

Commentary on Genesis (6)

The Table of Nations And the Explanation of the Divisions (Genesis 10.1b - 11.10a) TABLET V.

THE NATIONS DESCENDED FROM NOAH (CHAPTER 10).

This tablet is described as ‘this is the history of Shem’ (11.10a). It demonstrates the descent of the nations from the sons of Noah with special emphasis on Shem, including important snippets of information typical of ancient genealogies (10.9-10; 10.25). We can compare with it the Sumerian king lists which have similar snippets relating to things of especial importance. It finishes with a description of why the divisions took place (11.1-9).

In many ways it is unique in the ancient world. Although lists of people and nations are known elsewhere, this was no list of conquests. It was a deliberate attempt to reveal ‘a world view’. It demonstrated God’s concern for the whole world, and showed that Yahweh was God over all.

Its scope is quite remarkable and must reflect the knowledge of someone with wide sources of information such as we would not find in a non-seafaring country like Israel. It was just such knowledge as would be available to a man in Moses’ position in Egypt, although there are indications that at least part of it was composed earlier than Moses. See, for example, the mention of Sodom and Gomorrah as though they were still active cities.

God had said to man, ‘be fruitful, and multiply’. Here was the fulfilment of that command as man spread abroad to possess the earth. It demonstrated that Yahweh was the God of the whole earth. But it is also made apparent that this expansion results in a world split up into tribes and nations. This is seen as being the result of a further fall of man leading to judgment (Chapter 11). Very interesting is the fact that there is in it no mention of Israel. This would seem to confirm its great age and authenticity.

Lists themselves were a common early Mesopotamian literary form, giving personal and place names, including names of countries and mountains, and are extant from the second millennium BC onwards, and a genealogical ancestry of Hammurabi, king of Babylon, (c.1750 BC) contains names of individuals later applied to peoples descended from them or to the territory they inhabit. But their nature is not the same as this record.

It is impossible to put a firm date on the narrative, nor is it likely that it remained totally unchanged in subsequent centuries. Whereas sacred texts and narratives may be preserved complete, especially where they formed the basis of a covenant, a listing of place and tribal names would have a tendency to be updated to make sense to the present generation, where old names had fallen out of use and could be replaced with their modern equivalent. Thus the dating of the original record cannot be determined by individual, possibly updated, place names.

But we must not overdo the suggestion of updating. We may yet be unaware of the ancient origins of names known to us from later inscriptions, and such changes could have been few, if any. The fact that the Persians are not mentioned confirms that any such changes, if they took place, had ceased to be made by the time of the exile.

However the use of very ancient forms of names does demonstrate the early date of the essential narrative (consider how the early empire in Shinar is described - (10.10)) and there is much that is clearly early and on the whole nothing in it that need post-date the time of Moses at Pharaoh’s court, for such knowledge would have been available to Egyptian scholars. It is

true that some few names mentioned only appear in 1st millennium BC records, but those mentioned in those records must have had a preceding history and there is nothing unlikely in the names being far older.

However any work done by Moses may well have made use of an earlier record. Abraham may well have had access to knowledge of a similar, but earlier, kind at Ur of the Chaldees, and there are indications that the essential record is as ancient as Abraham.

The account is one of growth and prosperity but behind it lies the ominous reminder that the earth has become divided so that brotherly love has ceased. It begins with all speaking one language but ends with nations speaking many languages (10.5, 20, 31). The reason for this is given in chapter 11.

Surprising is the non-mention of Sumer, although attempts have been made to show that it is present in the name 'Shem'. It may have been thought of as indicated by 'the land of Shinar'. But comparison of place names between ancient nations is a difficult operation and is still very far from being an exact science through lack of material. In spite of great advances, too little is known about the languages concerned and how they were transliterated into other languages. Thus many 'identifications' must be viewed with caution and it is always possible that nations known to us by one name may be included under another. Sumer may have been known to the compiler of the record under a totally different name.

10.1b 'Shem, Ham and Japheth, to these were born sons after the flood.'

This is in the nature of a heading and is typical of a link connecting with a previous tablet. (Compare 'Shem, Ham and Japheth' (9.18).) Its purpose is to draw attention to the descent of known nations from the three sons of Noah (v.32).

When considering the record we must beware of interpreting it by modern assumptions. Tribal groups and nations were extremely complicated affairs, constantly affected by intermarriage, tribal movements in times of crisis, conquest, assimilation, and merger. We only have to consider Israel to recognise the truth of this. Israel began as the clan group round the patriarchs, made up of the core of descendants of Terah, but including a large number of 'servants' described as their 'households' (Abraham could call on 318 fighting men - Genesis 14.14), probably from a number of races. These later became known as 'the children of Israel', but the majority were only children by adoption.

Then when 'Israel' left Egypt they were joined by a 'mixed multitude', again of many nations (Exodus 12.38). These too were assimilated into 'the children of Israel'. So the 'children of Israel' who entered Canaan were far from being directly children of Jacob, any more than the whole of the nations in this chapter were directly related to only one of the sons of Noah. Israel itself was undoubtedly inclusive of Hamites and Japhites as well as Semites.

It is almost certain that later years saw further assimilation of groups and individuals with Israel, who were mainly of similar background and who were prepared to submit to the Yahweh covenant. This is evidenced in names borne by such people (Uriah the Hittite no doubt looked on himself as a 'child of Israel'). Thus not all Israelites were strictly Semites even if they had absorbed the Semite culture.

Indeed clans, nations and people were united by treaty, by intermarriage, by conquest, by assimilation and by convenience. This phenomenon was common in the ancient world, as indeed it is today. The terms normally employed for physical relationships ('sons of'; 'bore/begat') are all elsewhere used in Babylonian and Hebrew literature to denote such political alliances.

So the direct relationship of later clans and nations to the sons of Noah must not be seen as implying that all such were direct descendants of one particular son. Rather it shows their association in a variety of ways with those who were directly descended from one or the other.

It is certain from the heading of the Table of Nations, ‘These are the descendants (generations, genealogies or family histories - toledoth) of the sons of Noah’ (v.1), and from the words ‘These are the families (mispahot) of the sons of Noah according to their generations by their nations (goyim) and *from these came the separate nations on earth after the flood*’ (v.32) that the differentiation of nations was the main purpose of the narrative, and the assertion that they were all descended from Noah in one way or another. Further we cannot go.

In many ways the distinctions are based on territory occupied. The writer is seeking to explain to his readers the derivation of the peoples they are aware of. But it would be too simplistic to assume that that was the only basis for distinction. Some are mentioned twice, possibly because of intermarriage and marriage treaties, possibly because of the movement of part of a tribe to a different area. There were many movements of peoples in the Ancient Near East caused by various circumstances, including pressure from other peoples.

However, one main message of this record is that the ‘world’, as known to the writer, descended from Noah, was originally of one language, but that as a result of their behaviour towards God and each other, they split up into many nations and languages.

Bearing this in mind we will briefly look at the people and nations described.

The names of Noah’s sons are dealt with in reverse order, Shem being the last. This is in order to deal with the other two before concentrating on the one important to the future narrative. This is a feature of the whole of Genesis 1-11 and demonstrates the emphasis on one particular line chosen by God.

10.2 ‘The sons of Japheth; Gomer and Magog and Madai and Javan and Tubal and Meshech and Tirus.’

The term ‘sons of’ had wide significance in the Ancient Near East. It could mean descended from, connected with by treaty, subjugation in warfare, and so on. Here it is a recognition that the nations associated with these names in a general way look back to descendants of Japheth and are seen as associated with each other.

Whether they are to be seen as direct names of sons of Japheth we may never know. It could well be that later tribal or national names looked back to genuine individuals, but no certainty is obtainable, or necessary for the purpose of commentary. It would have been quite normal to call nations ‘sons of -’ when there was genuine connection of one kind or another.

The above are the major groupings from which other groupings (‘their sons’) derive. The deliberate point is that Noah bore nations not just sons. In Ezekiel 27.14 Togarmah, Tubal, Javan and Meshech are mentioned as peoples who supply slaves, horses, mules and other merchandise to Tyre. In Ezekiel 38.6 Gomer is connected with Togarmah as peoples.

Gomer probably here represents the ancestors of the Cimmerians, Madai of the Medes, Javan of the Ionians, Tubal of Tabal, and Meshech of the Muski, the latter being people who entered the Ancient Near East from the Northern steppe. Tabal and Muski are mentioned together in Assyrian inscriptions.

Tiras may be the ancestors of the Etruscans. Magog is not as yet satisfactorily connected with any known people but has connections with Tabal and Muski and may well be the name of a

people rather than a land, 'the land of Magog' meaning the land where they lived (Ezekiel 38.2). (Meshech and Tubal are not etymologically connected with Moscow and Tobolsk in spite of their comparative similarity in English. Such a connection does not tie in with the usual transliterations of letters used in those days).

10.3-4 'And the sons of Gomer, Ashkenaz and Riphath and Togarmah. And the sons of Javan, Elishah and Tarshish, Kittim and Dodanim.'

Ashkenaz probably represents the ancestors of the Scythians. Togarmah may well relate to Tegarama witnessed to in 14th century BC as lying between Carchemish and Harran. Elishah, probably connected with the Alasia in the Amarna letters, and Kittim (Phoenician kt or kty), are the ancestors of Cyprus, and Dodanim possibly the ancestors of Rhodes. (In Hebrew d and r are easily confused and the Samaritan Pentateuch and some Hebrew manuscripts read r here. The Septuagint (LXX) also has 'rodioi' - see also 1 Chronicles 1.7 which has Rodanim. Otherwise Dodanim is unidentifiable). Tarshish may represent the ancestors of Tartessus in South West Spain, but it simply means 'refinery' and could therefore be applied to a number of different places.

10.5 'Of these were the isles/coastlands of the nations divided. (These were the sons of Japheth) in their lands, everyone after his tongue, after their families, in their nations.'

The phrase in brackets would be expected, compare verses 20 and 31, but is not in the Hebrew text. It may well have dropped out in error in copying.

The 'descendants' of Japheth are thus seen as having spread out over the islands and the coastal regions on both sides of the Great Sea, the Mediterranean. However not all the above were coastland areas. The description is general rather than specific, indicating general whereabouts. 'Isles/coastlands' really indicates 'those across the sea'.

10.6 'And the sons of Ham: Cush and Mizraim, and Put and Canaan.'

Cush is connected with Nubia or Northern Sudan but also with the Cassites in Mesopotamia. Mizraim is the usual name for Egypt, its plural form possibly reflecting the two kingdoms, Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt, which formed to make one, although this is by no means certain. Put is Libya. Whether these were names of actual sons of Ham we cannot know but we do know that the writer intends us to see in them the nations which may well have descended from them.

While the plural name Mizraim, which could mean 'borderlands' or 'fortresses', would appear to be more improbable as the name of a real son we know that Canaan is a genuine son of Ham (Genesis 9.22 with 25). But the name also represents the peoples of Canaan and areas connected with the Canaanites such as Sidon (Canaanites reached much further than what we now think of as Canaan). Thus Canaan, the Canaanites and the nations south of Canaan are linked with Ham.

The linking of Canaanites with the Hamites has been questioned. Some suggest it was because at that time it came under the influence of Egypt, but then we would expect 'son of Mizraim'. But the earliest known inhabitants of Canaan were in fact non-Semites and showed some affinities to the Sumerians, who were also non-Semitic, thus their original descent may well have been Hamitic.

10.7 'And the sons of Cush, Seba and Havilah, and Sabtah and Raamah and Sabteca. And the sons of Raamah, Sheba and Dedan.'

Here Cush has clear connections with Arabia, for Seba is Saba in Southern Arabia, Dedan is Dedan in Northern Arabia. Havilah is mentioned in Genesis 25.18 and 1 Samuel 15.7 connecting with the Ishmaelites and Amalekites. It thus also has connections with Arabia. For Raamah, inscriptions found in Sheba suggest a location north of Marib in Yemen. Sheba is well known in the Old Testament as a trading nation and is also connected with Arabia.

10.8-9 ‘And Cush begat Nimrod. He began to be a mighty one on the earth. He was a mighty warrior (hunter) before Yahweh (i.e. even in the Yahweh’s eyes); wherefore it is said “Like Nimrod a mighty warrior before Yahweh”.’

Here we begin to see some of the complications facing us in identifying some of these peoples. Nimrod was clearly, in pre-history, a great warrior who left his homeland seeking conquests and established great cities. Thus the descendants of Cush become connected with Mesopotamia.

This need not necessarily mean that the Cassites were all directly descended from Cush. It could mean that Nimrod, possibly with a small but powerful band of warriors, conquered the people who became known as Cassites in a similar way to that in which the Philistines became overlord of some Canaanites and gave them their name.

The reference to ‘a hunter’ probably indicates his warrior status as a hunter of men. But ancient kings did boast excessively about their prowess in the hunt and he may actually have been remembered as an exceptional hunter. In Micah 5.6 Assyria is described as ‘the land of Nimrod’ confirming the above connections.

‘Wherefore it is said -’. This probably indicates a quotation from an epic passed down through the ages (compare Numbers 21.14). It is possible that the writer had access to ancient records about Nimrod and his activities. Alternately it may have been a well known proverb.

‘Before Yahweh’. Compare Jonah 3.3 where Nineveh is described as ‘a city great to God’. The idea is that even Yahweh God sees them as great. It represents a superlative.

10.10-12 ‘And the beginning (or ‘chief part’ or ‘mainstay’ - reshith - compare the use in Jeremiah 49.35 - ‘the chief’ of their might) of his kingdom was Babel and Erech and Accad and Calneh in the land of Shinar. Out of that land he went forth into Assyria and built Nineveh and Rehoboth-Ir and Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah (the same is the great city).’

Shinar is Babylonia proper (Hittite - Shanhar - see Genesis 11.2; 14.1; Isaiah 11.11; Daniel 1.2; Zechariah 5.11), Babel is Babylon, Erech is Uruk, a very ancient city (the city where Gilgamesh, of the Gilgamesh epic, reigned, now modern Warka), Accad is Akkad or Agade, which ruled a great empire prior to the time of Abraham - site unknown. Calneh is less certain but may be connected with the Kullania mentioned in Assyrian tribute lists. Alternately it may mean ‘all of them’ (Hebrew kullana) i.e. all the others.

Nineveh is Nineveh, Calah is Kalhu (modern Tell Nimrud) on the bank of the Tigris twenty four miles south of Nineveh. Rehoboth-Ir and Resen are unknown. However, resen goes back to Akkadian res eni meaning ‘head of a spring’, a common Assyrian place name. Rehoboth Ir could relate to Akkadian rebatu alu which parallels Sumerian as.ur, referring to Ashur.

The differentiation between the cities he ‘built’ and the earlier cities may suggest that he obtained the former by conquest. Indeed even the ‘building’ could be rebuilding and fortifying. Thus we may well see Nimrod as coming up from Africa on a trail of conquest and settling in Mesopotamia to found an empire. Elsewhere in Sumerian, Assyrian and other records he was seen as a legendary figure performing great exploits. It is possible that he was the source from

which came the idea of Ninurta (Nimurda) the Babylonian and Assyrian god of war.

‘The same is the great city’. This may refer to the four cities as being seen as forming one great metropolis stressing the greatness of his empire.

Connecting these facts with Genesis 11.2 may suggest that it was Nimrod who was responsible for that debacle (but then we might expect a mention here - compare 10.25), but it is more probable that it occurred before Nimrod’s time. Certainly this mention of Nimrod is ominous as it is the first mention of empire building and conquest in the record in Genesis 1-11. What the world would no doubt see as a glorious triumph is anathema to God, as chapter 11 makes clear.

10.13-14 ‘And Mizraim begat Ludim and Anamim and Lehabim and Naphtuhim and Pathrusim and Casluhim, from where the Pelishtim (Philistines) and Caphtorim went out.’

All these names are plural and represent peoples. The Ludim became famous bowmen and are connected with Egypt and Cush in Jeremiah 46.9 (compare possibly Isaiah 66.19). The Lehabim may equate with Lubim (2 Chronicles 12.3) and refer to the Libyans, but this is uncertain. Pathrusim - from pa to ris = ‘the land south’ - are the inhabitants of Upper Egypt. The Anamim and Casluhim are unknown with any certainty.

‘From where the Philistines and Caphtorim went out’. This interesting comment reveals that originally the Philistines and Caphtorim came from Africa from where they went to the Aegean, settling in Crete and elsewhere, but the African connection was before the time for which we have external confirmation. Again we have a demonstration of ancient knowledge of pre-history associated with Egypt which would serve to confirm pre-Mosaic connections with this Table of Nations.

In Amos 9.7 the Philistines are described as ‘from Caphtor’, and Jeremiah speaks of them as ‘the remnant of the isle (or sea coast) of Caphtor’ connecting them with Tyre and Sidon (Jeremiah 47.4). In Deuteronomy there is mention of ‘the Caphtorim who came from Caphtor’, and as we see in this passage the Philistines and the Caphtorim are related. Caphtor is in fact Crete, referred to in Cuneiform documents as Kaptara (in the Mari archives - 18th century BC and later at Ugarit in Akkadian), and in Egyptian Kaftiu from an original Kaftaru (represented in 15th century BC tomb chapels at Thebes). There is little doubt that they can also be connected with the Cherethites (2 Samuel 15.18; 20.7, 23; Zephaniah 2.5). To some extent the names were used interchangeably.

At this stage there is no mention of Philistine connection with Canaan. The invasion by the sea peoples including the Philistines would not come until about 1200 BC when it would destroy the Hittite Empire. This record was clearly made before then.

10.15 ‘And Canaan begat Sidon, his firstborn, and Heth, and the Jebusites and the Amorite and the Gergashite, and the Hivite and the Arkite and the Sinite, and the Arvadite and the Zemarite and the Hamathite, and afterwards were the families of the Canaanite spread abroad, and the border of the Canaanite was from Sidon as you go towards Gerar, to Gaza as you go towards Sodom and Gomorrha and Admah and Zeboiim to Lasha.’

The mention of Sidon as the firstborn probably refers to the fact that Sidon (which is later closely linked with Tyre) was the place where the Canaanites first settled when they arrived in the area. However there is a possibility that it should be seen as an indication that Sidon was a real son, in contrast to most of the others who are clearly undisguised peoples. Heth represents the Hittites who were for centuries a great nation in Syria before their sudden demise in 12th century BC. These two, Sidon and Heth, mentioned by individual name, are clearly seen as

being especially important. They are major players on the scene.

Exodus 13.5 and elsewhere refer to the 'land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Hivite and the Jebusite'. In Deuteronomy 7.1 (see also Joshua 3.10; 24.11) the Gergashites are included (as well as the Perizzites) to make the divinely perfect seven. The lack of mention of the Perizzites here when the others are included again points to an early date for the account (they could hardly have been overlooked later), as does the mention of Sodom and Gomorrha and related cities (destroyed about 1900 BC - Genesis 19) which points to a date no later than that. The Hittites here are those of the Hittites who had taken up residence in the land of Canaan. The Hivites are similarly Hurrians.

Amorites or, in Akkadian, Amurru are well testified to elsewhere as a nomadic shepherd people from Western Mesopotamia and are testified to in Syria, where there was an Amorite state, as a more sedentary people. Joshua 13.4-5 refers to this specific Amorite area. They are also testified to in external records as a mountain shepherd people (compare Numbers 13.29; Joshua 11.3; Judges 1.34). The name was sometimes used in external records as applying to the whole of Syria including Palestine. They became part of the Hittite empire and declined with them. Like Habiru it was a term that could be used to refer to people of a distinct type, in their case a shepherd people. Its general more widespread use, often seemingly parallel to that of 'Canaanite', was different from Canaanite in that it covered a wider area including Transjordan. Thus in Biblical usage the terms are not synonymous.

The Arkites, the Sinites, the Arvadites, the Zemarites and the Hamathites are all Phoenician peoples, along with Sidon. The Arkites probably relate to the Phoenician city of Arqa mentioned in Egyptian records, including the Amarna letters, and in later Assyrian records. Arvad is mentioned in Ezekiel 27.8, 11; (and in 1 Maccabees 15.23 as Aradus) as a Phoenician city and is also referred to in Assyrian records. The Zemarites relate to Sumar mentioned in the Amarna letters, which is referred to as Simirra in Assyrian texts. The Hamathites relate to the city of Hamath which is regularly mentioned in the Bible and inscriptions, and was on the border of the land of promise (Numbers 34.8). It was on the main trade routes and was at one time controlled by Solomon.

So the descendants of Canaan were seen as the inhabitants of the land of Canaan and the Phoenicians to the North who are all seen as 'Canaanites' in external records. (While of similar origin Ugarit prided itself on not being a Canaanite city).

10.20 'These are the sons of Ham, after their families, after their tongues, in their lands, in their nations.'

The descendants of Ham are seen mainly as the inhabitants of Canaan and Syria and nations to the South in Africa and Arabia. Yet, as we have seen, through Nimrod they have intermingled with peoples in Mesopotamia.

The description demonstrates that all aspects of peoples are covered. The families with whom they were identified, their languages, their countries, their nationhood.

10.21 'And to Shem, the father of all the children of Eber, the elder brother of Japheth, to him also were children born. The sons of Shem: Elam and Ashur, and Arpachshad and Lud and Aram.'

The special mention of Eber, the 'father' of the Hebrews, at this point, is the only concession in the whole account to the special importance of the ancestor of Israel, and it is noted that he descends from Arpachshad the least known of Shem's 'sons'. This comment was clearly written in a period when the writer's people were known as 'Hebrews'. There is nothing here

of the claims to grandeur made by other nations in their writings. There is no boasting. It is totally down to earth and practical.

It is of interest to consider the fact that Arpachshad's name is demonstrably non-Semitic and not related to any known nation. Genesis 11.2 demonstrates that he at least is a real 'son' of Shem, while the others are the names of well-known nations, and in their case, with the exception of Aram, no descent is given. Whereas the birth of the nations can be dealt with on a broad scope the birth of the ancestors of Israel must be accurately recorded and in detail. Furthermore the name is clearly genuine for no Israelite would ever have invented such a name. It was given at a time when all spoke one language which would have been a fairly primitive, pre-Semitic one. Thus we must not be surprised to find non-Semitic usage.

Elam refers to the area of the plain of Khuzistan north of the Persian gulf. They developed their own pictographic script shortly after writing began in Babylonia (third millennium BC). The reference to them here may reflect the presence of early Semitic people in the area. A king of Elam is mentioned in Genesis 14.

Ashur refers to ancient Assyria whose early kings were originally described as 'kings who lived in tents'. The first of these kings is mentioned in tablets at Ebla (3d millennium BC). The area included a good proportion of Semites, but was a mixture, as is confirmed by probable reference to them among the Hamites (see on 10.10-12).

Lud here may well refer to ancient Lydia (Ludu), as distinct from the Lud which is connected with Egypt (Isaiah 66.19; Jeremiah 46.9). As with Ashur the two may be connected.

Aram here may refer to the Aram(e.i) in the East Tigris region north of Elam and north east of Assyria. Reference is made to 'Aram' in an inscription of Naram-Sin of Akkad (c.2300 BC) referring to a region on the Upper Euphrates and to a city on the Lower Tigris in documents from Drehem (c.2000 BC). Later 'Aram' would become associated with Syria. The paralleling of Aram with Elam and Ashur is therefore a sign that the narrative is of a very early date.

10.23 'And the sons of Aram: Uz and Hul and Gether and Mash.'

The land of Uz was Job's homeland, whose location is uncertain, but this may well have been a different Uz. It is probably safe to say that the identity of these 'sons' is unknown.

10.24-25 'And Arpachshad begat Shelah, and Shelah begat Eber and to Eber were born two sons. The name of the one was Peleg, for in his days the earth was divided, and his brother's name was Joktan.'

The movement from 'begat' to 'born two sons' is in reverse to the earlier 'sons of' becoming 'begat' (10.8). The inclusion of both descriptions in the same sentence, yet in different order, serves to demonstrate that such changes are purely stylistic and not evidence of separate narratives.

'In his days the earth was divided'. Division is mentioned in 10.5 and 10.32, but there the idea is of a gradual division into nations. 'Division' is not mentioned in chapter 11. The meaning may therefore be that 'the land was divided' by irrigation channels. Peleg's name ('water-courses, division') may have been given because of this very intention. We can compare Isaiah 30.25; 32.2; Job 29.6; 38.25 where 'peleg' means irrigation canals (Assyrian plagu). Alternately the 'division' could refer to a dispute between the two sons, resulting in a divided land, like that between Abraham and Lot.

However it is possible that this is suggesting that Genesis 11 and the process of division into

nations began at this time, but then why not more directly say that ‘that was when the people were scattered’?

The genealogy of Arpachshad at this point is clearly a genuine genealogy as we understand it (compare 11.10-14) as befits the ancestor of Eber and Abraham. Thus Peleg comes very early on in the period that produced the nations.

Eber - the name means ‘one who emigrates’. He is thought of as the eponymous ancestor of ‘the Hebrews’, and the name appears to be referred to Israel in Numbers 24.24. But while the term ‘Hebrew’ is referred to Abraham and his descendants, and very much later became in general use connected with the Jews, it was originally essentially used in a context where the term is applied by foreigners who saw them as immigrants and probably mainly used in derision. Israel did not see themselves as ‘the Hebrews’.

10.26-29 ‘And Joktan begat Almodad and Sheleph and Hazarmaveth and Jerah and Hadoram and Uzal and Diklah and Obal and Abimael and Ophir and Havilah and Jobab. All these were the sons of Joktan.’ Hazarmaveth probably connects with the kingdom of Hadramaut in southern Arabia. Jerah means ‘the moon’ in Hebrew and occurs in southern Arabian inscriptions with this meaning. However no city or people of that name are yet known. Uzal perhaps connects with ‘Azal given by Arab historians as the ancient name for San‘a in Yemen.

Ophir is a tribe known from pre-islamic inscriptions lying between Saba and Havilah. This may or may not be the Ophir mentioned later as a source of gold (1 Chronicles 29.4 etc) but Havilah is connected with gold in 2.11. Havilah means ‘circle’ or ‘district’ (see also 10.7) - the site is unknown but is probably somewhere in Arabia, compare the Havilah mentioned in Genesis 25.18 in north west Arabia. This Havilah may be a different Havilah from the one in 10.7 but alternatively there may have been an absorption of one tribe by another with a consequent mixing of races. It is apparent from all this that at least some of Joktan’s descendants have affinities with Arabia

10.30 ‘And their dwelling was from Mesha as you go towards Sephar, the mountain of the East.’ Mesha may connect with Massa in northern Arabia. Massa was the seventh of the twelve princes of Ishmael according to Genesis 25.14, demonstrating Arabian connections for the name, and may be identified with the Masa who paid tribute to Tiglath Pileser III. Sephar can possibly be connected with the coastal town Zafar in the kingdom of Hadramaut. This is possible but by no means certain, especially in view of the z instead of s.

‘As you go towards -’ essentially meaning ‘in the direction of’. This would seem to link the ‘sons’ together as covering one large area in Arabia.

10.31 ‘These are the sons of Shem after their families, after their tongues, in their lands, after their nations.’

Compare 10.5; 10.20. The descriptions confirms that ‘sons’ is to be taken in the broader context of describing tribes, lands and nations.

The mention of language in each of these references is interesting. There is no attempt to divide by language. We must therefore see it as drawing attention to distinctions of language in preparation for the account given in chapter 11.

10.32 ‘ These are the families of the sons of Noah, after their generations, in their nations, and of these were the nations divided in the earth after the flood.’

This remarkable chapter has demonstrated the growth of the nations from the families of Noah

and his sons, simplifying a most complicated situation. Its concern is to demonstrate that all known nations are descended from Noah. At this stage there are no 'chosen people'. All nations are the same before God. But the connecting narrative will demonstrate why they are now no longer satisfactory in God's eyes leading on to his calling of one man, Abraham, to finally bring about a remedy for the needs and sins of the nations.

THE SIN OF THE NATIONS (11.1-9).

We are now to be shown why the nations divided up into different languages with the consequent suspicions, hatreds and warfares which resulted. Overall it will be seen as a result of puffed up pride and deliberate rebellion against God. (This chapter is only seen as a new chapter in our Bibles. In the record it was simply a continuation of the narrative). God has not been mentioned in chapter 10 except as a superlative (verse 9). The nations have grown without God. Now we are to see that the situation in chapter 10 was caused by Yahweh as a result of man's sinfulness and rebellion.

11.1 'Now the whole earth was of one language and one speech.'

It is noteworthy in chapter 10 that, although there was no suggestion of splitting nations according to language, reference to differing languages is made in 10.5, 20, and 31. That was in preparation for this chapter, as was the diversity of nations. Clearly to begin with, all the sons of Noah spoke the same language. The writer is asking, what then was the cause of the later distinctions?

11.2 'And it came about as they journeyed East that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and they dwelt there.'

'They' simply refers to those who made the choice to go. There is an interesting comparison here with Cain. It was Cain who left the mainstream of those who worshipped Yahweh and set up a 'city', in his case of tents, in order to demonstrate his independence and for mutual protection, and in order to build an alternative lifestyle and civilisation. Here we are clearly to see a group of Noah's descendants doing the same, but with less excuse for they have not yet been branded as outcasts. They made a free choice. The writer saw their aim as being to find somewhere where they could establish themselves in independence of God.

The land of Shinar is where Nimrod will later come in search of glory and conquest (10.10). It is the name of Babylonia proper. This will be the beginning of the symbol of Great Babylon which is later seen as the ultimate in rebellion against God (see Revelation 17-18).

11.3 'And they said to one another, "Go to, let us make brick and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone and slime for mortar.'

There is the idea here that they build with perishable materials, material that will not last, although they themselves no doubt saw it as a great advance. This may well be intended to signify the first invention of such building methods, and be seen by the writer as a sign of man's inventiveness replacing God's provision. It is part of their rebellion. But he knew that brick and mortar would not have the durability of stone.

11.4 'And they said, "Go to, let us build ourselves a city and a tower whose top may reach to heaven, and let us make us a name lest we be scattered abroad on the face of the earth."'

The building of a city is a sign of self sufficiency. They are banding together rather than depending on Yahweh. They no longer wish to depend on His protection, but will protect themselves. Great cities were later compared to prostitutes because they offered illicit

enjoyment and took men's minds away from God.

'A tower whose top may reach to heaven'. This is a graphic way of saying a very high tower (see Deuteronomy 1.28), but it probably contains in it the idea of connecting with the gods. It was not the height of the tower but the type of tower that was significant. It was almost certainly a ziggurat. These buildings, which became a regular feature of life in Mesopotamia, were stepped buildings which were meant to represent a mountain, and at the top of it was a sanctuary. It was felt that the gods dwelt on mountains, so that provision is being made for them to dwell in the city. Thus this represented idol worship. The tower, like the city itself, is seen by the writer as a further sign of rebellion against Yahweh, replacing Him with more amenable gods who will act according to their will.

'Let us make us a name lest we be scattered abroad.' Their aim was to fill the surrounding people with fear so that they might be free from attack. Their expectation was that their strength in gathering together, and the fearful tower in their midst, which would convince people that the gods were with them, would be sufficient to prevent any attack. Thus they would be safe and would not become scattered. They should have been concerned for the name of Yahweh, but they were only concerned for their own name. This contrasts with 4.26. They have repudiated His name.

11.5 'And Yahweh came down to see the city and the tower which the children of men built.'

The words are deliberately ironic. They are telling us that the city and tower were so small that God could not see them from where He was and so had to come down to have a look, and a laugh. 'He who sits in the heavens will laugh, Yahweh will have them in derision, then will he speak to them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure' (Psalm 2.4). The whole Psalm is apposite here.

'The children of men', stressing that they are but human beings after all and not gods. Their pitiable buildings are not a threat to God, only to themselves.

11.6-7 'And Yahweh said, "Behold, they are one people, and they all have one language, and this is what they begin doing. And now nothing that they purpose to do will be withheld from them. Go to, let us go down and there confound their language that they may not understand one another's speech".'

Yahweh would work on the principle of divide and conquer. Having begun in this way these men will continue with greater and greater rebellion, and lead others astray with them. So the best way to limit this was to confound their language so that men would not necessarily understand each other.

'Go to, let us go down ---'. Further deliberate irony. These men in their pride, arrogance and self-confidence had encouraged each other twice with 'go to' (let us get on with it), now it is Yahweh's turn to say the third 'go to'. Three is the number of completeness so that the third encouragement completes the scenario. When He acts it brings things to their conclusion.

'Let US go down --'. Yahweh will take His angels with Him to have a look (see 1 Kings 22.19 on; Job 1.6). Compare 1.26 where the angels were first called on to behold the creation of man. Now they must witness his humiliation. These men are to be a spectacle to the heavenly beings who surround the throne of God. They seek to build a mountain to serve gods. Let those who alone populate the heavens behold their folly.

This statement of Yahweh, communicated to some godly man, is the basis of this covenant record. It is a word spoken by Yahweh in a theophany and thus preserved for that reason.

11.8 'So Yahweh scattered them abroad from there on the face of all the earth and they ceased building the city.'

We must notice carefully what happened and what did not happen. There is no suggestion that the tower fell down. No cataclysmic event is described. They do not suddenly start to speak different languages.

'Yahweh scattered them abroad'. It is not difficult to see how. Other men, seeing what they are about, attack them before it is too late, as Nimrod would later (10.10). (Alternatively there may have been climactic storms and lightning striking the city which caused them to flee in terror, or disease and pestilence and famine may have caused their flight. Whatever it was they fled never to return). Thus their efforts have proved in vain and they are scattered. The final result will be that their languages will begin to change until they are dialects, and will continue to change even more and establish more advanced systems, until they are unrecognisable to each other.

11.9 'Therefore its name was called 'Babel' (similar to 'balel' - to confound) because Yahweh there confounded the language of all the earth, and from there Yahweh scattered them abroad on the face of the earth.'

Bab - el means literally 'the gate of god' (compare Babylonian 'bab ili') but the writer makes a play on words to change it to signify confusion. The gate that these men thought would lead them to the gods resulted only in their confusion. So as the writer looks back on what happened he recognises what its final consequences were.

There is a partially parallel account of this event elsewhere where Ur-Nammu (3rd millennium BC) is seen as commanded by the gods to build a ziggurat, but the gods are then offended and throw it down, confusing men's languages and scattering them over the earth. The throwing down of the tower is clearly an addition to the story suggesting that the Ur Nammu version is later than an earlier account on which Genesis is based. Unlike this story with its deep undertones that was but an example of the irascibility of the gods.

The final result is that mankind is to be scattered and split up. By their act of independence unity and brotherhood is gone. The world is no longer one.

The Birth of Abram (Genesis 11.10b to 27a).

The genealogy that follows links Abram back to Shem. This was why God was to be blessed with regard to Shem (9.26). It would be through him that God's man for the times would come. There is a chosen line reflected throughout chapters 1-11, and it leads up to Abram.

11.10b 'Shem was a hundred years old and begat Arpachshad two years after the flood. And Shem lived after he begat Arpachshad five hundred years and begat sons and daughters.'

The pattern of the genealogy is different from that in chapter 5. This stresses that these genealogies were not an invention of the writer but based on material handed down from different sources with differing patterns. It was he who built those earlier records up into the account we now have, without altering the basic records except in order to make a continuing narrative.

The narrative uses round numbers. The significance of numbers in the ancient world lay in their intrinsic meaning, rather than their numerical meaning. 'A hundred years' signifies that the time of Arpachshad's birth was right. It was in the fullness of time. It is ten intensified.

(Using other information (5.32 and 7.6) and adding two years we would come to 102. To suggest that there is a conflict is to discount the fact that the figures could exclude or include parts of years respectively. The traditions of the inclusion or exclusion of part years changed from age to age. The writer is not trying to reconcile the numbers but taking them as they are written. Using part years they can be reconciled, but that is not the point. The numbers are probably not intended to be taken literally anyway).

Shem lives another 500 years making 600 in all. This is probably intended to draw attention to his covenant connections and also to the fact that he does not achieve 700, a divinely perfect age. As a sinful man he must come short. (We could go further and suggest that 1 is the number of unity showing that at the time of Arpachshad's birth the world was united, that 5 is the number of covenant showing that Arpachshad is the child of covenant, and it may well be right. Numbers were used in this way in ancient times. But we would not wish to press it).

The patriarchs that follow are listed with ages gradually decreasing, a further indication of the fact that man is fallen and must die, and ever more quickly. The names are mainly clearly of a Mesopotamian background. Eber reminds us of the Habiru, Peleg reminds us of the irrigation canals (palgu), and possibly of Phaliga on the upper Euphrates, Serug reminds us of Sarug, west of Haran, Nahor reminds us of Nahiri, near Haran, Terah reminds us of Turahi on the Balikh, Haran reminds us of Haran itself which was the seat of the ancient moon cult.

That these patriarchs lived lives of great longevity we need not doubt but as we have pointed out elsewhere [The Use of Numbers in ANE](#) it is very questionable whether the numbers are intended to be taken literally.

The line of ten patriarchs is probably to be seen as a selection of patriarchs numbering ten to represent completeness, rather than indicating the complete line, as with the list in chapter 5 and in the king lists of other nations. We must admit to grave doubts as to whether Shem was alive when Abram made his great venture of faith, for if he was he would have been the family patriarch and would need to be consulted on 'family' matters, and his name would appear in the colophon. It is rather Terah who appears as the head of the family. And if these great men of faith were still alive, why are they never mentioned in any way?

11.26-27a 'When Terah had lived seventy years he begat Abram, Nahor and Haran. Now this is the history of Terah.'

The age at which Terah bore his children is an intensification of seven. It was a divinely perfect result. Thus ends the final tablet of Genesis 1-11. The epic is complete and prepares the way for the future that is to come.

This brief tablet is the only tablet in the first part of Genesis not based on a covenant word. The reason why it was preserved was that Abram was God's covenant man. And indeed if Abram was the one who put together this epic this would explain why he concludes it with his genealogy.

The question of the basis of Abram's faith has to be accounted for. While it was true that he had vivid experiences of God, we can ask what originally turned his thoughts in Yahweh's direction when his father Terah was a worshipper of other gods and brought them up to worship them? Joshua states quite clearly to the people of Israel, "Your fathers dwelt of old time beyond the River (the Euphrates), even Terah the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods." Furthermore he gave his son the name Ab-ram 'my father is Ram'. What then caused this great change in Abram's life, whereby he turned from the gods his father worshipped to worship Yahweh, and why too were these tablets preserved and carried about in trying circumstances?

The answer to all these questions possibly lies in the fact that Terah as head of the family possessed the family covenant records and that Abram took these records and read them and came to faith in Yahweh. Then what more likely that he should put them together to form an epic on the pattern that we know of from the Epic of Atrahasis, which itself was probably based on earlier epics including the accounts of Creation and the Flood with which Abram was familiar. Someone with a Mesopotamian background did this. Who more likely than Abram?