For the Healing of the Nations

This study sets forth the thesis that the Bible includes nations or communities, not simply individuals, in the creative and salvific activity of God. This is evident from the beginning of the biblical story in the Garden of Eden and from the end of the story in the New Earth. Nations are present in both. These biblical pictures challenge individualistic understandings of Christian mission often prevalent in Western theologies and call on God’s people to mediate wholeness in a broken world.

The term “nation” in the Bible can refer to communities quite different from our contemporary understanding of “nation.” The term can refer to great empires such as Rome, or to small communities that we would probably call cities or towns. Perhaps the term “community” would be more appropriate in many cases.

We will begin with nations in the Garden of Eden, then move to the New Earth, and finally draw some conclusions.

# Eden

Genesis is not the only Old Testament book that speaks of Eden. It also occurs in the oracles against the foreign nations in Ezekiel. Such oracles represent a common genre in the prophets where the prophet denounces some of the nations that surround Israel. Ezekiel devotes most of chapters 25-32 to oracles against foreign nations, including Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Sidon, and Assyria, but his primary targets are Tyre and Egypt. Tyre deserves this denunciation, according to Ezekiel, for its treatment of Judah when Babylon invaded.

“Son of man, because Tyre has said of Jerusalem, ‘Aha! The gate to the nations is broken, and its doors have swung open to me; now that she lies in ruins I will prosper,’ therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against you, Tyre, and I will bring many nations against you, like the sea casting up its waves. (Ezekiel 26:2-3)[[1]](#footnote-1)

This denunciation of Tyre begins with a pronouncement of judgment in chapter 26, moves to a lament for Tyre in chapter 27, and concludes with two oracles in chapter 28, the first (vss. 1-10) against the “prince” (*negid)* of Tyre, and the second against the “king” (*melek)* of Tyre. Commentators differ as to whether the prophet intends a distinction between these two, or whether they simply parallel oracles. Both outline Tyre’s pride, arrogance and claims to divinity and then proceed to predict Tyre’s downfall.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Our concern is with the second part that addresses the “king” of Tyre and places him in Eden.

The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, take up a lament concerning the king of Tyre and say to him: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says:

“‘You were the seal of perfection,  
    full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.  
You were in Eden,  
    the garden of God;  
every precious stone adorned you:  
    carnelian, chrysolite and emerald,  
    topaz, onyx and jasper,  
    lapis lazuli, turquoise and beryl.  
Your settings and mountings were made of gold;  
    on the day you were created they were prepared.  
You were anointed as a guardian cherub,  
    for so I ordained you.  
You were on the holy mount of God;  
    you walked among the fiery stones.  
You were blameless in your ways  
    from the day you were created  
    till wickedness was found in you. (Ezekiel 28:11-15)

This passage is frequently interpreted as the fall of Satan from heaven since Tyre’s presence in Eden seems problematic. Such is the case in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary.*[[3]](#footnote-3)

However, according to Ezekiel, it is not only Tyre that was present in Eden. Assyria and Egypt were there as well! When we understand what Ezekiel 31 says of them, the oracle against Tyre is seen in a new light.

Ezekiel 29-31 is directed against Egypt. After the initial oracle in chapter 29, a lament for Egypt follows in chapter 30. In chapter 31 the prophet goes on to address “Pharaoh and his hordes” and reminds them of what God had done to Assyria, which had been a beautiful tree in the garden of Eden before its fall.

“‘Who can be compared with you in majesty?   
Consider Assyria, once a cedar in Lebanon,  
    with beautiful branches overshadowing the forest;  
it towered on high,  
    its top above the thick foliage.  
The waters nourished it,  
    deep springs made it grow tall;  
their streams flowed  
    all around its base  
and sent their channels  
    to all the trees of the field.  
So it towered higher  
    than all the trees of the field;  
its boughs increased  
    and its branches grew long,  
    spreading because of abundant waters.  
All the birds of the sky  
    nested in its boughs,  
all the animals of the wild  
    gave birth under its branches;  
all the great nations  
    lived in its shade.  
It was majestic in beauty,  
    with its spreading boughs,  
for its roots went down  
    to abundant waters.  
The cedars in the garden of God  
    could not rival it,  
nor could the junipers  
    equal its boughs,  
nor could the plane trees  
    compare with its branches—  
no tree in the garden of God  
    could match its beauty.  
I made it beautiful  
    with abundant branches,  
the envy of all the trees of Eden  
    in the garden of God. (Ezekiel 31:2b-9)

Notice what the oracle, which is directed against Egypt, says about Assyria. It was a beautiful tree, a cedar in Lebanon, nourished by water that flowed around its base. It was higher than the other trees and was the envy of all the other trees in Eden, the garden of God. For Ezekiel, the nations were trees in the garden of Eden, nourished by water that flowed around them. Assyria was the tallest of these trees. Yet despite its grandeur, we learn later in the chapter that this giant Assyria tree was felled and ended up in Sheol.

 I made the nations tremble at the sound of its fall when I brought it down to the realm of the dead to be with those who go down to the pit. Then all the trees of Eden, the choicest and best of Lebanon, the well-watered trees, were consoled in the earth below. They too, like the great cedar, had gone down to the realm of the dead, to those killed by the sword, along with the armed men who lived in its shade among the nations. (Ezekiel 31:16-17)

After this prolonged example about Assyria, Egypt is told:

“‘Which of the trees of Eden can be compared with you in splendor and majesty? Yet you, too, will be brought down with the trees of Eden to the earth below; you will lie among the uncircumcised, with those killed by the sword. (Ezekiel 31:18)

Ezekiel 31 points to Assyria, Egypt, and other nations, who envy the greatness of Assyria and Egypt, as trees in the garden in Eden. God created them there. God also sustained them there with rivers of waters that flowed around them. But God also felled them when they were disobedient. Eden is the locus of God’s creative activity, not only regarding humans and animals, but of the nations as well.[[4]](#footnote-4)

When we go back to Ezekiel 28, we observe that Tyre or its king is in the garden of Eden but is not specifically mentioned as a tree. Does the analogy with Ezekiel 31, however, at least suggest that Ezekiel may also have considered Tyre to be a tree in Eden? The fact that Tyre is adorned with precious stones such as carnelian, chrysolite, emerald, topaz, onyx, jasper, lapis lazuli, turquoise and beryl (Ezekiel 28:13) might seem to preclude this. On the other hand, the idea of a tree adorned with or even bearing precious stones may not be foreign to the ancient near Eastern mind. In tablet IX of the Gilgamesh epic, when the protagonist comes out of darkness into light, he sees something that appears to be a tree, although since the text is broken at this point it is not certain. The text reads:

Twelve leagues he traveled and it grew brilliant.  
 ...it bears lapis lazuli as foliage,  
 bearing fruit, a delight to look upon.

A tree bearing precious stones seems far-fetched to us, but then so do nations that are trees in the garden of Eden. Whether or not Tyre is included as one of the trees, Ezekiel sees its origin in Eden, and this should hardly be considered strange, since Egypt, Assyria, and other nations were also created in Eden. The garden of Eden is the place where God created the nations. It is also the place where God nurtured them with flowing water. But like Adam and Eve, God could also remove them from the garden, and even send them to Sheol, because of their disobedience.

Though much less explicit, the idea of nations in Eden is not absent from Genesis. The river that flows from Eden in Genesis 2:11-14 and separates into four rivers seems to suggest that Eden is a source of nurturing the nations. Remember that water nurturing the nations is present in the Ezekiel passages above.[[5]](#footnote-5) Clearly God’s creative activity in Eden includes not only humans and animals, but nations or communities as well. This creative activity also implies caring. God cares not only about individual human lives but about human life within communities. This is true not only in the biblical accounts of creation but is evident in biblical visions of the future as well.[[6]](#footnote-6)

# The New Earth

Within the thought of the classical Hebrew prophets such as Isaiah stood a vision that the nations would turn to God.

In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. (Isaiah 2:2, NRSV)

Paul draws on Isaiah’s vision to emphasize that the gospel is to include the nations, i.e. Gentiles in passages such as Romans 15:12. And the book of Revelation draws on this vision to include nations in its vision of the new earth.

In Revelation 21:3, according to the King James Version, a voice from the throne proclaims:

And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his **people**, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

However, the New Revised Standard Version reads:

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them as their God;

they will be his **peoples,**

and God himself will be with them;”

The presence of the singular “people” in the King James Version has contributed to a more individualistic reading of this apocalyptic vision. The new earth is made up of saved individuals. The plural, however, is the better reading of this textual variation on both external and internal evidence. The plural goes back to the fourth century with codex Sinaiticus and the fifth with Alexandrinus, whereas the oldest attestation of the singular is in the ninth century Leningrad manuscript.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The verse is a partial quote from Ezekiel 37:27, where both the Hebrew and the LXX have the singular. The context in Ezekiel clearly indicates the singular is intended, for God is promising to restore the two nations, Israel and Judah, into a single people. Therefore, the plural in Revelation 21:3 comes as a surprise. If John had originally written the singular, it is hard to understand why a later scribe would make it plural. On the other hand, a scribe who read the plural in Revelation 21:3 might be expected to change it to the singular, since scribes tended to harmonize. In other words, scribes liked the expected, not surprises.

Numerous commentators argue that the plural is original. Swete suggests:

One important and doubtless deliberate change has been made in the terms of these prophecies; our writer has substituted laoi for laoV--the many peoples of redeemed humanity for the single elect nation, the world for Israel.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Stefonovic says:

John switches the singular “people” to the plural “peoples.” The plural form indicates the inclusion of all God’s children from all ages—“from every nation and tribe and people and tongue” (Rev. 7:9)—in the population of the new earth.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Thus, John’s vision of the new earth is not only about individuals getting to heaven. It includes peoples, or nations and communities. This is evident from other references in the last two chapters of Revelation as well. Revelation 21:24 pictures nations and kings in the new earth when John says of the holy city, “The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.”

The first two verses of Revelation 22 speak of the healing of these nations.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

Given our usual individualistic understanding of Revelation, we might ask who these nations are, and in a world made perfect why do they need healing? Ranko Stefanovic suggests that this “refers figuratively to the removal of all national and linguistic barriers” so that all nations are “united into one family.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Whatever may be the case, however, it is undeniable that John envisions peoples and nations in the new earth. Just as we saw God’s creative activity in Eden embracing communities, not merely individuals, in Revelation we see God’s salvific activity embracing nations and communities as well.

# So What?

This raises many questions that we might explore, such as the nature and scope of metaphor, symbol, and figurative language in biblical creation accounts and apocalyptic visions. Time permits discussion of only one issue, however. These pictures of the nations suggest something about how we understand Christian mission.

Recently I heard a sermon which argued that Adventists should concentrate on one mission and one mission only: getting individuals saved and ready for heaven. The speaker argued that since we know from prophecy the world is only going to get worse until Jesus comes, therefore any effort at improving the world, including work for social justice, is a distraction and a waste of time. We are to focus only on proclaiming the gospel so individuals can get to heaven.

Although many of us in this setting would hardly be convinced by this such a line of reasoning, it is far more prevalent in the pew than we might imagine. For the past three years I have participated in a podcast sponsored by our local conference on racial justice from a Christian perspective. You would not believe the push-back our conference president has received from some church members for daring to sponsor discussions of issues such as sundown towns, green books, and the Tulsa race massacre of 1921. Our ministerial director, one of my former students, leads the discussions, and has literally lost friends over his participation.

Ezekiel’s picture of nations in Eden and John’s vision of nations in the New Earth, however, call such individualistic understandings of our mission into question. Without in any way denying the literal future reality of the second coming or the new earth, there is no question that the apocalyptic vision is not merely a *prediction* for the future but is a *prescription* for the present. God’s concern for the healing and salvation of nations or communities calls Christians to care about healing broken communities in the present, not simply making sure individuals get to heaven in the future. Social and political involvement to bring justice to the present world and break down barriers between communities is not a distraction from our mission, but an essential part of our mission as servants of the God who creates and cares for the “nations.”

Although the visions of Ezekiel and John invite us to participate in the healing of communities now, they do not tell us specifically what we must do. Prayerful consideration and careful thought about our resources and opportunities in relationship to the needs of the individuals and communities around us will have to guide us. The apocalyptic visions do tell us something about the shape our mission will take, however.

First, our mission will be holistic. We will not only care for souls but for overall well-being, physical, social, emotional, economic, etc. We are concerned to heal the brokenness of the present as well prepare for the future.

Second, our mission will be communal. Our concern is not only for broken individuals, but for the communities in which individuals find their identity and well-being. The two cannot be separated. We can’t heal individuals successfully while ignoring the communities in which they live.

Third, our concern will be inclusive. John’s vision includes every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. This rules out all racial and ethnic discrimination, prejudice and injustice. Breaking down these barriers is not an addition to the gospel; it is essential to the gospel (Ephesians 2:14, Galatians 3:28).

Fourth, our mission will be in harmony with the self-sacrificial attitude of Jesus, the slaughtered lamb of God. Our social and political involvement to help heal broken communities can never degenerate into me-first nationalism or strident, polarized, political partisanship, as is the case with much of the evangelical community today.

To summarize. The presence of nations or communities as objects of God’s creative care at the beginning in creation and at the end in God’s promised future calls Christians in the present to work for the healing of communities as they mediate wholeness in a broken world.

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1. Daniel Block adds another reason when he says:

   Because Yahweh had selected Nebuchadrezzar as his agent of judgment upon Judah, an attempt by any nation to thwart Babylonian activity in the Levant was perceived as defiance against the irrevocable divine decree. When Jerusalem finally fell in 586, the only states that were still resisting the Babylonians were Egypt and Tyre. It is not coincidental, therefore, that of the foreign nations addressed by Ezekiel, these two are singled out for the brunt of his oracular volleys.

   Daniel I Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48.* The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), Kindle Edition, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Block, P. 88 presents the following chart comparing the two:

   **A Comparison of Ezekiel 28:1-10 and 28:11-19**

   |  |  |  |
   | --- | --- | --- |
   |  | **28:1-10** | **28:11-19** |
   | **Genre** | **Judgment speech** | **Lament (*qina*)** |
   | **Literary style** | **Standard narrative prose** | **Elevated prose** |
   | **Addressee** | ***Negid sor,* “prince of Tyre”** | ***Melek sor,* “king of Tyre** |
   | **Issue** | **The arrogant claim** | **The glorious reality** |
   | **Manner of punishment** | **Through agents** | **By Yahweh himself** |
   | **The role of the nations** | **Agents of judgment** | **Witnesses of judgment** |

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* 4:675 reads:

   Verses 11-19, though presented as a dirge upon the king of Tyrus, can hardly be limited in its application to the Tyrian prince. The imagery so far transcends such a local reference, that designations such as “extreme irony” fail to answer the problems created if a wholly local application is given to the passage.

   The following statements seem particularly difficult to apply to any literal “king of Tyrus: (1) “Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God,”…. It seems that as Ezekiel beheld the character and activities of the literal king of Tyre in vision, Inspiration lifted the veil between the seen and the unseen and the prophet was permitted to see the invisible yet powerful being whom the king of Tyre served [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This idea of trees representing nations is not without analogy in the ancient near east. Michaela Bauks has shown from both literary and iconographic evidence that trees were used as symbols in three primary ways: as fertility symbols, as symbols of kings and their power, and for sacred places. The gardens that kings had around their palaces serve as a background for much of this symbolism. There is fluidity between the notion of the tree as a symbol of the king or of the nation. Bauks also gives examples of trees that represent kings being felled as judgment for their hubris. Michaela Bauks, “Sacred Trees in the Garden of Eden and Their ancient Near Eastern Precursors,” *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 3. Jg., 267-301, (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Although the roots of the term “Eden,” have traditionally been seen in a word meaning “steppe,” many now hold that it comes from a word meaning a place of luxurious moisture, a well-watered area. The Tell Fakhariyah inscription seems to suggest this. See, for example, Richard S. Hess, “Eden, A Well-Watered Place,” *Bible Review* 7:6 (December 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a presentation of the connections between the picture of Eden in Genesis and John’s apocalyptic vision in Revelation see Sigve K. Tonstad, *Revelation,* Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), p. 322-330. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. According to the Aland *Greek New Testament*, the plural is attested by Sinaiticus, A, 046,1, 94, 2042, 2053, 2081, and Irenaeus. The singular reading occurs in P, 051, 1006, 1611, 1854, 1859, 2020, 2065, 2073, 2138 and 2432. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of John: The Greek Text with Introduction,* *Notes and Indices* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), p. 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2002), p. 577. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Stefanovic, p. 593. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)