

Genesis 11
The Tower of Babel

I. 11:1 *Now the whole earth had one language and few words. 2 And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 3 And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. 4 Then 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 scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." 5 And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. 6 And 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. 7 Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." 8 So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 9 Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.*

A. Outline -

1. Place - vv. 1-2
2. Production - vv. 3-4a
3. Pride - v. 4b
4. Puniness - v. 5
5. Peril - v. 6
6. Punishment - vv. 7-9

B. **One Language?** Genesis 11:19 is the record of the departure from one language and common speech to a plurality of tongues in the human race. This event took place at the tower of Babel, where mortals had decided that they would “make a name for {them}selves {lest they be} scattered over the face of the whole earth” {Gen 11:4}. A recently discovered Sumerian tablet also tells for the first time from an extra-biblical perspective the story of a time when all language were one on the earth.¹ The problem therefore is this: why does Genesis 10:5, 20, 31 described each of the descendants of Noah’s three sons as having differing languages when this was not supposed to have happened until the next chapter? Isn’t this a mistake (called by scholars an anachronism) on the part of the writer of Scripture, in that it is a misplacement in time and space? The Bible does not represent itself as always desiring to present its material in a strictly chronological sequence. Often it prefers to present it in a topical sequence. For example, the three temptations of Jesus in the Gospels are found in three different arrangements because the air of the author was to present them so as to make the preaching and teaching point of theology that each had in mind. Likewise, the writer of Genesis

¹Samuel Noah Kramer, “The Babel of Tongues: A Sumerian Version,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88 (1968): 108-111. See also Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966), pp 63-80.

jumps ahead of himself for the moment to describe what happened to the descendants of Noah's three sons, even though it outdistanced the story that he would resume in chapter 11. This technique is typical of the writer of Genesis. There is another clue in the text itself that demonstrates that this is so. In Genesis 10:25 it mentions "one [who] was named Peleg, because in his time the earth was divided." Here is a clear allusion to the confusion of languages at the tower of Babel that will be described in the next chapter (Gen 11:8-9). Since *Peleg* in Hebrew means "to divide" or "to split," it is more than likely that he received his name in memory of this event.

- C. ***one language and few words*** - the Hebrew is, '*echad saphah . . 'echad dabar* which is translated in other Bibles as "one language, and of one speech." In one sense the phrase can seem repetitious but the insight seems to be that even within Language groups, words can have different meanings. The RSV insight also seems to imply that concepts and thoughts could formerly be expressed with fewer words. Later things become more complex even among those sharing the same language. Simple things came to be complex!
- D. ***Shinar*** - That is Sumer, the land of the Sumerians, The area later called Babylon, modern day Iraq. The next verse describes building methods of the Sumerians
- E. ***and a tower with its top in the heavens*** - Such towers or Ziggurats are a common archeological feature of this part of the world. They look like tall, stepped pyramids. The tower itself was not the problem. Thinking it could reach to God in Heaven was the sin involved.²
- F. ***and let us make a name for ourselves,*** - Herein lies the real sin: making a name for ourselves. Recall that Man named all the animals and decided what to call them. But God named man.³ To name something or someone is to know something of it's essence. Parents name their children. In the ancient world this was very significant. Today this is less so. But Ultimately it is God who names us.⁴ In so doing it is he who declares our essence.
- G. ***lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.*** - Though unity is precious to God, it is not a work of Man but must be based on God and his truth. Without God, unity can merely become a despotic source power that is abused. Atheistic communism is perhaps the best example of this in our time. Concentrated centralized power can be a serious problem indeed if God is not it's

²The Later verse calling this place Babel is significant. Babel is the Hebrew word meaning "gate of God" or by extension - gate of (to) heaven.

³Gen 5:1 *This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. 2 Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created.*

⁴Rev 2:17 *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it.'*

center and source. In the American system of Government there is a delicately balanced share of power, Executive, legislative, judicial with checks and balances. Further there are rival parties. Praying for unity is not wrong, but God alone must be its source.

- H. ***5 And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built*** - a humorous description. The tower was really so puny that God had to go down to see what it was!
- I. ***this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.*** - In this anthropomorphic description God almost seems worried that man will become too powerful. It is true, man thinks he has become godlike in his power. Satan had said, you will become like gods!⁵ But what God seems to be getting at is more negative. In effect He says, if He does not intervene the depths of our depravity will know no limits. Thus he intervenes and puts limits lest wickedness know no bounds. So God does two things:
1. He confuses their speech
 2. He scatters them abroad.
- J. ***Therefore its name was called Babel,*** - Literally Babel in Hebrew meant “gate of God” but it also came to mean “confusion” as a result of this event.
- K. In the next Chapter we shall focus on one of the migrants from this region (as God Scatters them) - Abram who is commanded to leave UR of the Chaldes and God toward Palestine.
- II. The Genealogy continued - ***10 These are the descendants of Shem. When Shem was a hundred years old, he became the father of Arpachshad two years after the flood; 11 and Shem lived after the birth of Arpachshad five hundred years, and had other sons and daughters. 12 When Arpachshad had lived thirty-five years, he became the father of Shelah; 13 and Arpachshad lived after the birth of Shelah four hundred and three years, and had other sons and daughters. 14 When Shelah had lived thirty years, he became the father of Eber; 15 and Shelah lived after the birth of Eber four hundred and three years, and had other sons and daughters. 16 When Eber had lived thirty-four years, he became the father of Peleg; 17 and Eber lived after the birth of Peleg four hundred and thirty years, and had other sons and daughters. 18 When Peleg had lived thirty years, he became the father of Reu; 19 and Peleg lived after the birth of Reu two hundred and nine years, and had other sons and daughters. 20 When Reu had lived thirty-two years, he became the father of Serug; 21 and Reu lived after the birth of Serug two hundred and seven years, and had other sons and daughters. 22 When Serug had lived thirty years, he became the father of Nahor; 23 and Serug lived after the birth of Nahor two hundred years, and had other sons and daughters. 24 When Nahor had lived twenty-nine years, he became the father of Terah; 25 and Nahor lived after the birth of Terah a hundred and nineteen years, and had other sons and daughters. 26 When Terah had lived seventy years, he became the father of***

Abram, Nahor, and Haran. 27 Now these are the descendants of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot. 28 Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, 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 two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran.

- A. The List is similar to the one in Chapter 10 but:
 - 1. The focus is only on Shem for from his will descend the Hebrews
 - 2. We get life spans
 - 3. We see the life spans shrink dramatically down into the upper 100's and lower 200's by the end of the chapter.
 - 4. Some wives and daughters are mentioned.

- B. The list also extends further to the time of Abram and Sarai