

Chapter 10 is the account of Shem, Ham and Japheth, Noah's sons (10:1). It is primarily a genealogy, but with additional biographic and geographic material. The primary concern seems to be the identification of various nations; for that reason, chapter 10 is widely known as the "Table of Nations."

Verses 10:5, 18, 20 and 31 make it clear that we are concerned with *peoples, clans, languages, territories and nations*, and not just individuals in the line of Noah. Consequently, there is some connection between names in the genealogy and groups of people.¹ In the lists below, we give the associations that are reasonably well established. For simplicity, we omit the evidence, the more obscure or controversial identifications, and the scholarly references. We also refer to locations, for the most part, by their modern names.

But before going into details, there is a serious problem that needs to be considered:

*The modern interpreter finds the juxtaposition of the table of nations (chap. 10) and the tower of Babel story incongruous. On the face of it, they offer two incompatible accounts of the origins of the nations and their different languages. But the very fact that the author of Genesis included both shows that he regarded the material as complementary, not contradictory.*²

This comment points to an issue that we have raised before as critical to understanding Genesis: considering how the text would have been understood by the original readers. By itself, the Table of Nations might suggest a tranquil and uneventful fulfillment of God's command to fill and subdue the earth. The Babel story corrects this impression by indicating that the spread of mankind throughout the world and a multiplicity of languages were both results of God's direct intervention.

To understand the relationship between the chapters in this way, Babel must come before at least some of the Table of Nations. The fact that there is no explicit indication of this in the text suggests that the original audience did not expect things to be presented chronologically as a matter of course; there were different expectations. We saw this previously in chapter 1, where the organization by "days" suggests, to modern readers, a chronology that seems to lead to contradictions.

There is another problem for the modern reader: the Table of Nations seems to imply genetic and linguistic relationships that are not consistent with current scientific understanding. One way of dealing with this is along the same lines as for chapter 1 – we should not require from the text explanations for matters it was never intended to deal with. Chapter 10 asserts that all people, of all nationalities, come from Noah's sons and are in that sense God's people, ultimately under his rule, and ultimately recipients of his blessings.

We now look at the details of chapter 10. Two general comments may be helpful here. First, the author deals with the least important matters first – getting them out of the way, as it were. Thus, the Japhethites had very little to do with Israel at the time of writing. The Hamites, particularly the Canaanites, were a very immediate concern. And finally, the Shemites included Israel itself – though this fact has yet to be disclosed.

Second, the chapter speaks of exactly seventy nations. This round number suggests, though of course it does not prove, that the listing is selective, intended to be representative of a larger whole – just as we have previously seen that genealogies were expected to be selective and representative. 10:5 suggests the same conclusion.

The Japhethites, or sons (i.e., "descendants") of Japheth, are primarily associated with northern and western sites (Asia Minor and Europe):³

- *Gomer* (10:2): Cimmerians, Indo-Europeans from north of the Black Sea (southern Russia/Ukraine) who settled in Turkey.
 - *Ashkenaz* (10:3): Scythians, from the Russian steppes who settled in Media (northwest Iran), driving the Cimmerians before them.
 - *Togarmah*: perhaps a region in Syria
- *Madaï*: Medes, Indo-Europeans northeast of the Tigris River (northwest Iran)
- *Javan*: Ionian Greeks (southern Greece and western Turkey)
 - *Elishah* (10:4): probably Cyprus

¹ Kenneth Matthews, *Genesis 1-11 (New American Commentary)*, 1996, 440 ff

² Gordon John Wenham, *Genesis 1-15 (Word Biblical Commentary)*, Zondervan, 2014, 242

³ Matthews, *op. cit.*, 433

- *Tarshish*: perhaps Spain, or Carthage⁴
- *Kittites*: Greeks on Cyprus
- *Rodanites*: Greeks on Rhodes⁵

10:5 indicates that these people *spread out* by sea. Taken together, these verses indicate that the *sons of Japheth* populated the Mediterranean lands. Clearly, this is true only for some of the nations involved.

The Hamites, or sons of Ham, are primarily associated with Egypt, Mesopotamia, and some of Arabia.⁶ The length of this section indicates how important the Hamites were to Israel.

- *Cush* (10:6): Cush is traditionally translated “Nubia” (Septuagint) or “Ethiopia.” However, there is reason for doubt about this identification, because most of Cush’s descendants are associated with Arabia, though more precise location is problematic.
- *Egypt*:⁷ this is more or less the same as modern Egypt.
 - *Ludites* (10:13): perhaps Lydians in western Turkey.
 - *Philistines* (10:14): one group of the Sea Peoples that settled around Gaza along the Mediterranean coast at about the time of Joshua.
 - *Caphtorites*: Caphtor is almost certainly Crete.
- *Put*: modern Libya seems the most likely location.
- *Canaan*: the region west of the Jordan River, commonly called Canaan in the Bible (modern Israel, Lebanon and parts of Syria)
 - *Sidon* (10:15): the earliest of the great Phoenician seaports.
 - *Hittites*: this is probably not a reference to the Hittite empire of central Turkey, but rather to people in Canaan.⁸
 - *Amorites* (10:16): a group in Canaan known to Abraham (14:5-7) and later. Some dynasties in Babylon and Assyria were of Amorite descent.

Nimrod (10:8-12) is presented as an historical figure with vast accomplishments, well known enough to be the subject of a proverbial saying. He is credited with founding multiple cities in both Babylonia and Assyria, most of which are well known to scholars. Several identifications with known men in history have been proposed, but none come close to matching all that is said here.

The boundaries of Canaan expanded as the clans living in the area migrated (10:18-19). The considerable detail given would have been relevant to the first audience because this land was promised to Israel.

The Shemites, or sons of Shem, are primarily associated with the areas of northern Mesopotamia, Syria, and Arabia.⁹ These verses are much more like the genealogy seen in chapter 5. We will discuss this lineage again while treating 11:10-26. Three sons of Shem are clearly identified with nations:

- *Elam* (10:22): east of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley (southwest Iran), and a longtime rival of Mesopotamia.
- *Ashur*: Assyria, on the upper Tigris River (in Iraq).
- *Aram*: diverse places in Syria and Mesopotamia.

We also note that a comment is made about Peleg: *in his time the earth was divided* (10:25). It is possible, though not certain, that this is an indication that the scattering after the tower of Babel took place in his time. Additionally, no descendants of Peleg are given here; instead, this is deferred to chapter 11.

In chapter 11, we suggest that the tower of Babel was somewhere in Mesopotamia. This conjecture is strengthened by noting that all the nations mentioned in the line of Shem are in Mesopotamia.

To be consistent, this would mean that the descriptions of the lines of Japheth and Ham refer to times considerably later than Peleg, again contrary to the chronological expectations of modern readers.

⁴ There is considerable debate on the identification. It has been suggested that Tarshish refers to an activity, smelting (*Ibid*, 442), or to the sea (Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17 (New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990, 333), rather than a particular location.

⁵ The NIV footnote to 10:4 indicates that this identification is problematic.

⁶ Matthews, *op. cit.*, 433

⁷ Older versions of the NIV have *Mizraim*, which is a transliteration of the Hebrew word for Egypt.

⁸ So Matthews, *op. cit.*, 455. Some scholars have suggested that the Hittites of the Bible were a Canaanite group previously part of the Hittite empire.

⁹ Matthews, *op. cit.*, 433