

CHAPTER 15

Did the Continents Split in the Days of Peleg?

Introduction

In Genesis 10, two-thirds of the way through the genealogies of the post-Flood patriarchs, we read in verse 25:

To Eber were born two sons: the name of one was Peleg, for in his days the earth was divided; and his brother's name was Joktan.

The same parenthetical phrase “for in his days the earth was divided” also appears in the repetition of this genealogical entry in 1 Chronicles 1:19.

Many find these genealogical lists very boring to read. So they skip over the details and often miss this parenthetical phrase. However, there are some Christians who get excited about this phrase and suggest that maybe this is where the continental drift, which secular scientists have proposed, fits into the Bible!

It seems odd that this little “nugget” should appear in this genealogy of Noah's three sons and their descendants after the Flood. But does this phrase, “for in his days the earth was divided,” suggest that continents drifted apart in the days of Peleg as a result of God dividing and separating the continents?

1. Special thanks to Dr. Andrew Snelling for his contributions to this chapter.

Have the Continents Shifted?

In today's secular society, people have been taught as fact that the continents were once joined together in a supercontinent that split apart and then the resultant continents drifted over millions of years into their present positions. One primary piece of conclusive evidence usually presented to support this idea is the jigsaw puzzle fit of Europe and Africa matching closely with North and South America, respectively. If the North and South Atlantic Ocean basins are closed, these continents fit together at approximately the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, a range of mountains on the ocean floor centrally located in the Atlantic Ocean basins.



The Mid-Atlantic Ridge is strong support for the concept of plate movement.

It was this reconstruction that led to the idea of the earlier supercontinent called Pangea. The secular concept for this continental drift, now known as plate tectonics, goes further and suggests that there were earlier supercontinents, such as Pangea, Pannotia, and Rodinia, encompassing the earth's proposed multi-billion-year geologic history.

Creation scientists and Flood geologists do not deny that these continents may have been connected to one another in the past as a single supercontinent in light of Genesis 1:9. Actually, it was a Christian geologist named Antonio Snider in 1859 who was the first person to publicly comment on this jigsaw puzzle fit of all the continents, except that he believed the spreading apart and separation of the continents occurred catastrophically during the Genesis Flood.

Creation scientists believe, along with their secular colleagues, that there is good observational evidence that is consistent with an original supercontinent in the past that was split apart, and that today's continents moved to their present positions on the earth's surface. However, the main difference is the timing.

Whereas our secular colleagues believe these processes were slow and gradual over millions of years, creation scientists insist it all took place totally by catastrophic means, involving continental sprint rather than continental drift. However, many Christians who see the specific mention of the earth being divided in the days of Peleg, as quoted from Genesis 10:25,

appeal to this particular time for the biblical explanation for continental shifting.

Did the Continental Division Take Place in the Days of Peleg?

The Context of Genesis 10

A careful search of the context of Genesis 10:25 clearly reveals that the referred-to division of the earth regards dividing up the post-Flood people on the basis of languages and families, and moving them into different geographical locations. In fact, all of Genesis chapter 10 is dedicated to dividing up Noah's family into its three major divisions based on Noah's three sons and their families, and then to further list the sub-family groups.

Because these genealogical lists encompassed all the people on the post-Flood earth, the division referred to in verse 25 must have affected the entire post-Flood human population. Several other verses dotted throughout Genesis chapter 10 indicate that it was these people who were being split up by language and moved across the earth to different geographical locations or lands:

... separated into their land ... (Genesis 10:5)

... the families of the Canaanites were dispersed (Genesis 10:18)

... according to their families, according to their languages, in their lands and in their nations (Genesis 10:20)

Even the culminating verse to the chapter states:

These were the families of the sons of Noah, according to their generations, in their nations; and from these the nations were divided on the earth after the Flood (Genesis 10:32).

The chronological sequence of events on what happened at the Tower of Babel is given in Genesis 11, where we are told in verse 8 that "the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth. . . ." But it's actually in Genesis 10 where we are told about the different groups of people who were divided into their families with different languages as a result of the Tower of Babel judgment.

It is appropriate to compare Scripture with Scripture in the context it is written. There are four verses listed above in chapter 10 (verses 5, 18, 20, and 32) which explain the parenthetical statement (in verse 25) that "in his days the earth was divided," as the division of family groupings according to the languages God gave them into different lands across the face of the earth. Verse 25 was not referring to an actual physical division of the earth from one supercontinent into today's many continents.

Another Flood!

Let's stop and consider for a moment what would be the effect of the break-up of a supercontinent followed by the sprinting of the new continents into their present positions. In late 2004, there was an earthquake in the eastern Indian Ocean, resulting in movements of up to 15 or more feet along faults. The energy of the earthquake was transmitted through the water above, producing an enormous tsunami that devastated coastlines all around the Indian Ocean basin. And even a few feet of movement on the San Andreas Fault in Southern California causes the ground to shake for many miles around and freeways and other structures to collapse.

If the continents did indeed split apart in the days of Peleg, moving thousands of miles into their current positions in a catastrophic manner, the resulting devastation would have utterly destroyed the face of the earth and everything living on it. The ocean waters would have flooded over the continents in huge tsunamis, creating a second worldwide flood event!

In Genesis 10 and 11, we see no written description of such an event. To the contrary, at the end of the Flood in Noah's day, God made specific statements that He would never allow another worldwide Flood to ravage the earth's surface and its inhabitants (Genesis 8:21–22,² 9:11³). God specifically stated that He had set the boundaries around the land beyond which the waters would never again flood the earth (Psalm 104:8–9⁴).

Of course, in order to shore up their belief that Genesis 10:25⁵ is a reference to continental break-up during the days of Peleg, some may respond that God somehow miraculously held back the ocean waters to keep another flood from happening while this land division occurred. However, there is absolutely no indication in Scripture, not even a hint, that this was the case.

Quite clearly, it is far better to err on the side of caution with regard to these Scriptures. This is particularly necessary when the context of Genesis 10 has four other verses that confirm the meaning of verse 25 as referring to the division of people according to their languages into lands of their own

2. Genesis 8:21–22: Then the LORD said in His heart, "I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease."

3. Genesis 9:11: Thus I establish My covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.

4. Psalm 104:8–9: They went up over the mountains; they went down into the valleys, to the place which You founded for them. You have set a boundary that they may not pass over, that they may not return to cover the earth.

5. Genesis 10:25: To Eber were born two sons: the name of one was Peleg, for in his days the earth was divided

across the face of the earth. Furthermore, this is in keeping with God's command to Noah and his family after the Flood to be fruitful and multiply, and to fill the earth (Genesis 9:1).

A Major Geographical Problem

There is also a major geographical flaw with the claim that the continents split apart in the days of Peleg. The description of the Flood of Noah's day in Genesis 8 says that on day 150 of that global, year-long event the ark ran aground in the mountains of Ararat. We read in verses 3–4:

And the waters receded continually from the earth. At the end of the hundred and fifty days the waters decreased. Then the ark rested in the seventh month, the seventeenth day of the month, on the mountains of Ararat.

Why is this so significant? The mountains of Ararat should not be confused with the post-Flood volcano in Turkey called Mt. Ararat. As far as we can tell, the biblical reference to "the mountains of Ararat" speaks of mountains located in the region of eastern Turkey and eastward toward the Caspian Sea.

The buckling of the rock layers within these mountains indicates that they were formed by continental collisions. Thus, if a supercontinent such as Pangaea broke apart in the days of Peleg to arrive at its present positions, then these mountains of Ararat would only have formed in the days of Peleg. Thus, they would not have existed on day 150 of the Flood for the ark to run aground on them.

The mountains of Ararat appear to have been caused by the collision of the Eurasian Plate with the Arabian and African Plates, perhaps influenced by the concurrent collision of the Indian Plate with the Eurasian Plate. Thus, it would seem that most of the continental shifting between Europe, Asia, Africa, Arabia, and India most likely would have largely been completed by day 150 of the Genesis Flood.

Naturally, there could have still been comparatively minor adjustments after this point in the Flood, as the mountains of Ararat could still have been rising as further mountain

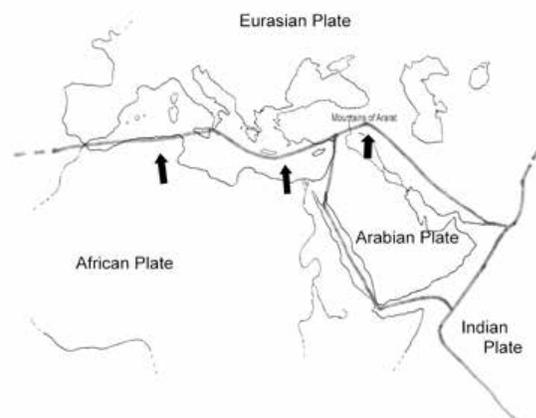


Plate movement resulted in the formation of the mountains of Ararat.

formation occurred after the ark ran aground. Again, there appear to be no hints in the biblical narrative of the Flood in Genesis 6–9 that there was any major continental shifting across the earth's surface after day 150, at least in the region of the mountains of Ararat.

It's possible however, that there could have still been some minor continental movement on the other side of the globe, with respect to North and South America, Australia, Antarctica, and so on. This cannot be ruled out entirely. However, according to Genesis 8:2, the fountains or springs of the great deep were stopped, and the windows of heaven were closed on day 150, implying that the Flood waters possibly had reached their zenith at that point.

Furthermore, if the springs were associated with the rifting of the earth's crust and the sea-floor spreading, subduction and mantle convection that had moved the continental plates apart catastrophically, then the closure of these springs or fountains would seem to imply that the processes allowing for major movement of the continents would have stopped at this point, or at the very least, began to start decelerating, and eventually reach their present snail's pace.

All the primary geologic processes responsible for forcing the catastrophic continental movements during the Flood appear to have likewise begun to rapidly decelerate on and after day 150. Also, Genesis 8:3 indicates that the Flood waters began to steadily decrease and therefore recede from this time point onward, which would seem to indicate that the Flood waters were now subject to new land surfaces and topography rising and valleys sinking as a result of vertical earth movements. This is in stark contrast to the large horizontal movement and associated mountain building that shifted the continents apart in the first portion of the Flood year.

Conclusion

Though continental division and shifting in the days of Peleg appears feasible from a superficial reading of Genesis 10:25 in isolation, this concept has some major problems associated with it:

1. When Genesis 10:25 is read within the context of the whole of Genesis 10, the four other verses (5, 18, 20, and 32) speaking of the division clearly emphasize that this was a linguistic and family division of all post-Flood people into different lands (geographical locations).
2. Had the division of continents occurred during the days of Peleg, then the associated catastrophism would have resulted in another worldwide Flood, in violation of God's specific promise to Noah.
3. Had the division of continents occurred during the days of Peleg, then the ark (with Peleg's ancestors) would have had no place to land,

as the mountains of Ararat produced by continental collisions would not have yet existed.

4. There is tremendous fossil and geologic evidence for continental division having occurred only during the Flood.

We, therefore, gently and lovingly encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ to refrain from claiming the division of continents occurred during the days of Peleg. The phrase “for in his days the earth was divided” in Genesis 10:25 needs to be kept and read within its context of Genesis 10 to give the statement its correct meaning. On the other hand, we also want to encourage people to realize that the Flood is the only major catastrophic event and the only logical mechanism for splitting apart the continents.

Answering a Few Objections⁶

Objection 1. “To start with, the Hebrew word for ‘earth’ in Gen. 10:25, 10:32 and 11:1 is Hebrew *erets* in *Strong’s Concordance*. *Strong’s* says this word means earth, field, ground, land, and world. . . . In fact, the clear meaning of this Hebrew word for ‘earth’ . . . is a very strong indication that the Peleg reference has to do with actual breakup of the land mass.”

Answer: There are other uses of this word, as Hebrew lexicons readily point out, in particular nations and inhabitants. Those not fluent in Hebrew need to consult reputable Hebrew lexicons such as *Brown, Driver and Briggs* (BDB) or *Koehler and Baumgartner* (KB) to see how each Hebrew word, in its context, should be used. Naturally, these do not hit every instance but representative instances (keep in mind, *erets* is used well over 2,000 times in the Old Testament).

BDB uses as one of its representative examples that Genesis 11:1⁷ is in reference to inhabitants of earth.⁸ However, the two brought up in Genesis 10 were not mentioned.

Though KB does not reference any of the three pointed out, it does reference 2 Chronicles 12:8,⁹ where *erets* is used for nations/kingdoms as well as several others to indicate countries and regions of people.¹⁰

6. These are actual comments made to Answers in Genesis regarding the issue of an alleged continental split during the days of Peleg.

7. Genesis 11:1: Now the whole earth had one language and one speech.

8. Francis Brown, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), p. 76.

9. 2 Chronicles 12:8: Nevertheless they will be his servants, that they may distinguish My service from the service of the kingdoms of the nations.

10. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1 (Boston, MA: Brill Publishers, 2001), p. 90–91.

So to exclude this definition may not be wise. And considering that BDB used *erets* specifically in Genesis 11:1 to refer to people confirms the point. According to leading Hebrew lexicons that utilize the context, these would be referring to the people being divided by language. Also, keep in mind that if one wants to argue for *erets* to mean “continent(s),” this is not even listed as a definition among the lexicons.

Objection 2. “You are incorrect that the Peleg reference comes in the middle of an account of the division of languages. It comes in the middle of a genealogy. The story of the division of languages comes afterwards, separately.”

Answer: Genesis 10 is a breakdown of the language divisions that are discussed in more detail with the chronological account in Genesis 11. Even Genesis 10 points out after each genealogy of Japheth, Ham, and Shem that it was a *linguistic division* in accordance with their family group to their nations. Consider the phrases in Genesis 10 that summarize and signify the context of language in these verses:

From these the coastland peoples of the Gentiles were separated into their lands, everyone according to his *language*, according to their families, into their nations (Genesis 10:5).

These were the sons of Ham, according to their families, according to their *languages*, in their lands and in their nations (Genesis 10:20).

These were the sons of Shem, according to their families, according to their *languages*, in their lands, according to their nations. (Genesis 10:31)

The context of Genesis 10 is indeed referring to linguistic divisions from which the nations were being divided. Even Josephus, a prominent Jewish historian, understood this to mean a division of nations. Consider Josephus’s comments here:

Heber begat Joctan and Phaleg; he was called Phaleg, because he was born at the dispersion of the nations to their several countries; for Phaleg, among the Hebrews, signifies division.¹¹

Objection 3. “Have you carefully looked at the word for ‘divided’ in each reference? They are two different Hebrew words: vs. 25 *palag*, and vs. 32,

11. *The Works of Josephus, Complete and Unabridged*, translated by William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), p. 37.

parad. The former can mean to split or cleave, and the latter, to scatter. . . . What is being divided appears different since the Hebrew verb is different in both verses.”

Answer: The name of Peleg [Strong’s #06389] in verse 25 is a variant of [#06388] *peleg*, which in turn is a derivation of [#06385] *palag*. This same root word for Peleg’s name is also used in Genesis 10:25 is [#06385] *palag*. It makes sense why this was used in direct reference to Peleg’s name. But also, this is still different from verse 32 where [#06504] *parad* is used. However, they each appear in the same context.

Parad

Working backward, the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* points out that *parad* is in reference to the scattering of peoples under comment 1806 (discussing *parad*). They in turn reference A. Wieder, “Ugaritic-Hebrew Lexicographical Notes,” JBL 84: 160–164, esp. p. 163–164.

In fact, *parad* is also the Hebrew word used in Genesis 10:5: “From these the coastland peoples of the Gentiles were separated [*parad*] into their lands, everyone according to his language, according to their families, into their nations.” Deuteronomy 32:8¹² also uses *parad* in reference to the split of nations.

Palag

The Hebrew word *palag* is only used three times in Scripture outside of Genesis 10. In 1 Chronicles 1:19,¹³ it repeats Genesis 10:25. In Job 38:25,¹⁴ it refers to a splitting of a water channel when it overflows. In Psalm 55:9,¹⁵ it refers to splitting of languages. David was speaking of his enemies and was asking of the Lord to judge them with the splitting of their tongues. Obviously, David was conjuring thoughts of the Tower of Babel and tongue shifting there.

Peleg’s name was a direct derivation of *palag*, and considering the context of Genesis 10, it makes sense this Hebrew name was indeed referring to the linguistic division. So there would be no reason to distance ourselves from this plain interpretation.

12. Deuteronomy 32:8: When the Most High divided their inheritance to the nations, when He separated the sons of Adam, He set the boundaries of the peoples. . . .

13. 1 Chronicles 1:19: To Eber were born two sons: the name of one was Peleg,[a] for in his days the earth was divided. . . .

14. Job 38:25: Who has divided a channel for the overflowing water. . . .

15. Psalm 55:9: Destroy, O Lord, and divide their tongues. . . .

So to reiterate, when evaluating the question of an alleged continental split in the days of Peleg, we need to get back to the Bible. It should be obvious that “in the days of Peleg,” it is discussing the context, which is a splitting of the earth by people groups and languages. Any splitting of continents would have occurred during the Flood.