it. One law shall be for the native-born and for the stranger who sojourns among you.

In Exodus 12:37-38, God hints at a dualism which verses 47-48 develop. In doing so, He answers at least two important questions for us:

If the mixed multitude is the folk of the woof, what people make up the warp? Exodus 12:37-39 mention two groups of people—Israelite and the mixed multitude marching out of Egypt. Verses 47-48 establish that dualism as a dichotomy, a clear, distinct division. There is "a great gulf fixed" between Gentile and Israelite that only circumcision can bridge.

Thus, metaphorically, God expresses the Israelite-Gentile dualism as the warp and the woof. The Gentile is the woof, the *gehrev* that marched out of Egypt with the children of Israel. The Israelite is the warp.

What is the relationship of the peoples of the woof to those of the warp? We saw earlier that the defining characteristic of the warp-woof relationship is *unity*: A woven cloth is useless without *both* warp and woof. It is a relationship of interdependence. The warp-woof metaphor of Exodus 12 stresses the *union* of peoples. In fact, the relationship appears almost symbiotic, an "intimate living together of two dissimilar organisms in a mutually beneficial relationship."

The very same chapter records the first Passover, introduces us to the mixed multitude *and* outlines the condition under which God would accept Israelite and Gentile. God required physical circumcision for both. Through circumcision, the Gentile can take the Passover and become completely united under "one law" with the Israelite (Exodus 12:49). Warp and woof together make one fabric. Israelite and Gentile together make one nation under God. They become one physical nation under one constitution—God's Law.

God uses the warp-woof metaphor behind the word *mixed* to illustrate an important principle: *He can turn a dichotomy into a union.* Figuratively, He can weave diverse threads, running crosswise to each other, into a single, strong fabric. This metaphor from weaving describes how He works with His people.

At the time of the Exodus, God was offering the woof—the mixed multitude—the chance of a lifetime. In His grace, God was *at that time* offering these Gentile folk the opportunity to take their

place *with* the children of Israel, interlaced with them, as an integral part of the fabric of the nation He was building. An essential part! What an opportunity these people had for national greatness! The mixed multitude was on the ground floor of God's nation-building.

We cannot identify with certainty these peoples' ethnic and national backgrounds. Some of them may have been native Egyptians who, witnessing the power of God in their land, forsook their own weak gods and cast their lots with the "winning team." The word *mixed* certainly indicates that they were not of a single ethnic origin. Rather, it appears that they were a veritable kaleidoscope of peoples, probably black and yellow and red slaves the Egyptians had gathered in their conquests. To God, they were a folk of rich potential, having qualities He wanted as part of His own "rainbow coalition." God was, indeed, weaving a "coat of many colors."

Not for Everyone

God offered only to certain gentile peoples the opportunity to be a part of Israel. He was selective then, just as He is today when He calls individuals—"one from a city and two from a family" (Jeremiah 3:14)—to spiritual salvation. Notice some examples of God's rejection of Gentiles through Israel's history:

During the period of Joshua: God warned Joshua to stay away from the indigenous population of Palestine (Joshua 23:6-7; Judges 2:2).

During the Kingdom Period: I Kings 11 records the pathetic state of affairs in Israel near the end of Solomon's life. Solomon had married the

women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites—from the nations of whom the LORD had said to the children of Israel, "You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. For surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods." (I Kings 11:1-2)

During the post-exilic period: Nehemiah 13 records God's rejection of whole Gentile nations *after* the remnant of Judah and Benjamin returned from Babylon. The people of the remnant came to understand that "no Ammonite or Moabite should ever come into the congregation of God" (Nehemiah 13:1).

In Joshua's, Solomon's, and Nehemiah's time, God did *not* choose to weave whole nations of Gentiles into His fabric, Israel. But during the Exodus, God extended His mercy to Egypt's mixed multitude, offering these folk a chance to join Israel.

God did not offer that opportunity again on any wide scale until the days of the apostles (Acts 10). At that time, He offered spiritual, not national, salvation to the Gentiles He called. In one sense, Exodus 12 foreshadows Acts 10, with the physical type preceding the spiritual. In both cases, whether under the Old Covenant or the New, God's calling is His prerogative. What is first recorded in the Old Testament (Exodus 33:19) is repeated in the New (Romans 9:15): "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion."

Clean Garments and Called Multitudes

Earlier, we saw there were historically *two* mixed multitudes, one in Moses' time, the other in Nehemiah's. Some might protest, "God is unfair! Why didn't He accept the woof of Nehemiah's day just as He accepted the woof of Moses' day?" Paul asks the same question in somewhat different terms in Romans 9:19: "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" Since God's calling is totally unilateral, and since no one can resist His will, why does He find fault in people?

His answer is that God can do whatever He pleases with *His* creation (verses 20-26). He is the Potter, and the clay cannot legitimately question the Potter's methods or purposes (see Isaiah 29:16; Jeremiah 18:1-11). He, as sovereign ruler over His creation, is under no obligation to tell us *why* he chooses as he does.

The warp-woof metaphor of Leviticus 13:47-59, the law dealing with leprosy in cloth, reinforces Paul's conclusion. A priest is to examine a cloth thought to be leprous, but make no decision about the disposition of the garment for seven days, during which time it is to remain isolated, separated from the people of Israel (verse 50). After the seven days, He reexamines the suspect garment (verse 51). If the leprosy has spread, "whether warp or woof, . . . it shall be burned in the fire" (verse 52). If the leprosy has not spread yet is still present, the garment is to be washed and isolated for yet *another* seven days (verses 53-54). If the leprosy has not changed its color after this second week, the garment is to be burned, even though the plague has not spread (verse 55). If the plague has disappeared, then the garment is clean and fit for use after it has been washed a second time (verse 58).

What an example of God's mercy, patience and long-suffering! He extends mercy on mercy—to a piece of cloth! How much more grace does God show us, the warp and woof of His garment! How much more has He given the Gentiles in offering them spiritual salvation now! How much more will he exhibit when He calls whole *nations* of Gentiles—when the time is right!

Was there a difference between the woof of Nehemiah's day and that of Moses' day? Indeed there was! The woof of Exodus 13 was a slave nation *called* by God, but the woof of Nehemiah 13, made up of Moabites and Ammonites, remained *uncalled* to that point in history. In other words, this latter woof was *unclean*, suffering from the "leprosy" of sin. However, God judged the woof of Exodus *clean*.

Did you notice that Leviticus 13 leaves an important question unanswered? It does not tell us *why* God chooses to cleanse one garment and not another. Likewise, God never tells us why He accepted the mixed multitude of Exodus, but rejected the mixed multitude of Nehemiah. The *why* is known only to Him; as clay, we cannot question the Potter's decisions.

New Testament Warp and Woof

The clear implication of Leviticus 13:47-59 is that some, though not all, leprous garments became clean. Peter's vision of "all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air" (Acts 10:12) speaks to this point. *God made it clear that He was capable of cleansing the Gentiles, but never said He had cleansed all of them at this time.* Notice His admonition to Peter: "What God has cleansed you must not call common" (verse 15). Peter got the picture when he met Cornelius shortly after, telling the Roman centurion: "In truth I perceive that

God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him" (verses 34, 35). While God calls from "every nation," only some, those who fear and obey, are acceptable to Him.

In verse 36, Peter interjects a vital idea: Christ "is Lord of all." Verse 45 records that the "Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also." The "apostles and brethren who were in Judea" (Acts 11: 1) came to understand that "God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life" (verse 18).

God cleansed *some* Gentiles, those He appointed to salvation. Paul addresses this fact in Romans 3: 29-30:

[I]s He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

In Galatians 3:28, the apostle to the Gentiles continues in this vein: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you all are one in Christ Jesus." In Colossians 3:11, he reiterates Peter's comment in Acts 10:36 that Christ "is Lord of all": "[W]here there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all."

God is bringing many diverse peoples into *one* body, His church (Romans 9:6-33) with Christ as its Head (Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:15-16). He is truly weaving "a coat of many colors."

Separating from the World—and Rejoining It

There is a warning to God's people today in all this: leprosy.

Leprosy is a type of sin. Sin can strike "either in the warp or in the woof" (Leviticus 13:51); no one in God's church is immune to it. If sin does not abate, God will tear it "out of the garment" (verse 56). As we saw in Numbers 11, the leprosy of sin struck the mixed multitude. In rebellion and lust, these peoples sinned. Some of them died, and others later departed from the "church in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38, margin). The same can happen to us.

These Gentiles started out on the right path. At least initially, the mixed multitude took the opportunity God offered them. Sometime after the "quail incident" of Numbers 11, though, they chose to separate themselves from God and His people. God's Word does not tell us the exact circumstances. What is important to understand is this: *Whatever the reason they cited for their defection, when these peoples made the decision to depart from God and His people, they chose to rejoin the world's nations, the world's system.*

God intended Israel to be separate from the world's other nations. It is one of the reasons God separated His people from Egypt—so He could teach them His way of life. Along this line, Balaam's comments in Numbers 23:9 are instructive: "For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him; there! *A people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations.*"

God even connects Israel's separateness with His own holiness. "And you shall be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be Mine" (Leviticus 20:26). When the mixed multitude rejected the pillar of fire, when it forsook the cloud, it "mixed" with the world! *It lost the separateness it possessed as long as it remained with God's people.*

From Fame to Anonymity

What a tragedy of missed opportunity! What potential those people had, physically and nationally—the chance of a lifetime. Literally, somewhere in the Sinai desert, they walked away from it.

The mixed multitude, just like the children of Israel, had been Egyptian slaves—the weak of the world (I Corinthians 1:26-31), nobodies. These peoples, Israelites and Gentiles, were more than witnesses of God's mercy. *The warp and woof together experienced it.* The Gentiles were there! As long as they stayed with God's people, they were **partakers** of God's grace.

These nobodies had a chance to enjoy the national blessings God was ready to shower on the Israelites, if they obeyed Him. But the folk of the mixed multitude took another path, one that seemed right to them, and passed out of the pages of Scripture and history. They exchanged the opportunity of national fame for historical anonymity.

The mixed multitude does indeed sound a clarion warning to us today. "For indeed the gospel was preached to us *as well as to them*; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith" (Hebrews 4:2). They died in the wilderness like the unbelieving Israelites, missing the blessings of the Promised Land.

Lacking faith, the peoples of the mixed multitude—Gentiles blessed above all others then living—murmured, complained, lusted. Because they suffered from the leprosy of sin, God eventually tore them out of the fabric He was weaving. Some of them died of plague. Others left for parts unknown. *All failed to reach the potential God placed before them.*

We of the spiritual Israel of God, "whether in the warp or in the woof," dare not follow their path. If we do, ours will be a tragedy of grander scale, of eternal consequence. As Peter says so encouragingly:

Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (II Peter 1:10-11)