

Genesis Lesson 6: Kin and Confusion

Read Genesis 10

We have gone through the flood and now the Genesis account is going to give us the family trees of Noah's three sons. Chapter 10 starts us off with the fifth toledoth (see lesson 4), leading us into our next section of this great text. Japheth's descendants are recorded in the first few verses and is the shortest of the three sons' genealogies that are listed in this chapter. As we study, remember that the goal is to follow the lineage of the Messiah, not to gain an exhaustive historical account of all of mankind at this time. Knowing the purpose of any text is always invaluable for perspective and understanding.

Another important piece of information to keep in mind is that the order of names does not necessarily imply order of birth. As we will see from the text, it is highly improbable that Shem was the oldest of Noah's sons despite being listed first in passages like Genesis 10:1. However, it is highly probable that the most eminent son be listed first, which makes perfect sense when we again consider the purpose of these genealogies. Jesus is a descendant of Shem, not Japheth or Ham. This would make him the most crucial of the three sons, but we will briefly discuss all of their descendants.

Japheth's name means "expansion" or "opened". His family tree is recorded first, but is also the shortest of the three. It is generally accepted that his descendants spread mainly north into Europe and some parts of Asia after the tower of Babel, which we will discuss in more detail later. Ham's descendants are recorded next

and include the infamous Nimrod. In Genesis 10:9-11, we see that Nimrod was a "mighty hunter". This terminology may imply that he protected his people from wild animals. Also, Nimrod established Babel, or Bablyon, as well as Ninevah. Ham's descendants are believed to have mainly settled toward the south into Africa, including Egypt which we know from Psalm 78:51, 105:23,27, and 106:22. Interestingly, Ham's name means "hot".

The last section of chapter 10 is Shem's family tree which will be reiterated more specifically for the lineage of Christ in chapter 11. Shem's name means "name" and he is the father of the Shemites, where we get our word Semitic to describe the Jewish people. The "h" is left out as it is in Sabbath for the Hebrew word SHABBATH. Shem's descendants seem to spread out towards Asia.

I want to pause here for a moment and discuss Genesis 10:21. Many reputable versions of the Bible translate this verse to read as though Shem is the older brother of Japheth, but this verse can be translated as Japheth being the elder brother and is done so by the KJV and the NIV. Upon close examination of some other key verses, we find that the KJV and NIV are probably the winners on this translation debate. In Genesis 5:32 we are told that "Noah was five hundred years old, and... became the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth." Now, keep in mind that does not necessarily mean Shem was born first, but rather that Noah started having his sons at the age of five hundred. We know from

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Genesis 8:13 that Noah was six hundred and one years old when he came off the ark, but Genesis 11:10 says that Shem was “one hundred years old, and became the father of Arpachshad two years after the flood.” Obviously Noah did not have Shem at five hundred, but rather five hundred and two. Therefore, it seems more feasible that Japheth was the elder son. Shem is by no means the only younger son to be listed first in Scripture. We will look at another example of this in chapter 11.

In Genesis 10:25, we see that the “earth was divided” during Shem’s descendent Peleg’s days. This verse is set apart from the others and piques our interest in the midst of a seemingly mundane section of text. The Hebrew word PELEG does indeed mean “division”. Some are of the opinion that this division is referring to the earth dividing into continents, while others hold to the belief that it refers to the separation that occurred at Babel. The later position appears to follow the context of chapters 10 and 11 as the separation that occurred at Babel is mentioned in verses 5, 25, and 32 of chapter 10 and the whole story of Babel is found in chapter 11. I would encourage you to read John Morris’ article entitled “What Happened in the ‘Days of Peleg?’” for some questions that would arise if this passage was referring to the separation of the continents as well as a possible explanation for human and animal migration to the various continents. Of course, we cannot know for sure on this side of eternity all the details of what transpired in those days, but it is wise to at least contemplate difficult passages and be ready to defend the authenticity of God’s word. If we could answer everything, there would be no need for faith. I for one love the historical fact that God’s word has repeatedly been proven right when man has adamantly stood

against it through the ages. I have no doubt that more things will continue to be revealed that prove man to be in error while God’s word to yet again be faithful and full of truth.

Think About It:

Based on Genesis chapters 9-11, what do you think is the birth order of Noah’s three sons?

What names, if any, stood out to you in the genealogical record found in Genesis chapter 10 and why?

Whose descendants did the Israelites mainly uproot for the promised land?

Research how the Hebrew words for Madai, Javan, Cush, and Mizraim from Genesis 10:2 and 10:6 are later translated in Scripture.

(Hint: they are all later translated as certain locations or nations)

Read Genesis 11:1-9

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Hopefully you will remember from an earlier lesson that it was not uncommon for ancient writers to tell the summary of a story and then retell parts of it with more detail immediately after that summary. This style of writing was used to describe the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2 and is employed once again here in chapters 10 and 11. Chapter 10 tells us in verses 5, 20, and 32 that the nations were separated and then in Genesis 11:1 it says, “Now the whole earth used the same language and the same words.” This is not a contradiction because it is not written chronologically. It is simply a more detailed account of something that happened in the middle of chapter 10, most likely during Peleg’s days, and is now explaining how that separation came about. So, what happened?

Well, we are not told exactly what God found so displeasing about the building of a tower in Babel, but we may have some clues. Mankind did not seem to have a problem with God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply”, but they do appear to struggle with His command to “fill the earth” or spread out. In Genesis 11:4, the people state their purpose for building the tower was to “make for ourselves a name; lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.” Perhaps God punishes them simply for their pride and arrogance in wanting to “make a name” for themselves. Perhaps He punishes them because they do not want to be spread out as He desired. Their goal was to not be “scattered”, but in Genesis 11:8-9 God directly opposes that directive. Whether it is pride, disobedience, or both, the bottom line is that God is sovereign. We cannot forget who He is or who we are in comparison to Him.

Before we move on to the next section, I just want to comment on Genesis 11:6. I find it interesting that modern man wants to categorize ancient mankind as intellectually inferior, yet history and God seem to say the exact opposite. We still have no idea how the Egyptians accomplished the precision of their architectural accomplishments without all the technology that we have today and here, in Genesis 11:6, God says, “now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them.” Based on these facts, we would be hard pressed to call them the inferior ones.

Think About It:

What do you think it would be like now if everyone spoke the same language?

What are the key words or phrases found in Genesis 11:1-9?

What do you think the people meant when they wanted to build “a tower whose top will reach into heaven”?

What do you think it would have been like on the day God came down and confused their language?

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How does the tower of Babel account fit in with 1 Corinthians 14:33?

Can you think of a time that God may have “frustrated” your plans or someone else’s plans to accomplish His will?

Read Genesis 11:10-32

The next section in chapter 11 is a recount of Shem’s descendants, but this time focused on one line and following it further to get all the way to Abram. Once again we see the purpose is to follow the Messianic line. It is important to note that not every person in the lineage may have been listed on every account. That does not mean that God’s word is in error. It is just simply not the goal or main objective, Jesus is.

Earlier in this lesson we learned that the order sons were listed in did not equal birth order. We find more evidence of that in the record of Terah and Abram. According to Genesis 11:32 and 12:4, Terah was 205 years old when he died in Haran and Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran. Therefore, the youngest Terah could have been when Abram was born would have been 130 years old. In Genesis 11:26, we know that Terah began fathering sons at the age of 70 years old. According to this time frame, Abram could not have been Terah’s first born, but he most certainly was the son we want to focus on.

The last section of chapter 11 continues with the line of Terah and how he uproots his family from Ur to “enter the land of Canaan”. Ur was

once a seaport on the Persian Gulf. It was a wealthy, advanced city. Terah takes his family from the comfort and ease of such a city and heads toward Canaan which will afford a substantially more primitive life. We are not told what prompts Terah to make such a life changing decision, but no doubt God had His hand in it as we will soon see as Terah’s son Abram becomes the father of the great nation that will usher in our Messiah.

Think About It:

What name is missing from Shem’s descendants in Genesis 11:10-26 that is included in Luke’s account in Luke 3:34-38?

Can you think of any other times in the Scripture when a younger son was listed first out of importance?

According to Joshua 24:2, was Terah faithful to the one and only God when he lived “beyond the River”?

Why do you think God included the detail that “Haran died in the presence of his father Terah” in Genesis 11:28?

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How do you think Terah and his family's lives changed when they left Ur?

What events in your life or others' lives have prompted a huge change or risk?
