

Genesis 11 – Babel and the Lineage of Abram

Review

Last time, we examined the genealogies of Noah's sons Shem, Japheth, and Ham who survived the flood along with their wives. We looked at the so-called "curse of Canaan" and the historical evil false teaching that arose from it. In Genesis 10 – the so-called "Table of Nations" – we saw the names of the various peoples descended from these three brothers and looked at some maps showing "educated guesses" about the homelands where these people groups eventually settled. After following the lines of Japheth and Ham for a few generations, we focused in on the line of Shem through whom the LORD Jesus was to be born into the flesh of a man. We followed Shem's line to his great, great grandson Peleg whose name means "division."

Now in Genesis 11 we are really getting into the heart of Genesis – God's choosing from the peoples of the earth one nation as His own – Israel. We will once more take up the genealogy of Shem, but first we find the famous story of the Tower of Babel.

The Tower of Babel

¹Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. Genesis 11:1 (ESV)

Recall from our previous study, Moses wrote in Genesis 10:5 that the peoples of the coastlands descended from Noah's son Japheth each had their own language. He repeated similar statements about the peoples descended from Ham and Shem. Yet here in the next chapter, he starts by saying the entire earth (that is the peoples of the earth) had one language and the same words. Certainly, this seeming inconsistency is fertile ground for Bible skeptics to draw the veracity of God's Word into question. But is it really an inconsistency?

Recall in Genesis 2:5-7 Moses wrote that before God formed mankind from the dust of the Earth that no bush or small plant of the field had yet sprung up. Yet Genesis 1:11-13 we read that God created the plant life on the third day of His creative labor, but He didn't make mankind until the sixth and final day. This too is an apparent inconsistency.

But logically, just because one statement precedes another in a narrative doesn't necessarily imply that the events described occurred in that order. Genesis 2 doesn't specify the exact order in which God created mankind and the plants – just that He did create them. In Genesis 2, we find a reiteration of the creation of mankind, because in a very real sense, mankind is God's crowning achievement of creation. The purpose of Genesis 1 was to provide a broad overview of the six days of creation, while Genesis 2 gives us more specifics about God's most important creation – mankind.

Recall also that Genesis 10 lists Havilah as one of Noah's great grandsons. But in Genesis 2:11 describing the rivers flowing from the Garden of Eden, Moses describes the river Pishon as flowing all around the land of Havilah – more than a thousand years before the man for which this land was named was ever born! The purpose of Genesis 10 was to trace the lineage of Noah's descendants – simply listing some of their names, and some of the locations where they settled. But here in Genesis 11, Moses was moved by God's Spirit to fill in the details of how all the peoples listed in the previous chapter came to have different languages.

It certainly makes sense that all the people aboard the ark spoke the same language, otherwise the ark's skipper – Noah – would have had a very difficult time leading his crew. But hundreds of years after the flood, the peoples listed in Genesis 10 each had their own language. The story of how that

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came about is an important object lesson in the dangers and foolishness of human pride as we shall see.

ASIDE – If you’ve been paying attention, you will have noted that in my little diatribe above I said that Genesis 10 lists only **some** of those descended from Noah. You can prove to yourself that only some of the names are listed by scanning through Genesis 10 to see if you can find a single woman listed. Obviously, women must have been present in the lives of these people groups or none of this “begetting” could have taken place. Furthermore, notice that the lines of Japheth and Ham only carry on for a few generations. But obviously these lines must have continued, or no one descended from these people groups we find listed in Genesis 10 would be alive today.

The line of Shem is the important one because it is from Shem’s descendants that Jesus of Nazareth was born. Yet even the line of Shem was only carried down in Genesis 10 to Peleg who was so named because in his time the earth was divided. The story of that division on the plain of Shinar is taken up here at the beginning of Genesis 11 before Moses continues listing the descendants of Shem.

²And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. Genesis 11:2 (ESV)

Recall from our study of God’s covenant with Noah at the end of Genesis 9, that God’s command for mankind as our part of that covenant was to... ***“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”*** But far from obeying His command, the peoples descended from Noah’s sons congregated in the land of Shinar. It makes practical sense that they would do so. You may recall from our previous studies that the Plain of Shinar lies between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers just north of where they flow together to form the Shatt al-Arab before they empty into the Arabian Gulf. This is a fertile land very desirable for agriculture due to this precious water resource. In fact, during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s this area was where the most intense fighting took place resulting in more combat casualties than in any conflict since WWII.

It makes sense that the people descended from Noah’s sons would have migrated from the mountainous region where the ark came to rest down to the more well-watered, more arable land of the Mesopotamian plain. Yet in doing so, they were clearly disobeying God’s command given to Noah that people were to fill the earth.

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. Genesis 11:3 (ESV)

I find Genesis 11:3 quite intriguing because later masonry on the plain of Shinar such as the city of Babylon used unfired brick. Consequently, these ancient buildings have completely washed away over thousands of years of erosion. Apparently, the people who set out to build the Tower of Babel wanted their creation to last. Of course, the plain of Shinar today is dotted with oil wells. The bitumen they used for mortar no-doubt bubbled up from the huge petroleum deposits underground.

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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.” Genesis 11:4 (ESV)

When we looked at the Noahic covenant, I mentioned rather flippantly that God’s command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth seems to be one of God’s commands at least that human beings haven’t had any trouble obeying. That’s certainly true today, but as we can see from Genesis 11:4 initially people resisted it. Ironically, they chose to congregate in a place where the rainbow God established as a symbol of that covenant is rarely seen. 😊

Seriously though, notice that the root of this blatant disobedience lay in human pride – the root of all sin.

5And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. Genesis 11:5 (ESV)

Well of course, the LORD didn’t need to “come down” to observe what the people were doing on the Plain of Shinar. He knows everything. I’m reminded of the story in Exodus 32 as Moses was on Mt. Sinai receiving God’s instructions for the building of the tabernacle while the people were below worshipping the golden calf that Moses’ brother Aaron had made for them.

7And the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.” Genesis 32:7 (ESV)

It was Moses who needed to go down to discover what was happening among his people, not God.

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 [בָּבֶל bābel - confusion], 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. Genesis 11:6-9 (ESV)

Why did God break up the party on the Plain of Shinar? Was it because He felt His position as Master of the Universe threatened by the people building their tower to make a name for themselves? Certainly not. God knew that if the people persisted in building the tower, they would not disperse and fill the earth as He had commanded in His covenant with Noah, Shem, Japheth, and Ham. God’s confusion of the languages was His means to set the people back on the correct path of obedience.

In fact, God’s gentleness in His correction is awe inspiring. After all, God could have simply destroyed the tower and placed cherubim with flaming swords around the site to force the people to disperse as He had originally commanded. Pondering this, I think back on the times in my own life when God

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corrected me with loving gentleness when He could have and would have been perfectly justified in correcting me as harshly as I deserved! Two relevant scriptures spring to mind.

***4Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment. Psalm 51:4 (ESV)***

***11My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline
or be weary of his reproof,
12for the LORD reproves him whom he loves,
as a father the son in whom he delights. Proverbs 3:11-12 (ESV)***

In Genesis 11:6 God remarks that because humankind had a single language, nothing we propose will be impossible for us and that the building of the tower was only the beginning of what we might do. Does God desire for us to fail in our endeavors for the sake of enforcing our obedience to Him? Quite the contrary. In fact, Jesus told us...

7So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. 8All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. 9I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. 10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. John 10:7-10 (ESV)

But God knows as we read in Genesis 6:5 that the wickedness of man is great in the earth and every intention of our hearts is only evil continually. At the risk of sounding flippant and perhaps a little blasphemous, God's confusion of the languages at Babel only bought a little time – several thousand years – for God to work His plan of salvation among us through the birth, sacrificial death, and miraculous resurrect of His Son Jesus. Today, we see the effects of God's confusing the languages starting to dissipate. English is increasingly the global lingua franca beginning with the rise of the British Empire over the last few hundred years just as Alexander's "Hellenization" policies made Greek the language of scholarship throughout the Mediterranean Basin of Jesus' day despite the domination of the region by the Latin-speaking Romans. Furthermore, technology has made instantaneous translation among languages quite accurate and effective. This has led to an explosion of knowledge and global migration since the time of the European Renaissance. Indeed, this global expansion of knowledge and communication is a necessary precursor to the coming of the end of the age now that God's plan of salvation is fully in place (cf. Daniel 12:4).

Before we move on, notice in Genesis 11:7 that God says "...***let us go down...***" This is an accurate translation of the Hebrew **יָרַד *yārād* – to go down or descend**. In this verse, this verb is plural reflecting the triune nature of the Holy Trinity. Of course, God – being omnipresent – doesn't ever "go" anywhere, but that's a rabbit hole for another day.

ASIDE – Noah's great grandson Nimrod is traditionally saddled with responsibility for leading the rebellion of the people on the Plain of Shinar. In Genesis 10:8-12 we learned that Nimrod was indeed a great leader in the region of Mesopotamia not only in the Plain of Shinar where he began to be a mighty man, but further north in the region of Nineveh which later became the capital of the Assyrian Empire. But Nimrod's name isn't mentioned anywhere in the story of Babel. Nimrod may have been

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one of the people involved in building the tower, but he may be getting a bad rap as the ringleader – being guilty by his presence, but no more. In fact, Nimrod may have been the leader who led some of the people northward from Babel after God confused the languages, while other descendants of Noah's sons dispersed in other directions.

The Lineage of Abram

See the Descendants of Noah and Comparison of Biblical Genealogies references.

After God confused the language of humanity, the people dispersed from Babel and began to fill the earth just as God had commanded in the Noahic covenant, becoming the progenitors of the various people groups with their own languages and homelands we read about in Genesis 10. Here in the latter part of Genesis 11, the narrative returns to the genealogy of Shem's descendants. This time however, the focus is sharpened down to a single son in each generation, along the paternal line which led to Jesus of Nazareth. This is somewhat ironic since Jesus' real father is God's Spirit who overshadowed Jesus' mother Mary.

The paternal heritage of Jesus' stepfather Joseph is mostly irrelevant. I say mostly irrelevant, but not totally. Numerous prophecies throughout the Old Testament point to the coming of the promised מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ* who would come forth out of the royal line of King David who in-turn traced his lineage back to Shem and ultimately to Adam along the line we have already examined in the book of Genesis.

I frequently emphasize that the great theme of all God's Word is the Gospel of Jesus Christ – God's plan of salvation for all mankind out of death brought into creation by mankind's sin. The Gospel is indeed the end of God's purpose for man, but the means is God's choosing for Himself one people out of all the earth whom He would call His own and through whom Jesus the מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ* was born. Thus, the genealogy of Shem's descendants along the royal line we now focus into is important even though Jesus' Father is not Himself descended from these men. It is the line of inheritance that led to Israel upon which Genesis 11 now focuses.

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. Genesis 11:10-17

(ESV)

We looked at the line of Shem's descendants down to his great-great-grandson Peleg when we studied Genesis 10. We won't reiterate the meanings of these names in any detail. They are listed in the Descendants of Noah reference. Recall however that the name פֶּלֶג *peleḡ* means division. Peleg was possibly so named because he was born just after God confused humanity's languages at Babel. Recall

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from Genesis 10:25 that he was called Peleg because “*...in his days the earth was divided.*” Assuming this refers to God’s confusion of the languages we can infer from the listing in Genesis 11:10-16 that the building of the Tower of Babel happened just under 100 years after the flood.

Notice that this listing of Shem’s descendants reverts to the same poetic form we saw in Genesis 5 listing the descendants of Adam through Seth to Noah and his sons.

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

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

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

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

26When Terah had lived 70 years, he fathered Abram [exalted father], Nahor, and Haran [mountaineer]. Genesis 11:18-26 (ESV)

Notice that Abram’s brother Nahor was named after their grandfather. This reuse of names in God’s Word can sometimes lead to confusion. In this case however, we find that the elder Nahor is only mentioned here as the father of Abram’s father Terah and in the parallel genealogy of 1 Chronicles 1. All the other instances where the name Nahor is found refer to Abram’s brother, not their grandfather.

Before we move on, notice that the lifespans of the men listed in this genealogy since the flood decreased. Recall from Genesis 6:3 that God said, “*...he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years.*” After the flood we see the dying ages in the genealogical listings steadily decrease, and of course Moses himself lived exactly 120 years. Some have proposed that prior to the flood there was a protective layer of water above the earth shielding the life on earth from harmful cosmic rays, but after God opened the windows of heaven at the beginning of the flood, that protective layer was no longer present. Possibly, but we can’t infer that from God’s Word, so we’ll put that idea aside and press on with our study.

ASIDE – When my brother and I visited the Houston Manned Spaceflight Center a few years ago, there was a display showing the cosmic ray shielding capabilities of various materials including gold, lead, and some other materials that I don’t remember. What struck me though was that of all the materials demonstrated, pound for pound the best shield is water. God has created for us a perfect habitat. Little things about it like His provision of a water vapor shield in the atmosphere to protect us from cosmic rays are often unnoticed and underappreciated.

27Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot [covering]. 28Haran died in the presence of

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his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans. Genesis

11:27-28 (ESV)

Ur of the Chaldeans – the home of Abram’s father Terah – was near the modern city of Nasiriyah, Iraq along the southern bank of the Euphrates River, about 80 miles west of the modern confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates and about 150 miles southeast of Babylon (Babel), and about 130 miles northwest of the present mouth of the combined rivers (the Shatt al-Arab) on the Arabian Gulf.

29*And Abram and Nahor took wives. The name of Abram’s wife was Sarai [princess], and the name of Nahor’s wife, Milcah [queen], the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah [one who looks forth].* Genesis 11:29 (ESV)

The family relationships of Terah’s family are complex. It was a “blended” family to say the least, and the text of Genesis 11:29 doesn’t make it easy to discern who was related to whom and how they were related. Of the two wives, Milcah’s lineage is the simplest, so we’ll consider her first. Milcah was Nahor and Abram’s niece – the daughter of their deceased brother Haran. Milcah was Lot’s sister, and they had another sister named Iscah.

We can’t tell anything from Genesis 11:29 about Sarai’s lineage. However, later in Genesis 20:12 Abraham (formerly Abram) told the Canaanite leader Abimelech that Sarah (formerly Sarai) was his step-sister – “*...the daughter of my father though not the daughter of my mother...*” So either Abraham (the one to whom God credited his faith as righteousness) was lying once more to Abimelech to justify his previous lie about Sarah not being his wife (not entirely unimaginable), or Abram’s father Terah had at least two wives – one of them Abram’s mother and one Sarai’s.

30*Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.* Genesis 11:30 (ESV)

Sarai’s infertility is just thrown out in this verse as an aside, but it was critical to the story of God’s choosing Israel as His own people and through them bringing forth their מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ* Jesus as we shall soon see.

31*Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran [הָרָן *hārān*], 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 [הָרָן *hārān*], they settled there.* **32***The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran.* Genesis 11:31-32 (ESV)

Once more, the wording of Genesis 11:31 isn’t altogether helpful in coming to grips with how the players in the story were related. Lot was Terah’s grandson by his deceased son Haran. This verse also mentions Sarai as Terah’s daughter-in-law, but if Abraham wasn’t lying to Abimelech in Genesis 20:12 then Sarai was Terah’s daughter, not his daughter-in-law. The Hebrew word כַּלְיָה *kallâ* translated as “daughter-in-law” is quite specific. It means daughter-in-law, bride, or spouse. This is a mystery for which I have no explanation. Perhaps it is God’s way of emphasizing Sarai’s role as Abram’s wife and later the mother of the Israelite people, while minimizing her role as her father-in-law’s daughter. Either that, or Abraham was lying to Abimelech again in Genesis 20:12.

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BTW – Did I happen to mention that Abraham the righteous one was also a habitual liar? Maybe I ought to just drop the subject (for now), huh?

As if the waters weren't already muddy enough, Genesis 11:31 uses two slightly different Hebrew proper names – **הָרָן** **hārān** and **הֶרָן** **hārān** – both transliterated into English as Haran. The first is the name of Terah's deceased son. The second is the name of the town where Terah and his family settled on their way from Ur of the Chaldeans to Canaan. Notice that in Hebrew, the name of Abram's dead brother starts with the letter **ה** – **he** while the name of the town starts with **הֶ** – **het**. If you aren't already confused enough, both these Hebrew letters are pronounced as "H" in English. Suffice it to say that Haran – the town – already had its name when Terah arrived. He didn't name the place after his deceased son as one might assume.

Looking Ahead

Next time, God willing, we'll discuss God's call upon Abram to leave Haran and go to Canaan – the land of promise.