

Genesis 10-11
March 14, 2021

1) Introduction to Chapters 10 and 11

a) Context – The story of the flood ended with the names of Noah’s 3 sons and then stated, “from these the whole world branched out.” Chapters 10 and 11 are the story of that “branching out.” Chapter 10 and Genesis 11:10-32 belong together as a table of nations formed by the descendants of Noah.

b) Purposes

i) The authors stress the kinship and unity of humankind prior to the disunity seen in the story of the tower of Babel. There is a kinship prior to Babel that unites all humankind, including Jew and Arab. World peace will be possible only when a reunion occurs of the large and diverse family descending from Noah’s 3 sons.

ii) The genealogies of chapter 10 emphasize the sovereignty of God extending to everyone and everywhere. Sibley Towner comments, “no place and no tribe lies beyond the bounds of the Lord’s care... Listed among the 70 nations are all those against whom Israel struggled most desperately during the course of its history: Egypt, Syria, Babylon, and especially, Canaan.”

iii) The emergence of the Hebrews and the nation of Israel is not the result of some innate superiority or holiness. There is nothing we are told that serves as a godly hallmark of those who will become the chosen people. They are simply one name among 70 others included in this table of nations. It is only by the grace of God, and nothing else, that Abraham and his descendants are chosen by God to be God’s special people.

2) Genesis 10:1-5 – The Nations of Japheth

a) Verse 1 names the 3 sons of Noah and announces the branching out of humankind following the flood. With this introduction we are moving from primordial and prehistorical events and into the realm of recorded history.

b) Verses 2-5 describe the descendants of Japheth. The people mentioned in these verses live north and west of Israel, in the nations of Europe and Asia Minor. Gomer refers to the region of the Caucasus. Madai refers to the Medes who settled east of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley in what we call Iran. These people gave rise to the Persian Empire. Javan mentioned in verse 4 is the Hebrew term for Greece. Tarshish, is the westernmost location in what we now know as Spain.

3) Genesis 10:6-20 – The Nations of Ham

a) The descendants of Ham inhabited the area reaching from Mesopotamia south to Egypt and extending to Sudan. Cush, mentioned in verses 6-8, is a common biblical term for Egypt and particularly Nubia in northern Egypt. The status of Nubia was assured because it was a source of gold.

b) The character of Nimrod, mentioned in verse 8-9, was not Egyptian but Mesopotamian. He was an impressive legendary ruler who founded the greatest cities of Mesopotamia mentioned in verses 10-12. The exact historical identity of Nimrod is uncertain, but it is significant that this non-Hebrew was described as “a mighty hunter before the Lord,” whose greatness was blessed by God.

c) The writers sought to isolate Canaan from the people of Israel, so in this telling of the genealogy Canaan is listed with the nations of Ham. The descendants of Ham are named Sidon and Heth. Sidon is the main seaport of Phoenicia while Heth is the ancestor from which the Hittites derive their name. These people inhabited Syria and Asia minor. Along with the Amorites mentioned in verse 16, the Canaanites and Hittites came to populate the entire region of the Fertile Crescent beginning about 2000 BC.

4) Genesis 10:21-31 – The Nations of Shem

a) This is the most important part of the table of nations because the family of Shem, we are told in chapter 11, produces Terah, the father of Abram, the founder of Israel. Verses 14-16 emphasize the name of Eber because it is

from that name that the term “Hebrew” is derived and it is from Eber that the 1st persons called Hebrews – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – descend.

- b) There are 26 nations listed among the descendants of Shem, and though they give rise to the Hebrew people, 13 of the nations are affiliated with Mesopotamian and Arab nations. Even as they take great pains to distance themselves from the Canaanites, and even though they focus on their distinct Hebrew identity, the early writers of the Hebrew history recognized their close kinship with their Arab neighbors.

5) Genesis 10:32 – A Summarizing Formula

- a) The table of nations concludes with a statement summarizing the spread of Noah’s family throughout the known world. This is an announcement of good news proclaiming that divine sovereignty extends to all the known inhabitants of the earth. There are 70 nations listed, a number that marks perfection and completion, and a number that demonstrates the fulfillment of a divine plan. This is no random or accidental occurrence.
- b) Listed among these nations are the key actors who will play a central role in the Old Testament: Egypt, Syria, Babylonia, the Canaanites, the Moabites, the Hittites, and the Arabs. The priestly writers of these verses understood clearly that humankind was one large family with undeniable kinship. Von Rad emphasizes the importance of this list of nations when he writes, “Nowhere is there a survey of international relations comparable to the biblical table of nations, so universal in its breath of view and so comprehensive in its purpose.”

6) Genesis 11:1-9 – The Tower of Babel

- a) Introduction to the Story
 - i) The story explains many things: 1) the origin of many languages; 2) the meaning of the word “Babel;” 3) the explanation for the many towers throughout the Babylonian region; 4) the theological charge of human pride; and 5) the reason why nations are alienated and scattered throughout the earth. Historically, the story has been presented as a

condemnation of human pride, a critique of urban culture, and an attack upon the oppressive imperialism of the Babylonian nation. Perhaps a true understanding of the story may include multiple explanations.

- ii) It is very possible that there is a historical antecedent to the story of the tower of Babel. There was one very ancient defensive tower erected in the city of Jericho that dated to about 7000 BC. Larger and more recent towers have been uncovered by archaeologists in Shechem and Jerusalem. Most prominent in the ancient world were the massive ziggurats that dotted the Babylonian landscape. They were claimed to provide a doorway to heaven and remnants of those structures survived until the time of the writing of Genesis. Probably, one of these structures served as the model for the tower of Babel.
- b) Genesis 11:1 begins with the statement that the whole earth “had one language and the same words” referring to a primitive setting where humanity spoke with a single vocabulary. Sibley Towner argues that this story is told in the style of folklore, showing that it is “cast in the genre of a legend – a story about human origins set in primeval times.”
- c) Verses 2 and 3 describe how the human community moved from the east to the legendary plain of Shinar. Other Old Testament writers like Daniel and Zechariah treated the terms of Shinar and Babylon as interchangeable. For mortar we are told they used bitumen, which we would understand as tar sands, such as found in the La Brea tar pits of California. Such natural sites were to be found in prehistoric times in the Middle East as well. Many ancient writers referred to the Dead Sea region as “Mare Asphaltitis” as if tar pits had been near the surface in earlier times. The Greek historian Herodotus also spoke of rivers of molten asphalt in ancient Mesopotamia. In short, verses 1-3 are grounded in the historical reality of the ancient Mideast.
- d) With verse 4 we see that this is more than a story of towers and tar pits. The massive building is constructed so that humans can make a name for themselves by building a tower to reach heaven. The purpose of the building is self-protection, making a name for themselves so that no one would dare attack them and scatter them across the earth. (We are aware of that strategy when used by persons like the Russian freedom fighter Alexei Navalny. If

you become famous enough, no one would dare to harm you without widespread reaction.) As stated by Sibley Towner, the purpose of the tower was “the building up of the greatness of the name of the human community to the point that God could not touch it without risking a major scandal on earth and in the heavenly places alike.” This was an attempt to secure human solidarity forever, “otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

- e) Verse 5 begins with the words, “The Lord came down to see.” This is not meant to suggest that the Lord was nearsighted. Rather, it is to mock the insignificance of the structure when viewed from God’s vantage point. As Von Rad says, these words are to be “understood as a remarkable satire.” One is reminded of the passage in Psalm 2:4: “He who sits in the heaven laughs; the Lord has them in derision.”
- f) Verses 6 and 7 picture the Lord addressing his heavenly counsel. The plural language used here, “let us go down,” may well be the remnants of a mythic conversation of some divine assembly of the gods. But in the hands of the Hebrew writers, the words of God are brief and the description of the heavenly council is sparse. Instead, the focus is on God’s harsh response to “confuse their language ... so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” By one decisive act, God dissolves the unity of humankind, and the result is alienation, disunity, and strife. The language of one person is unintelligible to another, which could result not only in the fault in human speech, but also a failure to listen. It is a total breakdown of human communication. Walter Brueggemann comments, “A society that suffers failed speech... not only cannot build towers,... it cannot be human.”
- g) Verses 8 and 9 describe the chaos resulting from the confusion of language. The building was abandoned, the people were scattered over the face of the earth, the unity of one language was forever destroyed, and humanity could not work in harmony anymore. Human autonomy was dashed, and the claim of unlimited human power was demolished. In verse 9 we are told the meaning of the word “Babel.” It is derived from the Hebrew word “balal,” meaning “to confuse,” related to our current English word “babble.” Two other word connections are inescapable: 1) A literal Hebrew translation would recognize “bab” as meaning “entrance,” and “el,” meaning “of God.”

This, of course, was the claim that the Tower of Babel would provide entrance to heaven itself. 2) The linkage of the word Babel to Babylon is inescapable particularly in light of the prideful and powerful threat of the oppressive Babylonian nation.

7) The Theological Meaning of the Tower of Babel

- a) The primordial histories found in Genesis 1-11 record a series of “fall stories” –Adam and Eve in the garden, Cain killing Abel, Noah and the flood, and now the tower of Babel. In each case it is the story of human sin and God’s judgment. The focus here is upon the prideful sin of humanity, thinking they can become as the gods and dwell in heaven. As in the other cases, an ancient mythic legend is refashioned by the Hebrew writers to convey the theological message of a sinful humanity and a responsive God who reacts with clear judgment, whether expulsion from the garden or the confusion of language. In every instance except for the tower of Babel there is also an act of grace, as when the rainbow appears and God promises never to destroy again with a flood. Here the act of grace lingers until Abram enters the picture in chapter 12.
- b) It is possible to interpret the remainder of the entire biblical story as the narrative of humanity seeking to overcome the curse of Babel and struggling to find unity and peace for all people. That longing for universal reconciliation was partially realized, according to the New Testament apostles, on the day of Pentecost. Sibley Towner summarized the Pentecostal event by saying, “For years, Christian preachers and exegetes have understood that the story of the birth of the church at Pentecost, told in Acts 2:1-13, holds forth promise that the confusion of tongues and the consequent alienation of people from one another is not a permanent blight on humankind.” The events of Acts 2 are but a foretaste of the coming kingdom of God when the confusion and chaos of Babel will be no more.

8) Genesis 11:10-32 –From Shem to Abram

- a) The concluding verses of Genesis 11 narrow the genealogy in an hourglass fashion to one individual – Abram. Then, starting in chapter 12, the story expands again by telling the story of the 12 tribes of Israel who will play a

role in God's plan for the redemption of all humankind. We are dealing here with real people in a dramatic situation. With these verses, we move from primeval history with its traditions and mythic backgrounds, and we find ourselves now dealing with historical reality, concrete personal stories, and geographic precision.

- b) Genesis 11:10-26 relates the detailed genealogy of the family of Shem.
 - i) Though interrupted by the story of the tower of Babel, the sin of the tower is certainly not a stain on the family of Shem alone. This family was affected along with all the other families mentioned in Genesis 10. The interruptive story of the tower was simply inserted in a very awkward place.
 - ii) Compared to the genealogies found in Genesis 5, here lifespans are dramatically shorter, reduced by approximately 50%. This list provides a transition toward more normal human expectations. Several of the names that are mentioned in these verses mirror geographic places such as Nahor and Terah. According to information in verse 26, Terah produced 3 sons in the same year! Their names are Abram, Nahor, and Haran.
- c) Genesis 11:27-30 gives us interesting biographical information concerning the family of Terah. Haran tragically died before his father but had a son, Lot, a nephew of Abram, who could be his potential heir. Nahor and Abram both married, but Abram's wife, Sarah, was barren. By that simple fact, a dramatic challenge arises concerning the future of Israel. Who will be the heir of Abram; who will carry out the promise? The narrator withholds a great deal of information that will be revealed only later in the pages of Genesis.
- d) Genesis 11:31-32 tells the story of Terah taking Abram, Sarah, and Lot from Ur of the Chaldeans. The exact location of the city of Ur is uncertain, but its traditional site is in Iraq and was visited by Pope Francis this past week. It is that ancient city that gives birth to Abraham and the religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The principal god worshiped by the Chaldeans was a moon god, a pagan deity as noted in Joshua 24:2, "Thus says the Lord, the

God of Israel: long ago your ancestors – Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor – lived off beyond the Euphrates and served other gods.”

- e) Conclusion: Abram, Sarah, and Lot are pagan worshipers from an obscure village of Ur. Sarah, the wife of Abram is barren. There is nothing so far in the saga told of the descendants of Noah that would designate Abram as the leader of anything, much less the father of our faith. The inconspicuous nature of Abram’s character is made even more dismal by the barrenness of Sarah. How can this possibly be the beginning of the greatest story ever told? Walter Brueggemann emphasizes, “the road to Israel is unexceptional... There is nothing special, sacred, or religious about the appearance of Israel. Israel is a free act of God’s grace. But apart from that always surprising grace, there is no preparation that leads us to expect it. Israel appears as a surprise among and from the nations.”

Questions for Reflection

1. The table of nations listed in chapter 10 are difficult to pronounce and hard to understand. What possible meaning do you find in this listing of 70 nations? Does it show the ultimate kinship with all humankind? Does it show a divine relationship to all persons? Does it change how we relate to persons of other races, creeds, and nations?
2. Does it bother you that the story of the Tower of Babel shows evidence of mythic and traditional influences from other Middle Eastern cultures? Does it bother you that God responds in a harsh way to confuse and scatter the human community?
3. What positive lessons can we learn from the Tower of Babel? Is it a warning of the danger of human pride? Is it a warning against urbanized and technological culture? Is it a warning against human autonomy?
4. Do you agree that the emergence of Abraham is one of the most surprising stories in human history? Why do you think Abraham is the one chosen by God? Why him of all people? What chances of success would you have given to Abraham to become the father of our faith?