

## Comments on Genesis 10

This chapter presents the genealogies of Noah, or the "Table of Nations", by the three sons, in age-reversed order. The text is deliberately structured with a frame formed by v. 1 and v. 32, and each of the three son's posterities ended with the statement "after their families, their tongues, their countries, their nations."

The story of the Tower of Babel in the next chapter would fall somewhere in the timeline given in this chapter. Where is unclear, but it is clear that it falls within the timeline as the families are all together at the start and by the end of each of the three son's genealogies there are different nations with different languages.

The account in this chapter is reminiscent of the genealogy of Cain (cf. 4:16-24) and Seth (ch. 5). Cain's posterity contains details that are unflattering and Seth's is flattering. We see the same here with Ham's and Canaan's posterity containing unflattering details, and Japheth and Shem's is a more direct presentation without any unflattering insinuations. As was the case with the previous genealogy, the implication is bad parents produce bad children. The notable exception in this case being Nimrod, but his children end up being exceptionally prideful, resulting in the events of the next chapter.

Jewish commentators tend to focus on the construction of the genealogy with 70 nations (Nimrod is excluded from the counting as he is a single individual, not a nation) presented in multiples of 7, both of which numbers clearly hold symbolic value in Genesis. Everett Fox points out that Israel is notably absent from the genealogy of this chapter, suggesting the providential nature of their existence outside of the natural means detailed herein. I see these details as representative of the Lord's acting as a social engineer over human history. Individuals have free agency, but the Lord works His will over the wide course of humanity to make sure His will is accomplished in the broad scope.

Robert Alter in his The Five Books of Moses comments on this chapter as follows:

In keeping with the universalist perspective of

Genesis, the Table of Nations is a serious attempt, unprecedented in the ancient Near East, to sketch a panorama of all known human cultures—from Greece and Crete in the west through Asia Minor and Iran and down through Mesopotamia and the Arabian Peninsula to northwestern Africa. This chapter has been a happy hunting ground for scholars armed with the tools of archaeology, and in fact an impressive proportion of these names have analogues in inscriptions and tablets in other Near Eastern cultures. The Table mingles geographic, ethnic, and linguistic criteria for defining nations, and the list intersperses place-names and gentilic designations (the latter appearing first in plural forms and beginning with verse 16 in singular forms).

<sup>1</sup> Now these are the generations of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth: and unto them were sons born after the flood.

v1 An opening statement, identifying the purpose of the text, repeated in v. 32, with additional text.

<sup>2</sup> The sons of Japheth; Gomer, and Magog, and Madai, and Javan, and Tubal, and Meshech, and Tiras. <sup>3</sup> And the sons of Gomer; Ashkenaz, and Riphath, and Togarmah. <sup>4</sup> And the sons of Javan; Elishah, and Tarshish, Kittim, and Dodanim. <sup>5</sup> By these were the isles of the Gentiles divided in their lands; every one after his tongue, after their families, in their nations.

v2-5 Japheth's sons.

v5 "isles of the Gentiles", could also be translated to "coastlands of the nations" (NAS) or "the maritime nations" (JPS). Suggesting perhaps the Greeks, assuming "Javan" in v. 2 is "Ion", or Greece.

<sup>6</sup> And the sons of Ham; Cush, and Mizraim, and Phut, and Canaan.

<sup>7</sup> And the sons of Cush; Seba, and Havilah, and Sabtah, and Raamah, and Sabtechah: and the sons of Raamah; Sheba, and Dedan.

<sup>8</sup> And Cush begat Nimrod: he began to be a mighty one in the earth. <sup>9</sup> He was a mighty hunter before the LORD: wherefore it is said, Even as Nimrod the mighty hunter before the LORD. <sup>10</sup> And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. <sup>11</sup> Out of that land went forth Asshur, and builded Nineveh, and the city Rehoboth, and Calah,

<sup>12</sup> And Resen between Nineveh and Calah: the same is a great city.

<sup>13</sup> And Mizraim begat Ludim, and Anamim, and Lehabim, and

Naphtuhim,<sup>14</sup> And Pathrusim, and Casluhim, (out of whom came Philistim,) and Caphtorim.

<sup>15</sup> And Canaan begat Sidon his first born, and Heth,<sup>16</sup> And the Jebusite, and the Amorite, and the Girgasite,<sup>17</sup> And the Hivite, and the Arkite, and the Sinite,<sup>18</sup> And the Arvadite, and the Zemarite, and the Hamathite: and afterward were the families of the Canaanites spread abroad.<sup>19</sup> And the border of the Canaanites was from Sidon, as thou comest to Gerar, unto Gaza; as thou goest, unto Sodom, and Gomorrah, and Admah, and Zeboim, even unto Lasha.<sup>20</sup> These are the sons of Ham, after their families, after their tongues, in their countries, and in their nations.

v6-20 Ham's sons. Note the genealogy also contains a list of cities explicitly identified, where the other two do not, they only identify lands. The list of cities includes Babylon, Assyria, Sodom and Gomorrah, all of which bear distinctly negative connotations in Genesis and subsequent Biblical writings.

v8-9 Nimrod is described as "mighty" three times, a superlative. He is a great man who evidently fears the Lord, and he establishes what becomes a great city and nation of Babylon, which in turn produces Assyria. The problem is his children are not like him. They go on to seek to establish a name for themselves using arm of the flesh techniques we see in the next chapter. Perhaps the text is suggesting his children are not able to live up to the example of their father using righteous means as he did, so they resort to unrighteous means to try to be just as great as him.

Nimrod is the only individual to receive treatment in this chapter, presumably to set up the Tower of Babel narrative in the next chapter.

v10 "Babel...in the land of Shinar", the rhetorical connection to the Tower of Babel story, cf. 11:2.

<sup>21</sup> Unto Shem also, the father of all the children of Eber, the brother of Japheth the elder, even to him were children born.

<sup>22</sup> The children of Shem; Elam, and Asshur, and Arphaxad, and Lud, and Aram.<sup>23</sup> And the children of Aram; Uz, and Hul, and Gether, and Mash.<sup>24</sup> And Arphaxad begat Salah; and Salah begat Eber.<sup>25</sup> And unto Eber were born two sons: the name of one was Peleg; for in his days was the earth divided; and his brother's name was Joktan.<sup>26</sup> And Joktan begat Almodad, and Sheleph, and Hazarmaveth, and Jerah,<sup>27</sup> And Hadoram, and Uzal, and Diklah,<sup>28</sup> And Obal, and Abimael, and Sheba,<sup>29</sup> And Ophir, and Haviilah, and Jobab: all these were the sons of Joktan.<sup>30</sup> And their dwelling

was from Mesha, as thou goest unto Sephar a mount of the east.  
<sup>31</sup> These are the sons of Shem, after their families, after their  
tongues, in their lands, after their nations.

v21-31 Shem's sons.

v24 "Eber", apparently the lineage whom the Hebrews come  
through.

v25 "was the earth divided", Robert Alter in his The Five Books  
of Moses, says:

The three consonants of the name Peleg, which as a common  
noun means "brook," form the verbal root that means "to  
split." It is a stronger verb than "divide," the term used  
by most English translators. Rabbinic tradition construes  
the splitting here as a reference to the Tower of Babel,  
but it is at least as plausible to see it as an allusion to  
an entirely different epochal event of "division," such as  
a cataclysmic earthquake.

<sup>32</sup> These are the families of the sons of Noah, after their  
generations, in their nations: and by these were the nations  
divided in the earth after the flood.

v32 The closing of the generations of Noah, a restatement of v.  
1, with the addition of the genealogy of individuals turning  
into nations that are divided populations. The intent is to  
show the influence one person, in this case Nimrod, can have,  
and how one family can turn into many people.

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