

The Table of Nations: A Geographic Odyssey

By [Guy Darshan](#) *Biblical Archeology Review*. Summer 2025



According to the Book of Genesis, after the great flood receded, Noah's three sons disembarked from the ark, and "from them the whole world branched out" (9:19). Genesis 10 then provides a detailed account of where Noah's descendants settled. It presents a genealogical list of names known as the Table of Nations, with each name representing a different group of people.¹ For instance, Javan signifies the Ionians or Greek groups in the northwest, Madai indicates the Medes in the northeast, and Hazarmaveth represents the people of Hadramaut, located in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, among many others spanning a vast geographic expanse.

In recent years, scholars have pondered how the biblical writers, who represented an inland population and who typically focused on internal Israelite affairs, gained access to such extensive geographical knowledge. They have proposed various sources of inspiration or information. One potentially fruitful avenue is to examine Mesopotamian literature, considering the Table of Nations' association with the Flood narrative (which originated in Mesopotamia) and the broader influence of Mesopotamian culture on Israelite literary models. Mesopotamian literature features several instances of geographical and encyclopedic texts, such as the *Babylonian Map of the World* and works detailing the extent of Sargon II's empire, such as the *Sargon Geography*.² Both texts demonstrate substantial geographical knowledge and literary prowess. However, scholars acknowledge that Mesopotamian geographical compositions differ from the biblical Table of Nations in terms of content, genre, and extent of geographical focus. Unlike the Table of Nations, which primarily serves as a genealogical lineage listing the eponymous descendants of the protagonist of the Flood story, these Mesopotamian works primarily emphasize geographical details. Thus, while the two bodies of literature may share common elements, the biblical Table of Nations stands apart in its distinct focus and purpose.

Furthermore, although the biblical Flood story has its origins in Mesopotamia, none of its Mesopotamian precursors depicts the protagonist or his sons as the fathers of the world's nations, nor do they emphasize the genealogies of these eponymous fathers. Figures such as Ziusudra, the Sumerian flood hero, and Utnapishtim in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* attain eternal life but are subsequently removed from the human sphere, with their descendants left unmentioned.

Many years ago, Umberto Cassuto briefly proposed an alternative way of understanding the origins of the Table of Nations. He noticed the similarities between it and the lamentation for Tyre in Ezekiel 27, both of which demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge of geography.³ In this lamentation, Ezekiel vividly portrays Tyre as a grand and opulent ship, constructed from the finest materials sourced from various regions across the ancient

world (Ezekiel 27:3–7). Nations from far and wide participated in the operation of this ship: “The inhabitants of Sidon and Arvad were your rowers ... The elders of Byblos and its artisans were within you ... Paras and Lud and Put were in your army,” and so forth (27:8–10). Drawing a parallel between Ezekiel’s prophecy concerning Tyre and the Table of Nations in Genesis 10, Cassuto proposed that both lists of peoples might be rooted in geographical traditions acquired by Phoenician traders and settlers through their extensive connections with surrounding lands.

Unfortunately, only a few literary works have survived from the ancient Phoenician world that might strengthen Cassuto’s hypothesis, largely due to the prevalent practice in the Levant of writing on perishable materials. Nonetheless, there is some late fragmentary evidence suggesting that Phoenician literary traditions did include lists of eponymous names. The use of geographical or ethnic names in genealogies in the style of Genesis 10 can be found, for example, in the second-century CE writings of Philo of Byblos (as preserved by Eusebius), who apparently drew upon earlier Phoenician traditions; for example, he offers a description of an old generation of peoples bearing the names of mountains or mountain ranges, including Casius (Mt. Zaphon), Lebanon, and Anti-Lebanon (Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 1.9–10). The next generation saw the birth of two brothers whose parentage is not specified: Samemroumos, also called High-in-Heaven (Hypsouranios), who founded Tyre, and his brother Ousoos who quarreled with him. The first brother represents *šmm rmm*, a district within the ancient city of Tyre, while the second represents Ushu, the name of mainland Tyre.

Further support for Cassuto’s hypothesis may come from early Greek genealogical compositions first put in writing in the late seventh or early sixth century BCE. Recent editions of Hesiod’s *Catalogue of Women*, a seminal Greek genealogical work,⁴ along with new studies of Greek mythographers in prose, offer a comprehensive approach to early Greek genealogical material and its parallels with the Pentateuch.⁵ Notably, similarities between Greek genealogical compositions and Genesis include the depiction of ethnic groups descending from a flood hero. Just as Noah begets Shem, Ham, and Japheth in the biblical narrative, the Greek flood hero Deucalion—son of Prometheus and grandson of the Titan Iapetus—holds a central role in Greek genealogical traditions. Deucalion begets Hellen, the forefather of the Greeks, whose three offspring become the progenitors of major Greek groups: Dorus, Aeolus, and Xuthus, the father of the Ionians and the Achaeans (Hesiod, preserved in Plutarch, *Table Talk* 9.747f).

The parallels between biblical sources and Greek genealogical traditions are significant, particularly considering the absence of the dispersion of peoples following the flood in Mesopotamian accounts. While a direct link between biblical and Greek sources cannot be claimed, it is noteworthy that the Greek flood account is believed to have originated from the ancient Near East rather than being indigenous to Greece. The flood protagonist holds a prominent place in Greek genealogical traditions, although the flood story itself did not attain the same prominence in Greece as it did in the ancient Near East. Scholars suggest that the flood story reached the Greek world through contact with civilizations in the northern Levant or Syria during the Archaic period (c. eighth–fifth centuries BCE). It is plausible that this Syro-Levantine flood narrative included the genealogical pattern of placing the flood protagonist at the head of genealogical lists, along with other unique motifs.

If the Greek flood story indeed reflects Syro-Levantine traditions, then this may further support the claim that the biblical Table of Nations is based on geographical, mythological, and genealogical traditions that circulated in the eastern Mediterranean. Writers from this region described their history and delineated their ethnic identity in comparison to neighboring groups by drawing upon the Mesopotamian legacy and reworking these traditions and old notions in a new spirit. Thus, the genealogical-geographical lists in Genesis 10 are but examples of similar traditions prevalent in the eastern Mediterranean. Although the Mesopotamian geographical texts cannot serve as a close model to the biblical Table of Nations, the lament to Tyre in Ezekiel 27 and several Greek genealogical works preserve similar broad geographical traditions and may attest to interconnections and interrelations between civilizations of the pre-Hellenistic eastern Mediterranean.

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MLA Citation

Darshan, Guy. "The Table of Nations: A Geographic Odyssey," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 51.2 (2025): 60–62.