

Genesis, Commentary to Chapter 10

Nahum Sarna

The Table of Nations (vv. 1-32)

The preceding chapter noted that after the Flood “the whole world branched out” from the three sons of Noah. The text now amplifies this statement in elaborate detail through an intricate series of genealogies. Hitherto, all such accounts in Genesis have related to individuals. Now we are given a genealogy of nations.

The Table of Nations, as it has come to be known, is framed by introductory and concluding formulas of summarization. In addition, each of three major groupings has its own caption, as well as a generalized closing recapitulation that draws attention to the territorial, linguistic, familial, and national divisions that characterize the human race.

The geographic horizon of this roster of peoples roughly encompasses the vast territory that stretches from the Caucasus in the north to Arabia in the south, from the Iranian plateau in the east to the island of Crete, and perhaps beyond, in the west—all from the perspective of one centered in Canaan, the future Land of Israel, which is where three geographic arcs intersect.

- The arc of Japhethites covers approximately the areas to the north and west of the land, including Asia Minor, the Greek mainland, and the islands of the eastern Mediterranean.
- That of the Hamites, by far the most extensive, comprises the great river civilizations of the Nile and the Euphrates, as well as the areas both west and east of the Nile Delta and also some parts of Arabia in the south.
- The Shemite arc embraces the area stretching from the Iranian mountains into northern Mesopotamia and Syria and down into the Arabian Peninsula.

The Nature of the Table. On the surface, the use of verbs expressing birth and of terms like “son,” “father,” “first-born” suggest straightforward genealogies of the kind already encountered in previous chapters. In actual fact, these recapitulations disclose that the terminology is not meant to be taken literally but, rather, in the same figurative way that one speaks of a “metropolis” in the sense of “mother city,” of “daughter colonies,” or of “fatherland” and “mother country.” Many of the personal names listed here are otherwise known to be those of places or peoples. Ten names have plural endings, nine others take the gentilic adjectival suffix *-i*, which indicates ethnic affiliation, and they also have the definite article, which is inadmissible with personal names in Hebrew.

In the ancient world, kinship terms were often employed to describe treaty relationships. Thus, where the contracting parties were on equal terms, they would describe themselves as “brothers,” but a vassal would refer to the suzerain as “father,” and the suzerain would speak of his dependent as “son” or as having “borne” him. The same kind of familial terminology is used in connection with the phenomenon of the “eponymous ancestor”— the explanation of the name of a city or a people deriving from a personage of antiquity who is said to have been its progenitor.

The ancient Greeks, who were known as Hellenes, provide an excellent illustration of this process.

Hellen was said to have been the son of Deucalion and Pyrrha, the survivors of the flood. His three sons were Dorus, Aeolus, and Xuthus. The first two were supposed to have been, respectively, the ancestors of two of the four major subdivisions of the Hellenes, the Dorians and Aeolians; the third fathered Ion and Achaeus, from whom sprang the Ionians and Achaeans. Similar familial ethnographic usage is attested at Ugarit, where, for instance, the “sons of Ugarit” conduct an international transaction with the “sons of Canaan.”

In the Bible, too, a pedigree is often the literary form through which ethnic origins and political and other relationships are described. The genealogical register provides a convenient way of schematizing these relationships. This is demonstrated, for instance, by the merging of the individual with the group. For example, in Genesis 17:20 Ishmael is prenatally destined to become the “father” of twelve chieftains; however, when the names are listed in 25:16 “in the order of their birth” it is clear that one is dealing with the constituents of a confederation of Arab tribes. In the present chapter, the summarizing formulas in verses 5, 20, and 31 show the same literary process at work and indicate the diverse and composite nature of the materials included.

Apart from the genealogical data, the Table of Nations, like chapter 4, is sprinkled with various tidbits of information, such as fragmentary biographical details about a certain Nimrod, a list of cities in Mesopotamia, the boundaries of the Canaanite territory, the area of Joktanite settlement, and a reference to some major event that occurred in the days of Peleg.

Its Problems. The Table itself is riddled with difficulties, many of which remain insoluble in the present state of knowledge. It defies the consistent application of any single criterion of selectivity or of principles of classification, apart from the very general and rudimentary distribution according to the three broad groupings. Racial characteristics, physical types, or the color of skin play no role in the categorizing. Nor is language a guideline since Canaan, recognized in Isaiah 19:18 to have the same tongue as Israel, is affiliated with Egypt among the Hamites, while the Elamites, who spoke a decidedly non-Semitic language, are classified under Shem. A special problem is the listing of Sheba and Havilah under both Ham and Shem, and the subsuming of Mesopotamian, Ethiopian and Arabian entities all under Cush, a Hamite.

Clearly, geographic proximity, ethnic affiliations, sociopolitical and economic relationships, as well as historical and even literary considerations, were the varied factors that controlled inclusion in the Table and that determined its internal divisions and subdivisions. In many instances, one or more of these factors are evident; in some, future discovery may provide illumination.

The Seventy Peoples. The peoples listed amount precisely to 70, excluding Nimrod, who is an individual. There are 14 Japhethites, 30 Hamites, and 26 Shemites. The figure 70, even if not explicitly given, can hardly be fortuitous. The mere recognition in verse 5 of the existence of additional, unnamed “maritime nations” lends added significance to the enumeration as being deliberately chosen.

In the biblical world, the number 70 is “typological”; that is, it is used for rhetorical effect to evoke the idea of totality, of comprehensiveness on a large scale, as opposed to the use of seven on a smaller scale. Thus, according to Genesis 46:27, the entire household of Jacob that went down to Egypt comprised 70 souls. The representative body of the entire community of Israel in the wilderness consisted of 70 elders, as recorded in Exodus 24:9 and Numbers 11:24; and the prophet Ezekiel, in 8:11, uses the same figure at the end of the period of the monarchy.

In the mythology of Canaan, as expressed in Ugaritic literature, the pantheon comprised 70 members, who are said to have been the sons of the supreme god Il and the mother goddess Ashirat.

In light of this convention, one may safely assume that making the offspring of Noah's sons total 70 is a literary device to convey the notion of the totality of the human race. The same device is employed in rabbinic literature, where the phrases "70 peoples" or "70 languages" express humanity in its entirety.¹ This device affords an insight into a major function of the Table, a document thus far unparalleled in the ancient world. **This strangely perplexing miscellany of peoples, tribes and places is no mere academic or scholastic exercise. It affirms, first of all, the common origin and absolute unity of humankind after the Flood; then it tacitly, but effectively, asserts that the varied instrumentalities of human divisiveness are all secondary to the essential unity of the international community, which truly constitutes a family of man.** [Emphasis Shammai's]

This conviction, incidentally, is strikingly inconsistent with the particularistic fancies of the ancient Egyptians, who exclusively reserved for themselves the designation "men," while regarding all other peoples as descended from the enemies of the gods. Of course, the universalistic approach of the Table of Nations proceeds naturally from the monotheistic Creation narratives of Genesis. God's sovereignty extends to every nation; His providence governs them all.

The Prominence of the Shemites. While the preceding episode about Noah, Ham, and Canaan contains an intimation of future developments, the present chapter carries forward this foreshadowing in several subtle ways. The genealogies pointedly reverse the order of Noah's sons, even though the sequence Shem-Ham-Japheth has already appeared in 5:32, 6:10, 9:18, and here in 10:1. This inversion serves to dispose of those branches of humanity whose religious history becomes static and sterile from the monotheistic standpoint of the Narrator. This strategy enables the text to direct attention climactically to the line of descent that eventually leads to the spiritually dynamic Abraham. The Narrator used the identical technique in shifting the focus from the spiritually sterile line of Cain in 4:17-25, to the divinely favored Seth in chapter 5. In the same way, 25:12-18 will detail the line of Ishmael in order to make way for the story of Isaac, and chapter 36 will dispose of Esau's genealogies so that the biography of Jacob and his progeny may resume without interruption.

Another pointer to a major function of the Table is the use of exceptional, double prefatory formulas in verses 21-22 to introduce Shem's line, a sure indication of his importance to the Narrator and another proof that the entire document is deliberately structured so as to project Shem and one line of his offspring into prominence. Moreover, while the genealogies of Japheth and Ham continue for only three generations each, that of Shem extends to the sixth generation. Here again, Aram is disposed of first, then one line is selected in chapter 11, and it continues for a total of ten generations that reach to Abraham.

Israel and the Nations. This brings us back to the number 70, which is not only emblematic of the totality of the human race but may also function to intensify the general prefiguring thrust of the Table. The number 70 resonates with the composition of the offspring of Jacob who went down to Egypt. The special significance this assumes is demonstrated not only by its emphasis in Genesis

¹ For "the seventy peoples," see Suk. 55b; for "the seventy languages," see Mish. Sot. 7:5, Sot. 36a-b, Meg. 3b, Shek. 5a, Sanh. 17a, Men. 65a; so Test. Naph. 8:4-6; 9:1, Targ. Jon. to Gen. 11:8; Deut. 32:8.

46:27, but also by its reiteration twice more, in Exodus 1:5 and Deuteronomy 10:22. It is as though the totality of the nations and the totality of the Israelites who migrate to Egypt are intertwined. The fundamental biblical theme of Israel and the international community is delicately insinuated into the text. It is not coincidental that God's first communication to the patriarch Abraham immediately places his offspring in a worldwide context: "All the families of the earth / shall bless themselves by you." This same universal frame of reference recurs in subsequent reiterations of the divine blessing to Abraham, as well as to Isaac and Jacob. It finds its first expression, albeit by artful insinuation, in the present chapter.

1. Following the digression about Noah's drunkenness, the text resumes the theme of 9:18-19.

after the Flood This same phrase functions in Mesopotamian texts.

THE JAPHETHITES (vv. 2-5)

These are the most northerly group, comprising seven "sons" and seven "grandsons."

2. **Gomer** The Gimmiraya of cuneiform sources, Kimmerioi in Greek, and Cimmerians in English. This people came from beyond the Caucasus Mountains in the region of the Black Sea to invade and terrorize Asia Minor in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E.

Magog This name has become famous through the combination "Gog and Magog," based on Ezekiel 38 and 39, which came to be used figuratively for the final war that is to prelude the messianic age. The name "Magog," however, has not yet turned up in extrabiblical sources. From the passages in Ezekiel, it is clear that the land of Magog was thought to be in the furthest reaches of the north, which may possibly mean southern Russia or Asia.

Madai Derived from Old Persian Mada, it refers to the land and people of the Medes in the mountainous country east of Mesopotamia, west of the Caspian Sea, and south of the Zagros Mountains, now northwestern Iran. In biblical texts, such as Isaiah 13:17 and 21:2 and Jeremiah 51:11, 28, Madai includes the Persians, as well. They are frequently mentioned by Assyrian kings from the ninth century B.C.E. on.

Javan The Ionians, a branch of the Greek people, who colonized the west coast of Asia Minor. They are similarly listed together with Tubal and Meshech in Ezekiel 27:13, where they are described as traffickers in slaves and traders in bronze vessels.

Tubal, Meshech See Comment to 4:22.

Tiras This may be identical with the Tursha, one of the sea peoples defeated by Pharaoh Merneptah, ca. 1220 B.C.E.; or perhaps it is the same as the Tyrsenoi, the Greek name for the Etruscans, a people who migrated from Asia Minor to Italy and competed with the Romans for control of the central part of that country.

THE DEPENDENCIES OF GOMER (v 3)

Ashkenaz Doubtless identical with the Ashkuzai or Ishkuza of Assyrian texts. They were an Indo-European nomadic people, expert in cavalry and archery, who inhabited the area between the Black and Caspian seas. The Greeks called them "Scythian." Jeremiah 51:24 mentions them in association with Ararat and with Minni, who are the Mannai of Assyrian texts, both of which peoples are located in Armenia. Since the Middle Ages, "Ashkenaz" has been used by Jews as a designation for Germany.

Riphath The corresponding list of 1 Chronicles 1:6 reads Diphath, as do many biblical manuscripts and printed editions here. Neither name is identifiable.

Togarmah In Ezekiel 27:14 and 38:6 the names associated with Beth-togarmah place it in Asia Minor. Cuneiform texts from the 19th century B.C.E. on frequently mentioned the city and district of Tegarama, which lay north of Carchemish and Haran along an important trade route that led from Assyria to Cappadocia in Asia Minor.

THE DEPENDENCIES OF JAVAN (v 4)

These are listed in two pairs, the first being place-names, the second ethnic designations. All four are located west of the preceding group, beyond the mainland of Asia Minor.

Elishah Ezekiel 27:7 refers to “the coasts of Elishah” as a source for the export of blue and purple cloth to the city of Tyre in Phoenicia. Doubtless, Elishah is Alashiya, frequently mentioned in Egyptian, Hittite, and Akkadian texts of the second millennium B.C.E. in reference to Cyprus or to part of that island, perhaps to Enkomi and the area under its control on the east coast of the island.

Tarshish This is one of the most enigmatic place-names in the Bible. With the exception of a Phoenician inscription from Nora, Sardinia, it is not found in extra-biblical sources. Jonah 1:3 shows that it must be accessible via the Mediterranean Sea. Ezekiel 27:12 indicates that it was a place from which silver, iron, tin, and lead were exported. Three Mediterranean coastal cities bear names that resemble Tarshish: Tarsus, the chief city of Cilicia in southeast Asia Minor; Tartessus, on the Iberian Peninsula west of the Straits of Gibraltar; and Tharros, in the western part of the isle of Sardinia. Only in the last two were all the aforementioned metals mined. The oft-mentioned “ships of Tarshish” would be oceangoing vessels that sailed to far-off Tarshish. But in 1 Kings 22:49, these ships are at Ezion-geber on the Red Sea; clearly, the term had lost its original meaning. According to one view, *tarshish* is simply a Semitic term for a metal refinery, deriving from Akkadian *rashashu*, “to melt, smelt.” A “*tarshish* ship” would then be a vessel capable of transporting metals, that is, one able to sail the open sea. Another view derives the name from Greek *taros*, “an oar,” or complex of oars, that is, a great oceangoing ship propelled by sets of oars. A third suggestion connects the term with Hebrew *tirosh*, “wine,” a poetic description of the sea as “wine dark,” as used in the Homeric epics, with the secondary meaning of oceangoing vessel.

the Kittim The inhabitants of Kition, present-day Larnaca on the southeast coast of Cyprus. The Phoenicians called it *kitt* or *kitti*. The name was gradually extended to designate the entire island. Before the Phoenicians colonized it in the ninth century B.C.E., it had been inhabited first by Minoans, then by Mycenaeans in the second half of the second millennium B.C.E. By the 12th century, most parts of the island had been settled by Greeks, a situation reflected in the present genealogy.

the Dodanim The associated names require that this refers to a people in the area of the Aegean islands, but no such is presently known there. The Targums Jonathan and Yerushalmi render “*dardenaya*,” which suggests the inhabitants of the town of Dardania in Asia Minor in the region of classical Troy. The parallel text in 1 Chronicles 1:7 reads “*Rodanim*,” which is also the text of the Greek Septuagint translation, the Samaritan recension, and many Hebrew manuscripts. This would refer to the Isle of Rhodes, which certainly fits the context. Genesis Rabba 3 7: 1 notes these variant readings, which may be attributed to the graphic similarity of the Hebrew letters *resh* and *dalet*.

5. From these... branched out Several maritime peoples separated themselves from the parent body of Japhethites in order to populate the isles and coastlands of the Mediterranean and form distinct political entities.

These are the descendants of Japheth This phrase is not in the Hebrew text, but is supplied here in conformity with the summary notations that close the lists of Ham and Shem in verses 20 and 31.

THE HAMITES (vv. 6-20)

These comprise four primary subgroupings, listed from south to north. The first three are situated in Africa, while the last constitutes the land bridge between Africa and Asia. The principal Hamitic components formed the Egyptian Empire during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties (ca. 1552–ca. 1200 B.C.E.). The list contains seven Cushite peoples, seven peoples connected with Mizraim, seven Mesopotamian cities, five peoples associated with Canaan, and six Phoenician-Syrian cities.

6. Cush See the Comment to 2:13. Here the term is restricted to the region known as Kash or Kesh in Egyptian, roughly covering Nubia or northern Sudan, south of Egypt.

Mizraim This is the usual Hebrew word for Egypt, but here, in light of verse 14, it specifically refers to Lower Egypt, from the Mediterranean Sea to Memphis, as also in Isaiah 11:11 and Jeremiah 44:1.

Put This originally must have been the name of a Libyan tribe or district, then used for the entire land of Libya, west of Egypt. Elsewhere in the Bible, the Greek Septuagint renders Put by “Libya.”

Canaan As in the previous chapter, Canaan is the “son” of Ham, meaning that it is closely affiliated with Egypt. This was especially the case in the period of the Egyptian Empire, when it was designated “the Province of Canaan” and when the petty kingdoms or city-states within the country were vassals of Pharaoh. The geographic boundaries of Canaan are given in verse 19. The term “Canaanite” is already found in an eighteenth century B.C.E. document found at Mari.

THE DEPENDENCIES OF CUSH (w 7-12)

Three groups ethnically and geographically distinct African, Arabian, and Mesopotamian—are all subsumed under the Hamites because they all happen to bear similar sounding names. In addition, historical considerations seem to have entered into the classification. It is known that from very early times, the African and Asian shores of the Red Sea, particularly at its southern part, engaged in active and reciprocal sea commerce. South Arabians crossed the Bab el-Mandeb as traders and colonists and greatly influenced the culture on the western side. The connection with Mesopotamia is discussed below.

7. Seba This name is associated with Egypt and Cush also in Isaiah 43:3 and 45:14, but the location is unknown. In Psalms 72:10 it is paired with Sheba, which also appears in the present list. It is possible that the two forms, Seba and Sheba, are dialectic variants of the same name and refer to one tribe that split up. Seba would designate the African branch.

Havilah See Comment to 2:11-12.

Sabtah This may refer to Shabwat, the ancient capital of Hadramaut in southern Arabia, but that region is listed in verse 26 as Shemitic.

Raamah Also mentioned together with Sheba in Ezekiel 27:22 as a trading people whose merchandise happens to be characteristic of Arabia, but it is otherwise unknown.

Sabteca No such locality is known, but a Nubian prince named Shebteko (ca. 700 B.C.E.) is recorded, whose name may reflect a place-name.

THE DEPENDENCIES OF RAAMAH (v 7)

Sheba Ezekiel 38:13 also connects Sheba with Dedan. Since the latter can be located in northern Arabia, it is reasonable to suppose that the Sheba mentioned with it is situated in the same area and that the reference here is not to the kingdom of that name in southern Arabia with which Solomon had commercial connections. That Sheba is listed in verse 28.

Dedan The Dedanites are caravaneers and traders, according to Isaiah 21:13 and Ezekiel 27:15, 20. Cuneiform texts mention them as early as the Old Babylonian and Ur III periods (2113-2006 B.C.E.), and Dedan can now be identified with the present-day oasis of Al'Ula in northern Arabia. This was a major center of the spice trade and an important station along the international trade route.

Nimrod (w 8-12)

This section is a digression that shifts the focus of interest to Mesopotamia. How this region came to be associated here with Cush, son of Ham, can be accounted for on the principle of homonym referred to above. Two possible explanations exist. One is that behind the present Cush is the royal city of Kish, where, according to Mesopotamian tradition, kingship initially resumed after the flood. These early postdiluvian rulers inaugurated the first fully historical period in Mesopotamian history, called by scholars the Early Dynastic Period (2800-2500 B.C.E.). The royal city of Kish long enjoyed preeminence and imposed a measure of unity on Lower Mesopotamia. The title "King of Kish" acquired such prestige that, even after that city was no longer a royal capital, later kings of Mesopotamia retained the epithet in order to signify hegemony over Sumer and Akkad, and as a symbol of imperial rule. Another possibility is that Cush is a reflex of the dynasty of Kassites, a Caucasian people who came down from the Zagros Mountains and ruled Babylonia for about four centuries from 1595 B.C.E. on. Their chief god was named Kashshu, which is written Kushshu in the Nuzi texts.

8. Nimrod This outstanding personality, whose exploits obviously left their mark on the historical memory of Israel, has not been positively identified with any known individual in the ancient world. Micah 5:5 echoes the traditions behind these verses. The site of the ancient city of Calah, mentioned in verse 11, is presently known locally as Birs Nimrud. Attempts have been made to associate him with Naram-Sin, grandson of Sargon I of Akkad, who dominated a great portion of the Near East for about 50 years during the last quarter of the third millennium B.C.E. He was the first to use the title "King of the Four Quarters of the World," and another of his titles was "Strong Male," which recalls the "man of might" here in verse 8. His achievements were widely commemorated on steles, buildings, and votive inscriptions, and he was the subject of numerous tales and legends. One persistent tradition holds that he came to a grievous end for defying the gods. In this connection, the Hebrew name Nimrod may be a play on the name Naram-Sin in that it evokes the verb *m-r-d*, "to rebel." This interpretation of the name as "rebel" is found in Eruvin 53a.

Another suggestion identifies the hero with Tukulti-Ninurta I (ca. 1234-1197 B.C.E.), the famed Assyrian monarch who first conquered Babylon and whose enthusiasm for hunting big game is well documented. His exploits, too, were the subjects of epic poems. It is not easy, however, to connect the name Nimrod with Tukulti-Ninurta.

10. The mainstays of his kingdom Rather, in light of verse 11, “His kingdom began with....” These cities constituted the power base from which he proceeded to expand into Assyria.

Babylon The famous city on the River Euphrates, about 50 miles (80 km.) south of modern Baghdad, Iraq. The oldest Sumerian name for the city was kadingir-ra, which was understood to mean “the gate of God.” It was translated into Akkadian as bab-il. According to Enuma Elish, the Mesopotamian creation epic, the gods themselves built the temple there for the god Marduk at the beginning of time. The choice of Babylon to head the list of cities here is most likely determined by the next episode, in chapter 11.

Erech The Sumerian city-state Uruk, now Warka on the east side of the Euphrates, about 40 miles (64 km.) up the river from Ur in southern Iraq. The Sumerian King List gives this city as the seat of the second dynasty of kings after the flood, the third monarch of which was Gilgamesh.

Accad The Sumerian King List reports that Uruk was defeated, and its kingship carried off to Akkad. This city, called agade in Sumerian, became the center of the kingdom of Akkad founded by the famous Sargon (ca. 2300 B.C.E.), who established a dynasty that lasted about 150 years. The site of this city, somewhere on the Euphrates, has not been located. Eventually its name came to embrace the whole of northern Babylonia as opposed to Sumer in the south. “Akkadian” now signifies the Semitic Assyrian and Babylonian languages.

Calneh The only name in this list that never appears in Akkadian inscriptions. It cannot refer to the city mentioned in Amos 6:2 and called Calno in Isaiah 10:9 because that is situated in northern Syria, not in Mesopotamia. A widely accepted suggestion is to read ve-khullanah, “all of them being...,” which is also an ancient Samaritan tradition. The advantage of this interpretation is that verses 10-12 list exactly seven Mesopotamian cities, another example of the heptad pattern in the Table of Nations.

Shinar The land of Babylonia, embracing Sumer and Akkad and bounded on the north by Assyria, modern southern Iraq. 7 This name was not used in Mesopotamia itself but is frequently found in one form or another in Egyptian, Hittite, Mitannian, and Amarna texts to designate the Kassite kingdom of Babylon (ca. 1595-1160 B.C.E.).

11. Either Asshur or Nimrod could be the subject of the Hebrew verb *yatsa'*, “went forth.” The latter is preferable, and the text would thus be rendered, “From that land, he (i.e., Nimrod) went forth to Asshur.” This reading is supported by Micah 5:5, which terms Assyria “the land of Nimrod,” and it is also how Targum Jonathan and Bekhor Shor understand the text. “Asshur” is then a geographical name, parallel to “Shinar,” the two referring respectively to Upper and Lower Mesopotamia. The passage reflects the verifiable historical fact that, in its early period, Assyria was long under the domination and religious, linguistic, and cultural influence of Sumer and Akkad, a debt it freely acknowledged.

Asshur The entire region of the Upper Mesopotamian plain. The city of Asshur, situated on the right bank of the Tigris, gave its name to this region. The other principal cities of Assyria were Nineveh and

Calah, both mentioned here. All three sites have been thoroughly excavated. See Comment to 2:14.

Nineveh Situated on the left bank of the Tigris, about 250 miles (400 km.) northwest of Babylon, presently the mounds of Kuyunjik and Nebi Yunus (“the prophet Jonah”) opposite Mosul. The kings of Akkad, including Sargon, built at Nineveh. The name suggests a Sumerian origin.

Rehoboth-ir Literally, “broad places of the city.” No such city is known from Assyrian sources, but the reference is probably to a well-known suburb of Nineveh there called rebit Ninua, “greater Nineveh.”

Calah This is the famous Assyrian city Kalah, the site of which is presently known as Nimrud, located on the left bank of the Tigris near where that river is joined by the Great Zab. Shalmaneser I (ca. 1265-1235 B.C.E.) rebuilt Kalah and made it his capital after abandoning Asshur.

12. Resen An unknown site, possibly standing for Akkadian *res eni*, meaning “springhead,” equivalent to Hebrew Rosh Ha’ayin, which is the name of a modern Israeli urban settlement.

that is the great city The ambiguity here is noted in Yoma 10a, where the parallel with Jonah 1:2 and 3:1, 3 is taken as indicating decisively that the reference is to Nineveh.

THE DEPENDENCIES OF MIZRAIM (w 13-14)

All seven names are in the plural form, which indicates inhabitants of a region or designates members of a tribe.

13. Ludim Both Jeremiah 46:9 and Ezekiel 30:5 mention this people in association with Cush and Put in prophecies concerning Egypt. The contexts there, as here, exclude identification with the Lydians of Asia Minor. They may be some as yet unknown African people.

Anamim An unknown name, possibly in Cyrenaica, west of the Libyan plateau.

Lehabim Possibly Libyans, though they are usually called *Lubim* in the Bible.

Naphtuhim This otherwise unknown name has been connected uncertainly with an Egyptian phrase signifying the “northland,” that is, Lower Egypt or the Delta region, in contrast to the next name.

14. Pathrusim This undoubtedly refers to the inhabitants of Pathros, which is Egyptian for the “southland,” that is, Upper Egypt, a meaning it also has in Isaiah 11:11. King Esarhaddon of Assyria called himself “King of Musur (=mizraim), Paturisi (pathros), and Cush.”

Casluhim The place is otherwise unknown.

Caphtorim This corresponds to *kaptaru* in Akkadian texts, *kptr* in Ugaritic, and probably also to *keftiu* in Egyptian, all generally identified with the isle of Crete and its environs in the eastern Mediterranean. Deuteronomy 2:23 tells that the Caphtorim settled in Gaza, which became a major stronghold of the Philistines in the times of the Judges. Both Amos 9:7 and Jeremiah 47:4 report that this people came from Caphtor. Hence, the phrase “whence the Philistines came forth” more likely applies to the Caphtorim than to the unknown Casluhim.

THE DEPENDENCIES OF CANAAN (w 15-19)

This section is a composite. Only the first two of the eleven names listed are without the *-i* ending that indicates a gentilic form, and they are to be understood as the names of individuals who are the eponymous, or name-giving, ancestors of the Sidonians and the Hittites. The next four names appear

in the numerous biblical registers of the original, pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan. It is not clear why specifically these were selected here. Further, the order of presentation is unique and appears to be independent of the other similar registers. The Jebusites, named first here, otherwise almost invariably close the lists. Also, the list includes the rarely mentioned Girgashites. The last five names are those of cities in Phoenicia and Syria.

15. Sidon The famous Phoenician port city. The designation “first-born” and the omission of Tyre point to a period when Sidon held undisputed sway over the other cities of southern Phoenicia, so that the name became synonymous with the whole of Phoenicia, as in Deuteronomy 3:9 and Joshua 3:4, 6. This biblical usage conforms to information available from other sources. Thus the Egyptian inscriptions that record the campaigns of Thutmose III (ca. 1490-1436 B.C.E.) in Canaan and Syria also mention Sidon, but not Tyre. The latter is similarly ignored in the Homeric epics, which deal with events in the twelfth century B.C.E. and which refer to Sidon and its inhabitants. The same is true of the annals of Tiglath-pileser I (1109-1088 B.C.E.), who conducted military expeditions to Syria and Phoenicia. By the tenth century, however, Tyre had eclipsed Sidon in importance.

Heth Undoubtedly, Heth is taken here to be a personal name, that of the ancestor of the Hittites. This term, like “Canaan/Canaanite,” is noticeably imprecise. Around 1800 B.C.E., an Indo-European people who had settled in Asia Minor and had taken over the name of the earlier inhabitants, the Hatti, founded an empire. The name “Hittite” was gradually extended to the entire region and the peoples incorporated within it. After the Hittite empire collapsed ca. 1200 B.C.E. and the city-states of Syria became independent, they continued to call themselves Hittite for several centuries. Assyrian and Babylonian records regularly used “Hattiland” to refer to the whole of Syria and Palestine. In the present context, Heth probably refers to the Neo-Hittite states of Syria.

16. Jebusites Nothing is known about the origins or history of this people. At the time of the Exodus, they lived in the hill country, according to Numbers 13:29. In the period of Joshua’s wars of conquest and until David’s time, they were located more specifically in Jerusalem. In fact, Jerusalem itself was called Jebus, and it was from Araunah the Jebusite that David bought the plot of land on which the Temple was later built.

Amorites They appear as a distinct ethnic group in all the lists of the pre-Israelite peoples of the land. In the course of time, the term lost all ethnic significance in the Bible and, like “Canaanite,” came to be employed as a general designation for them all, as for instance in 15:16. The Amurru, as they were called in Akkadian, were a West Semitic people who first appeared in Babylonia in significant numbers about 2000 B.C.E., having migrated from the fringes of the Syrian desert. In subsequent centuries, successive waves of Amorites infiltrated the entire Fertile Crescent. In the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C.E., cuneiform texts refer to a state north of Canaan called Amurru.

Girgashites Nothing is known of them. 11 They may have been an offshoot of the “land of Karkisha” in Asia Minor, mentioned among the allies of the Hittites in the inscriptions of Ramses II about the battle of Kadesh. The personal names **grgsh** and **bngrgsh** appear in Ugaritic texts.

17. Hivites Despite more than a score of scriptural references, nothing is known about this people from any external source.

17-18. Arkites... Hamathites All these refer to the inhabitants of five Syrian cities, four on the coast and one inland. Arka, about 13 miles (20 km.) northeast of Tripoli, Lebanon, is mentioned in Egyptian execration texts as early as the twentieth century B.C.E. Sin, in cuneiform *siannu*, bordered on the

territory of Ugarit. Arvad was the most northerly of the important Phoenician cities. The site is presently Ruad, built on a rocky island about 50 miles (80.5 km.) north of Byblos. It is frequently mentioned in Assyrian records. Zemar, lying about midway between Arvad to its north and Tripoli to its south, is mentioned in Egyptian, Amarna, and Assyrian texts. Hamath, now Hamah, lies inland on the middle Orontes River alongside one of the major trade routes, about 50 miles (80.5 km.) east-northeast of Arvad.

Afterward... This note corresponds to that in verse 5. Here the text gives recognition to the fact that Phoenicia proper and Palestine constituted a cultural continuum.

19. Here “Canaan” is not a person but a people. The Table of Nations displays this exceptional interest in the territorial boundaries of Canaan because it is leading up to the progenitors of Abraham, whose descendants are to inherit the land. Significantly, the city-states north of Sidon, detailed in verses 17-18, are excluded, and only the region west of the Jordan is included. Sidon constitutes the extreme northern limit; Gaza represents the southwestern extremity, and then the border extends westward across the low hill country to the Dead Sea region.

These boundaries do not correspond either to those delineated elsewhere in the Bible, particularly in Genesis 15:18 and Numbers 34:2-12, or to any known historical reality in Israelite times. The Israelite conquest never reached Sidon. The description of Canaan given here corresponds to that of the Egyptian province of Canaan as it emerged following the peace treaty between the Egyptian king Ramses II and the Hittite king Hattusilis III (ca. 1280 B.C.E.), which defined the spheres of interest of the respective empires. Following this, the Egyptians gave up all efforts to control northern Syria, which belonged to the Hittites, while southern Syria and Palestine remained under Egyptian tutelage.

Gerar This city is not mentioned in either Egyptian or Assyrian sources, which means that it was not situated along the Via Maris or main north-south highway parallel to the coast, the road used by imperial armies. The patriarchal narratives in chapters 20 and 26 show Gerar to have been an important royal city in the western Negev and to have been situated west or northwest of Beer-sheba in a region sufficiently well watered to provide pasturing facilities for shepherds. All the signs point to its being identified with the impressive mound of Tell Haror (Tell Abu Hureireh), which lies on one of the major wadis, Wadi esh-Shari’ah, about 15 miles (24 km.) northwest of Beer-sheba. Archaeological surveys in this area have revealed strong Egyptian influence on the material culture between 1550 and 1200 B.C.E.

Gaza Inscriptions of the Egyptian king Sed I from around 1300 B.C.E. refer to this city as “The Canaan.” It was the regional capital of the Egyptian province of Canaan. Gaza, the most southerly of the coastal cities, was strategically situated along the main highway and trade route that linked Mesopotamia and Egypt. Later it became a major Philistine city.

Sodom... Zeboiim These are the so-called “cities of the Plain,” mentioned again in 14:2 and Deuteronomy 29:22, that were destroyed because of their wickedness. The first two form the theme of chapter 19, while the last two appear in Hosea 11:8. Since the order of the cities is always uniform, it most likely derives from some ancient topographical list, many examples of which have been found in Mesopotamia and Egypt. It should be noted that, unlike 13:10, the present passage contains no reference to the destruction of the cities. They have not been identified. Their most likely location appears to be in the area now covered by the southern extension of the Dead Sea below the Lisan.

Lasha Otherwise unknown; Targum Jonathan and rabbinic sources identified it with Callirrhoe, a site of hot springs near the eastern shore of the Dead Sea.

THE SHEMITES (vv. 21-31)

The introduction to this chapter makes note of the special nature of this section. As to the order of listing, the guiding principle seems to be from the more remote to the closer kinship with Israel. The Shemites comprise two groups of thirteen entities each.

21. all the descendants of Eber Although he is the fourth generation from Shem, he receives special mention here because he is the ancestor both of Israel and of a variety of peoples with whom Israelite history is closely intertwined. According to later genealogies in Genesis, these include Arameans, Ammonites, Moabites, Midianites, the Ishmaelite tribes, and Edomites. One would expect these descendants of Eber to be called “Hebrews” (Heb. *ivrim*). Nevertheless, it is strange that of all the above-mentioned peoples, only the line of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob is so designated. Probably for these reasons, Rashi and Ramban take *‘ever* here not as the name of the individual mentioned in verse 24, whose line is taken up again in 11:16-29, but as meaning “the region beyond,” a denotation *‘ever* has in 50:10 and Numbers 21:13. *Benei ‘ever* would then be “the inhabitants of the region beyond [the Euphrates].” In fact, in Akkadian, the land west of this river is called *eber nari*, a phrase often used as a geographical term referring to Upper Syria, which is what *‘ever ha-nahar* means in Joshua 24:2.

older brother of Japheth Because an adjective does not usually modify a proper name in biblical Hebrew, this is the natural meaning required by the syntax. However, the Septuagint, Genesis Rabba 27:6, and most medieval exegetes render “brother of Japheth who is the oldest.”

22. Elam The ancient name for modern Khuzistan in southwestern Iran in the Iranian Plateau east of Babylon and northeast of the Persian Gulf. Its capital was Susa, the biblical Shushan of Esther 1:2-5. Elam is the most easterly country in the Table.

Asshur See Comment to verse 11. The city of Asshur on the Tigris in Upper Mesopotamia gave its name to the surrounding territory, which became known as Assyria. Asshur-uballit I (ca. 1356-1321 B.C.E.) was the first monarch to be called “king of the land of Assyria.”

Arpachshad This name is a puzzle. A tradition from Second Temple times connects the last three Hebrew consonants with Chesed of 22:22, the eponymous ancestor of the Chaldeans (Heb. *kasdim*, Akk. *kashdu*). This was the name of a seminomadic Aramean tribe that inhabited the desert regions between northern Arabia and the Persian Gulf. As a geographical term, it was first applied to the southern part of Mesopotamia but was eventually used for the whole of Babylonia. The first element of the name—Arpa—might be Arip, which is frequently found in Hurrian proper names.

Lud This cannot be the same people as the Ludim of verse 13. It may refer to Lydia, a region on the west coast of Asia Minor, but its known history does not begin until the middle of the seventh century B.C.E., and it would be expected to be classified under the Japhethites. Neither Isaiah 66:19 nor Ezekiel 27:10 shed light on its identity.

Aram It is unclear whether this term applies here to a specific tribe or to the wider confederation of Aramean tribes that were Western Semites. The patriarchs of Israel maintained close family connections with Arameans in Aram-naharaim and Paddan-aram. This is clear from 25:20; 28:5; and 31:18, 20-24. In fact, according to Deuteronomy 26:5, the Israelite farmer annually declared at the festival of first fruits, “My father was a fugitive Aramean.”

A variant tradition in Genesis 22:21 has Aram as the grandson of Nahor, Abraham's brother. The different genealogies may well reflect tribal relationships at different periods of history. Amos 9:7 says that the Arameans migrated from Kir, which in Isaiah 22:6 is parallel to Elam and which would place them in the northeastern part of the Fertile Crescent. That would be consonant with the tradition of the present Table.

23. Of the four subdivisions of Aram, only Uz is otherwise known. In 1 Chronicles 1:17 he and the other three are sons of Shem and brothers of Aram. In Genesis 22:21, Uz is Aram's uncle. The present Table, which makes him a son, reflects the historic reality of a later time, when Aram had overwhelmed the Uzzites and incorporated them into the Aramean tribal league. Two regions named Uz are mentioned, one northeast of Canaan near Har(r)an and another between Edom and northern Arabia, referred to in 36:29, apparently the homeland of Job (1:2). Josephus locates Hul in Armenia. Mash may be the mountains of Lebanon and the Ante-Lebanon; they are called Mashu in the Gilgamesh Epic.

24. Shelah See Comment to 5:25.

25. Peleg His descendants are listed in 11:18-28. The name can mean "water channel" (Akk. *palgu*) and so may refer to an area of land watered by irrigation canals. A geographic lexicon from the city of Ebla in Syria, deriving from ca. 2500 B.C.E., includes a place named Palag.

the earth was divided Hebrew *niflegah* is a play on *peleg*. Traditionally, this has been taken as a reference to the confusion of languages and the dispersal of mankind described in the next chapter. Hence, the rabbinic term *dor ha-pallagah*, "the generation of the dispersal/confusion of speech," an interpretation perhaps supported by Psalms 55:10. However, the verb *p-l-g* is used neither in 11:7-9 nor here in verse 32. Accordingly, "the dividing of the earth" more likely has some other reference, possibly the development of agriculture by irrigation canals, or some historic split-up of tribes, or even an earthquake. Bekhor Shor observes that from Peleg on the life spans of the patriarchs listed in 11:11-32 are all in the two-hundred-year range and less, whereas his predecessors lived at least four hundred years. He therefore interprets the phrase to mean that the human life span was halved.

THE DEPENDENCIES OF JOKTAN (w 26-30)

This list is extraordinary, both for its unparalleled extent and because the Joktanites are here said to be descended from the same stock as the Israelites, which is itself remarkable since their settlements, where identifiable, are located in the southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula. Furthermore, most of the names are not the same as the Arab tribes mentioned in Assyrian inscriptions from the ninth century B.C.E. on. All these peculiarities suggest that behind this list is some lost history of relationships, probably of a commercial nature in connection with the spice trade, between Israel and the Arabian tribes. Incidentally, the name Joktan (Heb. *yoktan*) can mean "diminution" and may hide some now forgotten word play corresponding to that on the name of his brother Peleg. It is noteworthy that the names of several areas in Arabia are formed from the stem *k-t-n*, such as Qatna.

26. Almodad The element *modad* means "beloved one," the same as in *Me-dad* of Numbers 11:26. The first syllable may either represent 'el, "god," or Arabic 'al, "family."

Sheleph Possibly the same as a Yemenite tribe Shalphy or the Arabic place-name Salph between Yemen and Hadramaut.

Hazarmaveth This well-known kingdom mentioned in South Arabic inscriptions is the present-day Hadramaut on the southern coast east of Yemen.

Jerah Omitted in the list of 1 Chronicles 1:20-24, which has twelve Joktanite tribes in all. This may be the region of Yemen known as Warah. In Hebrew and in South Arabic inscriptions, *yr[k]h* means “month.”

27. Hadoram The first element is an epithet of the god Baal, the name meaning “[the god] Had is exalted.” A modern place-name Dauraum near San’a, capital of Yemen, is known.

Uzal A late Arab tradition of doubtful validity identifies Uzal as the old name for San’a.

Diklab Probably derived from *dekel*, “a palm tree,” and the name of some oasis in Yemen.

28. Obal Omitted in the Septuagint, which has a twelve-tribe list. Abil is a common place-name in Yemen.

Abimael An unknown name that means “My Father is indeed God.”

Sheba See Comment to verse 7. This is the kingdom in southern Arabia, frequently mentioned in Assyrian royal inscriptions, with which King Solomon formed relationships.

29. Ophir A “brother” of Havilah, which is a source of gold according to 2:11-12. Ophir is consistently cited in the Bible for its gold. An ostrakon found at Tell Qasileh on the River Yarkon northeast of Tel Aviv reads, “Gold from Ophir for Beth Horon 30 Shekels.” Since the biblical sources indicate that Ophir was accessible by ship, it was most likely located somewhere on the shores of the Red Sea.

Havilah See Comment to 2:11-12.

Jobab No satisfactory identification for the name has been found.

30. The extent of the settlements of the Joktanites is paralleled in the Table only by the boundaries of the Canaanites, again testifying to the special importance of this tribal league at some still unknown period of Israelite history.

Mesha This may be the same as Massa of 25:14, but that appears to be in northern Arabia, and a southerly location, otherwise unknown, is indicated here.

Sephar The word means “border” in post-biblical Hebrew. The reference may be to Zafar, a port city and center of the spice trade in Hadramaut, or to a place southwest of San’a.

32. Taken with verse 1, this summarizing conclusion forms a literary frame to the Table of Nations and forges the transition to the next episode.

Genesis, Commentary to Chapter 11

Nahum Sarna

The Tower of Babel (vv. 1-9)

The preceding Table of Nations repeatedly called attention to the distinguishing forms of human variation—ethnic, linguistic, and territorial. The first is probably taken to be a natural outgrowth of the ramified lines of descent from Noah's three sons. The last is easily explained as a normal development of the geographic dispersal imposed by God on man. But the biblical Narrator is disturbed by the vast diversity of languages that characterizes the human race. Given the Bible's presupposition that all mankind constitutes one great family traceable to a common ancestry, it becomes necessary to account for the rise of a polyglot humanity. The present narrative deals with this development. Conscious of the misunderstandings, discord and strife that result from the disruption of communication between human beings, it looks upon the lack of a common language as a calamity that humankind has brought upon itself in consequence of its overweening pride and deliberate defiance of God's will.

Though the story of the Tower of Babel has no parallel or prototype in Mesopotamian literature, it does display an intimate acquaintance with Babylonian construction techniques, a familiarity with some characteristic formulas of cuneiform royal building inscriptions, and a knowledge of certain Mesopotamian traditions. As a matter of fact, it seems to be a deliberate expression of ideas that are in antipodal opposition to some cherished notions of ancient Mesopotamia.

This episode does not contain the names of individuals. A key expression, repeated five times, is "all the earth," for the entire human race is presumed to be sinful. The postdiluvian generations, having learned nothing from history, have proved themselves to be disappointingly out of harmony with God. God must start again, as it were, in a fresh attempt to have His purposes on earth fulfilled. That is the reason why the present narrative, which closes the second universal epoch in human history, is immediately followed by a genealogy that issues in Abraham, the founder of a new nation that is to have a special relationship with God and is to become the divinely wrought instrument for the mediation of His demands to a wayward humanity.

The narrative is almost equally divided between the doings of man (vv. 1-4) and the counter-measures of God (vv. 5-9). God's sudden intervention, in precisely the middle verse, signals impending radical change in the situation. Pronouncements about the state of affairs on earth frame the entire episode, with the last verse describing the reversal of the situation portrayed in the first. This turnaround is reinforced by the inversion in verse 9 of the order of the key expressions "all the earth" and "language" used in verse 1. The symmetrical structure imparts added emphasis to the metamorphosis caused by God's reactions in that the second part reiterates the phraseology of the first part, often with ironical force. Finally, the Hebrew vocabulary exhibits an unusually large number of assonantal features or verbal correspondences.

THE MAKING OF BABEL (vv. 1-4)

1. Everyone on earth The reiterated emphasis on the involvement of the totality of humankind in the offense is crucial to the understanding of the episode as the climactic event in the universal history of the Book of Genesis.

the same language See Comment to 2:20. Hebrew *safah*, “language,” is also repeated five times. Belief in an original universal human language seems to have also been current in ancient Sumer. A fragment of a myth, “Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta,” relates that the speech of mankind was confounded as a result of strife and jealousy between two gods. Our biblical story views the disruption of communication between human beings as the consequence of man’s placing himself in disharmony with God.

2. migrated Humankind is envisaged as having been initially nomadic after the Flood. The Hebrew stem *n-s-*, “to travel,” originally meant “to pull up stakes,” as it does in Judges 16:14 and Isaiah 33:20.

from the east That is, from the vantage point of Canaan. The survivors would actually have migrated from Ararat in a southeasterly direction.

a valley Rather, “a plain,” referring to that flat alluvial land in southern Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Shinar See Comment to 10:10. A similar tradition is preserved by Berossus, whose story of the Mesopotamian flood also has the survivors first going to Babylon.

there Hebrew *sham*, repeated five times, directs our attention to the central importance of the particular site chosen; at the same time, its sound evokes an association with *shamayim*, “heavens,” with which the site is supposed to be physically connected, as well as with *shem*, “a name,” in verse 4.

3. The Narrator, clearly writing from the perspective of a foreign observer, displays an accurate and detailed knowledge of Mesopotamian construction techniques. The rarity of stone in the plain of Lower Mesopotamia necessitated the use of molded, sun-dried clay as the common building material, an invention that ushered in the epoch of monumental temple architecture. The discovery of the technique of firing the brick in a kiln enhanced its solidity and durability and made possible the erection of multistoried buildings. The use of bitumen for mortar further added to the strength, cohesion and impermeability of the brick.

Bitumen is early attested in Mesopotamia. It was found in abundance at Hit on the Euphrates, about 140 miles (225 km.) upstream from Babylon. By contrast, stone was plentiful in Canaan and was widely used for monumental architecture, though sun-dried brick was the norm for common construction. Kiln-fired brick was not used in that region before Roman times; nor was bitumen used as mortar, despite its abundant presence in the Dead Sea.

Come, let us Hebrew *havah* expresses both intention and a call to action.

make bricks The preparation of building materials should follow, not precede, the decision to build. The inversion of the logical sequence reflects the important role of the brick in Mesopotamian architecture, repeatedly encountered in Akkadian tents. One version of their creation story describes primeval chaos as a time when “no brick was laid, no brick-mold was formed.” The Enuma Elish version that refers specifically to the founding of Babylon tells that “for one whole year they [the gods] molded bricks.” This scene also appears on a cylinder seal that portrays the gods mining clay, climbing ladders, carrying mortar, and passing bricks to those at the top of the temple.

Akkadian building inscriptions, which hail the achievements of the great kings, repeatedly emphasize the making of bricks. Indeed, the molding of the first brick was regarded as an important rite and was accompanied by elaborate ceremonies.

Brick... mortar This is an editorial aside expressing wonderment at construction techniques so different from those familiar to the Narrator. The phrase “with bitumen and burnt-brick” (*ina kupri u agurri*) is a standard formula in Babylonian building inscriptions.

4. a tower The reference is certainly to the ziggurat (Akk. *zigguratu*), the lofty, massive, solid brick, multistaged temple tower that was the outstanding feature of most Mesopotamian cities and dominated their landscapes. The term is derived from the Akkadian verb *zagaru*, meaning “to build high.” This type of architecture seems first to have developed in Babylonia in the third millennium B.C.E. in the dynasty of Akkad (ca. 2360-2180 B.C.E.). Its function, it is generally agreed, was to symbolize a mountain. The sacred mountain played an important role in most religions in ancient times. Rooted in the earth, with its head lost in the clouds, it was taken to be the meeting point of heaven and earth and, as such, the natural arena of divine activity. On its heights the gods were imagined to have their abode. Constituting the obvious channel of communication between the celestial and terrestrial spheres, the sacred mountain was looked upon as the center of the universe, the “navel of the earth.”

Many of the ziggurat names reveal an association with the mountain motif. The ziggurat of Nippur was called “The House of the Mountain.” At Asshur, there was “The House of the Mountain of the Universe.” “The House of the Link between Heaven and Earth” was situated at Larsa. The most famous ziggurat of all, the one at Babylon, is the focus of the present narrative. It was known as the *e-temen-an-ki*, “The House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth.” In the flat, alluvial plain of Lower Mesopotamia, the ziggurat constituted a man-made sacred mountain in miniature, the physical means by which man and god might enter into direct contact with one another.

with its top in the sky This expression is actually a cliché in Mesopotamian building inscriptions, particularly with reference to ziggurats. The Sumerian king, Gudea (ca. 2140 B.C.E.), says of the temple Eninnu that “it lies in heaven.” A text from Nippur addresses a tower “whose peak reaches the sky.” Hammurabi (ca. 1728- 1686 B.C.E.) gives himself the epithet “raiser of the top of Eanna,” and it is related of him that he built a temple tower “whose top is sky high.” Esarhaddon (680-669 B.C.E.) says that he “raised to heaven the head” of the temple of Asshur and that he “made high its top up to heaven.” The phrase is most persistently used in respect of the temple of Marduk in Babylon, which was known as the *esagda*, meaning “the House of the Lifting Up of the Head.” It is this phrase, “with its top in the sky,” that led to the widespread but unlikely interpretation that the aim of the tower builders was to be able to storm heaven. Generally, the Bible regarded tall towers as symbols of human arrogance, as, for example, in Isaiah 2:12-15, 30:25, and Ezekiel 26:4, 9.

to make a name for ourselves “Name” here probably connotes “monument,” as in Isaiah 56:5. This meaning developed from the fact that the names of most of the important kings of Mesopotamia were associated with great building projects designed to assure the monarch’s eternal fame. The royal name and titles were inscribed on bricks and cylinder seals that were deposited in the foundations of the ziggurats. Thus, a temple inscription of Gudea of Lagash records that, “on account of the great name that he made for himself, he was received among the gods into their assembly.” Nebuchadnezzar, who restored the ziggurat at Babylon, records in a commemorative inscription:

“The fortifications of Esagila and Babylon I strengthened, and made an everlasting name for my reign.”

else we shall be scattered A prime motivation of the builders is said to have been the consolidation of group unity, and that certainly would have been a major result of their labors. Construction carried out on such a colossal scale and involving large masses of people necessitated a centralized authority and a high degree of organization. The resultant monumental edifice would have been a great source of civic pride and would have fostered a spirit of unity. However, in the present context, the stated purpose of the builders, “that we be not scattered all over the world,” constitutes a direct challenge to the intent of God as expressed in the blessing to postdiluvian humanity: “Fill the earth.” Man did not perceive this to be a blessing and so devised means to thwart its fulfillment.

GOD’S COUNTERMEASURES (vv. 5-9)

5. The Lord came down God does not react capriciously; He investigates man’s doings. The identical anthropomorphism, or depicting of God in human terms, appears again in 18:21 in connection with the divine scrutiny of the situation at Sodom and Gomorrah. This figurative usage implies no limitation on God’s omnipotence, for the divine “descent” presupposes prior knowledge of human affairs from on high, and God’s subsequent counteraction unqualifiedly exhibits His absolute sovereignty. Rather, there is subtle irony here. Man builds a tower “with its top in the sky,” where God is popularly thought to dwell. Scripture emphasizes God’s infinite transcendence and incomparable supereminence by having God “go down” in order to scrutinize the scene.

man A satirical note is now introduced by the use of Hebrew *benei ha-’adam*, a phrase heavily charged with the consciousness of man’s earthly origin, his mortality and frailty. In Mesopotamian tradition, the gods erected the temple at Babylon for the greater glory of Marduk, who actually gave the order for its construction. Furthermore, the myth has Babel and its temple being built in primeval times, at the very creation of the world. The biblical Narrator lays stress on the strictly human nature of the enterprise in both its initiative and execution; the emphasis on its postdiluvian origin tacitly nullifies Mesopotamian beliefs.

had built Thus far. Verse 8 shows that the project remained uncompleted.

6. Humankind has abused the benefactions of kinship and ready communication for unworthy, vainglorious ends in defiance of God’s will that the entire earth be populated. Unless preventive measures are taken, there will be no limit to man’s arrogant schemes.

7. Let us, then Hebrew *havah*, the term employed by men to introduce their project, is now ironically echoed by God in pronouncing its doom. For the plural use of the verb, see Comment to 1:26.

confound It can hardly be coincidental that *navlah*, a unique form of the Hebrew stem *b-l-l*, “to confuse,” is a disarrangement of *levenah*, “brick,” the order of the first three consonants being reversed. The device underlines the teaching that a human enterprise that runs counter to the will of God is inherently perverse and doomed to self-defeat.

8. Thus the Lord scattered them The pathetic futility of man’s rebellious resolve, expressed in verse 4, is laid bare.

they stopped building The present saga must have been inspired by the spectacle of Babylon and its ziggurat lying in ruins. Such was the case, for instance, after the Hittite raid on the city ca. 1600 B.C.E.

the city An example of synecdoche, the mention of the part for the whole.

9. it was called Literally, “one called its name,” an ironic echo of verse 4. They aspired to “make a name” for themselves, but succeeded only in attaching the name “confusion” to their handiwork.

Babel See Comment to 10:10. The word play *babel-babal*, approximating “Babel-babble,” in English, hides a subtle satirizing of Mesopotamian notions. Not the “gate of god” as the inhabitants of Babylon interpreted the name, not the navel of the earth, as they conceived their city to be, but a site of meaningless gibberish, the center from which human divisiveness radiated, and the cause of disastrous alienation from God.

speech... scattered The episode appropriately concludes with a summary testifying to God’s nullification of human efforts to resist His will. The transformation in the situation of humankind is symbolized by the reversal of the sequence of the two key terms of verse 1.

From Shem to Abraham: Transition to the Patriarchs (vv. 10-32)

In the foregoing episode, the human race again became estranged from God. In the Table of Nations, the genealogy of Shem received special attention, an intimation of future developments. These two elements now come together. The focus of the biblical narration decisively narrows to concentrate upon one particular line of descent within the family tree of Shem. This line issues in Abraham, who is the tenth generation from Shem, just as Noah was the tenth generation from Adam. From the scriptural point of view, the birth of Abraham constitutes a turning point in human history.

The present genealogy is closely related to that of chapter 5, which recounts the generations from Adam to Noah. Both genealogies give the age of the father at the birth of his first-born son, the number of years the father lived thereafter, and a formulaic statement that he begat sons and daughters. Also, both lists close with a notable who had three sons.

Unlike chapter 5, this chapter omits the summary total of the respective life spans as well as the note about each one’s death. The pervasive, if unarticulated, air of pessimism about the seemingly incorrigible nature of man that rises from the preceding narratives is now relieved by the emphasis on life, on a new birth, on the orderly sequence of the generations, on the possibility of a fresh start for humanity. At the same time, there is a considerable diminution in the human life span as compared with the antediluvians, and procreation now begins at a much younger age than before. For the sake of completeness, the list of the initial five generations from Shem to Peleg is repeated from 10:21-25. Thereafter, a further drastic reduction in the duration of life occurs.

The advent of Terah is a climactic event that is set off by the *’elleh toledot* formula, which also serves to establish the transition from universal to patriarchal history. The text mentions Terah’s three sons because the posterity of each is to be connected with the fortunes of Abraham and his offspring. One intriguing aspect of the genealogy is that some of its names are those of places in the northwestern part of Upper Mesopotamia, the region with which the patriarchs of Israel continued to maintain associations long after Abraham’s migration to Canaan.

10. This is the line See Comment to 2:4.

100 This figure is approximate since Shem would now have been 102 according to the data of 5:32 and 7:6.

Arpachshad Inexplicably, in 10:22 he is the third son of Shem, whereas here he seems to be the first-born.

18. Reu Probably a shortened form of Reuel, meaning “friend of God,” a name known from the nineteenth-century B.C.E. archives of Mari, and one held by several biblical figures.

20. Serug The well-known city of Sarugi, not far north of Haran in the Balikh Valley, is the site of the modern village of Suruc on one of the important Near Eastern trade routes.

22. Nahor Cuneiform documents record both the personal name Naharum and a city Nahur. The latter is frequently mentioned and was an important site in the upper Balikh Valley, which had a West Semitic population.

24. Terah Assyrian sources mention a place-name Til (sa) Turabi situated on the Balikh River not far from Haran and Nahor. The name may well be connected with *yareah*, “moon.” Several members of Terah’s family, as well as some of the sites connected with him, bear names that are associated with moon worship. Joshua 24:2 explicitly designates Terah as having been an idolater.

26. 70 years Terah begets posterity at an age at least twice that of all his forebears in the line of Shem. This fact insinuates into the text the motif of prolonged childlessness, a condition that is to be characteristic of his descendants, the patriarchs of Israel.

Abram This form of the name is consistently used until it is expanded to “Abraham” in 17:5, after which it appears again only in Nehemiah 9:7 and 1 Chronicles 1:26 as required by their respective contexts. No certain, precise parallel to the name Abram has been found so far in Near Eastern sources. It could mean “exalted father” or “the father is exalted,” which would then make it a variant of Abiram, Abarama, found in Akkadian texts of the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries B.C.E.

Nahor He is apparently named after his grandfather.

Haran This name seems to be derived from the element bar, “a mountain,” used in the sense of “mountain-god” in some West Semitic personal names found in Egypt, such as sheen-bar, ya’akob-har, anat-har.

THE FAMILY OF TERAH (vv. 27-32)

This section has its own prefatory formula, which gives recognition to the culmination of a historic process of continuous divine selection that began with Adam’s sons. An epochal juncture in the history of humankind has been reached. The formula is an introduction to the biography of Abraham. All the names now mentioned—with one enigmatic exception, Iscah—play a role in the patriarchal narratives.

27. Lot The origin of this name is unknown.

28. Haran died This fact is essential for understanding 12:4-5.

Ur of the Chaldean These were a Semitic people related to, but distinct from, the Arameans. The Hebrew form *kasdim* is original. The English is based on the Greek rendering, which, in turn, reflects a variant form, *kaldu*, that arose in the dialects of the Akkadian language as the *-sd* sound came to be

pronounced *-ld*. The name of the city, as given here and repeated in 15:7 and Nehemiah 9:7, poses a problem. The great city-state of Ur in Lower Mesopotamia has been well excavated. Situated at modern Tell el-Migayyar near the northern part of the ancient coastline of the Persian Gulf in southern Iraq, its history goes back to the fourth millennium B.C.E. In the course of the third millennium, it was one of the dominant city-states in the area and a foremost center of culture, reaching its zenith under the kings of the third dynasty, about 2060-1950 B.C.E. However, the rich documentation records nothing about Chaldeans in southern Babylonia before about the beginning of the first millennium B.C.E., and this people did not become the ruling caste until the seventh-sixth centuries B.C.E. Therefore, if “Ur of the Chaldeans” refers to this city, the characterization would seem to be an anachronism in our text. Some scholars have noted that the text may refer to one of the sites named Ur in Upper Mesopotamia. These were possibly founded by citizens of the famous city in the south and named after it. An Upper Mesopotamian Ur would have been much closer to Haran, which is central to the patriarchal narratives.

29. Sarai The name, changed to Sarah in 17:15, means “princess” in Hebrew but “queen” if based on Akkadian *sharratu*, a term used for the female consort of the moon-god Sin, the principal god of Ur.

Though the parentage of Nahor’s wife is given, that of Sarai is not. This omission is so extraordinary that it must be intentional. The Narrator withholds information so as not to ruin the suspense in chapter 20 when Abraham, in order to extricate himself from an embarrassing predicament, reveals that Sarai is his half-sister.

Milcah The name, as vocalized, is a variant form of Malcah, “queen.” Akkadian *malkatu* is a title of the goddess Ishtar, who was known as “Queen of Heaven,” daughter of the moon-god Sin. Nahor married his niece, the orphaned daughter of his departed brother Haran. The granddaughter of this marriage was Rebekah, who became the wife of Abraham’s son Isaac, as told in 24:24, 27. This is another example of the narrative technique of introducing information into the text with an eye to later developments.

Iscah The name may derive from the stem *s-k-h*, “to see,” and be a shortened form of a sentence name, “May God see (that is, with favor) the child.” There is no information about her. She may have been the central figure of some traditions that are now lost. Ancient lore makes her identical with Sarai, but this would contradict the data of 20:12 since she would then be Abraham’s niece, not his half-sister.

30. Sarai is said to be barren, but Milcah is not so described even though she too has no children. Undoubtedly, this note is preparatory to chapter 12. It points up the striking contrast between the impending divine promises to Abraham of abundant posterity and the harsh reality that tries his faith. A deliberate act of divine Providence terminates the prolonged state of childlessness. The resulting offspring is predestined to be the instrument of God’s purposes. This theme recurs in connection with the matriarchs Rebekah and Rachel and, later, with the mothers of Samson and Samuel.

barren Hebrew *‘akarah* simply means “childless” but not necessarily infertile.

31. Haran is situated some 550 miles (885 km.) northwest of Ur, about 10 miles (16 km.) north of the present-day Syrian Turkish border on the left bank of the Balikh River. The name means “route, journey, caravan,” and it doubtless derives from the city’s location as an important station along the main international trade routes from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean Sea. From the Mari

archives it is clear that in the eighteenth century B.C.E. Haran was a center of semi-nomadic Amorite tribes. Like Ur, it was also a center of the moon-god cult. The journey from the southern city of Ur to Canaan would not normally take one as far north as Haran. Before the effective domestication of the camel, a journey across the Syrian desert would be ruled out, and the most likely route would take the traveler up the Euphrates to Mari and then on to Aleppo, where the road turned south to Damascus and led on to Hazor in Canaan. The reason for Terah's detour to Haran is not given, but it may have had to do with Haran as a focus of the international donkey caravan trade and with the fact that both it and Ur were centers of the moon-god cult. Of course, the problem disappears if a northern Ur is intended. We are not told why the family migrated from Ur in the first place. If Ur was the southern city, the migration could have been prompted by the gradual decline of the city and the increasingly harsh economic conditions, along with overpopulation, known to have been its lot in the course of the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2100-1600 B.C.E.).

they set out Nahor is not mentioned as being included in the company, yet a series of texts shows him to be closely associated with Haran. In fact, the place is called "the city of Nahor" in 24:10. Perhaps, for some reason, he migrated at a later time.

32. Terah died A calculation based on the data of verse 26 and 12:4 shows him to have been 145 years of age when Abraham left Haran for Canaan; thus Terah lived on in Haran for another sixty years after Abraham's departure.

Genesis, Commentary to Chapter 11

Everett Fox

The Unfinished Citadel (11a--9)

At its most obvious, in an isolated context, this famous story is about the overweening pride of man, as represented by his technology. God's actions here recall the ending of the garden story, where humanity was also within reach of the divine.

Yet more is involved than a threat. Buber felt that this episode has been inserted at this point to show that humanity has failed again, as at the time of the Flood. It has not spread out and divided into nations, as in Chap. 10. The failure paves the way for a new divine plan, which is to be realized through one man (Avraham) and his descendants.

Structurally, the story is a tiny literary masterpiece. It utilizes numerous plays on sound which make meaningful and often ironic linkages between sections and ideas in the text. Most significant is how the general message—that God's response occurs in exactly the same terms as the human challenge (i.e., divine justice)—is transmitted by means of form. Fokkelman has provided a detailed study; it will suffice here to indicate only the outline. The divine "Come-now!" of v.7 clearly stands as an answer to humankind's identical cry in vv.3 and 4. In addition, humans, who congregated in order to establish a "name" and to avoid being "scattered over the face of all the earth" (v.4), are contravened by the action of God, resulting in the ironic name "Babble" and a subsequent "scattering" of humanity (v.9). The text is thus another brilliant example of biblical justice, a statement about a worldview in which the laws of justice and morality are as neatly balanced as we like to think the laws of nature are.

There is an important cultural background to the story. "Shinar" refers to Mesopotamia, and the "tower," undoubtedly, to the ubiquitous *ziggurratu* (now unearthed by archeologists) which served as man-made sacred mountains (i.e., temples). By portraying an unfinished tower, by dispersing the builders, and by in essence making fun of the mighty name of Babylon, the text functions effectively to repudiate the culture from which the people of Israel sprang (Avram's "Ur" of 11:28 was probably the great Mesopotamian metropolis). From Chap. 12 on, a new worldview is created.

Genesis, Commentary to Chapter 11

Richard Elliott Friedman

11:4. we'll make ourselves a name. The story of the tower of Babylon has its ambiguity at its center. It tells of an attempt by humanity to build a tower whose top is in the sky, but it never tells what they will do when they finish the tower, what is meant by "make ourselves a name," or why they fear being scattered if they do not have this tower. When YHWH sees the tower He is described as concerned that "now nothing that they'll scheme to do will be precluded from them." Their actions appear to be an act of rebellion of some sort, and in this sense the episode fits with those of Adam and Eve, Cain, and the flood, i.e., that humans as a species are continuously in conflict with the initial "good" state of creation. And so God disperses them and gives them languages that make them less intelligible to one another and thereby less united. The story thus prepares the way for a shift in the narrative away from dealing with the fate of the species and, instead, dealing with individuals. At the same time, this narrative provides the etiology of languages and of the dispersion of humans all over the earth. It also provides a Hebrew etiology for the name Babylon (Hebrew bbl) "because YHWH babbled the language of all the earth" (11:9). This would have come as a surprise to the people of Babylon, who understood the name to derive from *bab-ilu*, the "Gate of God."