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Creation & Blessing
Genesis 11 → *Scattered*

A The Lord confuses and disperses the nations.1-9)

11 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ²And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." ⁵And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. ⁶And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." ⁸So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

B The generations of Shem and Terah lead to Abram. (10-32)

¹⁰These are the generations of Shem. When Shem was 100 years old, he fathered Arpachshad two years after the flood. ¹¹And Shem lived after he fathered Arpachshad 500 years and had other sons and daughters.

¹²When Arpachshad had lived 35 years, he fathered Shelah. ¹³And Arpachshad lived after he fathered Shelah 403 years and had other sons and daughters.

¹⁴When Shelah had lived 30 years, he fathered Eber. ¹⁵And Shelah lived after he fathered Eber 403 years and had other sons and daughters.

¹⁶When Eber had lived 34 years, he fathered Peleg. ¹⁷And Eber lived after he fathered Peleg 430 years and had other sons and daughters.

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¹⁸ When Peleg had lived 30 years, he fathered Reu. ¹⁹ And Peleg lived after he fathered Reu 209 years and had other sons and daughters.

²⁰ When Reu had lived 32 years, he fathered Serug. ²¹ And Reu lived after he fathered Serug 207 years and had other sons and daughters.

²² When Serug had lived 30 years, he fathered Nahor. ²³ And Serug lived after he fathered Nahor 200 years and had other sons and daughters.

²⁴ When Nahor had lived 29 years, he fathered Terah. ²⁵ And Nahor lived after he fathered Terah 119 years and had other sons and daughters.

²⁶ When Terah had lived 70 years, he fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

²⁷ Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot. ²⁸ Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans. ²⁹ And Abram and Nahor took wives. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah.

³⁰ Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.

³¹ Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there. ³² The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran.

C Abram will father a nation (12ff)

12 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

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This passage explains how the nations came to be scattered across the face of the ancient world. It is a message of judgment: what they prided themselves in became their downfall, and what they feared the most came on them (cf. Prov. 10:24a).

The account is structured in antithetical parallelism and chiasm. Everything that mankind proposed in the first half (Gen. 11:3–4) was disposed of in the second (vv. 5–9), almost an undoing or reversal of their activity, even to the extent of parallel expressions. The narrative hinges on the central fact, “the LORD came down” (v. 5).¹

One of the problems in this passage is its connection with chapter 10. At the beginning of chapter 11 the whole world is of “one language” and one vocabulary. But chapter 10 has already divided the nations according to peoples and tongues. “Territories,” “clans,” “nations,” and “languages” occur three times, though not always in the same order (10:5, 20, 31). Probably 11:1–9 explains how the arrangement in chapter 10 came about. Genesis often goes outside the chronological order to arrange the material thematically. The exact chronology is only hinted at in the expression about Peleg: “In his time the earth was divided” (10:25).

11:1–4. The sin of the Shinarites (people in a plain in Shinar) appears to be immense pride. They said, **Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves.** This was open rebellion against God, an independence of God. Humility is often equated with trust and obedience, and conversely pride is related to independence and disobedience. Here the people came together to strengthen themselves and in pride to make a reputation for themselves lest they **be scattered over the face of the whole earth.** This appears to be in direct opposition to God’s command to spread out and fill up the whole earth (9:1).

11:5–9. Their desire to enhance their unity and strength had potential for the greatest evil, according to the Lord’s evaluation: **If ... they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.** Thus what they would not do in obedience (viz., scatter over the earth, v. 4) He did for them in judgment (v. 8).

No doubt Shinar (v. 2) refers to the area of Babylon, because the passage culminates (v. 9) in a name play: **Babel** (*bābel*) sounds similar to the verb **confused** (*bālal*). Written Babylonian accounts of the building of the city of Babylon refer to its construction in heaven by the gods as a celestial city, as an expression of pride (*Enuma Elish* VI, lines 55–64). These accounts say it was made by the same process of brick-making described in verse 3, with every brick inscribed with the name of the Babylonian god Marduk. Also the ziggurat, the step-like tower believed to have been first erected in Babylon, was said to have its top in the heavens (cf. v. 4). This artificial mountain became the center of worship in the city, a miniature temple being at the top of the tower. The Babylonians took great pride in their building; they boasted of their city as not only impregnable, but also as the heavenly city, *bāb-ili* (“the gate of God”).

This narrative provides a fitting conclusion for the primeval events. It describes the families of the earth hopelessly scattered throughout the then-known world. There was then no record of a mark for the fugitive (cf. 4:15), no rainbow in the clouds (9:13), no ray of hope or token of grace. This leaves the reader looking for a solution. After a connecting genealogy (11:10–26), that solution is provided: out of the scattered nations God formed one nation which became His channel of blessing. So God was not done with the human race. This chapter simply prepares the reader for His work.

Israel was called out of Egypt to be God’s theocracy. Israel was to be established as the unified people of God, known around the world. The one simple requirement of them was that they obey. If they would do so, God would establish them firmly. But if they lifted their heads in pride and rebelled against God, they too would be scattered across the face of the earth. As it turned out, Israel followed the same disastrous course as the Babylonians.

The theme of pride here, then, is important. God puts down those who exalt themselves in pride. Scattering (with its wars and conflicts) is better than unified apostasy. God’s plan will be accomplished, if not with man’s obedience, then in spite of man’s disobedience.

The undoing of Babel was cleverly explained by Zephaniah, whose terms certainly retraced this event, anticipating the great unification in the millennial kingdom, when everyone will speak one pure language and worship in God’s holy mountain, being gathered from the nations into which they have been dispersed (Zeph. 3:9–11). The miracle at Pentecost (Acts 2:6–11) was a harbinger of that yet-future event.

*Zeph. 3⁹ “For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples
to a pure speech,
that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD
and serve him with one accord.*

*¹⁰ From beyond the rivers of Cush
my worshipers, the daughter of my dispersed ones,
shall bring my offering.*

¹ Allen P. Ross, “Genesis,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 44.

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11 *“On that day you shall not be put to shame
because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me;
for then I will remove from your midst
your proudly exultant ones,
and you shall no longer be haughty
in my holy mountain.*

11:10–26. This genealogical record traces the line from Noah’s son **Shem** to **Abram**. Earlier Moses had traced the families of the earth that came from Noah’s three sons (chap. 10), explaining how they came to be scattered around the earth (11:1–9). Here he directed attention again to the Shemites.

The genealogy of **Shem** is a “vertical” genealogy designed to show legitimate ancestry. This type was often used in the ancient world to establish the authenticity of a king or a dynasty. The list in verses 10–26 shows the straight line of Shem, who was blessed, to Abram, thus authenticating God’s handing down the blessing to Abram.

Some have argued that the names in the genealogical lists in chapters 5 and 11 are contrived, with the names selected (from among others not listed) to show symmetry (e.g., each list ends with reference to three sons, 5:32; 11:26), but this view cannot be substantiated by consistent exegesis. To show “gaps” in the genealogy, one must posit ellipses: “X lived so many years and begot [the line that culminated in] Y.” Such ellipses are hard to prove. Moreover, gaps are not possible in two places in the list (Shem was the son of Noah, and Abram was the son of Terah). Thus verses 10–26 seem to present a tight chronology.

The main contribution of this passage is the linking of Abram with the line from Shem. The ancestry of Israel lies here. Interesting archeological material shows that many of these names are preserved in place names around Haran.

Unlike the genealogy in chapter 5, the list in 11:10–26 does not tally the total number of years of each person and does not close each section with the words “and he died.” Genesis 5:1–6:8 stresses death before the Flood; 11:10–26 stresses life and expansion even though longevity was declining. The mood of chapter 11 is different, then, from the earlier genealogy. This is because verses 10–26 trace the lineage of Abram—who was to be blessed by God—back to Shem, the son of Noah who was blessed by God (9:26).

11:27–32. This brief section accounts for the three sons of **Terah**, and their marriages. (See the chart “Terah’s Family.”) It also accounts for Lot, Abram’s nephew, who figures prominently in the narratives about Abram.

Terah was an idolater, worshiping other gods (Josh. 24:2). Perhaps the home of Terah was originally in **Haran** because many of Terah’s ancestors’ names are similar to place names in the land of Aram where the city of Haran was located. If so, then the family had migrated southeast approximately 600 miles to **Ur**, capital of Sumer, where Terah’s youngest son **Haran** was born and (Gen. 11:28) **died**. God’s call to Abram (12:1) initially came in Ur, and the family then moved back to **Haran** and **settled there** (11:31), where Terah **died** (v. 32). Because that was not the Promised Land, Abram moved on to Canaan, where God appeared and confirmed the location.

Four great events are recorded in Genesis 1–11: the creation of the universe, the fall of man, the Flood, and the attempted construction of the Tower of Babel. These chapters reveal that where mankind disobeys God, the Lord judges sin, and then in His grace makes a new beginning.²

Adam and Eve sinned, but God clothed them and promised to send the world a Redeemer. Cain killed Abel, but God sent Seth to carry on the godly line. The Sethites intermarried with the godless Cainites, and God had to wipe the earth clean with a flood; but Noah and his family believed God’s Word and were spared. After the Flood, the descendants of Noah’s three sons repopulated the earth. But the new beginning with Noah eventually led to one of the most arrogant revolts against God recorded anywhere in Scripture.

Rebellion (vv. 1–4). It’s likely that the events in chapter 11 occurred prior to those in chapter 10 and that the scattering described in chapter 10 was the consequence of God’s judgment at Babel.

The “tower” that they built at Babel was what is known as a “ziggurat.” Archeologists have excavated several of these large structures which were built primarily for religious purposes. A ziggurat was like a pyramid except that the successive levels were recessed so that you could walk to the top on “steps.” At the top was a special shrine dedicated to a god or goddess. In building the structure, the people weren’t trying to climb up to heaven to dethrone God; rather, they hoped that the god or goddess they worshiped would come down from heaven to meet them. The structure and the city were called “Babel,” which means “the gate of the gods.”

This infamous project was an arrogant declaration of war against the Lord, not unlike the revolt described in Psalm 2:1–3.

God in heaven is never perplexed or paralyzed by what people do on earth. Babel’s conceited “Let’s go up!” was answered by heaven’s calm “Let’s go down!” “He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall hold them in derision” (Ps. 2:4, NKJV).

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Basic*, “Be” Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1998), 134.

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As with Adam and Eve in the Garden (Gen. 3:22–24), God’s judgment at Babel not only dealt with the immediate sins but also helped to prevent future problems.

The word “babel” sounds like the Hebrew word *balal* which means “confusion.” Because of God’s judgment, the “gate of the gods” became the “the door to confusion.” Instead of making a name for themselves, God gave the project a new name! In His church, “God is not the author of confusion” (1 Cor. 14:33); but in the world, God sometimes uses confusion to humble people and keep them from uniting against His will.

Babylon eventually became a great city and a great empire. In 606–586 B.C., the Babylonian armies attacked and captured the kingdom of Judah, burned the temple and the city of Jerusalem, and took thousands of Jews captive to Babylon for seventy years. God used the cruel and idolatrous Babylonians to chasten His own disobedient people.

But in Scripture, Babylon symbolizes worldly pride, moral corruption, and defiance against God. The biblical contrast is between the earthly city of Babylon that rebels against God, and the heavenly city of Jerusalem that brings glory to God. You will want to read Jeremiah 50–51 and Revelation 17–19 to appreciate the contrasts between these two cities. Babylon represents the world system that opposes God, hates Jesus Christ, and appeals to the baser appetites of human nature. Babylon is the opposite of the heavenly Jerusalem which is the city of the saints (Heb. 12:18ff).

In the original Babel, the people wanted to build a tower that reached up to heaven; but in the Babylon of Revelation 17–18, Babylon’s sins reach up to heaven (18:5). The original worldwide unity that Nimrod desired for the Genesis Babylon will one day be achieved by Satan’s godless world system (vv. 3, 9, 11, 23). Earthly Babylon is called a prostitute, while the holy city from heaven is called bride of Christ (17:1; 21:9ff).

But the Holy Spirit is using the church as an agent of reconciliation to bring things together in Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:10; 2 Cor. 5:14–21). In one sense, Pentecost was a reversal of Babel, for the people present in Jerusalem at Pentecost heard the praises of God in their own languages (Acts 2:1–12). The day will come when people from every tribe and nation will worship Jesus Christ (Rev. 15:4) and the judgment of Babel will be done away (Zeph. 3:9).

God had promised that He would send a Redeemer, “the seed of the woman” (3:15), who would defeat Satan and bring salvation. Noah’s prophecy revealed that God would bless the world through the line of Shem, the “Semites” who were the ancestors of the Hebrew people (9:26–27). “Shem was the ancestor of all the sons of Eber” (10:21, NIV), and it’s likely that the word “Hebrew” comes from the name “Eber.”

The people named in 11:10–26 didn’t live as long as the men named in Genesis 5. The list begins with Noah’s 950 years and dwindles down to Nahor’s 148 years. The post-Flood generations were starting to feel the physical consequences of sin in the human body.

If Genesis 1–11 is a record of four key events—Creation, the Fall, the Flood, and the judgment at Babel—then Genesis 12–50 is the record of the lives of four key men: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

There’s quite a contrast between man’s ways at Babel and God’s ways in calling Abraham and Sarah. The world depends on large numbers of powerful people in order to accomplish things, but God chose two weak people and started a new nation. The people at Babel wanted to make a name for themselves, but God promised to make Abraham’s name great. The workers at Babel followed the wisdom of this world, but Abraham and Sarah trusted the Word of God (Heb. 11:11–12). Babel was built by the energy of the flesh and the motivation of pride, but the nation of Israel was built by the grace and power of God and in spite of human weakness.

It makes it clear that unity and peace are not ultimate goods: better division than collective apostasy (cf. Luke 12:51).³

Pentecost opened a new chapter of the story, in the articulating of one gospel in many tongues. The final reversal is promised in Zephaniah 3:9: ‘Yea, at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord’ (RSV).

9. *Babel* (Babylon) called itself Bab-ili, ‘gate of God’ (which may have been a flattering reinterpretation of its original meaning); but by a play of words Scripture superimposes the truer label *bālal* (‘he confused’). In the Bible this city increasingly came to symbolize the godless society, with its pretensions (Gen. 11), persecutions (Dan. 3), pleasures, sins and superstitions (Isa. 47:8–13), its riches and eventual doom (Rev. 17, 18). One of its glories was its huge *ziggurat*, a temple-crowned artificial mountain whose name, Etemenanki, suggested the linking of heaven and earth. But it was her sins that ‘reached ... unto heaven’ (Rev. 18:5). In Revelation she is contrasted with the holy city which comes ‘down out of heaven’, whose open gates unite the nations (Rev. 21:10, 24–27).

The tower of Babel (11:1–9). About halfway between the time of Noah and Abraham, the earth was “divided” (10:25; 11:16), the most likely cause of that division being God’s dispersion of the human race following the confusion of languages (11:7–8). A place in the plain of Shinar (central Mesopotamia) had become the focal point of civilization, and at that place

³ Derek Kidner, [Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 1, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 119.

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wicked men began to erect a tower (known as a *ziggurat* in ancient Near Eastern writings) to celebrate their own fame and to resist the purpose of God in filling and dominating the whole earth (11:4). As He had in Noah's time, God "came down" and overturned these evil plans, terminating the construction and, by introducing incomprehensible speech dialects, scattering the human race. Thereafter the place was called Babel (from the Akkadian word *bāb-ilī*, "gate of the gods") for God had "confused" (Hebrew, *bālal*, a pun on *bābel*) their speech (11:9).

*The full genealogy of Shem (11:10–26).*⁴ The purpose of this longer register, then, is to create a bridge between Shem and Abram, between the Semites (a later form of the word "Shemites") in general and the Hebrews, between the Noahic Covenant and the Abrahamic Covenant.

1 This chapter opens with the assertion that the *entire world had one language and one speech*. How are we to square this information with Gen. 10, which tells us, not once but three times, that mankind already possessed multiple languages (vv. 5, 20, 31, "their languages")? We have suggested an answer to this question in our discussion of ch. 10—we are dealing here with a case of deliberate dischronologization.⁵

Thus Gen. 10 and 11 would make linguistic sense in their current sequence. In addition to the local languages (*l^ešōnōt*) of each nation (ch. 10), there existed "one language" (*šāpā eḥāt*, ch. 11) which made communication possible throughout the world (ch. 10).

2 Similarly, the emphasis in this verse on permanent settlement (*yāšab*) is balanced by the "dispersed" (*pûš* of v. 8). What the tower builders wanted—a tower and a name—they lost or never obtained. What they wanted to avoid—a nonsedentary life-style—was imposed on them. Interestingly, this whole chapter begins and ends (vv. 2, 31) with attention on a group of people who moved from place *x* to place *y* and settled in the latter place. In fact, both verses use the same form of the verb *yāšabū wayyēš^ebū* (translated "settled" in this commentary). But there is quite a difference between the tower settlers and the Terahite settlers. With the first group, and their insistence on their selfishly conceived project, God is most displeased; but to the second group God promises great blessing.

Events in Gen. 1–11 have consistently been identified with *the east*. The garden of Eden is in the east (2:8). The cherubim are posted on the east side of the garden to prohibit entrance to the garden (3:24). Cain's home-away-from-home is in Nod, east of Eden (4:16). Shem's descendants, appropriately, occupy the hill country of the east (10:30). And here, an unidentified group march to Shinar from the east.

5 It is difficult to miss the irony in this verse. The builders' intention is to erect a tower whose top will be "in the heavens," that is, among the gods. But even though they build the tower, it is so far from the heavens that God must *come down* to see it.

Verse 5 functions structurally as a bridge joining vv. 1–4 and vv. 6–9. It is in effect the midpoint of the story, as the emphasis shifts from the human act to the divine act.

7 To that end God comes down not to inspect the scenario, as in v. 5, but to thwart it. His method is perhaps surprising: he will *confuse their language*. Why not simply topple the tower? Because that would solve the problem only temporarily. Towers are replaceable. Even if the people did not build another tower, they could choose another equally presumptuous project. The solution must go deeper than that. It is not the tower that must be done away with, but what makes possible the building of that tower—an international language that provides communication among linguistic groups. If this ability to communicate is removed, it is unlikely that the individuals will continue with their work.

9 We indicated above, in our discussion of v. 5, one of the ironic elements in the narrative. Here is another. The people wanted to make a name (*šēm*) for themselves, and, indeed, they did, but it is a name of shame. The city, once destined for greatness, now has its builders dispersed. The author connects Yahweh's confusing of the language (*bālal*) with his name for Babylon, *Babel* (*bāḅēl*).

The oldest attested extrabiblical name for Babylon is *ká-dingir-ki* (usually written *ká-dingir-ra*), "gate of god." This name is reflected in later Babylonian *bab-ili(m)*, "gate of god(s)," a name that may itself be a popular etymology for the name of the city.

It is unlikely that Gen. 11:1–9 can contribute much, if anything, to the origin of languages. I have already suggested that the diversification of languages is a slow process, not something catastrophic as Gen. 11 might indicate. I have stated above my reasons for not interpreting the movement from v. 1 to v. 9 as that from a monoglot world to a polyglot world. Such an interpretation, common among commentators, leads to the conclusion that Gen. 11 provides a most incredible and naive explanation of language diversification. If, however, the narrative refers to the dissolution of a Babylonian lingua franca, or

⁴ Charles Dyer et al., *Nelson's Old Testament Survey: Discover the Background, Theology and Meaning of Every Book in the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: Word, 2001), 18.

⁵ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 350.

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something like that, the need to see Gen. 11:1–9 as a highly imaginative explanation of language diffusion becomes unnecessary.

This scenario has taken place in the land of Shinar. Here both the tower and the city are constructed. We recall from ch. 10 that the land of Shinar is connected to Nimrod (10:9–10). Gen. 10 also informs us that Nimrod is the grandson of Ham (10:6–8). Thus in the two post-Flood scenes involving sin and disgrace (9:20ff. and 11:1–9), Ham is involved directly or indirectly. The Hamites of Shinar are indeed aping their ancestor.