

Studies in the Book of Genesis
Part 2:

The Table of Nations in [Genesis 10](#)—Its Structure

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Introduction

The tenth chapter of Genesis remains one of the least satisfactorily studied passages in the book. When compared to the volumes produced on the other sections of Genesis, the efforts to understand the structure and meaning of this passage in its context have been sparse. Westermann laments this fact, noting that most writers address themselves to the location of the individual names or to the classification of the sections into sources.¹

difficulties with the passage

The Table of Nations is a lengthy listing of many names of peoples in the ancient Near East in the form of a genealogy of the sons of Noah—Shem, Ham, and Japheth. The fact that many scholars have addressed themselves to the study of the individual names on the list is due in part to several difficulties with the listing of certain names under supposed ancestors (such as the Hittites and Amorites being among the descendants of Canaan, a connection that cannot be supported by archaeology or history).

Not only are there a number of difficulties with the names on the Table, but there is also a tension over the structure of the record, for it incorporates a variation in style between the בְּנֵי (“sons of”) sections and the יָלַד (“begot”) sections. The former is an unadorned list of names, whereas the latter appears to incorporate various embellishments. Many scholars have felt that a classification into P and J sources, respectively, is the only solution to this variation.

V 137, p 341 V 137, N 548, p 341 p 341 A related tension comes from the inclusion of certain elements in the genealogy, such as the boundary list of the land of Canaan in [10:16–19](#). This listing of Canaanite cities seems suspicious on a Table of Nations. Moreover, the cliché list of the pre-Israelite tribes of Canaan ([10:15–19](#)) is suspected by some to be an addition.² Then again many have had trouble with the extended list of Joktanites (thirteen Arabian tribes) in the Shem section, which not only seems disproportionate but also includes names found in other sections of the Table. Such “doublets” are often considered by scholars as sure evidence of overlapping sources.

studies in the passage

In spite of the fact that so much has come to light from archaeology, and that there has been a growing interest in the relationship of structure to meaning, only

a few works have attempted to understand the form and function of the Table in Genesis.³

Commentaries deal with the passage, of course, but as Simons observes, “few are really helpful or of outstanding originality.”⁴ Many have simply followed the critical interpretation. Driver suggested that in the Table the nations around Israel were represented by eponymous ancestors.⁵ Skinner, who put the critical method to work on a full scale, also thought of the names as eponyms, representing a political geography.⁶ *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines *eponym* as “one who gives, or is supposed to give, his name to a people, place, or institution, e.g., among the Greeks, the heroes who were looked upon as ancestors or founders of tribes or cities.”⁷ However, while the word *eponym* can be used to refer to actual historical figures, the ideas associated with the word often tend to cast doubts on the historicity of the person, place, or institution being named. It is frequently used of those mythical personages from whom the names of places or peoples are reputed to have derived.

Unfortunately this is the concept that is often understood when the term is used in discussing [Genesis 10](#). Skinner says that there is no distinction between real and ideal historical parents for the beginning of nations.⁸ Aharoni concludes that the Table was “simply a literary and historical creation based on the principle that all peoples known to Israel had descended from one ancestor.”⁹ Von Rad takes this view, stating that the Table did not reveal humanity according to either race or language.¹⁰ Speiser, [V 137, p 342](#) [V 137, N 548, p 342](#) [p 342](#) following Gunkel, describes the Table as a pioneering effort in ethnographic studies, one which was largely political and geographical.¹¹

Many, however, have rejected the critical approach in favor of the traditional interpretation. In addition to older works by Bush,¹² Keil and Delitzsch,¹³ the new commentary by Delitzsch,¹⁴ and Jacob,¹⁵ the work by Cassuto provides a stimulating and constructive approach.¹⁶ He argues that it delineates the providence of God in scattering the nations around Israel.

Inner tensions and variations in the style of [Genesis 10](#) have led some to suggest a composite nature for the text. Others, recognizing that difficulties are not removed by assigning various portions of the text to different sources, have accepted the present form of the text. But there still remains the task of working out the meaning of the Table within the writer’s free use of style and content.¹⁷ An analysis of the structure of the Table of Nations must begin with observing the patterns that appear in it.

Numerical Symmetry

The first thing in [Genesis 10](#) that strikes the reader is the arrangement of the Table into three groups headed by Shem, Ham, and Japheth. This division

reflects a pattern in the early part of Genesis. The genealogy of Cain ends with three sons (Jabal, Jubal, and Tubalcain). The genealogy from Adam to Noah ([Gen. 5](#)) includes ten names, and the last person on the list (Noah) has three sons (Shem, Ham, and Japheth). The genealogy from Noah to Terah ([Gen. 11](#)) also includes ten names (counting Noah), and the last person on the list (Terah) has three sons as well (Abram, Nahor, and Haran). The patterns appear to reflect parallel uses of the genealogical records; the division into three lines offers a natural arrangement.

On investigation the reader is struck by a deliberate pattern in the selection of names for the Table. For example, of the sons of Japheth, who number seven, two are selected for further listing. From those two sons come seven grandsons, completing a selective list of fourteen names under Japheth. With Ham's thirty descendants and Shem's twenty-six, the grand total is seventy. Cassuto believes that this total is an attempt to show that the placing of the nations around Israel (which is not listed) is by divine providence.¹⁸ He suggests that the seventy nations correspond to the number of the families of Israel, for God arranged their boundaries according [V 137, p 343](#) [V 137, N 548, p 343](#) [p 343](#) to the number of the Israelites ([Deut. 32:8](#)). At least the numerical symmetry of the Table shows a unified and ordered arrangement.

Names of Individuals

While it is clear that the Table lists "families" ([10:32](#)), there are also individuals in the chapter. [Genesis 6–9](#) presents Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth as four individuals, recording their births, ages, and activities.

The fact that an event is said to have taken place in the days of Peleg would suggest that he too was thought to be an individual. In fact, all the names in the line of Shem (as recorded in [Gen. 11](#)) are presented as actual individuals.

Nimrod is depicted in the chapter as an individual and not an eponym. In fact, one of the reasons the Nimrod section is classified by the critics as J is that it describes an ancient hero and is not merely a genealogy.

Tribal Names

In addition to the names of individuals, tribal names also appear in the Table. Besides the declarative statement that families are among the entries ([10:32](#)), the names themselves also provide proof for this observation. The Kittim, Dodanim, Mizraim, Ludim, Ananim, Lehabim, Naphtuhim, Patrusim, Casluhim, and Caphtorim are all plural nouns and must represent tribes rather than actual sons.

In addition, names with the gentilic ending'. ("–ites")—the Jebusites, Amorites, Girgashites, Hivites, Arkites, Sinites, Arvadites, Zemarites, and Hamathites—are also found in the Table. These include the names of cities, and the gentilic ending depicts tribes in those locations.

Place Names

Some names on the list are clearly designated as places: Babylon, Erech, Accad, Calneh, Shinar, Asshur, Nineveh, Rehoboth-ir, Calah, and Resen. The text identifies these as cities built in certain geographical locations.

Other place names are listed without being clearly designated as geographical locations; usage suggests they are such. Sidon normally represents the city in Phoenicia. Magog is elsewhere [V 137, p 344](#) [V 137, N 548, p 344](#) [p 344](#) called the land of Gog. Tarshish, Elishah, Gomer, Meshech, Havilah, and Sheba are known as locations in the Bible.

So the Table incorporates the names of people, places, and tribes, in order to trace the ancestry of the surrounding nations. The tribal and place names stand for real individuals from whom the nations were believed to have descended.¹⁹

If this Table simply assigns fabled ancestors to the various nations, then there are exegetical problems with the tradition of Genesis. The chapter includes famous people, well-known cities, tribes and nations, as well as a number of names that could be individuals but are known later as peoples. Since the word *eponymous* is used so widely for the mystical personages of pagan traditions, it seems inappropriate for Genesis, for these biblical traditions not only rejected mythical concepts but frequently included polemics against them. But if the word can be limited to its basic meaning of a founder or ancestor who gave his name to the people or place, then there is no problem, for that does not call the tradition into question. In other words, as Wiseman says, “the tradition of these relationships, where they are listed in the genealogical manner, goes back to an initial physical relationship....”²⁰

So the names include the names of tribes, cities, inhabitants of those cities, and countries along with various individuals. This does not nullify the possibility that there were ancestors or founders who descended from the survivors of the Flood.

Genealogical Formula

That the Table is constructed with a variation of style has been a tension for scholars for some time. Part of it follows a בְּנֵי (“sons of”) formula, and part of it follows a יָלַד (“begot”) formula.

The word בְּנֵי, the construct plural of בֶּן (“son”), occurs fourteen times (twice seven) in the chapter. It presents the family and hereditary relationships coming from a father or ancestor. Of the nearly five thousand uses in the Bible, this word most often depicts a literal son or grandson (or children in general).

But on the Table the word is used with geographical terms, e.g., Elishah and Tarshish are among the “sons of” Javan. This usage is comparable to [1 Chronicles 2:50–51](#) where Salma is called the father of Bethlehem. The ancient world frequently used terms of family relationships to denote political and civic relationships: a father was a more powerful nation, a son was a dependent tribe, brothers were allies, and daughters were suburbs.²¹

[V 137, p 345](#) [V 137, N 548, p 345](#) [p 345](#) This idea of dependency or subordination of the “son” to the ancestor or sovereign occurs fairly frequently among figurative

uses of בן . Haag traces the primary examples in his discussion of the word; one example is the message of Ahaz to Tiglath-Pileser, saying, “I am your servant and your son” ([2 Kings 16:7](#)).²² Moreover, membership in a group by virtue of identification with the nature of the “father” is also a frequent use. The phrase “sons of Belial” would characterize people according to moral or ethical standing. Uses like these, then, depict a connection, derivation, subordination, or dependency on the source word.

So the looser sense of בן describes a relationship in which the “son” derives a quality or essence from the ancestor, or one in which the “son” is subordinate to and dependent on the ancestor. It is not difficult, then, to see how the term could be applied to a city which had been founded by an ancestor or to a tribe started by an ancestor.

The term בָּרָא , the other key word in the genealogical formula, means “bear” or “bring forth.” A study of this term leads in the same direction as בן . It is used many times of the physical act of birth. However, it too may have a figurative sense in which cities and nations are said to be begotten. [Genesis 10](#) indicates that Egypt, a country, begot the Ludim, a tribe. Canaan, possibly a land, begot Sidon, a city. The intent again would be to show that the “father” was actually the ancestor or founder of the tribe or city, and that the “sons,” produced by “begetting,” are dependencies, nationally and politically.

However, it must be noted that, discounting the Table of Nations, the examples of the figurative uses of בָּרָא and בן are rare in Genesis. This book deals with lineage, offspring, wives, sons, and inheritances. The normal meaning of these words would suggest actual descent in the beginning. Even if the terms are used rather loosely in genealogical listings (e.g., to call tribes brothers), this normally presupposes some actual relationship in antiquity. Tribal beginnings in a patriarchal society would readily give rise to genealogical formulas in expanding tribes.

In [Genesis 10](#) the tribes and cities are not always traced back through the lineage. But they are connected by actual relationships with ancestors somewhere in the remote past.²³ The Kittim came from Javan in the division of Japheth. At the time of the composition of the Table, the Kittim may have been only popularly connected with that Aegean power as a dependency, sharing a common heritage.

V 137, p 346 V 137, N 548, p 346 p 346 It may be concluded that the Table of Nations offers a realistic picture of developing nations, portraying their movements and developments at the dawn of world history. But in using the terms בן and בָּרָא , the writer may very well be tracing tribal relationships back to ancestral connections in the remote past, from whom the nations of the earth developed. Because of this understanding, the writer of the Table maps the various families of the earth to show their common origin. Moreover, because Genesis is concerned with tracing the blessing of God on His people, one is not surprised to find at the turning point of the book a Table emphasizing ancestral connections to the three who were blessed ([9:1](#)).

Variation in the Terms “Sons of” and “Begot”

As stated, the two expressions “sons of” and “begot” are somewhat similar in their meaning in the passage. But why are they used as they are?

The heading of the chapter is, “These are the particulars [תולדות]²⁴ of the sons of [בני] Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth; and sons were born [ויולדו] to them after the flood” (author’s translation). Both terms occur in the heading.

In the line of Japheth only בני is used for the fourteen names. However, the record is not meant to be complete with this listing; from these were spread the isles of the sea, a continuing development.

The line of Ham uses both. The sons of (בני) Ham are four: Cush, Mizraim, Put, and Canaan. The sons of (בני) Cush are five; the sons of (בני) Raamah are two. But Cush begot (ילד) Nimrod, who founded the empires in the east; Mizraim begot (ילד) various Egyptian tribes; and Canaan too begot (ילד) a number of peoples dwelling in the land.

In the line of Shem both terms are used as well. At the outset the account declares that sons were born (ילד) to Shem, the father of all the sons of (בני) Eber, and the brother of Japheth.²⁵

The sons of (בני) Shem are five, the sons of (בני) Aram four. But then the passage indicates that Arpachshad, a son of Shem, begot (ילד) Shelah, and Shelah begot (ילד) Eber. To Eber two sons were born (ילד): Peleg and Joktan. Joktan begot (ילד) thirteen tribes. The Table describes these thirteen as the sons of (בני) Joktan.

The title announced the passage to be the תולדות of the בני Noah; the summary describes the results. The word תולדות, [V 137, p 347](#) [V 137, N 548, p 347](#) [p 347](#) coming from ילד, supplies the key to the use of the terms. The Table is not concerned with a simple list of the sons of the ancestors; rather, it is concerned with tracing “what became of” these sons. Within the structure of the בני Noah, the passage is focusing on the great development and movement of families that were of interest to Israel. The בניים provides the point of departure, and the ילד points out the development. It is the writer’s concern to emphasize the development of certain people; ילד introduces those sections and reminds the readers that the Table is a תולדות.

The term ילד was used to introduce readers to the development of the kingdoms in the east and the expansion of Egyptian tribes leading to the inclusion of the Philistines. It also identified the inhabitants of the land being given to Israel, the chosen line which descended through Arpachshad to Eber (the famous ancestor of the Hebrews), and the Arabian tribes bearing the closest ties with Israel. But where there are ילד sections, there are closing reminders that these are the sons of (בני) Ham and the sons of (בני) Shem. The ילד is used to bring in the emphasis of the תולדות and to blend with בני for continuity.

The use of these two terms is precise. The term בן points to the ancestor; the term ילד (and related forms) points to the descendants. The former emphasizes

the beginning; the latter the continuing results. By using these terms correctly the writer, in one Table, bridged the past with the present, thus forming a major transition in the book.

The Structure of the Table

The structure of the Table, in its final form in Genesis, is as follows (The translation is the author's).

<i>Table Heading:</i> “Now these are the generations [תּוֹלְדוֹת] of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the sons of [בְּנֵי] Noah; and sons [בְּנֵיִם] were born [יְנִלְדוּן] to them after the flood” (10:1).		
1.	<i>Japheth</i>	
	Heading:	“The sons of [בְּנֵי] Japheth ...” (10:2).
	Expansion:	“And the sons of [בְּנֵי] Gomer ...” (10:3).
		“And the sons of [בְּנֵי] Javan ...” (10:4).
	Colophon:	“From these the coastlands of the nations were separated into their lands, every one according to his language, according to their families, into their nations” (10:5).
2.	<i>Ham</i>	
	Heading:	“And the sons of [בְּנֵי] Ham ...” (10:6).
	V 137, p 348 V 137, N 548, p 348 p 348 Expansion:	“And the sons of [בְּנֵי] Cush ...” (10:7a).
		“And the sons of [בְּנֵי] Raamah ...” (10:7b).

		“Now Cush begot [יִלְדָּ] ...” (10:8).
		“And Mizraim begot [יִלְדָּ] ...” (10:13).
		“And Canaan begot [יִלְדָּ] ...” (10:15).
	Colophon:	“These are the sons of [בְּנֵי] Ham, according to their families, according to their languages, by their lands, by their nations” (10:20).
3.	<i>Shem</i>	
	Heading:	“And also to Shem, the father of all the children of [בְּנֵי] Eber, and the older brother of Japheth, children were born [יִלְדָּ]. The sons of [בְּנֵי] Shem ...” (10:21–22).
	Expansion:	“And the sons of [בְּנֵי] Aram ...” (10:23).
		“And Arpachshad begot [יִלְדָּ] ...” (10:24a).
		“And Shelah begot [יִלְדָּ] ...” (10:24b).
		“And two sons were born to [יִלְדָּ] Eber ...” (10:25).
		“And Joktan begot [יִלְדָּ] ...” (10:26).
		(Colophon: “All these were the sons of [בְּנֵי] Joktan” 10:29).

	Colophon:	“These are the sons of [בְּנֵי] Shem, according to their families, according to their languages, by their lands, according to their nations” (10:31).
	<i>Final Colophon:</i>	“These are the families of the sons of [בְּנֵי] Noah, according to their genealogies [לְתוֹלְדוֹתָם], by their nations; and out of these the nations were separated on the earth after the flood” (10:32).

The Colophons

Each section on this plan has its own heading and its own colophon which reiterates the specific emphasis of the section.

One element found in each of the endings is לְמִשְׁפַּחָתָם (“according to their families”). This use of a standard form of classification most commonly refers to physically related clans, normally a national subdivision. In this passage it is a subdivision of גּוֹי (“nation”). This, of course, is a major point on the Table, according to [10:32](#).

A second element in the endings is לְלִשְׁנֹתָם (“according to their languages [tongues]”). Part of the criteria for the listings on the Table is the languages the families or tribes spoke.²⁶

V 137, p 349 V 137, N 548, p 349 p 349 A third element is בְּגוֹיָהֶם (“in their nations”). Nations are usually composed of persons closely associated by common descent, language, or history, and usually organized as a political state (which is objective and impersonal, and usually coordinate with a kingdom²⁷). Here a different preposition is used; בְּ normally would suggest location, but could be taken as a standard of measurement (“by”).

The fourth element is בְּאֶרְצוֹתָם (“in their lands”). The division of the families uses national boundaries for some of the distinctions.

So the sons of Noah are sectioned off by means of anthropological, linguistic, political, and geographical criteria. This is why the Table includes names of people, tribes, countries, and cities.

The order of these elements is not always the same, and one can observe the differences:

Japheth:	lands, languages, families, nations
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Ham:	families, languages, lands, nations
Shem:	families, languages, lands, nations.

Shem and Ham, both of which have $\tau\lambda\eta$ sections, are arranged in identical order. All three end with nations, showing perhaps that in the final analysis these are units with national and political affiliations. Japheth, having lands at the beginning, is predominantly geographical and linguistic, having little tribal emphasis. Conversely, Ham and Shem, beginning with families, appear to emphasize tribal details. They are not restricted to areas (although area is important), but in fact overlap. The $\tau\lambda\eta$ additions, showing the development of tribes and clans, support this emphasis of the summary endings.

So while one cannot oversimplify the arrangement of the Table into geopolitical or ethnolinguistic arrangements, one can see that Moses had in mind a definite plan in tracing out the developing families. To do this he used four criteria to categorize the names he selected for his grand purpose. Thus he was able to compile a document portraying the early advances of the beginning nations.

Types of Genealogies

It is generally concluded that there are two major types of genealogical lists: those that trace lineage and those that chart alliances. They can be identified by form as well as nature. When a [V 137, p 350](#) [V 137, N 548, p 350](#) [p 350](#) genealogy gives only one line of descent from an ancestor, then it is called a “linear genealogy.” When a genealogy expresses more than one line of descent from an ancestor, then it exhibits segmentation or branching and is called a “segmented genealogy.” The function is directly related to the form.²⁸

The function of the linear type is to link the name with the ancestor. The function of the segmented type is more varied. It may be used for domestic purposes, mirroring the changes in society; for political-jural purposes, showing the tribal alliances; or for religious purposes, celebrating some festival.²⁹

Segmented genealogies emphasize that tribal affiliation was essential for treaties and alliances.³⁰ The tribe was stronger than the individual, and tribal affiliations added to that strength. Charts that register blood ties reflect the social and political relationships necessary for defense and offense. Thus in the ancient world a kindred group was more than a family grown large.

Segmented genealogies have symmetrical patterns; but they also have a certain fluidity so that they may undergo rapid adjustments to reflect real or desired changes in ties. They also have depth; linear lists may go back as far as nineteen names or more, and segmented lists usually express societal structure with ten, twelve, or fourteen names. However symmetrical they may be, they are never stereotyped.

By relating the biblical material to these genealogical patterns of the ancient Near East it is clear that [Genesis 5](#) and [11](#) fit the pattern of the linear lists, linking

individuals from one era to another. [Genesis 10](#), although unique, is more closely connected to the segmented pattern. This Table of Nations, then, traces affiliation of tribes to show relationships, based on some original physical connections. Showing such kinship was necessary for confederations, intermarriage, habitations, possession of lands, and holy war.

Conclusion

[Genesis 10](#) is a structured arrangement of the important nations of the ancient world. It is clear that the writer is emphasizing the development of those nations that were of primary importance to Israel (דָּוָד sections) within the overall Structure of the Table (בְּנֵי arrangement). The next article in this series will analyze the names in this structure to determine the purpose of the Table of Nations in Genesis.