

## Particularity: Defining the Context

One of the critical challenges of Asian American theology is the difficulty of defining a context that is extremely diverse and complex. Not only do the aspects of multiple ethnic heritages and generations pose challenges, the overall context itself is in flux amid changing global forces and cultural shifts. As postcolonial studies argue for an anti-essentialist hybridic identity for subalterns, this hybridity applies just as well to Asian Americans who must negotiate various aspects of their bicultural identity. Essentialism refers to stereotypical and homogenizing representations of a social group, usually by the colonializing power or the majority culture, representations that disregard this group's internal diversity and shifting nature, and hold hegemony over it. Avoiding this problem, and proceeding in a nonessentialist fashion, is one of our key tasks.

This conundrum of Asian American identity becomes apparent when the label "Asian American" is often used in an ethnically specific and narrow manner to functionally refer to first-generation Korean Americans in the works of Jung Young Lee or Sang Hyun Lee, for example.<sup>1</sup> A different ethnic center is adopted for the term "Asian American" in the works of Japanese American or Chinese American

theologians.<sup>2</sup> This kind of ethnic and generational monopolizing of the term “Asian American” exacerbates matters by confusing identity and contextual framing. For example, what does Confucianism have to do with South Asian Americans, or is marginality really experienced similarly among various generations, or in what sense is the Chinese Exclusion Act or Japanese internment significant to other communities?

Considering the size of Asia, the term “Asian American,” properly speaking, includes those of East Asian, Southeast Asian, and South Asian heritages at the very least. The peoples covered by this broad category do not share any single cultural heritage, history, immigration narrative, or even skin color. While the concept of marginality in some shape or form is often used to circumvent this diversity issue, such a strategy results in ignoring each person’s cultural heritage and dulling the particularity that is so crucial for any theology that takes context seriously.

Regarding this issue of context and ethno-racial identity, a cursory look at Barth’s works yields scant resources, except for his condemnations of *Blut und Boden* (Blood and Soil) ideology and its theological counterparts. However, such a judgment belies the rich potential in his insights and nuances present in his understanding of *Volk* (peoplehood or nationhood). Although Barth does not always develop his insights fully or in the direction that is required for the task of Asian American theology, it would certainly be a mistake to think that constructive wisdom about defining contexts and identities is absent altogether in his work.

As we have discussed in the introduction, the goal here is not so much to be faithful Barthians, but to honor Barth as a teacher by continuing his theological trajectory, as Barth does with John Calvin and Wilhelm Herrmann. Therefore, Barth’s ideas presented here, as

1. Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995); and Sang Hyun Lee, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).
2. David Ng, ed., *People on the Way: Asian North Americans Discovering Christ, Culture, and Community* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1996).

in the later chapters, will be extended and also critiqued at times for our purposes. However, we will follow closely Barth's deep theological conviction of respecting divine precedence in all matters in an attempt to avoid Babylonian captivities of every kind.

With these reflections in mind, Barth's affirmation of the Jewish flesh of Jesus, the implications of election for Israel and the Jews, and his connection of these insights to the general concept of peoplehood are fruitful groundwork for defining, developing, and engaging with contexts for Asian American theology. In the flow of argument from the Jewish flesh of Jesus to general peoplehood, Barth avoids the abstract nationalism that so plagued his contemporary political and ecclesial situation, while allowing for the affirmation of nationhood or peoplehood as a concrete context for receiving God's Word for discipleship. The key lies in avoiding essentialism, in a sense, and asserting that peoplehood as a context is reversible, fluid, and removable.<sup>3</sup> The limits of Barth's insights will be noted in time; however, the crucial idea is that by rejecting an essentialist definition of the context, it does not become a straitjacket or a form of Babylonian captivity for the Word.

As proposed in the schema delineated in the previous chapter, we proceed first by discussing Barth, then, general contextual theology, and finally, Asian American theology. Our argument begins with Barth's rejection of abstract nationalism while retaining a sense of peoplehood, which he expositis in the "Neighbors Near and Far" section in §54 of the *Church Dogmatics* III/4.<sup>4</sup> This section represents Barth's mature thought regarding the idea of peoplehood, where he explores the relationship between Israel and the nations. In order to understand the wider background to this relationship between Israel and the nations, the election of Jesus Christ and of Israel is addressed.

3. Barth does not use the word "essentialism," which has been developed within postcolonial studies. However, Barth's articulation of cultural boundaries resonates closely not only with Tanner's description of the postmodern notion of culture, but also with postcolonial insights into hybridity.

4. Carys Moseley, *Nations and Nationalism in the Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Moseley addresses this dynamic of Barth's rejection of nationalism while affirming nationhood. While we do not follow the logic of her argument, we are indebted to her for exploring Barth's wider engagement with these concepts throughout his career.

Moreover, the ways Israel and the nations relate to the doctrine of creation and providence are explored. The concluding point is that peoplehood boundaries matter for theology, but with significant qualifiers.

Second, continuing Barth's flow of thought, peoplehood as a concrete context, yet in a nonessentialistic manner, is articulated. Barth's affirmation of Jesus's Jewish flesh and the fluidity of peoplehood as a context are extended by putting them in conversation with the works of J. Kameron Carter, Willie Jennings, and Kathryn Tanner.

On the one hand, the Jewish flesh of Jesus is significant for the discussion of the context's concreteness. In his provocative work, *Race*, Carter recovers the covenantal flesh of Jesus to dismantle the racist structures of modernity.<sup>5</sup> Also, Jennings, in his *Christian Imagination*, argues that this covenantal flesh lays aside essentialist differences to achieve true intimacy as the body of Christ.<sup>6</sup> As we will argue below, however, this definition of Jewish flesh as covenantal appears too narrow as it does not take seriously the fullness of this flesh, thus exposing it to a docetic reduction and losing the concreteness of carnal election, as Michael Wyschogrod argues. Jewish flesh is not just a theological or spiritual reality; it is an embodied reality that can be expressed as peoplehood with its particularities. This carnal election means that cultural or ethnic identity is theologically significant—a point that Carter and Jennings undervalue.

On the other hand, this cultural or ethnic concreteness is not an essentialist aspect of the context, which means it is not an unchanging, homogenous stereotype. Contextual particularities matter in the concrete situations of discipleship; however, they are ultimately reversible, fluid, and removable. In this sense, Barth's insights resonate closely with Kathryn Tanner's postmodern notion of culture as a dynamic and porous phenomenon.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, this notion of nonessentialist concreteness of the context is

5. J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

6. Willie J. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

used to critically evaluate the theological adequacy of Asian American theologies and also to dynamically define the Asian American context. While there are various approaches to Asian American theologies, we suggest that at least three main methodologies are significant: the cultural, marginality, and postcolonial approaches. Our goal is to expose their weaknesses and affirm their strengths regarding their methods. Offering a constructive proposal, the Asian American Quadrilateral (AAQ) represents a new way of defining the context as the intersection and the interaction of four layers: Asian heritage, migration experience, American culture, and racialization. This dynamic and multilayered approach seeks to take the concrete particularities seriously without essentializing them.

Now that we have laid out a map for the rest of this chapter, we begin by looking at Israel and the nations within Barth.

### **Jesus the Jew, Israel, and the Nations in Barth's Theology**

Barth's exposition of the concept of *Volk* (peoplehood or nationhood) is important for contextual theology because he explicitly affirms the importance of taking one's immediate and concrete situation seriously in both theological work and discipleship. This simple but significant point is lost to many who only hold shallow stereotypes of Barth. Of course, Barth often made this methodological move implicit, simply assuming it. In our discussion of actualism in the next chapter, we will more deeply explore Barth's stress on the present particular situation. We should also note that Barth's contemporary political situation, in which *Volk* and *Rasse* (Race) were essentialized to the point of idolatry, made him wary of the overemphasis, or misplaced emphasis, on essentialism in theology.

To get a good grasp of the development of Barth's thought, including his rejection of nationalism and affirmation of nationhood, we will cover three key themes in this section: Jesus as a Jew, the election of Israel, and the nations in light of Israel. The goal here is not a

7. Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997).

systematic study of Barth's Israelology, which goes beyond the scope of this study, but rather, the construction of an argument that reveals the connection between these three themes, leading to an understanding of nationhood or peoplehood.<sup>8</sup> Affirming the Jewishness of Jesus first debunks any form of nationalism. Jesus's Jewishness is, of course, vitally connected to the election of Israel, which serves as a larger context for the christological election. The chosen nation then serves as a center from which to understand the basis and destiny of all other peoples.

### Jesus the Jew and the Election of Israel

In December 1933, as Hitler's first year as chancellor came to a close, Barth preached a sermon on Jesus as a Jew at Schlosskirche in Bonn.<sup>9</sup> Based on Romans 15:5–13, Barth argued that

Christ belongs to the people (*Volk*) of Israel. *This* people's (*Volk*) blood was in his veins, the very blood of God's Son. *This* people's (*Volk*) way of life he took on by taking on humanity, not for the sake of this people (*Volk*) or from a preference for this people's (*Volk*) blood or race, but rather for the sake of truth, that is, for the sake of demonstrating the truthfulness and faithfulness of God.<sup>10</sup>

Barth explicitly subverted Nazi ideology of German Christians, in which Jesus was seen as an Aryan, even as a leader of an anti-Semitic crusade.<sup>11</sup> Barth's bold claims led many in the congregation to walk out in protest.<sup>12</sup> However, in the larger context of this sermon, Barth stresses the Jewishness of Jesus to communicate the *extra nos* (outside

8. For the place of Israelology in the broader discipline of systematic theology, see Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1994).

9. Karl Barth, "A Sermon about Jesus as a Jew," in *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich*, ed. Dean G. Stroud (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 64.

10. *Ibid.*, 68.

11. The view of Jesus within Germany at the time was complex. There were some who rejected the Jewish Jesus as having impure blood. However, the German Christianity viewed him as an Aryan or a Teutonic Jesus, who was a warrior opposing the Jews. Thus, this anti-Semitic Jesus led the way for Hitler to assume the role of a spiritual leader in the same tradition. See Mark R. Lindsay, *Covenanted Solidarity: The Theological Basis of Karl Barth's Opposition to Nazi Antisemitism and the Holocaust* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 199–200.

12. Karl Barth, "A Sermon about Jesus as a Jew," n18.

of us) character of the gospel, its unmerited nature and the fact that salvation does not come from us, but from outside, even from the Jews. Moreover, as a result, the church is unlike a nation and is created out of a disparate heterogeneous mix of people.<sup>13</sup>

With such rhetoric and theological assertions, Barth made a stand against the nationalistic idolatry and its co-option of the creation order doctrine. However, Barth's Christology did not always affirm the Jewish flesh of Jesus. In chapter 2, drawing from the watershed work of Bruce McCormack, we will discuss the progressive development of Barth's theology from the harsh diastasis of the *Römerbrief* to the *Humanity of God*, recovered through his doctrine of election.<sup>14</sup> Here, however, we simply highlight the important moments in Barth's changing thoughts on the historical particularities of revelation in Jesus Christ.

At the beginning of his theological career (1916–20), when he broke radically with the liberal tradition that subsumed revelation into history, Barth firmly believed that God as “Wholly Other” must be protected in order for God to be God and not just a projection of humanity.<sup>15</sup> While God's revelation in Christ occurred *in* history, it could not be *of* history. This revelation was a pure event, only limited narrowly to the crucifixion and resurrection but not including the person of Jesus Christ in his entirety.<sup>16</sup> Correspondingly, there was little room for the humanity of Jesus to be significant, nor for the historical particularity of Jesus as Jewish.<sup>17</sup>

Continuing his dialectical conviction and retaining the all-important diastasis between God and humanity, Barth made a significant breakthrough by recovering anhypostatic-enhypostatic Christology during his Göttingen years (1921–24). On the one hand, the anhypostatic side stated that the human nature of Christ had “no independent existence before its union with the divine Logos . . . [and]

13. Moseley, *Nations and Nationalism*, 114.

14. Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

15. Lindsay, *Covenanted Solidarity*, 202.

16. *Ibid.*, 204.

17. *Ibid.*, 201.

safeguarded revelation from historicization.”<sup>18</sup> History would neither become a straitjacket of revelation nor would it replace it. On the other hand, the enhypostatic side affirmed that “the Godhead included all the (perfected) human attributes,” allowing Barth to be “insistent that the fully divine Christ is also fully human and, thus a specific historical reality.”<sup>19</sup> In this sense, in *CD I/1*, Barth followed the Chalcedonian insight and rejected both ebionitism and docetism—the first, a heresy that historicizes revelation, and the second, one that denies historic specificity.<sup>20</sup>

So far, Barth has arrived at the notion that Jesus’s historic specificity matters; however, that specificity could be theoretically generically human. In a sense, Jesus’s Jewishness could be merely accidental. In the 1930s, opposing Nazism and German Christianity through various political writings, Barth came to stress that salvation comes from the Jews and that Jesus was Jewish, as we saw in his sermon of 1933. Furthermore, Barth established the necessity of Jewish flesh dogmatically in his doctrine of election.

The innovation in Barth’s doctrine of election lies in his understanding of Jesus Christ the God-man “as both the subjective and objective ground of our election . . . at once the electing God and the elected man.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Barth avers that this election is supralapsarian and universal. Focusing on the object of election, the chosen are not some abstract human beings, but rather, the particular man, Jesus of Nazareth and the people who are in him.<sup>22</sup> That historic particularity, and that particularity as Jewish flesh, was established before creation.

In his postwar years, Barth would stress Jesus’s ethnic identity explicitly, saying that his Jewish flesh is something “we must emphasise especially [because it] is often overlooked. . . . It is not taken

18. *Ibid.*, 203. See Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 152.

19. Lindsay, *Covenanted Solidarity*, 203.

20. Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. I/1, *The Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 399–403. Hereafter, references to the *Church Dogmatics* will take the form: Barth, *CD I/1*, 399–403.

21. Lindsay, *Covenanted Solidarity*, 214.

22. *Ibid.* See *CD II/2*, 8.



seriously or seriously enough.”<sup>23</sup> Only in his Jewish flesh is Jesus the savior of the world because his Jewishness is necessary to confirm God’s election of and faithfulness to Israel.<sup>24</sup>

Through the election of Jesus Christ, we have arrived at the election of God’s people. For Barth, the election of God’s people takes two forms—Israel and the church. Because Jesus Christ is *the* reprobate and *the* elect in Barth’s christological rendering of the doctrine of election, Barth extends this logic to explain the place of Israel and the church without falling into supersessionism or anti-Semitism:

Israel is the people of the Jews which resists its election; the Church is the gathering of Jews and Gentiles called on the ground of its election. This is the formulation which we have adopted and this or a similar formulation is necessary if the unity of the election of the community (grounded in the election of the one Jesus Christ) is to remain visible. We cannot, therefore, call the Jews the “rejected” and the Church the “elected” community. The object of election is neither Israel for itself nor the Church for itself, but both together in their unity.<sup>25</sup>

These two forms of election—Israel and the church—united in the one covenant of grace, both witness to the person of Jesus Christ. For that reason, Barth rejects mission to the Jews because they are already witnesses as “to divine judgment, to the promise as heard, and to the humanity that is passing away.”<sup>26</sup> The church, on the contrary, witnesses “to God’s mercy, to the promise as believed, and to the humanity that is to come.”<sup>27</sup> In its witness, Israel has a legitimate

23. Ibid, 212. Quoted from CD IV/1, 166–17.

24. Ibid. See CD IV/1, 168, 170, and Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (London: Collins, 1965), 27–28. We note that Barth’s own rhetoric regarding Israel, i.e., “Synagogue of death” (CD II/2, 264), paints a much more ambivalent picture. To make matters worse, Barth acknowledged that he struggled with “a totally irrational aversion” in his personal encounter with Jews. See Karl Barth, *Letters, 1961-1968* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 262. Also, Sonderegger underscores Barth’s anti-Judaism, not anti-Semitism; see Katherine Sonderegger, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew: Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Israel* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992). For a more negative assessment of Barth’s views of the Jews, see Stephen R. Haynes, *Reluctant Witnesses: Jews and the Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 64–89.

25. Barth, CD II/2, 199.

26. Eberhard Busch, “Indissoluble Unity: Barth’s Position on the Jews during the Hitler Era,” in *For the Sake of the World: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 68, 70. This idea of Israel as “the humanity that is passing away” and representing divine judgment is clearly problematic. It is debatable if the dualistic notion of Israel and church can overcome its tendency toward anti-Semitism even as Barth seeks to avoid it.

27. Ibid., 71. See CD II/2, 195–305.

place alongside the church, opposing any form of supersessionism that replaces it with the church. In fact, in God's faithfulness, Israel, even after its rejection of Christ, remains the first and original people of God:

Without any doubt the Jews are to this very day the chosen people of God in the same sense as they have been so from the beginning, according to the Old and New Testaments. They have the promise of God; and if we Christians from among the gentiles have it too, it is only as those chosen with them; as guests in their house, as new wood grafted onto their old tree.<sup>28</sup>

As these two forms of election bear witness to different aspects of Jesus Christ, they also differ in the sense that Israel is a "people" (*Volk*), in which membership is through birth, whereas the church is an "assembly" or a "gathering" (*ecclesia*), in which the members are those called by God.<sup>29</sup> Closely related to the idea of Israel as *Volk*, Barth observes rightly that the church is composed of both Jews and Gentiles.

However, more surprisingly, Barth also states that Jews in the church, like Paul, might not "abandon Judaism because of their faith in Christ, but [remain] Jews, loyal and obedient members of Israel, the eternally elect people."<sup>30</sup> This idea of Jews within the church, who remain faithful Jews, will prove to be a significant point later. Barth does not develop this idea of faithful Jews within the church any further; however, he states their role as the church's "secret origin, as the hidden substance which makes the Church the community of God."<sup>31</sup> From this perspective, the creation of the one new humanity in Christ would not mean the dissolution of Jewish peoplehood (Eph 2:15). However, just what does this "peoplehood" mean?

In his doctrine of providence, Barth lists the history of the Jews as a sign and witness of divine providence, even as he puzzles over defining the Jewish *Volk*.<sup>32</sup> In terms of race, speech, culture, religion, and even

28. Karl Barth, "Jewish Problem and the Christian Answer," in *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-war Writings, 1946-52* (London: SCM, 1954), 200, as quoted in Michael Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 220.

29. Busch, "Indissoluble Unity," 67n49.

30. *Ibid.*, 67. See CD II/2, 235, for this idea of Israel in the church. Also see Mark S. Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005), 176.

31. Barth, CD II/2, 201.

history, Barth sees no unifying commonality that can define the Jews as a single people. For example, there is no such a thing as pure Jewish blood or even particular physical features. Hebrew continues to serve as a cultic language, but the people of the Jewish diaspora speak many languages as their mother tongues.<sup>33</sup> In terms of culture, again, their diasporic reality has led to various levels of assimilation and exchange with various national cultures throughout Europe. In terms of religion, a person is still a Jew, whatever his or her religion might be. Finally, the history of Jewish people is fragmented, again because of their diasporic dispersion. Ultimately, rather than any external features, it is only the singular electing love of God that holds them together and sustains them.<sup>34</sup> Jewish identity is a riddle biologically, but is a witness to God's providence theologically.

Despite all these ambiguities, the Jews still exist as a people and will continue to exist as a witness to God's faithful election. Moreover, their eternal election provides a way to understand their place in relation to all the other peoples on the earth.

### Israel, the Nations, and the Context of Discipleship

Beginning from establishing the Jewishness of Jesus as a necessary aspect of his historic specificity, we then situate the election of Israel within the broader soteriological context. We are now finally ready to see the place of Israel in respect to the nations and to define one's cultural/ethnic context theologically, looking at Barth's exposition of "Near and Distant Neighbours" in *Church Dogmatics* III/4.<sup>35</sup>

In regard to the election of Israel and the role of the nations, Barth's line of thought moves from revelation, creation, and reconciliation. In this whole discussion, Barth seeks to reject the natural theology of the *Deutschen Christen* (German Christian), while finding the proper place of *Volk* within theology.

32. Barth, *CD* III/3, 210–26.

33. This is not true of the state of Israel where Hebrew also functions as the mother tongue of its citizens.

34. *Ibid.*, 221.

35. Barth, *CD* III/4, 285–323.

## DOUBLE PARTICULARITY

First, to think properly about the nations theologically, Barth begins with the reminder that revelation is primarily and centrally about the covenant and with special history. The nations and world history can only be secondary and peripheral:

Neither the history of humanity nor that of the nations is the true theme of the biblical message. The most to be said is that it is always a subsidiary theme. . . . The main theme is the history of the covenant between God and man which secretly begins in and with creation, is revealed in the election and calling of Abraham, is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ and is shown in His promised return to be the meaning and purpose of all creaturely occurrence.<sup>36</sup>

Submitting to revelation with special history at the center means taking the doctrine of election as the basis for theological reflections on general history. Thus, the election of Jesus Christ and the one community of Israel and the church determine how we are to understand the nations.

Second, based on revelation, Barth rejects *Volk* or *Rasse* distinction as an order of creation. The idolatry of the German Christians claimed “people[hood] and nationality as the creation of God” and that the “distinctive nature of each nation is a special creative thought of God.”<sup>37</sup> However, Barth finds that in the creation accounts in Genesis, there is no creation of the nations, let alone their histories. From Genesis 1–9, there is no account of the relationship of near and far neighbors, or of the place of these nations in respect to God:

It seems obvious that nations were actually there. But it is hard to find any concrete indications. The narrators obviously wish to conceal the fact, to push it into the background. . . . As His will as Creator it is obviously not bound in [any ethically significant] way in these chapters.<sup>38</sup>

In a way, the place of the nations is a matter of providence, not of creation proper. Furthermore, these nations cannot be understood independently of the covenant, Christ, or revelation.

36. *Ibid.*, 309.

37. *Ibid.*, 307.

38. *Ibid.*, 311.

Third, when the nations are included in Genesis 10 and 11:1–9, they serve as a transition to the beginning of the covenant of grace and the calling of Abraham in Genesis 12. Like the two accounts of creation, Genesis 10 and 11:1–9 provide two distinct accounts of the separation of the people.<sup>39</sup> On the one hand, the Table of the Nations in Genesis 10 provides this separation or differentiation in a neutral, matter-of-fact way, without judgment. This differentiation is under divine providence and must be accepted in obedience. However, Barth avers that based on this account, there cannot be any “abstract internationalism and cosmopolitanism,” nor “abstract nationalism and particularism” because there is no justification for that kind of assertion.<sup>40</sup> On the contrary, the tower of Babel narrative in Gen 11:1–9 recounts this separation, not as a simple differentiation, but rather, as a scattering, as a work of divine wrath. Barth interprets the tower as an expression of religious hubris and the scattering as not only judgment, but also an act of grace in order to thwart greater human rebellion.

As stated at the beginning of this discussion, these two accounts of peripheral world history in Genesis 10 and 11:1–9 must be understood in light of the central special history in Genesis 12, the election of a particular people who will bring all these nations back together again. The calling and election of Israel, fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ the Jew, establish the place of the nations and give them a *teleological* movement toward becoming the one people of God.<sup>41</sup>

Looking to the New Testament, in the miracle of Pentecost in Acts 2, the Spirit works in and through Israel as a bridge people to overcome the separation between the nations. Barth stresses that the multinational crowd at Pentecost was “the universal Israel,” meaning faithful Jews and proselytes from all over the world. Also, the disciples represent the Israel in its impure Galileans, who are “halfway already

39. See Hunsberger’s analysis of various interpretations of these two passages in regard to cultural diversity. He labels Barth’s view as a dialectical assessment that still has a negative view of this diversity, and prefers the progressive assessment of Newbigin. See George R. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin’s Theology of Cultural Plurality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 244–55.

40. Barth, *CD* III/4, 312.

41. *Ibid.*, 320.

to the Gentile world outside . . . the Israel of the frontiers.”<sup>42</sup> So, as a bridge people, Israel holds a sacramental role in bringing the nations together again:

It is in this one people that the expansion and universalisation takes place. The new language is spoken by Israel, even if only border Israel. And it is heard and understood by Israel, even if only the Israel of the dispersion.<sup>43</sup>

Barth stresses that this is a divine work, not the work of Israel, but it is a divine work *in* and *through* Israel, the one people of God called out of the many nations.<sup>44</sup>

Barth’s teleological perspective of human differentiation assesses the separation as something that is overcome eschatologically in Jesus Christ. However, the call of one people of God does not mean the dissolution of all particularities. As noted above, Barth allows for the distinction between the Jew and Gentile even in the church, which is God’s eschatological community. Jesus Christ himself remains a Jew forever and never loses his cultural/ethnic particularity because of its soteriological significance. The Jews are forever God’s chosen people because God keeps God’s promises. Given that truth, are the Gentiles simply generically gentile, lacking any particularity?

In protecting against distortions of a creation order basis for ethnic/cultural particularities, Barth appears to overreact and sound more philosophical than biblical as though there are no nations in the eschaton, contra the biblical witness (Rev 7:9, 21–22). Of course, as Barth has noted, cultural/ethnic distinctions are so fluid that they cannot be essentialized or divinized. However, they are a part of who we are as human beings, if we are not to end up with a gnostic anthropology. Even in the eschaton, with all the dividing walls broken

42. *Ibid.*, 322.

43. *Ibid.*, 323.

44. Hunsberger notes that, for Barth, the original unity that exists before Genesis 10 and 11 is “ultimate,” because Barth believed that the “present diversity as only provisional and as an interruption of the ideal,” and thus, “cultural plurality can only then be seen in an ultimately negative light” (Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 248). However, as discussed in the previous section, Barth’s idea of “faithful Jews within the church,” who do not simply lose their particularity offers another possible perspective within his theology, even if he did not develop it further. See *CD II/2*, 235.

down by Christ and united into his one Body, these particularities cannot disappear if we are truly human and not simply spirit. Given his political context, it might be understandable, but Barth did not develop these pressing issues as Lesslie Newbigin did, for example.<sup>45</sup>

In any case, whatever his eschatological perspective on cultural/ethnic particularities was, Barth firmly asserted that particularities are a part of the concrete context in which we encounter God's Word. We locate Barth's view about nationhood/peoplehood as a context for discipleship under the command of God within the doctrine of creation.

For Barth, the command of God assumes the dialectical union of dogmatics and ethics. There exists an "inseparability of indicative and imperative," meaning that in encountering God, we are summoned under divine lordship.<sup>46</sup> This command means "permission, 'the granting of a very definite freedom'" in which we are free to be who we really are.<sup>47</sup> Because our true identity is found in Christ, God's command "in effect, says not only: This is what you must do! But also: This is who you are!"<sup>48</sup>

Peoplehood is the particular context in which God's command is received. God's command, his call to freedom, comes in the context of fellowship with others, in the encounters between men and women, between parents and children, and between neighbors near and far. In his discussion of "Near and Distant Neighbors," Barth positively as well as critically addresses the issue of belonging "to a larger group which forms a more or less recognizable totality."<sup>49</sup> Barth affirms the rightful need for contextualization, while claiming that the gospel is beyond every context.

More specifically, Barth positively affirms our cultural context, and yet, gives it critical limits. At a "lower level" from the standpoint of our

45. As Newbigin was a missiologist, especially in a country as diverse as India and later on in multicultural England, addressing cultural diversity was a core aspect of his calling. See Newbigin's discussion of this theme in Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

46. John Webster, *Karl Barth*, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2004), 154.

47. *Ibid.*, 155. Quoting from Barth in *CD II/2*, 585.

48. *Ibid.*, 156.

49. Barth, *CD III/4*, 287.

experience, the “wider blood-relationship and biological particularity, . . . speech and customs, and perhaps a common geographical location” in their totality provide a sense of belonging, a home for us.<sup>50</sup> It is in this place or space that we hear God’s Word, the divine command. These particular places “acquire for [a person] the character of an allotted framework in which he has to express his own distinctive obedience.”<sup>51</sup>

In our own language, geographical location, and history, we do hear and obey God’s command. Barth notes that these three examples of cultural context are not meant to be exhaustive. They are merely examples to show that in every way, our context is to be taken up in our response to God’s command. Regarding our cultural contexts, “it is not accidentally or in vain but meaningfully and purposively that God has called himself and the men of his people to serve Him in this determination and with this outlook, background and origin.”<sup>52</sup> Within the context of the divine command, our cultural context is “not mere disposition of nature or fate,” but “really is important, and has therefore to be honoured and loved.”<sup>53</sup>

However, at a “higher level” from the direction of God’s command, even this context must submit to divine lordship and must be dealt with critically.<sup>54</sup> All these aspects of cultural context must be “absolutely subordinate” to the purposes of the divine command.<sup>55</sup> They must not be an end in themselves.<sup>56</sup> Barth state his chief concern thus:

Again everything hinges upon the preservation of the right super- and sub-ordination in this decision. The command of God must be *master*, and all historical interpretations and notions, all other considerations, all economic, political, social, cultural and even religious evaluations of the situation must *be mastered and not try to play the master*.<sup>57</sup>

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid., 288.

52. Ibid., 292.

53. Ibid., 293.

54. Ibid., 287.

55. Ibid., 290.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid., 296. Emphasis added.



In fact, those three examples, along with every other aspects of our cultural context are reversible, fluid, and removable.

The opposition between people from different cultural contexts is *reversible* and *reciprocal*. This relationship is not a naturally ordered one, not part of the created order. Also, our cultural distinctives are *fluid*. The boundaries of culture are not so sharply defined. While cultural boundaries might exist, there is also engagement, exchange, and connection across different cultural contexts. Moreover, the cultural boundaries are *removable*. Languages die. People intermarry. Nations break apart, and new ones form.

Because these cultural contexts are reversible, fluid, and removable, they cannot constitute a permanent division between fellow human beings. Moreover, they cannot become the criteria to which the command of God must conform: “There is obviously no special form of the command of God in respect of the existence and relationships of peoples.”<sup>58</sup> We must understand that Barth is not rejecting the significance of our cultural context. Rather, he is setting proper limits upon them so that they do not become idols.

In this section, we covered much ground to see the vital connection between Jesus the Jew, God’s election, Israel, the nations, and the concrete context for discipleship in the theology of Karl Barth. The question of cultural/ethnic particularity is not a marginal matter, but rather, lies at the heart of Christianity with the identity of Jesus Christ. In the next section, we see how Barth’s concerns and ideas resonate closely with the contemporary developments in reflections about identity and culture.

### **Non-Essentialist Concreteness of the Context**

The insights of Barth presented above serve as the raw material for this section, which steps back toward more general concepts for contextual theology. In conversation with contemporary theologians, we argue that the context is *concrete*, yet *nonessentialist*.

58. *Ibid.*, 303.

In developing the *concreteness* of the context, we examine the “new black theology” (Willie James Jennings, J. Kameron Carter, and Brian Bantum) to engage the Jewish flesh of Jesus as it relates to the problem of race. However, instead of race, our concern is cultural particularity. Critiquing their racial framework and looking to the insights of Michael Wyschogrod, we argue that in order to avoid docetic anthropology or discipleship, cultural particularities must be engaged.

We draw the concept of context as *nonessentialist* from Kathryn Tanner’s postmodern notion of culture that poses context as dynamic, conflicted, and porous. The concrete context previously affirmed is a contested space as well as a nonstatic one. Therefore, ethnocentricity or identity politics of boundary-keeping or purity-seeking is not allowed theologically. Rather, in this hybrid space as postcolonial theology as stated, we are constantly negotiating and discerning the context.

### Concreteness of the Context

Barth developed a doctrine of election of a Jewish Jesus and of Israel, and further connected this doctrine vitally to the place and role of the nations. These same themes are at play in the so-called new black theology of Jennings, Carter, and Bantum, which is framed within questions about race and colonialism.<sup>59</sup> For our purposes, we will limit our discussion to Jennings and Carter alone because they represent the core arguments of this “new” theology. Our concern is the connection that is made between the Jewish flesh of Jesus and the nations or cultural diversity.

In *Race*, J. Kameron Carter theorizes “that the modernity’s racial imagination has its genesis in the theological problem of Christianity’s quest to sever itself from its Jewish roots.”<sup>60</sup> This supersessionism led to the concept of whiteness, which allowed Europeans to transcend the

59. Jonathan Tran, “The New Black Theology: Retrieving Ancient Sources to Challenge Racism,” *The Christian Century*, January 26, 2012, <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-01/new-black-theology>. See Carter, *Race*, Jennings, *Christian Imagination*; and Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

60. Carter, *Race*, 4.

particularities of their identity toward an enlightened universality of this general whiteness, unlike other races that were still stuck in their ethnic distinctiveness.<sup>61</sup>

In this paradigm of whiteness, Jesus is not Jewish but simply a transcendent or abstract human figure. Moreover, as Christ's wisdom moves beyond the crude laws of the Old Testament, it ironically represents "a purer form of . . . the wisdom of the Greek philosophers."<sup>62</sup> This denial of Jewish particularity, Carter elaborates, is gnostic, neo-Marcion, and docetic; furthermore, it denies the body and establishes a racism that is deeply rooted in the modern situation.<sup>63</sup>

To counter this rejection of the concrete particularity in favor of abstract universality, Christ's flesh as Jewish, covenantal flesh must be recovered. This covenantal flesh constitutes—instead of some ethnocentric affirmation of identity—"a social-political reality displayed across time and space into which the Gentiles are received in praise of the God of Israel."<sup>64</sup> For Carter and Jennings, the concept of identity is problematic because of its ethnocentric nature. They are seeking to establish a particularity, or a "social-political reality displayed across time and space" that does not succumb to ideological co-option and become a theological abstraction. Avoiding identity and its temptation toward purity, Carter argues that Christ's flesh is "mulatto" in that it is multiracial and "*intra*racial," continually intersecting and being "contaminated" by God's disruptive presence and the inclusion of Gentiles.<sup>65</sup>

Carter states that this "mulatto" reality is Pentecostal in that different bodies are "no longer within an order of tyrannical division [as in the Tower of Babel] but, rather, in an order of 'peaceful difference,' the one-many structure of creation."<sup>66</sup> Thus, particular bodies are made one without being confused, "without a loss of what is distinctive regarding the many as to 'language, places, and customs'"<sup>67</sup>

61. *Ibid.*, 89.

62. *Ibid.*, 117.

63. *Ibid.*, 107.

64. *Ibid.*, 30.

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid.*, 351.

Just as the true meaning of Israel's election is "to be a nonnationalistic nation, a different kind of people" with a nonsolipsistic destiny, all the peoples in Christ are to have their identities "dispossessively" with an openness and vulnerability to others.<sup>68</sup>

Whereas Carter situates his argument about racism within the intellectual framework of modernity, Jennings looks to colonialism as the culprit. However, there is much in common between Jennings and Carter, such as their focus on the Jewish flesh of Jesus, the connection between supersessionism and contemporary racism, and the problem of abstract universalism.

Jennings bemoans the colonialist mindset that made "theology as the catalyst for cultural recapitulation. Theology invited peoples to look culturally inward in search of a theological reiteration of the collective self."<sup>69</sup> For example, looking at the gospel translation theories of Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls, Jennings observes that both mission historians miss the supersessionism embedded in their ideas about the universal gospel transcending the Jewish particularity. Thus, they both fail to seriously account for the colonialist sensibility even as they affirm indigenous culture. In a sense, the problem of Christianity in context can be posed in christological terms, that is, as docetism and adoptionism:

Unfortunately, the universal (bound up in docetism) and the contextual (bound up in adoptionism) are currently the dominant options for the contemporary theological imagination. They are two sides of the same coin, the one enabling the other, and neither finding its way to a Christian theology that of necessity creates intimacy [between peoples].<sup>70</sup>

Determining a theological basis for establishing this elusive intimacy amid the division is the agenda of Jennings.

Jennings believes that the key to a necessary intimacy between diverse peoples is found in the election of Israel, more particularly in "Jesus' own trajectory toward the many in Israel and through Israel to

67. *Ibid.*, 364.

68. *Ibid.*, 309.

69. Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 154.

70. *Ibid.*, 167.