

Genesis 10-11
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Overview

The “generations of the sons of Noah” has two distinct sections:

- one strongly genealogical, ch. 10
- another narrative, 11:1-9, describing the tower of Babel and the division of human languages.

Chronologically, ch. 11 happens in the middle of the genealogical development of chapter 10..

- Shem, Ham, and Japheth began to have children before the scattering of ch. 11, for 10:25 shows that the division took place three generations after Shem.
- Yet this chapter distinguishes the nations by their “tongues” (vv. 5, 20, 31), so the final state of affairs outlined here didn’t happen until ch. 11.

We should recall that the duty of Noah’s sons was to fill the earth (9:1,7). This chapter outlines the distribution that resulted when they finally did so. But 10:25 shows that they were sluggish about it, so ch. 11 goes into more detail about how God gave them a nudge.

10:1-32, The Result of the Scattering

As in ch. 4 and ch. 5, pearls on a genealogical string. But the names of the “sons” are mostly well-known place names. Either we are being introduced to the eponymous ancestors of the nations, or the kinship terms are being used metaphorically. Note in each case

- notable geographical references (see the maps). I will focus only on those that are fairly undisputed, and used later in the OT; many of these names cannot be located with certainty, or are known only from extra-biblical references.
- pearls
- concluding statement, which frames each section

1-5, Japheth

Notable geographic references:

- Gomer = Greek *kimmerioi*, settled in Asia Minor south of the Black Sea.
- Madai = the Medes, in the Iranian plateau.
- Javan = the Greeks (originally, the Ionians, along the Adriatic Sea, across from Italy).
- Tarshish = some location in the Western Mediterranean (cf. Jonah), perhaps Spain or Carthage
- Kittim = Cyprus

The closing summary differs from the other two by emphasizing “the isles of the Gentiles,” lit. “coasts of the Gentiles.” Most of the nations whom the Israelites thought of as coastal nations

were Japhethite. Their interactions with Hamites and Shemites were more often by way of land, at least until the time of Solomon's voyages on the Red Sea.

This emphasizes that Israel was distinctly NOT a seagoing people. Relate this to Gen 1:2 (all sea), 9-10 (part sea), and Rev 21:1 (no more sea). The saltwater is death, an emblem of pre-creative chaos.

To understand the significance of this, recall Moses' interpretation of this chapter in Deut 32: "7 Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations: ask thy father, and he will shew thee; thy elders, and they will tell thee. 8 When the most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel. 9 For the LORD'S portion *is* his people; Jacob *is* the lot of his inheritance." These dispositions are not arbitrary, but reflect the Lord's sovereign disposition of his creatures.

Israel would have seen Japheth's inheritance among the coastlands as distinctly unpleasant and unfortunate. "Those poor Gentiles, forced to cope with the wild sea." But Israel could say, Psa. 16, "5 The LORD is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup: thou maintainest my lot. 6 The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage."

So we must realize that our "location" in life is not an accident, but the bountiful provision of a loving, covenant-keeping God. Though mostly Japhethite, we have entered into the blessings of Israel, and should rejoice in the "pleasant places" that the Lord has given us.

6-20, Ham

Noteworthy names include

- Cush = Ethiopia, though his descendants (notably Nimrod) extend into Arabia.
- Mizraim = Egypt
- Canaan = the original settlers of the levant. Two descriptions:
 - 15-18 list names that include the nations whom Israel later conquered (Deut 7:1; Josh 24:11; only Perizzites not named in Gen 10).
 - The boundary description in 19:
 - Sidon on the Lebanese coast, still there today
 - Gaza, toward Egypt, now the center of the Gaza strip
 - Then inland to the five cities of the plain, including Sodom and Gomorrah, in the vicinity of the southern end of the Dead Sea.
 - Thus we can trace the fulfillment of the curse from Gen 9:25-26.

Ham's geneology contains a "pearl" in the description of Nimrod.

Nimrod

8-9, His Power

The details in these verses raises several questions.

The name means “We shall rebel.” In what sense does he rebel?

He was an innovator. Just as Noah innovated in agriculture (9:20), so Nimrod innovated in being a *gibbor*. But what does this mean?

He was a “mighty one” *gibbor*, used in Genesis only 3x: 2x of Nimrod (vv. 8,9), then also of the postdiluvian offspring of spirits and men (Gen 6:4).

- This reference is at least an explicit comparison of Nimrod with the violent giants of old.
- It may suggest that he, though descended from Cush on his mother’s side, had demonic paternity, and is an instance of the “after that” in 6:4.
- But in what sense was he the first *gibbor*? We must look further to understand this.

Next, he is called a “mighty hunter,” literally “a mighty one of hunting.” It would be a mistake to understand this simply to say that he spent October in the UP. To see the deeper sense here, took ahead to vv. 10-12.

10-12, His Profession

v.10 is the first reference to a “kingdom” in the Bible. Nimrod organized people politically.

- He began with Babel and its environs. Thus he may have been a ringleader in the events in the next chapter.
- V.11 should probably be understood, “He [Nimrod] went forth to Assyria, ...,” extending his kingdom to the north.

This situation explains the questions we have encountered above.

Question: Why is he said to rebel? Answer: civil government is one of the two forces that have always been opposed to God; the other being organized religion. People are not content to live directly under God’s rule, but insist on setting themselves up over one another.

Question: How was he first *gibbor*? Answer: He was the first to exalt himself above others and organize political structures. The earlier giants had simply exalted themselves individually (6:4) and filled the earth with violence (6:11). Nimrod organizes people to legitimize this grasp for power. Compare Isa 3:2, which lists the *gibbor* as the first of the various people involved in leading a country successfully.

Question: Why the emphasis on his skill in the hunt? Answer: Ancient rulers boasted of their skill in the chase to show their courage, and their ability to protect the people from wild beasts.

- Cf. Beowulf, the legendary Scandinavian prince who came to rule in England, whose capability was proven by slaying first the demon Grendel and his mother, and then the dragon. The mss is about 1000, but the story probably goes back to 700 AD.
- This is strikingly parallel to the Babylonian epic (2000 BC) of Gilgamesh, “the shepherd of Uruk”: We read of his friend Enkidu, “He took his weapon // to chase the lions, // that shepherds might rest at night. // He caught wolves, // he captured lions, // the chief cattlemen could lie down. // Enkidu is their watchman, // the bold man, // the unique hero” (ANET p. 77). Then he and Gilgamesh set off to conquer the wild monster

Huwawa: “his roaring is the storm-flood, his mouth is fire, his breath is death” (p. 79), and subsequently Gilgamesh kills “the bull of heaven.”

The invariant theme is that just as a shepherd must protect his flock from wild animals, so the ruler must guard his people from beasts both physical and demonic. So we are shown Nimrod as a man of might, whose strength encourages people to submit to him for protection.

His Probation

He was renowned for his might “before YHWH.” This expression, when used to modify a predication rather than an action, always reminds us that the characteristic in question is known to God (refs below). He described himself as a rebel (“Nimrod”), perhaps of divine parentage, and was able to organize the first significant human kingdom as a surrogate for God’s rule. But still he cannot escape the judgment of God, who observes his rule and will hold him accountable for it. This is thus the earliest example of the truth later revealed in Dan 4:25,32-35; 2:21; *5:18-21; Jer 27:5-7; Rom. 13:1-7. Cf.

- Ge 6:11 The earth also was corrupt *before God*, and the earth was filled with violence.
- Ge 13:13 But the men of Sodom [were] wicked and sinners *before the LORD* exceedingly.
- 1Sa 2:17 Wherefore the sin of the young men was very great *before the LORD*
- 2Sa 3:28 And afterward when David heard [it], he said, I and my kingdom [are] guiltless *before the LORD* for ever from the blood of Abner the son of Ner:
- Ro 3:19 Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty *before God*.

Contrast with Nimrod, the example of David. Cf. 1 Sam. 17:31-47. Like the ancient heroes, he shows his ability to defend his people by prowess against wild beasts. But unlike them (Beowulf excepted), he gives the glory to the Lord.

He in turn is a picture of our Lord Jesus, who has slain the wild beast that threatened us, Satan, and offers us his protection. In anticipation of this, the OT calls the Lord “the shepherd of Israel,” Ps 23, Ps 80:1; Isa 40:11.

21-31, Shem

Noteworthy locations:

- Elam: highlands east of the Tigris.
- Asshur: home of the Assyrians, northern Mesopotamia. Capital was Nineveh; this kingdom took the Northern Kingdom of Israel captive.
- Aram: the name for “Syria,” thus the area west of Mesopotamia.

The line of Arphaxad is traced the farthest, because it includes Eber, who is also named in v. 21. he is significant because he is the eponymous ancestor of the Hebrews. Called Heber in Luke 3:35 in the genealogy of our Lord.

The division of the earth, described in ch. 11, took place in Eber's time, and he named his son Peleg "division" in memory of it. Peleg is the fourth generation after Shem, the fifth after Noah! The fact that the division took this long shows how sluggish men were about obeying God's command. More of this when we study ch. 11.

Closing summaries

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|--------------|----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| |)erec | la\$on | mi\$paxa | goyim |
| Japheth, v.5 | 1. be)arcotam | 2. lil@\$onow | 3. l@mi\$p@xotam | 4. b@goyeyhem |
| Ham, v.20 | 3. be)arcotam | 2. lil@\$onotam | 1. l@mi\$p@xotam | 4. b@goyeyhem |
| Shem, v.31 | 3. be)arcotam | 2. lil@\$onotam | 1. l@mi\$p@xotam | 4. l@goyeyhem |

Note summaries at vv. 5, 20, 32, and in particular the terms "families, tongues, lands, nations." This expression is echoed later in scripture:

- Pagan kings use it to claim their worldwide dominion: Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 4:1; Darius in Dan 6:25. They are the heirs of the spirit of Nimrod.
- But the Lord shows Daniel that this dominion rightly belongs only to the Son of Man, who must receive it; Dan 7:14, the only one who can exercise his "might" "before the Lord."
- This is fulfilled in Rev. 5:9, 7:9; 11:9.

11:1-9, The Cause of the Scattering

The passage exhibits a number of symmetries, which we shall examine as they occur. The major structural division is between what man does (1-4) and what God does (5-9). Man sets himself up as powerful, but God overwhelms him. "Man proposes, God disposes."

1-4, Man's Actions

v.1 takes us back to the time before the summaries of 10:5, 20, 31, when Noah's descendants still spoke the same language. We can in fact set a date on this:

- 10:25 shows that the earth was divided in Peleg's days, and the fact that his parents gave him this name means that the initial action must have taken place about the time of his birth.
- 11:11-16 shown that Peleg was born 101 years after the flood.
- 9:28 shows that Noah lived 350 years after the flood, so he was alive at this time.

v.2 pictures them as journeying, lit. "wandering." The same verb describes the wanderings of the patriarchs, and Israel's wanderings in the desert. They were doing this, not "from the east," but "easterly," in the area east from the vantage point of Israel.

- Wandering was not a bad thing to do if they wanted to fulfill God's objective to fill the earth, 9:1.
- It reflects the pilgrim status of the church today: Heb. 11:8-16.

- But it is an unsettled existence, uncomfortable to the flesh. So it is not surprising that when they came across the broad, well-watered plain of Shinar, they decided to settle down.

Right away, we should be apprehensive about their decision. Two reasons:

1. God's covenant required them to "replenish the earth," 9:1. By settling down in one place together, they were not carrying out this purpose.
2. This collocation gave Nimrod the opportunity to construct his kingdom, supplanting the rule of God over his creatures.

vv.3-4 highlight the peoples' resolve to construct an enduring edifice.

[[“Go to” from *yhb*, here and 38:16 (Jacob to Tamar), Exod 1:10 (“come on,” Pharaoh’s resolve to afflict Israel). Judges 7:3 “na”, Gideon sending the fearful people away. 2 Kings 5:5 *hlk*. King of Syria resolving to send Naaman to Israel. Eccl 12:1 *hlk n’* Solomon to his heart, to find pleasure. Isa 5:5 *na’* God’s resolve to break down his vineyard. Jer 18:11 *na’* God sending Jeremiah to the people of Judah.]]

The idea of a “city and tower” is characteristic of Mesopotamian culture. Each city had a temple tower. That of Babylon was reckoned one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. There were three motives for their action:

- reach heaven: they thought that they could storm the gates of heaven, as it were, and force God to take account of them by their own actions. The same attitude is reflected in the name that the Babylonians gave to the great temple tower constructed under Nebuchadnezzar, *e temen anki*, “the house of the foundation of heaven and earth.” Upon the top storey was the dwelling of Marduk, the chief god of the Babylonian pantheon.
- make a name: such a tower would make them famous and guarantee that they would never be forgotten.
- not be scattered abroad: in particular, it would form a cultural center that would attract people to stay in Shinar, rather than settling elsewhere.

These are in fact entirely consistent with Nimrod’s motives as outlined in ch. 10, and we may suppose that he was the ringleader in this construction, seeking by it to solidify the center of his kingdom in Babel.

5-9, God’s Response

v.5, “the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.” The verse answers the people’s resolve to “build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven.”

- They built a city and tower; the Lord comes to see the city and tower that they built.
- Most notably, they want it to reach to heaven, but the Lord must “come down” to see it. This is not a primitive anthropomorphism showing a primitive view of God, but a direct slam at the people. They couldn’t even get their tower close enough to God for him to be able to examine it directly from heaven. He has to “come down” to examine it.

v.6 returns to the theme of “one language” that was introduced in v.1. In fact, vv. 5-6 correspond to vv.1-2 in showing travel to a common meeting place based on one language. The people

convene in Shinar because they all speak one language, and that is the cause of God's coming down to deal with them there.

That he is called the Lord rather than God reminds us to look for covenant implications. Only a century after Noah, they can hardly have forgotten the divine command to replenish the earth, and God is calling them back to this.

Corresponding to the people's resolve in v.3 is the Lord's resolve in v.7. There are three points of correspondence:

- The hortatory particle "go to," "come now." Used to encourage unity of action among two or more people: Jacob and Tamar (38:16); Pharaoh and Egypt against Israel (Exod 1:10). (Note how this reflects plurality in the godhead, cf. 1:26.
- The latter part of v.7, "one another's speech," corresponds to the beginning of v.3, "said one to another."
- Somewhat more subtle is a pun between "let us confound" *nablah* and "let us make brick" *nilbenah lebEnim*, both emphasizing the consonants NLB. The Hebrew verb "confound" is *bll*, and here becomes the basis for the name "Babel."

vv.8-9 counter the people's resolve in v.4. They wanted to build a city crowned by a tower; God forces them to leave off building even the city. Recall their three motives:

- They were trying to reach heaven *shamayim*. God's response scatters them "from there" *misham*, punning on the sounds SH and M.
- They wanted to avoid being scattered; that is exactly what God did to them.
- They wanted a name; God gives them one, "Babel," because there he confused *balal* their language.

Application

Most generally, "Man proposes, God disposes." This section shows their attempt to subvert God's purposes, and emphasizes how utterly futile it is.

More specifically, the confusion of Babel was necessary because they did not take seriously their responsibility to fill the earth. Compare the command in Acts 1:8, and the need for God to intervene to scatter them abroad to that end in 8:1-4. *diaspeirw* Gen 9:19; 10:18,32; 11:4,8,9; Acts 8:1,4; 11:19 (all re. scattering from Stephen). There could have been a friendly dispersion, all one language, if they had done what the Lord commanded. Instead, their tongues are scrambled, creating what is one of the major causes of strife and misunderstanding in the world today. The Lord sometimes permits difficulty into our lives to nudge us out of our comfortable ruts and get us where he wants us.

Finally, here we see God's judgment on Nimrod's attempt to set up a kingdom. It is a judgment that will one day be repeated; Rev 18. God alone must be our king, and we must be very wary of human attempts to supplant his authority.

11:10-26, Generations of Shem

This section consists entirely of a genealogy, to get us from the flood to Abraham. Key observations:

- Based on the ages in this genealogy, Shem and Eber outlived Abraham, and were alive into the adulthood of Isaac and Jacob. The knowledge of the flood and the tower of Babel was not far distant to these people, but was accessible to them from their contemporaries. Like Adam in the age before the flood, they were a witness to God's demands and his judgment on those who violate his law.
- The ages at death drop off rapidly after the flood, perhaps due to the loss of the protection from cosmic radiation provided by the waters from heaven (7:11).