

The Spread of the Nations

Genesis 10-11

Introduction Pagans are not people with no religion. Pagans are people with many religions. While westerners do not usually think of themselves as “pagan”, in this sense, they are. They have many gods. Even many people who call themselves Christian actually serve a god, but not the true God, the God of the Bible. Basically, pagan gods are like their creators, are needy and can be manipulated. This is the god of many people in churches today. Their god needs them, is just like them just bit bigger, and responds to manipulation. So, their god provides money or health in exchange for giving or prayer or even just believing in them.

Why does this matter? Why start a message with such an unfriendly and startling assertion? Because our text today is going to tell us bit of where religious paganism in all its forms comes from. Moses wrote this text, partially to expose as false the pagan religions around Israel. I do not want us sitting here thinking that it really has very little impact on us. Our civilization and our technology hide our basic paganism. People all around us are bowing down to all kinds of gods. So we need a text like this to tell us where this confusion of languages, peoples and nations came from. We must pay attention to this Babel, who is the harlot mother of all false religion and whose consort is the father of lies, Satan.

The Division of the Nations

(Ch 10)

Seventy descendents of Noah’s sons are listed here comprising the tribes, nations, peoples and languages that surrounded Israel during the early days of the trek to the Promised Land when Moses wrote Genesis. The point here is not to establish descendents, but to show how the major nation families came into being in the division of the nations.

This is an extraordinarily elegant piece of literature. I know, you look at it a say, “what?” Here is a good example of how the Hebrew form drives the function. There is a carefully crafted interplay of sets of words and structure of thought that Moses uses as a major transition in the narrative. In this section, Moses bridges the past to the (his) present.

First, each unit is built on a structure that looks like the following parallel chiasm.

Heading: The sons of ____ were... This section establishes the first generation under each of the sons of Noah.

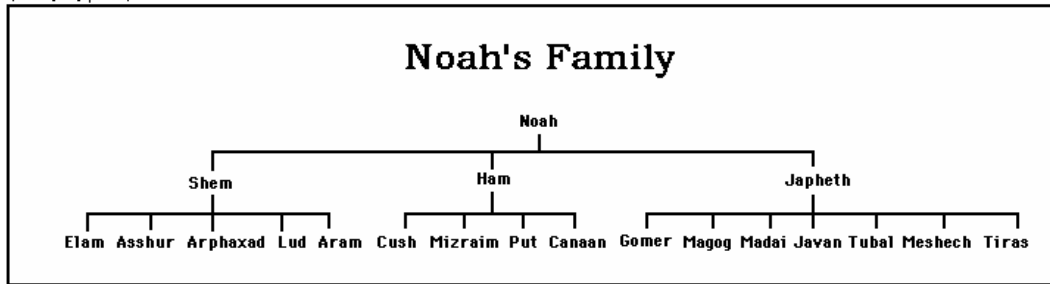
Expansion: The sons of those sons were... Here relationship is developed either with a *sons of* or with a *descended from*.

Colophon: These were... according to their lands, language, families and nations.

Second, the closing or colophon divides the nations by means of anthropological, linguistic, political and geographical criteria. The list for Japheth is different from the others: Japheth is lands, languages, families and nations whereas the other two are families, languages, land and nations. Through this, Moses explains why some of the names in the list are widely varied as to what they refer to: some are cities, some are political boundaries, others are families and tribes, and some refer to language groups. These biblical divisions reflect much more the differences between those Israel felt were her allies and those who were her enemies.

But this is not a lesson in historical geography. As always in Genesis, the list was included for a theological reason—to relate the chosen line of Shem to the other non-elect lines. The genealogy of the non-elect is always placed before the chosen line: Cain before Seth (chs. 4–5), Ishmael before Isaac (ch. 25), Esau before Jacob (chs. 36–37). The choice of Shem and the rejection of Ham has already been intimated (9:25–27), and this is confirmed in this chapter...³

(BKC [OT] p. 43)



The Line of Japheth

The line of Japheth is comprised largely of those tribes and peoples who lived along the west coastlands and north into modern Europe. Some of the names are familiar to us from history. The popular identification of Gomer with Germany and Magog with Russia simply will not bear out Biblically. Most of the nations here are along the north and west Mediterranean rim.

Gomer represents the Cimmerians; *Magog* was somewhere in the north (Ezk. 38:2); *Madai* represents the Medes in northern Iran, *Javan* the Ionian Greeks, and *Tubal*, *Meshech* and *Tiras* have been identified with Turkey. **3** *Ashkenaz* represents the Scythians, and *Togarmah* was a district north of Carchemish. **4** *Elishah* was probably in Crete. *Tarshish* was a Mediterranean city, possibly Carthage. *Kittim* is identified with Cyprus and *Rodanim* with Rhodes (the *Dodanim*, the alternative reading, may come from the Aegean).⁴

³Carson, D. A. *New Bible Commentary* : 21st Century Edition. Rev. ed. of: The new Bible commentary. 3rd ed. / edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970. 4th ed., Ge 10:1. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: InterVarsity Press, 1994.

⁴Carson, D. A. *New Bible Commentary* : 21st Century Edition. Rev.

The Line of Ham

The line of Ham is comprised largely of those tribes and peoples who settled the eastern and southern regions of Mesopotamia. Among their nations are some of Israel's closest neighbors and fiercest enemies. The first major grouping, the descendants of Cush, populate the African continent including modern Sudan and Ethiopia and the Arabian Peninsula of the Persian Gulf.

In an important interruption of the flow of "descended from", Moses gives three who fathered or begat. These are very important, one because of his place in world history and the others because of their place in Israel's immediate history.

The first use of begotten is in reference to Nimrod. His name means, "Let us rebel." He is the first to establish an imperial world power. He founded the mystery religion from which all false religions are derived. He is identified as a mighty hunter before the Lord. This is often the way the great Assyrian kings represented themselves, great hunters of men who were to be feared. The Bible highlights him as the founder of several of the greatest cities in the ancient world. He founded Babylon, Nineveh and Calah, along with other major cities in their lands. These three mighty cities became the centers of culture and tyrannical rule around the Fertile Crescent.

The second use of begotten is in reference to Mizraim or Egypt. The peoples and regions of what later became the Egyptian empire are listed here. Again, Moses is highlighting the near history of Israel as they have just left Egypt and its terrible slavery and slaughter.

The last use is in reference to the Canaanites. All the tribes, peoples and language groups that occupied the Promised Land are listed here. Their names will become familiar to Israel in the wilderness wanderings and in the conquest of the Land.

The Line of Shem

Finally, Moses gives those from whom Israel herself would descend. The most important here are Arpachshad as the Jewish line and Eber, from whose name comes the term *Hebrew*. Moses also tells us that the earth was divided during the days of Peleg. Given that the next account is that of Babel where the nations were dispersed, it is generally accepted that this is the event indicated. Thus, the dispersion would have occurred five generations after Noah, between 131 years and 300 years after the Flood (see Genesis 11:10-18).

The closing colophony for the whole section reminds us that this table of nations not only gives the roots of those surrounding Israel, but also from which all the nations of the earth derived. So this leaves some very important questions:

Why are there are so many languages if everyone came from Noah's family?

Why are there so many religions if Noah knew the Lord and taught his sons?

This is what chapter 11 is all about. Babel is about the confusion of worship that leads to the confusion of language.

The Dispersion of the Nations

(11:1-9)

Like the Flood, this is a famous story in the Bible. Isolating it from its context and not noting its structure will ruin Moses' purpose for its writing. Again, I am deeply indebted to Allen Ross and to Bruce Waltke for helping me so much with this section.

Moses uses both the structure of the text and the sound of the Hebrew in order to give this shape and substance.

Let's begin with *THE STRUCTURE*. It is an antithetical chiasm. It is not quite as obvious in English as it is in the Hebrew. There interplay of the words and where they sit in the verbal cadence of the sentences gives rise to the following structure.

A All the earth had one language
 B Settled to there
 C Spoke to one another
 D Come, let us make
 E Let us build for our selves
 F A city and a tower
 G The Lord came down to see
 f the city and the tower
 e The humans built
 d Come, let us confuse
 c Not understand one another
 b Spread from there
 a Confused the languages of all the earth

This might look contrived in English, but when the linguist lays this out using transliteration of the key Hebrew words, it is plain to the eye and ear.

Let's also consider how *THE SOUND* of the words reinforces this structure and the substance of Moses' point.

The play on the words *babel* and *balel* throughout this text give us the thrust of the message: the construction on earth is answered by the destruction from heaven; men build, but God pulls down. The fact the man's words are turned lyrically and used by God give a sense of irony, "God sings *with* the people while He works *against* them."

Fokkelman stresses the same point with the words *sem*, *sam*, and *samayim* in the Hebrew. To bring everlasting fame (*sem*) they unite in one spot (*sam*) as the base of their efforts to obtain that fame by reaching up to the heavens (*samayim*), the abode of God. God responds from heaven (*samayim*) and scatters them from there (*missam*). (Cited by and adapted from Ross).

Now let's think about the story and unpack it for our profit.

Their Rebellion

(v.2-4)

The narrative here shows how this rebellion against God occurred in the normal course of life. They were all joined as one people in language and custom (v.1). They moved together from place to place, finally settling in the rich land of Shinar, in the heart of the Fertile Crescent (v.2). Here, the land and the location allowed them to settle and to prosper.

The rebellion seems to begin as they prosper and to advance in technology. Now this might not seem like much to us, but the kiln baked brick that was the façade on the ziggurats of Babylon is famous for its durability and its beauty. It was a magnificent achievement in ceramic. They see what they are able to accomplish and their hearts are lifted up in pride and self-sufficiency.

Then their rebellion grows. They resolve to build a city and a tower, or ziggurat. As indicated earlier, this was a system of cities creating a vast city-state, a metropolis. The Babylonian ziggurats were stepped temples built with stone, back-filled with clay and dirt, covered in their brick and surrounded by buildings for the religious and political purposes. In these brief words, Moses points an accusatory and condemning figure to all that this rebellion grew into. Nimrod, who founded this city and who may have headed this rebellion, founded not only a massive imperial rule but also established the formal religious system from which all false religions come (See Revelation 17:5). The tower was built not for man to access heaven, but rather as a monument to the gods of the heavens as the gate of the gods. This was to be the stairway for the gods to come down and interact with men. This developed in Babylon into a system of priests and priestesses, worship of the stars, invisible spiritual beings and with the elevation of a virgin as the mother of the gods. Moses then is condemning all the false religions which have developed from Babel.

Their evil motivations are brought to light. They will build the city and the tower to make themselves a name and to keep themselves together. Here is their pride and their disobedience. It is clear that Moses intends for us to connect these with the accounts in chapter 10 to go out over all the earth. They intend to stay together, build a huge city-fort, erect the stairway to the heavens, concourse with the gods and become the mighty in their deeds and in their fame.

God's Response

(v.5-7)

In a wonderful piece of irony, the true God has to come down to this great high tower to see what is going on. What is supposed to reach up to the heavens as a stairway for the gods, the true God has to come *down* to see it and to check it out!

God evaluates the implications of their unity and their ingenuity. With one language and culture, their religious, political and technical achievements will be staggering. It is not enough that man will rebel in pride, but he will bend all his energy and intelligence to create religions, gods, cultures and technologies, not to serve the Lord God as an expression of man's assigned dominion, but to usurp and displace God. Romans 1 gives us the interpretation of what goes on. Man begins with knowing God and truth, suppresses, substitutes and speculates through a series of exchanging truth for lies, worship of God for worship of crea-

ture with the consequence that God hands them over to depraved desires and beliefs.

So God intervenes here in a history altering way. God breaks up their unity and sets enormous diversity and disunity in motion. He confounds their languages. He fills people's minds and tongues with words that are new and different. Now, it is obvious that God did this within the scope of the three major streams given in Chapter 10. So people who could communicate together will be seeking each other out. Think about the fear and frustration in the hours, days and weeks that followed God's action.

The Results

(v.8-9)

The effect of confounding the languages is given in these two verses. God is seen as the active agent in confusing the languages and causing the dispersion that He originally commanded. Moses is clear that this is impetus to the great migration of the people groups across the face of the whole earth.

Through languages God causes diversity in cultures and nationalism to come into being. Clearly, globalism, one-worldism and a world-wide single language are not what God intends for this time. God restrains man's potential for sin through this kind of division, dispersion and diversification. The present ability to overcome many of these barriers is contributing to the global increase in both knowledge and wickedness.

In a final stab of irony, Moses reminds Israel of two important things. The great effort to build the city of man and the tower of the gods is left off. And the name of the place is called Babel, confusion, because God there confounded the efforts of man by confusing his language. Ah, mighty man. What confusion his religions, his politics, his technical achievements are when they are opposed by God.

As one writer put it, "By portraying an unfinished tower, by dispersing the builders, and by in essence making fun of the mighty name of Babylon, the text functions effectively to repudiate the culture from which the people [of] Israel sprang." [E. Fox, cited by Waltke, *Genesis*, p.183.] It also stands to repudiate all of the heirs of that rebellion and religion, whether clearly pagan and pseudo-Christian.

The Descendents of Blessing

(v.10-26)

In this next paragraph, we come once more to a genealogical table that makes up a whole Tol*Dot or section of Genesis. Rather than go through this in any detail, let's think about it this way.

The Shape of the Text

This genealogy is structured as a parallel to Genesis 5. It looks like the following.

Genesis 5	Genesis 11
Adam	[Noah]
Seth	Shem
Enosh	Arphaxad
Kenan	Shelah
Mahalel	Eber
Jared	Peleg
Enoch	Reu
Methuselah	Serug
Lamech	Nahor
Noah	Terah
Shem, Ham Japheth	Abram, Nahor, Haran
Canaan (9:18)	Lot

There are ten generations represented in each account. Noah's name is assumed and provides the balance. While Luke 3:36 adds an additional name in this genealogy, many linguists agree that it appears to be an addition in the Greek possibly to provide the balance we have by supplying Noah as the first. So they are constructed deliberately with a verbal symmetry, one to show the time between creation and the Flood, the other to show time between the Flood and the call of Abraham. Between these three benchmark events, Moses records the generations and the years so as to know when those events were.

The Sense of the Text

Two important things are being communicated here.

Like Genesis 5, the years between the Flood and the call of Abraham can be calculated. Once again, you simply add up the years in the beget line. That this is one of Moses' purposes is clear when he tells us exactly how long after the Flood before Shem fathers Arphaxad. One of the fascinating effects of this genealogy and its historical accuracy is that Noah died when Abraham was over 50 years old. This puts Noah, Job and Abraham all living fairly near one another around the same time!

Unlike Genesis 5, we do not have the total years of a person's life nor the statement that "he died". Of course, they did die. And they did live as long after they fathered the son as is recorded. In Genesis 5 Moses is showing the growing affects of the curse in death, the death of individuals and the massive death in the Flood. He is moving toward judgment. But here, Moses is showing the effect of the blessing in life. He is moving toward the great blessing for all the world, Abraham, whom every child of God counts as our spiritual father.

One writer helped me see three important lessons that we should learn from this section of God's Word. (Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, p. 230). **Lessons**

All the nations are one family of man for we all descended from one family. There is only one human race, not races. We are all tied together through ancestry, not to some family of monkeys, but to a remnant family spared through judgment.

The human race is divided by language, peoples, tribes, territory and politics, all of which is God's design for diversity and as a limitation. God had a good purpose in restraining sin and the inventiveness of people through a unified expression of language and religion. Thus, even the pluralism of our world serves God's ends and aims.

The people groups of the world all share, even to today, the cursing and blessing of God's plan given in the oracle of Noah. The dispersion of the nations and their relationships to one another all reflect the outworking of the sovereign plan of God.

In Christ, the true stairway to heaven is erected. He is the only true connection between God and man, between heaven and earth. That connection comes not through the pride of man, but through the humility of the Lord God who, in Christ, comes down, all the way down to a cross-kind of death.

At Pentecost, God moves through the gospel to transcend and overcome these language and cultural barriers. The Holy Spirit enabled the Apostles to speak in languages unknown to them so that the gospel can also disperse through diverse languages and cultures. This world wide sending of the gospel calls out God's people to form a new people group who may yet be diverse, but are not divided. Their very diversity brings richness to their relationship to Christ. Through the Holy Spirit, Christians speaking different languages still understand one another.

True unity now comes for us as Christians, not through some effort of human invention or construction, but rather as an effect of the Holy Spirit. He has brought us true union. We express that union through love, compassion, service and sacrifice for one another.

The city of God from heaven, the bride of Christ, the church, will one day overcome the city of man on earth. The New Jerusalem will cast down the old Babylon. That day will come when the gospel has run its full course and the Lord Jesus comes. Then, in true union, all of God's people from all the ages will stand and with one voice, adoringly worship our Redeemer and Ruler.

May God haste that glorious day.