

Jot & Tittle

A Journal Devoted to the Study of the Inspired Word of God

October 2004

The Sons of Japheth

by Dana L. Goodnough

Noah's three sons—Shem, Ham, and Japheth—became the ancestors of all nations and people groups on earth. The Table of Nations (Genesis 10) provides a historical background to the current diversity of people groups around the world. "Critics used to argue that the table could not be true, but most of the names in the table now have been discovered in written remains from the ancient Near East and the chapter increasingly is regarded as a trustworthy record."¹ Noah expressed a blessing on Japheth, indicating that God would "extend the territory of Japheth" (Genesis 9:27). Japheth's descendants became what we know today as the Indo-European nations, sometimes referred to as Aryans. "The Japhetic or northern peoples, fourteen in number, originally concentrated in the Caucasus region between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, thence spread east and west to form the great Indo-Germanic family."² Genesis 10:2-5, along with the parallel account in 1 Chronicles 1:5-7, lists Japheth's seven sons and his immediate descendants, and provides a historical foundation for understanding the spread of the Indo-European people groups.

Gomer and his Sons

Japheth's first son was Gomer, whose descendants, according to Ezekiel 38:6 lived in the far north. Gomer is often identified with

the ancient Cimmerians, known to the Assyrians as Gimirrai and to the Greeks as Kimmerioi.³ They apparently lived north of the Caucasus Mountains, posed a threat to the Assyrian Empire, and eventually migrated into Asia Minor. "Esarhaddon (681-668 B.C.) defeated them. Ashurbanipal (668-625 B.C.) mentions their invasion of the kingdom of Lydia . . ."⁴ Josephus associates Gomer with the Galls, or Galatians, who eventually migrated into France and northern Spain. "Gomer founded those whom the Greeks now call Galatians, but were then called Gomerites."⁵ This connection, however, is uncertain.

Gomer's three sons—Ashkenaz, Riphath, and Togarmah—likewise have historical connections. Although Ashkenaz is the modern Hebrew name for the Germanic peoples, Ashkenaz most likely refers to the ancient Scythians. "Ashkenaz is probably to be identified with the Ashkuz of Assyrian texts, known in English as Scythians and located in the region of Ararat."⁶ By the time of Jeremiah, the descendants of Ashkenaz were living in Armenia (Jeremiah 51:27). Riphath's legacy is less certain. "The name is evidently preserved in the Riphæan Mountains, supposed by the ancients to skirt the north shore of the world. Josephus identifies Riphath with the Paphlagonians."⁷ Togarmah was located "in the far north" (Ezekiel 38:6, compare 27:14) and is often associated with Armenia, "whose people have a tradition that they are descended from Targom."⁸

Magog and Madai

Japheth's second son, Magog, is identified with Gog, a ruler of the northern tribes of Meshech and Tubal (Ezekiel 38:1-2; 39:1-6). Davis says, "When a Babylonian king wrote to an Egyptian pharaoh in the fifteenth century, her referred to Magog as a barbaric tribe living in the north, presumably in the vicinity of the Black Sea."⁹ Pfeiffer adds, "The Amarna Tablets from the fourteenth century B.C. Egypt mention a people called Gagai, which may be related to the kindred word, Gog."¹⁰

The identification of Madai, Japheth's third son, is more precise. "Madai is almost unanimously identified with the Medes who lived in ancient times in the mountains south and west of the Caspian Sea"¹¹ east of Assyria.

Javan and his Sons

Javan was the fourth son of Japheth as recorded in Genesis 10. His name is associated with Ionia, the region of land in western Asia Minor that runs along the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea. In Hebrew, Javan is the word for the Greeks. Genesis 10:5 describes Javan and his descendants as maritime people, and indeed the ancient Greeks were noted for their sailing adventures and their colonization efforts throughout the Mediterranean world.

Javan's descendants were Elishah, Tarshish, the Kittim, and the Rodanim. Elishah is sometimes identified as Cyprus. "Elishah is Kittim or Cyprus, the Alashia of the Amarna Letters."¹² However, Kittim is distinct from Elishah and is most certainly associated with Cyprus. For this reason, some see Elishah as different from Cyprus. "Elishah seems to refer to the western Greeks of Sicily and southern Italy."¹³ Tarshish may refer to one of several settlements, including a location in Spain. "Tarshish has been located at Tartessus in southern Spain, on Sardinia, and at various places in the eastern Mediterranean; perhaps the Spanish location has received widest support."¹⁴ The Rodanim (1 Chronicles 1:7), or possibly the Dodanim (the alternate reading of Genesis 10:4), are difficult to identify due to the variation in spelling. "Dodanim might refer to the Danunim people of Cilicia, mentioned in the Phoenician Karatepe inscription, or the Dardanian of Homer's *Iliad*, a name applied to the people of Troy. The term Rodanim would suggest the Isle of Rhodes in the Aegean Sea."¹⁵

Tubal, Meshech, and Tiras

Tubal and Meshech, the fifth and sixth sons of Japheth, are often mentioned together (Ezekiel 27:13; 32:26; 38:3; 39:1). Tubal and Meshech may be identified as Tabali and Mushki referred to in Assyrian texts. "The Tabali are first mentioned in the frontier campaigns of Tiglath-pileser I (c. 1100 B.C.) and Mushki by Shalmaneser III (860-825 B.C.), and both names occur prominently later."¹⁶ They would have lived northeast of Cilicia in Asia Minor, and may have migrated from there to the region of the Black Sea.

The seventh son of Japheth was Tiras. There is no clear consensus on identifying his descendants. According to Josephus, "Thiras also called those whom he ruled over, Thirasiens; but the

Greeks changed the name into Thracians."¹⁷ The ancient Thracians lived southwest of the Black Sea. However, "no evidence except the similarity of name" supports this identification.¹⁸ Davis says, "Tiras has been variously associated with the Etruscans of early Italy and with an 'Aegean counterpart of the Etruscans.'"¹⁹ Unger indicates, "Tiras perhaps represents the Tursenoi, a people dwelling anciently on the north shores and islands off the Aegean Sea and greatly dreaded by the Greeks as pirates."²⁰

While not every one of the seven sons and seven grandsons of Japheth can be identified with ancient or living people groups, there are enough historical connections to the family line presented in Genesis 10 to assure us that the Bible is firmly rooted in history.

¹ Vos, Howard F. *Genesis*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1982, p. 50.

² Unger, Merrill F. *Archaeology and the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954, p. 79.

³ Hurlbut, Jesse Lyman. *A Bible Atlas*. Revised Edition. New York: Rand McNally & Company, 1928, p. 7.

⁴ Unger, p. 79.

⁵ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*. 1.6.1 (123).

⁶ Vos, p. 51.

⁷ Unger, p. 80.

⁸ Hurlbut, p. 7.

⁹ Davis, John J. *Paradise to Prison: Studies in Genesis*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1975, p. 138.

¹⁰ Pfeiffer, Charles F. *An Outline of Old Testament History*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1960, p. 25.

¹¹ Vos, p. 51.

¹² Unger, p. 81.

¹³ Pfeiffer, p. 25.

¹⁴ Vos, p. 51.

¹⁵ Pfeiffer, p. 26.

¹⁶ Unger, p. 80.

¹⁷ Josephus. *The Antiquities of the Jews*. 1.6.1 (125).

¹⁸ Hurlbut, p. 9.

¹⁹ Davis, p. 139.

²⁰ Unger, p. 80. Compare Pfeiffer, p. 26.