

Genesis 11

The Tower of Babel is a story of the dispersal of humanity along with the confusion of languages. While most scholars picture this tower as a ziggurat, there is no known parallel to this story among the ANE peoples. We are not compelled to visualize this tower as a ziggurat. It might have just been a defense tower like we see in Judges 8:9 and 9:46. The word (which we will translate here as “large building”) is used 45 times throughout the OT. God has been clear that He wanted man to multiply and spread across the earth (1:28; 9:1, 7). Man had refused to obey God’s command to “fill the earth” by living in one location.

We do not know much about the ancient history of Babylon, one of the oldest nations in man’s history. The Euphrates River has shifted over time and buried lower levels. There is no significant information about Babylon until it becomes the capital of the empire which bears its name in the 18th century B. C.

TRANSLATION - 11:1-9:

1 And it happened all the earth [had] one language and united words. **2** And it happened when they journeyed toward the east that they found a valley of the land of Shinar and they settled there. **3** And they said a man to his neighbor, “Come, let us make bricks and let us burn them thoroughly.” And there was to them brick for stone and tar was for them for mortar. **4** And they said, “Come, let us build for ourselves a city and a large building and its top in the heavens and let us make for ourselves a name, lest we scatter on the face of all the earth.”

5 Jehovah came down to see the city and the large building which they built, the sons of man. **6** Then Jehovah said, “Behold, one people [they are] and one language for all of them and this [is] the beginning to make and now it is not impossible for them anything which they plan to do. **7** Come, let us go down and let us confuse there their language which they do not hear, a man the language of his neighbor.” **8** So Jehovah scattered them from there on the face of all the earth and they stopped building the city.

9 Therefore its name is called Babel since there Jehovah confused the language of all the earth and from there Jehovah scattered them on the face of all the earth.

WORDS:

“Language” (ver. 1; 178 times) is the lip (most frequent use), language spoken with the lips, or the edge of the shore. “United words” translate two words, the plural of “one” with “word” (1,454 times with its related verb, “to speak” used 1,136 times). It conveys the idea of “vocabulary.” “Tar” and “mortar” (ver. 3) are related words. The former is used also in Gen. 14:10 and Exo. 2:3. The word translated “large building” (ver. 4) comes from the word family of the adjective “great” or “large.” So, they wanted to make a tower. “Top” (vers. 4) translates the word for “head.”

“People” (ver. 6; *am*) suggests connections of families (14:16; 23:7, 11-13). The word used in chapter ten (*goy*) denotes political or geographical units. “Come” is found in the mouth of the sons of man (verses 3, 4) as well as the Godhead (vers. 7). “Called” (vers. 9) is used 739x and has a flexible range of meanings. “Babel” sounds like the verb to “confuse” (vers. 9).

GRAMMAR:

The verb “let us burn them” is also cohortative and is followed by the same verb in an infinitive construction, so the people were emphatic, “let us burn thoroughly.”

ARCHAEOLOGY:

Shinar is the land of Mesopotamia which was first called Sumer, then “Sumer and Akkad,” and finally Babylonia. Moses shows a quite accurate and detailed knowledge of construction techniques of Mesopotamian culture. Bitumen used for mortar adds strength and cohesion to the bricks. Bitumen was found early in man’s history in Mesopotamia. On the other

hand, stones were used for such building projects in Canaan. Babylon will not appear again in Genesis or the Pentateuch as a whole. “Ur of the Chaldeans,” south of Babylon, is the home of Terah and his family (11:28, 31; 15:7; Neh. 9:7).

COMMENTS:

God had intended the human population to be fruitful, multiply, and spread over the earth. Man wanted to stay in one place and make a reputation (“name”) for himself. Moses begins the account by stating the unity of language and communication which mankind had. That sets up the scene for the people to unite their strengths and skills to build this great building or tower.

The people journeyed east, indicating a further move from the presence of God (cf. 3:24; 4:16). They came to the infamous land of Babylonia, Shinar. There, this people began making kiln-fired bricks and adding mortar to it. The first thing they decide they want to build is a “city.” Then they want to build the “large building,” or, better known as a tower: The tower of Babel. There were really two goals to their building project: making a name (reputation) for themselves and rebelling against God’s command to scatter.

Israel understood that God sits above the earth (Isa. 40:22) so that for God to come down to see man illustrates the weakness of man’s ability to reach heaven (cf. Psa. 139:7-12). The whole incident makes a mockery of man’s pride. The OT is also consistent in teaching that God is omniscient (Prov. 15:3; Jer. 23:24; cf. Heb. 4:13) so that He does not have to *literally* “come down” to see what man is doing.

God saw the power of their unity, the power of their united language. If God were to let them go, they would fall into the same cesspool of violence, sin, and corruption of the pre-flood world. God decided to confuse their language so that they could no longer communicate in building their large building. Once God confused their language, they eventually scattered, fulfilling reluctantly the command of God to fill the earth. It seems that the building of the city, to stay in one place, was the heart of their rebellion against God.

Moses then highlights the shame of the people, saying the land was called “Babel” (*bb* in Hebrew) since God “confused” (*bb*) their language. So Jehovah God scattered the people. There are two references to God “scattering” the people; again, their sin was refusing to fill the earth. God forced them to scatter by confusing their languages. They had intended to make a “name” for themselves; instead, God caused them to be known for their shame. God will take the initiative to make Abram a “great name” (12:2).

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - The sin of the Babylonians was in refusing to fill the earth as God had commanded (9:7). The large building, unfinished, became testimony to all those who remained in the vicinity that they should obey God’s command. Darkness and confusion will result when one refuses to listen and obey God’s word.

Contemporaries in Moses’ day - Coming out of Egypt, the Israelites needed constant reminders that idolatry would be punished. They needed to be warned that “making a name for yourself,” especially if it meant violating God’s commandments, was a dead-end street. The tower of Babel would teach them that lesson. But, would they listen?

Later Hebrew writers - Isaiah, in words that are reminiscent of the tower of Babel (14:13-15), chastises Babylon (14:4) for her arrogance and sin. The Israelites who lived through the Babylonian invasion and exile should have known that God has the ability to stop their behavior and confuse their plans, if only Israel would stay faithful to God.

NT writers - It is possible that Jesus had the tower of Babel in mind in His comments about counting the cost of discipleship (Luke 14:28-30). Some see the events of the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), preaching the Gospel in the languages of the people and drawing them into a single body of Christ, as a reversal of the events here at Babel. Where there is no linguistic reason to see Luke referring to Genesis 11, theologically, it is correct that the existence of the church of Christ undoes the division of languages brought about by sin.

TRANSLATION - 11:10-32:

10 These are the generations of Shem. Shem [was] the son of one hundred years, and there was born Arpachshad, two years after the flood. **11** Shem lived after was born Arpachshad five hundred years and there was born sons and daughters.

12 Then Arpachshad lived thirty-five years and there was born Shelah. **13** And Arpachshad lived after was born Shelah four hundred and three years and there was born sons and daughters.

14 Then Shalah lived thirty years and there was born Eber. **15** And Shelah lived after there was born Eber four hundred and thirty years and there was born sons and daughters.

16 Then Eber lived thirty-four years and there was born Peleg. **17** And Eber lived after was born Peleg four hundred and thirty years and there was born sons and daughters.

18 Then Peleg lived thirty years and there was born Reu. **19** And Peleg lived after was born Reu two hundred and nine years and there was born sons and daughters.

20 Then Reu lived thirty-two years and there was born Serug. **21** And Reu lived after was born Serug two hundred and seven years and there was born sons and daughters.

22 Then Serug lived thirty years and was born Nahor. **23** And Serug lived after was born Nahor two hundred years and there was born sons and daughters.

24 Then Nahor lived twenty-nine years and was born Terah. **25** And Nahor lived after was born Terah one hundred and nineteen years and there was born sons and daughters.

26 Then Terah lived seventy years and there was born Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

27 Now these [are] the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran and Haran fathered Lot. **28** Then Haran died before Terah, his father, in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans.

29 Then Abram took and Nahor to them two wives: the wife of Abram [was] Sarai and the name of the wife of Nahor [was] Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and the father of Iscah.

30 Now Sarai was barren; there was not to her a child. **31** Then Terah took Abram, his son and Lot, the son of Haran, the son of his son, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, the wife of Abram his son, and they went out with them from Ur of Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan and they came as far as Haran and they dwelt there. **32** The days of Terah were two hundred and five years and Terah died in Haran.

WORDS:

“Barren” (vers. 30) is used a dozen times.

ARCHAEOLOGY:

The Chaldeans were an ethnic group related to the Arameans. The “Chaldeans” are found 73 times, prominently in Jeremiah. “Ur of the Chaldeans” appears four times in the OT: Gen. 11:28, 31; 15:7; Neh. 9:7. Haran (the city is spelled differently in Hebrew than the man’s name) is located about 550 miles northwest of Ur, in modern Turkey. Haran was about halfway between Ur to the land of Canaan.

COMMENTS:

Verse 10 will be the last mention of the flood in the book of Genesis, leaving that tragedy and the ante-diluvian world behind. Verse 10 also denotes one of the divisions of Genesis, marked off by the phrase “these are the generations.” Verse 10 begins the division relative to Shem’s family. Verse 27 will use the same phrase, denoting the division relative to Terah’s family.

There is some similarity between the name of Terah and the Hebrew word for moon. Sarai is related to the Akkadian name for the female partner of the moon-god. Milcah is a name for the daughter of the moon god. Both Ur and Haran were centers of moon worship. We know

that Abram comes out of a city which was well known and focused on worship of the moon. We are informed in Joshua 24:2 that Abram came from an idolatrous family and community.

“Abraham” seems to have been a popular name in the second and first millennia B. C. God will call Abram to leave Ur of Chaldea before He called him to leave Haran (cf. 15:7; Neh. 9:7; Acts 7:2-4). Remember that Abram lived in a society that was engulfed in idolatry and in a family which worshipped idols. Idols neither see, nor hear, nor talk (Deut. 4:28), so for God to speak to Abram, out of the blue, would test Abram’s faith, calling him to follow a God whom he could not see.

Notice in verse 30 that Sarai’s barrenness is emphasized. In two ways, Moses notes that she did not have children; she could not have children. That sets the stage for God’s powerful, unbelievable, promise to Abram coming up in 12:1-3. God will work in the lives of barren women several times through OT history, like Rebecca (25:21), Rachel (29:31), Mrs. Manoah (Judges 13:2), Hannah (1 Samuel 1:5-6), and Elizabeth (Luke 1:7) in order to prepare the hearts and minds of the Jews for the unique virgin birth of Jesus Christ (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38).

APPLICATION:

Later Hebrew writers - The historian utilizes this genealogy in 1 Chronicles 1:17-27.

NT writers - Stephen will begin his account of the history of Israel with God’s call of Abram from Haran (Acts 7:4), which is the subject of Moses’ next chapter. Luke will use this genealogy when he gives the genealogy of Christ in Luke 3:34-36. Luke adds “Cainan,” who is missing in the MT but is found in the LXX of Genesis 11.