

Homily for February 17 2016

As we continue to read through this first portion of Genesis, in chapter 10 we are introduced to the names of the sons born to Noah after the Flood: Shem, Ham and Japheth.

Ham had four sons: Cush, Egypt, Put and Canaan. Notice that from Ham's line springs the Philistines as well as the nation of Egypt, which would hold Israel in bondage for centuries (see Gn 10:14). We have only to pick up the latest newspaper or turn on the TV to read about how this family feud continues to this very day.

Cush fathered Nimrod, "a mighty hunter before the Lord" (v. 9), who built a kingdom for himself in Babel (later called Babylon, which is present-day Iraq). This tyrant continued into Assyria and built the great city of Nineveh. So Ham's family came to encompass Egypt, Canaan, Philistia, Assyria and Babylon.

The Israelites would look at this list and see a veritable rogues' gallery, an ancient hall of shame, consisting of the most vile characters in history, all of whom raised their families to become Israel's worst foes. Old Testament history offers a blow-by-blow account of Israel's ongoing abuse at the hands of Ham's wicked descendants: Israel was enslaved by Egypt, ensnared by Canaan, oppressed by the Philistines, annihilated by Assyria and exiled by Babylon.

In the face of such opposition, God's chosen people needed to remain strong in faith or else perish. The elect family was growing through Shem. (He was one of the two firstborn sons in Genesis who didn't succumb to pride and end up being passed over for a worthier younger brother; the other was Abram.) Not only did Shem not abuse his power, he even used his favored position as firstborn to serve his father and his family. Because of his righteousness, Shem was elevated and blessed in a unique way. He is said to have lived five hundred years after the flood (see Gn 11:11). Not surprisingly, he was not without enemies, especially within the line of Ham.

Meanwhile, the Hamite king, Nimrod, had settled in the land of Shinar, along with his offspring. They apparently wanted to outdo the architectural feats of the Canaanites: "Come," they said, "let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name (Hebrew, shem) for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth" (Gn 11:4).

God quickly intervened and put a stop to this ill-conceived project by confusing their speech. He thus scattered the peoples by making it impossible for them to communicate with each other. Why was God so opposed to this tower-building project? The key is to see the subtle way in which the narrative presents their sin.

Apparently, it wasn't just a neutral architectural enterprise. By announcing their intention "to make a shem for ourselves," these builders were implementing Nimrod's plan to build a counter-kingdom to the godly line of Shem. It was starting to sound like a repeat performance of the pre-flood situation. Once again, the ungodly were rejecting the covenant authority structure within the Father's family; only this time Shem was the target, as the firstborn son that Noah had blessed. Presumably, Noah had been grooming Shem to assume leadership as a new father figure after his death.

But the Hamites under Nimrod didn't go for it. They deserved divine judgment. But God had sworn a covenant oath never to wipe out the wicked with another flood. So instead of a clean sweep, build-an-ark rescue mission, God embarked on a plan to reconquer the human race with his love, through a man named Abram.

God went to work, restoring his family's legacy by calling Shem's great-great-great-great-great grandson, Abram. "I will ... make your name (shem) great, so that you will be a blessing.... and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (Gn 12:2-3).

In other words, God was telling Abram: I won't wipe out my family again, not even the wicked. Instead, I'll do the impossible. I will take you—a seventy-five-year-old man—and use you to bless all of the families on earth. In that way, the whole unhappy human family that has been torn apart by sin might be brought back to me, as their Father, even the wicked. In other words, Babel-in-reverse. How could the Father achieve such an impossible goal? Against all odds, as we shall see in the next scene from this biblical love story.¹

This is something that gets to the heart of the human enterprise; will we live making a name for ourselves? Or will we live exalting the name of the other, the name above all names, the Name Jesus Christ. If we live making a name for ourselves, what an inconsequential enterprise that is. But if we live making a name for Jesus, then we find ourselves in line with Shem, and Abram, and can in the words of today's Collect pray:

God of might, giver of every good gift, put into our hearts the love of your name, so that by deepening our sense of reverence, you may nurture in us what is good, and by your watchful care, keep safe what you have nurtured.

¹ This is taken from: Hahn, S. (1998). A Father Who Keeps His Promises: God's Covenant Love in Scripture (pp. 89–91). Cincinnati, OH: Servant Books; St. Anthony Messenger Press.