

**Genesis 10:21-32**  
**The Table of Nations, part 3**  
**The Sons of Shem**

Once again we turn our attention to the Table of Nations. While it has been easy for me to overwhelm you with historical detail, I hope also that we have been able to recognize in this Table of Nations the sovereignty of God. After all, even the particularly historical passages of Scripture were not included to indulge my tastes alone. I hope your patience and attention have been rewarded.

So let us begin this final session by reminding ourselves that we must acknowledge that God is sovereign over all His creation, and that included repopulating the earth. People procreated, traveled, and settled in accordance with His divine mandate. This is the valuable theological lesson of the Table of Nations. We have also seen that the Table of Nations was the fulfillment of the promises of God to Noah. And we have seen that the Table of Nations is the geographic representation of the peoples of the world as they established themselves in the generations after the Flood. From Noah and his three sons, humanity spread out over the entire known world, encompassing three continents - Europe, Africa, and Asia.

Finally, let us remember that this is the world described at the time of the writing of Genesis, that is, just as the Israelites were about to enter Canaan. This description of the world is not that of the century after the Flood. That world would change dramatically after the rebuke of God after the building of the Tower at Babel. This was the world as Moses and his countrymen knew it. The Israelites had 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.

The Table of Nations was structured according to the three sons of Noah. Though their birth order was likely Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Genesis 6:10), the list given here reversed that order. It dealt first with the generations of Japheth, then those of Ham, and now finally those of Shem. Japheth's descendants were those people groups with whom the nation of Israel (line of Shem) would have the least contact. Their relationship with Israel were more limited due primarily to their geographic remoteness from Palestine. The descendants of Ham became the Canaanites. These became nations with whom Israel would become involved far too often, and usually to its detriment. They populated the regions of Arabia and the other territories within and adjacent to the land of Canaan.

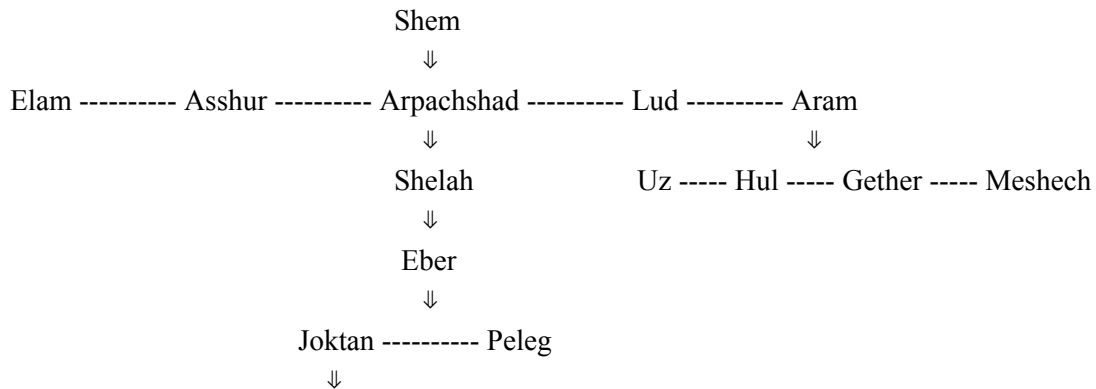
Throughout it all we have witnessed the hand of God as he sovereignly orchestrated the repopulation of the earth according to His plan for history. These people procreated, traveled, and settled in accordance with His divine mandate. And that brings us to one last historical note. The story of history is forever evolving. We do not have historical records, either actual written records or archaeological artifacts that bear witness to all that is recorded in Scripture. That is not a concern. We testify, as a cardinal ordinance of our faith, that the truths of Scripture are unchanging. The Bible, as recorded in the original, is the very Word of God and is perfectly true and accurate in all details. That modern historical research has not yet caught up with the facts as recorded in Scripture is not a problem for the believer. We can study the Bible as an historical text in itself, and we can take what it says to be historical fact.

## The Line of Shem

The line of Shem was the line to which the author had been building in his narrative. There is climatic effect at work here. They are the last in the Table of Nations because they are the most significant in God's salvation history. "Also to Shem, the father of all the children of Eber, and the older brother of Japheth, children were born" (v. 21). Shem is again identified as the older brother, the firstborn. Additionally, within this *tōlēdōt* formula, Eber is singled out for attention. That foreshadows the fact that not only is the line of Shem important, but the particular branch of the family tree that traces itself through Eber, was even more so. It was Eber who would become the ancestor of Abram's father Terah, as we will see when we look at Genesis 11.

Further evidence of the importance of Eber is the break in the genealogy at his two sons. With Peleg, that side of the family line is ignored in chapter 10; it is the line of Joktan that is given detail here. That is in keeping with past biblical patterns of detailing the non-elect line before treating that line which is favored. We saw that the descendants of Cain were discussed in Genesis 4, while the descendants of Seth did not enter the narrative until chapter 5. Here we see that repeated. Joktan's descendants are treated in this passage, and Peleg's descendants, leading to Terah and Abram, are given more thoughtful attention in Genesis 11.

The family tree as presented in the Table of Nations looks like this:



Almodad-Sheleph-Hazarmaveth-Jerah-Hadoram-Uzal-Diklah-Obal-Abimael-Sheba-Ophir-Havilah-Jobab

In the text it reads,

“<sup>22</sup>The sons of Shem were Elam and Asshur and Arpachshad and Lud and Aram. <sup>23</sup>The sons of Aram were Uz and Hul and Gether and Mash. <sup>24</sup>Arpachshad became the father of Shelah; and Shelah became the father of Eber. <sup>25</sup>Two sons were born to Eber; the name of the one was Peleg, for in his days the earth was divided; and his brother's name was Joktan. <sup>26</sup>Joktan became the father of Almodad and Sheleph and Hazarmaveth and Jerah <sup>27</sup>and Hadoram and Uzal and Diklah <sup>28</sup>and Obal and Abimael and Sheba <sup>29</sup>and Ophir and Havilah and Jobab; all these were the sons of Joktan” (v. 22-29).

*Elam* was a culture located in the mountainous region to the east of the Tigris and Euphrates River valleys. It was the most eastern city mentioned in the narrative. The capital, Susa is mentioned as the center of power in both Esther 1:2-5 and Daniel 8:2, where it seems to have been a base of Persian power

that spread from Ethiopia to India. In his battles with the king who abducted Lot, Abram defeated a king of Elam (Genesis 14:1, 9). The second son, *Asshur*, founded a people that was located on the Upper Tigris, and its name, at least, became appropriated by the Assyrian empire that ruled much later. One of the regions dominated by Nimrod was Assyria, though whether he conquered the descendants of Shem there or simply established his own kingdom is uncertain.

The location of the descendants of *Arpachshad* has not been established with any certainty. Some argue for the city of Arrapha in modern Iraq, others think it must be Babylonian since it relates to the Chaldean word *kasdîm*, a people that lived in southern Babylonia. As we discussed when looking at the descendants of Ham, *Lud* is associated with western Asia Minor (modern Turkey) in Isaiah 66:19, but with Ethiopia in Jeremiah 46:9. The descendants of Lud in the Shemite branch of the family are likely those that settled in Asia Minor.

The final son mentioned, *Aram*, founded a people that was known to the Greeks as Syria, though the Old Testament uses Aram and Arameans rather loosely, sometimes referring to the entire kingdom (1 Kings 10:29) and at other times to specific tribes or cities. This branch of the family played an important role in the Old Testament narrative, since some of the descendants of Aram provided wives for the patriarchs (Genesis 25:20, 28:5, 31:18, 20-24). At their height, the Arameans controlled the area from east of the Jordan River to the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers valley.

In the next generation, of the five sons of Shem, only genealogies for Arpachshad and Aram are given. The inclusion of the Arameans is sensible for reasons we have just mentioned. *Uz* is mentioned as a son of Abraham's brother Nahor (Genesis 22:21), and is thus Aramean, but it is also mentioned as the home of Job (Job 1:1), which would place it further east (Job 1:3), perhaps near Elam. It is likely that the Uz of Job is different altogether. The best we can say of *Hul*, *Gether*, and *Mash* is that they were Aramean cities.

But it was the descendants of Arpachshad that provided the line that led to Abram. In looking at these peoples, *Shelah* is unknown, though the Old Testament identifies it as among the clans of Judah (Genesis 46:12; Numbers 26:20; and 1 Chronicles 2:3) and ruling in Moab (1 Chronicles 4:21-23). His son, *Eber*, was the ancestor from whom the name Hebrew seems to have been derived. In fact, Eber has been inferred to be a demonym for Hebrew. That is, it is used in the same way we use American to describe someone from America, or Cuban to describe someone from Cuba. Hebrew was the name used by, and given to, the patriarchs and other Israelites. For example,

When reporting the capture of Lot, “a fugitive came and told Abram the Hebrew. Now he was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and brother of Aner, and these were allies with Abram” (Genesis 14:13).

In accusing Joseph of rape, Potiphar's wife “called to the men of her household and said to them, ‘see, he has brought in a Hebrew to us to make sport of us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I screamed’” (Genesis 39:14).

“Now it came about in those days, when Moses had grown up, that he went out to his brethren and looked on their hard labors; and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren” (Exodus 2:11).

However, it must be stated that the Old Testament does not use Hebrew in the genealogies of Genesis 10 and 11, and the word itself is rarely used in the Old Testament. Instead, Scripture prefers to describe the people of God as Israelites. The term, Hebrew, when used, has the intention of distinguishing the Israelites from foreigners.

“So they served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat bread with the Hebrews, for that is loathsome to the Egyptians” (Genesis 43:32).

“<sup>6</sup>When the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, ‘what does the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews mean?’ Then they understood that the ark of the Lord had come into the camp. <sup>7</sup>The Philistines were afraid, for they said, ‘God has come into the camp.’ And they said, ‘woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. <sup>8</sup>Woe to us! Who shall deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who smote the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. <sup>9</sup>Take courage and be men, O Philistines, or you will become slaves to the Hebrews, as they have been slaves to you; therefore, be men and fight” (1 Samuel 4:6-9).

An alternative explanation, is that the term Hebrew comes not from Eber, himself, but from the Akkadian *abiru/apiru* which meant outcast or fugitive. That is, the word describing the Israelites was not their own word, from an ancestor, but was the word used by other people in the region to describe them as social and ethnic outsiders.

Of Eber’s two sons, Peleg is mentioned only by the cryptic comment that “in his days the earth was divided” (v. 25). As we have seen before in Scripture, often the biblical writer does not give us modern readers the details we might want, simply because the audience to whom he was writing needed no such enhancements. One particular challenge is that ‘Peleg’ is related to the Hebrew word for ‘divide’, *nipēlgâ*. In fact, in the Hebrew, they are homonyms and can mean either a stream or channel, or to confuse something with another. Other passages in Scripture that use the same word include,

“He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water” (Psalm 1:3).

Who has cleft a channel for the flood,  
Or a way for the thunderbolt?” (Job 38:25).

“Confuse, O Lord, divide their tongues,  
For I have seen violence and strife in the city” (Psalm 55:9).

Several suggestions have been offered to solve the enigma. One is that in the Akkadian language, *palgu*, means canal. It can also refer to a given district. Does that mean that under Peleg a system of irrigation works was developed to bring in water? Or perhaps, it was under his leadership that the region was

divided into administrative districts for the convenience of governing. Or more prosaically, and probably more likely, it was during his lifetime that the building of the Tower of Babel occurred, with its resulting division of the peoples.

The final grouping of names are the sons of Joktan. These include a full one-half of the names listed in the genealogy for Shem. Generally, for those that can be specifically identified, they occupied the southern portion of the Arabian peninsula.

*Almodad* is unknown to us, though an intriguing idea occurs. In the Hebrew *mōdad* means ‘beloved’ and ‘al’ can be rendered ‘el’ which is a frequently used name for God (think El Shaddai, El Elyon, etc.). Taken together, if read as ‘Elmodad’ the name could then mean beloved by God, or God’s beloved. Others, however, argue that this is the ancestor of the south Arabian tribe of Al-Murad. *Sheleph*, is the same as the Arabian ‘salaf’ or ‘salif’ and occurs in inscriptions in modern Yemen. It is related to the Yemenite tribe of *Hazarmaveth* which was located in Wadi Hadramaut in southwest Arabia, just east of modern Yemen. *Jerah* is also unknown, but logically associates itself with the other Arabian names. Interestingly, the word ‘yerah’ in Hebrew means month and is closely related to ‘yārēah’ which means moon. In southern Arabia, the primary deity was the moon God. All of this simply shows how words, and their associations, evolve over time and the difficulty in assertively advocating for a particular point of view with regards to these elusive people groups.

*Hadoram* is equally a mystery. That name occurs in 1 Chronicles 18:10 where a Hadoram, son of Tau king of Hamath, is mentioned, and as ‘Adoram’ an administrator for King David (2 Samuel 20:24). *Uzal* has been considered either as modern Sanaa (the spelling then would be Auzal), the capital of Yemen or as it occurs in Ezekiel 27:19 as a northern Syrian town. We always must remember that there can be two cities of the same name, though. *Diklah* means “date palm grove” so it likely would have been centered around an Arabian oasis that featured date palms.

*Obal* is the ‘Ebal’ of 1 Chronicles 1:22 and is suggested as the modern Ubal in Yemen. *Abimael* means “my Father is truly God” but is otherwise unidentified. *Sheba* may be the Sabaeans, a Semitic people of southern Arabia. However, there is also a Sheba, the son of Jokshan (not Joktan), the son of Abraham by Keturah (Genesis 25:3). If so, this would point to a people farther north.

*Ophir* is well attested in Scripture as a distant land famous for its gold ore (1 Kings 9:28; 1 Chronicles 29:4; Job 22:24; Psalm 45:9). Both Solomon and Jehoshaphat sent ships to trade there. Its precise location, however, is less sure. As with many other countries of legendary wealth, locations from India to Africa have been put forward by historians. As the other family relations of Joktan seem to congregate in Arabia, perhaps it is best to offer that as a possible compromise.

*Havilah* repeats itself, as there was a descendant of Ham by that name. Again as with Sheba, perhaps the best we can do is to posit a southern Arabian location for the descendants of Shem and a northern Arabian location for the descendants of Ham. *Jobab* is the name of a king of Edom (Genesis 36:33-34) and as a king of Hazor (Joshua 11:1). But its precise location eludes us.

The line of Shem concludes, “<sup>30</sup>now their settlement extended from Mesha as you go toward Sephar, the hill country of the east. <sup>31</sup>These are the sons of Shem, according to their families, according to their languages, by their lands, according to their nations (v. 30-31). As with so much else in the Table of Nations, the exact perimeter of the boundary cannot be determined, since both Mesha and Sephar are geographically unidentifiable. The clue about the eastern hill country allows us to premise that the boundaries were given in east-west, rather than north-south terms, but beyond suggesting that these people spread out east and west through Arabia, nothing more can be asserted.

The Table of Nations concludes by bringing the reader back to the founder. “These are the families of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, by their nations; and out of these the nations were separated on the earth after the flood” (v. 32). The list has taken the reader from Spain (Tarshish) to Persia (Elam) and from southeastern Europe (Gomer) to Ethiopia (Cush). Nowhere in either the cuneiform writing of the ancient Mesopotamians or the hieroglyphic tablets and scrolls of the ancient Egyptians do we find such a treasure.

### **Takeaways**

The theological value of the Table of Nations is that it affirms God’s sovereign rule over the peoples of the world. He will choose one people from all of these, but all of these people are, in both a creative and jurisdictional sense, His. All humanity, despite the linguistic, cultural, and geographical differences, share a common origin. Even the wording bears this interpretation out. The word ‘families’ or ‘peoples’ is *mišpəḥōt*. The word implies a solidarity by reason of origin or source. That single source is Noah, from Adam, from God. Our world today would do well to remember that.

The Table of Nations also demonstrates God’s faithfulness to honor His pledge to Noah and his family. Even in our brief look at history thus far, we have seen that God is faithful. He had given humanity His image, the *imago dei*, and it remained His intent to see humankind prosper and flourish. This despite themselves and their disobedience.

But not to be missed is the sequencing of the Table of Nations in Scripture. Some readers might find this narrative better placed following, rather than preceding the narrative of the Tower of Babel. It might seem more logical to outline the varying people groups into which peoples developed after the dispersion of the Tower narrative. But if it was placed there, the Table of Nations would be interpreted as the wrath of God upon an arrogant and egotistical humanity. It would be seen only negatively, as a judgment rather than as the fulfillment of a divine promise.

The Table of Nations was part of God’s plan. His unfolding of history, leading to the cross, required the dispersion of people groups according to His specific purposes. The interaction of many of these nations with Israel during the time covered in the Old Testament was crucial to developing the Israelites as a people and for them to see God work on their behalf. At times, these people groups were used by God to humble His chosen ones. But this was all a part of God’s great plan of salvation. And for that reason, if for no other, it deserves our attention.