WHO ARE THE MANY?

* * *   WHEN THE "MANY" IMPLICITLY REFERS TO ISRAEL   * * *

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INTRODUCTION. The adjective/pronoun "many" occurs hundreds of times in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. In the vast majority of those instances, the immediate context makes clear to whom/what "many" refers. However, there are a small number of important instances in which there is no definite referent for "many" (e.g., **Dan**8:25; 9:27; 11:14,18,26,33,34,39; 12:10; **Matt**19:30; 20:16; 20:28; 22:14; 26:28; **Mk**10:31,45; 14:24; **Luk**14:16); it should be noted that these instances tend to occur in the O.T. and the synoptic Gospels, which focus on the nation of Israel under the Dispensation of Law (also in the Epistle to the Hebrews; cf. Heb9:28). In these instances, the "many" refers to Israel.

ARGUMENT. Under the Dispensation of Law (i.e., Genesis 12 to Acts 2), God's focus (and that of Scripture) was on Israel. That is obvious in the O.T, but it is explicitly stated to be so during the earthly ministry of Jesus in the Gospels as well (cf. Matt10:5-6; 15:24; Rom15:8). Thus, during this period of time, the context (when left unstated or indefinite) should be considered to be Israel by default. However, there is more support for this understanding that merely a dispensational default.

Consider the covenant the LORD made with Abraham when He called him out of the Gentile nations to father a new nation, the nation of Israel. The Abrahamic covenant is centered around three unconditional promises: 1) a land, 2) a seed, and 3) worldwide blessing (cf. Gen12:3). In Genesis 12:2, God promises, "I will make of thee a great nation". Throughout the remainder of the O.T., God expanded upon this promise, making clear that one of the ways in which the greatness of the nation of Israel will be manifested is numerical "many". Consider,

Before sojourning in Egypt:

> "And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them; and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be." (Genesis 15:5)

> "That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore..." (Genesis 22:17).

During the sojourn in Egypt:

> "And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceedingly mighty; and the land was filled with them." (Exodus 1:7)

> "And Pharaoh said, Behold, the people of the land now are **many**..." (Exodus 5:5)

After the Exodus, before entering the Promised Land:

"The LORD your God hath multiplied you, and behold, year are this day as the start of heaven for multitude." (Deuteronomy 1:10).

During the Kingdom:

"Judah and Israel were **many**, as the sand which is by the sea in multitude..." (1 Kings 4:20)

In exile in Babylon:

"Son of man, they that inhabit hose wastes of the land of Israel speak, saying, Abraham was one, and he inherited the land: but we are **many**; the land is given us for inheritance." (Ezekiel 33:24)

Thus, as numerical multiplication of the descendants of Abraham is a key aspect of the Abrahamic covenant, an undefined "many" (without an explicit referent) becomes a covenant descriptor for the nation of Israel, especially in the large portion of the Bible dedicated to the nation of Israel under the Dispensation of Law.

EXEGETICAL APPLICATIONS. Understanding that the "many" without an undefined referent can be a covenant descriptor for the nation of Israel, where does this occur with important doctrinal implications? Consider a few significant examples.

"And he shall confirm the covenant with **many** for one week..." (**Daniel 9:27**)

The antecedent of the pronoun "he" is "the prince that shall come" (Dan9:26; i.e., the Antichrist), but here "many" used as a pronoun has no obvious referent. In this case, it should be understood to mean Israel. The 70th week of Daniel (i.e., the Tribulation) will begin when the future Antichrist confirms a covenant (i.e., peace treaty; cf. Isa28:14-19) with the nation of Israel. This "covenant" is not an agreement with "many" nations (e.g., the United Nations) as supposed by some commentators; such suppositions miss the fact that "many" is being used as a covenant descriptor to indicate the nation of Israel. Many more occasions of "many" without an explicit referent indicating the last days nation of Israel occur in Daniel 11-12.

"So the last shall be first, and the first last: for **many** be called, but few chosen." (**Matthew 20:16**)

Calvinists misinterpret this verse as supporting their view of unconditional election. Their interpretation is that in this verse "many" means all, whereas "few" are the elect. However, "many" in this verse is a covenant descriptor for the nation of Israel. Israel was the nation "called" of the LORD (cf. Gen21:12), not for the salvation of individual Jewish persons (cf. Rom9:6-7), but for a particular role in His plan (cf. Rom3:1-2; 9:4-5). Yet, out of the nation of Israel, "a remnant shall be saved" (Rom9:27). This is an important case in which "many" should not be interpreted to mean all.

"Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for **many**." (**Matthew 20:28**)

Here is an instance where Calvinists interpret "many" to mean the so-called elect, in contradistinction to all, in order to support their unbiblical

doctrine of Limited Atonement. Other theologians, in order to use this verse in support of an unlimited atonement of Christ, are forced to argue that "many" really means all (cf. 1Tim4:10; 1Jn2:2). However, a much better understanding is to recognize that "many" is used as a covenant descriptor for the nation of Israel. Such an understanding is consistent with Galatians 4:4-5, which speaks of Christ being "... made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law ...", as well as the use of "many" in Isaiah 53:11 [1]. There is no need to strain "many" in this verse to mean either the elect or all.

CONCLUSIONS. A multitude of Bible expositors miss the fact that the "many" without an explicit referent is used as a covenant descriptor for the nation of Israel, and by doing so they come to an incorrect doctrinal understanding of a verse or passage. In the O.T. prophets, this can lead to mistaking the nation of Israel for "many" Gentile nations. In both the O.T. prophets and the N.T., this can lead to equating "many" with either the so-called elect or all individuals. Both of these errors can be avoided by the recognition that the "many" without an explicit referent is a covenant descriptor for Israel.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] To say that Christ died for the nation of Israel is not to say that Christ did not die for all men; of course, He did (cf. Jn1:29; 3:16; 2Cor5:15; 1Tim2:4-6; 1Jn2:2). Elsewhere it is said that Christ died for the Church (Act20:28; Eph5:25) and that He died for the Apostle Paul (Gal2:20). That Christ is said to have died for the nation of Israel, or for the Church, or for the Apostle Paul individually, does not mean He died exclusively for any of them. To read exclusivity into these statements is the fallacy of illegitimate totality transfer.