

Studies in the Book of Genesis
Part 3:

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

Allen P. Ross

The previous article in this series dealt with the structure of the Table of Nations in [Genesis 10](#).¹ The deliberate design in its construction, symmetry, and unity were examined in an effort to understand its purpose as a תולדות. But in addition to the evidence from its structure, there is a wealth of information about the nations of the world that is important for the complete understanding of this chapter within the message of Genesis.

The Analysis of the Passage

The heading of the chapter ([Gen. 10:1](#)) declares that this is the record of the particulars of what became of Shem, Ham, and Japheth after the Flood. The verse serves not only as a heading for the Table, but also as a literary connection back to [Genesis 9:18](#) and [28](#). It is to be read with the oracle of Noah in mind!

the sons of japheth ([10:2–5](#))

In the listing of Noah's sons, Japheth usually comes last. But here he is first because the tribes descended from Japheth were spread across the remote lands of the north and therefore were less involved in Israel's history.

The connection of Japheth and Ἰαπετός of the Greek tradition is striking.² In both Greek and Hebrew traditions, then, Ἰαπετός was the ancestor of the Greeks. Genesis, however, shows him to be fully human.³ He is simply the ancestor of many northern [V 138, p 23](#) [V 138, N 549, p 23](#) [p 23](#) tribes who were non-Semitic in physiognomy, language, and custom.⁴

The sons of Japheth are seven. Gomer, mentioned also in [Ezekiel 38:6](#), represents the Cimmerians, thought to be of the same stock as the Scythians.⁵ Magog is also mentioned in Ezekiel ([38:2](#) and [39:6](#)) as the land of Gog, the region between Armenia and Cappadocia; the name seems to represent the Scythian hordes southeast of the Black Sea.⁶ Madia (מַדְיָה) is the normal Hebrew word for the Medes ([Isa. 13:17](#)) or Media ([2 Kings 17:6](#)), east of Assyria and southwest of the Caspian Sea. Even though the Median Empire was not formed until the seventh century, this does not mean that such a people were not known earlier as a group in the Lake Van area. The text of Shalmaneser III refers to them in a way that implies they were older inhabitants.

Javan is the general word for the Hellenic race, used throughout the Old Testament for the Ionians who dwelt in western Asia Minor.⁷

Tubal and Meshech are always found together in the Bible; they represent northern military states ([Ezek. 27:13](#); [32:26](#); [38:2](#); [39:1](#); and [Isa. 66:19](#)). Tubal is equivalent to Tibarēni in Pontus; and Meshech is located in the Moschian mountains near Armenia.⁸ Their range was from eastern Asia Minor to the Black Sea.

Tiras has been identified in classical writings as the Thracians living in the area of the river Tiras.⁹ It is now popular to identify them as the Pelasgian pirates of the Aegean coasts mentioned in Merneptah's list of seafaring peoples.¹⁰

From these seven, seven more were derived. From Gomer came Ashkenaz, Riphath, and Togarmah. Ashkenaz appears to represent a northern branch of Indo-Germanic tribes related to the Scythians.¹¹ Riphath may bear a remote resemblance to the name of the river Rhebas near the Bosphorous, or the Riphæan mountains to the west. Josephus suggested these were the Paphlagonians.¹² Togarmah seems to represent the extreme north in [Ezekiel 27:14](#) and [38:6](#).¹³

From Javan came four "sons"—two geographical names and two tribal names—all of which are kin to the Greeks. Elishah is to be identified with the place Alashiyah on the island of Cyprus.¹⁴ Tarshish is the name of a distant coast reached only by sea ([Isa. 66:19](#); [Jer. 10:9](#); [Ezek. 27:12](#)). It has been identified with several places on the southern coasts of Asia Minor, places founded by Phoenician shippers.¹⁵ Kittim is preserved in the [V 138, p 24](#) [V 138, N 549, p 24](#) [p 24](#) name of Kition (or Kettion), also on the island of Cyprus;¹⁶ this plural noun refers to the people who inhabited that island, as well as other islands east of Rhodes.

Dodanim, the last of the four from Javan, is difficult to identify because of a textual problem. The word, spelled "Rodanim" in [1 Chronicles 1:7](#), would represent the inhabitants of Rhodes. But the *Qere* at that passage suggests the spelling "Dodanim." Moreover, Ezekiel lists a Dedan among northern merchants ([27:15](#)). Neiman suggests they are the Dodanoi, the people of Dodona, the most ancient oracle in Greece.¹⁷

These descendants of Japheth may be broadly summarized as Cimmerians, Scythians, Medes, Hellenes, and Thracians. From the fourteen names given, the text adds that from these the isles of the nations were divided in lands, by tongues, after families, in nations. They dwell in remote lands and distant isles.

It should be noted in passing that these names occur frequently in prophetic writings. In Genesis the great military hordes and western merchants are rather remote. They do not come into play, so far as the destiny of Israel in the land is concerned, until much later. Genesis knows something about them, but they are far beyond the movements of the patriarchs. They too will eventually subjugate the inhabitants of the land.

the sons of ham ([10:6–20](#))

More attention is given to the line of Ham than to that of Japheth or Shem.

Ham's line has four branches: Cush, Mizraim, Put, and Canaan. All four are probably place names for Nubia-Egypt, Upper and Lower Egypt, Libya, and Phoenicia-Palestine respectively. In addition, the descendants of these four are both places and tribes.

Ham is the ancestor of all these people from Phoenicia to Africa. The etymology of the word *Ham* is disputed,¹⁸ but it is used to depict countries in close proximity to Egypt.

Cush is the "eldest son" according to the plan of the Table. In antiquity this was an independent kingdom on the southern flank of Egypt; and especially during the reign of Kamose it served as the backbone of the Egyptian army, helping to expel the Asiatics (Hyksos).¹⁹ So the list begins in the far south with the African tribes known to the Greeks as Ethiopians.

Mizraim lies to the north of Cush. The word occurs almost ninety times in the Old Testament for Egypt.

V 138, p 25 V 138, N 549, p 25 p 25 Put is used six times in the Bible, usually representing a warlike people used as mercenaries in the Egyptian armies (e.g., [Ezek. 27:10](#)). Some connect Put with Somaliland, known as Punt (pwn.t).²⁰ But the identification of Put with Punt is phonetically problematic.²¹ Thus the identification with Libya seems to have more support although not by similarity of names.²²

The last of the four is Canaan, which normally represents the land of Palestine and Phoenicia with its kaleidoscopic mixture of races, a natural result for a country which is the "bridge" of continents.²³ The name Canaan has been connected with various etymologies including the Hurrian *kinahhu*, a reddish-purple shellfish dye.²⁴ References from antiquity show the name is geographical.²⁵ Possibly it may have been used of the merchant class in early commercial activities.²⁶ Exclusive to the Old Testament is the use of the term for inhabitants of the area in a general sense. It later came to mean the pre-Israelite population without distinction of race or social status. These many tribes are in some way related to Canaan, and thus are called Canaanites.

The lines of three of these are now carried further in the expanding list. First are listed five sons of Cush, all of whom show expansion in Arabia.²⁷ Seba is usually identified with Upper Egypt on the Nile, with the ancient city of Meroë between Berber and Khartoum. Havilah, which means "sand-land," could fit several areas according to its usage: Ishmaelite Arab territory ([Gen. 25:18](#)), eastern Arabia on the Persian Gulf ([Gen. 10:29](#)), the Ethiopian coast ([Gen. 10:7](#)), or even India as an extension of the east ([Gen. 2:11](#)). The fact that Havilah is mentioned under both Shem and Ham shows mixing of the races: both Shemites and Hamites lived there.

Sabtah is near the western shore of the Persian Gulf. It has been identified as Shabwat, ancient Hadhramaut.²⁸ Raamah appears to have been in southwest Arabia; Sabteca is possibly to be identified with Samudakē, east toward the

Persian Gulf.

So these five tribal regions in the lower sections of Arabia were populated with descendants from Ham. Of them, Raamah produced two other tribes: Sheba and Dedan. Sheba is the name of the ancient kingdom in southwest Arabia whose metropolis is Marib, forty-five miles east of Sena'a of Yemen.²⁹ Dedan is associated with modern 'Ula in northern Arabia, an important trading center from antiquity, bordering on Edom ([Ezek. 25:13](#); [27:20](#)). Some of the people of Sheba and Dedan traced their ancestry [V 138, p 26](#) [V 138, N 549, p 26](#) [p 26](#) back through the Cushite Raamah; others traced their ancestry to Joktan in the line of Shem ([10:29](#)).

Inserted in the Table is the story of Nimrod ([Gen. 10:8–12](#)). This is the first טָרַף (“begot”) section and forms a major stylistic break from the tribal and territory names preceding it. The verse need not be interpreted to say that Nimrod was the actual son of Cush, but that is possible. Many attempts have been made to identify him, but the most plausible is the reflection of the name in Ninurta, the god of hunting and war.³⁰

Because his name has been connected with the root מָרַד (“to rebel”), and because of the statements made about him, he seems to represent tyrannical power. [Genesis 10:9](#) describes him as a mighty hunter,³¹ a term often used for the hunting of men, and the founder of the colossal powers of the east, which suggests he is not just someone known for his derring-do.

[Genesis 10:10](#) lists these cities as the “beginning” of his kingdom: Babel, Erech, and Accad (and Calneh in the land of Shinar). Since Babel, the well-known city of Babylon, is listed first, it is not surprising to see it as the subject of the next narrative ([11:1–9](#)), where it is described as the first gathering point of the race.

Erech is the Akkadian *Uruk*, to be identified with ancient Warka, the city of heroes like Gilgamesh.³² It is one hundred miles southeast of Babylon. Accad is another ancient city, the Agade of Sargon, north of Babylon on the Euphrates. It declined sharply in importance about 2000 b.c.

Calneh is nowhere attested in cuneiform. While some have tried to find a city so named in the great Shinar region, many have followed Albright and translated it “and all of them.”³³

The second part of the Nimrod digression lists the cities he colonized ([Gen. 10:11–12](#)). Nimrod went out to Assyria³⁴ and built Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, and Resen. Nineveh is the most famous city of Assyria (just as Babel was for the other region). Rehoboth-Ir could be explaining Nineveh, but probably is the suburb of Rebit Ninâ. Calah is Kalḫu, modern Nimrud situated twenty miles south. Resen may be Risnu, between the other cities. It seems that all these cities were close enough together to be one great metropolis.

Nimrod's exploits extended over two geographical areas, Shinar and Assyria, and included seven cities. All these are part of the Hamitic line.³⁵

[V 138, p 27](#) [V 138, N 549, p 27](#) [p 27](#) After this טָרַף section, another follows: Mizraim

developed into tribes. From the Egyptians sprang the Ludim, a group of African tribes west of the Delta;³⁶ the Anamim, in the vicinity of Cyrene;³⁷ the Lehabim, the Libyans on the north African shore ([Nah. 3:9](#) and [Dan. 11:43](#)); the Naphtuhim, the people of the Delta (Lower Egypt); the Pathrusim, the people of Upper Egypt;³⁸ the Casluhim, the people who dwelt east of the Delta between Egypt and Canaan;³⁹ and the Caphtorim, the Cretans.⁴⁰

The clause “from whence come the Philistines” is problematic because of its position in the text. Scripture connects the origin of the Philistines with Caphtor ([Amos 9:7](#); [Deut. 2:23](#); [Jer. 47:4](#)), but the Caphtorim, the Cretans, come after this clause. While some have suggested rearranging the clauses, it may not be necessary. The clause in the Table suggests migration and not lineage. Amos has the Philistines from Caphtor in the same sense that Israel was from Egypt—migration and not origination.⁴¹ The difficulty may be solved by looking at their origin and their migration from the Aegean bases through Caphtor into the Delta and finally into Palestine.

But part of the problem is the general assumption that this name is anachronistic since all sources so far attest that the Philistines in the strict sense date from around 1200 b.c. But the Philistines of Genesis are quite different from those of later periods. Grintz concluded that they were different enough to posit successive migrations of different tribes.⁴² He concluded there were three migrations: the first was the migration of Pelasgo-Philistine tribes from Casluhim (Genesis and Exodus), the second was the movement of the Philistines from Caphtor to Gaza, and the third was the further movement of the Pelasgo-Philistines in the period of Rameses III. Therefore the tribes from Mizraim are seven, and out of one come the Philistines. If this be so, then the powerful Egyptian influence carried far north into the Aegean.

The final Hamite line to be traced is that of the sons of Canaan ([Gen. 10:15–19](#)). This line focuses on the peoples living in the land promised to Israel.⁴³ In fact, the section closes with the territorial boundaries specifically given.

Once again a $\text{T}\bar{\text{L}}\bar{\text{I}}$ section is inserted to introduce the cities and tribes. The first-begotten is Sidon, the predominant Phoenician city.⁴⁴ This suggests that the founder gave his name to the city.

Heth, the Hittites in the Old Testament, is problematic here under Canaan. The text is listing a mixed population in Canaan, [V 138, p 28](#) [V 138, N 549, p 28](#) [p 28](#) and so the term is justified if it describes Hittites who swept south in vast ethnic movements.⁴⁵

A series of tribes are mentioned beginning with the Jebusites. The Jebusites dwelt in Jebus (Jerusalem) and were part of the early stock of Canaanite tribes. The Amorites pose another problem. The term can refer to a mixed population in the land in general. It does not fit the description of the western Semites whose center was in Mari.⁴⁶ These are smaller ethnic groups that inhabited the mountains around Jordan.

Very little is known about the Gergashites and the Hivites. They are mentioned

only in the cliché lists for Canaanites in Edom, Shechem, and Gibeon.⁴⁷ Possibly terms like “Hivite” and “Hittite” are used pejoratively and ideologically, but as North says, “we cannot see that all organic link of origin with those foreign populaces is excluded.”⁴⁸

The rest of the list includes the Arkites, those living in Lebanon north of Sidon; the Sinites near ‘Arqa; the Arvadites, the most northerly of Phoenician cities north of the river El Kebir; the Zemarites, those living in the town of Şumra (modern) north of ‘Arqa; and the Hamathites, the inhabitants of Hamath on the Orontes. Hamath, it may be noted, is the central point of the northern boundary of the land.

It is clear that the writer wished to emphasize the names of the Canaanites who dwelt in the land promised to Israel because he mentions the familiar boundary notices in all directions, from the cities of the plain to Gerar to the northern extremities. Such an emphasis coming after the account of the curse of Canaan and written for a people who were to dispossess these Canaanites would have great impact.

the sons of shem ([10:21–31](#))

A new heading lists the relationship of Shem to Japheth (the brother) and Eber (the descendant)—the former speaking of an alliance based on [Genesis 9](#) and the latter speaking of the connection in the line to the Hebrews.

The first name in the list is Elam. Descendants of Shem early penetrated the highlands east of Babylon even though they were later not the dominant racial or linguistic group.⁴⁹ Asshur, Shem’s second son, is the name for the region and people of Assyria. Arpachshad, the third name, is the ancestor of the Hebrews. Arpachshad’s meaning and location have caused considerable speculation, but he can only be generally listed as residing [V 138, p 29](#) [V 138, N 549, p 29](#) [p 29](#) northeast of Nineveh.⁵⁰ Lud is probably the Ludbu of the Assyrians, situated on the Tigris. Aram is the name of the Aramean tribes of antiquity living in the steppes of Mesopotamia.

The descendants from Aram—Uz, Hul, Gether, and Mash—are not well known. They seem to be located in the north between Armenia and Mesopotamia.⁵¹

The passage then refers to the developing line from Arpachshad, using the TLJ form through Shelah to Eber. One of Eber’s sons is Peleg, in whose days the earth was divided (probably referring to the division of nations at Babel⁵²). Once the Table mentions Peleg, it traces his line no further. Rather, it lists the many tribes from Joktan, using the TLJ formula again.

The first tribe was Almodad, referring to a South Arabian people.⁵³ The second is Sheleph, another tribe of the southern Arabian peninsula.⁵⁴ Hazarmaveth, the third, is identified with the exporter of myrrh known as Hadramaut in Southern Arabia.⁵⁵ Jerah and Hadoram are difficult, but are

assumed to be in the same vicinity. Uzal is the designation of San'a, the old capital of Yemen. Diklah, the Arabic name for "date-palm," may refer to an oasis. Obal seems to be 'Abil, a term used for several localities in Yemen. Abimael is taken to be a genuine Sabaeen formation, with the *ma* being emphatic ("my father, verily, he is God").

Sheba was also listed under Ham; the name here attests to the fact that Joktanites lived there as well.⁵⁶ Ophir and Havilah, also listed under Ham, were southern Arabian territories rich in gold. Jobab is assumed to be identical to Yuhaybib in South Arabia.

These thirteen descendants of Joktan represent settled Arabian tribes in the peninsula. Israel would find ancient blood ties with the Joktanites of the desert of Arabia, as well as her relatives to the east.

The final verse of the chapter forms the colophon-type ending of the Table. All families came from the sons of Noah, but these families listed here have significant developments (יְלִידוֹת) as far as Israel's interests are concerned.

The Meaning of the Passage

Most commentators observe that the Table demonstrates the unity of the human race. Coming from the sons of Noah, the survivors of the Flood were fruitful and multiplied.

V 138, p 30 V 138, N 549, p 30 p 30 But the passage is far more complex than that. The Table is a select list of names, and that selection must serve a purpose. The names are names of individuals, cities, tribes, and nations arranged according to the genealogical connections of the ancestors or founders. The pattern of the Table is segmented rather than linear; it is designed to show blood ties, treaties, alliances, and other connections between existing peoples.

That the promised land is central to the Table can be seen from the arrangement of the descendants. The Japhethites are spread from east to west across the northern frontier; the Hamites surround the land from south to west; and the Shemites are traced from the eastern to the southern borders of the land. Moreover, the preoccupation with the Canaanites in the land of promise shows the concern of the writer to fit the Table to the message of the book: the fulfillment of God's promise to bless Israel as a nation in that land, and to bless those nations that bless her, and curse those who are antagonistic to her.

The Table then deliberately selected these tribes and traced their development. This was done by expanding (in the יְלִידוֹת ["begot"] sections) important elements found in the basic genealogy (the בְּנֵי ["sons of"] structure). From the heading (תּוֹלְדוֹת, "particulars") it is clear that the passage was designed to do just this. The purpose of this תּוֹלְדוֹת in Genesis is to trace what became of Noah's descendants, but the particular items included in this genealogy were selected because of their significance for Israel.

The תּוֹלְדוֹת of the בְּנֵי Noah moves in four directions (in each of the יְלִידוֹת sections). Through these four sections the genealogy focuses on the dominant kingdoms of Assyria and Shinar, the powerful Egyptian tribes, the Canaanite

tribes in their lands, and the Arabian tribes of the line of Shem. These are peoples with whom the new nation of Israel would have dealings in accord with the oracle of Noah in [Genesis 9](#).

According to Genesis, the new nation of Israel was to be blessed as God's people in the land of Canaan. God's plan to bless Israel involved the movement, displacement, and subjugation of other peoples. The oracle of Noah in [Genesis 9](#) anticipated the blessing for Shem, along with Japheth, and the cursing of Canaan, a son of Ham. This Table in [Genesis 10](#) gives direction to that oracle. It presents the lines of Shem and Japheth as pure tribal groups around the promised land; it also presents the old block of Hamites, especially the mixed races in the land of Canaan, as the predominant powers on the earth. The טָרָם sections [V 138, p 31](#) [V 138, N 549, p 31](#) [p 31](#) identify these tribes for Israel and signify their relationship to the blessing or cursing.