

# Genesis 9:18-10:32

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## Lesson 6

This episode of Noah planting grapevines and making wine stands quite independent from the flood episode and has no counterpart in the traditions of Mesopotamia. This narrative is also separated in time by the period it would have taken for a newly planted vine to yield its grape harvest. This span is further indicated by the fact that Noah now has a fully-grown grandson (Canaan). This section deals with Noah as a hero of culture in introducing viticulture and who fell victim to the depravity of his progeny. It is likely that this story was well known to the original audience and because of that only the barest essence of the story is given here. The original, longer version is now lost to us and because of this a number of aspects of the account are left in obscurity.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the things left in obscurity are for instance is Ham guilty solely of voyeurism or is the description here a

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<sup>1</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, in The JPS Torah Commentary series (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), pp. 63-64.

euphemism for some act of gross indecency. We are not told why Noah curses Canaan rather than Ham. Clarification of this, the alliance between Shem and Japheth and the curse of servitude imposed upon Canaan would seem of critical importance and would appear to call for clarification, but none is offered. This section ends with the death of Noah and then opens a new ten-generation section that concludes with the birth of Abraham. The political overtones should be noted in this section with both Egypt and Canaan being highlighted as descendants of Ham (10:6). In Psalms 78:51 Egypt is described as “the tents of Ham” and in Psalms 105:23, 27 and 106:22 Egypt is once again identified with Ham.<sup>2</sup>

This connection between Ham, Egypt and Canaan will be used elsewhere and carry with it an overtone of sexual deviance as at Leviticus 18:3 where the text reads, **“You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow**

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<sup>2</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 64.

**their statutes.”<sup>3</sup>** What follows is then a list of sexual abominations, which is the reasoning behind the Canaanites being expelled from their land. The same sentiment seems to be expressed in Leviticus 20:23 after another list of the depraved practices of the Canaanites. This same thematic thread underlies other episodes in Genesis such as Pharaoh taking Sarai in Egypt (12:10-20); Abimelech’s taking of Rebekah in Canaan (20; 26:7-11); the sexual perversions of the Sodomites (19:5-8); Dinah’s experience in Shechem (34); the offenses of Er and Onan the sons of Judah’s Canaanite wife (38) and finally the attempted seduction of Joseph by Potiphar’s wife (39). This indicates that a major role of this section is to introduce the theme of the depravity of the descendants of Ham who also are the rivals of Israel.<sup>4</sup>

The role of Japheth, who acts in concert with Shem, is also highlighted, and not as Shem’s rival, and to whom the Canaanites are to be subjugated. According to the genealogy

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<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Le 18:3). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

<sup>4</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 64.

Japheth is the ancestor of the tribes associated with the Aegean and Anatolia. This suggests that at some point there is an invasion from the peoples of the Aegean and Anatolia, which seems to connect to the historical event of the invasion of the sea peoples of the east Mediterranean. These people first attacked Egypt around 1220 B.C. during the reign of Merneptah, and then again in 1175 B.C. during the reign of Ramses III. It was as a result of these invasions that the Philistines and others from the Aegean settle in the coastal regions of Canaan. This happens about the same time as Israel is invading Canaan from the east. The Canaanites were being attacked from the east and the west and this would lead to the total collapse of their civilization in the region that Israel would come to occupy.<sup>5</sup>

This is most likely a part of what is being alluded to in this narrative. This reinforces the central message of this section which is that God is continually directing the fate of the peoples of the earth and that their fate is bound up with

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<sup>5</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 64.

their moral state.<sup>6</sup>

**18 The sons of Noah who went out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan.**

In this verse we are introduced to material that at this point seems irrelevant but which will be crucial to understanding why Noah later curses Canaan.<sup>7</sup> The emphasis shifts here from Noah to his sons and future generations. The information that follows is meant to indicate the piety and virtue of the Shemites and the Japhethites in contrast to the Hamites that include such people as the Egyptians, Babylonians and the Canaanites. Noah's descendants carry on the seed of both of the Serpent and of the woman.<sup>8</sup> The struggle between good and evil that began in the Garden continues and a demonstration of this can now be seen in the offspring of Noah. Several lessons are embedded in the narrative that is unfolding here. Many times we rapidly skip over the genealogical

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<sup>6</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 65.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis A Commentary* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2001), p. 147.

sections of Genesis and fail to comprehend the messages that they contain. One of these lessons is that the immoral actions of the father tend to carry over to their offspring. A second lesson is that the peace and prosperity of a people cannot be separated from their moral character as a whole. God chooses to bless the morally upright and to curse the morally deviant.

**<sup>19</sup> These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was peopled.**

The command of God, “to be fruitful and multiply” was indeed carried out by those who were saved through the ark.<sup>9</sup>

**<sup>20</sup> Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard.**

The phrase describing Noah as “a man of the soil” implies something that was well known about him and links back to 5:29. The text that follows will indicate that Noah was not only the father of viticulture but also the father of viniculture (growing grapes for wine). The Egyptians

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<sup>9</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, in the Word Biblical Commentary Series (Waco TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), p. 198.

ascribe the original cultivation of grapes to Osiris; the Greeks to Dionysius. This story marks a notable departure from other Mesopotamian accounts in that it assigns the origin of wine to postdiluvian times rather than antediluvian times.<sup>10</sup> Wine was considered of major importance because it uniquely cheers, comforts and gladdens the heart (Judges 9:13; Psalms 104:15). It was considered a major breakthrough in dealing with the curse of the soil, which brought forth sorrow and pain because it failed to easily yield produce as it once had.<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting that the origin of the grape vine has it originating in Armenia, which is the landing point of the ark. The vine, which brings comfort and cheer, also proves to be a mixed blessing.<sup>12</sup>

**21 He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and he lay uncovered in his tent.**

Brief and to the point scripture gets directly to the issue and leaves out the lurid details. This account seems to

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<sup>10</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 65.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis A Commentary*, p. 147.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 198.

go against the description of Noah as “righteous and blameless among his contemporaries” (6:9)? The contrast here is so striking that it has caused some to suggest that the material here and the material of chapter six come from two different sources.<sup>13</sup> The text, however, appears to attach no blame to Noah in this account as the verse that follows will demonstrate, after all he was in the privacy of his tent.<sup>14</sup> Wine is seen as one of God’s gifts to man (Psalms 104:15) and every burnt offering had to be accompanied by a libation of wine (Numbers 15:5-10), and Deuteronomy 14:26 encourages its purchase at the festivals. The vine would become one of Israel’s national symbols (Isaiah 5:1-7; Mark 12:1-11).<sup>15</sup> Another issue is that Noah had no way of knowing the affect that wine would have upon himself as he is the first to drink it.

**22 And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside.**

The earliest postbiblical traditions take the account

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<sup>13</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 198.

<sup>14</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 198.

here quite literally as being about the voyeurism of Ham. The indication being that Ham lacked filial respect and modesty by leaving his father in this uncovered situation and then gossiping about what he had seen. Some however, have seen the verbs of verse 24 and the severity of Noah's reaction as a suggestion that the Torah has sanitized an extremely repugnant act perpetrated by Ham. Rabbinic sources are divided as to the exact nature of the offense with speculation being on the one hand that Ham castrated his father or committed sodomy with him. The idea of Noah being castrated might be supported by the fact that Noah has no children after the flood.<sup>16</sup>

I suspect that the more ancient tradition is much more likely to be the correct interpretation of this verse. More modern societies have tended to lessen the importance of honoring parents and failed to recognize that even when parents are disgracing themselves there is a duty on the part of the children to aid them (Deuteronomy 27:15-16; Exodus

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<sup>16</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 66.

21:15, 17; Deuteronomy 21:18-21; Mark 7:10).<sup>17</sup> The respect and honor shown to ancestors is very important in the Near East.

**<sup>23</sup> Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness.**

Shem and Japheth act in a totally different manner to Ham and I think here this verse reiterates that voyeurism is likely in view as they make so much effort not to look upon their “father’s nakedness.” Note the contrast between the very brief account of the wrongdoing and the longer more drawn out account of the good behavior of Shem and Japheth. The account is drawn out so that the focus of attention is on the positive behavior rather than upon the negative behavior.<sup>18</sup> This is perhaps something that much of our public media and Hollywood could learn from as they continue to spew forth the sordid details of all sorts of

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<sup>17</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 199.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 200.

depravity and in so doing promote rather than hinder such behavior.

**24 When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him,**

This section gives the first example of the genre of parental blessing and cursing that will be featured again at 27:4, 27-29, 39-40 and especially in chapter 49. It should be noted that the order the names have been given in has been Shem, Ham and Japheth: this order has has been given five times and this order clearly does not indicate order of birth. In 10:21 it is explicitly stated that Shem is elder brother of Japheth, which would make Ham the youngest brother.<sup>19</sup>

**25 he said,**

**“Cursed be Canaan;**

**lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.”**

The text is silent as to why Canaan is cursed and not Ham. Speculation has been that in the fuller account the word Father of Canaan was included in the text and that

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<sup>19</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 66.

Canaan was somehow involved in the wrongdoing here.<sup>20</sup>

There are other explanations that do not require emendation of the text that are worth noting. First, *Midrash Bershith Rabbati* 36:7 points out that God had recently pronounced a blessing on Noah and all of his sons (9:1) so that Noah could not possibly speak against the blessing given by God. Secondly, there may be an element of what might be described as mirroring punishment: Noah's youngest son sinned against him and so it was in some manner appropriate that Ham's youngest son would be punished for his father's wickedness. Third, the sons of Noah embody in some sense the character of their descendants. The Canaanites were notorious in the Old Testament for their aberrant sexual practices. Thus Noah's curse would then represent God's curse upon the Canaanites.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps it is not simply one or the other that best serves as an explanation for why Ham was cursed but a

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<sup>20</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 66.

<sup>21</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 201.

combination of some or all of the explanations. It is appealing to me to combine 1 and 3, but there may actually be an element of 2 that is correct as well.

**<sup>26</sup> He also said,**

**“Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem;**

**and let Canaan be his slave.**

It is of note that Noah does not appear to have the power to make his blessings to come about and likely does not expect that he has the inherent power to empower the curses either. He calls upon God to invoke the blessing here and he connects the curse in the same vein; he calls upon God to empower these desires for his progeny.

**<sup>27</sup> May God make space for Japheth,**

**and let him live in the tents of Shem;**

**and let Canaan be his slave.”**

This blessing makes a play off of the meaning of the name Japheth, which means, “may God enlarge Japheth.” The next part of the blessing has been interpreted in a variety of ways: one is that Japheth was to dwell in the tents of Shem and the other, which is the old Jewish interpretation

is that God is to dwell in the tents of Shem. It is likely that the reference is actually to Japheth dwelling in the tents of Shem as this section is meant to be a blessing to Japheth and not to Shem. The use of the plural term “tents” also is perhaps suggestive that a group of people is dwelling among Shem and not a singular God.<sup>22</sup>

**28 After the flood Noah lived three hundred fifty years.**

These next two verses complete the genealogical record of Noah. His descendants are not listed here because they are listed in the next chapters through his sons.

**29 All the days of Noah were nine hundred fifty years; and he died.**

Noah dies, unlike the heroes in the Mesopotamian accounts that were granted immortality he dies like those before him have died. The results of separation from God still prevail in this newly recreated world and death is still a part of the world of men.

This next chapter begins a new section and provides

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<sup>22</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, pp. 202-203.

an explanation for why God chose Israel over other nations and why He is going to use them as an instrument to punish and even destroy Egypt and Canaan in particular. This would provide strong motivation for Israel in the coming struggles to endure because they represent God's hand of judgment in the struggle between good and evil. As we know this is a great honor and also a tremendous responsibility that has often proven difficult for Israel because God's expectations of Israel are high.

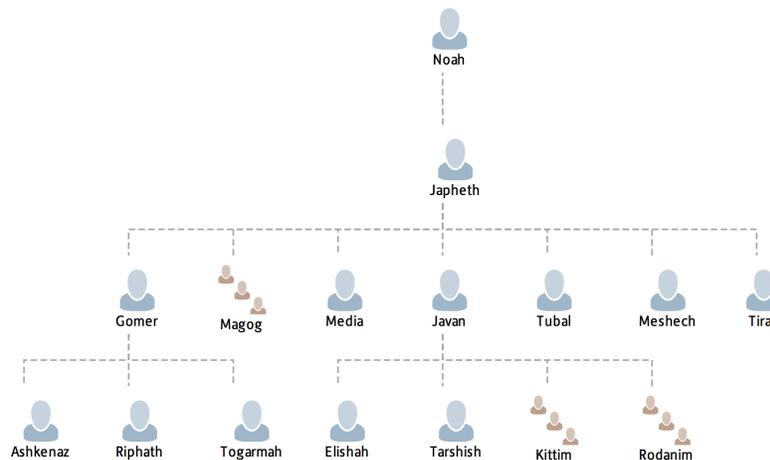
**10 These are the descendants of Noah's sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth; children were born to them after the flood.**

Though at first sight this "table of nations" appears to be very similar to the genealogies that have gone before there are notable differences. First, no ages are mentioned, unlike the practice at 5:1-32 and 11:10-32. Second, there are many names that appear to be personal names while others are the names of places. In this table "sons of" or "fathered" might well be referring to a people's political or geographical affiliation rather strictly speaking their

genealogical connections. It should however be noted that when speaking of Israel the idea is that they are descended from a singular line. All men are indeed to sons of Adam and at the same time sons of Noah.<sup>23</sup>

This chapter, and what follows afterward in chapter eleven is very much a part of the preamble leading to the real focus of this book, which is Abraham and his descendants. The importance of Shem in this table of nations is apparent.

**<sup>2</sup>The descendants of Japheth: Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech, and Tiras.**



<sup>23</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 215.

I am not going to look at each of these names in detail, largely because of the very speculative nature of much of what is written regarding them. The name “Magog” however is of interest since it is linked with “Gog” based on Ezekiel 38 and 39. This linkage of names came to be associated figuratively with the final war that is to be the prelude of the messianic age. The name “Magog” has not yet turned up in sources outside the biblical text. It is however clear from the text of Ezekiel that the land of “Magog” was thought to be in the furthest reaches of the north, which might correspond today with southern Russia or Asia.<sup>24</sup>

### **<sup>3</sup> The descendants of Gomer: Ashkenaz, Riphath, and Togarmah.**

Since the Middle Ages Jews have used the term “Ashkenaz” as a name for Germany.<sup>25</sup>

### **<sup>4</sup> The descendants of Javan: Elishah, Tarshish, Kittim, and Rodanim.**

The term Tarshish remains one of the most enigmatic

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<sup>24</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 70.

<sup>25</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 70.

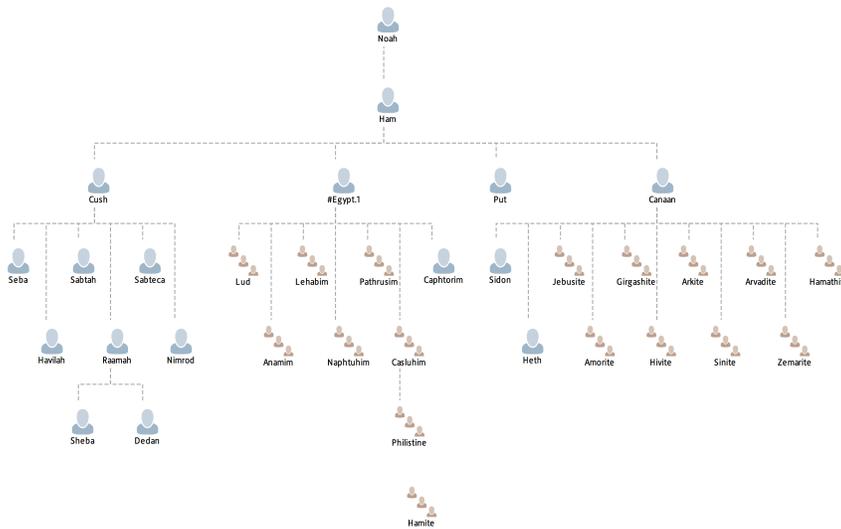
in scripture and may refer either to ships capable of sailing the open ocean, “an oar” or refer to the “wine dark” color as a description of the sea.<sup>26</sup> The names change usage throughout the long history of the Bible, but they were meant to convey to Israel the spread of humanity across the face of the world. The exact meaning of these names is highly problematic and any solutions are highly problematic as these names appear to have changed meanings throughout their history making precise identification an impossible task for us in our current state of knowledge.

**<sup>5</sup> From these the coastland peoples spread. These are the descendants of Japheth in their lands, with their own language, by their families, in their nations.**

**<sup>6</sup> The descendants of Ham: Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan.**

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<sup>26</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 71.



**<sup>7</sup> The descendants of Cush: Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Raamah, and Sabteca. The descendants of Raamah: Sheba and Dedan.**

**<sup>8</sup> Cush became the father of Nimrod; he was the first on earth to become a mighty warrior.**

**<sup>9</sup> He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; therefore it is said, “Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the LORD.”**

This individual has not been identified with any known individual in the ancient world, but he obviously left

some kind of mark on the memory of Israel.<sup>27</sup> He does not appear to be a positive character in Israel's memory. He may have been a well-known villain who opposed Israel.

**<sup>10</sup>The beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, and Accad, all of them in the land of Shinar.**

There is then an account that entails great civilizations of the ancient world starting with Babylon and moving into Assyria.

**<sup>11</sup>From that land he went into Assyria, and built Nineveh, Rehoboth-ir, Calah, and**

**<sup>12</sup>Resen between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city.**

**<sup>13</sup>Egypt (Mizraim) became the father of Ludim, Anamim, Lehabim, Naphtuhim,**

**<sup>14</sup>Pathrusim, Casluhim, and Capthorim, from which the Philistines come.**

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<sup>27</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 73.

**<sup>15</sup> Canaan became the father of Sidon his firstborn, and Heth, <sup>16</sup> and the Jebusites, the Amorites, the Girgashites,**

**<sup>17</sup> the Hivites, the Arkites, the Sinites,**

**<sup>18</sup> the Arvadites, the Zemarites, and the Hamathites.**

**Afterward the families of the Canaanites spread abroad.**

**<sup>19</sup> And 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.**

**<sup>20</sup> These are the descendants of Ham, by their families, their languages, their lands, and their nations.**

A part of giving this history is going to be to indicate the reasoning for this people to be displaced from the Promised Land and to give an indication of the depth and extent of their depravity.

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

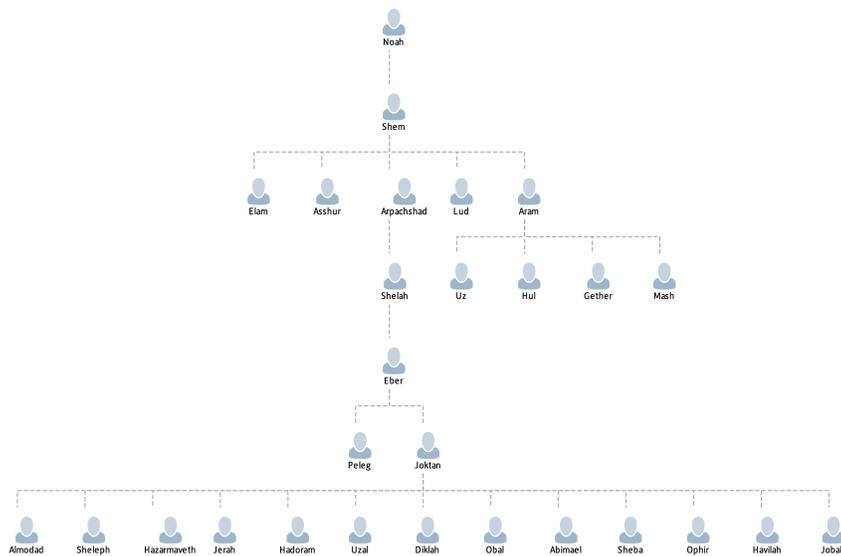
Although Eber is the fourth generation from Shem he receives special mention because he is both the ancestor of Israel and others with whom they are intertwined.

According to the later genealogies in Genesis these include the Arameans, Ammonites, Moabites, Midianites, the Ishmaelite tribes and the Edomites. One might expect these people to all be called “Hebrews,” but it is only the line of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob that is designated as Hebrew after their ancestor Eber. Because of this some have speculated that the term Eber is the name of a region and not an individual.<sup>28</sup> This view however differs considerably from that convey in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* where the text has “To Shem also *a son* was born. He is the father of all the children of the *Hebrews*, the brother of Japheth, great *in the fear of the Lord*.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 78.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, in *The Aramaic Bible* series, Vol. 1B (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 48.



**<sup>22</sup> The descendants of Shem: Elam, Asshur, Arpachshad, Lud, and Aram.**

**<sup>23</sup> The descendants of Aram: Uz, Hul, Gether, and Mash.**

**<sup>24</sup> Arpachshad became the father of Shelah; and Shelah became the father of Eber.**

**<sup>25</sup> 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.**

**<sup>26</sup> Joktan became the father of Almodad, Sheleph,  
Hazarmaveth, Jerah,**

**<sup>27</sup> Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah, <sup>28</sup> Obal, Abimael, Sheba,**

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

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

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

**<sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup>**

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<sup>30</sup> *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ge 9:18–10:32). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

## Synopsis

This section primarily serves the function of differentiating the descendants of Noah into 2 camps. This will serve to prepare Israel for the future conquest of Canaan while it also helps in dealing with the separation anxiety that Israel has regarding the life that has been left behind in Egypt. The genealogical materials serve as a stark reminder that God expects certain standards and at this point even without announcing those standards the way is prepared for the giving of the Law.

This section makes clear that God is in control of human destiny and that He can be expected to reward acceptable behavior while at the same time he can be expected to punish unacceptable behavior. Through the material here these lessons can be couched in such a way that individual responsibility is place in a subservient position to the family. Those who selfishly pursue their own well being without regard for their offspring can expect that their offspring will suffer because of their poor decisions.

Making good, righteous decisions is both expected and encouraged. Let there be no misunderstanding good behavior will be rewarded while poor decisions will bear heavy consequences not only in results but also in relation to their standing before God.

## **Main Points**

- God has expectations with regard to standards of behavior.
- There are consequences to making the wrong choices that affect not only the one who makes the wrong choices, but their descendants.
- God punishes the wicked.