

Genesis, Lecture 17: Curse on Canaan, Table of Nations, Babel

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Abstract

This lecture explores several key theological and historical themes in Genesis 9 through 11, starting with Noah's curse on Canaan and his blessings upon Shem and Japheth. It then analyzes the Table of Nations in Genesis 10 as a unique historical family tree of peoples, discussing the prominence of Nimrod and evaluating how Moses utilized written sources. Finally, the lecture examines the Tower of Babel narrative in Genesis 11, focusing on its architecture as a symbol of human pride and evaluating different linguistic theories regarding the confusion of tongues and subsequent dispersion of humanity.

Outline

I. Noah's Curse on Canaan and Blessings on Shem and Japheth (Genesis 9:25-27)

A. The Curse on Canaan (Genesis 9:25)

1. Meaning of "servant of servants": Complete, emphatic subjection to brethren.
2. Identification of Canaan's brethren in Genesis 10:6 (sons of Ham):
 - a. Mizraim (Egypt).
 - b. Cush (Mesopotamia or Ethiopia).
 - c. Put (East Africa or Southern Arabia).
3. Identification and geographical borders of Canaanites (Genesis 10:15-20):
 - a. Ancestors (Sidon, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Girgashites, Hivites, Arkites, Sinites, Arvadites, Zemarites, Hamathites).
 - b. Geographical expansion (Sidon to Gerar/Gaza, toward Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, to Lasha).
4. Historical fulfillment of the curse:
 - a. Lack of major power status in the ancient Near East.
 - b. Subservience as a buffer zone between Mesopotamia and Egypt.
 - c. Theological reason: Noah perceived Ham's traits in Canaan to a higher degree, anticipating Canaanite immorality (cf. Leviticus 18).

B. The Blessing on Shem (Genesis 9:26)

1. Theological phrasing: "Blessed be the Lord God of Shem" — first time Yahweh is identified with a specific group.
2. Theological implication: Shem's line is the vehicle for the promised seed of Genesis 3:15.
3. Genealogy tracing: Traced from Shem to Abraham (Genesis 11).
4. Historical fulfillment: Israel's conquest and subjection of Canaanites (e.g., Solomon's levy of bond service in 1 Kings 9).

C. The Blessing on Japheth (Genesis 9:27)

1. Enlargement of Japheth: Territorial and numerical expansion.
2. Meaning of "dwell in the tents of Shem":
 - a. Interpretation of sustenance or protection.
 - b. Interpretation of territorial conquest (supported by Psalm 78:55, 1 Chronicles 5:10).
3. Historical fulfillment: Greek (Alexander the Great) and Roman conquests of the land of Canaan.
4. Spiritual result: Contact with Semitic peoples leads Greeks and Romans to the knowledge of Christ.

II. The Table of Nations (Genesis 10)

A. Unique Character in Ancient Literature: Traces the unity of the human race back to Noah's sons without parallel.

B. Structural Nature: A family tree of peoples and nations rather than individual genealogies (marked by plural "-im" and gentilic "-ite" endings).

C. The Exception of Nimrod (Genesis 10:8-12):

1. Described as an individual, "a mighty hunter before the Lord."
2. Kingdom center in Mesopotamia (Babel, Erech, Accad, Calneh in Shinar; went to Assyria and built Nineveh).
3. Historical identification: Unresolved (proposals like Naram Sin of Akkad, ca. 2220 B.C.).

D. Chronological Indicators of the Table of Nations:

1. Written after the Flood.
2. Nimrod was a known historical figure and Babylon/Nineveh were established.
3. Written before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.
4. Written after the confusion of tongues (implied by division "after their tongues").
5. Overall timing: Likely compiled around the time of Abraham (ca. 2000 B.C.).

E. Methodological Implications for the Composition of Genesis:

1. Use of written sources: Moses used written records of earlier times to compose Genesis.
2. Biblical precedents: Common practice in Kings, Samuel, and Chronicles to use historical records.

3. Inerrancy and superintendence: Holy Spirit superintended Moses' use of source material to ensure error-free writing.
4. Contrast with secular source criticism (which claims sources are contradictory and unhistorical).

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

A. Narrative Overview (Genesis 11:1-4):

1. Initial state: One language and speech.
2. Migration: Eastward movement to a plain in Shinar.
3. Materials: Thoroughly baked brick (instead of stone) and tar (for mortar).
4. Goals: Build a city, erect a tower "to the heavens," make a name, and prevent dispersion.

B. Architectural Interpretation of the Tower:

1. The popular ziggurat theory: Step-pyramids of Mesopotamia as the throne/altar of deities.
2. Critiques of the Hammurabi association: Association with Hammurabi's ziggurat (1700 B.C.) is too late; Babel pre-dates the language split.
3. The fortification theory: Use of the Hebrew term migdol.
 - a. Often refers to military or defense towers (e.g., Uzziah in 2 Chronicles 26:9).
 - b. Idiom "to heaven" signifies high fortification (Deuteronomy 1:28, 9:1).
 - c. Suggests Babel was intended as a centralized hub for political and tyrannical control.

C. The Nature of the Sin and Divine Intervention (Genesis 11:5-9):

1. Exultation of human might and pride independent of God.
2. Pursuit of "renown" and "a name" (comparisons to Genesis 4:17, 6:4).
3. God's scattering of humanity as a judgment against tyrannical unity.

D. Linguistic and Scientific Considerations:

1. Mechanisms of the confusion of tongues (Theories):
 - a. Theory 1: Immediate divine confusion of tongues leading to dispersion.
 - b. Theory 2: Immediate scattering by God, leading to language differentiation through isolation.
 - c. Theory 3 (Combined): Initial confusion of tongues by God causing dispersion, followed by continued natural differentiation.
2. Correlation with modern linguistics:
 - a. Languages cannot be traced to a single original unity, but to a small number of original stock languages (e.g., Indo-European).
 - b. Isolation and separation of non-interacting communities naturally produce mutually unintelligible languages (e.g., Sudan, American/Pacific/Sumerian links).

c. Languages undergo constant, ceaseless change.