

PART FIVE
FROM NOAH TO THE
DESCENDANTS OF SHEM
GENESIS 10:1 – 11:9

Descendants of Japeth

¹These are the descendants of Noah's sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth; children were born to them after the flood.

²The descendants of Japheth:

For this list of peoples or countries the Priestly School drew on the best geography available in sixth century Babylon. Their goal was to relate Israel to the other nations known to them.

They begin with Japeth, whose name recalls Iapetos of Greek mythology, a Titan born of Ouranos (the heavens) and Gaia (the earth), among whose sons are Prometheus and Atlas (see Homer, *The Iliad* 8.479 (middle 8th century BC) and Hesiod, *Theogony* 507 (c. 700BC).

Seven (the number is clearly symbolic) peoples are named as descended from Japeth, all located north and northwest of Israel.

Gomer,

The first is Gomer (see also Ezekiel 38:6). These are the Cimmerians, an Indo-European people who settled in Cappadocia, the plateau that dominates central Asia Minor (Turkey). They migrated from the north coast of the Black Sea between the Don and the Danube (see Homer *The Odyssey* 11.14).

Magog,

The second is Magog, the land of Gog, that is to say Lydia in western Asia Minor, with its capital Sardis, of which Gog, ancestor to the famous Croesus, was the first king. See also Ezekiel 38:2; 39:6 and Apocalypse 20:8.

Madai,

Madai (also Isaiah 13:17; 21:2; Jeremiah 25:25; 51:11, 28; 2Kings 17:6; 18:11) are the Medes, an Indo-European people from northeastern Assyria, closely associated in history with the Persians.

Javan,

Javan (also Ezekiel 27:13; Isaiah 66:19) are the Ionians of western Asia Minor. After Alexander the Great 'Javan' is used for the Greeks generally (see Joel 4:8; Zechariah 9:13; Daniel 8:21; 10:20; 11:2).

Tubal, Meshech,

Tubal and Meshech are mentioned together in Ezekiel 27:13; 32:26; 38:2-3; 39:1; also in the Greek version of Isaiah 66:19. They are the peoples inhabiting Cilicia and Phrygia.

and Tiras.

Tiras refers to one of the Indo-European Sea Peoples who, along with the Philistines, attacked Egypt in the 13th century BC. These are probably the Tyrrhenians from the islands of the Aegean, and may be related to the Etruscans and Thracians.

We now have three peoples related to Gomer. The first, Ashkenaz (also Jeremiah 51:27) are the Scythians who replaced the Cimmerians as rulers of area north of the Black Sea.

Josephus claims that Ripath refers to the Paphlygonians from between the Black Sea and Bythinia.

Togarmah (also Ezekiel 27:13-14; 38:3-6) is in the same area and may be a city bordering the lands of Tubal (10:2).

This is followed by four peoples related to Javan, bringing the total to seven, indicating fullness (compare 10:6-7).

The first is Elishah (also Ezekiel 27:7), one name given to the island of Cyprus.

The second is Tarshish (also Isaiah 66:19; Psalm 72:10; Jonah 1:3; 4:2; 1 Kings 10:22). There are indications that the reference is to islands in the Aegean. It may also refer to the Phoenician colony at Tartessos in Spain.

Kittim (also Numbers 24:24; Isaiah 23:1,12; Jeremiah 12:10; Ezekiel 27:6; Daniel 11:30) is another name for Cyprus.

Rhodanim (also 1Chronicles 1:7) refers to the inhabitants of Rhodes.

The descendants of Japheth are all in areas to the far north and west of Israel.

Note that each people has its own language (see 11:1).

³The descendants of Gomer: Ashkenaz,

Ripath,

and Togarmah.

⁴The descendants of Javan:

Elishah,

Tarshish,

Kittim,

and Rodanim.

⁵From these the *Sea Peoples* spread. These are the descendants of Japheth in their lands, with their own language, by their families, in their nations.



Descendants of Ham

⁶The descendants of Ham:

**Cush,
Egypt,
Put, and Canaan.**

⁷The descendants of Cush:

**Seba,
Havilah,**

Sabtah,

**Raamah,
and Sabteca.**

**The descendants of
Raamah: Sheba**

and Dedan.

Four peoples are recorded as descendants of Ham, plus seven more that are related to two of the five. They are all to the south of Israel in North Africa and Arabia.

The first is Cush (also Isaiah 11:11; Jeremiah 13:23), referring to peoples living south of Egypt, in Nubia and Ethiopia. The second is Egypt. The third is Put (Lybia). The fourth is Canaan, the land inhabited by the Israelites.

Seba (also Psalm 72:10; Isaiah 43:3; 45:14) is Iritrea on the west coast of the Red Sea.

Havilah ('sand-land') refers to part of Arabia (see also Genesis 2:11; 10:29; 25:18; 1Samuel 15:7).

Sabtah (Shabwat) is a trading centre in Arabia.

Raamah (perhaps, better, Ragmah) is a city in southern Arabia (see also Ezekiel 27:22). Sabteca is Shabataca, founded by the Nubian Pharaoh.

Sheba refers to the area on the east of the Red Sea, opposite Seba. It is also called Saba (see also Genesis 25:3; Isaiah 60:6; Jeremiah 6:20; Ezekiel 27:22; 38:13 Job 1:5; Psalm 72:15). Dedan (also Genesis 25:3; Ezekiel 38:13 [with Sheba]; Isaiah 21:13; Jeremiah 25:23; 49:8; Ezekiel 25:13) was an important commercial settlement located at one of the major oases in northwest Arabia.



This seems to be from a source other than the Priestly School. The focus here is on the descendants of Cush in Mesopotamia, rather than in Arabia. Nimrod is the legendary founder of the eastern empires (Micah 5:5 refers to Assyria). Though not an Israelite he lived in YHWH's presence.

Babel (also Genesis 11:9; Isaiah 13:1) is Babylon. Erech is the city of Gilgamesh in the Babylonian epic. It is southeast of Babylon. Accad, north of Babylon was founded by Sargon I c.2500BC. Shinar includes Sumeria and Akkad (southern Iraq). Assyria centred on Asshur on the Tigris River. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, north of Asshur. Rehoboth-Ir was near Nineveh, and Calah was the nearby royal residence. Resen, too, was near Nineveh.

The list has seven areas connected with Egypt. The Ludim are mentioned also in Jeremiah 46:9 and Ezekiel 30:5. The Lehabim are the Lybians. The Pathrusim are the inhabitants of Patros in upper Egypt (see also Isaiah 11:11; Jeremiah 44:1,15; Ezekiel 30:14; Psalm 68:31). The Caphthorim are the Cretans (also Amos 9:7; Jeremiah 47:4).

Sidon is in Phoenicia (Judges 18:7; 1 Kings 5:20; 16:31. Compare Homer *Iliad* 6.290f). Heth refers to the Hittites (see Genesis 15:20). For the Jebusites, Amorites and Girgashites see the commentary on Genesis 15:21. For the Hivites see Joshua 9:7; 11:19; Genesis 34:2. The Arkites inhabited a city north of Tripoli. The Sinites lived near Ugarit (1Chronicles 1:15). The Arvadites (also Ezekiel 27:8,11) were in the extreme north of Phoenicia. The Zemarites were south of Arvad, and the Hamathites (also Amos 6:2) dwelt on the Orontes River.

⁸Cush became the father of Nimrod; he was the first on earth to become a mighty warrior.

⁹He was a mighty hunter before YHWH; therefore it is said, "Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before YHWH."

¹⁰The beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, and Accad, all of them in the land of Shinar.

¹¹From that land he went into Assyria, and built Nineveh, Rehoboth-ir, Calah, and

¹²Resen between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city.

¹³Egypt became the father of Ludim, Anamim, Lehabim, Naphtuhim,

¹⁴Pathrusim, Casluhim, and Caphthorim, from which the Philistines come.

¹⁵Canaan became the father of Sidon his firstborn, and Heth,

¹⁶and the Jebusites, the Amorites, the Girgashites,

¹⁷the Hivites, the Arkites, the Sinites,

¹⁸the Arvadites, the Zemarites, and the Hamathites. Afterward the families of the Canaanites spread abroad.

¹⁹And the territory of the Canaanites extended from Sidon, in the direction of Gerar, as far as Gaza, and in the direction of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, as far as Lasha.

Descendants of Ham and Shem

²⁰These are the descendants of Ham, by their families, their languages, their lands, and their nations.

Descendants of Ham 10:8-19



²¹To Shem also, the father of all the children of Eber, the elder brother of Japheth, children were born.

²²The descendants of Shem: Elam, Asshur, Arpachshad, Lud, and Aram.

²³The descendants of Aram: Uz, Hul, Gether, and Mash.

Elam, with its capital at Susa is east of Babylon. The Elamites were not, in fact, Semitic. Asshur was listed in the older version as from Ham, not Shem (see 10:11). Arpachshad is another name for Babylon (see Genesis 11:10-11). Lud is Lubdu on the upper Tigris River. Aram is Syria. Verse twenty-three refers to regions of Syria.

The names in verses twenty-four and twenty-five are names of persons, not tribes. There is a pun on the name Peleg, the verb *pālag* means ‘to divide/split apart’.

Verses twenty-six to thirty refer to tribes, most from southern Arabia and to the east of Yemen. Hazarmaveth is modern Hadramaut on the southwest coast of Arabia.

For Sheba see also Genesis 25:3. Ophir was famous for its gold (see also Psalm 45:10). It was probably in Arabia, but others suggest India and still others North Africa.

We have been watching God’s blessing being realised throughout the whole world and all of human history. Luke writes:

God made from one every nation of human beings to live on the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and boundaries of their habitation.

– Acts 17:26

²⁴**Arpachshad became the father of Shelah; and Shelah became the father of Eber.**

²⁵**To Eber were born two sons: the name of the one was Peleg, for in his days the earth was divided, and his brother’s name was Joktan.**

²⁶**Joktan became the father of Almodad, Sheleph, Hazarmaveth, Jerah,**

²⁷**Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah,**

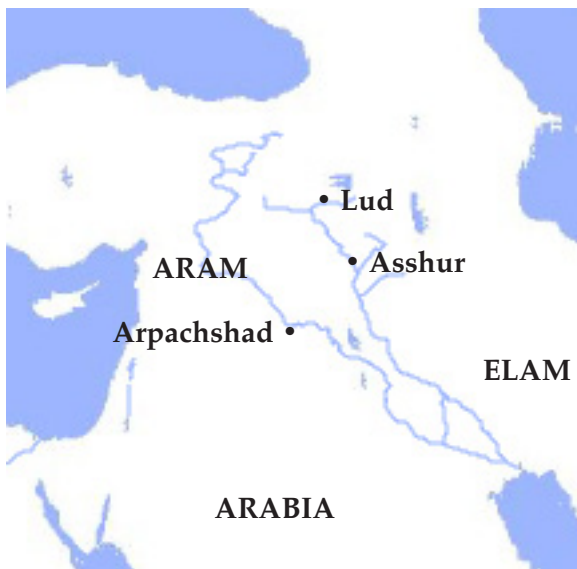
²⁸**Obal, Abimael, Sheba,**

²⁹**Ophir, Havilah, and Jobab; all these were the descendants of Joktan.**

³⁰**The territory in which they lived extended from Mesha in the direction of Sephar, the hill country of the east.**

³¹**These are the descendants of Shem, by their families, their languages, their lands, and their nations.**

³²**These are the families of Noah’s sons, according to their genealogies, in their nations; and from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood.**



[1] ¹And it happened that the whole world had one language and one vocabulary.

[2] ²And as they journeyed from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

[3] ³And each one said to his neighbour:

[4] 'Come! Let us make bricks [lebênîm] and bake them thoroughly' [And they used brick for stone and bitumen for mortar]

[5] ⁴And they said: 'Come! Let us build for ourselves

[6] a city and a tower with its summit touching the heavens so we will make a name for ourselves lest we be scattered over the face of the earth'.

[7] ⁵THEN YHWH CAME DOWN TO SEE

[6⁻] the city and the tower

[5⁻] that the sons of the human being ['âdâm] had built.

⁶And Yahweh said: 'See! They are one people and they all have one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. Henceforth nothing will be impossible for them in what they promise to do.

[4⁻] ⁷Come! We will go down and confuse [nâblâh] their language there

[3⁻] so that each one will not understand the language of his neighbour'.

[2⁻] ⁸And Yahweh scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth and they left off building the city.

⁹For this reason they called its name BABEL,

[1⁻] because there Yahweh confused [balâl] the language of the whole world. And from there Yahweh scattered them over the face of the earth.

This is a reflection on the experiences of the exiles in Babylon. The text is a condemnation of the pride and power of the kingdom of Babylon, attempting to crush subject peoples, including Judah. In chapter ten we have been introduced to a list of many peoples, each with their own identity and language (see 10:5). Babylon wants to impose its own gods and its own language on others, but God thwarts their efforts. It is a beautifully constructed narrative, highlighted in our presentation by the numbers 1 to 6, mirrored in 6⁻ to 1⁻ with the hinge at number 7 – ‘Then YHWH came down to see’. They want to make a name for themselves (11:6). The name they make is ‘confusion’ – a pun on the name Babylon.

They determine not to be scattered over the face of the earth, and this is exactly what they achieve by their attempt to build their own way into the heavens independently of God. Furthermore, it is God’s design that human beings spread over the earth (see 1:28).

There is a parallel to this narrative in the satire on the death of the king of Babylon:

You said in your heart, “I will ascend to heaven;
I will raise my throne above the stars of God;
I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon;
I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High.”
But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit.

– Isaiah 14:13-15

[Compare Ezekiel 28:2-9 on Tyre; and Ezekiel 31:1-14 on the pharaoh of Egypt]

The narrative prepares us for the story of Abraham and the beginnings of Israel, for it is this confusion and scattering that God wishes to reverse when he calls Abraham out of the east to make him a great nation: ‘All the tribes of the earth shall bless themselves by you’ (Genesis 12:3). History begins with Abraham, and it shows God’s merciful design to call human beings out of the confusion effected by sin into the sacred harmony of being God’s holy people. Human beings cannot make their own way to heaven, but God can come down as he does on Sinai (Exodus 3 and 19). The gathering together of mankind will happen in Jerusalem, not Babylon!

In days to come the mountain of YHWH’s house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.
Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of YHWH,
to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of YHWH from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.
O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in YHWH’s light!

– Isaiah 2:2-5 = Micah 4:1-5

We find a similar theme in Zechariah 8:20-22.

God's call to unity

We recall the following amazing statement found in Isaiah:

On that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to YHWH of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun. On that day there will be an altar to YHWH in the centre of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to YHWH at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to YHWH of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to YHWH because of oppressors, he will send them a saviour, and will defend and deliver them. YHWH will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know YHWH on that day, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to YHWH and perform them. YHWH will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to YHWH, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them. On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom YHWH of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage."

– Isaiah 19:18-25

Luke has the story of Babel in mind when he relates the story of the first Christian Pentecost. The Spirit of YHWH is calling all the scattered nations of the earth to come together in a community of love as disciples of Jesus. In this community there is only one language: the language of love, the language of the Good News. The early Christian community saw in the spread of the Good News the antidote to the break down of humanity into various linguistic units, each afraid of the other. Those building the tower of Babel broke up because they failed to listen to each other. At Pentecost God's Spirit offers a fresh capacity to listen that is not determined by the different human languages:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."

– Acts 2:1-11

The opening words function much as our ‘once upon a time’ does in introducing a story that carries a message rather than relating an event. We have already been told about the many different languages (10:5). Is this text referring to the sinful power of empire to impose its language on subject peoples? If so, God thwarts this. Every people is special to God.

‘Shinar’ is Mesopotamia (see Genesis 10:10). The authors are linking their story with the area of their exile.

In Palestine buildings were made of stone and mortar. Hence the need for the explanation given as a parenthesis at the end of the verse.

The focus is not on what they are doing, but on their intention. They want to break free of their creaturely dependence and touch the heavens by their own ingenuity. Linked with this is their desire to make a name for themselves, glorying not in the wonderful things that God has done and is doing for them, but in their own efforts. Finally, they think that the outcome of their endeavours is that they will avoid being ‘scattered over the face of the earth.’ There are echoes here of the account of the foundation of the city of Babylon given in the *Enuma Elish*: ‘Let its brickwork be fashioned . . . For one whole year they moulded bricks. When the second year arrived, they raised high the head of Esagila toward Apsu’ (VI, 60-62).

With the introduction of YHWH the narrative changes direction. YHWH cannot allow humanity to carry out its designs. Autonomy – acting independently of God – can only lead to self-destruction.

Again and again throughout Genesis we will see human plans having to give way before the overarching will of God.

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²And as they journeyed from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

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⁴And they said: ‘Come! Let us build for ourselves a city and a tower with its summit touching the heavens so we will make a name for ourselves lest we be scattered over the face of the earth’.

⁵THEN YHWH CAME DOWN TO SEE the city and the tower that the sons of the human being [‘âdâm] had built.

⁶And Yahweh said: 'See! They are one people and they all have one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. Henceforth nothing will be impossible for them in what they promise to do.

⁷Come! We will go down and confuse [nâblâh] their language there so that each one will not understand the language of his neighbour'.

⁸And Yahweh scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth and they left off building the city.

⁹For this reason they called its name BABEL, because there Yahweh confused [balâl] the language of the whole world. And from there Yahweh scattered them over the face of the earth.

We are reminded of YHWH's concern in the story of Adam and Eve. They had already eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. YHWH had to do something lest they eat from the tree of life (Genesis 3:22-23). Discontent with being a creature dependent upon God is presented as the basic cause of our failure to live to the full in harmony with each other and with the universe.

Speaking different languages is presented as the means for the carrying out of God's design that human beings 'fill the earth' (Genesis 1:28).

You will have noticed the play on words containing 'b' and 'l' ('bricks', verse 3; and 'confuse' verses 7 and 9). The explanation lies in the link made here with the city of Babylon (in the land of Shinar).

'Confusion' is the name that they have made for themselves! And they have failed in the efforts to thwart God's design that they spread out over the face of the earth.