

## SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY

### Week 5: Genesis 10-11 – The People and Tower of Babel Story

#### INTRO

**Watch:** the video from the Bible Project from the Torah Series called [Genesis 1-11](#) (5 minutes 45 seconds). This video was different from the one we watched at the start of this series. This one comes from their Torah Series, the other is from their Old Testament series. It's a great refresher video of the stories we have studied up to this point.

Before we jump into Genesis, chapter 11, I want us to watch one more video, because I think this is going to help us put things in perspective and plant some seeds that will help us down the road as we continue to explore the Old Testament. This one is called ["Setting in Biblical Narrative."](#) It's only five minutes long. **Watch:** Video from the Bible Project from the "How to Read the Bible" series called ["Setting in Biblical Narrative."](#) (5 minutes 45 seconds).

#### GENEALOGIES IN CHAPTERS 10 & 11

Before we get to our main passage for today, we need to look at something that occurs in chapter 10 and again in chapter 11. In each of these chapters we have genealogies.

Chapter 10 contains a list of names which results in a list of nations. This is the genealogy of Noah and his three sons. You have the descendants of Japheth, the descendants of Ham, and the descendants of Shem. And notice what it says about each of these people groups or nations. Look at verse 5 and verse 20 and verse 31. Notice what it says: *"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).

#### THE TOWER OF BABEL STORY TUCKED IN BETWEEN

So, you have a list of nations in chapter 10, and then in chapter 11, you find Abraham's family tree starting at verse 10. But tucked in between these genealogies, you have a curious little story about the tower of Babel (it's only 9 verses long).

#### ONE LANGUAGE? CONTRADICTIONS

But 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 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! So, what's the deal? Most likely, they are trying to get our attention. They are trying to make a point.

#### ETIOLOGICAL ELEMENTS

This story has some elements of an etiology. It speaks about the origins of the different languages we find in the world. But, it also introduces the origins of a people who will become the enemy of Israel. Who created the tower of Babel? The Babelonians! AKA the Babylonians. These are the people who had sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and took the Israelites into exile. These people were bad people. And this story describes where they came from; something we also see in the genealogy in chapter 10.

#### A POLEMIC AGAINST THE BABYLONIANS

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.

## 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 for today 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. (for more on Shinar, look at the end of this document).

## THE NEPHELIM CONNECTION

Before we continue with this story, I want us to take a look at something we skipped 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)

<sup>1</sup> When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, <sup>2</sup> the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose. <sup>3</sup> Then the Lord said, "My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years." <sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. <sup>7</sup> 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." <sup>8</sup> 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 report 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?

## THE ISSUE AT STAKE: A GENESIS CONNECTION

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.

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

**11** Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. <sup>2</sup>And as they migrated from the east,<sup>a</sup> they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>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.” <sup>5</sup>The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” <sup>8</sup>So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. <sup>9</sup>Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused<sup>b</sup> the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

So, what is this story about? It’s about that little group who comes 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.

## COMPARING WORSHIP SPACES

But think about how this compares to the worship space of Israel. The tabernacle, the tent, which was the prototype for the temple, suggested that humans didn’t have to go up to be with God, but instead, God comes down to reside with them. Could it be that the Israelites told this story because of the arrogance and pride of the Babylonians who constructed towers to reach up to heaven so that they could get God’s attention?

## THE IRONY OF GOD’S RESPONSE

What is God’s response? 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) and the city was called Babel because (vs 9) the lord confused (Heb. *Babal*) the language of all the earth. And so, what we see is that the confusion of languages is a play on words “*balal*” is a pun on the Hebrew word “*babel*” and a commentary on the silly, stupid, and arrogant Babylonians.

The confusion of languages is a play on words. The Hebrew word for “confuse” is *balal*, which is a pun on the Hebrew word *babel*, as in, the Tower of Babel. This is also where our word “to babble” comes from. This story does not give a historical account of where languages came from. It is brilliant political satire as we move to the story of Abraham. Those silly, stupid, arrogant Babylonians.

## THE INVERSE OF GENESIS 6:1-4

And 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

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<sup>a</sup> Or *migrated eastward*

<sup>b</sup> Heb *balal*, meaning *to confuse*

the cosmic boundaries by *going up* to get to God's level. The Babylonians will later rebel against the true God when they sack God's house, the Temple in Jerusalem, and then carry Israel off to Babylon.

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."

**SHINAR** (PLACE) [Heb *šīn'ār* (שִׁנְעָר)]. A name for the region of Babylonia (Gen 10:10). It can be called either the "land of Shinar" or simply "Shinar." The first mention of the "land of Shinar" (Gen 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 Gen 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" (Gen 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" (Josh 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" (Isa 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 (Zech 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," where he placed them in the temple treasury of his own god (Dan 1:2).