

The Table of Nations

Genesis 10:1-32

In quickly passing over this list of nations in Genesis 10, John Calvin writes, “If anyone pleases more accurately to examine the genealogies related by Moses in this and the following chapter, I do not condemn his industry...[But, he says,] Undoubtedly it seems to be the part of a frivolous curiosity to seek for certain and distinct nations in each of these names.”

Frivolous curiosity, says Calvin. With an even stronger disinterest in these verses, another commentator writes at the end of his comments on Genesis 10, words intended for preachers, “It may very well be questioned whether a man should ever preach on a chapter such as this.”

Those words get your attention, don’t they? Maybe I should question myself in choosing to preach on this whole chapter. But then again, maybe I shouldn’t! For I have discovered great wealth in this list of nations, wealth I eagerly share with you.

But let me encourage you first by telling you what I am NOT going to do. I am NOT going to offer authoritative identifications for each of these 70 nations listed, and I am NOT going to structure my sermon so that I exhort you to learn or memorize those 70 nations. That’s not the goal of this sermon. This is not a trivia game, but the inspired word of God. So I won’t test you on these 70 names, nor ask you to learn them. But in reviewing those 70 names, I do want to give you a very distinct impression--that this chapter is a chapter of incredibly profound history.

One commentator remarks that “there is no comparable catalog of ancient nations available from any other source. It is unparalleled in its antiquity and comprehensiveness.” He writes

that “here is the one link between the historic nations of antiquity and the prehistoric times of Noah and [those living before the flood.]...There is nothing in any other ancient writing discovered by archaeologists which is at all comparable in scope and accuracy. It gives every appearance of being a sort of family record, kept by a venerable patriarch of the family as long as he remained alive and could keep in touch with his descendants.”

My paternal grandmother put together a similar record for my family. It goes back many generations, even back to Scotland and then into Canada. One of my relatives was a well-known Canadian patriot in St. John’s, New Brunswick, and I have visited the statute erected to his honor in the middle of that city. I consider Genesis 12 just as accurate and just as personal. This, too, is my genealogy. This is your genealogy.

So I don’t question myself at all in preaching on this chapter, for the great thrust of this chapter teaches that,

I. SCRIPTURE GIVES US AN ANCIENT HISTORY OF THE WORLD.

The whole chapter certainly claims to be historical and historically accurate. From the beginning of the chapter until the end.

v.1

v.32

Thus, the sons of Noah’s sons grew into clans, and then into nations, nations that spread out over the earth after the flood. Actually, the Tower of Babel and the scattering of the nations described in chapter 11 is the basis for this history lesson of chapter 10. If everything were written in strict chronological order, most of chapter 10 would come after chapter 11, because until the Tower of Babel there were no language barriers, there were

no distinct nations. As we'll see next week, all of that came as a consequence of God's sovereign discipline in scattering the nations all over the world.

The results of that scattering are described for us in this amazing chapter, obviously starting with Noah and then the next generation of his three sons. We studied those three sons two weeks ago, and looked at their symbolic significance, Ham representing the sinfulness of wicked men, Japheth representing the Gentile nations, and Shem representing the nation of Israel. Tonight, let's look again at those three lines, though a bit more historically. First, the,

A. Nations descended from Japheth.

Seven sons are listed.

v.2

And grandsons are listed for two of those seven,

v.3-5

Most of these names are recognizable as ancestors of the Indo-European peoples, the Aryan people, those from India and Europe. As I said last time, most of us would fit into that category. In general terms, the descendants of Japheth spread all over Europe, with one major branch heading eastward into Persia and India.

To be specific, Gomer is generally identified by ancient writers with a district north of the Black Sea, today the area of Crimea. The Jews identify Gomer's son Ashkenaz with Germany. Gomer's son Togarmah is almost certainly the ancestor of the ancient people known as the Armenians.

Ancient historians also connect Japheth's son Magog with a

region near the Black Sea, and together with the sons Meshech and Tiras can be considered the origin of the modern Russian peoples. Meshach's name is preserved in the previous name for Russia, Muskovi, and the current capital, Moscow.

Japheth's son Madai, according to all authorities, is the ancestor of the Medes, who would settle in what is now Persia. This group would migrate to India and be the origin of what we call Aryans. Japheth's son Javan, or Ionia, refers to Greece, and Javan's sons (listed in verse 4) all refer to Greece in one way or another as well.

So, Japheths' descendants spread out from Spain in western Europe through Asia Minor to Eastern Europe. They surround the Mediterranean coastline, including the Black Sea coastline, and are therefore called maritime peoples in,

v.5

Fascinating, isn't it? These are our roots! If we would go back far enough, this is our genealogy! This is our history! Then we have the,

B. Nations descended from Ham.

Four sons are mentioned,

v.6

Cush is without question a reference to Ethiopia. Mizraim is the ancestor of the Egyptians, a nation also called in Psalm 105:23, the land of Ham. No doubt, Ham accompanied his son Mizraim into Egypt.

Put is the land of Libya, the area of North Africa west of Egypt. And Canaan, of course, gives his name to the land of Canaan, the land which God gave to the Israelites after Moses led them

out of Egypt and through the wilderness. The sons of Cush listed in verse 7 are tribes in Ethiopia, including areas today known as Sudan and Arabia.

Yet the most illustrious son of Cush stayed right in the Tigris-Euphrates valley, and led the building of the city of Babel, building a governmental system and empire centered at Babylon.

v.10

Then he went across and founded the great city of Nineveh, later the capital of the Assyrian empire.

v.11-12

Then, Mizraim, again in Egypt.

v.13-14

And then the more familiar tribes of the Canaanites,

v.15

Sidon was the ancestor of the Phoenicians, with a city bearing his name. The Hittites descended from son Heth, and apparently attained great power and influence as an empire in later years.

The other nine sons of Canann inhabited the land when the Israelites arrived,

v.16-19

I ought to say of the Amorites, that they were so numerous and prominent at the time of the conquest that oftentimes all Canannites are simply called Amorites. Remember what God told Abraham about the promised land,

Gen.15:16 “But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

Then, finally, we have the,

C. Nations descended from Shem.

Five sons listed,

v.22

And the grandsons are listed in the following verses. But first, the sons. The Elamites are well known in Scripture. Asshur was evidently the founder of the Assyrians before being conquered by Nimrod. Arphaxad is in the direct line to Abraham, as we'll see in chapter 11. Lud may be the ancestor of the Lydians in Asia Minor. And Aram, father of the Arameans, is the same as the Syrians. They became a great nation, had their own language, commonly spoken among the Jews at the time of Christ, the language Aramaic.

So, what should we say about all of that? Lots of details, and I don't expect you to remember those details, but I do expect you to realize this--Scripture gives us an ancient history of the world. In God's providence, this is the history of mankind. This is the history of how one family, a father and three sons, grew into all the nations of the world. All of it according to God's plans and purposes.

Having gone through all that, let's stop and look more carefully at one of these 70 descendants, one which receives prominence in this chapter. Nimrod.

v.8-12

Nimrod was the founder of nations, great nations, great empires, ancient kingdoms. Babylon and Nineveh, particularly. So one of the great values of studying this chapter is to see how those kingdoms were founded.

II. SCRIPTURE GIVES US AN INSIGHTFUL DESCRIPTION OF THE BEGINNING OF ANCIENT KINGDOMS.

But let me ask first, in general terms, was Nimrod good or was he bad? Was he a servant of the Lord or an enemy of the Lord?

I'll answer that question, then explain my answer. I propose to you that Nimrod was an enemy of the Lord, that he worked in opposition to the Lord and to the Lord's purposes. In fact, we can determine that,

A. Nimrod was the leader in organized rebellion against God's purposes.

How do we know that?

v.8

First, let's trace Nimrod's line back. His father was Cush, Ham's oldest son. When God cursed Canaan, he was, in effect, cursing the descendants of Ham. Canaan was the youngest son, Cush the oldest, so Cush would have likely resented the place of subjection under which he had been placed. We can presume that by the time Nimrod was born, his resentment had become so strong that he gave his son a name meaning, "Let us rebel."

Names meant something then, and Cush would have trained his son from childhood how to resist and rebel against their lot in God's providence. Cush would see to it that his son would not be permanently enslaved to the other tribes. He trained his son to rule, to achieve power and influence. And I know that because that is precisely what Nimrod did!

Nimrod was a leader. Only his leadership was in opposition to God, in an attempt to thwart God's ordained purposes. He became a mighty warrior, which in this context gives the sense of a tyrant. His political power was achieved through hunting, not merely the sport of killing animals, but a symbol of his exercise of tyranny, hunting men down that he might enslave them in his own

kingdom, for his own advancement. He hunted his prey until he possessed them. So Nimrod became the first dictator on earth, the first despot, oppressing others and using them for the furtherance of his own interests.

B. Nimrod was a tyrant who amassed political power in rebellion against God's purposes.

v.8-9

And all of this done "before the Lord," "in the sight of the Lord. In other words, he amassed guilt, for the Lord saw all that he did and would call him to account, even if he did not at once proceed to take vengeance upon him. All of this was done defiantly "before the Lord," for he cared little about the Lord's approval or disapproval. He was bold and arrogant, presumptuous and successful. He founded a great kingdom.

C. Nimrod was the founder of a mighty kingdom in rebellion against God's purposes.

v.10-12

Babylon and Assyria! The two great powers of later centuries. The two nations who would eventually take Israel into captivity. Not a bad resume!

He was the founding father of Babel, or Babylon. And Nineveh, capital of Assyria. It actually says that he built Nineveh! There was no limit to his ambitious plans.

But as it becomes exceedingly clear in chapter 11, these great cities were not God's purpose for his people, for the great cities and powerful empires only fed the sinful pride of man. And God would take care of that, frustrating men with the barriers of language and location, scattering the people he created all across the earth.

It's interesting to see the connection with chapter 9, the verses which prescribe capital punishment for those who take the life of another man. That was the first regulation for establishing civil government, the first time man was authorized by God to be God's own agent in carrying out the demands of justice. The role of the civil government was established and defined, but notice how much farther Nimrod goes than God's prescription for government.

He formed a complex of cities centered at Babylon, creating a great empire over which he rule as a dictator. Surely that was not God's purpose for government, for government is instituted to place restraints upon the sinfulness of man, not to provide the context for that sinfulness to be encouraged. A government ruled by one who is described as a mighty warrior is a horrible thing!

We'll see how God responded when we get to chapter 11. Let's get a sneak preview,

Gen. 11:4 "And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." 5 But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. 6 And the LORD said, "Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. 7 Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." 8 So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city."

Oh, the sinfulness of mankind. Even the beginning of ancient kingdoms was done in rebellion against God, organized and led by a man trained from childhood to revolt. Oh, the sinfulness of a

man unwilling to submit to God!

There is a lot of that in us, too. It is a common temptation to consider the acquisition of power of prestige or wealth. It is common among men to chafe under God's authority, and to work to resist the absolute and unrestricted exercise of that authority. In other words, there is a tendency in all sinful men to resist the call to live in submission. At it's most basic level, I believe that was the sin of Nimrod. He became a great and mighty warrior because he refused to submit to God's authority. He would seek to be his own authority, and attempt to raise himself to God's level by his own accomplishments, most notably, the tower of Babel.

This is so edifying for us to study because we must constantly be on guard against such sinful tendencies in our own heart. The same commentator who questions whether any man ought to preach on this chapter granted that we might preach about Nimrod, but then commented that "such a sermon might have too little of the gospel content and be largely negative in character, showing what the kingdom of God is not."

Now, I must tell you, I really like that commentator, but I really disagree with the statement greatly. These verses about Nimrod are filled with the gospel, for the gospel comes to SINFUL men. Only when you realize that the pride and self-rule of Nimrod lurks deep in your own hear, only then will you truly turn to the Lord in repentance. And as Christians, you will grow to maturity only when you come to terms with this ugly rebellion against submission to authority which lies in the flesh of every man.

Such is the beginning of the ancient kingdoms!

One more gem to mine. One more glorious truth to glean from this table of nations. To put it into its broadest terms, the gem

which we can glean from these verses is the example of God's sovereignty, his sovereignty over all the nations. And so, I'll eagerly preach from this passage, because,

III. SCRIPTURE GIVES US A CLEAR DESCRIPTION OF GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY OVER THE NATIONS.

This table of nations is not merely an historical explanation. It is that, but it is much more. It does not merely teach us how the nations came into being and who originated them, as fascinating as that information is for us. There is much more. This is not merely a list of the nations of the world, but rather a description of God's sovereign authority over all the nations of the world. There are two ways in which that sovereignty is most clearly expounded in this chapter. First,

A. God separated all the nations from each other.

God separated them. We'll study the particulars of that next week in chapter 11, and there you must notice that the emphasis is upon the action of God. The Lord speaks,

Gen. 11:7 "Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." 8 So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city."

To be sure, they were scattered. The great nations were divided.

v.25

Now, as you might have guessed, "Peleg" in Hebrew means "divided" or "division." And he is included in this list for that very reason. God divided the nations, he separated them. He scattered them. He, in his own sovereign authority.

We see the result, just as God purposed,

v.32

And those nations were spread out over the earth to be separated by the frustration of the lack of communication. Different languages or tongues. We see that repeated in the lines of each of the three sons of Noah.

Shem, v.31

Ham, v.20

And Japheth, v.5

Each nation with its own language, by God's sovereign authority. One final thing demonstrates God's sovereignty, and this will provide the appropriate introduction to chapter 11, and to the rest of Genesis and the rest of the Bible. Something significant comes to and end with the end of chapter 10. There is a distinctly different emphasis in chapter 11. And everything that follows in the rest of Scripture continues that emphasis. What we have been looking at in chapter 10 is the table of nations, all the nations. All mankind, created in the image of God.

What happens in chapter 11 is that we get a new genealogy, and this one does not trace the history of all mankind, but only God's people. The genealogy of chapter 11 traces the line of Shem only, and traces it to Abraham! And from then on, we study the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the twelve tribes of Israel. From now on, we'll be studying only one nation, the nation of God's people. And what we see introduced in chapter 10 is that,

B. God chose the nation of the Hebrews to be his people.

God sovereignly chose the nation of the Hebrews to be his people. See,

v.21

Why is Eber mentioned up front? He is really Shem's great-grandson, mentioned again in verse 25. But why the identification in verse 21? Because Eber was the line of God's people. Eber really begins with an "H" sound, and is, therefore, the word for "Hebrew."

The line of Eber is the line of the Hebrews. They are one and the same. The Hebrews, in the line of Shem, were God's people. They were the nation of God's people. But only the chosen line. Through Eber. Through Peleg. Through Reu, Serug, Nahor, Terah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

That was the line through whom God chose to reveal his plan and purpose of salvation. And that was the line through whom Jesus would come in the flesh. They were the elect, God's people, those to whom he would enter into covenant relationship with, as is made so clear through the successive covenants made with Abraham, Moses, and then David.

And so, from Genesis 11 forward, through the rest of the OT and through the rest of the Bible, we read about the history of God's people, a people whom he will bring to salvation in Jesus Christ.

So, you may not remember any of the 70 nations, or you may remember only a very few. And that's all right. But you should remember and see more clearly God's sovereign grace in choosing his people from all the nations of the world, and bringing them unto salvation.

And therefore, quite frankly, I think I should very well question any man who intentionally fails to preach on a passage as rich as this one.