



Catalog No. 1597

Genesis 10:1-32

35th Message

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July 31, 2011

# MAPPING THE NATIONS

*SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS*

The 2011 finals of the National Geographic World Championship were held on Wednesday. It was fitting that they should be held here at Google, for it is to Google that most of us now turn if we want a map. But I still like physical maps that I can hold and peruse at leisure. My love of maps is reflected in my first two degrees, in geography and in surveying. I have lots of maps and lots of atlases. Whether we have physical maps or not, all of us carry in our heads mental maps which can vary widely in their correspondence to reality on the ground. Most men think they have good mental maps, so they never ask for directions. But our mental maps can be pretty sketchy: few of us have all fifty states correctly located in our mind, let alone the countries of sub-Saharan Africa.

Sometimes these mental maps are rendered explicit in physical form. Early maps often depicted Jerusalem at the center, surrounded by the three continents of Asia, Africa and Europe. This was not intended to depict geographical reality; it was spiritual reality. Some maps portrayed these three continents as the homelands of Shem, Ham and Japheth respectively. This allocation of Noah's three sons to the three continents is based upon Genesis 10, our text for today.

This chapter is usually called "The Table of Nations." It is just that, a table or listing of many nations or peoples. It's a listing that would tax any biblical geographer in a quiz. Some of the peoples are well known, others are obscure. Often commentators and preachers focus on identifying these peoples and places as if on a physical map. But I'll spare you that, because this doesn't really help understand why Israel was given this list. With a few exceptions, the precise location of the peoples is of marginal importance. The purpose of this table is not to give Israel a detailed gazetteer or atlas of the world, but to give it a general sense of how the peoples of the world are distributed with respect to Israel—despite the fact that Israel is not even mentioned. So, I find it more helpful to think of this table as a mental map not a geographical one.

The Table of Nations begins with a heading:

**This is the account of Shem, Ham and Japheth, Noah's sons, who themselves had sons after the flood. (Gen 10:1 TNIV)**

The Table of Nations starts a new account. Genesis contains ten accounts (*toledot*), of which the first five form the primeval history (2:4–11:26) that is the material for this preaching series. The third account was that of Noah (6:9–9:29). Now the fourth account is of Noah's sons. It comprises two parts: the Table of Nations (10:1–32) and the Tower of Babel (11:1–9). As for all ten accounts, this is not the story of the ones listed in the title, but of their generations, of what proceeds from them. We were told the story of the three sons, or all that we need to know of it, at the end of Noah's account.

The Flood marked a change of eras. After the Flood, God blessed Noah and his sons, saying, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth." From these three sons the whole earth was scattered (9:19). It was scattered under God's blessing, and also under the pronouncements

of Noah. Because of the behavior of his sons, Noah had cursed Canaan, but pronounced positive destinies for Shem and Japheth (9:25–27). God would bless them both but in different ways. Shem would have the great privilege of the Lord identifying himself with Shem as his God. God would extend Japheth, but beyond that Japheth would dwell in the tents of Shem. So, under these dual pronouncements of God and Noah, sons were born to them after the Flood.

Few readers pay attention to this chapter; most skip on to the Tower of Babel. There are several things to note about this table that will help us read it with understanding.

1. Noah's three sons are always listed as Shem, Ham and Japheth, but the Table covers them in the reverse order. We might assume that the usual order indicates their birth order, but this is not necessarily so. It seems that Ham is actually the youngest (9:24), and it is ambiguous whether Shem or Japheth is the oldest (10:21). Nor does it matter. What does matter is the order in which the Table enumerates the three sons: Japheth, Ham and Shem.

2. Though the Table contains many names, it is not an exhaustive list. It is selective, even highly so. It is selective in how far it drills into each line of sons. It is selective in how many sons and grandsons it lists, showing a preference for sets of seven. Even for the names listed, the Table is selective in its level of interest, using two different formulae: "the sons of..." formula for the less important lines and the "begat" or "fathered" formula for the more important lines.

3. Several times the listing of peoples is interrupted by a narrative portion. We should pay particular attention to these insertions.

4. Each of the three lines ends with a similar formula, noting that each of the three sets of sons is according to their clans and languages, in their territories and nations. This refrain is a reminder that this Table is all about the filling of the earth.

## Japheth (2-5)

**The sons of Japheth:**

Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshek and Tiras.

**The sons of Gomer:**

Ashkenaz, Riphath and Togarmah.

**The sons of Javan:**

Elishah, Tarshish, the Kittites and the Rodanites. (From these the maritime peoples spread out into their territories by their clans within their nations, each with its own language.) (10:2-5)

Japheth's line is listed first and most briefly. His list contains seven sons and seven grandsons for a total of fourteen peoples. Sons are listed for only two of Japheth's seven sons, an example of the selectivity which here produces a double "seven." The sons of Japheth and Gomer inhabit Anatolia and the areas around the Black Sea. Javan is the Ionian Greeks, whose sons spread out into the islands of the eastern Mediterranean. From these the maritime peoples spread out, the peoples of the distant coastlands and islands, the thin sliver of land

seen on the far horizon by a sailor. The Table is not very interested in any of these peoples, using the “sons of” formula throughout. The Japhethites inhabit the lands on the far horizon of Israel’s world. They will interact but little with Israel, so they are covered briefly.

## Ham (6-20)

### The sons of Ham:

Cush, Egypt, Put and Canaan.

### The sons of Cush:

Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Raamah and Sabteka.

### The sons of Raamah:

Sheba and Dedan. (10:6-7)

Ham’s section begins with his four sons: Cush, Egypt, Put and Canaan. Cush is south of Egypt, in ancient Nubia, modern Sudan. Put is Libya to the immediate west of Egypt. Cush, in turn, has five sons and two grandsons, for another total of seven. These descendants of Cush are spread across either side of the south end of the Red Sea. But the Table is not interested in any of these, using the “sons of” formula for all three sets.

But Cush has another son in whom the Table is interested, as indicated in two ways: by a change of expression from “the sons of Cush” to “Cush was the father of...,” and by a lengthy narrative insertion.

**Cush was the father of Nimrod, who became a mighty warrior on the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; that is why it is said, “Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the LORD.” The first centers of his kingdom were Babylon, Uruk, Akkad and Kalneh, in Shinar. From that land he went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah—which is the great city. (10:8-12)**

Who is Nimrod? His name is much more familiar in the UK than here in the USA. It was the name of Shackleton’s ship for his first Antarctic expedition. It is the name of the British equivalent of the P-3 Orion marine surveillance aircraft that used to be a familiar sight here when it flew out of Moffett Field. Most famously, Nimrod is the name of the beloved ninth variation of Edward Elgar’s *Enigma Variations*. But what does the name evoke here in the USA? Only a derogatory term: to be called a “nimrod” is not a compliment!

So, who was Nimrod? The Table of Nations gives him far more attention than any other character. Nimrod had two characteristics: he was a mighty hunter and he was an empire builder. In both respects he marked a new beginning for humanity. Here, in this book of beginnings, we have another beginning: Nimrod began to be, or was the first to become, a mighty man (Heb. *gibbor*). There’s an ominous echo here of the Nephilim who were mighty men (Heb. *gibborim*) from of old (6:4). His skill as a mighty man was especially evident in the hunt. Indeed, his prowess as a hunter of game was proverbial, so that it was said, “Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the Lord.”

Nimrod was also an empire-builder. Cain or his son was the first city-builder in human history (4:17). Condemned to a life of wandering in self-exile from God, he built a city so he could be secure and so he could be king. Nimrod went a stage further: he built not just one city, but multiple cities. More than that, he built two sets of cities, two empires. He wasn’t content to rule over his own city; he wanted to rule over other cities as well. That’s the difference between a kingdom and an empire: a king rules over his own people, an emperor has dominion over other peoples as well. The first center was in Shinar, that is southern Mesopotamia. Here he built four cities:

Babylon, Uruk, Akkad and Kalneh. Then he moved north and built a second empire in northern Mesopotamia, in Assyria. Here, too, he built four cities: Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen. Ominously this is described as the great city. Under Nimrod we have the first mention of the great city that will become an important motif in Scripture. The great city is the city of man, built by man where he can live in autonomy from God. Its antithesis is the holy city, built by God, where people can dwell in God’s presence.

Who was this Nimrod? Attempts have been made to identify him with a historical figure, usually Sargon or his grandson Naram-Sin. Around 2350 BC Sargon founded the kingdom of Akkad and established a strong dynasty. His chronicle said of him that he “had neither rival nor opponent. He spread his terror-inspiring glamor over all the countries.” But no single historical figure founded these four cities of Shinar and four cities of Assyria. Yet from an ideological point of view these cities and empires did share a common founder. His name is Nimrod, which means “we rebel.” The founders of the cities and empires of southern and northern Mesopotamia were mighty men, famed as warriors, hunters and city-builders. This was long the Mesopotamian ideal of the king. Perhaps some of you have seen the reliefs in the British Museum of the Assyrian kings as lion hunters. But these kings are dismissed as rebels. Furthermore, though Nimrod was a mighty hunter, he was so “before the LORD.” Nimrod thought that he was sovereign, but he was still “before the LORD.” There was a sovereign higher than himself: the Lord.

But why is Nimrod of Mesopotamia listed under Cush a thousand miles away in Nubia? A frequent explanation is that the author confused Cush with the Mesopotamian Kish, where kingship was re-established after the flood. The Greek historian Herodotus (5th century BC) did confuse the two. But I think the compiler of the Table of Nations knew exactly what he was doing. Here it helps to think of this Table as a mental map. The Assyrian and Babylonian peoples of Mesopotamia were actually Shemites; indeed, Ashur is listed as a son of Shem. But the Table places Nimrod, and hence the empires of Babylonia and Assyria, under the Hamites. Why? Because all of Israel’s enemies are among the Hamites. Ham behaved badly toward Noah, the new Adam, whom God blessed; his descendants will continue to oppose those whom God blesses, namely Israel.

These enemies include also two other sons of Ham: Egypt and Canaan. The Table signifies their importance by continuing the “be-gat” formula:

### Egypt was the father of

the Ludites, Anamites, Lehabites, Naphtuhites, Pathrusites, Kasluhites (from whom the Philistines came) and Caphtorites.

### Canaan was the father of

Sidon his firstborn, and of the Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Gergashites, Hivites, Arkites, Sinites, Arvadites, Zemarites and Hamathites.

Later the Canaanite clans scattered and the borders of Canaan reached from Sidon toward Gerar as far as Gaza, and then toward Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboyim, as far as Lasha. (10:13-19)

Egypt fathered seven sons. The sixth of these peoples, the Kasluhites, are credited with being the progenitors of the Philistines. Here is another instance of the Table tinkering with reality. The Philistines were one of the Sea Peoples who moved southwards from the Aegean. Properly they should be Japhethites, but they’re listed under

Ham because they were another of the enemy peoples. The Philistines moved into the coastal region of Canaan around the same time that Israel was trying to take possession of the land. For centuries they would oppose Israel until King David finally defeated them.

Canaan fathered eleven sons, best read as one plus ten. The one is his firstborn Sidon, chief of the Phoenician cities strung along the eastern Mediterranean coast. The other ten will occupy the interior of the land of Canaan. Many of these names will be repeated again and again in listings of the native inhabitants of the land. These are the people whom Israel must later dispossess. Their significance is indicated by another narrative insertion, this one detailing the borders of Canaan. The reason for this insertion is obvious: this is the territory that will be promised to Abraham for his descendants.

**These are the sons of Ham by their clans and languages, in their territories and nations. (10:20)**

In all, the sons of Ham number thirty. Here we find all the enemies of Israel: Shinar (Babylonia), Assyria, Egypt, the Philistines, and the Canaanites. Some are not ethnically Hamites: the Mesopotamians are Shemite, the Philistines are Japhethite. But they are all Hamites: they all oppose God's purposes and God's people. Israel will interact much with these people, but it will always be negative, always confrontational.

### Shem (21-31)

Finally the Table turns to Shem.

**Sons were also born to Shem, whose older brother was Japheth; Shem was the ancestor of all the sons of Eber.**

**The sons of Shem:**

**Elam, Ashur, Arphaxad, Lud and Aram.**

**The sons of Aram:**

**Uz, Hul, Gether and Meshek. (10:21-23)**

The Table's interest in Shem's line is indicated by the special introduction. To Shem also sons were born. We are reminded that he is the brother of Japheth. It is ambiguous which is the elder brother: Shem (most English versions) or Japheth (NIV uniquely). Nor is it clear why it matters who is the older. What does matter is that Ham is not listed as a brother. Shem and Japheth were brothers in their response to Ham's sin, and in their reception of Noah's blessing. They will be brothers again when Japheth finds a home inside the tents of Shem. But Ham is not a brother.

Shem was the father of all the sons of Eber. This is important because Eber gave his name to the Hebrews (Heb. *'ivri*, the gentilic form of Eber's name).

Shem's five sons and his four grandsons through Aram are listed briefly using the "sons of" formula.

**Arphaxad was the father of Shelah,  
and Shelah the father of Eber.**

**Two sons were born to Eber:**

**One was named Peleg, because in his time the earth was divided; his brother was named Joktan.**

**Joktan was the father of**

**Almodad, Sheleph, Hazarmaveth, Jerah, Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah, Obal, Abimael, Sheba, Ophir, Havilah and Jobab. All these were sons of Joktan.**

**The region where they lived stretched from Mesha toward Sephar, in the eastern hill country.**

**These are the sons of Shem by their clans and languages, in their territories and nations. (10:24-31)**

The formula switches to "father of" to give the linear genealogy of Shem through his third son Arphaxad, running to the fourth generation, Eber himself, to whom two sons were born. These two are of such significance that the linear genealogy, tracing only one son per generation, is halted and broadened to two sons. The significance is really Peleg's, for in his day the earth was divided. This is a wordplay on Peleg's name which means "division."

What does it mean that in Peleg's day the earth was divided? Long ago, when I was into Biblical creationism and reading the Bible as a science book, I accepted the position that the division of the earth in the days of Peleg was the physical separation of the continents. The theory of continental drift was proposed in 1912 by the German scientist Alfred Wegener, but not accepted until the 1950s. Once it was accepted, Biblical creationists had to find some place in the Bible to put it. Here is where they put it: in the days of Peleg when the earth was divided. Thirty years ago I accepted that. Biblical creationists today still advance this explanation. But I have long since ceased to think that is what this verse is about.

The text itself makes it clear what the division is. The division is between the brothers Peleg and Joktan and their respective descendants. Although Peleg is the first-named son, his descendants are not listed here; they will be listed later. Instead, Joktan and his thirteen sons are listed for a total of fourteen Joktanites. The line of Peleg will not be given until after the Tower of Babel, where the account of Shem is a ten-generation linear genealogy leading from Shem through Peleg to Abraham (11:10-26). The Table of Nations is immediately followed by the story of the Tower of Babel. From the point of view of the narrative, Joktan leads to the Tower of Babel, but Peleg leads beyond the Tower of Babel. That's the division of the earth in the days of Peleg: a line that leads to Babel and a line that leads to Abraham, God's answer to Babel.

### The Clans of Noah's Sons (32)

The prologue (10:1) is matched by an epilogue:

**These are the clans of Noah's sons, according to their lines of descent, within their nations. From these the nations spread out over the earth after the flood. (10:32)**

From the sons of Noah the nations spread out over the earth. The Table has been selective: 14 sons for Japheth, 30 for Ham, and 26 for Shem, for a total of 70. This is surely a symbolic number: seven multiplied by ten, both themselves symbolic numbers. Seventy represents the fullness of this spreading out over the earth. It was out of this fullness of the nations that God would call Abraham to birth a new nation. To Abraham he would promise the territory of the Canaanites to be the land for this new people. At the end of the book of Genesis, Jacob and his family go down to Egypt; their number is given: "seventy in all" (46:27; Exod 1:5). Israel has become as numerous as the nations. Israel has become the new nation.

### Israel and the Nations

The Table of Nations gave Israel a mental map for understanding its relationship to the other nations. On the far horizon were the Japhethites, too far away to have much interaction with Israel. Closer were the Hamites, from whom came all Israel's enemies. Related to Israel were the Shemites. You can plot these nations on a

geographically-accurate map. But it's more helpful to draw a mental map, such as the map showing Jerusalem at the center.

Israel was unique, Israel was different. Starting with just one, Abraham, called from out of the seventy nations, God built a new people, numbering seventy. Israel was in the center, surrounded by these other nations. What was Israel to think of these other nations? The Lord warned Israel not to think that it was any better than the other nations. The Lord had chosen her not because she was better, but because of his great love. The Lord chose Israel from the nations but also for the nations. The Lord also warned Israel not to behave like the Egyptians or the Canaanites, but it did just that.

As Israel sank deeper into sin, becoming increasingly indistinguishable from the surrounding nations, God sent his prophets to warn of impending judgment: expulsion from the land just like the Canaanites, reversing Abraham's journey out of Mesopotamia. But through these same prophets God also announced a remarkable vision for the nations, for the descendants of Japheth and even Ham.

The Japhethites inhabited the distant coastlands, the land on the far horizon of Israel's world. Isaiah frequently told of the Lord's purposes for these distant coastlands; for example, in the last chapter:

**“And I...am about to come and gather the people of all nations and languages, and they will come and see my glory.**

**“I will set a sign among them, and I will send some of those who survive to the nations—to Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians (famous as archers), to Tubal and Greece, and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations. And they will bring all your people, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD.” (Isa 66:18-20)**

Tarshish, Tubal, Greece, the distant islands: these are all Japhethites. The Lord will bring them to Zion to worship.

Isaiah proclaimed a similar vision for the Hamites:

**In that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the heart of Egypt, and a monument to the LORD at its border. It will be a sign and witness to the LORD Almighty in the land of Egypt. When they cry out to the LORD because of their oppressors, he will send them a savior and defender, and he will rescue them. So the LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians, and in that day they will acknowledge the LORD...**

**In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance.” (Isa 19:19-21, 23-25)**

Egypt and Assyria: Israel's two great enemies, one on either side. But the Lord will make himself known even to them. Not all of Israel liked this vision. Jonah got very upset, angry enough to die, when God heard the cry of the Ninevites and saved them.

Earlier in the service we read part of Psalm 87:

**Glorious things are said of you,  
city of God:**

**“I will record Rahab and Babylon  
among those who acknowledge me—  
Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush—  
and will say, “This one was born in Zion.”  
Indeed, of Zion it will be said,  
“This one and that one were born in her,  
and the Most High himself will establish her.”  
The LORD will write in the register of the peoples:  
“This one was born in Zion.” (Ps 87:3-6)**

Who are these? Rahab (Egypt), Babylon, Philistia, Tyre (sister city of Sidon), Cush. These are all Hamites! But the Lord will change their birth certificates. He will write in the register of the peoples, “This one was born in Zion!” “This one belongs to me. He is mine. I am his father.” Place of birth is very important. It is listed in our passport. Citizenship can depend upon it. Here the Lord changes the birthplace of these peoples to declare that they are his.

The Old Testament prophets depict Zion as the center of world pilgrimage for all peoples: Shemites, Japhethites, even Hamites. All the nations that God has made will come and worship before him.

### The Church and the Nations

What is your mental map of the nations? The Jews at the time of Jesus accepted that foreigners could be incorporated into God's people, but they had to become Jews. The early church maintained this same belief. But then the church in Jerusalem was scattered (Acts 8:1). On the road to Gaza, Philip encountered an Ethiopian eunuch; he was from the region of Cush, so he was a Hamite. He believed in Christ and was baptized. A little later Peter was summoned to Caesarea to the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and therefore a Japhethite. He, too, believed and was baptized. The church eventually concluded that the Gentiles did not have to become Jews to be incorporated into God's family. They realized the gospel of Christ was for all nations. God had demolished the divisions between peoples. So Paul could declare to the Areopagus in Athens:

**From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands...In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. (Acts 17:26, 30)**

Do you share that vision for the nations? That God wants to reconcile people of all nations to himself through the Lord Jesus Christ. That he extends the gospel of grace even to enemies. Paul calls this the mystery of Christ, “that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph 3:6).

This is why missionaries go out to the far ends of the earth, confident that the gospel is for all nations, confident that God wants to write in the register of the peoples, “This one was born in Zion.” This should be our mental map: Zion at the center with the peoples all around. Not Zion as a physical city anymore, but Zion still as the people of God; Zion as the place where God and his people dwell together: Zion as the church. We've a story to tell to the nations, to call them to come and know the Lord, to come and worship him.

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