THE GEOGRAPHICAL HORIZONS OF THE EARLY ISRAELITES: THE TABLE OF NATIONS REVISITED

Gordon R. Lewthwaite

In their rôle as geographers, the Old Testament Israelites have evoked some rather different reactions. As Wright and Filson remarked, "The Bible is unique among the world's scriptures; it is the only one for whose comprehension the study of historical geography is basic."¹ Indeed, Napoleon found the correlation of document and place so compelling that he had the appropriate scriptures read to him in situ throughout his Palestinian campaign.² Yet, there are surprising lacunae: as Baly and Tushingham remarked, even the location of sacred Mount Sinai passed from Israel's memory.³ That fact, of course, reflects long severance from a region which was traversed but never settled; and at least until the Exile and far-flung Dispersion, most Israeliite geography remained conspicuously close to home. A tally of identifiable Old Testament place names,⁴ however incomplete, indicates that fully 90 percent were located in the "Holy Land" itself (Figure 1). Yet, for all the allusions to natural phenomena, the regionally varying landscapes of even the homeland are seldom limned with geographical precision; and references to distant lands are rarely coupled with an identi-

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flying phrase. Peoples and places then taken for granted are thereby now obscure.

**Time, Place, and the Table of Nations**

Historians of geography differ quite markedly in their assessments of even unambiguous data. Thomson, for instance, deemed Ezekiel's lament song for Tyre (Ezekiel 27) to be both premature and "rather highly coloured," while Kish perceived it as "a detailed and accurate statement of the subject matter of what we now call regional or economic geography." Ezekiel's list seems to have been at least partially rooted in the Table of Nations (Genesis 10, 1 Chronicles 1), a document which has received the most varying assessments. In Hettner's view, it was both belated in construction and erroneous in content, part and parcel of the borrowed and misleading cosmography which Judaism bequeathed to medieval Christendom. Though
data from Solomon’s trading era were doubtless incorporated, Hettner conceived the Table as largely derived from Phoenician sources and finally formulated around 500 B.C.\(^7\)

If a layman in such matters can read the experts aright, some second thoughts now seem in order. Not that there is any real consensus about the Table: there are still too many incompatible presuppositions, viewpoints, and principles of construction for any such conclusion. Yet, it seems clear enough that there has been a significant shift of qualified opinion since Hettner’s day. Rejecting even the once-popular assumption that the Table was constructed around 700 B.C., recent authorities have insisted that it must have been formulated during the United Monarchy. Thus, Wright and Filson, Albright, and Aharoni all concluded that the Table took shape within the 1000-800 B.C. time span, with the tenth century favored by both Aharoni and Albright.\(^8\) Specifically repudiating his former preference for an eighth century provenance, Albright underscored his view that an earlier date was consistent with both the prior appearance of peoples hitherto thought to have been late arrivals on the historical scene and the otherwise anomalous inclusion of archaic elements — particularly in Arabia — which subsequently disappeared from the record. Some of these must have originated deep in the second millennium B.C., even if “a document of the tenth century B.C.” was postulated as the immediate source.\(^9\) Reinforcing this point, others claim that the core of the Table was probably composed by 1500-1300 B.C. from ancient tablets of the patriarchal era, with subsequent “slight scribal revision” accounting for the inclusion of later groups such as Philistines, Medes, Scythians, and Cimmerians.\(^10\) As Harrison and Wiseman saw it, it was essentially the pattern of 1500 B.C. which the Table records,\(^11\) an hypothesis confirmed by growing data from Mesopotamian and Egyptian records, with probable substantiation from new-found Ebla. There was a far-flung
network of trading contacts and deliberate geographical enquiry. Egyptian land and sea traffic were then extending the length of the Mediterranean, and Mesopotamian and Arabian traders and migrants were bringing information to the Egyptian court from as far afield as India, southern Arabia, and the Caspian Basin. Indeed, a still earlier formulation of the Table of Nations is conceivable, for before 2000-1800 B.C. "the flow of trade, and therefore of merchants and their supporting caravans and military expeditions [was] abundantly attested by contemporary documents and implies a knowledge of the very area outlined in Genesis 10."\(^{12}\)

Such chronological variations, of course, compound the problem noted by Thomson: unless the geographical data are synchronous a world map can scarcely be constructed.\(^{13}\) Besides, Genesis 10 scarcely purports to be a geographical document per se: it is a genealogical tree linking the sons of Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Tables 1, 2, 3). Yet there is more to the listing than meets the eye, and there is scarcely a scholar who reads it quite that way. Not only are various "sons"—Sheba, Havilah, and Ludim in particular—credited with an embarrassing plurality of fathers and gentilic rather than individual names incorporated into the list, but by ancient usage the term mishpahoth, or "families," could also denote quite varied relationships—political, social, and territorial, as well as biological. Further, all analysts, it seems, agree that geographical location had at least something to do with the linkages.

Not a few, in fact, believe that location was fundamental to the order of the Table. As Sperber put it, "the principle behind the classification is generally geographic proximity rather than ethnic or linguistic connections."\(^{14}\) Simons, though strongly qualifying his approval of this territorial principle, still stressed the essentially geographic structure of the nucleus, with the sons of Ham given preeminence in Egypt and associated lands to the south, Japhetic peoples spreading through northern and
Table 1: JAPETHIC PEOPLES AND REGIONS
[Mainly Indo-Europeans (Aryans) to the North and West]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Israelite Name</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Togarmah</td>
<td>Tegarama, Cappadocia</td>
</tr>
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<td>Magog</td>
<td>Scythians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madai</td>
<td>Medes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Javan</td>
<td>Ionian Greeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elishah</td>
<td>Alishiya-Enkomi, Cyprus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarshish</td>
<td>Tarsus, Cilicia; Tartessus, Spain; Sardinia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kittim</td>
<td>Kition-Larnaka, Cyprus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dodanim (Rodanim)</td>
<td>Rhodes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tubal</td>
<td>Tabali, Anatolia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meshech</td>
<td>Mushki, Anatolia</td>
</tr>
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<td>Tiras</td>
<td>Thrace; Thursha-Etruscans</td>
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western lands, and the sons of Shem accorded their central rôle in the Fertile Crescent and Arabian peninsula. Others, however, believe that this presses the geographical aspect too far, and point to broader implications in Hebraic phraseology. With significant reiteration, the peoples are grouped according to their “families, languages, lands and nations,” an encompassing formula that seems to signify broadly ethnic, linguistic, geographic, and political components. Furthermore, the word-order is varied in this verbal formula, with lands given priority in the Japhetic list (Genesis 10:5) and families in the Hamitic and Semitic groupings—priorities which Wiseman thinks may well be intended by the tabulator.

Whether or not some differential weighting was thus implied, most commentators seem to agree with Wiseman that “elements of geography, linguistic and physical affinities all appear” in interwoven fashion through the
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Table 2: HAMITIC PEOPLES AND REGIONS

[Egyptians (or Sumerians) and Associated Peoples]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Israelite Name</th>
<th>Tentative Identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cush</td>
<td>Nubia-Ethiopia; Kassite-Mesopotamia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seba</td>
<td>SW Red Sea region; Sudan-Eritrea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Havilah</td>
<td>Haulan, SW Arabia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabtah</td>
<td>S. Arabia; Shabwa-Hadramaut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raamah</td>
<td>S. Arabia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheba</td>
<td>Saba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedan</td>
<td>NW Arabia, al-Ula oasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabteca</td>
<td>unknown; S. Arabia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nimrod</td>
<td>Nimrud, Mesopotamia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mizraim</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ludim</td>
<td>Lydia, Asia Minor; NE Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anamim</td>
<td>A-na-im, Cyrenacia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lehabim</td>
<td>Lubim, Libyans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naphtuhim</td>
<td>Lower Egypt, marshland-oases, delta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathrusim</td>
<td>Upper Egypt, Nile floodplain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casluhim</td>
<td>unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philistines</td>
<td>Palestine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caphtorim</td>
<td>Crete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put</td>
<td>Libya (Phut); Somaliland (Punt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canaan</td>
<td>Palestine-Phoenicia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zidon</td>
<td>Sidon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heth</td>
<td>Neo-Hittites, Syria; Hittites, Anatolia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jebusites</td>
<td>Jerusalem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amorites</td>
<td>Syria-Palestine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gergashites</td>
<td>unknown, Syria-Palestine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hivites</td>
<td>Horite-Hurrian, Syria-Palestine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkites</td>
<td>Tell Arqa, Lebanon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinites</td>
<td>Sinn ad-darb, Lebanon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arvadites</td>
<td>Arvad, Syria-Phoenicia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zemarites</td>
<td>Sumra, Syria-Phoenicia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamathites</td>
<td>Hamath (Hama), Syria</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3: **Semitic Peoples and Regions**

[Mainly Fertile Crescent and Arabian Peninsula]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Israelite Name</th>
<th>Tentative Identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elam</td>
<td>Khuzistan, SW Iran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asshur</td>
<td>Assyria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arpachshad</td>
<td>Arrapachtitis-Kirkuk; Chaldea-Babylonia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelah</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eber</td>
<td>Hebrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peleg</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joktan</td>
<td>S. Arabia; al-Qatan; unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almodad</td>
<td>Unknown; S. Arabia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheleph</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazarmaveth</td>
<td>Hadramaut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerah</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hadoram</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzal</td>
<td>Sana, Yemen; Izalla, NW Arabia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diklah</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obal</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abimael</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheba</td>
<td>Saba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ophir</td>
<td>S. Arabia; NE Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Havilah</td>
<td>Haulan, SW Arabia, NE Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobab</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lud</td>
<td>Lydia, Asia Minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aram</td>
<td>Aramean-Syrian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uz</td>
<td>NE Arabia-Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hul</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gether</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mash</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

List, and that “whenever it was compiled between the Exodus and the Exile . . . the Table of Nations shows an awareness of the geographical distribution of people according to their countries.” In Aharoni’s phraseology, it thus “reflects the ethnic and geographic world known to Israel during her apogee, [providing] a faithful sketch of
Palestine’s position among the peoples and kingdoms of the ancient Near East.”

Japhetic Peoples and Northern Horizons

The Table of Nations, then, must be taken seriously, even if there is puzzlement as well as enlightenment in its data. In Cyrus Gordon’s words, it “remains a great historical document . . . an attempt, containing considerable historicity, to put all the nations known to the Hebrews into an organic framework.” There is a real, if admittedly elusive, order in what Barnett called “the early mappa mundi of Genesis X,” an ethnographic order which may perchance be clarified somewhat by a circuit beginning from the northeastern sector of the map. From the northeast to the west, the sons of Japheth—the Aryans or Indo-Europeans of more recent terminology—held sway; and among these the Madai or Medes may have occupied the farthest northeastern horizon (Figure 2, [Image of map: THE JAPHETIC PEOPLES])

Figure 2: The Japhetic Peoples
Table 1). The view that the Chinese were the "Sinim" of Isaiah (Isaiah 49:12) has been all but completely abandoned in favor of Egyptian Syene; Josephus' identification of the "sons of Gether" with the Bactrians of Central Asia seems to evoke little if any support; and India—or rather modern Pakistan—is not mentioned until the days of the Persian Empire and the Book of Esther. Indeed, the Persians themselves may have escaped mention in the Table of Nations. Admittedly, they may have been included in the "Madai" as Simons and others, not without some documentary support, are disposed to argue; but as others point out, it is a curious fact that the Persian benefactors, of all people, receive no explicit mention in a supposedly post-Exilic document. Better, they argue, to assume both the omission of the Persians and the composition of the Table during the early phase when the Medes were still predominant.

While the Table's classification of the still unclassifiable Elamites as sons of Shem (Genesis 10:22) is a puzzle which continues to divide the commentators, all seem to agree with Herotodus, Strabo, and the Table of Nations that the Medes were indeed Aryan-Japhetic, as were most of their neighbors to the north. Just how far north is open to question. Some have conceived that the northern shores of the Black Sea and now-Russian steppes were in view; but the Table itself, while seemingly touching on Armenia and Anatolia, seems devoid of such an extension.

True enough, the "Rosh" of some translations (Ezekiel 38:2-3, 39:1 RV) has occasionally been identified with "Russia"; but this is viewed by most as a chronological and exegetical impossibility. The Scandinavian traders and warriors who formed the original "Russ" had not infiltrated the region before the ninth century A.D. The relevant Hebrew word may have meant no more than "great chief"; and if a land or people was indeed intended, it was most likely the "Rashu" of Assyrian inscriptions,
seemingly located somewhere on the Zagros-Tigris borderland. Though Gog and Magog, Meshech, and Tubal have served apocalyptic purposes, they all seem to be ethnogeographic elements living south of the Caucasus ranges and the Black Sea shores. Admittedly, Josephus was probably right in equating the Magogites with a Scythian group; but these were Scythians of the Anatolian rather than the Russian steppes, and were very likely the same as the “Gagaia” alluded to in the Amarna tablets of fourteenth-century Egypt. Perhaps the “Gog” who later—but only later—was linked with Magog was indeed the “Gogo” of Assyrian inscriptions, the people of King Gyges of seventh-century Lydia. Likewise, the sons of Gomer were probably the “Gimirai” or Cimmerians of Assyrian and Greek nomenclature respectively, peoples of the Crimean-Ukrainian realm who surged southwards into Anatolia before the eighth century B.C.—though their identification with the Celtic Galatians or Gauls of Cappadocia by Josephus appears to be anachronistic.

The descendants of Ashkenaz, Riphath, and Togarmah are also viewed as inhabitants of Asia Minor, though precisely where is not so clear. Some have linked the Ashkenaz with the Ascania district near the Aegean Sea; but most now favor their identification with the “Askuza” of Assyrian inscriptions, apparently Scythians who settled in the Lake Urmia district—a location much more compatible with their alliance with the Armenians and the Minni or Mannae of the Medo-Assyrian borderland in the struggle against Babylonia (Jeremiah 51:27). The sons of Riphath—a reading generally preferred to the “Diphath” of 1 Chronicles 1:6—are more of a puzzle. Josephus’ belief that they were the Paphlygonians of the Black Sea shore is not implausible, but some have variously pointed to the Rebas River in Bithynia, the Rhibii tribe that classical writers placed somewhere east of the Caspian, and the snowy Riphean Mountains of Greek mythology—the Carpathians, perchance. In similar fashion Josephus equated
the sons of Togarmah with the so-called Thrugammeans or Phrygians of Asia Minor; but present-day scholars tend to link them with the “Tegamara” or “Til-Garimanu” of Assyrian annals, a city or region strategically placed across the routeways of the Armenian-Cappadocian borderland. A link with one Thorgom, claimed as a forefather by some Armenians, has also been mooted. As for Meshech and Tubal, they seem rather firmly equated with the Moschoi and Tiberinoi of Herodotus and the Mushki and Tabali of the Assyrians. Though almost invariably coupled in the historical records, they may well have had different ethnic roots. The Mushki were probably immigrants from the northern steppes who became dominant in northeastern Anatolia, while the Tabali were a neo-Hittite confederacy with their nucleus in the southern Taurus. Their power and territory fluctuated, but between the twelfth and ninth centuries B.C. they joined the Phrygians to “spread southwards over the whole of the vast Anatolian plateau.”

Sea Peoples and Mediterranean Lands

Doubtless such Anatolian peoples carried ancestral memories of their homelands to the north, and Mediterranean traders sailed the shores of the Black Sea. Indeed, it has been somewhat improbably affirmed that Phoenicians tapped Crimean forests to get timber for Solomon, but the Black Sea goes unmentioned in the annals of ancient Israel. Not so the neighboring Mediterranean. The Table of Nations seems to have been shaped more by maritime than continental contacts; and westward lay the homelands of Tiras and the four sons of Javan, “whence the coastal peoples spread” (Genesis 10:5).

Again, the precise identity of these peoples is usually uncertain, but there is little doubt as to their location along the Mediterranean shores. Some may still follow Josephus in his thought that Tiras was ancestral to the Thracians, but others think this rests on a purely verbal association. Identity with the Thursha, one of the roving
sea peoples who troubled Egypt, is more commonly fa-
vored. They were very likely one and the same as the
Tyrensoi of Greek tradition, who in turn are viewed as
probable ancestors of the Etruscans of central Italy, which
is where Aharoni was disposed to place Tiras. Javan is
more unambiguously equated with the Greeks and the
Ionian Greeks in particular; and though the shores of Asia
Minor and the Aegean islands rather than the Greek pen-
insula may have been intended, a wide panorama was
clearly implicit in the tabulation of Elishah and Kittim,
Dodanirn (or Rodanirn), and Tarshish.

These names, in fact, seem to have acquired both broad
and narrow meanings. In the narrowest sense, Elishah
and Kittim have been commonly identified with two Cyp-
riot towns. There seems sound reason to take Elishah as
synonymous with Alishiya, a copper-rich area alluded to
in many an extra-Biblical source, and identify this with
the Enkoni-Alassia site excavated on the eastern coast of
Cyprus. At least since Josephus' day, Kittim has been com-
monly accepted as Kition or Larnaka in the southeast of
the same island, though the evidence is really inde-
cisive in either case. At least some ancient references to
Alishiya seem indicative of an extensive mainland re-
gion, perhaps on the Syrian or Cilician coast; and many
think it extended westward along the coast of Asia Minor.
Indeed, Josephus may well have been correct in describ-
ing Elishah and Kittim as spreading to the coastlands and
islands of the Aegean, including the lands of the Aeol-
ian Greeks; and Jewish tradition later—but probably only
later—applied the term Elishah to the Greek colonies of
Sicily and southern Italy. Dodanirn, by contrast, poses a
textual rather than a geographical problem; for though the
Dodanirn have been proposed as cognate with either the
Dardanians of Homer's Troy or the Danunirn of Cilicia
known only from a Phoenician inscription, no such equa-
tion seems needed. The initial reading was almost cer-
tainly "Rodanim," as in 1 Chronicles 1:7. In that case,
Rhodes and its neighboring islands were presumably intended.  

**Westward to Tarshish**

The Tarshish question, however, is much more problematical (Figure 3). Admittedly, southern Spain, and the ancient realm of Tartessus in particular, has been widely accepted as the solution. Thus, Hettner envisaged the Phoenician-Israelite expeditions of Solomon’s day as tapping the ores of the Sierra Morena; Ellen Churchill Semple inevitably quoted lines from the classics on “the silver-bedded River Tartessus”; and Jacquetta Hawkes more recently invoked “the shadowy kingdom of Tartessus,” whence the Old Testament “ships of Tarshish” seemingly derived their name. Certainly, there is much to suggest the validity of this view. A mining village called “Tharsis” or “Tasis” seems to have been located nearby; and the prophets listed such appropriate trade items as iron, tin, silver, and lead (Jeremiah 10:9, Ezekiel 27:12). Phoenician enterprise was busily tapping the region at the appropriate time, and Greek and Semitic artifacts have also been unearthed in the locality. Besides, Tarshish was clearly a distant land as Jonah implied (Jonah 1:3).

Nevertheless, the question is far from settled. Neither Tarshish nor “Tarshish ships” can be identified with conviction. True enough, Albright’s explication of “Tarshish” as a derivative of a similar-sounding Semitic word for smelting, and of “ships of Tarshish” as a general term for seacraft with the size and strength to carry ores and ingots, has been widely accepted. As suspicious critics point out, however, the interpretation of Tarshish as cognate with smeltery is curiously absent from early literature; and the Biblical references seem distinctly locational. Some think a link with *tarsos*, the Greek word for oar, to be more likely, and view the “ships of Tarshish” as Mycenaean-type craft modified to carry a double bank of oars—a suggestion not incompatible with the common
Figure 3: Tarshish: Attempted Identifications
equation of Tarshish with Tarsus in Cilicia. Greek trading ships had something to do with that city’s founding, or at least its growth.\(^44\) Whatever the derivation, it has long been thought that a Tarshish-ship denoted some kind of sea-going vessel, rather than a ship that belonged to some particular place; and at least some Jewish tradition long interpreted Tarshish as a general reference to the sea.\(^45\)

Even so, most authorities seem to accept some etymological and geographical link with smelting, an association consistent with the metal-yielding rôle accorded Tarshish. Southern Spain apart, a variety — and sometimes also a multiplicity — of sites have been suggested with more or less plausibility. To Josephus, as to many present-day scholars, Cilician Tarsus with its backdrop of ore-bearing mountains was the Tarshish of the Table of Nations.\(^46\) Ritter, who considered Hebrew voyaging to a Spanish Tarshish as both intrinsically unlikely and incompatible with the silence of the records, insisted that Genesis 10:4 could well be read as “Tarshish-Kittim,” or, as the New English Bible suggests, “Tarshish-of-the-Kitions”—a Tarshish within the Greco-Cypriot sphere, and very likely Tarsus itself.\(^47\) Some have suggested a site within or near the Aegean—in Rhodes, or another Greek island, or in Asia Minor, or even Thrace. As Simons underscores the point, there may be no call to search for any Tarshish outside the Eastern Mediterranean Basin.\(^48\)

Many, however, prefer to look further westward. Some have suspected a Tuscan Tarshish, and one strong (but probably late) Jewish tradition, which influenced both the Septuagint and Vulgate, identified at least the Tarshish of Ezekiel 27 with Carthage.\(^49\) The latter, however, was but one among a series of Phoenician centers that stippled the shores of the central and western Mediterranean after the expansionist burst which marked the tenth and ninth centuries B.C. Among these Sardinia has been deemed the likeliest candidate. Not only did metal-smelting and Phoenician traders come early to that island, but also the very
word "Tarshish" occurs in a Phoenician inscription at Nora in the south. All things considered, both Aharoni and Albright came to view Sardinia as probable, with Albright suggesting the Tharros site as the original Tarshish.50

Nile Valley and Fertile Crescent

Still, the western horizon of Israelite consciousness remains indeterminate, and the Semitic and Hamitic peoples who occupied other sectors involve still further questions. The Hamitic peoples (Figure 4, Table 2) include the sons of Cush, Mizraim (Egypt), Put, and Canaan. Ethnographically, at least, this is a somewhat puzzling association; for if, as is commonly thought, the Hamites were essentially the Egyptians and their associated or satellite peoples of northeastern Africa, the inclusion of the Caphtorim, the Canaanites, the Cushites of Nimrod's realm, and the Ludim seems to involve both ethnic and geographic anomalies. The Caphtorim were almost certainly
the Cretans, and the Canaanites of Palestine, the Cushites or Kassites of Mesopotamia, and the Ludim or Lydians of Asia Minor—unless the Ludim were an unknown African people as some think—are all difficult to classify as Hamitic-Egyptian. Factors other than the ethnographic are therefore invoked, especially Egyptian political dominance of Canaan including Philistia, the connections of the Philistines with Crete, the postulated presence of Lydian mercenaries in the Egyptian army, and scribal confusion between Nubian Cushites and either Mesopotamian Kassites or the inhabitants of the ancient Mesopotamian city of Kish. Still others demur, claiming archaeological confirmation of an early Egyptian-Hamitic presence in at least Canaan and probably also Crete, Lydia, and Mesopotamia, while Wiseman proposed a reversal of the pattern of interpretation: it was not the Egyptians but the Sumerians of Babylonia who constituted the original sons of Ham. By cultural diffusion and migration, their influence is envisaged as spreading from Mesopotamia southwards into Arabia and westwards around the Fertile Crescent into Canaan, Egypt, and beyond, a sequence claimed as fully congruent with archaeological data. “Early pottery, seals and statuary known to be ‘Sumerian’ have been found in each of the areas listed under Ham,” and only after 2000 B.C. did the progressive Semitization of the Fertile Crescent mask and fragment the indices of previous Hamitic-Sumerian occupation. Given such data, Wiseman maintained, the duplication of names in the Hamitic and Semitic lists clearly reflects ethnic mixing, especially across the southern Red Sea where Afro-Arabian contacts were intensified by “an early and active sea traffic.”

Such alternative viewpoints, however, are more relevant to the ethnographic than the geographic aspects of the Hamitic section, and both the Fertile Crescent and northeast Africa seem listed in some detail. As Aharoni notes, the bounds of Canaan are delimited in terms con-
sistent with the shape Canaan assumed as an Egyptian province, and then a series of cities and constellations of cities intervene between the Levant coast and the Persian Gulf. There are obscurities in the list: it is still true to say, with Josephus, that successive disruptions have obliterated the identity of some places, though recent archaeology has uncovered some sites and found allusions to others. Clearly, the Table refers to the Phoenician coastal cities of Arqa, Sin, Arvad, and Sumra (Zemar) along with Sidon, though whether or not Tyre and Byblos were encompassed in "Sidon" or omitted because they lacked prominence when the Table was first constructed does remain a moot question. Back of the coastline, the Amorites and the city of Hamath (Hama) on the Orontes are clearly indicated, and the Arameans or Syrians are duly noted as Semitic (Figure 5, Table 3). The sons of Heth, however, have been variously identified with pre-Aryan Hattians, the Hittites of Anatolia, and (more commonly) the neo-Hittites of Syria. The Girgashites and Hivites remain unknown, though Girgas is not unknown as a personal name; and many suspect that "Hivites" is a scribal slip for Horites or Hurrians.

To the east and southeast lay the lands of the Cushites or Kassites, the Assyrian realm with its cities of Nineveh and Calah (Nimrud) and the Babylonian cities of Erech (Warka) and Accad—though Babylonia itself may not be included—along with the neighboring region of Elam in the Karun Basin of Khuzistan in southwestern Iran. Several of the names, however, are subject to variant interpretation, especially Calneh, Rehoboth-ir, and Resen. Wary of the tendency towards convenient textual emendation and noting that "the trend of archaeological discovery is to confirm even points that the consensus of opinion had rejected," Cyrus Gordon suggests that these may have been real cities which await future research. Others believe that "Calneh" may be plausibly amended to include "all of them"—as in the Revised Standard Ver-
sion (Genesis 10:10). Some also maintain that scribal transliteration from Sumerian into Hebrew may have obscured original references to the geographically-appropriate city of Assur, for “Rehoboth-ir” very likely means “city of open spaces” or “city-square,” and “Resen” may mean “head of spring” or refer to some achievement in hydraulic engineering affecting water supply. “Arpachshad” also has its variant translations. Some think it is a reference to the otherwise missing Babylon of the “Kasdim” or Chaldeans, and others note a close parallel with the “Arrapactitis” of Greek nomenclature — variously identified with present-day Kirkuk and the region between lakes Urmia and Van. Furthermore, though most assume that “Shinar” was Sumer in southern Babylonia, some see reason to identify it with the Shinjar region in Assyria to the north.

Despite such differences of interpretation, Mesopotamia was clearly in view, as was Egypt on the other flank of the Fertile Crescent. The name Mizraim or “Two Districts” probably signified upper and lower Egypt; and,
though Josephus affirmed that nothing save their Biblical names was known of the ancient Ludim, Anamim, Lehabim, Naphtuhim, Pathrusim, Casluhim, and Caphtorim, at least some seem to have been recovered from obscurity. The Casluhim remain something of a puzzle, though many believe that part of the puzzlement is due to displacement of the phrase “whence came the Philistines” (Genesis 10:14). It probably was the Caphtorim—almost certainly the Cretans and perhaps some Aegean neighbors—who gave rise to the Philistines. The other peoples are generally accounted north African. The Pathrusim were seemingly the inhabitants of “Pathros” or the Egyptian “South,” the entrenched valley floor extending to Aswan; and the Naphtuhim, though variously interpreted, were almost certainly northern Egyptians. Some have sensed in the Naphtuhim a reference to the followers of Ptah, who was a deity of the Memphis region in particular, while others think it alludes to “northern land.” Also, a strong case has been made for rendition as “they of the marshland” or delta, or perchance as those of the “oasis land” west of the delta. Other names can probably be referred to locations still further west. If the Ludim were north Africans rather than the Lydians of Asia Minor, they probably lived west of the Nile; and, if the Lehabim were indeed the “Lubim” of other Biblical reference (for example, 3 Chronicles 12:3) and the “Libu” of Egyptian texts, they were the original “Libyans” (or more strictly a Marmarican tribe) of ancient times. The Anamim, however, remain quite unknown save for one suggestive but inconclusive cuneiform reference to the “A-na-im” of Cyrene. The people of Put were probably also a Libyan-Marmarican group; for though Josephus reported that the Greeks used “Phut” for Moorish regions further west, this was probably a late extension of the term: earlier usage seems to refer to Libya and Cyrenaica in particular. An alternative reading which would equate Put with the “Punt” of Egyptian records and thereby locate
it in distant Eritrea-Somaliland would seem incompatible with its Biblical-historical rôle as a source whence the Pharoahs could draw auxiliary forces. Nevertheless, Cush or "Ethiopia"—more strictly Nubia along the Nile between Aswan and Khartoum—was in view, though possibly dimly. Cush seems to have exemplified a far-distant land to the Israelite mind. Yet there was obvious awareness of "the rivers of Ethiopia" (Isaiah 49:12), as well as Cushite Seba and Havilah, peoples presumably located on the African shores of the Red Sea (Figure 4, Table 2).

Red Sea Shores and Arabian Peoples

Here both the unity of the Table of Nations and the identity of Afro-Arabian peoples come into question. For some, the fact that Sheba and Havilah are listed among the descendants of both Ham and Shem (Genesis 10:7, 28, 29) is decisive evidence of the conflation of incompatible documents. To others such duplication is an ancient mode of indicating ethnic dispersal and mixing, processes particularly effective across the southern Red Sea. Thus Cushite Seba and Havilah are probably assignable to African shores, while Semitic Sheba and Havilah are envisaged as their Arabian counterparts. Cushite migration, furthermore, has been proposed as a solution to the occurrence of a "Cush" in both Africa and Mesopotamia; for the soldiers or merchants of Mesopotamian Cush are postulated as carrying the name of their homeland southward into Yemen (where Arabian tradition locates still another Cush), whence it ultimately reached African shores.

Whether the occurrence of "Cush" in widely separated areas reflects geographic ignorance or ethnographic insight, there is now no doubt that Arabian peoples and influences anciently flowed from the peninsula into Africa. However, the tabulation of peoples seems to follow an opposite order—first Africa, then Arabia. Yet Africans
seem to receive rather peripheral mention while Arabs—and southern Arabians in particular—receive more detailed attention. If Simons is right, this reflects the addition of later information to an originally brief tabulation. Not all agree, though. In Albright’s view it was ancient rather than belated Arabian data which were incorporated in the tenth-century Table, and Montgomery attributes the inclusion of detail to a Hebrew sense of kinship with the fellow Semites of the peninsula.68

Relatively few of these Arabian names, however, can be interpreted with any confidence, though some are tantalizingly echoed or paralleled in either local tradition or ancient reference. The name Peleg, for instance, has recently been described in an Ebla tablet, with a possible hint of Mesopotamian affiliations.69 Uz, the land of Job, was presumably located somewhere in the Syrian-Arabian borderland, with the Wadi Sirhan as a possible nucleus.70 Mesha is vaguer in location. If it were indeed the “Ma’sa” of Assyrian inscriptions, it was probably in northeastern Arabia; but if the Sephar with which it is textually coupled (Genesis 10:30) was Zofar in Hadramaut, then Mesha was probably in south Arabia too. These, though, are doubtful assumptions resting on doubtful assumptions, as is also the not uncommon equation of Joktan with the al-Qatan claimed as forefather by the “pure” Arabs of the south, an equation found “difficult” by Simons and “etymologically impossible” by Montgomery.71 Uzal is also uncertain, regarded as the ancient name of Sana in the Yemen by some, and as Izalla near Medina by others. Raamah and Sabtah find some parallels in both classical literature and Arabian inscriptions. Ptolemy alluded to one Raamah by the Persian Gulf, but both Strabo and Arab-Minean inscriptions indicate the existence of another Raamah in southwest Arabia, which seems a likelier location. Sabtah is very possibly the “Sabotah” that Pliny referred to as a trading center in the Hadramaut—perhaps the same as Shabwa, an ancient cap-
ital of that region. There are some relative certitudes, for the Hadramaut itself appears in the Table of Nations as Hazarmaveth; Dedan is rather firmly identified as al-Ula oasis north of Medina; and Sheba is almost certainly Saba. These instances highlight a point. Given the paucity of archaeological data, few places in Arabian ethnography are yet anchored in time and space.  

Southeastward to Ophir

Nowhere is this uncertainty better exemplified than in the search for Ophir, the very epitome of geographic bafflement (Figure 6). Not that confident claims have been lacking. Columbus claimed to have found Ophir in Haiti; subsequent Spanish explorers opted for Peru or the Solomon Islands; Karl Peters linked it with southern Africa's
Zimbabwe and Sofala in Mozambique; and others looked to the Asian realm, to Sumatra, the Malay peninsula, or—not without more show of reason—to Sri Lanka or the western coast of India. Despite some ambiguity, the latter seems to have been Josephus’ understanding, as it was the conclusion of Carl Ritter’s sustained reasoning and Ellen Churchill Semple’s affirmation: “The apes, sandalwood and peacocks, the latter with a Sanskrit name among the Hebrews, all point to India as a place of origin.”

Yet the question is not that readily resolved. It touches, in fact, on many a sticky question of interpretation and etymology, trade items, and ancient voyaging; and most authorities now tend to narrow the search to the southern shores of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, or the Horn of Africa. If a locational order is indeed implicit in this portion of the Table, it is significant that Ophir is listed between Sheba and Havilah, that is, between Saba and Haulan—if one widely accepted but unconfirmed identification of Havilah be assumed—in southwest or at least southern Arabia. It is also notable that the Ophir voyages are recorded alongside the Queen of Sheba’s visit (1 Kings 9-10; 2 Chronicles 8-9), and that most authorities interpret both the visit and the voyages as indicative of an alliance between Sheba and Solomon to break or bypass an Egyptian grip on the Red Sea trade. Nor would this necessarily preclude voyaging beyond an Arabian Ophir into wider seas as Crauford, Berkowitz, Boyce and others have severally proposed. Careful preparation, Phoenician help, three-year expeditions, exotic products, and an accumulation of evidence that there had been long contact between Middle Eastern and Indian cultures have all been invoked to sustain the argument that Solomon’s ships may have sailed much farther than southern Arabia. Those who argue thus still tend to invoke the list of trade-goods as indicative of Indian contacts. Arabia and the African shore, it is admitted, might yield gold, gems, apes, and ivory, but not Asian peacocks and sandalwood. Not only
that, but the Hebrew words for sandalwood, ape, and peacock have been widely accepted as derivatives from Indian roots — Hebrew *algum* (or *almug*), *kof*, and *tukki* from Indian *agil*, *kapi*, and *tokei* respectively.76 Granted this premise and granted also the significance of Josephus’ remark that Ophir was the Golden Chersonese “that belongs to India,”77 along with with the Septuagint’s translation of Ophir as India, and the case seemed all but closed. Ritter (among others) pressed the issue still further, identifying Ophir with Suphara or Upara to the north of Bombay.

Even so, this thesis has provoked its antithesis—hence, the trenchant assertion that “no attention should be paid to the baseless and absurd attempts still made to identify Ophir with India or South Africa”78; for the supporting data have been challenged at virtually every point. If Albright is right, the Hebrew words *kof* and *tukki* were derived not from Indian roots but from the Egyptian *gf* and *ky*, which signified not apes and peacocks but two kinds of monkeys—vervet monkeys possibly and baboons almost certainly.79 Along with gold, silver, ivory, and perhaps tropical woods, these were precisely the items procured by Egyptian expeditions to “Punt,” presumably the Eritrean-Somaliland region, though Yemen is not necessarily excluded. The evident parallels with the Ophir trade strongly suggest the proximity, if not the identity, of Punt and Ophir, even as the elimination of “peacocks” and perhaps also “sandalwood” weakens the argument for Indian connections.

It was not necessarily Indian sandalwood that was cut for Solomon’s court. There are, in fact, two words employed, and the relationship between the *almug* of 1 Kings 10 and the *algum* of 2 Chronicles 9 is still unresolved. As some see it, a scribal transposition of syllables is all that is involved, but others think that two species and two geographical realms have been confused by the Chronicler. Noting that *algum* appears as a Lebanese timber species in 2 Chronicles 2:8, in Jewish tradition, and in extra-Biblical
records, some favor its identification with some such conifer as the eastern savin (*Juniper excelsa*) or the evergreen cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens horizontalis*). The *almug*, by contrast, seems to have been a tropical timber procured during the Ophir trade, though not necessarily growing in Ophir itself. Red sandalwood (*Pterocarpus santalinus*) from India is frequently suggested, but ebony, African yew, mahogany, and especially the tropical Asian cabinet wood termed lign aloe or eaglewood (*Aquilaria agallocha*) have all been accounted as likely species, with some concomitant leaning towards African or Asian sources. Crauford, without scientific identification but not without some circumstantial detail, argued that *almug* was a tall, straight hardwood native to the south Arabian uplands, with a resonant timber valued for musical instruments and first-grade dhow-masts, and conformable to Josephus’ description as “like the wood of the fig-tree, but ... whiter and more shining.”

If the nature and source of *almug*/*algum* wood is still undetermined, so also is the voyaging distance. Three years of sailing would, of course, bring many a land within the range of Solomon’s ships, but the Hebraic “three years” need mean no more than one full year and two parts, as in Albright’s suggestion that the flotillas could avoid much summer heat by leaving in November or December and returning in May or June in the third year—a time span paralleled by Babylonian and Egyptian practice. Nor would all the time be spent in sailing: winds, trading seasons, loading, collecting, and perchance also mining activities were all potentially involved in the reckoning.

Again, this would not preclude some voyaging beyond Ophir or procurement of imported goods in Ophir markets. As Benzinger has emphasized, the most relevant verses (1 Kings 10:22; 2 Chronicles 9:21) do not identify Ophir as the only destination or source of exotic products. They simply state that “ships of Tarshish,” sailing with
Hiram’s fleet, returned with such items, and much else is conjecture. The text could thus accommodate Boyce’s concept of voyages ranging far beyond an originally-Arabian Ophir, or Crauford’s theory (recently revived by Berkowitz) that the “ships of Hiram” were small craft that worked the coastal harbors of the Red Sea and Arabia whilst the larger “ships of Tarshish” plied East African and Indian waters before all foregathered at Ophir for the voyage home.

Theories are many and facts are few, and the mixture is not untinged with romanticism. Benzinger’s principle may well be worth extending: all we really know from Josephus is that Josephus thought Ophir was in India, a view shared by others of his time who envisaged India as “the land of gold.” Arabia, however, was also a land of gold, a point elucidated by Montgomery in his argument that “Ophir-gold” was originally none other than the apryon- (or “river”-) gold of Arabian nomenclature—the notably pure metal that once flecked the stream-beds and wadis that scored its hard-rock uplands. His conclusion that we need search no further than Arabia for the source of Solomon’s supply—though not perhaps his argument for alluvium—has recently been reinforced by claims of members of the U.S. Geological Survey to have discovered Ophir as Mahd adh Dhabab, “the Cradle of Gold” ensconced in the mine-pocked mountains between Mecca and Medina, scarcely 700 miles from Jerusalem.

The discovery of Solomon’s mines, though, has usually proved premature; and most prefer to locate Ophir in some more distant sector of the Arabian coast or its African neighborhood, not without appeal to some linguistic parallel, real or imagined. Even within this narrowed orbit there has been no shortage of candidates. Apir at the head of the Persian Gulf, Ofra or Afir in Oman, Dhofar, Dahlak Island (once called Urphe or Uphre) off the Eritrean coast, and the land of the Afars in Djibouti—all these and sundry other sites have had their advo-
icates. Granted the fact that their etymological insight has normally been found wanting, their geographical sense may not have been wholly awry. Sober authorities like Eissfeldt have thought location beyond southern Arabia improbable; J. J. Hess tended to favor Yemen; and Albright could find "no reason to locate Ophir anywhere except in the region extending from Eritrea to Somalia and possibly beyond it."90

A Circle of Uncertainty

Thus the circle of Israelite geographical knowledge cannot now be closed; any attempt to suggest it—as in Figure 7—is no more than hopefully-informed conjecture. Not only is the periphery necessarily vague, but also much within the circle is uncertain. Yet the Table of Nations may still have data to yield. Quite a few names in

--- Close Contact
--- Considerable Contact or Knowledge
--- Vaguer Awareness or Occasional Contact

Figure 7: Israelite Geographical Horizons c. 1000-950 B.C.
Arabia and elsewhere have not yet been matched with extra-Biblical records or archaeological discovery (Tables 1, 2, 3). Of course, much that was known to Israelite individuals or groups may not have been inserted in the Table, apart from the probability that the circle of knowledge expanded (and perchance contracted) with time. Still, as Pinches suggested, such information as the Table recorded was usually secured “from merchants, travelers, envoys and ambassadors,” and the absence of information about northern Eurasia along with India and the Far East implies that “communications were easiest in the West, the limit of trade in that direction being apparently Spain.”91 Whether Spain was included or not, the pattern of data does indeed suggest extended knowledge along the main axes of travel—the Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Fertile Crescent in particular. Thus, even though Hettner may have notably underestimated both the antiquity and content of the Table of Nations, his general geographic framework may not have been so wrong after all. In defining Israelite knowledge as extending from Elam westward to a Spanish Tarshish and from the Black Sea southward to southern Arabia, he sketched a pattern not so different from recent perceptions.

NOTES


TABLE OF NATIONS REVISITED


24. For example, Harrison, p. 588; and Wiseman, 1973, p. xvii.


the "Aurea Chersonesus" has been construed as a reference to
the Crimea rather than the Indian/Malay realm (Antiquities,
VIII, vi, 4, p. 180; and VIII, vii, 1, p. 181).

Bib: Enc., Vol. V (1939), p. 2986; and T. C. M[itchell], "Tiras,

34. Aharoni, p. 7; Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, The
Macmillan Bible Atlas (New York: The Macmillan Company,
1968), Fig. 15, p. 21.

35. Josephus, Antiquities, I, vi, 1, p. 31; T. C. M[itc]hell, "Elishah,

Hist., Vol. II (1975), pp. 201-205.

292.

38. Pfeiffer, p. 40.


40. Ellen Churchill Semple, The Geography of the Mediterranean
Region: Its Relation to Ancient History (New York: AMS Press,


44. R. D. Barnett, "Early Shipping in the Near East," Antiquity,
Vol. XXII (1958), pp. 220-230; and D. J. W[iseman], "Ships and

65.

46. Josephus, Antiquities, I, vi, 1, p. 31; E. M. Blaiklock, "Tarsus,

Simons, pp. 88-89.


Aharoni, pp. 8, 76.


Gordon, p. 28.


74. Semple, p. 169.
84. Berkowitz, p. 33; Boyce, p. 38; and Crauford, pp. 280-286.
86. Montgomery, p. 38.


*Key to Abbreviations*

Bib. Arch. Rev.: Biblical Archaeology Review
Camb. Anc. Hist.: Cambridge Ancient History
Enc. Jud.: Encyclopaedia Judaica
Int. Std. Bib. Enc.: The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia
Jew. Enc.: The Jewish Encyclopedia
New Bib. Dict.: The New Bible Dictionary
Univ. Jew. Enc.: The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia