

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY
GENESIS 10-11 – THE DESCENDANTS OF NOAH AND TOWER OF BABEL STORY

OUTLINE OF GENESIS 10-11

GENESIS 10:1-32 NOAH’S FAMILY TREE – THE SEVENTY NATIONS OF THE WORLD

Genesis 10:2-5 **Japheth and his descendants**; including Gomer, Magog, Tubal, and Meshech

Genesis 10:6-20 **Ham and his descendants**; including Canaan and Nimrod

Genesis 10:21-32 **Shem and his descendants**; including Peleg, Terah, and Abram and Sarai

GENESIS 11:1-9 THE TOWER OF BABEL

Genesis 11:1-4 Humans attempt to unify themselves for their own glory

Genesis 11:5-9 God scatters them by confusing their language at the tower of Babel

GENESIS 11:10-32 THE GENEALOGY OF ABRAHAM – TEN GENERATIONS FROM SHEM TO ABRAM

THE FAMILY OF NOAH

Before we get to our main passage for today (which is the story of the Tower of Babel), we need to recognize where it is located within these two chapters. It is sandwiched in between a pair of genealogies.

Chapter 10 contains a list of names which results in a list of nations; the genealogy of Noah and his three sons: Japheth, Ham and Shem. And notice what it says about each of these people groups or nations (vs 5, 20, 31):

*“These are the descendants of Japheth in their lands, **with their own language**, by their families, in their nations.” (vs 5).*

*“These are the descendants of Ham, by their families, **their languages**, their lands, and their nations.” (vs 20).*

*“These are the descendants of Shem, by their families, **their languages**, their lands, and their nations.” (vs 31).*

This list identifies three large spheres of nations that overlap precisely in Canaan (Japhethites, Hamites, and Shemites).

Notice that the families of Japheth (10:2–5) and Ham (10:6–20) are cited first, and then the elect line of Shem is given (10:21–31). But also, the line of Shem itself takes two different roads:

- In chapter 10, the non-elect line of Joktan is followed; Shem → Joktan → Babel (Genesis 10:21-31).
- In chapter 11, the chosen line of Peleg is traced down to Terah’s sons; Shem → Peleg → Abram (Genesis 11:10-26).

THE TOWER OF BABEL STORY TUCKED IN BETWEEN THE GENEALOGIES

Genesis 11:1–9 (NRSV) *The Tower of Babel*

11 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ² And as they migrated from the east,^a they came upon 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; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

⁵ The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶ And the Lord said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will 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 it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused^b the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

ONE LANGUAGE? CONTRADICTIONS

Notice how it begins: *“Now the whole world had one language and the same words.”* Wait! What?!!

Noah’s family tree in chapter 10 had just said that there were three basic people groups that had spread out all over the known world as seventy nations and each had their own language. And so, what is the biblical writer or editor doing

^a Or *migrated eastward*

^b Heb *balal*, meaning to *confuse*

putting this story about “*the whole world having one language and the same words*” right after genealogies that mention multiple languages? Isn’t that a contradiction? What’s going on here? Didn’t they realize this inconsistency when they put the stories together? Of course, they did! Someone is trying to get your attention!

A POLEMIC AGAINST THE BABYLONIANS WITH ETIOLOGICAL ELEMENTS

Remember, the Torah was probably put together in its final form after the people of Israel had returned from exile in Babylon and so they are going to have strong feelings about their former enemy and captors. And their stories are going to reflect this. These are the people who enslaved them until the king of Persia set them free to return to the promised land again. Not only does this story speak about the origins of the different languages we find in the world, it also serves as an account of how their hated enemy got their name.

Who created the tower of Babel? The Babel-onians! AKA the Babylonians. The name Babel (Hebrew: בָּבֶל) is the **exact same** word we later translate as Babylon. And it sounds very similar to the Hebrew word *balal* בָּלַל which means “to confuse”. Verse 9 says that city was called Babel because “YHWH babbled the language of all the earth” (11:9). This would have come as a surprise to the people of Babylon, who understood their name to derive from *bab-ilu* which meant the “Gate of God.” (See Genesis 28:16-17; where Jacob sees the stairway to heaven; Jacob’s ladder).

Anyhow, what we have here is a play on words, a pun, brilliant political satire that mocks Babylonian culture and says, “Look at those silly, stupid, arrogant Babylonians.”

What was so bad about a bunch of people seeking to build a city? Surely the reason the Bible gave for this project—the people’s desire not to be “scattered all over the earth”—did not sound blameworthy in and of itself. Why, then, had God frustrated their plans and then sent them off in every different direction? What was so wrong with the tower?

In seeking an answer, ancient readers eventually focused on what the builders say themselves: “Let us build a city for ourselves, with a tower that reaches to heaven.” Stipulating such a great height for the tower certainly sounded fishy. Perhaps, as so often, scripture here was hinting in a word or two at some major point: the tower was the whole reason for God’s displeasure. After all, God is in heaven and people are on earth. It just did not seem right that humans should try to reach the realm of the divine, perhaps even challenging God’s heavenly rule in the process; the arrogance of this very idea must have been what caused God to frustrate their plans.

Such a suspicion only seemed to be reinforced by the precise wording of the continuation of this text. The Bible said that God went down to earth “to inspect the city and the tower”; the latter specification seemed once again intended to indicate to readers that the tower itself had been the real sticking point.

As a consequence, ancient interpreters came to refer to this story not as the “City of Babel” but as the “Tower of Babel.” In fact, interpreters came to believe that behind this building project stood still more nefarious, if unstated, aims: the builders actually wished to enter heaven itself or to challenge God’s control of the celestial realm.

This story is a parable of human arrogance in general. Human beings ought to know their place, it seemed to say. Ingenuity and teamwork are fine so long as they do not lead humans to think too much of themselves—and too little of God. The great half-built structure of Genesis 11 loomed ever afterward in people’s minds as a model of what godless arrogance can lead to.

The story reflects both astonishment at the advanced technological level of Babylonian ziggurat-building and a keen sense that technology poses grave dangers when it is not accompanied by reverence for God. The ambition of the builders to erect a tower with its top in the sky is properly compared with the prideful boast of the king of Babylon in Isaiah chapter 14, verses 13-14; a section that talks about the downfall of the King of Babylon: “I will climb to the sky; / Higher than the stars of God / I will set my throne.... I will match the Most High.”

HEADING EASTWARD

We saw how the story begins in verse 1 with the declarative statement about all the earth and peoples having one language. Now let’s notice what it says in verse 2. Where have these people come from? What direction are they

heading? Notice, they are migrating eastward (see the footnote in the NRSV at verse 2). Remember what it said in our second video from the Bible Project about settings and particularly about moving East or settling in the East. What does it typically mean when someone moves eastward in the biblical story? They are heading into trouble.

From the Adam and Eve story in the garden, being banished to the East, we learn to expect trouble whenever people head to the East. Adam and Eve are banished to the east. Cain wanders to the East. And now the people are moving to the East to build the city of Babel. And all of this points forward to the time when Israel will be taken in exile to the East, in Babylon. Also, notice where these eastward heading people settle. They settle in the land of Shinar.

NIMROD IN SHINAR

If we go back to the genealogy of Noah above in chapter 10, we will see which descendants settle in the land of **Shinar**. In verse 10 we see that it is Nimrod. And it says that “the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, and Accad, all of them in the land of **Shinar**.”

Nimrod was a descendant of Cush, who was a descendant of Ham. And who was Ham again? Oh yes, the one who saw his father Noah drunk and naked in his tent and something sketchy happened for which his son, Canaan, was cursed. So, we have this descendant of Ham named Nimrod who begins his kingdom by building three cities, one of which is named Babel and it is located in the plain of Shinar.

SHINAR (PLACE) [Heb *šīn'ār* (שִׁנְעָר)]. A name for the region of Babylonia (Genesis 10:10). It can be called either the “land of Shinar” or simply “Shinar.” The first mention of the “land of Shinar” (Genesis 10:10, in the fragment of the Yahwistic Table of Nations) calls it the mainstay or beginning of the kingdom of Nimrod. In it were found the cities Babel (Babylon), Accad (Agade), Erech (Uruk), and possibly Calneh.

According to Genesis 11:2 the early human race settled in a valley in the “land of Shinar” and began to build the abortive Tower of Babel. Abraham had a hostile encounter with a coalition of four kings, one of whom was “Amraphel king of Shinar” (Genesis 14:1, 9).



When the Israelites were thwarted in their conquest of Ai because Achan had stolen some of the “devoted things,” one of the items he stole was a (presumably valuable) “cloak of Shinar” (Joshua 7:21).

An oracle in the book of Isaiah promises that a remnant of Yahweh’s people will be returned from many places, including “Shinar” (Isaiah 11:11).

After the Exile, the prophet Zechariah saw a vision in which the sin of the people, personified as a woman, is transported to the “land of Shinar” in an ephah (a large container) and set up in a temple there (Zechariah 5:11).

The book of Daniel relates that Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, removed some of the vessels from the temple of God in Jerusalem and took them to the “land of Shinar” and placed them in the temple treasury of his own god (Daniel 1:2).

THE NEPHELIM CONNECTION

Before we continue with this story, I want us to take a look at something we talked about a little earlier. Turn to Genesis 6:1-4. This is the story that is inserted right before God decides to send the flood to wipe out all of creation, save for Noah and his family and the animals. It's another curious story in Genesis.

Genesis 6:1–8 (NRSV)

¹ When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, ² the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose. ³ Then the Lord said, "My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years." ⁴ The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.

⁵ The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. ⁶ And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. ⁷ So the Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." ⁸ But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.

This story talks about the Nephilim who were the product or offspring of the union of the sons of God and the daughters of humans. They appear later in the Torah in Numbers 13:33 when the spies sent by Joshua spy out Canaan and make the report of giants, who they call "Nephilim" and who are designated as the sons of Anak. They may also be alluded to in Ezekiel 32:27 as ancient fallen soldiers. In 1 Enoch 6-19, they are referred to as "fallen angels," which is how they are alluded to in 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6. The Hebrew root of the name Nephilim (*npl*) means "to fall". Are they the heavenly beings in Psalm 29:1 or Job 1:6?

Well, what is wrong with this story in Genesis 6:1-4? What's the problem?

The answer goes back to the creation story in Genesis 1. God created order out of the chaos and put things in their places. These sons of God are disrupting the created order by coming down and taking the daughters of humans as their wives and bearing children. They are deciding what is good and evil. They are doing their own thing not trusting God's proper order of things.

God and the angels have their place. Humans have their place. The God of Genesis, chapter one, is located above the sky, above the heavens. Humans down below. These "angels" were coming down and choosing human wives, something that wasn't supposed to happen. This story sounds more like something the Greek gods would do.

THE TOWER STORY

So, with this background in mind, let's turn to the story in Genesis chapter 11 again. What's the first thing the people do in verse 3? They get together and talk about making bricks. And they use "bitumen" as mortar. These are important details that set the stage for something that will occur later in Israel's history. The beginning of the Exodus story talks about the Israelites being forced into labor making bricks and mortar and building cities. And in Exodus, chapter 2, when Moses' mother places him in the papyrus "basket" (Hebrew: *teba* meaning "ark"; the same word used for the boat that saved Noah), she uses "bitumen" to seal it up before she places it in the water. Details like this link these stories to other stories in the Old Testament.

So, what is this story about according to verse 4? It's about that little group who want to make a name for themselves. Why? They don't want to be scattered. Their intention is to stay together which contradicts the divine imperative to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (See Genesis 1:28; 9:1,7).

They come together to build a Ziggurat, a tower designed to reach the heavens. These are the people who settled in the valley of Shinar, the ancestors of the Babylonians, the enemies of Israel who will later destroy their temple and take them captive to Babylon. Their tower has stairs for sides and an altar on top. Since (in the ancient world) the gods were "up there" somewhere, building a "stairway to heaven" was an attempt to get in touch with the gods. The LORD is

described here as fearing the human power that might result from ethnic and linguistic unity (we saw a similar fear expressed in Genesis 3:22 in the garden of Eden story).

COMPARE THIS TO THE WORSHIP SPACE OF THE ISRAELITES

Where did the Israelites worship? In the Tabernacle, the tent, which was the prototype for the temple. The tabernacle and later the temple suggested that humans didn't have to go up to be with God, but instead, God comes down to reside with them. Think Ark of the Covenant; the mercy seat of God.

As a polemic against the Babylonians, this story is commenting about the silliness, arrogance and pride of the Babylonians who constructed these huge towers of brick with stairways to heaven meant to allow them to connect with God and enter God's space.

THE IRONY OF GOD'S RESPONSE

What is God's response to the Babylonian tower? If you look in verse 5, it says something quite comical. The Babylonians wanted a tower to reach up to the heavens, but in verse 5, God comes down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. What an insult against the Babylonians.

And the irony is that they built it so that they would not be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth (vs 4), but God's response is to scatter them abroad (vs 7). Being scattered is typically negative, a consequence of disobedience. But, if you look in Deuteronomy 30:3, we find the first of many times when God promises to "gather" from all the places where God has "scattered" (see also Ezekiel 11:16-17; 20:34, 41; 28:25). So, is it a punishment? Or could it be something else? Why doesn't God just destroy the tower or wipe out the city if punishment was the answer?

THE INVERSE OF GENESIS 6:1-4

What we see is that this story is the inverse of Genesis 6:1-4. There, the sons of God break through boundaries God set up for the cosmos and *come down*, with grave consequences. Now, these Babylonians are trying to break through the cosmic boundaries by *going up* to get to God's level. This story is a way for later Israelites to say, "See, we know all about you Babylonians. All along you've been a pain in God's side. Not much has changed."

PENTECOST CONNECTION

The confusion of languages in this story gives even more significance to the story found in Acts 2 regarding God's actions on the day of Pentecost. The spirit of God moves among the people and people who have come from all over the world hear the words of the disciple's, but they hear them in their own native languages. And so, what we have on Pentecost is a reversal of the Tower of Babel story. Instead of God dividing and confusing people by giving them different languages, God unites and helps people understand one another by God's Spirit moving among the people.

THE END OF CHAPTER 11 – INTRODUCING ABRAHAM

Again, after the tower of Babel story, we have another genealogy. And this is where we trace the descendants of Shem all the way to Abraham. He is introduced at the end of "the descendants of Shem" (11:10–26). But in verse 27, we quickly move to "the descendants of Terah," Abraham's father. After all, the line of Terah is about Abraham, the central character in Genesis, and along with Moses and King David, one of the three central characters in the entire Old Testament.

Chapter 11 ends with Terah taking his family out of Ur (in Babylon) and moving them northwestward along the two rivers (the Tigris and the Euphrates) to Haran, north of the land of Canaan. The writer adds here that Abraham's wife Sarai (later called Sarah) is barren, which will become a key point in the story soon enough.

This is the first appearance of the theme of barrenness of the three most central matriarchs: Sarai/Sarah, Rebekah (25:21), and Rachel (29:31). Their initial barrenness helps highlight God's power to provide heirs of the promise.

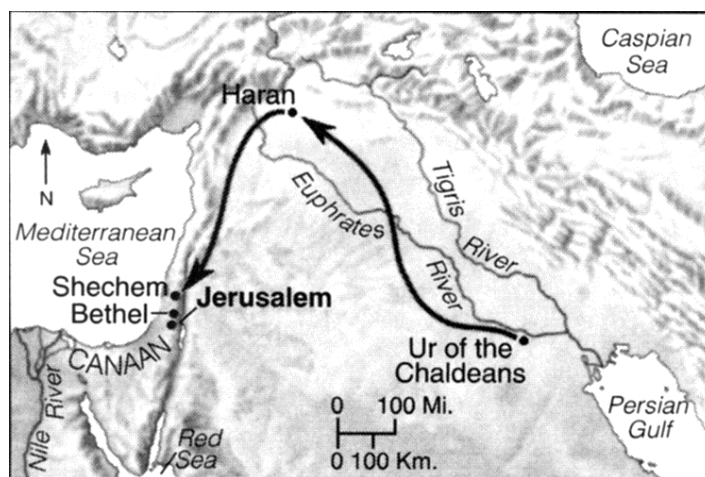
LOCATIONS

SHINAR

In later times Shinar was equated with Babylon: Isaiah 11:11 speaks of God bringing back a remnant from Shinar (i.e., returning exiles from Babylon); Daniel 1:2 says that Nebuchadnezzar took “Jehoiakim king of Judah ... with some of the vessels of the house of God” to Shinar; Zechariah 5:11 predicts the ephah of wickedness will be taken to a house built for it in Shinar.

UR OF THE CHALDEANS

As the ancestral home of Abraham, Ur is mentioned four times in the Bible (Genesis 11:28, 31; 15:7; Nehemiah 9:7); in each instance the Hebrew phrase *'ur kasdim* is used. *Kasdim* here almost certainly indicates the “Chaldeans” (as indicated in the LXX; the Septuagint), which suggests that the phrase as a whole refers to the southern Mesopotamian Ur of the period of the Neo-Babylonian/Chaldean Empire. To be sure, this period is much too late for Abraham, and so most modern scholars suppose that the use of the term *kasdim* here is an anachronism of the biblical editors, who would have worked during the Babylonian exile, precisely the heyday of Chaldean Ur.



HARAN

Who is Haran? The son of Terah and brother of Abraham and Nahor. He was the father of Lot and also had two daughters, Milcah and Iscah (Gen. 11:27–29). He died in the Chaldean city of Ur.

But there is also a city that goes by his name. A city located in northwestern Mesopotamia about sixty miles above the confluence of the Balikh and Euphrates rivers. Haran was an important center of religious and political activity for the Hurrians, who dominated this region in the middle of the second millennium BCE. Haran was an important center for the worship of the moon god, Sin.

According to Genesis 24:10 (cf. Genesis 29:4), Haran was Abraham’s ancestral home. Terah, Abraham’s father, takes his household to Haran after leaving Ur of the Chaldees (Genesis 11:31–32) and he dies in Haran. Abram (i.e., Abraham) is living in Haran when he receives the call from God to depart and go to Canaan (Genesis 12:1). He does so, taking with him a sizable household and considerable wealth, amassed while in Haran (12:4–5). Notably, a number of personal names of Abram’s relatives are also names of cities or towns in the region of Haran: Peleg, a distant ancestor (11:18); Serug, Abram’s great-grandfather; Nahor, his grandfather and his brother; and Terah, his father (11:22–29). And, of course, Abram’s brother is named Haran (the father of Lot and also had two daughters, Milcah and Iscah (Genesis 11:27–29). He died in the Chaldean city of Ur.)

Later, Abraham sends his servant back to the region of Haran to procure a wife for his son Isaac (24:10). Still later, Abraham’s grandson Jacob is instructed by Rebekah to return to Haran as a place of refuge following his appropriation of Esau’s birthright (27:43; 28:10). Thus, it is in Haran that the sons of Jacob who become the eponymous ancestors of Israel’s tribes are all born.

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