

GENESIS

Chapter 11

The Tower of Babel

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. 2 And as people 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 dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” 5 And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man 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, so that they may not understand one another's speech.” 8 So the LORD dispersed them 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 dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

11:1–9 Chronologically earlier than ch. 10, this section provides the main reason for the scattering of the peoples listed there. The narrative is a beautiful example of inverted or hourglass structure. (CSB)

11:1 *the whole earth* – The survivors of the flood and their descendants (see vv. 4, 8–9). (CSB)

All people on earth at the earliest time were direct descendants of Noah; therefore, the whole had the same language. Chapter 11 describes events that happened prior to the division of nations described in chapter 10. (TLSB)

This was the group of people who had survived the Flood and had given birth to the next generations. (CSB)

one language – Moses now provides an explanation for the puzzling fact that nations which trace their origin to a common ancestor today speak more than 5000 different languages. The great variety of languages in the world today has been called a monument to the cleverness of the human mind. This chapter shows us that it's more a monument to the rebelliousness of the human heart. (PBC)

It soon became obvious that although their language had not changed, the attitude of these descendants of Noah had changed – and not for the better. (PBC)

11:2 *people migrated from the east* – Here we see the Shemites, the line which had received Noah's special blessing, rebelling against God' expressed will for them. After Noah's family left the ark God has commanded them: “Fill the earth!” it was God's good will that in time the whole earth should be filled with people who would live for His glory, so that from east to west His reputation as Savior would be magnified. (PBC)

Noah's descendants started out well. From Armenia, where the ark had come to rest, they journeyed down into the Tigris-Euphrates valley, often referred to as Mesopotamia (present day Iraq). The direction of their migration was to the southeast; here it's described as "eastward," because the Hebrew language has expressions only for the four points of the compass; it has none for the oblique directions. (PBC)

Until now, all events have been consistently identified with "the east." Now, Noah's early descendants journeyed down the Tigris-Euphrates Valley of Mesopotamia. (TLSB)

land of Shinar – A well-watered plain would naturally look good to farmers and, in disobedience to God, they decided to stop their migration and settle down. (PBC)

11:3 *brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar.* Stone and mortar were used as building materials in Canaan. Stone was scarce in Mesopotamia, however, so mud brick and tar were used (as indicated by archaeological excavations). (CSB)

On the plain near the Tigris-Euphrates Rivers, stones were scarce, while clay was plentiful. The process of "burning" bricks was unique to the region; it was not used in Egypt until much later. (TLSB)

burned them thoroughly – Instead of sun-dried clay or stone, they chose fire-hardened brick for their building project, with tar for mortar instead of the customary mud. They wanted something that would last. (PBC)

bitumen for mortar – Use of "slime" (tar from coal or oil) with bricks for construction well describes the historical setting of the account. (TLSB)

11:4 *us ... ourselves ... we ... ourselves.* The people's plans were egotistical and proud. (CSB)

tower. The typical Mesopotamian temple-tower, known as a ziggurat, was square at the base and had sloping, stepped sides that led upward to a small shrine at the top. (CSB)

Ziggurat pyramids are known from Ur, Babylon, and other Mesopotamian cities. This architecture dates back to the third millennium B.C. (TLSB)

top in the heavens. A similar ziggurat may be described in 28:12. Other Mesopotamian ziggurats were given names demonstrating that they, too, were meant to serve as staircases from earth to heaven: "The House of the Link between Heaven and Earth" (at Larsa), "The House of the Seven Guides of Heaven and Earth" (at Borsippa), "The House of the Foundation-Platform of Heaven and Earth" (at Babylon), "The House of the Mountain of the Universe" (at Asshur). (CSB)

No effort is to be spared. If stones are not available, they must be manufactured. Nothing shall deter these men, so greedy of enhancing the glory of their own name. (Leupold)

name. In the OT, "name" also refers to reputation, fame or renown. (The Nephilim were "men of renown [lit. 'name']," 6:4.) At Babel rebellious man undertook a united and godless effort to establish for himself, by a titanic human enterprise, a world renown by which he would dominate God's creation (cf. 10:8–12; 2Sa 18:18). (CSB)

“Glory to man in the highest!” That’s turning God’s plan for us topsy-turvy. That’s rejecting His goal for life and substituting a goal of our own. Sustenance (food & shelter), security status – these were the life goals the descendants of Noah had adopted. (PBC)

Their plans were made with care. Instead of the usual sun-dried brick they proposed to use burnt brick, which would be able to withstand the ravages of the weather so much the better. And instead of merely laying the bricks loosely, they planned to set them firmly by the use of asphalt, which is found in large quantities near the ruins of Babylon. Just what motive prompted them to undertake the building of such a city and tower whose top should reach to the sky is shown in their words: And let us make for us a name, lest we be scattered over the face of the whole earth. An arrogant, blasphemous pride was here combined with a cringing fear of the avenging justice of the Lord. They were full of enmity toward God; their purpose was to defy His almighty power and to make this city with its tower the center of the world, to which they might return even if it should happen that the Lord would scatter them into the four winds. (Kretzmann)

be dispersed. Noah’s descendants were to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (9:1). Their intention to create a local point that would keep them in one place was proof that they intended to break God’s command. (TLSB)

This phrase breathes defiance of God. The tower was to provide the rallying point and to at the same time a token of their oneness of purpose. (Leupold)

11:5 *Lord came down to see* – This is not to be understood literally. God does want to emphasize, however, that whenever he intervenes in judgment He has carefully evaluated all the facts; His judgment is never impulsive or arbitrary. (PBC)

God is described in human terms, intervening in the affairs of humankind (cf Ps. 144:5). (TLSB)

These are expressions of Holy Scripture to which one must become accustomed. God “comes down,” not really or essentially—for He is everywhere—but He ceases to take no notice, He ceases to be long-suffering, and begins to reveal, punish, and convict sin. Therefore the smug people who used to think that He was far away now see that He is present, and they begin to tremble. (Luther)

11:6 *the Lord said* – God is spoken of as Yahweh because of the mercy His displays in preventing mankind from carrying out its pernicious purpose. (Leupold)

now ... will be impossible. If the whole human race remained united in the proud attempt to take its destiny into its own hands and, by its man-centered efforts, to seize the reins of history, there would be no limit to its unrestrained rebellion against God. The kingdom of man would displace and exclude the kingdom of God. (CSB)

This refers to sinful conceits. If the human race remained united in self-interested pride, there would be no limit to people’s rebellion against God. (TLSB)

The verb נִחַד is familiar, for it means to reach some decision as a result of some proposal and to consider whether it is good or evil. Such is its meaning in the passage before us: “They have decided to do this; they have made up their minds; and they will not allow themselves to be turned away from what they have undertaken.” This is a sort of complaint from God, who is amazed and grieved at the great arrogance of men, because to their own great harm, they smugly despised the authority of Noah. (Luther)

What they had begun to do they would work for with all possible energy; and nothing would be restrained, held back, from them. The result would be the eventual destruction of true freedom, of personal life, and of the plans which God had concerning the Messiah. (Kretzmann)

What follows in italics is from the Lutheran Hour Ministry Devotion of 8/30/2014 by Rev. Kenneth Klaus...

Yet not my will, but yours be done. Luke 22:42

The other day I came across an old, German legend.

It begins in a farming community which had been repeatedly hit by drought and disaster. Believing God was being unfair and unwise, the people came together and said, "Lord, our crops have been scanty and skimpy and small. If You have no major objections, and we hope You don't, we'd like to run the show."

Now, the story says that God, who knows best and is always caring, for reasons of His own, said, "Okay. I'll let you take control -- for a year."

And so it was. If the villagers wanted rain, they got rain. If they wanted sun, they got sun. That year the plants grew big and strong. Sadly, when harvest time came, there was no grain brought in. None at all.

Once again, the people complained.

In reply, God told them: "You got what you asked for. But you didn't ask for what you needed. Along with sun and rain you also need the north winds which pollinate your plants. No harsh wind ... no crop."

Now that old story is telling us a number of things. First, it identifies our human desire to have only sunny skies in the day and gentle rains which come at night. More importantly, the tale tells us we want to be in control because we think we know better than the Lord.

Thankfully, the Lord doesn't let us take control as He did that fictional German village.

Look at the disaster which occurred in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve thought they knew better than God, and they ended up opening a whole Pandora's box of trouble when they ate from the forbidden fruit.

Scripture points out others who thought they could improve on God's handiwork.

Against God's orders, Lot's wife tried to sneak a peek at the destruction of her home and city. Moses thought He knew better than God when He struck the rock for water rather than speaking to it. The Children of Israel thought they knew better than God when it came to conquering the Promised Land.

Those stories and others lead us to thank God that He doesn't give us our way and follow every foolish notion that might spring from our sinful brains and hearts.

The truth is God is God, and we are not. Left to our own devices, we would still be trying to work

our way into heaven. Left to our own invention, we would still be ineffectually struggling and incompetently striving to atone for our many misdeeds. But God has not left us on our own. In His wisdom HE decided to send His Son to rescue us. In His love HE declared that whoever believes on Jesus as Savior will have their souls washed of all wrongdoing.

Now because of what HE has done, we are moved to say, "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

11:7 *let us.* God's "Come, let us" from above counters proud man's "Come, let us" (v. 4) from below. (CSB)

This is spoken out of the fullness of the character of God, who is called by the plural name 'Elohim and who possesses unbounded resources and potentialities. Though not a direct reference to the Holy Trinity, the plural here involves that too. The same plural is used in 1:26 and 3:22. (Leupold)

Direct manifestation of divine power appears to have altered their thought processes, making it impossible to communicate and trust one another. (TLSB)

not understand each other. Without a common language, joint effort became impossible (see v. 8). (CSB)

11:8 *dispersed.* See v. 4; 9:19. God dispersed the people because of their rebellious pride. Even the greatest of human powers cannot defy God and long survive. (CSB)

That was the consequence of the miracle. A great migration of families and tribes over the whole earth began, by which men were scattered to the four winds. The great project as planned naturally had to be abandoned. Even if some few people, whom we may now term Babylonians, remained in the city, to be conquered afterward by Nimrod, the purpose of the human race in its blasphemous pride was not realized. (Kretzmann)

God not only caused them to desist from their evil purposes but also to "fill the earth" as He intended (9:1). (TLSB)

It is interesting that God does this again when in Acts 1:8 Jesus tells His disciples: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." BUT, they, too, don't get it done until we read Acts 8:1: "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria."

11:9 *Babel.* The word is of Akkadian origin and means "gateway to a god" (Jacob's stairway was similarly called "gate of heaven"; see 28:17). (CSB)

Hebrew verb *babal* means "to confuse;" a form of the verb, when contracted, results in Babel, the name of the city. (TLSB)

We get our word "babel" from this. When there is no communication there is ultimately going to be chaos. The real communication problem here was that the people had stopped communicating with God and thus were alienated from him. When we are alienated from him, becoming alienated from our fellow human being is the next step.

confused. The Hebrew word used here (*balal*) sounds like “Babel,” the Hebrew word for Babylon and the origin of the English word “babel.” (CSB)

Luther called God’s action at Babel a much more horrible judgment than the flood. That divine judgment wiped out only a single generation of humanity. Confusing the languages at Babel, however, has bred confusion and suspicion and hatred in every generation since then down to our broken, disorderly world. (PBC)

11:1–9 To curtail the pride and evil design of early humankind, God intervenes to make it difficult for family groups and tribes to communicate with one another, thereby causing them to disperse to different regions of the Near East and beyond. Like the story of the fall, the story of Babel shows that rebellion against God ultimately leads to divisions among people. People are driven away from paradise and from one another. Yet the Lord was preparing to gather and bless all nations in the birth of the living Word from the line of Shem. • We praise You, O God, that You enable Your Church to overcome language barriers with the Gospel of salvation in Christ Jesus. Amen. (TLSB)

Shem’s Descendants

10 These are the generations of Shem. When Shem was 100 years old, he fathered Arpachshad two years after the flood. 11 And Shem lived after he fathered Arpachshad 500 years and had other sons and daughters. 12 When Arpachshad had lived 35 years, he fathered Shelah. 13 And Arpachshad lived after he fathered Shelah 403 years and had other sons and daughters. 14 When Shelah had lived 30 years, he fathered Eber. 15 And Shelah lived after he fathered Eber 403 years and had other sons and daughters. 16 When Eber had lived 34 years, he fathered Peleg. 17 And Eber lived after he fathered Peleg 430 years and had other sons and daughters. 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.

11:10–26 A ten-name genealogy, like that of Seth (see 5:3–31). Unlike the Sethite genealogy, however, the genealogy of Shem does not give total figures for the ages of the men at death and does not end each paragraph with “and then he died.” It covers the centuries between Shem and Abram as briefly as possible. (CSB)

Genealogical list is a continuation of ch 5, recording further development of the human race, emphasizing the lineage that would stand in special relation to God, and introducing the genealogy of Terah and Abram. (TLSB)

11:10 *two years after the flood* – Establishes the point in time for reckoning the following genealogy. (TLSB)

11:11 *daughters* – Although daughters are mentioned, they are not listed by name, perhaps because they were not essential in describing the messianic line. (TLSB)

11:12 *lived 35 years* – Tow catastrophes, the flood and the confusion of languages, perhaps shortened people’s live. Childbearing recorded as occurring at younger ages. (TLSB)

11:13 *other sons and daughters* – The human population despite the shortening life span, increased in size dramatically during these generations. One could calculate that if each family of the 10 generations averaged 10 children, the population by the time of the 11th generation would have totaled nearly 300 million. (TLSB)

11:14 *Eber* – Ancestor of the Hebrews; the name is associated with the act of “crossing over” the Euphrates and migrating southward. If there were no gaps in the genealogies, Eber could actually have outlived Abraham. (TLSB)

11:26 *Terah ... became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran.* As in the case of Shem, Ham and Japheth, the names of the three sons may not be in chronological order by age (see 9:24; see also 10:21). Haran died while his father was still alive (see v. 28). (CSB)

Three sons of Terah who had important roles in subsequent history; Abram (“the father is exulted”) as the father of the chosen family line, Nahor as the ancestor of Rebekah, and Haran as the father of Lot. Abram would be named Abraham in chapter 17. (TLSB)

11:10–26 Sin weighs heavily on the human race as spans of life are drastically shortened. Yet this section assures us that the promised messianic line continues through human history. • Thank You, O Lord, that You never abandon Your people, that they may hold fast to the hope of everlasting life. Amen. (TLSB)

Terah's Descendants

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.

Haran fathered Lot – Lot is mentioned specifically because of his role in Abraham’s life (chapters 13-14; 19). (TLSB)

11:28 *Haran died* – The reason Lot would go with Abram. (TLSB)

Ur of the Chaldeans. Possibly in northern Mesopotamia, but more likely the site on the Euphrates in southern Iraq excavated by Leonard Woolley between 1922 and 1934. Ruins and artifacts from Ur reveal a civilization and culture that reached high levels before Abram’s time. King Ur-Nammu, who may have been Abram’s contemporary, is famous for his law code. (CSB)

Archaeological discoveries have situated Ur on the west bank of the Euphrates in southern Babylon. This city was the center of the cult of the Mesopotamian moon god Sin. (TLSB)

11:29 *Milcah, daughter of Haran* – Later, marriage with half-sister or niece would be forbidden by Mosaic Law. Cf Lev. 18. (TLSB)

11:30 *Sarai was barren.*† The sterility of Abram’s wife (see 15:2–3; 17:17) emphasized the fact that God’s people would not come by natural generation from the post-Babel peoples. (CSB)

Because Sarai’s inability to conceive a child would play prominently in future events, advance attention is called to her condition. (TLSB)

11:31 *go into... Canaan* – Canaan was familiar to the inhabitants of the Tigris and Euphrates valleys. (TLSB)

they came to Haran. In Hebrew the name of the town is spelled differently from that of Abram’s brother (v. 26). The moon-god was worshiped at both Ur and Haran, and since Terah was an idolater (see Jos 24:2) he probably felt at home in either place. Haran was a flourishing caravan city in the 19th century B.C. In the 18th century it was ruled by Amorites. (CSB)

Mesopotamian city in the north; a commercial center. Like Ur, it was a seat of worship for the Mesopotamian moon god Sin. Terah, an idolater, probably felt at home settling there. (TLSB)

11:32 Terah’s death ended his plan of reaching Canaan, but Abram would fulfill the plan because of the heavenly Father’s call. (TLSB)

11:27–32 After the human race has again turned away from God, the history of salvation and the messianic promise is narrowed to one man, Abram, the son of Terah of the line of Shem. Terah adopts heathen superstition and idolatry, a common practice in every age. But God identifies Abram as the father of the line by which all nations of the earth would be blessed. God will call Abram to leave all and follow Him, first to Haran and, in due time, to Canaan. • Thank You, gracious Lord, for Your patience in working out the details necessary for our salvation in Christ Jesus, and for Your patience and forgiveness when we succumb to this world’s attractions and fall into sin. Amen. (TLSB)