

# **GENESIS**

## **A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY**

***THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB***

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## THE BEGINNING OF THE NATIONS (*GENESIS 10*)

If there's one lesson to bring away from history, it's that we are what we are because of what has happened in the past. History unfolds from actions of men and nations; it's a cumulative effort of millions of people over thousands of years working within and across many cultures and civilizations. And all of this life-force is adding to the foundations of future generations: the ancestors are continually handing their descendants the resources, situations, and issues that they themselves struggled with. Wittingly or unwittingly, we are all helping to create the future with our present actions.

For the second time in history the human race was again reduced to a single man and woman – Noah and his wife – from whom the rest of us have descended. One would have thought that this would have forced humanity to have common characteristics. But actually the world of men and nations immediately diversified as Noah's descendants spread around the globe, and each group took on their own unique characteristics. In fact there is so much diversity that, as we look at history and its events, it seems as if we're reading the story not of a single race but of hundreds and thousands of alien races in conflict with each other on the same planet.

This chapter doesn't make for thrilling reading; it's simply a list of the nations of the early world that formed from the sons of Noah. But it does carry within it the seeds of thousands of years of ensuing events that would provide the background, the foundation, the themes, and the flow of the overall history of the Bible. It creates the setting for the record of God's works among his people Israel.

**The cultures of the Bible** – Noah had three sons, and their families grew and spread out into southern Europe, northern Africa, and across Mesopotamia into Asia.



As they separated from each other and settled down in different geographical areas, they not only formed and adapted their way of life to their physical

surroundings but also according to the opportunism, resources, personalities, successes and failures that appeared within their own historical situations.

Egypt was isolated not only by distance but also by geography: there was a desert between them and Mesopotamia, and the Nile River dictated a certain kind of lifestyle. Babylon and Assyria, on the other hand, were right in the middle of a land bridge between East and West, had wide irrigated areas to farm and settle in, and offered wandering tribes and armies an easy prey for conquest.

As a result Egypt's culture provided a tremendous stability over the centuries that was difficult for other nations to disturb. It not only was a dependable source of wealth for the people of God to

periodically plunder, it also provided a safe cocoon for the family of Abraham as it grew from a small tribe to a great Nation, preparing for the day when it would move out and take over Canaan.

Mesopotamia, on the other hand, was a continual turmoil of nations, wars, ambitious and ruthless kings, and continuously changing cultures. Whenever Israel had to deal with them, it inevitably meant trouble and disruption to their own way of life.

The Canaanites were, as we've seen, the descendants of Ham who inherited their ancestor's spiritual qualities – which means they were the “low life” of the area. Here is the land where their gods allowed and encouraged the sins of the flesh, the sacrifice of children, immorality and injustice and hedonism and all the sins that destroy a society. God had his eye on these people for a long time; he intended to punish them in due course and give their rich land to the descendants of Abraham. God's warning to the Israelites concerning the Canaanites, however, was always relevant – to avoid the sins of the Canaanites, to reject their false gods which promoted immorality, to destroy the “high places.” In other words, get rid of these pagans so that God's people wouldn't fall into the same sins.

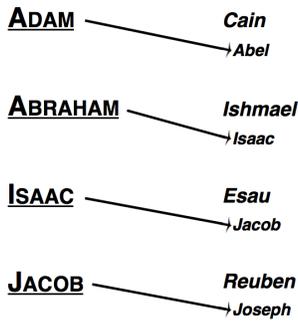
According to the timeline of the Middle East, there were almost 400 years between the Flood (Genesis 6) and when God called Abram and made his Covenant with him (Genesis 12). During these 400 years the predominant cultures that the entire Bible deals with, from Exodus to Revelation, were founded, developed, and took on their unique characteristics. As the Israelites themselves grew from a family to a Nation, and during their time in the

Promised Land under the Judges and the Kings, and while they were taken away to Exile and then returned to try to restore their Kingdom, they were always in the middle of these predominant cultures first described here in chapter 10. So this chapter provides the historical and cultural background to the story of the entire Bible.

**Not to the eldest** – Notice that even though the Biblical phrase describing Noah's sons is “Shem, Ham and Japheth” (verse 1), Shem is *not* the eldest son – Japheth is. See verse 21. Students should keep this in mind when reading genealogical lists, because it may mean rearranging the timelines if the firstborn son is not the first-named in the list.

But there's another element at work here. When it comes to the works of God, the eldest son was not usually God's choice to carry on the work. Shem was the son who settled in Mesopotamia, and it was from his descendants that Abraham was chosen and the line was developed for the Nation of Israel. In most cultures the firstborn son is the one chosen to be his father's heir; but in fact, we are going to see this principle set aside over and over when God chooses his own heirs. Shem was not Noah's firstborn son, but God chose his line to bring forth the Messiah. Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph weren't firstborn sons either, yet God deliberately rejected the firstborn in each case and chose younger sons to inherit the spiritual Covenant Promises. It seems to be a consistent theme in Genesis – rejecting the natural choice and choosing the unexpected.

**FIRSTBORN SONS**  
*Rejected by God*



If we were given a strict line of descent from father to firstborn in Genesis then we could indeed conclude that the Covenant was an inheritance passed down through one's physical family. But God has a different plan: he gives the inheritance to the spiritual descendants of Abraham, not necessarily to his physical sons. The justification for inheriting the Family treasure, then, is found in God's choice and not in man's.

The son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. (Galatians 4:23)

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12-13)

**The Bible's theological background** –

Whatever religion the sons of Noah may have gleaned from their father, it certainly didn't carry through to their descendants. If you do some reading in Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) religions you will find anything and everything in their morality and worship. The only common element in all these religions was that they were *not* like the religion

of Israel; they didn't even have the essence of a true understanding of God.

Archeologists and scholars like to believe that the Israelites learned their religion from the surrounding nations; they try to find points of contact between the doctrines and practices of the Old Testament and those of their neighbors, which gives them "proof" that Israel borrowed from other religions. But their arguments have been disappointing. As we saw with Cain and Abel, you can have the right elements of worship involved but with completely different meanings and purposes. Most religions have the concept of sacrifice, most have an ethical system, they have some sort of "God" they believe in, they have ceremonies and rituals they carry out in worship of their god. But that's like saying we all eat food and drink water and produce young and wear clothes – so therefore we must all share the same worldview. Not so: what is common between civilizations are the basic needs of humanity in general; what is different between Israel and the rest of the world was a life from another world, addressing the problems of mankind in a way that sinful man can't do for himself. That's why God brought the Israelites into the picture and *gave* them the solution to mankind's problems.

There were all sorts of gods in the ANE, representing forces of nature, the ideals of philosophy, the desires and lusts of the average person, the values of the culture, traditions built over centuries, political and economic forces, and so on. That there could have developed so many religious views, and that so many were incompatible and opposing views, is really an indication of the state of the heart of man. He really wants *someone* to give him what he wants in life, but he doesn't know where

to turn. If you offer him a God who demands holiness then he will of course reject that; he loves his sin too much to part with it.<sup>1</sup> But if you offer him a false god that will permit his sin and fill his life with this world's pleasures, you immediately have a loyal devotee. It doesn't matter at all that you can't produce proof that this god exists. All you have to do is show that it worked (sort of!) for one person, and the rest will go after it like the lottery.

What all these false religions *did* have in common was what the Apostle described as "having no hope and without God in the world." (Ephesians 2:12) The true God doesn't honor men simply because they have a religion; he will destroy them all in the end. That's why the argument that Israel borrowed from their pagan neighbors just doesn't hold up under examination; their experience of God was qualitatively different.

**Alienation** – As cultures develop, they don't solve their problems, or create their world, in the same way as their neighbors do. The differences between Babylon and Egypt, for example, were profound. What started out as a unified human race in Noah's day ended up as nations divided by languages, customs, values, histories and traditions – as well as problems solved badly through war and slavery and oppression and robbery and deceit. It doesn't take long for even family members to start quarreling with one another; given the fact that geography and language usually create

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<sup>1</sup> Which is why modern Liberals have so much problem with the authenticity of the Old Testament: like the pagan Canaanites, they don't want to have anything to do with Israel's God – if he's like the record describes him.

lines on the map that become difficult if not impossible to cross, the opportunities for alienation and warfare between cultures expand exponentially.

Here again we see a major factor in the shaping of human events. There has always been war on the earth – between neighbors, within communities, between nations, anywhere there is a potential for political differences and material gain. Most "achievements" in history have been possible only through the shedding of blood, of hatred and oppression and greed and the struggle for power. The story of a civilization might be fascinating to read about, and the things they accomplished and the artifacts they left are interesting to study, but the ordinary person would be appalled at the personal suffering and the price that most people have had to pay behind this sanitized historical record. The great powers didn't get where they were by being nice to each other. There is so much behind the simple record of nations in Genesis 10 that would disgust a decent person. But that's the way the world of sinners works.

The story of the Bible drops down into this savage wasteland between bitter enemies and shows us a new power on earth that can wage war against all of them and win. But we will also see that God brings a new agenda to the battlefield, one that the rest of the nations haven't been addressing. While men and nations fight over land and water rights and food and political control and treasure, God fights against *all* men over the most important of issues: **sin**.

God will win this battle. He intends to kill all of his enemies, dismantle all the world systems that have created this moral disaster that fills the earth, and set

up a new Kingdom that will supplant all men's governments and systems. He will reward those who are faithful to him, those who pursue righteousness and holiness according to his Law. None of the nations except Israel will be worth anything to him; they are all spiritually bankrupt, and people all through history have been focusing on all the wrong issues. When God sweeps through the earth there will be nothing left of Egypt or Babylon or Canaan or any of the nations recorded here in Genesis. He used them all in their time for his own purposes, but ultimately they are worthless to him. According to his standards, they contributed nothing to the plight of the human race except ignorance, misery and death. Not much of a legacy!

**No Covenant, no agreement** – We of course know the end of the story – that God introduced a new Solution to mankind's fundamental problems of sin and death. During this historical wasteland of chapter 10, however, we have no record of anybody who was aware of this Solution.

Many religions have the concept of another world where the spirit of a person goes after death. But this was only a hope, and a false one at that, because they made up their own rules on how to get there – which of course favored their sins that they didn't want to get rid of. We also have our own false notions about justifying our entrance into Paradise: "Surely God will weigh my good deeds against my bad ones!"

The world they wanted to go to, of course, would be "perfect" in contrast to the poverty and emptiness and harshness of this world – a "paradise" that made up for all the problems that a person went

through here. But there was no justification at all for their false hopes. Not only did they have a completely false notion of God's world, they had no proof that God would accept them. Their idea of the next world and the requirements for entry there was totally their own creation, a product of their own imaginations.

This is in stark contrast to the *Promise* that God made to Abraham and his descendants. God had not spoken to other peoples about the next life; they had absolutely no concept of it, no idea of what it would be like if there was one. But Abraham could see "the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God." (Hebrews 11:10) Israel's hope, their entire religion, was based on what they knew was fact – not philosophical systems that man invented to satisfy the curiosity. And their religion was something made by their Creator, not by their own devising, and revealed to them by God himself who of course is the only reliable source of such knowledge.

So again, pagan cultures made up their religions without any basis in fact. The reason was that they weren't God's children. He only reveals his inheritance to his own sons and daughters, through his Word, by means of his Prophets, and gives his Spirit as a guarantee of things to come. The blindness and ignorance of pagans is due to the fact (aside from their willful rebellion against him) that God hasn't shown them the truth. So when they despise our faith, there's no reason to take their arguments seriously. They're only proving that they've been rejected.

**The Point** – Anybody who is familiar with the Ancient Near East would immediately see the obvious in this chapter: here was a spiritual wasteland,

morally impoverished, filled with war and oppression and misery and destruction, with no Word or hope from God. They only achieved some semblance of civilization at the cost of untold millions. There were no answers in any of these cultures, in none of their religions, in none of their achievements, in none of their great works. What one civilization held up to be the standards of life, all the rest denied and opposed with their own solutions. In the end, civilizations rose and fell; men and women died; gods and idols crumbled into dust; gold and treasure transferred from one thief's hand to another; and lives were poured out in cities and battlefields and wastelands like worthless water. After centuries of efforts of individuals and nations, they accomplished nothing that God wanted to see done on earth. Hence there is no mention at all here about what these nations did. It's a sobering thought that

this is, for the most part, our legacy as well.

The profound silence in the Bible about the "achievements" and "greatness" of these nations shows us two things: *first*, we see the need for something more lasting and useful for the human soul than what they have given us. It's sobering to think that thousands of years, and millions of lives, were spent for nothing. The fact that they have been honored by philosophers and museums and historians doesn't earn them any privilege in the records of the Bible. *Second*, we are going to see the stark contrast between God's answers and man's best efforts. In chapter 12, all of this empty historical "achievement" is set aside and the real story of the Bible begins – with Abraham and his descendants. While untold millions lived their lives in futility, true life came to *only one* Family on earth.

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