The Table of Nations (Genesis 10) — A Socio-cultural Approach

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I

Whenever a scholar settles down to investigate the Biblical Table of Nations (Gen 10), he soon finds that the most intriguing question is: what was the criterion according to which the nations and countries were distinguished and divided into three main groups? Why would a scribe be tempted to link up Cush (an African people) with Nimrod, a hero belonging to the Mesopotamian world?

This question, asked time and again, is the result of two factors: (1) The warranted and plausible presupposition that the classification of the ancient world into three groups must follow a certain leading principle, each group being definable by its own characteristics and peculiarities. (2) The attempts of the scholars to trace the leading principle, and the various proposals offered by them, stem from the very fact that the answer given by the Biblical author in the text itself is not satisfactory. From verses 5, 20, 31 we can learn that the author of Gen 10 employs, or rather mentions, several criteria concurrently: ethnopolitical, linguistic, and geographic; thus causing confusion to anybody who is looking for a single guiding rule. Moreover, the alleged principles of classification cannot be employed simultaneously since each of them entails different and even contradictory ways of grouping. If we take, for example, the linguistic criterion, one should link together the cities in Mesopotamia with Aram, Canaan and the sons of Eber, but not with Cush and Egypt.

The principle of ethnic affinity has to be abandoned since there is no ethnic connection between Elam and Aram, or between Egypt and the great cities of Mesopotamia. The land and peoples are not enumerated in geographical sequence, or according to geographical proximity. Lud, in Asia Minor (Jes 66,19) is grouped with Shem (in verse 13 with Ham) and not, as one would expect, with Japheth. The linking of Ashur with Sheva (verses 22, 27), negates any ground for the contention that geographical order is the leading criterion for the threefold division of mankind.

The untenability of the three aforementioned criteria served as an impetus for the scholars to search after another, more appropriate guiding principle. Nevertheless, the various criteria proposed by the scholars could not illuminate it satisfactorily. The conjecture that the Biblical author distinguished the peoples according to colour of skin, after the manner of the Egyptians, is inapplicable. The theory that the Table was based upon political-historical considerations, as previously suggested by Wilhelm Spiegelberg, is applicable only for part of the list (i.e. Egypt and the areas predominantly under Egyptian influence), and it cannot be rigorously carried through the whole text, nor can it be safely used as an argument for fixing the date of the Table. For the same reason, the suggestion that the Table of Nations is a list of states and nations enumerated according to the political sympathies and antipathies is unsatisfactory.

The solution of the classical source criticism is that the Table of Nations, in its present form, is a redactional composition in which two literary sources are interwoven (i.e. J and P), with some very late additional interpolation.

The argument for this interlacing of two different sources is based on inner discrepancies, contradictions and differences in style. This textual analysis of the list is very convincing. Indeed, it is impossible, on the basis of the two sources theory (i.e. J and P) to lay down any strict rule concern-
ing the classification of mankind, but at the same time it bears a decisive argument according to which the present text is not a genuine composition of a particular author, but the work of a redactor. We fully agree that the author of the Table incorporated material from both J and P, but our contention is that the interlacing of two different sources is only one phase, and a late one, in the long history of the development of the tradition underlying the composition, or rather, the compilation of Genesis 10.

It is widely recognized that Genesis 10 is a late composition, probably not earlier than the 8th century B.C.E.12 The Table is an artificial composition in a genealogical pattern reflecting no reality in any historical period. The genealogy of Noah pretends to embrace the entire pre-Israelite world and its population,13 but at the same time, the ethnogeographical map which emerges from this enumeration of countries and nations cannot be assigned to any historical period. Moreover, the intention of the scribe to grasp the entire inhabited world both synchronically and diachronically in the framework of the belief that all mankind originated from one progenitor, using at the same time a tripartite pattern, resulted in a puzzling Table of Nations with a complex of inconsistent principles of division; hence the many remarks and suggestions proposed regarding the structure, meaning and historical background of this mysterious chapter.

II

A possible escape from this confusion and impasse may be provided by the suggestion which I intend to introduce here. This suggestion, though admittedly tentative, ignores the individual problems but focuses on the basic idea underlying the Table of Nations.

Simply stated, this article will hold that (1) the Table of Nations in its present form and content is the outcome of an old document which after a long process of transmission, updating and changing of the principle of classification has reached the form of the extant text in Gen 10.14 Using the argument for «original nucleus» of the Table, I am in league with J. Simons who has already claimed that «it seemed safe enough to assume a priori that the contents of Genesis X are probably made up of an original nucleus, and small or greater secondary elements».15 (2) That the proposed proto-

13 Westermann, Genesis, 680-681; Speiser, Genesis, 71:1.
14 In line with Gen 9,19 — שָׁפֵלָה אָדָם בִּין הַמָּאָרֹת וְתָּכְבֵּר נָא אָדָם — and most conspicuous feature both of Gen 4 and Gen 10 is... classification has reached the form of the extant text in Gen 10.15
15 This means that J and P both ultimately derived from the same old document. For a similar gradual process of transmission concerning the Epic of Gilgamesh, see E. Lipinski, IEJ 34 (1984), 208.
16 J. Simons, The Table of Nations (Genesis X): Its General Structure and Meaning, OTS 10 (1954), 155–184 and references to former literature in 156–157. Nevertheless, we differ in the method of investigation, in the content of the «hard core» of the Table and in the leading principle underlying the nuclear document.

17 By socio-economic and socio-cultural criterion I mean classification of mankind into various groups according to social and economic practices in all fields of culture — the political organization, the social hierarchy and stratification, the economic basis and sources of maintenance and mode of life. In the following we shall use the term «socio-cultural.»
18 This passage may stand by itself as an independent tradition since verse 23 can be connected directly with verse 21 on the one hand, and because of the absence of any relics of this tradition in Gen 11, 28–31 on the other.
19 See Westermann, Genesis, 671, according to whom «Der J-text von Gen 10 steht Gen 4,7–26 nahe.»
20 «The threefold division of mankind is a feature common to P and J,» see Skinner, Genesis, 192.
21 See R. Kittel, Biblia Hebraica, s.v; Skinner, Genesis, 119 who reads: «He became the father of every artificer in brass and iron...»
22 Westermann, Genesis, 451 and there on the suggestion that the component «Cain» is a late addition.
23 It is true that Seth was conceived by his mother as a replacement for Abel, but that is only one version of the various traditions. On Seth as an additional element in the light of the widespread threefold scheme see A. Papasyan, in Drevnij Vostok 4, 1983, 39 (Russian).
24 On the three sons of Ham (excluding Put) and the three sons of Shem (excluding Ashur and Lud) see Westermann, Genesis, 686, 701.
25 On the tendency to close a genealogy with three names see Skinner, Genesis, 192.
a supposed eponymous ancestor, Hellen, who had three sons — Dorus (Dorians), Aeolus (Aeolians) and Xuthus (Ionians and Achaeans)24.

The second remarkable feature in Gen 4 is that the criterion of classification is professional, each group having a definite occupation, pastoral nomadism, musical entertainment and smithing25. In enumerating the three sons of Dedan (Gen 15,3) we have substantially the same kind of threefold division of a clan according to a socio-cultural criterion. The sons of Dedan are according to Skinner, Genesis, 190. Iapetos, the son of Uranos and Gaia had three sons: Atlas, Prometheus and Epimetheus. On the principle of grouping deities, after a model of triads (or >trinity<) containing three independent divine components, see M. Khvedelidse, >Babylonian and Egyptian Triads< apud H. Klengel, Gesellschaft und Kultur im alten Vorderasien. 1982, 137–141.

According to Skinner, Genesis, 118 «the three sons represent three permanent social divisions and (we must suppose) three modes of life.» According to Skinner, Genesis, 118 «the three sons represent three permanent social divisions and (we must suppose) three modes of life.»

The third lucid feature of the list in Gen 4 is the intention of the author to convey the concept of the »culture heroes«. The genealogical line of Lamech includes three »culture heroes«, each one is the ancestor (אֶת) of a certain human group, or a founder/inventor of a definite occupation27. נַעַר, מֵאֶת, לֶאֶם = termini technici in a context dealing with ancestors, founders and inventors, those who mark the cultural beginning of mankind28. The idea of an ancestor of a definite group or a founder of a certain profession is not unique to the genealogical list of Lamech. It was the universal custom of antiquity to invent a legendary founder of a city, state, people or profession29. Cain (or his son Enoch) is the ancestor of city dwellers (Gen 4,17)30. Lugalbanda and Dumuzi are two of the many godly ancestors and founders of various branches of human civilization31.

The list of Lamech in Gen 4 is an indispensable text for our purpose as it may justifiably serve as a paradigm for any literary piece which includes the conception of threefold division of population according to socio-cultural principle cast in the form of genealogy and bound up with the idea of a »culture hero«. We claim that the nuclear text of Gen 10 was substantially built after the structural pattern and the basic formula inherent in Gen 4, but we do not take a stand concerning the chronological relationship between the two texts.

The Table of Nations consists of three main sections — Shem, Ham and Japheth. As we have already made clear, the threefold division was conventional. Consequently, the nuclear document was also cast in the shape of threefold division: שם, חם, יפרת = שָם, חָם, יָפֵרָת. The critical question is: did the author of the original text of the Table apply the socio-cultural principle of classification? The method that we shall follow is to trace the unique features of each group and to find its peculiar elements. The rationale of this method is that the items can be grouped together if they have a peculiar feature in common.

The point of departure is the group of Shem. With regard to Shem it is explicitly said: שם miles = סָם פָּלִים (v. 21).

Now Gen 4:26 reminds us promptly of the list in Gen 4, the sons of Lamech. The scribe uses the same formula we have clearly found in Gen 4. This, in and of itself, leads us to the possibility that the proto-text of the Table, divided mankind into three branches of human culture, attaching to it may justifiably serve as a paradigm for any literary piece which includes the conception of threefold division of population according to socio-cultural principle cast in the form of genealogy and bound up with the idea of a »culture hero«. We claim that the nuclear text of Gen 10 was substantially built after the structural pattern and the basic formula inherent in Gen 4, but we do not take a stand concerning the chronological relationship between the two texts.

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each cultural branch a founder or an ancestor — שֵׁם. Shem is the father of all the sons of «Eber». Eber is the patros eponymus of all the Hebrews. The Old Testament allusions to Hebrew/s — שֵׁם, שָׁם — are extremely confused, and a matter of controversy and cannot be fully discussed here.38

In all likelihood, «bene Eber», in this context has the sense of nomas, seminomads, those who are אֲבֵדֶרָה are connected to the region, crossing (a boundary) or wandering from one place to another, which, in a sense, is in line with the pastoral nomadic life of Abraham. In the Septuaginta אֲבֵדֶרָה is translated רָכְבָּם. Abraham is the father of a multitude of nations, many of them nomad tribes which figure as offsprings of Hagar (see Gen 16,12–14; 25,16) and Keturah (see Gen 15,6) who inhabited the Syrian-Arabian desert and southern Sinai. Some of them, like Kedar, Nebaioth and Massa, are later on called Arabs.36

The tribes of Israel believed that Abraham, their ancestor, was a wandering Aramean (Dtn 16,5) and they linked their origin with the peoples in the east (like the Edomites and the Moabites) and not with the settled population in the west (the Canaanites).37 We can adopt Frankfort's assertion that «the Hebrews, whatever their ancestry and historical antecedents, were tribal nomads».38 The relationship of Eber to habiru: 'pr is beyond the scope of the present paper. It is a question that has received a voluminous discussion.39 Scholars generally agree that Habiru designates a socioeconomic class, usually consisting of foreigners, outsiders and not an ethnic group.40 The possibility of Habiru with Eber only lends support to the claim that Eber is a socio-economic and cultural term, and not an ethnic one. A case in point is the well known phenomenon that a series of geographical and ethnic names happened to turn at a certain period in antiquity into conventional terms, designating certain human groups according to their mode of life, social characteristics or profession, such as Amur-

35 See notes 39, 40.


37 See also Hos 12,10 «I will again make you to dwell in tents.»

38 H. and H. A. Frankfort apud H. and H. A.- Frankfort et al., The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man, 1946, 371–372. See also G. E. Wright, BA 3 (1940), 29–32. Cf. the sociopolitical approach of N. K. Gottwald, The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of Religion of Liberated Israel, 1979, who argues strenuously against the conventional view that Israel was a desert nomad or a pastoral nomad prior to the «settlement».41


41 See notes 39, 40.

42 B. Oded, The Table of Nations (Genesis 10)

See CAD s. v. kustaru, 601; J. N. Postgate Nomads and Sedentaries in the Middle Assyrian Sources, apud Silva-Castillo (ed.) op. cit. (above n. 40), 49.

43 Gibbon, op. cit. (above n. 39), 219.

44 Diakonoff, op. cit. (above n. 8), 23.

45 Verste 24 «is an interpolation (based on 11:12–14) intended to harmonize J. with P–. Skinner, Genesis, 219

46 In Gen 25,18 Havilah is connected with the tribes of Ishmael, the son of Keturah.

47 Eph'al, op. cit. (above n. 36), 227–228.

48 Cf. Cassuto, Genesis II, 194, according to whom the information concerning the northern peoples (i.e., the sons of Japheth) reached Israel through Phoenician merchants. Winnett claims that the scribe derived information about South Arabian tribes from source, or sources, that was not always reliable. See notes 39, 40.
are tribes who dwell in the desert, parallel to the generalization in Jeremiah »and all the kings of Arabia that dwell in the desert« (Jer 25,24), and to the Assyrian inscriptions which described the nomad tribes as »remote Arabs who live in the desert«. Moreover, the disproportionate preoccupation with Arabian tribes, despite the fact that Abraham descended from Peleg and not from Joktan, only hint to the character which the author applied to the sons of Shem. It is remarkable that the sons of Eber are described as dwelling near Mount Qedem. Qedem (»East«) is mentioned in our text only in connection with Shem. This is by no accident whatsoever. The land of Qedem, mentioned also in Sinehu story, is located in the steppe, east of Palestine (Gen 25,6). The »Sons of Qedem« are usually mentioned in connection with the stories about conflicts between the sedentary population and nomads (e.g. Jud 6,5; 7,2).

The conclusion is that Eber, son of Shem, represents, in our text, the migrating segment in the world population, as distinct from the sedentary society. In Gen 10 Eber comprises various types and phases of nomadism, such as the so-called »Mari nomadism« or »enclosed nomadism« and full nomads in the wilderness, a type defined as »external nomadism«.

The parallel with Jabal is most instructive. We have the same formula and conception: Jabal is the father of all the tent dwellers and pastoral nomads. Jabal definitely means a nomad and corresponds with the akkadian »asibite kultari« (tent dwellers) as a designation for the nomad and pastoral tribes, those who dwell in the desert or on the fringes of the settled land. Thus, Jabal represents the nomadic segment of the population, and in this case, the pastoral nomads who lead a migratory herding life. Their main grazing zones are areas of steppeland between cultivated lands and the desert proper, where they either settled in some kind of semi-permanent camp or moved with their animals between summer and winter pastures. By the same token, Shem is the father of all »bene Eber« which denote, as we have demonstrated, nomadic tribes.

The similarity in words, structure and principle of division between Shem and Jabal leads to the possibility of structural isomorphism of the original Table and Gen 4,20–22. In other words, the nuclear document, which also used the threefold division pattern, was formulated according to the stereotype of »Adam, Naamah, Naamah«.

IV

The second component is Ham, who is known as »Saban el-Kafin« (Gen 9,22). What section of world population did Ham represent in the original text?

Our conclusion concerning Shem, may serve as a starting point. If the division is governed by a socio-cultural principle and Shem represents the nomad tribes, then Ham represents the natural adversary of the nomads, the sedentary population living in villages, towns, cities, and organized in the framework of kingdoms. This possibility turns into probability if we take into consideration the following three points: 1) The animosity and hatred between Shem and Ham. 2) The antagonism and the traditional rivalry between nomads and the sedentary population. 3) The peculiar items in the list of Ham.

As for the first point, the enmity of Shem, who of course reflects the attitude of the Israeleite Biblical author towards Ham, the father of Canaan, is epitomized in Gen 9,25–26: »Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren«. This curse provides the underpinning for the animosity against the Canaanites. On the other hand, the sons of Japheth are welcome in the tents of Shem.

There is a plethora of research regarding the second point, the contrast between nomads of various types and the sedentary population in ancient and modern times, since the problem of the interrelation between nomads and the sedentary world has been investigated both by historians and anthropologists. We shall not, of course, elaborate upon the variegated relat—

49 Simons, op. cit. (above n. 16), 168.
50 The possible identification of סבך with סבך, the son of Keturah, buttresses our argument that the Biblical author applied a nomadic mode of life to Joktan and his descendants. On this identification see Westermann, Genesis, 702, and his comment to 25,2–3, 484.
51 ANET, 19.
52 Cf. Gen 25,6 according to which the sons of Abraham, including the sons of Keturah, were sent away eastwards to הַנְפֹלֵה. See the article of Rowton cited in n. 59.
53 CAD s.v. Kultar, 601 and references there.
54 Skinner, Genesis, 118 »The whole Bedouin life is thus assigned to Jabal as its progenitor. «
tions between nomads and settlers, between tribe and state, but will limit ourselves to findings which bear directly on the issue in question. The nomad-sedentary contrast is documented in the Biblical and extrabiblical material. First and foremost is the story of Cain and Abel, known also as «Cain-Abel Motif». This literary episode, attributed to the primeval history of civilization, is an expression of the dispute between the pastoral nomad (or shepherd) and the cultivator. On the other hand, the curse upon Cain «a restless wanderer shall you be on earth» (Gen 4,12) reflects the attitude of a settler towards the mode of life of the nomads. The narrative about the rape of Dinah by Shechem, the son of Hamor, and the massacre committed by the two sons of Jacob, may well serve as an example of the hostility between urban populations and pastoral nomads. Fortresses and citadels were build up because of the continuous need to defend the cities and farms against invaders from the desert. The punishment foretold by the prophet Ezekiel for the kingdoms of Transjordania that stretched along the borders of a settler towards the mode of life of the nomads.

The nomad-sedentary contrast is possibly reflected in the prohibition of drinking wine, since wine is typical to sedentary life. And thus we read in Gen 9,20: «and Noah began to be a husbandman and he planted a vineyard». In Gen 43,22, we are told that the Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews. This matter concerns a social rather than a national distinction and stands in conformity with verse 46,34 according to which «all shepherds are abhorrent to Egyptians».

The rivalry between these two modes of life form a favorite topic in the literature of the Ancient Near East. Examples: the myth which includes the dispute between Enet and Emesh, sons of Enlil, two cultural divine heroes, one typifying the farmer, the other the shepherd. Another myth is the so-called «The Wooing of Inanna» (known also as «Enkimtu and Dumuzi») which deals with the merits and virtues of shepherd vis-a-vis farmer. Another variation of the Cain-Abel motif in Near Eastern mythology is the myth about Lahar, the cattle god, and Ashnan, the grain goddess. It is not fortuitous that the Cain-Abel motif is found in mythology since the characteristic feature of mythological thought is that it builds up structured sets based on binary oppositions (or: «structure of opposites») typical to «the savage mind» to use the terminology of Lévi-Strauss. Thus, in light of the dichotomizing character of mythological literature, it is only natural to find the traditional rivalry and the dichotomy between pastoral nomads and sedentary, between settled and non-settled groups as a motif in mythological stories.

The famous Sumerian hymn relating to the god Amurru vividly illustrates the attitude and prejudices of the sedentary folk towards the mode of life of the nomadic Amorites who are called lú-kùr (strangers/enemies).

64 We follow the conventional translation «husbandman» «Ackersmann», contrary to the translation «Master of the earth» suggested by Cassuto, op. cit. (above n. 11), 159–160. Gen 3,17 in the light of Gen 2,3; 3,23; 4,11–12 obviously denotes to cultivating the earth. On the stylistic connection between ḫémi and ḫémi see Weimar, op. cit. (above n. 9), 146 n. 138.

65 S. N. Kramer, Sumarian Mythology, 1944, 49–51. On the Cain-Abel motif as an expression of the rivalry of professions in which the protagonists are represented as a «tiller of the ground» and a «keeper of the sheep» see TH. H. Gaster, op. cit. (above n. 32), 53–55.

66 A. J. Jawad, op. cit. (above n. 59), 71–72. See e.g., the data-formula for the fourth year of Su-Sin «Year when Su-Sin king of Ur built the wall (or fortress) of MAR.TU (called) MARD-IQ TIDD-MI-IM (i.e., which holds back Tidnum).» Gibson, op. cit. (above n. 39), 223. On the limes of Ur and Amorites see P. Michalowski, History as Charter, JAOS 103 (1983), 244. The city of Ashur was under «constant threat of intrusion of Nomads as raiders or settlers.» M. T. Larsen, The Old Assyrian City-State and its Colonies, 1976, 27.

67 On the desert which was «conceived of as the dwelling place of hostile powers» by the settled population see H. Haldar, The Desert in the Sumerian and West-Semitic Religion (Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift, 1950: 3), 1950, 11, 50, 66–70, and there also on the desert as the opposite of the cultivated earth (Pederson).

By the same token, the nomads considered their mobility as an advantage superior to sedentary existence. The conflict of the Hanean nomads and the local population, together with the revolt of the Jaminites against Zimmilik, are expressions of the pressure of nomads (called »bédouins« by G. Dossin) on settled communities and of the tension between nomads and settlers. In ancient Egyptian literature, one can also find reflections of the negative attitude of the »civilized« Egyptian towards nomads (»Sand far- ccrs«) and semi-nomads. The origin of enmity and conflict is probably the seasonal migration of the nomads from the arid steppes into the settled regions.

Nevertheless, that is only one side of the story. The other is interaction, co-existence and even symbiosis. The Mari archive discloses interaction between nomads and settled population, between the tribe and town. This interaction, especially accelerated under imperial control, is in some places the effect of the physical environment where agricultural land and pastoral land overlap. Great cities stand alongside nomads roaming the countryside. The fact is that all types of nomadism are non autarkic and cannot therefore function in isolation. The nomads cannot provide all the food, and cannot manufacture all the goods which they may need or want. To obtain these supplementary products they either have to resort to the use of force or to agree with the settled community on mutual trade. The economic interdependence led to peaceful relations between the two divergent socio-economic patterns, nomad and sedentary. The city of Sippar, for example, on the periphery of the urbanized region, served as a port of trade between the sheep-nomads of the desert and the inhabitants of the urbanized stretches along the Euphrates. The royal officials of Zimri-Lim made efforts to establish peace between the Hanean nomads and the local population, between shepherd-nomads and the farmers. The inherent tendency towards symbiosis is reflected in literary compositions in which the disputes end in a reconciliation rather than in murder. The settled population merged with the invading nomads on the one hand, and the nomads themselves passed through various levels of sedentarization on the other hand. The Amurru who were described in the Sumerian texts as leading a nomadic life, formed, later on, an important part of the settled population.

The traditional rivalry between the nomads and the settled population, and the tendency toward reciprocal relations have been documented in the written material of the Ancient Near East. Nevertheless, the contradiction between the two modes of life was more a matter of theoretical conceptions and emotion than empirical and real. The economic, legal and administrative texts dealing with everyday happenings and activities reflect mainly the real situation of interaction and symbiosis, whereas the literary texts which deal mainly with belief, ideas, perceptions and attitudes deviate (sometimes even invert) from socio-cultural reality and reflect the conceptual approach and emotional attitude of one kind of socio-cultural group toward the other. Our text in Gen 10 is a literary piece of composition. It was not written just to inform and record historical reality, but to represent a special conception of the author. Consequently, it is reasonable to maintain that if the hypothesis that Shem represents the migratory segment of mankind is correct, then it seems plausible that Ham represents the rival mode of life, the sedentary population.

Here we come to the third point, the peculiar items in the list of Ham, a point which lends strong support to the above mentioned hypothesis. The terms unique to the list of Ham are נמלט (city, town) and ממלכה (kingdom, empire). The mention of celebrated cities like Uruk, Accad, Ashur, Calah, Nineveh, each having served as a major capital at one time or another, is a prominent feature in the list of Ham, especially in light of, and in contrast to, the tents and the unfortified seasonal dwelling of bene Eber (or bene Kedem). The mention of ממלכה (kingdom) denotes well organized state-societies in contrast to tribal and stateless societies so prominent in the list of Shem. Nimrod is the name of a hero, probably a king, whose domain, according to the text, included Babylonia and Assyria.
His authority extended over the whole of Mesopotamia. Nimrod is probably connected with the idea of the first empire. The very words נימד (v. 8, 10) point to the probability that the nuclear document dealt with the founders and the beginnings of various aspects of human civilization. Uruk, Babylonia and Accad are some of the earliest cities, in which the city-culture began.

It is my contention that only by a socio-economic and socio-cultural criteria could a scribe combine in one setting the kingdom of Babylonia and the great cities of Mesopotamia in the north with Egypt and Cush in the south. Accad and Egypt represent the great political organizations (states and empires) of the settled population. Egypt and Mesopotamia, with its techno-economic water control represent, par excellence, the settled and politically organized branch of civilization, in contrast to the nomads and their tribal confederations. Canaan, the son of Ham, joins perfectly with Egypt and Mesopotamia under the socio-cultural criterion, at least from the Biblical scribe’s viewpoint.

The Unique Term in the List of Japheth

The unique term in the list of Japheth is אֲבֵדָה (v. 23). We have already noted that viniculture is typical sedentary civilization. The borders of the sons of Canaan, in the Table of Nations, are very instructive: they brought from Canaan to the desert a branch with one cluster of grapes and they carried it between two upon the staff. Most of Canaan’s sons are identical to the various city-states which existed in Canaan. Canaan is a land of wheat and barley and vines (see also Dtn 6,10–11). The story about the spies (Num 13) is very instructive: they brought from Canaan to the desert a branch with one cluster of grapes and they carried it between two upon the staff (v. 23). We have already noted that viniculture is typical sedentary civilization. The borders of the sons of Canaan, in the Table of Nations, are designated by two great and famous cities — Sidon in the north and Gaza in the south, in contrast to Mesha and Kedem as toponyms for the delineation of the territory of Eber, the son of Shem. The conjecture that derives the valley in contrast to the red soil is the relation between Abel and Cain. Cain was accursed. Nimrod, a descendant of Ham built a city, and Canaan, the son of Ham was cursed (Gen 9,25).

To conclude the section of Ham, we can confidently say that Ham represents, in the genuine text, the agricultural-urban population and the organized states of the Ancient Near East, in contrast with the nomadic tribes and confederations of tribes represented by Shem. Consequently, we can restore the second and the middle element of the nuclear text — אִם אֵין מִלְּיָה יָרוֹשׁ וּרְאֵהוּ עֵדֶד מְדֹּשֵׁה מְדֹּשֵׁה.

V

Thus far, two out of the three sections of the Table of Nations comply with an intelligible idea. One may reasonably ask, what section of population does Japheth represent?

Let us start with the unique feature in the paragraph about Japheth. The unique term in the list of Japheth is אֲבֵדָה. The descendants of Japheth comprises various ethnic groups that were settled at the time in Anatolia, the Aegean region and beyond the horizon of Shem and Ham. Most of the sons of Japheth represent the maritime nations (isles of the nations/Gentiles), those who dwell on islands and along the seashores. Thus Japheth designates, in general, the seafarers, the island and seashore dwellers, for example, is not just the name of a far away place across the sea, but has the connotation of land accessible only by ship.

The suggested equation of Japheth with Ικατεος, father of Prometheus, lends support to our argument that Japheth is the epitome of the island and seashore dwellers, representing those who practise the profession of seafaring and whose communication was mainly by sea. Consequently, it seems justified to reconstruct the last link in the chain of Noah’s sons — אֵל אל אֵין יָדִישׁ — which may duly be translated as Japheth the father of all the isles (coastlands) of the nations.

Thus Cain, according to this tradition is the progenitor of the city life. See Skinner, Genesis 115, and the instructive remark of Hallo, JCS 23 (1970), 64, «this can only imply that he became the first builder of a city, i.e., that the building of cities began with him...».

On the question why the curse was pronounced on Canaan and not on Ham see discussion in Cassuto, Genesis II, 153–155.

See above, 24.

85. The mentioning of the cities in Babylonia (v. 10) before the cities in Ashur reflects an historical fact. See Westermann, Genesis, 61. Verse 9 is probably an interpolation since the direct continuation of verse 8 is verse 10.
86. According to Westermann, it has also the meaning of coastland, seashore.
87. A. H. Sayce, The Tenth Chapter of Genesis, JBL 44 (1925), 197.
VI

By reducing the Table of Nations to its original features, we have substantially reached the same kind of formulaic division as Gen 4 which in essence divides mankind by a tripartite paradigm and according to a socio-cultural criterion thus:

Shem: the father of all the children of «bene Eber»
Ham: the father of all the dwellers of city and kingdom
Japheth: the father of all the isles of the Gentiles/Nations

The extant text of the Table of Nations goes back to the conventional archetype preserved in Gen 4. The original nuclear record, based on the socio-cultural criterion, was vulnerable to changes and had been obscured, in the course of a long editorial process by later scribes with their interpolations and alterations. There is no way to trace the various stages of accretion and revision through which the seed-text passed until it reached the form it has in Gen 10. It is clear that changes were made in each phase. Each scribe, at a particular stage of development in the tradition, revised, rearranged, incorporated and elaborated materials in line with his ethnographic and geographical knowledge, his conceptions and aims, using whatever criterion he chose to divide the nations into three groups. At each stage, the Table of Nations was enriched or diminished with names with the consequence that many changes do not fit into the author's original intention, thus obscuring the basic pattern and hampering our correct interpretation of the text. In Gen 10 only part of the archaic relics have been preserved. The author of Gen 10 mentions several criteria, since he was occupied with numerical symmetry and arithmetic (seven, twelve, seventy) rather than with a leading principle and historical reality.

It is remarkable that in the first chapter of I Chronicles, a later version of the Table in Gen 10, there are no vestiges of the unique features of each group. The essential genuine elements of the core, which served as a cornerstone to the reconstruction of the embryonic text, were completely rejected in the later version of Chronicles. The greater the distance in time of the scribe from the original text, the less he was aware of the original form, structure and concept of the tripartite division of mankind.  

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97 E.g., verses 16–18a as Deuteronomic elaboration, see P. Weimar, op. cit. (above n. 64), 148–149.
100 Thus, the scribe who added the paragraph 8–12 (J) to the nucleus was still aware of the original aim and meaning of the genealogy of Noah. The same with the secondary paragraph 26–30 (J). On the other hand, the including of Arabian tribes in v. 7, (P) as the sons of Cush, a descendant of Ham, or including Elam in the list of Shem is a late accretion from the hand of a scribe who was not cognizant of the meaning and aim of the original text.

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The Plagues of Egypt: Ancient Tradition or Literary Invention?

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There is an opinion, widely held in the literature on Exodus, that the plagues narrative reflects an ancient tradition that predates the literary sources of the Pentateuch. It is said that at least in its essentials the story of the plagues goes back to oral tradition. Before examining this proposition, let me set out my view on the source problem without detailed argumentation. Here I follow M. Noth who is of the opinion that we have to do with only two sources in the plagues narrative, the Yahwist (J) and the Priestly (P). The J account consists of a narrative of seven plagues: the Nile that...