



The Story Of Salvation

NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010

Andrew Klynsmith and Hank Schoemaker

5. The Nations, Nimrod and Babel

The place of the nations in God's salvation history needs to be considered. Questions arise, most notably:

- Did God have a creational intention for the rising of distinct nations and cultures across the face of the planet?
- Or, is their development an outcome of the rebellion of humanity in the garden, a mark of the division and discord now deep in the heart of all people?

Genesis 10 and 11 gives a complex and subtle answer to this question. Genesis 10 traces the genealogy of nations from Noah onwards. Genesis 11 describes the further rebellion of humanity at Babel, before going on to trace the particular genealogy of the descendants of a man called Terah.

Genesis 10

Noah's three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, along with their wives, were with him in the ark. Every mention of the three sons together puts them in this order, which is somewhat surprising as Ham is actually the youngest of the three (see Gen. 9:24 and 10:21 for the birth order). It seems that the writer of Genesis is putting them in a kind of geographical order according to their descendants proximity to the promised land to be given to Israel.

Genesis 9:20-27 is important before we come to these chapters. In response to Ham's dishonouring Noah pronounced prophecy concerning the destiny of his sons. Ham, in the name of his son Canaan, is cursed to being a lowly slave towards the other brothers, whilst Shem is highly blessed, and Japheth is given a share in that blessing. One important thing to note here, the writer of Genesis wants us to know that *prophecy* is a power in the shaping of history. *Events don't just "happen": God's word shapes and directs the unfolding of history.*

10:2-5 Japheth's descendants are described in these few verses. Scholars disagree about exactly which nations these descendants become. The descendants of Javan became the "coastlands peoples"—those found along the Mediterranean coast.

10:6-20 The descendants of Ham are much more familiar sounding names to Bible readers. Cush (vv. 7-12) is the father of a group of sons who are the ancestors of various Arabian tribes, and possibly also the nations of the Horn of Africa (Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, Ethiopia). Nimrod is the son of Cush, and is said to be the first on earth to become "a mighty warrior", or "a tyrant-hunter." The fact that he is such "before the LORD" indicates that the LORD took note of him; possibly that he stood opposed to the LORD in his city and kingdom building; and, that what he did

had some interaction and interplay with the covenant purposes of God. In fact, we find he is a city builder in Shinar, the land of Babylon, and then of various other cities in the land of Assyria.

Another of Ham's sons is Egypt (vv. 13-14), and from Egypt are descended also the Philistines.

Canaan (vv. 15-19) is the last mentioned of Ham's sons, and from him come the inhabitants of the land that the LORD is later to give to Israel His people: the Jebusites, Amorites, Girgashites, Hivites and others. Their territory spread down from Sidon (in later Lebanon) towards the border with Egypt (Gaza) and then in the direction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Ham's sinful gazing on his naked father is seen to continue in the perversity of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah.

10:21-31 The sons born to Shem became the fathers of the various Semite nations. The one notable mention in the list given here is of Eber and his two sons Peleg and Joktan. We are told that it was during the days of Peleg (which means *division*) that the earth was divided. What this refers to is the apportioning of the earth to the various nations that happens in the post-Babel scattering of the nations. See Acts 17:26-27.

Of each group of descendants we are told that they are listed by their families, (own) languages, lands and nations. **10:32** has a ring of the creational mandate about it: the spread of the nations abroad on the earth after the flood is part of the intention of God that man fill the earth and subdue it (**Gen. 1:28**).

11:1-9 Babel epitomises man's corporate rebellion against God. Although there are those who call on His name, in general there is widespread opposition to Him and His purposes. The flood hasn't flushed everything away. A deeper work will need to be worked in the human heart.

Up to the time of Babel, the various descendants of Noah had one language. The settling in Shinar seems to link with the account of Nimrod's city-building at Babel in 10:10. Not only is Nimrod a tyrant; those involved in his venture are glad participants in this rebellion against God. That this is rebellion is seen in a number of ways:

- "let us build ourselves a city"—a self-determined future seems to be the intent; the materials selected indicate permanency as the desired outcome;
- "a tower with its top in the heavens"—to reach the place of God's rule, and so to supplant His rule with theirs; perhaps the idea is to secure themselves against any future judgment like a flood;
- "let us make a name for ourselves"—again, a self-determined identity, meaning, and future (in that names were prophetic of character and destiny);
- "otherwise we shall be scattered"—there is no intention to keep God's command to fill the earth and subdue it.

The LORD responds to this action with a judgment. He is prompted because "this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose will be impossible for them (v. 6)". It is not that the LORD is threatened that they will indeed overthrow Him, for He has to stoop down to consider what this pimple-tower is! What concerns

Him would be then the possibility of the damage their evil will do in the earth. “Theirs is a dangerous, anti-God, secular unity.”¹ Part of the strength of this evil dynamic is from their unity of language and “peoplehood”. So, His judgment works to take away that strength: He confuses their languages so that they no longer understand one another. The building of the city is discontinued and the people are scattered over the face of the earth.

The story of Babel is repeated time and again in history, and the judgment of God on our Babylonish hearts is the same over and over. In a day, quite so at times, a system which seemed impregnable collapse to the ground and vanishes. (Read Shelley’s *Ozymandias* for a telling description of Babel’s end.)

To our original question we see that the two accounts of the arising of the nations, one in chapter 10 and the other in the account of Babel in chapter 11 indicates a duality in the matter of the nations.

Firstly, the covenant LORD has been working out His purposes in the events that follow. Noah’s prophecy tells us this, as well as the scattered references to the LORD that occur in the text (10:9; 11:5,9).

Secondly, the intention of God that humanity fill the whole earth is pursued by Him even if it is opposed by humanity. The table of the nations in Genesis 10 does not indicate that the arising of nations, lands and languages is in any way a judgment, but part of the scattering of the peoples.

Thirdly, human willfulness against God is expressed throughout the story, and God deals with that evil will in order to progress and safeguard His intention for the earth. At the start the man was told to till the garden and keep it. He has refused to do this, and God has rolled up His sleeves and taken on the task Himself, in the face of the failure of His image and partner in the work.

Fourth, God’s judgments then work out His initial intention. His judgments do not simply create a second-best option.

¹ Geoffrey Bingham, *Salvation History*, 1st. ed., p. 9