

# Genesis 11:1-32

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## *Lesson 7*

### ***The Tower of Babel***

The Tower of Babel narrative is a necessary element in the telling of the story regarding the family of mankind. From the perspective of the Israelites, who are now in the wilderness, this story is critical, because they know enough about the world to recognize the diversity of languages and peoples. The story narrated here gives details that help them to understand how the world came to be what they see around them, both with regard to diversity of languages and also with how mankind had spread out so widely over the face of the earth.

The confusing of the languages is at least in part an element in explaining how humans spread out and separated themselves from each other. A consciousness of the discord and strife that would result from the disruption of communications is important. The explanation that this disruption of communication resulted as a consequence of the overarching and persistent pride that resulted in

downright defiance of God is important too. It is of note that the sinfulness described here is extremely widespread. This is an indication of the prevalence of this sinfulness amongst the whole of humanity. The postdiluvian generations appear to have learned nothing from the history that has gone on before and therefore they are destined to repeat the same mistakes that continue to elicit a response from God.<sup>1</sup>

The first part of this narrative is almost equally divided between the activities of humanity (1-4) and the activities of God (5-9). The intervention of God in exactly the middle verse signals the impending radical change that will ensue.<sup>2</sup>

**11 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.**

The emphasis that the “whole earth” holds a common language is a precursor to the fact that the “whole earth” is going to be involved in the offense against God. Belief in a

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<sup>1</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, in The JPS Torah Commentary series (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), pp. 80-81.

<sup>2</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 81.

single, common, universal language was a collective belief it seems, in ancient Sumer.<sup>3</sup> This narrative suggests that this single human language has descended into a singular language of disobedience.<sup>4</sup> *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* portrays this one common language as Hebrew, “the language of the Sanctuary” and also the language used by God in creating the world.<sup>5</sup> This is a common perception amongst the Jews.

**<sup>2</sup> And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.**

In the time after the flood mankind is initially portrayed as being nomadic (migratory). They settle in the area of what would later be called “Babylon.”<sup>6</sup>

**<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.**

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<sup>3</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, in *The Interpretation series* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, in *The Aramaic Bible series*, Vol. 1B (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 81.

The narrator here clearly understands the situation on the plain of lower Mesopotamia with the rarity of stone making it necessary to use molded bricks as a building material. The phrase, “with bitumen and burnt-brick” is a standard formula in Babylonian building inscriptions.<sup>7</sup> This knowledge of the building materials is a remarkable feature and indicates the authenticity of this account.

**<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.”**

Now the purpose of their construction becomes apparent, to build “a city” and “a tower.” The tower is to be high enough that its top is in the sky. The ambition to do this seems to be dominated by a desire to stop the scattering of people across the “face of the whole earth.” From a strictly human perspective it appears that building such a tower is audacious, but from the viewpoint of Genesis it is much more, it is sacrilege. The idea seems to be that they

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<sup>7</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 82.

are attempting to reach up, almost in challenge to God and attempting to restore relationship with him or perhaps assault heaven itself through their own human efforts.<sup>8</sup>

The suggestion is that the ambition of the people is to gain power and rights in such a manner as to commit another impious act before God.<sup>9</sup> It is likely that the tower they were seeking to build was a ziggurat, sort of a pyramid/mountain structure that served in cultures of this area after this time as a mythopoeic gate to heaven. The ziggurat of Larsa was named “The House of the Link Between Heaven and Earth and the most famous ziggurat of all, at Babylon, is named “The House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth.”<sup>10</sup>

The ziggurat culminated with a small shrine at its pinnacle, often painted with blue enamel to allow it to blend in with the celestial home of the gods.<sup>11</sup> In rabbinic

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<sup>8</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, in the Word Biblical Commentary Series (Waco TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), p. 239.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 240.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis A Commentary* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2001), p. 179.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis A Commentary*, p. 179.

tradition the idea that the Tower of Babel is part of a plot to wage war against God is being presented here.<sup>12</sup> At the very least in the attempt to “make a name” for themselves they are attempting to find significance and immortality in their own achievements. It is not the building of cities and structures that is banefully wrong in this context, but the human pride and security that is attached to the cities that God finds so repugnant and unacceptable.<sup>13</sup>

This same failing continues to be at the heart of so much about humanity that stubbornly refuses to allow God to be God and creature to be creature.

**<sup>5</sup>The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of man had built.**

Notice first of all in this section the perspective of God to this great tower that was to reach up to the heavens: He came down to see the great, high and mighty tower. From God’s perspective the tower is beneath Him and certainly no

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<sup>12</sup> “And they said: “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top *reaching towards* the heavens. Let us make ourselves *an idol at its top, and let us put a sword in its hand, and let it draw up battle formations against (him) before we are scattered from upon the face of the earth.*” Michael Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis A Commentary*, p. 179.

genuine threat to Him in any way (Isaiah 40:22). God's coming down to investigate is in no way making a statement with regard to God's omniscience. This investigation, like those before, depicts the nature of God in the narrative. God does not act capriciously or hastily; He carefully scrutinizes and then acts in the best interests of His children. This response would have perhaps seemed shocking to the Israelites who might have expected God to act swiftly with a burning anger. Just as they had come to expect from the stories that they will have been familiar with regarding the Egyptian and Mesopotamian gods.

**<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.**

The people take the God-given gift of language and use it in a fashion that is detrimental to their well-being rather than just allowing their deviant ambition to continue. God intercedes and once again life on earth becomes harder than it previously was because of the rebellious nature of

mankind. A part of this change is to stop another great gift of humanity from being utilized in the pursuit of things that are against God's will. Just as they were excluded from the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Life for their own protection: they now have a great gift removed from their grasp. That gift is the ability of humans to work together as a single unit. Doing so would give them power beyond their wisdom to use it properly. Communication is critical to working together as a team and without good communication unity is destroyed and in its place strife and division is sown.

**7 Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech."**

This verse provides some interesting aspects, note the use of the plural verbs. Some have seen this an indication that God invited the angels to come down and participate in this confusion of the languages.<sup>14</sup> It may also be the case that just as God used the plural at 1:26 the usage here is

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<sup>14</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 241. Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis A Commentary*, p. 180. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* 11:7 and Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 84.



very similar and for Christians this has been seen as a mark of the Triune God.

**<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.**

The result is that God now sends humanity across the earth and thwarts their efforts at self-aggrandizement.

They leave off their paltry efforts and move on.

**<sup>9</sup>Therefore it 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.**

Humanity sought to make a name for themselves and succeeded only in leaving the name “confusion” (Babel) over their efforts. There is a word play here in the Hebrew (*babel-balal*) that in some sense approximates the English “Babel-babble.” There is also a swipe here at the Mesopotamian notion of “Babel” as the “gate of god” which is how the Babylonian inhabitants interpreted this name. They conceived of Babylon as the navel of the earth and here it is being cast as the center of confusion and human

divisiveness as well as the cause of a great and disastrous alienation from God. Another aspect of this episode is that it is futile to resist the will of God and such resistance is not only futile but brings with it disastrous consequences.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Descendants of Shem***

***(1 Chr 1:17-27; Lk 3:34-36)***

***<sup>10</sup>These are the descendants of Shem. When Shem was one hundred years old, he became the father of Arpachshad two years after the flood;***

In the Tower of Babel episode the human race became estranged from God. In the previous section, in the Table of Nations, the genealogy of Shem received special attention among the descendants of Noah. These two elements now come together and the focus of the narrative narrows decisively to concentrate upon the family tree of Shem. This line will bring forth in its tenth generation Abraham, which will constitute a turning point in human history.<sup>16</sup>

This genealogy in many ways resembles that of

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<sup>15</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 84.

<sup>16</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 84.

chapter five, but there are some notable differences, such as the greatly shortened life spans of the postdiluvians, and the younger age at which they began having children. The advent of Terah is seen as a critical event and the text mentions his three sons because they are ultimately connected with Abraham.<sup>17</sup> Note in Luke 3:23-38 the pedigree of humanity. This is one of those parts of the Bible that most people either skip over completely or they read through very quickly and wonder what the point of all of this is?

Here in Luke the genealogy is extremely interesting. Much of the material is exactly what one might expect in this type of list. However, special note needs to be made of the ancestor of Adam which comes with the same formula as all those that precede it. The formula (τοῦ θεοῦ) is the same when indicating the relationship between Adam and God as it is between Adam and Seth. The indication appears to be that God is the Father of Adam.

There is no known parallel in the Old Testament or in

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<sup>17</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 85.

Rabbinic sources for a genealogy to begin or to end with God. It is therefore a possibility that Luke saw in the genealogy one way of understanding the ascription of the title Son of God to Jesus. This then would make God the father of Jesus Christ not only through the categories of pre-existence or physical (or metaphysical) relationship between Father and Son, but through the line of the Old Testament patriarchs and post-biblical historical figures. In this way Luke can historicize the title emphasizing the continuity of Jesus as the son with the Old Testament and with Judaism. This would then represent an example of Luke demonstrating a consciousness of the continuity of history in the midst of seeming discontinuity.<sup>18</sup>

This would be an indication that just as the church in one way is the successor of Israel, but on the other hand stands in the same line of redemptive history as does Judaism so also Jesus initiates a new epoch and yet derives significance, at least in part from the fact that he stands in

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<sup>18</sup> Marshall D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies with Special Reference to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus*, in *Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series*, Vol. 8 (Cambridge: The University Press, 1969), pp. 237-238.

historical continuity with the redemptive history of Israel and Judaism. This then serves the purpose of clarifying the meaning of the divine voice heard at the baptism of Jesus which proclaimed “you are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.”<sup>19</sup>

It also may be the case here that a part of Luke’s intent here is that the original intent that God always had for humanity is ultimately fulfilled through Jesus Christ who is a descendant from God through the intervention of the Holy Spirit, but also through the point of origin of humanity in Adam. It is in Jesus Christ that the chaos and disorder of man’s sinfulness is transformed into order and perfection. This order, and perfection, is what God had intended and envisioned for mankind from the beginning. Jesus becomes the second Adam and restores mankind, at least in his person, to the state of being God had intended for humanity which can now be described by the phrase “very good” that God used to describe his creation at 1:31.

### **11 and Shem lived after the birth of Arpachshad five**

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<sup>19</sup> Marshall D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies with Special Reference to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus*, p. 238.

**hundred years, and had other sons and daughters.**

**<sup>12</sup> When Arpachshad had lived thirty-five years, he became the father of Shelah;**

**<sup>13</sup> and Arpachshad lived after the birth of Shelah four hundred three years, and had other sons and daughters.**

**<sup>14</sup> When Shelah had lived thirty years, he became the father of Eber;**

**<sup>15</sup> and Shelah lived after the birth of Eber four hundred three years, and had other sons and daughters.**

**<sup>16</sup> When Eber had lived thirty-four years, he became the father of Peleg;**

**<sup>17</sup> and Eber lived after the birth of Peleg four hundred 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 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 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;**

**<sup>25</sup> and Nahor lived after the birth of Terah one hundred nineteen years, and had other sons and daughters.**

**<sup>26</sup> When Terah had lived seventy years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran.**

This verse marks a new section as is marked by the prefatory marker (אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹתַי) “these are the descendants” (generations) of Terah. This marker gives recognition that a historic process is now reaching a point of culmination of continuous divine selection that began with Adam’s sons. An epochal point in history has been reached and this marker, in this context, is an indicator of this. This formula serves as an introduction to the biography of Abraham.<sup>20</sup>

**<sup>27</sup> Now these are the descendants of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot.**

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<sup>20</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, pp. 86-87.



**<sup>28</sup> Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans.**

The fact that Haran died is essential information for understanding why Lot travels with Abram, who as the oldest brother will assumed the rights forfeited by his father when he died.

**<sup>29</sup> Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah.**

It is an interesting fact that the ancestry of Sarai is not given at this point, perhaps to avoid spoiling the surprise that will come later when it is revealed that she is Abram's half-sister.

**<sup>30</sup> Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.**

**<sup>31</sup> Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they**

**came to Haran, they settled there.**

**<sup>32</sup> The days of Terah were two hundred five years; and  
Terah died in Haran. <sup>21</sup>**

## **Synopsis**

The narrative here serves to explain a number of issues that would have been readily apparent to the Israelite people of the Exodus. These issues include such things as the diversity and variety of the nations with the many languages that they possess. It also includes at least a partial explanation for the way that humanity had spread out so widely over the face of the earth.

This section indicates that despite all the changes, and even the great flood, humanity still remains rebellious in nature and fails to acknowledge God in a manner that is in alignment with his purpose for creation. There is perhaps even an indication here of a direct attack on the authority over mankind. It is however, made clear that God can and

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<sup>21</sup> *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ge 11:1–32). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

does deal with such rebelliousness decisively and yet still with mercy. God causes their efforts to come to nothing but futility and confusion.

The genealogy given here continues to indicate the interest of God in particular individuals and will culminate at the end of the chapter with the name Abram. This then leads us into the main section of the book of Genesis, which deals with Abraham and the patriarchs of Israel.

## **Main Points**

- To explain the current situation of humanity with its diversity of languages.
- To demonstrate the futility of resisting or even challenging God.
- To introduce us to the main impetus of Genesis that begins with Abraham.