

Robert Vannoy, Old Testament History, Lecture 17

Curse on Canaan, Table of Nations, Babel

Curse on Canaan (Gen. 9:25-26)

We were discussing Genesis 9, the curse on Canaan, the latter part of the chapter. I made a few comments about the general situation there; we had gotten down to the content of the curse/blessing statements that Noah makes in verses 25-27. So that's where I want to pick up, and look at the content of those statements. We read in verse 25, Noah says, "Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants he shall be to his brethren." I think the idea of "servant of servants he will be to his brethren," means he will be a complete servant. He will subject to his brethren; it is an emphatic kind of formulation. So the question is who are his brethren? That's answered for us if you turn over to chapter 10 and look at the sixth verse. Chapter 10 is really a family tree of nations tracing back peoples to the three sons of Noah. You read in verse 6, "the sons of Ham: Cush, Mizraim, Put and Canaan." Genesis 9:26 says, "Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be to his brethren." His brethren are Cush, Mizraim and Put. Mizraim is the transliteration of the Hebrew term for Egypt. So Mizraim is the area of Egypt, Cush is often identified with Ethiopia, but on the other hand there is a Cush in Mesopotamia so there is a dispute as to whether Cush refers the people who settled in Mesopotamia or in Ethiopia. Put is probably East Africa or Southern Arabia, there's some dispute about that as well.

But I think the point that's being made here is that the descendants of Ham and these people, the Canaanites, being the one element we should really look at Genesis 10:15-20, to see who the Canaanites were. As we look at verses 15 and following, "Canaan was the father of Sidon his firstborn, and of the Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Girgashites, Hivites, Arkites, Sinites, Arvadites, Zemarites and Hamathites. Later the Canaanite clans scattered and the borders of Canaan reached from Sidon toward Gerar as far as Gaza, and then toward Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, as far as Lasha. The descendants of Canaan are those people who occupied what came to be known as the

land of Canaan that the Israelites eventually took over. If you read later in the conquest narratives you get that repetition of peoples, the Hivites, the Jebusites, the Gergashites, the Sinites and so forth.

The “*-im*” ending, I think it would be hard to analyze. If you go over to chapter 10 again to pick up on that, there were a lot of those *-im* endings, “And Mizraim begat Ludim, and Anamim, and Lehabim, and Naphtuhim.” I think the indication here is that these are really referring to peoples. Now whether there was some individual behind these peoples that bore the name in the singular that then becomes the plural is difficult to say. It’s quite possible. But over in chapter 10, generally you’re talking about peoples that come out of the progenitor. Like in verse 6, Ham is a progenitor but Cush, Mizraim and Put seem to be representative heads of peoples.

But the Canaanites as described in chapter 10, are the people who occupied the land of Canaan. I think fulfillment of this is adequately seen in the fact that the Canaanites were a very insignificant and subjected people in ancient times. Mesopotamia and Egypt were the great powers. Canaan was a sort of a cross where those two powers struggled for control and the Canaanites never became a major power in the ancient Near East. The first would be Canaan, the servant of servants to his brethren, Cush as Mesopotamia and Mizraim representing Egypt, that the Canaanites were subservient to the Mesopotamians and the Egyptians.

Line of Seth

When you go on to verse 26 you read, “Blessed be the Lord God of Shem, Canaan shall be his servant.” This is an interesting statement, “Blessed be the Lord God of Shem.” Why would it be put that way? It’s certainly not that Shem had anything to do with Yahweh. If God is blessed, it must be what God will do through Shem and its implications. Now this is the first time in Scripture that God is identified with some particular group of people. “The Lord God of Shem.” He’s identified in some special way with Shem. Now it seems to me that the implication of this is the line of Shem is to be the line through which the seed that was promised in Genesis 3:15 will ultimately come.

Now, of course, in chapter 11 you trace the line of Shem down to Abraham, and then, from Abraham on. But Canaan shall be his servant, that is Canaan shall be the servant of Shem. And you can't help but think by way of fulfillment of the conquest, because it's out of the line of Shem, through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, through the descendants of Jacob, the Israelites eventually come in and take the land of Canaan, and subject the Canaanites. So that when you get into the book of Kings, for example, you read in 1 Kings 9, "And all the people that were left of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, which were not of the children of Israel, their children that were left after them in the land, whom the children of Israel also were not able utterly to destroy, upon those did Solomon levy a tribute of bond service unto this day." So you not only have the conquest, where many of these people were destroyed at the time of the conquest, but those that were left over were subject to forced labor. You really have a prophetic statement there, remember we're in the time of Noah. So these statements have far reaching implications.

Line of Japheth

Remember as I said, these aren't statements of wishes or anger. They're really prophetic. The Spirit was speaking through Noah in these statements. Genesis 9:27, "God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant." Now certainly the first statement is rather clear, Japheth shall be enlarged. There's some discussion whether that statement has to do with numbers of people or geographically, I'm not sure you can settle that altogether. In Genesis 10:2-5 you read, "The sons of Japheth: Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech and Tiras. The sons of Gomer: Ashkenaz, Riphath and Togarmah. The sons of Javan: Elishah, Tarshish, the Kittim and the Rodanim." Now the Madai or the Medes are in Mesopotamia. Javan is generally associated with the Greeks over in that peninsula where Greece is presently located. Some of the others are hard to identify. But in any case, we read that "God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem."

Now there's a question as to what that phrase means, "dwell in the tents of Shem."

Some commentators say that it indicates sustenance or protection. Japheth will dwell in the tents of Shem. Shem will in some way give sustenance and protection to Japheth. I think that Ross has a better idea. Ross suggests that “enlarge” relates to territory, in the phrase “God shall enlarge Japheth.” Dwell in the tents of Shem implies conquest of the territory by the Japhites. Conquest, I think there’s good basis for that because in Psalm 78:55 you read, “He cast out the heathen also before them, and divided them an inheritance by line, and made the tribes of Israel to dwell in their tents.” Now, of course, this isn’t talking about Japheth, and Shem, it’s talking about the conquest of the land of Canaan. You notice what it says, “He made the tribes of Israel to dwell in their tents.” And to dwell in their tents in that context seems to imply conquest. 1 Chronicles 5:10, it says “And in the days of Saul they made war with the Hagarites, who fell by their hand: and they dwelt in their tents throughout all the east land of Gilead.” And it sounds like again, what is implied is conquest. They defeated these people and took over their territory. So that it would seem the prophecy here is that Japheth will be enlarged and he will conquer Shem, he will dwell in the tents of Shem.

Ross says a real political conquest is intended, and you see that initially in the Greeks and Romans. And the Greeks and Romans, initially Alexander pushes eastward and takes over the land of Canaan, among many other countries. Then after the breakup of his kingdom, eventually the Romans took over. In the Roman conquest of Canaan, you have the fulfillment of that. However, the implication of that is this, it results in religious blessings. Because its through contact with the Semites, and with the Jewish people that the Greeks and Romans ultimately come to the knowledge of Christ. So God enlarges Japheth, and dwells in the tents of Shem, when eventually results in religious blessings for Japheth. So these are brief statements but they have long ranging implications and are very significant. Any Questions or Comments?

Return to Curse on Canaan

Do you mean, did he curse Canaan instead of Ham? I think the only thing you can say about that is that Noah perceived that in some way the traits reflected in Ham were

also in Canaan but perhaps to a higher degree. What we find is that the Canaanites were a people that were characterized by a great deal of immoral behavior as is described in Leviticus and in other places in the Old Testament. It seems to me, he perceives something to that effect, but I can't be sure, there's no explanation here, you just have to make an assumption of that sort.

Yes, Noah woke from his wine and knew what his younger son had done to him, and then he says, "Cursed be Canaan." The NIV Study Bible Note there says, "Some maintain that Ham's son was to be punished because of his father's sin." But then it goes on to say that it is better to hold that Canaan and his descendants were to be punished because they were going to be even worse than Ham. See Leviticus 18, I think the latter is probably more appropriate.

F. The Table of Nations in Genesis 10

Let's go on to F. "The table of nations in Genesis 10," I'm not going to go through this in any detail, I might mention there's a good article on Genesis 10 in the *New Bible Dictionary*. It attempts to identify a lot of these people. There's a lot of obscurity and discussion with many of these names. But, if you want to work further on that, you can look at that article. I think that's in your bibliography. About a third of the way down on page 11, T. T. Mitchell, "Nation, table of-" in the *New Bible Dictionary*.

In chapter 10 where you have this table of the nations, you have something unique in ancient literature. There's no parallel to this, not as with the flood account, where you have some parallels to creation stories, but there's no parallel to chapter 10, where the unity of the human race is traced back to the original ancestors. In this case, it's out of the three sons of Noah that all these people have come. The chapter is really an enlargement of verses 18 and 19 of chapter 9. See 18 and 19, just before that interlude of the incident with Noah. Verses 18 and 19 say, "And the sons of Noah, that went forth of the ark, were Shem, and Ham, and Japheth. Ham is the father of Canaan." Canaan is of particular interest, because it is the Canaanites that are going to have contact with the Israelites. "These are the three sons of Noah: and of them was the whole earth overspread." Chapter

10 explains that statement. How was the whole earth overspread from the three sons of Noah? So it's a family tree of peoples or nations, not so much of individual persons. In many cases, the nations began with a certain person. It gets back to that question asked earlier.

Some of the nations are fairly well known, and some of them are very obscure. In verse 6 you have Mizraim, that's Egypt. In verse 22 you have Elam and Asshur, which are examples of nations that are well known. There are a number of those plural forms that we already mentioned with that "*-im*" ending. You don't find that kind of thing in genealogies of individuals, but you have a number of them in this chapter. You also have the other type of form that you see for example in verse 16 and following, the Canaanites and the Jebusites. The "*-ite*" ending, the Amorites, the Gargasites, Hivites, Arkites, Sinites, and the Arvadites. That's like saying the Englishmen, or the Frenchmen or something of that sort. It's more an indication of peoples or nations than it is of individuals.

Nimrod

Now the one exception is in verse 8 and following, where you read Cush begat Nimrod. Now you remember the discussion of Cush being in Mesopotamia, at this point it seems clearly to be Mesopotamia, because it says, "Cush begat Nimrod." And that seems to be an individual, because "he began to be a mighty one in the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD: wherefore it is said, even as Nimrod the mighty hunter before the LORD. And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. Out of that land went forth Asshur, and built Nineveh." It seems to be that Mesopotamian region, and he appears to be a very significant individual, so significant that he's introduced in this table of nations. His name is Nimrod. There's been a lot of discussion as to who Nimrod was, and no solution really to identify him with some known historical figure. Some have proposed it was Naram Sin of Akkad which was about 2220 B.C. Finegan discusses Naram Sin but he doesn't discuss Nimrod on page 46 and following. I don't think we know who Nimrod was, but he must

have been a significant individual. There's an article in your bibliography, by W.H. Bithspen, "Who was Nimrod?" where he discusses some of the possibilities without a great deal of certainty and conclusion.

Who was the Initial Audience?

Now as far as the purpose of the chapter I've already mentioned it is to trace people back to the three sons of Noah. But it seems to be to give to those for whom this was first written the information of how the peoples that they knew related back to those three sons. Now, the question is to whom was this first written? And we can't be too certain about that. Notice a couple things about it though. The Flood had already taken place. Verse 1, "Now these are the generations of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth: and unto them were sons born after the flood." Nimrod was a known historical figure. Babylon and Nineveh were already established. You find that in verses 10 and 11. Sodom and Gomorrah had not yet been destroyed, because when the Canaanites are destroyed, their borders say, "when you go to Sodom and Gomorrah." And interestingly enough, the confusion of tongues had already occurred. Verse 13, "These are the sons of Shem, after their families, after their tongues, in their lands, after their nations." Now the tower of Babel story doesn't happen until chapter 11. But you see the sequence at this point. You're working with the three sons of Noah and how all this developed out of the three sons of Noah. The author's put that at the end of the story of Noah, before he's gotten to tell us about the tower of Babel. But all these peoples develop with their different tongues and languages, and, of course. This is subsequently described in chapter 11. So that someone suggested that this may well have been written at about the time of Abraham, and that would make sense. It would seem most of these peoples would have been known at about the time of Abraham (ca. 2000 B.C.).

How Did Moses Get His Information?

Moses had to work with sources, with the early material in the book of Genesis. Moses wasn't around at the time of Abraham or prior to the time of Abraham. How did

he get the information about this time, about Noah, for instance? How'd he get the information about Abraham? He must have had some material at his disposal. So I'm assuming that he worked with already written records of earlier times to compose the parts of the book of Genesis, well, all the book of Genesis for that matter. That's prior to the time of Moses because Moses comes on in the early chapters of Exodus. It could have been revealed. The Lord could have told him these things. That's a possibility. But it seems with the writing of Scripture generally, I mean if you look at the book of Kings, its clear that he worked with written sources. The book of Samuel, its clear that the author worked with sources. In Chronicles you have the writings of Samuel the prophet mentioned explicitly. What were the writings of Samuel the prophet? He must have kept some records of his time. The person that put together the book of Samuel must have used those records. So then its not something uncommon elsewhere in Scripture for the writers of books that survey long historical periods to utilize sources of information prior to their time. And in fact a millennium prior to Abraham. That's why you see, a lot of times, when you speak about sources, particularly to evangelicals, it sounds like some sort of concession to source criticism. This is quite a different thing than that. It's just that I think these historians researched their material. Much like a historian would do today. Now the Holy Spirit superintended that so that what they utilized and what they wrote was free from error. There's no problem using sources (cf. Luke 1:1-4). The problem comes when you start saying this book is composed of X number of sources and they're contradictory. Now like, a J document account of creation is different from a P document of creation. The two can't be harmonized. They are contradictory and they are not historically accurate or reliable. Then you have a real problem. Any other questions on the table of nations in Genesis 10?

G. The Tower of Babel and the Confusion of Tongues (Genesis 11:1-9)

That brings us to G. "The tower of Babel, and the confusion of tongues, Genesis 11:1-9." Let me read those verses, "The whole earth was of one language and speech." See now we go back prior to the time where all these people develop, "As men moved

eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, ‘Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly.’ They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.’ But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The LORD said, ‘If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.’ So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel--because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.”

Why Did God Intervene at the Tower of Babel?

Now what we find in that story is how the multiplicity of people is described in chapter 10. In chapter 10 as I mentioned, the difference in language is already referred to. So now we see what the cause of this division of people into many language groups was. I think we can say that the chapter is clearly intended to be taken as a record of something that actually happened, a historical occurrence. Many would say its myth or legend. Many would classify it, as we discussed earlier as an ethnological legend. You can use the story to explain why there are a lot of languages. But it's presented here as straightforward history. I think much of one's attitude of that question rests on one's basic attitude towards Scripture. Whether it presents it in a reliable, trustworthy fashion means it happened or it didn't. Scripture certainly claims to do that. There's no reason to suspect that it's not doing that here.

Now, the question arises, which is not so easy to answer, what was the tower that they were building? Why did God intervene? What was so disturbing about what they were doing? In most treatments of this, you will find the tower of Babel is associated with the ziggurats of Mesopotamia. You've probably seen pictures of those tiered kind of buildings, step pyramid-like structures that were built in Mesopotamia. There are various

theories about their purposes. The main theory is that it was the throne of the deity and the altar of the deity. It was sort of the mountain from which the deity would rule the world. Now if you remember reading in Finegan, he says on page 50, discussing the Third dynasty of Ur, which is 2000 B.C., he says, “The first king was Ur Namu, who took the new title king of Ur and Acad, whose mightiest work was the erection of the great ziggurat at Ur. The ziggurat which stood at Babylon and today’s Hammurabi, the house of Ur’s platform of heaven and earth. It became more famous and was remembered in biblical tradition as the Tower of Babel.” So he is saying that the ziggurat, built by Hammurabi, which would be about 1700 B.C., is what is remembered here in biblical tradition as the tower of Babel. But he says the ziggurat at Ur is the best preserved of all the monuments of this type and so forth. That would have to assume that the material here is a very legendary sort of thing, attached to the ziggurat that Hammurabi built about 1700 B.C. But we’re talking about something built way before 1700 B.C. This is back before this multiplicity of languages and peoples developed. So I don’t think there can be any connection between any present day existing ziggurat in Mesopotamia and the tower of Babel.

Purpose of the Tower of Babel

A lot of people try to explain the anger of the Lord on the basis that this was some sort of heathen worship that was being practiced on these ziggurats. It’s interesting if you look at the Hebrew word for “tower,” verse 4 says, “Go to, let us build us a city and a tower.” The Hebrew word is *migdol*. I’ll put it on the board for those of you who have taken Hebrew. If you look at the use of that term, you will find that its often-used in context of fortifications, defense towers. 2 Chronicles 26:9, “Moreover Uzziah built towers in Jerusalem at the corner gate, and at the valley gate, and at the turning of the wall, and fortified them. Also he built towers in the desert, and digged many wells: for he had much cattle.” It seems the purpose of these was military. In Deuteronomy, talking about the Canaanites, you read in 1:28, “Where shall we go up, our brethren have discouraged our hearts saying, The people are greater and taller than we; the cities are

great and walled up to heaven.” There you don’t have the word “tower” used, but you have cities that are walled, but they’re “walled up to heaven.” You see in Genesis 11:4, “let’s build a city and a tower whose top will reach up unto heaven.” It’s a similar kind of expression. You have that same expression, in Deuteronomy 9:1. “Thou art to pass over Jordan this day, to go in to possess nations greater and mightier than thyself, cities great and fenced up to heaven.” “Fortified up to heaven,” there are a number of other references that have towers that have the idea of fortification. Now, perhaps what is going on here in Genesis 11:4 is that Babylon and the people constructing this city wanted to make it a center for political power, and tyrannical kind of control for the rest of mankind. That’s just a suggestion, some sort of absolute control and dominion.

You notice in verse 4 it says not only let us make a tower that reaches unto heaven, but also let us make a name. They wanted to be people with a name. They wanted to be prominent people. That idea is traced back, you remember in chapter 4 already, verse 17, “And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bore Enoch: and he built a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Enoch.” That’s in the line of Cain. And in Genesis 6:4, when you’re in that account of the sons of God and the daughters of men, “There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bore children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.” So there’s offspring of these polygamous relationships of the city state kings if that’s the way you understand Genesis 6:4, “men of the name.” It seems like it was already along with violence in the earth. So it seems to me it may be that kind of an idea is involved in chapter 11 in building the tower of Babel, that is, the exultation of human might apart from God. So the purpose of the tower would be satisfaction of human pride, an attempt to extend tyrannical rule and God intervenes. He stops the construction of that and scatters the people.

Confusion of the Languages

Now that brings us to this confusion of language question because God says,

“Behold, the people are one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.’ So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they stopped building the city.” The question often asked is, to what extent do the results of the study of languages correspond with Genesis 11:1-9? Those who study languages will tell us that language is developed by a long slow process and all languages are in flux, so to speak. They’re all in a constant process of change and you can see that today. You can see that if you look over a period of years with certain languages. We can see that with English, in the way it’s changed in the last several hundred years. Now certainly Genesis 11:1-9 doesn’t exclude that sort of development of language, but it does raise an important point of interpretation, which is does verse 7 provide the cause for the dispersion? Verse 7 says, “Let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the LORD scattered them.” Is it the confusion of language that causes the dispersion, or does verse 8 provide the means for the accomplishment of the confusion of tongues in verse 7? In other words, is it because the people became scattered and then as they became isolated and settled down in different places, gradually different languages evolved? Does verse 7 cause the dispersions in verse 8 or does verse 8 provide the means for the accomplishment of the confusion of tongues in verse 7? The most common view, and the one most accepted for us, is that God’s immediate act was the confusion of tongues by some unspecified means.

We don’t know how he did that. But there was an immediate act of God, “let us go down, and there confound their language.” He did that. We don’t know exactly how, but he confused the tongues of the people so they couldn’t understand each other. That caused the dispersion.

You get people who can’t communicate, and those who can communicate get together and gradually you have dispersion. So the divine intervention would be the confusion of tongues. Dispersion was the result. If that’s the case, the present processes

of language development isn't involved here, so there's divine intervention.

An alternative possibility that some have argued for is God's immediate act of scattering. Again by some unspecified means, but he scattered the people. He dispersed them and then the languages were confused according to presently observable processes, as the people were separated. So the divine intervention would be in the scattering. Linguists tell us that separation of two groups of people who speak the same language, who are isolated, will result in time with two unintelligible languages, which is interesting. That's been demonstrated, separation of people with the same tongue, given a certain amount of time will have mutually unintelligible languages. So that's a second proposal that some have made. Perhaps both were involved.

A third proposal is that perhaps both were involved. Perhaps God intervened, confused the tongues that caused them to scatter, and then that process of the natural differentiation of languages picks up and continues. Now, linguists who study languages tell us that there are so many languages, and they differ so widely, that they can't be traced back to an original unity. They can, however, be traced back to a relatively small number of original stock languages. That seems to fit with this, if God confused tongues, we don't know how many languages, but it could have been a relatively small number and then all these hundreds and thousands of languages that we know today developed subsequent to that.

In this book, *Modern Science and the Christian Faith*, it's on your bibliography, there's a comment in the article by a professor, right in the middle, "Christians and Anthropology," on language that's interesting. They point out all languages today through all of recorded history have been undergoing ceaseless and steady change. It's more accelerated in some than in others, but all languages are constantly changing. Furthermore, all language or dialect groups which do not make up a homogenous or interacting community are changing in such a way to become mutually less and less intelligible. Thus, in some areas in Sudan in Africa within a few hours walk of each other, speak languages mutually unintelligible, although both are derived from the same original language. This process is continued through history. So that languages are as

different as, now I'm going to read a long list of languages, as the modern languages of English, German, Dutch, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Irish, Scottish, Gaelic, Welsh, Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, Bohemian, Portuguese, French, Italian, Romanian, Albanese, Greek, Iranian, Hindu, not to mention the now extinct classical languages from which many of these are derived, Latin and Sanskrit. Plus many other less well known, can all be shown to stem from regular processes of change from the same language called Indo-European by linguists. Indo-European and Hittite, now extinct, can likewise be shown to be derived from still older languages. You see, you get these stocks of languages from back into an original group, a rather small group of languages. It's a rather amazing thing.

Of course, that process today has probably been curtailed somewhat with modern communication. English is becoming a global language. I think that's interesting. Stigers points out in his commentary on Genesis, which is also there in the middle of page 11, that an Assyriologist has discovered that there is a very definite relationship between the languages of the natives of middle and south American, the pacific islands and Sumeria and Egyptian. So you see you move from Sumeria, Mesopotamia and Egypt to South America and the Pacific Islands. And find connections between the languages of these people. Any questions or comments?

Transcribed Johnathan Clancy
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt
Final edit by Rachel Ashley
Re-narrated by Ted Hildebrandt