

Genesis 10:21 – Is Shem the Older Brother of Japheth?

In the KJV and the NIV, Genesis 10:21 is translated as though Japheth was the older brother of Shem, saying, "Sons were also born to Shem, *whose older brother was Japheth*; Shem was the ancestor of all the sons of Eber." (NIV). Contrary to this assertion, the Geneva Bible of 1599, William Tyndale's NT translation of 1526, and all *modern* versions (including the popular English Standard Version) translate Genesis 10:21 as saying "To Shem also, the father of all the children of Eber, *the older brother of Japheth*, children were born." (ESV)

Which brother is the older brother? Is Shem the older brother of Japheth or is it the reverse the case? Interestingly enough, the Hebrew text which underlies both translations is the same. Some translations render Japheth as the older brother, understanding the adjective הַגָּדוֹל (*haggadol*, "older") as modifying Japheth. However, in Hebrew when a masculine singular adjective follows the masculine singular construct noun and proper name, the adjective most often modifies the noun in construct, not the proper name. Such is the translation found in most modern bibles today (except the KJV and NIV), which is why the ESV translates Shem as the older brother of Japheth. But is this the only reason why modern versions translate it differently than the KJV and NIV?

Is this "minor detail" really *that* important after all? At first it appears as though it doesn't really matter which translation is correct. After all, it doesn't affect one's salvation (or so it has been argued). Indeed, it doesn't affect one's personal profession of salvation, unless this doctrine was to shake the very core of our trust in biblical inerrancy – *then it would* affect one's *assurance* of salvation. Ultimately I believe that God has revealed the correct answer to this problem and the first place it is to be sought after and found is in the structure of the Hebrew Scriptures themselves (and not just the syntax).

The Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures maintain a consistent *structure* for the hearers and readers of the text to recognize. (And keep in mind that this structure is much clearer to see and hear from the original Hebrew text.) The most common structures found among the Hebrew Scriptures is either symmetrical or parallel in *pattern*, and usually consists of two sets containing three parts each (a-b-c-a-b-c) with an additional seventh-part at the end (a-b-c-a-b-c-d) or the center (a-b-c-d-c-b-a) thereby creating a "mirroring" effect. The first pattern of seven is called a *parallel pattern* and the second is called a *chiasm* or *symmetrical pattern*. And most importantly, we must be learned at the outset that each *structure* needs to maintain its own *external* and *internal* patterns in order for there to be a legitimately intentional structure at all (i.e. one that's *not* arbitrary and artificial).

The external pattern can be thought of as the "larger" structure of the text. The internal pattern can be thought of as the "smaller" structure or "pieces" of the "larger" structure. The "smaller" structure of Genesis involves the placement of names of cities, people, and events in a certain pattern (within each external structure). And in Genesis 10:21 we have a certain internal pattern (which we will get to after showing the larger structure of Genesis). Let's look at the larger structure of Genesis 1-11 for a moment. It contains an arrangement of seven main units:

(See outlines on following page)¹

¹ The following outlines of Genesis 1:1-21:7 are from David Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament* [Baker Academic, 2005], pp. 55-56.

Genesis 1-11

a. **CREATION:** God creates the world and humankind - a beginning (1:1-2:3)

- dry land appears out of the water/sea
- animals: every living thing, birds, every animal that creeps (*remes*) on the ground; male and female (*zakar uneqeba*); after their kind (*lemina*)
- divine blessing on animals: "be fruitful and multiply upon the earth"
- Jehovah blesses the first people: "be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth."
- instructions regarding food that humans may eat (plants)

b. **HUMANKIND'S DEGENERATION:** sin and scattering of first people (Adam, Eve, Cain); line of Adam which did not receive the blessing and birthright (2:4-4:26)

- stories about humankind's sins
- God deliberates in first-person plural over human sin (3:22)
- punishment by banishing, scattering sinner

c. **TEN GENERATIONS** from Adam to Noah (5:1-6:10); In each genealogy, only one son receives the blessing and birthright, beginning with Adam's son Seth; Narrative ends by mentioning Noah as the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, *the first of which is the only son to receive the blessing and birthright*.

a. **FLOOD:** God destroys the world and humankind -- a new beginning (6:11-9:29)

- dry land appears out of the water/sea
- animals: every living thing, birds, every animal that creeps (*remes*) on the ground; male and female (*zakar uneqeba*); after their kind (*lemina*)
- divine blessing on animals: be fruitful and multiply upon the earth"
- Jehovah blesses the new first people: "be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth."
- instructions regarding food that humans may eat (now they may eat plant and *all* animals, clean and unclean)

b. **HUMANKIND'S DEGENERATION:** sin and scattering of first *new* people (Noah's descendants); line of Noah which did not receive the blessing and birthright (10:1-11:9)

- stories about humankind's sin
- God deliberates in first-person plural over human sin (11:7)
- punishment by banishing, scattering sinners

c. **TEN GENERATIONS** from Shem to Abram (11:10-26); In each genealogy, only one son receives the blessing and birthright, beginning with Shem's son Arphaxad; Narrative ends by mentioning Terah as the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran, *the first of which is the only son to receive the blessing and birthright*.

d. **CONCLUSION: Abram is called of God to journey to Canaan with his family (11:27-32)**

Notice how the conclusion (Abram – 11:27-32) sets the stage for the following literary structure (chiasm) of Abraham and the promise of a Son (Gen. 12:1-21:7):

Abraham and the Promise of a Son (Gen. 12:1-21:7)

a. **INTRODUCTION:** journey to Canaan and the promise of descendants (12:1-9)

b. Abram lies about Sarai in Egypt; God protects her in foreign king's court (12:10-20)

c. Lot settles in Sodom (and Abram settles in Hebron) (13:1-18)

d. Abram intercedes for Lot and Sodom militarily (14:1-24)

e. Promise of a Son: from Abram himself (15:1-21)

f. Ishmael's birth; promise to him (16:1-16)

g. **CENTER: Jehovah's Covenant:** Abram's and Sarai's names changed; circumcision instituted; promise of a Son reiterated (17:1-21)

f. Ishmael and Abraham circumcised (promise to Ishmael) (17:22-27)

e. Promise of a Son: from Sarah herself (18:1-15)

d. Abraham intercedes for Lot and Sodom in prayer (18:16-33)

c. Lot flees Sodom, which God destroys; settles in Moab (19:1-38)

b. Abraham lies about Sarah in Gerar; God protects her in foreign king's court (20:1-18)

a. **CONCLUSION:** Promise of a Son fulfilled in the birth of Isaac (21:1-7)

- What does all this have to do with Japheth being the older or younger brother of Shem?

Remember what was said earlier, that each *structure* needs to maintain its own *external* and *internal* pattern in order for there to be a recognized structure at all. Now that an external structure is known from the outlines above, what does the internal structure teach us? For instance, what internal structural evidence is there to support the age of Japheth in relation to his brother Shem? Again, we need to remember that the problem we are encountering has to do with the list of Noah's sons mentioned within (i.e. internally) the larger structure. According to the internal structure of Genesis, which one is listed as the oldest - Shem, Ham, or Japheth?

If we re-visit section "c" of the first chiastic pattern we find a list of "10 generations" wherein only *one* son receives the blessing and birthright according to each genealogy, *beginning* with Adam's son Seth. The chiastic pattern then *ends with Noah as the father of three sons* - Shem, Ham, and Japheth – but *only the first son receives the blessing and birthright*. The same pattern follows with the second "c" section, concluding with Terah as the father of three sons – Abraham, Nahor, and Haran – and again, *only the first son receives the blessing and birthright*.

The reason why this is important is two-fold. first, because the literary structure itself sets the pattern of *one son* receiving the blessing and birthright of Jehovah and more specifically, *the first son* listed as the one who is *that son*. So even when the three sons of Noah are listed, the first son receives the preeminence in the list because he alone receives the blessing and birthright. There is no evidence within the literary structure of Genesis which suggests otherwise (i.e. that the three sons listed from first-to-third were intentionally ordered by age, from oldest-to-youngest). And this leads us to the second reason why this is important: genealogy.

It is crucial to maintain a correct genealogy within the book of Genesis, especially in an age when the historicity of Genesis is being attacked. For example, modern scholarship has questioned the validity of the Hebrew (Massoretic) and Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) text when it refers to the age of Abraham's father, Terah, when he died. The Hebrew and Greek Old Testament texts both say that Terah was **70 years** old when he "begat Abraham, Nahor, and Harran" and **205 years** old when Terah died in Haran (midway to Canaan). Following that bit of information, in Genesis 12:4, we learn that Abraham was **75 years** old when he departed from Haran (midway to Canaan). In Acts 7:4, however, Stephen, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit says that Abraham left Haran **after** the death of Terah, his father, in Haran. If it is *assumed* that Abraham is the oldest son (being the first son listed among the three), then Terah, his father, must have died 60 years **after** Abraham's departure from Haran (on his way to Canaan), which contradicts Stephen's declaration that Abraham left Haran after his father died in Haran (age 70 @ Abram's birth + age 75 @ his departure + age 60 @ time of father's death in Haran = 205 years old when Terah died). Some scholars have even suggested that the Hebrew and Greek scriptures *must* be incorrect, and that a much different textual tradition known as the Samaritan Pentateuch should be considered as the correct reading because it says that Terah died in Haran at age 145.

So which is it? Is the Samaritan Pentateuch correct when it reads that Terah was 145 years old when he died in Haran, or is the original Hebrew and Greek Old Testament text correct when it reads that Terah died at the age of 205 in Haran? In Acts 7:4, is Stephen quoting the Massoretic/Septuagint reading or is he quoting the Samaritan Pentateuch?

Notice that the first faulty assumption from modern scholars is that the Massoretic text tradition is faulty in its genealogies. The second faulty assumption from modern scholarship is that Terah was 70 years old when Abraham was born (i.e. Abraham was Terah's firstborn son because he was listed first). These two assumptions are the crux of what influences modern scholarship to choose the "easy" route of escape when faced with apparent problems. Now, notice how simple the answer is to all of these apparent problems if these two faulty assumptions are not brought into one's interpretation of the text, and we let the literary structure interpret itself.

But notice that if the literary structure mentions the first *listed* son as the first to receive the blessing and birthright, then Terah doesn't have to be 70 years old when Abraham was born. Abraham would have been born 60 years after Terah started begetting sons, which would make Terah 130 years old when Abraham was born (age 205 @ Terah's death - age 75 @ Abram's departure = 130 years old when Abraham was born).

Remember that the original concern was whether Japheth was the older or younger brother of Shem, and the literary structure of Genesis 1-11 is the key to answering this concern. Well, enough time has been spent trying to provide evidence for a definitive answer to the problem, and so, here's what I believe to be the only viable answer if we are to maintain the integrity and inerrancy of God's Word. I believe the KJV and NIV are both correct and the other translations are not. Shem is "the brother [of] Japheth the older [one]" (KJV). Shem's name comes first because he received the blessing and birthright (Gen. 9:26; Luke 3:36). Hence we find the Messiah coming through his lineage. Moreover, Genesis 9:24-25 clearly mention Ham being the youngest son of the three (Shem, Ham, and Japheth), which automatically excludes the erroneous idea that the sons listed first-to-third were intentionally listed in chronological order (i.e. from oldest-to-youngest).

I believe the author structured the history of Genesis 1-11 to make clear who would receive Jehovah's blessing and birthright, which would ultimately work out according to God's promise to Abraham, and his seed (and *that seed* is Christ – Galatians 3:16).