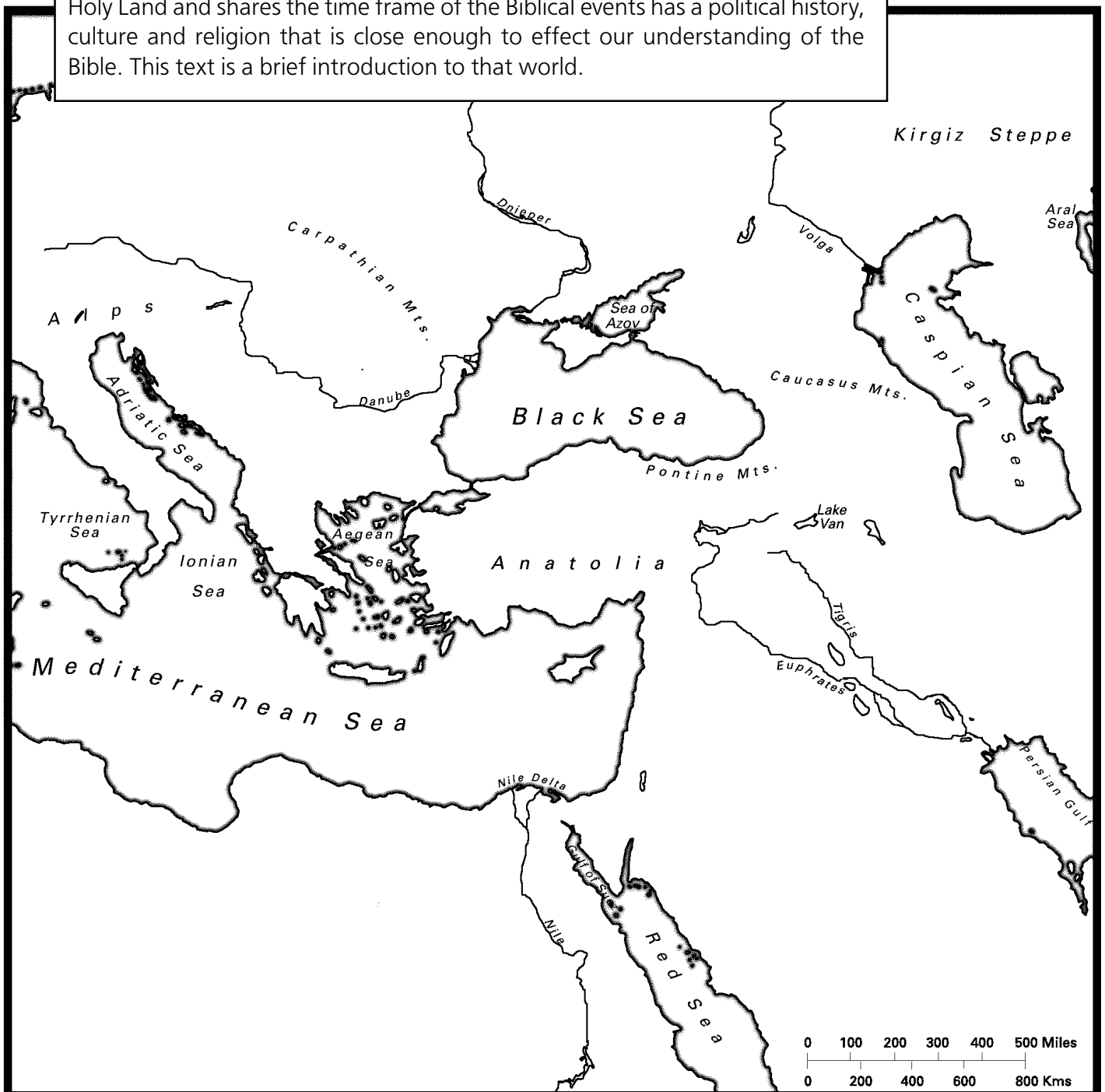


WHAT IS CONTEXT?

When someone asks for the context of a Biblical or literary quote, they are asking for what is said in the surrounding and connected text. Their request is generally gauged to enlighten the discussion as much of anything's meaning is determined by what company it keeps.

Consequently, when the historical context of the Bible is mentioned, the surrounding world is its company. The world that geographically encompasses the Holy Land and shares the time frame of the Biblical events has a political history, culture and religion that is close enough to effect our understanding of the Bible. This text is a brief introduction to that world.



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CHRONOLOGY

The Problems of Hard Dating

How do we know when something in the past happened? Why do we need to know? When we have various facts from different sources we have to piece together a time reference from the things mentioned that may be date-able. Consider the following conversation.

"I came by to see you Saturday at 3 p.m. but you weren't there." said Bill.

David stared at him for a minute. "Yes I was. Are you sure it was Saturday?"

"Yes. It was right before the game."

"Well I was there. I was with John and Steve watching the pregame show."

David insisted.

"Maybe my watch wasn't working," said Bill checking. "It seems o.k."

"It doesn't matter. Wasn't that good a game?"

"Sure it was! Seattle won by 20!" said Bill excited.

"That was two Saturday's ago," corrected David.

"It was?" Bill was feeling really confused.

"Yep. Remember you and Buffy had a big argument the following Monday because she was a Raider fan?"

"Oh yeah. How did you know?"

"You told me Tuesday and blamed it on the full moon."

"Well, today is Monday, the moon is waning and Seattle played Denver Saturday and lost. Here check the Sunday sports page."

This fictional confusion happens naturally with errors of our own memories. Our characters settled the question by an appeal to more fixed records (football schedules and newspaper) and to the movements of heavenly bodies. In history, when we deal with kings, wars, and empires the possible errors are greater and consequently a greater need to appeal to the constants.

Without hard dates for the events in antiquity we can do very little in establishing a correct context for Biblical history.

There are two streams of ancient history whose dating methods help us with establishing some time context for the events of the Bible. They are the Egyptian and the Babylonian, the closest regions and civilizations to the Holy Land. There were certainly other peoples in close proximity, but not with the intricacy of society and science that would produce available time keeping records.

The most complicated one and that which offers the fewest rewards we will consider first.

EGYPT

In Egyptian history the records we have are not continuous. They are broken, absent or in shreds. There were Annals of the Pharaohs since the first king, Menes, but they are lost excepting the first 5 dynasties, which are carved in stone.

A priest of the Ramessid Period (1300 B.C.) copied a king list, but of it we have one copy, and it is in shreds.

Our basic structure of the history of Egyptian kings comes from a priest of the Hellenistic period (after 300 b.c.) named Manetho. Our problem is we don't

HARD DATE: Any date (of an event) that is established by direct association with a regular event (i.e. celestial sightings like eclipses which are datable by modern methods and calendars). Our dates become softer (less sure) as we follow written histories away from the hard date.

have a copy of his work. All we have are long quotations from other historic writers of the Early Christian centuries which give us enough data to piece his entire work back together. Our current copy of the work of Manetho is a combination of quotes from Josephus, Julius Africanus, Eusebius, and Georgius Syncellus. Apart from the possible errors of transmission, Manetho does not give us much in terms of actual dates that we can trust. He does give us a king list, and we have built our concept of Egyptian history on his relating of the 31 dynasties.

With this sort of broken record how do we know anything about Egyptian history? What do we have that would make sense of it all? This is where it gets difficult.

Historians have discovered an oddity in Egyptian calendars that may give us an answer to the questions regarding when certain kings lived. This oddity is called the Sothic Cycle, and it gives us a structure to flesh out with the various king lists.

THE HELICAL RISING OF SOTHIS

The natural year, where ever you are, is 365 $\frac{1}{4}$ days long. For the Egyptians that year began at the heliacal rising of Sothis, which is when Sothis (Sirius), the Dog Star, could be seen rising just before the sun. According to our calendar this happens every year at about the 19/20 of July.

The oddity was that their calendar had 12 months, with 30 days in each month. This equalled 360 days and they would just add the 5 days they lacked at the end of the year. This did not account for the $\frac{1}{4}$ day in each natural year and never adjusted for it. Our calendars make the adjustment with what we know as Leap Year. Consequently, every four years their calendar would be off 1 day from the natural year. AND every 1460 years the two calendars would line up again. Each period of 1460 years is called a Sothic Cycle.

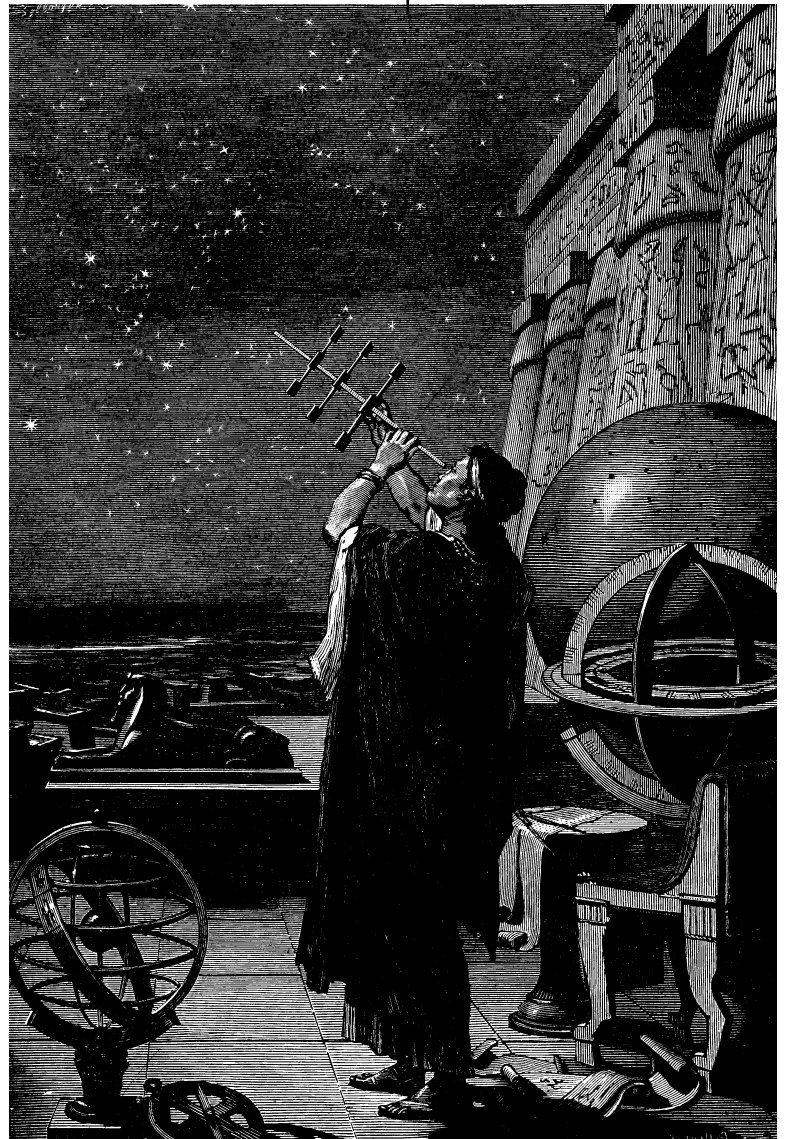
How does this help us get usable dates?

We need two things. We need documents that tell us on what day of the calendar the heliacal rising of Sothis occurred, AND we need to know the beginning date of the particular Sothic Cycle. Luckily for us the Roman historian Censorinus noted that in 139 a.d. the two calendars aligned on New Years Day. Adding increments of 1460 years gives us the two earlier Sothic Cycle beginnings in historic times. They are 1322 and 2782 B.C.

Now, for any ancient Egyptian document that mentions the date of the heliacal rising of Sothis we have an equation. Because every day the two calendars are off took four years to accomplish we would multiply the total number

"The Egyptian, they said, were the first to discover the solar year, and to portion out its course into twelve parts. They obtained this knowledge from the stars. (To my mind they contrive their year much more cleverly than the Greeks, for these last every other year intercalate a whole month, but the Egyptians, dividing the year into twelve months of thirty days each, add every year a space of five days besides, whereby the circuit of the seasons is made to return with uniformity.)"

**Herodotus
Book II Euterpe**



QUESTIONMARK

Recently a question has been asked that may put all of our dating of antiquity into doubt. Peter James, a graduate student at Cambridge University published a book called **Centuries of Darkness**. In it James questions the presence of the so-called Dark Ages that are in most of the ancient histories and suggests that the Sothic dating system is in error. Just like we adjust our calendars with a leap year, James suggests that the Egyptians may have done the same thus eliminating the Sothic Cycle as a viable method.

We do know they did not correct the calendars immediately given the various shifts we see in the Sothic sightings and thus far no convincing rearrangement of history has been proposed. Still it has caused much discussion the the study of history.

EPONYM: giving one's name to a thing or person.

2. Assyriology. A functionary...who...gave his name to his year in office.
Oxford English Dictionary, 1st Edition

A PORTION OF A LIMMU LIST

- B.C.
- 858. Shalmaneser king of ASSYRIA; (campaign) against [the land of]...
 - 857. Assur-bela-kain the tartan;...
 - 856. Assur-bani-apla-utsur the Rab-BI-LUL;...
 - 855. Abu-ina-ekalli-lilbur the governor of the palace;...
 - 854. Dan-Assur the tartan; ...
 - 853. Samas-abua the prefect of the city NA'SIBNA;...
 - 852. Samas-bela-utsur of the city of CALAH; ...
 - 851. Bel-bani-pal-a the governor of the palace;...
 - 850. Khadi-lipusu of the city of...

of days difference between the calendars by four. Because the anomaly causes the the civil calendar to fall behind the other, our equation must place us farther forward in history, but since these are B.C. dates forward means a smaller number hence we must subtract our number of years from the relevant Sothic Cycle beginning date. This should give us the date of that document.

THE EQUATION: Likely Sothic Cycle beginning date - (4 x # of days from the first of the year to the helical rising of Sothis)

What do we have to work with?

We have six recorded sightings of the Heliacal rising of Sothis. Three are usable. They are:

1. 12th Dynasty- Reign of Sesostris III
16th day of the 8th month = 1866 B.C.
2. 18th Dynasty - Amenhotep I
9th day of the 11th month = 1538 if Memphis/ 1518 if Thebes
3. 18th Dynasty - Thutmose III
28th day of the 11th month = 1458 if Memphis/ 1438 if Thebes

From these dates we anchor Egyptian history and fill it in with king lists. The farther we go away from these dates the greater the unreliability. In fact, all dates before the 12th Dynasty are guess work. Egyptian history is full of questions down to 664 B.C., when the Greeks started keeping more meticulous records

Other methods, like the Egyptian's 25 year lunar cycle, are inaccurate due to faulty Egyptian observation, and things like carbon 14 radiometric dating leave us with deviations greater than the inaccuracies in documentary evidence.

MESOPOTAMIA

We now turn to the second method of dating antiquity, a method far more rewarding than the Egyptian method in establishing Biblical dates. This method was recognized by linking Mesopotamian records with early Greco-Roman history. An astronomer living during the reign of Antoninus Pius left us a brief list of regnal dates of major kings from his time back to 747 B.C. It is called Ptolemy's Canon. The accuracy of this list is demonstrated by cross references to cuneiform tablets that refer to lunar eclipses, and it covers Oriental antiquity back through Persia and Neo-Babylon. With the discovery of archeological sites like Ashurbanipal's libraries a large number of tablets were found containing what are called limmu lists and attendant king lists. These were Assyrian in origin, and as the Assyrians ruled Babylon at times, these lists overlapped the record of Ptolemy. Most beneficial are the limmu lists, which are also called eponym lists, due to their structure. Rather than being a king list with just the number of years a king ruled, they listed every year as it occurred, noting it by the name of a certain official and the major event of that year. Of course, the accession or death of a king was generally the major event of a given year, so we are able to cross-check the claims of regnal years on the king lists. Still the primary benefit is the accounting for every year, much like a yardstick accounts for every inch.

Around World War I the Germans discovered another batch of eponym lists overlapping those discovered earlier and these account for every year back to 900 B.C. A subsequent discovery found even more lists that overlapped, which pushed our knowledge of Assyrian history back to approximately 1100 B. C., during the reign of Tiglath-pilezar I. In 1933, the University of Chicago

found a king list that pushed our historic dates to 1700 B.C. Anything before that time is considered uncertain. Babylonian dates are only precise when we can synchronize their king lists with those of the Assyrians, which is between 1400 and 943 B.C.

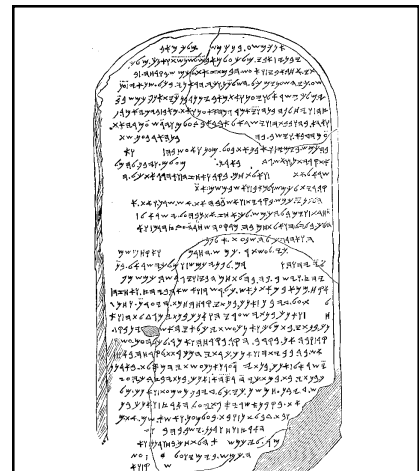
Given that our interest is contextualizing the Biblical world with the pagan empires, we look for any points of contact that these accurate records had with the characters in the Bible. Thankfully, the Assyrians were braggarts. Shalmanezar III, who reigned between 858 and 824, tells in an inscription of the contact he had with King Ahab of Israel. Twelve years later, in the eighteenth year of his reign, he makes another inscription, referring to tribute he receives from Jehu, King of Israel. Whether it be by chance or providence, the years between Ahab's last and Jehu's first were twelve – the same amount of time between the two inscriptions. Since we know from the eponym lists which years are Shalmanezar's 6th and 18th years, we automatically know the end of Ahab's reign and the beginning of Jehu's. Now that we have a date for characters inside the Bible, we can look at the Biblical king lists for early Israel, and thereby conclude that a major character, like King Solomon, would have acceded to the throne in 971/70 B.C. In I Kings it tells us that in the fourth year of Solomon's reign, 480 years after the exodus, Solomon began to build the temple. His fourth year is 967, hence the exodus occurred in 1447 B.C.

With simple beginnings and solid dates such as these, we can work Biblical history, both directions in time, to give us reasonable dates from Adam down to the last kings of Judah.

Shalmaneser III Campaigns of the Sixth and Eighteenth Years

Translation by Lunkenbill 1927

In the year of (the eponym) Daian-Ashur, in the month Aiaru the 14th day, I departed from Nineveh. I crossed the Tigris and approached the towns of Giammu on the river Bahh. They became afraid of the terror emanating from my position as overlord, as well as of the splendor of my fierce weapons, and killed their master Giammu with their own weapons. I entered the towns Sahlala and Til-sha-Turahi and brought my gods/images into his palaces. I performed the tasiltu -festival in his (own) palaces. I opened (his) treasury, inspected what he had hidden; I carried away as booty his possessions, bringing (them) to my town Ashur. From Sahlala I departed and approached Kar-Shalmaneser. I crossed the Euphrates another time at its flood on rafts (made buoyant by means) of (inflated) goatskins. In Ina-Ashur-utir-asbat, which the people of Hattina call Pitru, on the other side of the Euphrates, on the river Sagur, I received tribute from the kings of the other side of the Euphrates-that is, of Sanagara from Carchemish, Kundashpi from Commagene, of Arame, man of Gusi, of Lalli from Melitene, of Haiani, son of Gabari, of Kalparuda from Hattina, (and) of Kalparuda of Gurgum- (consisting of): silver, gold, tin, copper (or bronze), copper containers. I departed from the banks of the Euphrates and approached Aleppo. They were afraid to fight and seized my feet (in submission). I received silver and gold as their tribute and offered sacrifices before the Adad of Aleppo. I departed from Aleppo and approached the two towns of Irhuleni from Hamath. I captured the towns Adennu, Barga (and) Argana his royal residence. I removed from them his booty (as well as) his personal possessions. I set his palaces afire. I departed from Argana and approached Karkara. I destroyed, tore down and burned down Karkara, his royal residence. He brought along to help him 1,200 chariots, 1,200 cavalymen, 20,000 foot soldiers of Hadadezer of Damascus, 700 chariots, 700 cavalymen, 10,000 foot soldiers of Irhuleni from Hamath, 2,000 chariots, **10,000 foot soldiers of Ahab, the Israelite**, 500 soldiers from Que, 1,000 soldiers from Musri, 10 chariots, 10,000 soldiers from Irqanata, 200 soldiers of Matinu-ba'lu from Arvad, 200 soldiers from Usanata, 30 chariots, 10,000 soldiers of Adunu-ba'lu from Shian, 1,000 camel-(rider)s of Gindibu', from Arabia, [...] 1,000 soldiers of Ba'sa, son of Ruhubl, from AmMon-(all together) these were twelve kings. They rose against me [for a] decisive battle. I fought with them with (the support of) the mighty forces of Ashur, which Ashur, my lord, has given to me, and the strong weapons which Nergal, my leader, has presented to me, (and) I did inflict a defeat upon them between the towns Karkara and Gilzau. I slew 14,000 of their soldiers with the sword, descending upon them like Adad when he makes a rainstorm pour down. I spread their corpses (everywhere), filling the entire plain with their widely scattered (fleeing) soldiers. During the battle I made their blood flow down the *hur-pa-lu* of the district. The plain was too small to let (all) their souls descend (into the nether world), the vast field gave out (when it came) to bury them. With their corpses I spanned the Orontes before there was a bridge. Even during the battle I took from them their chariots, their horses broken to the yoke.



THE MOABITE STONE
Also mentioning King Ahab and Omri is the Moabite Stone. It is a declaration of a revolt by Mesha (II Kings 3:5 ff). See appendix for text.

In the eighteenth year of my rule I crossed the Euphrates for the sixteenth time. Hazael of Damascus put his trust upon his numerous army and called up his troops in great number, making the mountain Senir, a mountain, facing the Lebanon, to his fortress. I fought with him and inflicted a defeat upon him, killing with the sword 16,000 of his experienced soldiers. I took away from him 1,121 chariots, 470 riding horses as well as his camp. He disappeared to save his life (but) I followed him and besieged him in Damascus, his royal residence. (There) I cut down his gardens (outside of the city, and departed). I marched as far as the mountains of Hauran, destroying, tearing down and burning innumerable towns, carrying booty away from them which was beyond counting. I (also) marched as far as the mountains of Ba'li-ra'si which is a promontory and erected there a stela with my image as king. At that time I received the tribute of the inhabitants of Tyre, Sidon, **and of Jehu, son of Omri**.

THE TABLE OF NATIONS

These are the generations of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth; sons were born to them after the flood.

The sons of Japheth: Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech, and Tiras. The sons of Gomer: Ash'kenaz, Riphath, and Togar'mah. The sons of Javan: Eli'shah, Tarshish, Kittim, and Do'danim. From these the coastland peoples spread. These are the sons of Japheth in their lands, each with his own language, by their families, in their nations.

The sons of Ham: Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan. The sons of Cush: Seba, Hav'ilah, Sabtah, Ra'amah, and Sab'teca. The sons of Ra'amah: Sheba and Dedan. Cush became the father of Nimrod; he was the first on earth to be a mighty man. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; therefore it is said, "Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the LORD." The beginning of his kingdom was Ba'bel, Erech, and Accad, all of them in the land of Shinar. From that land he went into Assyria, and built Nin'veveh, Reho'both-Ir, Calah, and Resen between Nin'veveh and Calah; that is the great city. Egypt became the father of Ludim, An'amim, Leha'bim, Naph-tu'him, Pathru'sim, Caslu'him (whence came the Philistines), and Caph'torim. Canaan became the father of Sidon his first-born, and Heth, and the Jeb'usites, the Amorites, the Gir'gashites, the Hivites, the Arkites, the Sinites, the Ar'vadites, the Zem'arites, and the Ha'mathites. Afterward the families of the Canaanites spread abroad. And the territory of the Canaanites extended from Sidon, in the direction of Gerar, as far as Gaza, and in the direction of Sodom, Gomor'rah, Admah, and Zeboi'im, as far as Lasha. These are the sons of Ham, by their families, their languages, their lands, and their nations. To Shem also, the father of all the children of Eber, the elder brother of Japheth, children were born.

The sons of Shem: Elam, Asshur, Arpach'shad, Lud, and Aram. The sons of Aram: Uz, Hul, Gether, and Mash. Arpach'shad became the father of Shelah; and Shelah became the father of Eber. 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. Joktan became the father of Almo'dad, Sheleph, Hazarma'veth, Jerah, Hador'am, Uzal, Diklah, Obal, Abim'a-el, Sheba, Ophir, Hav'ilah, and Jobab; all these were the sons of Joktan. The territory in which they lived extended from Mesha in the direction of Sephar to the hill country of the east. These are the sons of Shem, by their families, their languages, their lands, and their nations. These are the families of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, in their nations; and from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood.

The Bible records what is called the Table of Nations in Genesis 10. It is called a "table" in the sense that it is an organized display of the descendants of Noah and what nations sprung from them. In terms of Biblical context it is the starting point of our understanding of whence all the peoples came. There are many theories of national sources, and of course very few of them agree with the Bible. Still, in pre-history we have to decide what we will trust, and then build our history on that foundation. In this text it will be the Bible.

THE TABLE OF NATIONS

The three sons of Noah—Japheth, Ham and Shem—are the basic outline for the Table of Nations.

First addressed are the sons of Japheth. He himself may be remembered by the Greeks as the son of Heaven and Earth, *Iapetos*, but it is his son, Javan, that has the closest Classical connection. The Bible says of his sons that from them "all the coastlands people spread" Isaiah 66:19 remembers that connection regarding Javan, and the Septuagint translates his name there as Hellas (Greece). Interestingly his name (Heb. *yawan*) is generally accepted as relating to the Greek Iones (or *laones/lawones*), which in Homer's Iliad (13.685) refers to the Ionians, one of the principal Greek peoples.

The other sons of Japheth are generally supposed to bring forth the following people. Gomer produced the Cimmerians, with his son Ashkenaz developing into the Scythians. Madai's tribe ended up being the Medes, and Mechech, the Muski of the Northern Steppe (Central Russia). Javan's son, Elishah was related to Alasia of Cyprus, as was Kittim, a later name for Cyprus. Tarshish is remembered in Tarshish of Cilicia or maybe Tarshish in southern Spain, while Dodanim has a likely connection with the island kingdom of Rhodes (see I Chronicles 1:7 "Rodanim").

Next in the Table are the sons of Ham. Cush is usually indentified with Ethiopia, but that may be a later designation given that Cush's son, Nimrod, was clearly Mesopotamian. The name of Cush might indicate a relationship to the Kassites of ancient Mesopotamia.

Egypt (or Mizraim) is a little obvious. Sheba is likely Saba in Southern Arabia, with Dedan being a direct memory as Dedan in Northern Arabia. Ludim is possibly the Lydians (of Asia Minor). Caphtorim is clearly Crete which, as a son of Egypt, puts our understanding of the Minoan civilization on a different track. The text itself says that the Casluhim (son of Egypt as well) gave rise to the Philistines which, since we know that the Philistines were part of the mysterious Sea People migrations, it helps us indentify them. The third son of Ham, Put, is Libya, and Canaan, the cursed son of Ham, was the father of Sidon (Phoenicians) and Heth (Hittites). The Phoenicians' relationship to Canaan is made more evident in what they were called in the Near East. That name, Kena 'ani (Akkadian: *Kinahna*) means both Canaanite and merchant (in Hebrew). Nimrod is notable in the text, being called "a mighty hunter before the Lord." He establishes some of the greatest cities of Mesopotamian antiquity. In Southern Mesopotamia he

built Babel (Babylon), Erech (Uruk), and Accad (Agade). Some scholars have connected him with Mesopotamian hero, Gilgamesh, because of their hunting prowess and being kings of the same place about the same time. After Nimrod built these three cities, he went north and built Nineveh (later famous as an Assyrian city), Rehoboth-Ir (unknown), Calah (Kalhu), and Resen (unknown). The greatest cities of Babylon and Assyria were established at the hands of Nimrod.



Use this map to place the regions each family occupied.

Lastly, the Table of Nations addresses the descendants of Shem. We get the name Semite from Shem due to the Septuagint reading of his name: Sem. His children are central to Biblical history. First was Elam, the ancestor of the southern Babylonian peoples, the Elamites. Asshur was the eponymous ancestor of the Assyrians, and became the national god. Arpachshad was the grandfather of Eber, from whom we probably get the name Hebrew, and hence, is the line of our Biblical characters. In Eber's son, Peleg, (which means *division*) we may have a reference to God dividing the nations at the Tower of Babel in that it says, "in his days the earth was divided".

Of the other sons of Shem, it maybe that Lud was the father of the Lydians rather than the Hamite, Ludim, and Aram is simply known as the progenitor of the Arameans.

The Table seems to account for a large group of humanity, but it does not include the developing Mongoloid peoples of China and the Far East. There is no Biblical account of which branch of Noah's family the Eastern peoples sprang but we can surmise in the three hundred years that Noah lived after the Flood he had other sons and daughters. They may have moved, perhaps with Noah, into the East. That or the three sons of Noah had descendants unnamed in the Table which has Biblical support as it says in Genesis 9:19 " These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was peopled."

Among the "Culture Heroes" of Chinese legend there is a Noah figure named Fu Hsi, who was associated with much water, a rainbow and many animals. A legend about the confusion of languages is NOT in the Chinese world, but it may have been that these descendants of Noah headed into the East before the Tower of Babel happened. The early civilization on the Yellow River goes back that far, (late 2000s B.C.) and Prince Yu of the Hsia Dynasty (the first Chinese dynasty) is known for draining the flood waters off the North China Plain.

SEPTUAGINT:

A translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek which commenced in approximately 250 B.C. It was commissioned in Alexandria, Egypt by Pharaoh Ptolemy and carried out, legend has it, by 70 Hebrew scholars