

GOD OVER THE NATIONS

Genesis 10–11

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This week's Scripture study includes three themes. First is the dispersion of nations in Genesis 10. Second, in chapter 11 as well as one instance in chapter 10, is the beginning of Babylon and its judgment. And there is also a third theme, which starts in chapter 11:10—that God is preserving a messianic line. Actually, this theme was begun in chapter 5, but it's the continuation of the theme—the descendants of Shem through Abram.

These are not normal chapters you probably would hear preached on Sunday morning. I was reading in a commentary this week from Genesis 10, which advised all preachers that this is not a chapter that should be used as the base of a sermon. It urged that the preacher would be well advised to pass on and go to something else. But I am always challenged with obscure texts. While I will not spend a whole morning in chapter 10, it will be a way to say again what Paul says: that all Scripture is profitable. We'll trust that will be the case.

I. First of all, let's look at the dispersion of nations noted in chapter 10 under the theme of Noah's three sons—Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

This is a remarkable account in Scripture. There's no parallel account in ancient religions that can describe the families of man. It is an account that shows how civilization went out from the Tigris-Euphrates Valley or the Mesopotamian area. It went out from the cradle of civilization, much like the spokes off the hub of a wheel. Indeed, history as well as Scripture is somewhat agreed that if we're to look for the roots of civilization, we should look in this very area between the Tigris and Euphrates.

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We see in chapter 10 the migration of peoples. There is a migration to the north and the northwest. There is a migration to the south and the southwest. Then there is a settling within the region of Tigris-Euphrates itself. In fact, when this chapter is done, the geographical span that it covers to the north is as far as Russia, to the east as far as the Iranian plateau, to the south as far as the sources of the Nile, and to the west perhaps as far as Spain. So you could say that all the Mediterranean civilization is spanned geographically within these chapters.

Noah's three sons and their families are noted. From them come what can be called nations.

A. There are, for example, the sons of Japheth in Genesis 10:2–5. There are some seven sons and seven grandsons, making a total of fourteen in all. Some of the names are pretty recognizable in terms of the origin of the people that the name represents. “Gomer” is thought to be a group called Cimmerians, a group of people located in what would now be South Russia. We recognize also terms like “Magog,” “Tubal,” and “Meshech.” Do you see in “Meshech” the possibility of the word “Moscow”? There may be some relationship there. But according to Ezekiel 38 and 39, these are the people who come upon Palestine in the latter times from the uttermost parts of the north, which gives them a geographical description.

Meshech is thought to be the Medes. We're familiar in Scripture with the Persians, or Medes.

“Javan” is thought to refer to the Ionian people; that is, people who settled on the Aegean islands and also the Greek civilization. Notice in the text that it makes mention of the coastland peoples.

These would be people who live near a body of water, either along a coastal strip or on islands.

The King James Version translates it “isles.” In the Old Testament the islands later come to represent the far-flung migration of men. Scripture says the gospel will even be preached to the islands, which represent in some ways the ends of the earth.

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The people spread out by families, language, and nations. Probably if we were to look for our own roots going back in the genealogical records of history, most of us might say we have the Japheth line more predominately than others.

B. The sons of Ham represented another migration. Whereas the sons of Japheth represent a migration to the north and northwest from the Tigris-Euphrates area, the sons of Ham eventually represent a migration to the south and southwest. So you find the name “Cush,” which is the land that would be south of Egypt; “Put,” which is Libya; and “Canaan,” with which the text is particularly concerned. The Canaanites are in the land of Israel when Joshua—the people of God, the people of Abraham—return to settle the land and take it.

Particular attention is made to two people of the sons of Ham—“Nimrod” and “Canaan.” We’ll have more to say about Nimrod in a second, but now just a word about Canaan.

We find in Genesis 10:15 the nations that settle in Palestine and are there when the Children of Israel under Moses’ leadership are ready to occupy the land. Some racists have used Scripture to justify their point of view that the curse described at the end of Genesis 9 is a curse upon the African people. In fact, Genesis 9 was used by some slave owners during the times of the Civil War to justify the mastery of the white race over the black race—asserting that indeed it was these people who are cursed in the curse of Ham. Let me parenthetically deal with that lest there are any who have come across that thinking.

Genesis 10 is not telling us racial distinctions among peoples. There is, as far as we know, no racial distinction between Shem, Ham, and Japheth. In fact, the Scriptures never tell us the origin of races. That is left a mystery. They never deal with racial distinctions in terms of their origin.

Another thing that should be noted is that the curse in Genesis 9 is not upon Ham but upon Canaan. That curse is specifically fulfilled when, under Joshua, the Children of Israel come into

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the land of Canaan. The people who are in the land are replaced and made servants of the Children of Israel who are coming in. Anyone who wants to make Scriptures serve their purposes by assuming these verses are taking that point of view is not treating the text fairly.

C. The third line that is being traced in this chapter is the children of Shem. Particular attention is made to the name “Eber.” Notice it in verse 21 and 25. Here’s a word, “Eber,” evidently from which the word “Hebrew” is derived. So coming across the pages of history is now the introduction of the Ebers, which Abraham himself is called later in the text of Genesis. He’s one of the sons of Eber. These people by and large settled in the Mesopotamian area.

Why all of this attention to these names? Scripture is doing a very important thing here. It is saying that there is a common humanity among the races of the world. Genesis 12 tells of the narrowing of God’s relationship to a particular people, namely Abraham and his descendants Isaac and Jacob. But before we come to the rest of the Old Testament—from Genesis 12 through the prophet Malachi, which specifically deals with Israel—we are taught in these chapters that God is the God of all men. Not simply the God of the Ebers or the God of Jacob, but the God who is related to all.

Indeed this lofty understanding of God in the Old Testament is unique among the religions of the ancient world. God is not simply the God of a tribe or a family or a person. He is God over all.

We find Paul making reference to this in Acts 17 when he is on Mars Hill in Athens. He says, “He made from one every nation of man to live on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17:26).

Someone has described in human terms God’s attitude in the Scripture this way: For a while, beginning in Genesis 12, God will bid good-bye to the nations in order that He might reveal himself to Abraham. This is so that from Abraham, the blessing of Christ might come to all the

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nations. This is a kind of temporary farewell in the Scriptures, but God is concerned for all the nations.

We find in our Scripture reading and throughout Isaiah and other passages that God is concerned with the nations. This should give us an appreciation of another person from a different culture, from a different geography, from a different nation, from a different racial type. All have the same view in God's eyes. It keeps us away from the idea of a super race or a master race or a dominant people. We're all in this world together, descendants of a common ancestor.

If you count all the names in Genesis 10 excluding Noah, Ham, Japheth, and Shem, you will find some seventy names. Genesis 10 relates the founding of seventy nations. It's not concerned to tell all of the nations that would eventually arise, or maybe not even all of them that are present when this is being written. Only seventy. That figure becomes so fascinating when you look to the New Testament and find in Luke 10 that Christ sent out the seventy—as if to say there is a representative for every nation of man.

In the cross of Jesus Christ, the families of the earth meet. It has been suggested, for example, that the Romans—or the Europeans—would fit in under the line of Japheth and that they are at the cross of Jesus Christ as His executioners. Perhaps Ham is there, the sons of Ham, in the person of Simon of Cyrene—Cyrene being north Libya, which we noted in the word “Put” in Genesis 10:6. This is a possible geographical derivation. And certainly the sons of Shem are there, both in the person of the disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the person of the opposition to Jesus.

It's a point of thought that while Genesis 10 records the dispersing of mankind, in the cross of Jesus Christ all men gather and find their center point, their reference. Regardless of background,

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in the cross of Jesus Christ we find a common meeting place. While here in Genesis 10 the nations scatter, in the person and in the cross of Jesus Christ they gather together again.

II. There is another theme that emerges in these chapters: the beginning of and judgment of Babylon.

Babylon will take an important place in both the Old and the New Testament. The Old Testament speaks of historical Babylon. The New Testament refers to a symbolic Babylon, which is representative of the end of the age of a civilization and a culture that is anti-God and which God will judge. But in the beginnings of Babel or Babylon we see references in Genesis 10 and 11. In Genesis 10:10 we see the reference of a leader founding Babylon. Then in chapter 11 we see reference to Babylon's religion and its technical accomplishments. If these chapters form the seed plot of Scripture, then Babel—the beginning of it here—is very instructive, for the things happening in the beginning characterize the city and the civilization throughout the rest of Scripture.

A. We're introduced to a person named Nimrod in Genesis 10:8. There are three characteristics of Nimrod that emerge.

One is that he is described as a mighty man. That phrase is loaded with significance. It was used before the Flood in Genesis 6 when it described persons of mixed parentage—both unbelieving and believing parents—who were mighty men, men of renown. These mighty men are described as men of violence. Here again on earth, the first on the earth after the Flood, comes Nimrod, a mighty man. This kind of gives us a tip-off of the rebellious spirit within man. It is not dead because of the Flood. It is now alive in the person of a man named Nimrod.

A second description that is used of Nimrod is that he is described as a mighty hunter. Certainly in that early time we would understand that ancient peoples needed food sources. Here was

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probably a very skillful hunter who could organize expeditions to get game to feed people. But it isn't long in Babylon's history until that term "mighty hunter" will mean more than a hunting of animals. It will mean a hunting of men. It will mean a subjugation of man. Scripture carries that theme of conquering of men consistently through to the end of the Bible in Revelation 18, which describes Babylon as a civilization without God. One of the merchandises of Babylon is that it traffics slaves, it masters and sells men, human souls. Its characteristic is there right from the beginning.

Another quality of Nimrod is that he found an empire. He is described as putting together a sort of league of cities. Cain was the first to begin a city. We remember his story from Genesis 4. He is under God's curse and he is told that he is going to be a wanderer. But he hopes to reverse the effects of the curse by settling down in a city. Now Nimrod founds an empire with people to govern. Nimrod's name itself literally means "revolt" or "let us revolt." Here is the first revolutionary. Here is the first one to advocate violence. Here is the first man who will seek to rule the then-known world. He is but the first of a kind. He will be followed throughout history by emperor after emperor, by Hitler and Stalin and people involved in world rulership today. If Nimrod is the first world emperor, then he's kind of a prophecy of the Antichrist who will, in association with Babylon in Revelation, seek to rule over the world.

Already this kind of evil potential in man has that emerging point of hideous quality. Babylon is not only connected as being founded by a man whose name means "let us revolt," but also as being a place where there is an attempt to glory in the technical triumphs and to worship in man's might. Thus you find the story in Genesis 11 of the tower of Babel. In modern circles this is greeted with a great deal of skepticism that all the languages of man originated from this simple incident. I would hasten to add that I don't feel the Scriptures indicate that all linguistic

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differences necessarily originate from this point. It's that they begin at this point and they keep on going.

But what is happening here in the plain of Shinar? It is the attempt to build a tower that would reach to the heavens so that men would have a name for themselves. That is, their place would be a center of religious worship. The tower they're building has religious overtones. They're also afraid of being scattered. So the idea of building a monument is so other people will be afraid to attack them.

Archeological excavations have indicated that there were such towers built within this geographical area. They were called ziggurats, large at the base and gradually sloped up until they became a kind of cone at the top. There is one that is five stories high of different colors representing different worship of heavenly things. The top is dedicated to the Babylonian god Marduk and has the signs of the zodiac on it.

Here is this going on, an attempt to build a religious system. An attempt to build a monument. What does God think of it? God's first thought is one of ridicule. It specifically notes in Scripture that they are using inferior building materials. Genesis 11:3 says, "They said to each other, 'Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly.' They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar" (NIV). A brick is not something you go out and excavate. They evidently did not have God-made materials like stones in the area to build with, so instead they use something that they can make. So they use brick and pitch—which holds the brick together instead of stone and cement or mortar. It's kind of like they've got this big thing, but God doesn't think too much of the building materials.

Another thing that occurs is this unusual text that introduces God in such a personal way. "The LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building" (Genesis 11:5, NIV).

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I think in the modern context we can look at that also from a humorous viewpoint by saying the tower was so small in God's eyes He couldn't see it. There were no telescopes in heaven that could pick it up. Men on earth might think they were making something really great, but God in heaven couldn't find the thing! So he comes down to look at it.

By the way, this theme is seen later in Psalm 2 when we find the nations and the people conspiring to destroy God's anointed, the Christ. Psalm 2:4 uses this unusual phrase: "He who sits in the heavens laughs. The Lord has them in derision." How ludicrous to think that man can do the things that God does!

God comes down to look. With that looking there's an accommodation that God gives man. He says, in essence: "This is only the beginning of what they will do, and nothing they propose to do will now be impossible for them" (verse 6). That is to say, God recognizes the mind within men—that technical things can be accomplished. God realizes as He looks at the technical abilities of these people that if He lets them go on unchecked, they will more and more move away from any understanding of Him. Indeed, God brings mankind up short to remind man, remind us, that we are in need of Him and that we indeed are not God. God confuses them to make communication among men difficult if not impossible.

Communication has been a problem in Genesis. Since the Fall there has been a lack of good communication. In the Garden of Eden man and woman communed with the Lord God. But immediately after the Fall, through sin, communication is hurt. Man and woman don't communicate well.

Man and woman still aren't communicating too well. Brother and brother have a problem communicating in the Genesis text. So now God brings about the whole communication difficulty in a more extenuated way.

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There is a beautiful picture in the New Testament of how God begins to reverse that. At Pentecost, He uses the languages of the nations to praise Him. And in Revelation it is seen that all of the languages of every tribe and tongue praise Him.

In addition to confusing the language, God also chooses to scatter the people who were on the face of the earth. This accounts for the migrations described in Genesis 10. Babylon, which sought to be built up as an empire, undergoes its first fall. There is a great comforting theme in that. It is the theme that the civilizations, the empires, and the kingdoms of men will come and go. They will be built up, but they will fall down and be scattered. Babylon will come, Babylon will go. So will Rome. It will come and it will go. In more recent times the empire Hitler sought to build came and went. In our day we live with the recognition that Russia is here and China is here. It almost seems like within our lifetime these are permanent powers in the world. But if the Lord doesn't return, if He allows the course of history to keep on moving, there will be a day in which these empires themselves will break up and be reformed under different people and different groups. God simply allows the scattering process to rise and fall. He's teaching the whole of mankind a basic humility in His presence.

This is the beginning of Babylon, the beginning of Babylon found by a man. Nimrod is a man who wanted rule. The tower is kind of pushing its head up into the heavens. Then we see characteristics of Babylon continuing throughout Scripture. For example, from Scriptures that describe Babylon we get indications of what Babylon was really like as a world empire. A clear description is used of the king of Babylon in Isaiah. We sometimes use this description to refer to Satan, but the reference specifically is to the king of Babylon, which may serve as a kind of symbol of Satan: "How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, 'I will

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ascend to heaven” (Isaiah 14:12–13, NIV). Doesn’t that sound like Genesis 11? “I will ascend.”

“I will be the ruler of my fate.”

What does God do? In the midst of boasting He brings it down. “You’ll be brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the pit” (Isaiah 14:15). It’s characteristic of Babylon rearing up its head in its pride and strength and then being brought low. It’s carried further with Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4:29–30: “At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon and the king said, ‘Is not this great Babylon which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?’” The minute he says that, the minute he takes pride in what he has done, he is literally put out to pasture for seven years.

Belshazzar, the successor to Nebuchadnezzar, is having a great banquet feast in his hall.

Belshazzar is also a king of Babylon. He brings in the golden vessels that had been used in the worship of Jehovah in the temple in Jerusalem. His kings and lords and wives and concubines ate from them. They drank wine and they praised the gods of gold and silver. And then Daniel notes that immediately the fingers of a man’s hand appeared.

In the end time this is seen again in Revelation 17 and 18. Babylon flexes its muscles and says, “I will exist forever. There is none other beside me.” Then immediately, Revelation says, in one hour, judgment has come.

What is the lesson to be learned for the people of God? Both Jeremiah and Revelation say to the people of God: “Come out of Babylon.” That is, don’t take part in its rebellious spirit toward God, in its thinking that man is sufficient, in its forgetfulness of God. Also remember that in the hour that Babylon looks the strongest, when it’s most impregnable, when its authority rules all over the earth, that is the moment when God comes down and visits it with judgment. At the very moment when man’s ascendancy and power is at its height, God intervenes.

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This happens continually with historical Babylon in the Old Testament. When Israel has failed God, Babylon's fortunes are up. But when Israel has remained true to God, Babylon's fortunes are down. It's kind of a prophecy of the age here in these chapters.

III. Another thing I think we can note from these Scriptures is God's care to preserve the line of the Messiah.

We see this happening in Genesis 11:10 and following. How beautiful these genealogies are. The genealogy in Genesis 11 is somewhat like Genesis 5. It's not continuous in terms of chronology. You can go a long period of time here. Many centuries are involved in what is happening in Genesis 11. But God is taking care.

Adam has three sons. Only one of those sons—Seth—will be the one through whom the promise is kept alive. The other two sons will fade away and their genealogies drifts into insignificance. Seth's line, in turn, is carried to Noah. Noah's line is carried forth, and he has three sons. But one of those sons will carry the messianic promise. That is Shem. Shem will then have children, and down the line in his genealogy will come Eber. He has two sons, and the promise comes through Peleg. It is kept alive until finally it comes to Terah. Terah has three sons, one of whom is Abraham. Abraham in turn has children, one of whom is Isaac. Isaac has Jacob, and Jacob has children, and one of those twelve is in the line of the Messiah. Through the turns of genealogy, God is keeping alive a promise He's made in Genesis 3:15—that from the woman's seed there would come one who would bruise Satan's head.

Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:20 says, "All the promises of God find their yes in Christ Jesus." I think of that when I look through this genealogy for the fulfillment of what God promised in Genesis 3:15—that there would come one who would bruise Satan, wound him, do him in. I look at all

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the names until I come down in history to Jesus. Is He the one? Yes. All the promises of God find their yes, their completion, in Christ.

We've looked at these chapters as an overview. Now let's try to get out of the historical context for a moment to understand how we may personally apply these points to our lives. I'm struck how God is concerned for the nations. The word "nation" in the Hebrew is the same word that is also translated "Gentiles." God is concerned for the nations. If we want to know what God is concerned with in the world today, it's stepping out of our selfish understanding of who we are, what our immediate families are, what our immediate church is and to be concerned with God's worldwide movement to the nations.

A second application I make is that Babylon's sin was trying to build something without really caring for God, without involving God in the daily routines of life. I have to ask: Is it possible you may be building a career without God and driving yourself to an extent that is not of God? Even though you have many achievements to your credit, yet you don't have peace in your relationship with God. You're sacrificing God for the sake of a career.

Is it possible that we sometimes try to build families without God? We go our own way, doing our own things, and God remains at the periphery in our family while we try to make a name for ourselves. Is it possible that one could pursue an education and do it without God? There are so many things. Is God involved in the intimate matters of our lives, or are we simply building a tower that God has to judge because we've not built it with Him?

Another application that can be made is this: History is going somewhere, and God is always at work with His purposes. There may periods of history like Genesis 11 that are relatively dry. Nothing much is said—just a bunch of names given. There are times in our lives like that, when nothing much significant seems to be happening. Just one day after another. They tend to blend

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into one another and be all the same routine. The great moments don't stand out. You wonder, "Is God with me in all these routines? Is God at work in my life?" Here in the quiet of Genesis 11, just names of men are noted—not what they did. But through that transmission biologically, the line of Christ, the genealogy of Christ, is being shaped and perfected. As a result of these peoples' names given here, eventually will come into the world the Christ child.

There are lines that went nowhere, but there is activity of God within history that is going somewhere, heading for Jesus Christ. Even in the quiet times when nothing great or significant is going on, God is at work in Scripture. I know that in the quiet times of my life, when nothing much appears to be happening, on this day as in other days, God is alive; God is working. His purposes are true. He will perfect what He has begun.