

Genesis 10:1-5
The Table of Nations, part 1
The Sons of Japheth

Much like the genealogies we studied earlier, the passage that has become known as the Table of Nations can be too quickly glossed over by the uninterested reader. Yet we must take as a fundamental premise of our faith the fact that,

“¹⁶All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

There is, in fact, great theology in the Table of Nations. At its most basic level, the Table of Nations is the fulfillment of the promises of God to Noah. During the episode of the Flood, from the time God first commanded Noah to build an ark, until years later when Noah and his family finally disembarked after the waters subsided, the land dried, and the earth became habitable again, God made, and renewed, His promises to Noah.

“But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall enter the ark - you and your sons and your wife, and your sons’ wives with you” (Genesis 6:18).

“²¹The Lord smelled the soothing aroma; and the Lord said to Himself, ‘I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done.

²²While the earth remains,
Seedtime and harvest,
And cold and heat,
And summer and winter,
And day and night
Shall not cease” (Genesis 8:21-22).

“⁸Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying, ⁹now behold, I Myself do establish My covenant with you, and with your descendants after you; ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you; of all that comes out of the ark, even every beast of the earth. ¹¹I establish My covenant with you; and all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood, neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth” (Genesis 9:8-11).

The Table of Nations, then, is the manifestation of the covenant kept by God. It is the ‘blessing’ of God that mankind procreate and repopulate the earth.

Practically speaking, The Table of Nations is a geographic representation of the peoples of the world as they established themselves in the generations after the Flood. Each of the different groups was descended from Noah and one of his three sons. They spread out over Asia, Europe, and Africa - from

the plateau of modern-day Iran to the Mediterranean, from the Black Sea to modern-day Somalia. Naturally, the center of this world was Israel, or as it was known then, Canaan.

The names given in the Table of Nations are of a mixed variety. There are personal names such as Japheth and Nimrod. There are tribal groups such as Hamite and Amorite. There are specific geographical locations such as Kittim and Sidon.

Also, the relationships between the various peoples listed in the Table of Nations are different. Some are related by ancestry, others by cultural influence such as Egypt or Babylon. Some are closely related by geography, such as the sons of Japheth. Some are related by diplomacy. In the latter context, it is interesting to study the dynamics of such relationships. Often in the ancient world, parties to a treaty referred to each other by the use of family names - brother, son, etc. It was seen as an assertion of superiority if you addressed another king as son rather than brother, or signed a treaty as father.

In this narrative, the biblical writer makes it clear that no one people group exists independently from the others. Also, there is no one group that is inherently superior to the others. It is a simple catalogue of nations. This is in contrast to most other accounts from the ancient world which seek to show that the god (or gods) created their group specially, and then other nations came after. That gave the favored group a sense of status and, in their minds at least, was an argument for their conquering and subjugating other peoples.

In contrast, the biblical Table of Nations shows that the multitude of nations were all descended from Noah, and therefore from Adam. The innate dignity of all human beings was confirmed in the presence of the *imago dei*, the image of God. To be sure, one line would be selected, the line of Shem, from whom all the peoples of the world would be blessed. The point, though, was that even for this 'chosen' people, God's purpose in so choosing was to bless all the peoples of the world. In fact, the presence in this Table of Nations of Israel's future enemies (Canaanites, Assyrians, etc.) shows that even they are part of the family of man.

The Table of Nations was foundational to the Hebrew people. For example the author of the books of Chronicles used this genealogical list in his own work (1 Chronicles 1). Its complexity has caused some scholars to wonder how a person such as Moses, apparently a simple herdsman, could have written such an account. The amount of detail seems beyond the abilities of such a man. And, there is no other work that is its equivalent in antiquity. To be sure, there is the Sumerian King List, and others of that type. But they document rulers, not entire people groups. Also, there were historical narratives that documented the founders of particular cities, and even traced their ancestry back to the gods. But the geographical breadth of the Table of Nations sets it apart from any other document known to us from the ancient world.

Some obvious answers present themselves to the question of how a seemingly average person such as Moses could have compiled such a text. First, let us simply assume that as the Holy Spirit superintended the writing of Holy Scripture, He empowered Moses to recall the details of the genealogies. This is a very faith-based answer, and while it might satisfy a believer in the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture, it is

not likely to have much influence over the minds of those who begin by questioning the historical accuracy of the narrative itself.

A second argument, then, might be found in that ancient societies often developed narratives (usually poetic) that allowed them to remember their history, ancestry, religious narratives, etc. One can think of the book of ships in Homer's *Iliad*, or even the King lists mentioned earlier. In cultures that were pre-literate, or only beginning to develop literacy, genealogical lists were crucial to create a sense of remembered history. While the Table of Nations is unique in its complexity and geographic extent, it was not alone in what it tried to accomplish.

A final fact worth noting, is that Moses was raised and trained in the household of Pharaoh in Egypt. The ancient world boasted no culture so sophisticated as ancient Egypt, and the historical records Moses had at his disposal must have been formidable. During his time there he must have had access to, and perhaps even took with him when he left, accounts and records of the peoples from whom he was descended. It does not undermine the supernatural authority of Scripture in the least to suggest that Moses took advantage of these resources as he wrote.

The Table of Nations is ordered according to the three sons of Noah. "Now these are the records of the generations of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah; and sons were born to them after the flood" (v. 1). Though their birth order was likely Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Genesis 6:10), the list given here reverses that order and deals first with the generations of Japheth, then those of Ham, and then finally those of Shem. This is likely a combination of both good writing, and historical realities. The author builds to the all-important favored line of Shem. However, the author also takes advantage of the basic geography and ensuing history. The generations of Japheth would be the most distant of the three lines, and those with whom the nation of Israel (line of Shem) would have the least contact. Their relationship with Israel were more limited than those of Ham, due primarily to their geographic remoteness. The descendants of Ham became the Canaanites, with whom Israel would become involved far too often, and usually to its detriment.

Three final introductory points need to be emphasized. First, while the Bible clearly teaches that God is a universal God who is sovereign over all nations, this does not mean, however, that He is acknowledged as God by all of those nations. We cannot assume, as some do, that the gods of Egypt or the gods of the Hittites is the Yahweh of Israel.

Second, there is no mention of the nation of Israel. We have not yet arrived at the time when God will choose them to be His covenant people. At this point in human history, we are dealing with the repopulation of the earth and the people groups into which these different settlements will evolve. There was a world of peoples before Abram, and out of that call all the peoples of the world would be blessed.

Finally, this is the world described at the time of the writing of Genesis. The Israelites have become a people, endured 400 hundred years of slavery in Egypt, received the Law from God, and prepared to enter the Promised Land of Canaan. This is the world described in the Table of Nations. We must keep in

the people of God. The text from Ezekiel seems to suggest that Gog was a king of Magog. *Madai* is usually associated with the Medes, a people group who dominated the upper Tigris River (modern Iran) and later co-mingled with the Persians. They challenged the Assyrian empire in the 9th and 8th centuries BC. *Javan* later became associated with Ionia, a culturally Greek region of western Anatolia (modern Turkey). Even later, during the Hellenistic period (323-23 BC), the term came to include all of Greece, which controlled the Aegean and traded with the Phoenicians of Tyre and the Philistines.

“Javan, Tubal and Meshech, they were your traders; with the lives of men and vessels of bronze they paid for your merchandise” (Ezekiel 27:13).

“⁴Moreover, what are you to Me, O Tyre, Sidon and all the regions of Philistia? Are you rendering Me a recompense? But if you do recompense Me, swiftly and speedily I will return your recompense on your head. ⁵Since you have taken My silver and My gold, brought My precious treasures to your temples, ⁶and sold the sons of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks in order to remove them far from their territory” (Joel 3:4-6).

As we can see, *Tubal* and *Meshech* are allies, it seems, with *Javan*. *Tubal* may be the Tabali people who lived in eastern Anatolia, and *Meshech* seem to be the Mušku. Both are frequently referenced in Akkadian texts. The descendants of *Tiras* are generally considered to be the Turasha, mentioned in Egyptian documents, or perhaps they became the Etruscans of ancient Italy.

The seven grandsons of Japheth are equally obscured by the mists of history. *Ashkenaz* are generally considered to be the people who lived along the upper Euphrates River in modern Armenia. Biblical historians recognize them as allies of the Minni who waged war against the Assyrians during the reign of Ésarhaddon (680-669 BC).

“Lift up a signal in the land,
Blow a trumpet among the nations!
Consecrate the nations against her,
Summon against her the kingdoms of Ararat, Minni and Ashkenaz;
Appoint a marshal against her,
Bring up the horses like bristly locusts” (Jeremiah 51:27).

Riphath is unidentifiable in history. 1 Chronicles 12:6 does mention a ‘Diphath’ but there is no reason to consider this a connection other than the similarity in language. *Togarmah* was known as an trader of horses to Israel, “those from Beth-togarmah gave horses and war horses and mules for your wares” (Ezekiel 27:14), and as an ally of Gog (Ezekiel 38:6).

Elishah is known as Alashiya, the Sumerian name for the island of Cyprus. *Tarshish* was known in biblical times as a far distant port from which precious commodities such as silver, iron, tin, lead, ivory, monkeys, and peacocks could be acquired.

“For the king had at sea the ships of Tarshish with the ships of Hiram; once every three years the ships of Tarshish came bringing gold and silver, ivory and apes and peacocks” (1 Kings 10:22).

“Beaten silver is brought from Tarshish,
And gold from Uphaz” (Jeremiah 10:9).

“Tarshish was your customer because of the abundance of all kinds of wealth; with silver, iron,
tin
and lead they paid for your wares” (Ezekiel 27:12).

Tarshish was also so far away, that Jonah thought he could flee there from the presence, or at least the accountability of, God. And the Old Testament refers to Solomon’s fleet that sailed to Tarshish, as well as Jehoshaphat’s ships of Tarshish.

“For the king had ships which went to Tarshish with the servants of Hiram; once every three years the ships of Tarshish came bringing gold and silver, ivory and apes and peacocks” (2 Chronicles 9:21).

“Jehoshaphat made ships of Tarshish to go to Ophir for gold, but they did not go for the ships were broken at Ezion-geber” (1 Kings 22:48).

The specific location of this remote and romantic port city is not given, though many scholars place it in southwestern Spain. Perhaps it is the ancient mining village known as Tartessus. *Kittim* is Kition, a Phoenician city on the southeast coast of the island of Cyprus. It became a significant part of the Phoenician empire by the 9th century BC. It was referenced by both Balaam and Jeremiah.

“But ships shall come from the coast of Kittim,
And they shall afflict Asshur and will afflict Eber;
So they also will come to destruction” (Numbers 24:24).

“⁹Therefore I will yet contend with you,” declares the Lord,
And with your sons’ sons I will contend.
¹⁰For cross to the coastlands of Kittim and see,
And send to Kedar and observe closely
And see if there has been such a thing as this!” (Jeremiah 2:9-10).

Dodanim may be related to *Rodanim* which may be a reference to the island of Rhodes, one of the largest of the Aegean islands.

Two final points must be made. First, the text allows for other generations to have developed from these seven sons and seven grandsons, as it refers to “the coastlands of the nations” (v. 5). Second, there is no reason to presume that this list of Japheth’s genealogy is inclusive of all the maritime peoples of the ancient world. That is, there are others from the descendants of Japheth not listed, and there are other sea peoples who were not descendants of Japheth.

Takeaways

We must recognize in this Table of Nations the sovereignty of God. This part of Scripture is not included to indulge the historian. Neither was it inspired simply to satisfy the cultural archaeologist. God is

sovereign over all His creation, and that included the repopulating the earth. These people procreated, traveled, and settled in accordance with His divine mandate. As Paul explained to some Athenian men who had come to the Areopagus to challenge him,

“²⁴The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; ²⁵nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; ²⁶and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, ²⁷that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us”
(Acts 17:24-27).