

GENETICS AND BABEL

"...[God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us." Acts 17:26-27

This Bible passage says that God made all people of "one blood." But what about the different "races" of people in the world? If we all came from Adam and Eve, why do we look different from each other?

A GENETICS LESSON

Let's take a brief look at genetics. We'll use skin shade for an example. In our example, we'll use the letters AaBb to represent the genes coding for skin shade, with "AB" referring to genes for a lot of melanin (the main pigment responsible for skin shade), and thus darker skin, and "ab" referring to genes for a small amount of melanin, and thus lighter skin. If we start with two parents with AABB, then their children will get a combination of those "capital letter" genes and will end up with dark skin. If we start with two parents both having aabb, then their children will get a combination that results in light skin. If both parents have AaBb, the combinations of those genes could cover a very wide range of skin shades that their children could have, in just one generation. This is very simplified; our genes are incredibly complex. But this illustrates a basic principle that still holds true even in that complexity.

THE FIRST COUPLE

Now why is this feature of genetics important to the whole question of "race"? Because it shows that it is possible for one couple to have all the genetic information that the world population has today! Adam and Eve would have had it, and also Noah and his family must have. Of course, over time we have become more specialized as people groups and overall have less genetic information than people did back then, so we don't really see that kind of variability now. So we see that genetics does not contradict what the Bible says about there being only one blood/race.

But we still have the question of why we have such distinct physical differences among different people groups today. Let's look at a world-changing event that could account for this.

A REBELLIOUS ATTEMPT

Just after the worldwide Flood, when Noah and his family had finally left the ark, God commanded that they should spread out and fill the earth again. But as the people multiplied, they began to resist God. Somewhere around 100-130 years after the flood¹, many of them gathered in the plains of Shinar (likely in modern Iraq) and began to build the city and tower of Babel, intending to make a name for themselves and to keep from being scattered over the earth— “And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven: and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:4).

Since God had commanded them to spread out and fill the earth, their attempt to stay together was an intentional act of rebellion. But God confounded their plans. “And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech” (Genesis 11:6-7). Until now, everyone had the same language, but at this point God gave them different languages.

This was very effective. (It can be a little unsettling to be in another country whose language we don't know. We certainly wouldn't want to collaborate in a tower-building project with people we don't understand!) Consequently, they scattered out over the earth, possibly by families.

THE GENE POOL

The group of people at the tower of Babel would have had quite a variety of genetic information among them—a gene pool with a lot of potential for diversification. When they split up, different parts of that gene pool went different ways. They were probably fairly isolated from each other for a while as they explored, migrated, and started building civilizations, which helped to develop consistent traits specific to their clan. Of course, it gets more complex than that, especially when these people groups have mixed at times or adapted to environment through epigenetics, changes in gene function that do not involve changes in DNA sequence. But this article gives the big-picture idea of how we ended up with all the different people groups that we have today.

CONCLUSION

So, are there different “races” of people? Not really. The Bible says all nations are made of one blood, one race—the human race. God created the first two humans, Adam and Eve, and gave them a huge variety of genetic information. They passed this down to their descendants, including Noah and his family. At the Tower of Babel that information-rich gene pool was split up and scattered across the earth, where each people group started to take on their own distinct sets of traits based on their subset of that gene pool. Throughout history, people groups have mixed and adapted up until the present day.

We are all descended from Adam and Eve and we're made in God's image. There is one human race, and we are all related. No matter what people look like, we are all fully human and equally infinitely valuable in God's sight. While the world's tendency is to divide and hate, listen to what we are told in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” The real difference that matters considering eternity is whether we are “in Christ”, or not. No matter what branch of the human family tree we're on, let's make sure we believe in Christ Jesus as our Lord and Saviour.

~Denton Ford

Endnote:

¹ Hodge, Bodie, “Tower of Babel: The Cultural History of Our Ancestors”, (Green Forest, Arkansas: Master Books, 2012), 37-41.