

PELEG IN GEN 10:25

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Many years ago I became fascinated by a short discussion by Henry Morris and John Whitcomb concerning the mention of Peleg in the genealogies of Genesis 10 and the etiological note that appears there: “In his days the earth was divided” (Gen 10:25). Though Morris and Whitcomb understood this to refer to the division of languages that would be revealed in the Babel pericope,¹ a visual presentation I witnessed later indicated that the verse may have referred instead to continental drift. I have subsequently wondered about this passage on a number of occasions.

My colleague Kurt Wise informs me that the passage has become a hot topic in the ongoing creation/theistic-evolution debate. The discussion, however, arises within the creationist camp solely among young-earth creationists who are trying to explain Biblically the separation of the continents. On one side are those who see the continental drift occurring within the cataclysmic flood of Genesis 7–8. On the other side are those who see it mentioned in the text before us. It is the purpose of this present paper to develop both of these views and to suggest a third view that may be more plausible.

I. THE POSSIBLE VIEWS

1. *Division of tongues/genealogies.* The traditional understanding of Gen 10:25 has been that the etiological notice appearing with Peleg’s name (“for in his days the earth was divided [*nīplēgâ*]”) is a literary foreshadowing of the division of languages in the account of the tower of Babel (chap. 11) and/or that it also may serve to demonstrate a division of Eber’s line into the ancestors of Abraham on the one hand and the builders of Babylon on the other.² Those who support a traditional view include Keil and Delitzsch, Morris and Whitcomb, G. C. Aalders, H. C. Leupold, Allen Ross, John Sailhamer,

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¹ H. M. Morris and J. C. Whitcomb, Jr., *The Genesis Flood* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961) 482, 486 n. 1. For the purposes of this paper I have ruled out the view of J. Strickling that Gen 10:25 may refer to the rift valley that contains the Red Sea (“Peleg’s Division,” *Creation Research Society Quarterly* 15/4 [1979] 159–160).

² It seems to me that perhaps these should be two separate views, since they seem to be mutually exclusive. That is, if the division refers to the division of languages in chap. 11, how then does it also refer to a particular and individual division of genealogy?

Victor Hamilton, Richard T. White³ and Jewish sources.⁴ Umberto Cassuto does not comment on the significance of the entire phrase. He only discusses “in his days.”⁵ But he does adopt the rabbinical designation of “generation of division” for the Babel account.⁶

To argue in this manner involves concentrating on three areas: (1) the context of the passage, which includes other references to this division; (2) the meaning of the verb *pālag* in other contexts; (3) the seeming division of the genealogies themselves.

In the context of chap. 10 there are several references to the separation of the people “into their lands, every one according to his language, according to their families, into their nations.” These occur at vv. 5, 20 and 31 (with some variation of word order) at the end of the genealogies of each of the three sons of Noah. Only at 10:5 and the summary statement in 10:32 does the verb “separate” (*pārad*) occur, but it should perhaps be understood also at vv. 20 and 31. (Also the verb “spread, scatter” [*pûš*] occurs at 10:18; 11:4, 8.) The fact that the division takes place “according to their languages” (10:5, 20, 31) strongly suggests literary foreshadowing of the Babel account in the next chapter, which story of course answers the “why” of the dispersion recorded in chap. 10. Given this context, it would seem that a reference to the division of the earth in the days of Peleg in 10:25 would also simply be a literary foreshadowing of and reference to the Babel account.

The traditional view also relies on the meaning of *pālag* in other contexts. 1 Chronicles 1:19 simply quotes Gen 10:25 and thus is of no help, other than perhaps establishing that Peleg’s “division” was still of sufficient enough importance for the Chronicler to include it in his genealogy. The piel stem in Job 38:25 seems to indicate the cutting out of a channel or watercourse. Finally, the use of the piel imperative in Ps 55:9(10) may suggest a division or confusion of tongues.⁷ An Aramaic occurrence of the verb in Daniel refers to a division of a kingdom (2:41). Additional support for the meaning of

³ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Bible Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 1.171; G. C. Aalders, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 1.237; H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1942) 1.381; A. Ross, “Genesis,” *Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* 44; J. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* 2.102; V. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 345; R. T. White, “The House of Peleg in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *A Tribute to Geza Vermes* (JSOTSup 100; ed. P. Davies and R. White; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990) 68.

⁴ The rabbis in the Haggadah refer to this generation as the “generation of separation.” References to the house of Peleg as a rebellious group who may have separated themselves from the Qumran community also appear in CD 20.22; 4QpNah 3–4 iii 11–iv 1 (see White, “House,” for details).

⁵ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: From Noah to Abraham* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1992) 221.

⁶ *Ibid.* 225.

⁷ This is especially true if *bāla*^c retains the meaning of “confuse.” The synonymous parallelism in Psalm 55 then would be somewhat analogous to the appearance of *pālag* in Gen 10:25 and the use of *bālal* in 11:7, 9. But if *bāla*^c should be understood in its primary meaning of “swallow,” then perhaps repointing *pallag* to *peleg* (supported by the Syriac) would render the phrase as “Swallow up, O Lord, the river (watercourse) of their tongue,” metaphorical language describing the overabundance of the words of those who oppress the Psalmist.

“division” also comes from the nouns *pělaggâ* (Judg 5:15–16),⁸ *pěluggâ* (2 Chr 35:5; Ezra 6:18) and *pělag* (Dan 7:25).

Finally, it is evident that at the point where Peleg occurs in the genealogy of chap. 10 there is indeed a division into the Pelegites, which results in Abraham (detailed in 11:18–26), and the Joktanites, who move toward the east (detailed in 10:26–31).⁹

2. *Continental drift.* Recently attempts have been made by certain young-earth creationists to see in Gen 10:25 a reference to the drift between the continents. Proponents include Donald Gray Barnhouse¹⁰ and Bernard Northrup.¹¹ To argue in this manner involves concentrating on the basic meaning of the root *plg* and its derivations in other languages, particularly Greek.

The noun *peleg* occurs ten times in Scripture, and each time watercourses (canals, tears, etc.) or rivers are in view (Job 29:6; Pss 1:3; 46:5[6]; 65:9[10]; 119:136; Prov 5:16; 21:1; Isa 30:25; 32:2; Lam 3:48). The noun *pělaggâ* in Job 20:17 also refers to rivers. One might see in this usage a division of land by water.

Northrup traces the development of the root *plg* from its Semitic cognates to its derivations. He concludes that the emphasis in Greek refers to dividing land masses by larger bodies of water, such as seas or oceans. Therefore the reference in Gen 10:25 must be to the division of the earth by large bodies of water and as such must be a reference to continental drift.¹²

Though one may certainly commend Northrup for his intriguing proposal, one must also question his reasoning with respect to how the usage of a given word in classical Greek can determine the usage of a similar word in Pentateuchal Hebrew—unless, of course, one accepts the documentary hypothesis. Even so, the traditionally understood dates for J (ca. 850 BC) and E (ca. 750) are probably still too early to be influenced by classical Greek (ca. 700–300). While one might argue successfully that the root *plg* in classical Greek may have derived from Semitic, one may not then impose the Greek gloss on the chronologically older basis for the alleged derivation. My colleague Gary Schnittjer says of Northrup’s reasoning that “only

⁸ The word *pělaggâ* in Job 20:17 refers to rivers, synonymously paralleling *nāhār* and *naḥal*. One wonders at the bearing (if any) that the antiquity of Job *vis-à-vis* the antiquity of the Genesis 10 account may have on the early semantic field of *peleg*.

⁹ The suggestion of Sailhamer at this point that the Joktanites were in part responsible for the building of the tower of Babel seems to argue against the notice in 10:10 that Babel was the beginning of the kingdom of Nimrod, a Hamite. On the other hand, the literary structure of the passage lends some credence to his view (see Sailhamer, “Genesis” 102). If he is correct, however, then the announcement of Peleg’s division several generations prior to Babel necessitates an understanding other than the traditional for the phrase under consideration.

¹⁰ D. G. Barnhouse, *Genesis: A Devotional Exposition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) 1.68. He mentions both views but seems to favor the continental-drift hypothesis.

¹¹ B. Northrup, “Continental Drift and the Fossil Record,” *Repossess the Land* (Bible-Science Association: Minneapolis, 1979) 165–170.

¹² *Ibid.* 166.

someone straining to prove a particular theological position would argue that way.”¹³

Northrup also argues that ^ʿ*ereš* in Gen 10:25 must be understood as referring to the “earth” rather than a given “land.”¹⁴ To be sure, ^ʿ*ereš* means “earth” often in Genesis and elsewhere in Scripture. But the fact remains that it is most often used in the Pentateuch to refer to the land of promise as a specific geographical region. Otherwise context will aid in determining its usage, such as in Gen 10:10; 11:2 (“the land of Shinar”).

One would also think that for such a dramatic event as continental drift to occur in the days of an individual would be as cataclysmic as Noah’s flood and would warrant similar space in Scripture due to its earthshaking importance.

3. *Canalization.* A third view that may be developed here is that the notice of the division of the earth in the days of Peleg may instead be an incidental reference to the widespread canalization of the land of Mesopotamia. This view recognizes the semantic field of the word but limits its meaning to canals or smaller streams of water, following its primary usage in the OT. Furthermore it has cognates in both Akkadian (*palgu*) and Ugaritic (*plg*), both of which mean “canal.” Though the idea came to me after studying the issues involved, it was published already by John Skinner¹⁵ and was more recently suggested as a possibility by Victor Hamilton.¹⁶

Can *peleg* assume the meaning of “canal” or “watercourse”? There seem to be some OT contexts that would accept this rendering. Initially one thinks of Job 38:25, a creation context in which it is stated that God makes a watercourse for the flood, synonymously parallel to a way for the thunderbolt. Could this then be akin to a drainage ditch? Proverbs 21:1 refers to God turning the king’s heart as one turns “channels” of water. How may water best be channeled if not by irrigation canals? In Deut 11:10 reference is made to watering gardens with the foot. The ancient Egyptians may have had foot pumps that were used in connection with irrigation canals. In Isa 32:2 *peleg* may refer to an irrigation ditch or canal in that normally dry places are watered by oases rather than naturally occurring living streams.¹⁷ The meaning “canal” for Akkadian *palgu* and Ugaritic *plg* both might argue for that meaning at least in some of the Hebrew occurrences.

In context the land of Genesis 10–11 seems to indicate the land of Shinar or Mesopotamia (10:10; 11:2) rather than the earth as a whole or Palestine in particular. Hence ^ʿ*ereš* here will either refer to humanity or to the land of Shinar itself with certain exceptions: In the summaries of 10:5,

¹³ Personal communication, March 12, 1996.

¹⁴ Northrup, “Continental Drift” 165.

¹⁵ J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (2d ed.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930) 220.

¹⁶ Hamilton, *Genesis* 345.

¹⁷ The NASB includes a marginal note translating *peleg* here as canals.

20, 31 are proleptic references to “lands” that I think look forward to the obviously worldwide dispersion indicated in 11:8–9.¹⁸

Since 10:5, 10:20 and 10:31 provide summaries of the lineages of Japheth, Ham and Shem that foreshadow the events of Genesis 11, with 10:5, 32 properly using *pārad* for that separation, what then is the purpose of 10:25 with its particular use of both the nominal *peleg* and verbal *pālag*? If it also refers to the division of languages in the time of Peleg, what purpose is served by its redundant insertion here? Also, of what significance is the nominal idea of a watercourse within the name Peleg itself? The verse in question may seem instead to offer an incidental statement of the widespread development of the renowned canal system of Mesopotamia. Peleg was named such (“canal”) because in his days the land was divided by watercourses (“canalized”).

II. CONCLUSION

I must confess that after examining all the evidence available I still tend to hold to the traditional understanding. It seems to be the view with the least problems. On the other hand, if one could establish a different reading for Ps 55:9(10), there would be very little support for reading “division” in Gen 10:25. A few feminine nouns and Aramaic forms would be the only support remaining. The preponderance of evidence would favor “canalization.” In fact, the suggestion of canalization is attractive. It has cognate support and some Scriptural usage. It would also be significant enough in Peleg’s time to warrant etiological comment. One who studies the contexts and perspectives of etiological comments might be able to observe certain patterns that could settle the issue.

The view of division of the earth by continental drift (separation by oceans) seems to be untenable. It lacks both etymological support and historical confirmation.

¹⁸ On the other hand, one could argue that *ʔeres* could refer to “land” throughout the passage, since the population was still ostensibly small enough to simply move to nearby regions initially, dispersing worldwide as population growth demanded.