

Genesis 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Genesis 11. Now the whole earth had one language and the same words, and as people migrated from the east they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 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. And 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.

And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the children of men had built. 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. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech.

So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 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.

These are the generations of Shem. When Shem was 100 years old, he fathered Al-Pakshad, two years after the flood. And Shem lived after he fathered Al-Pakshad 500 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Al-Pakshad had lived 35 years, he fathered Shelah. And Al-Pakshad lived after he fathered Shelah 403 years and had other sons and daughters. When Shelah had lived 30 years, he fathered Eber.

[1 : 3 8] And Shelah lived after he fathered Eber 403 years and had other sons and daughters. When Eber had lived 34 years, he fathered Peleg. And Eber lived after he fathered Peleg 430 years and had other sons and daughters. When Peleg had lived 30 years, he fathered Ryu. And Peleg lived after he fathered Ryu 209 years and had other sons and daughters. When Ryu had lived 32 years, he fathered Serug. And Ryu lived after he fathered Serug 207 years and had other sons and daughters. When Serug had lived 30 years, he fathered Nahor. And Serug lived after he fathered Nahor 200 years and had other sons and daughters. When Nahor had lived 29 years, he fathered Terah. And Nahor lived after he fathered Terah 119 years and had other sons and daughters. When Terah had lived 70 years, he fathered Abram, Nahor and Haran. Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor and Haran. And Haran fathered Lot. Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans. 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. Now Sarai was barren. She had no child. 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. The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran. The story of the Tower of Babel is one of the most important stories in the Old Testament. It's an origin story for the nations, and provides a backdrop for the events that occur in the chapters that follow. These are the nations formed as an act of judgment, and later on we'll see a nation that's formed through an act of blessing. This occurs in the context of Nimrod's kingdom in the land of Shinar, and all the people of the world have the same language, they have the same words, they're seeking to avoid being scattered abroad. And so they're gathering together and building this great empire. They invent a new technology, a new way of firing bricks, and they burn these bricks thoroughly, and so they can build things on a far greater scale than they ever would have built before. It's worth thinking about the way that the action of building the city and the tower comes after the invention of the new technology. Often when we invent something new, it gives us a new sense of our power, and the urge to build something is almost an imperative arising from the existence of the technology. Once we have the power to do it, we must do it. And this dream, this hubristic vision of what man could make for themselves arises out of this new technology. How many times have we experienced that within our society, where we develop a new technology or new capacity, and we seek to express our pride and our power, and our ability to master the world for our wishes around that new technology and express through it. They build, on the one hand, a city, and on the other hand, a tower. These are two things, not just a tower.

The city is to gather all people together, a one world society, and the tower is to present this power structure, this ladder to heaven, as it were, this ability to commune with the gods, to have the power of the gods, this religious centralization as well. So the tower, with its tops in the heavens, relates the heavens to the earth. They want to make a name for themselves. Think about the situation that man faces. Man is faced with the struggle of death. Death has entered into the world, and death wipes away all the things that we build, like sandcastles on the beach as the tide comes in.

Nothing we build is left behind. And so what they want to build is something that will outlast them, something that will express their power, their name, their vigor as a society. And it will be something that outlast them. Even the power of death won't take this away. And God comes down, and he sees the city and the tower, which they have built. There is plural language used at this point. Come, let us go down. And there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech. Here, I think we should see, in the background, the divine council. This is not just God, but this is God surrounded by his angels, surrounded by the principalities and powers and the divine forces, and they are going to put humanity in their proper place. Again, let's think about part of the importance of this as God curbing mankind's intent to express its sinful, wicked will in a way that is unchecked. God is going to prevent that will from achieving its full intent. This is an act of grace, among other things. God does not want, human sinfulness to reach its full flourishing. And so he prevents human hubris from achieving its purposes. God scatters them upon the face of the earth. In part, this is fulfilling the intent that

God had for humanity, that they would fill the earth and subdue it. That it would not just be ruling in a particular centralized location and forming a one world government, but it would be a scattering abroad, forming many different peoples and niches and societies, and God divides them as a result. God confuses them by dividing their language so that they can't understand one another's speech.

[7 : 41] Now, often people see this as an instantaneous action. That's not necessarily the case. This may have occurred over many decades that the speeches of the different people started to become disparate and they become divided from each other, not as an instantaneous event so much as a gradual divergence. God disperses them across all the face of the earth and the place of the city is called Babel because God confused the languages there. And the name of Babel and other features of this text involve all sorts of punning and we'll maybe return to this at certain points as there are allusions back to it in the later story, not least as we get into the New Testament and we read something like the story of Pentecost. It calls back to this event in a number of different respects. From there we read the story of the generations of Shem. We've already read some of the people groups that arose from Shem in the previous chapter in the Table of the Nations, but now there is this genealogical succession from

Shem and ten generations. We've already seen ten generations coming from Adam to Noah and now we have another list of ten generations ending in Terah, Abram, Nahor and Haran. This list of people again gives the number of the years that the father had before he fathered the child and then how long he lived afterwards. And so it's similar to chapter 5 in that respect. The ten generations invites comparison with the events of chapter 5, not least in the fact that at the end we meet Terah with Abram, Nahor and Haran, much as we met Noah with Shem, Ham and Jetheth, a man with three sons. Haran, the son of Terah, dies when he is still in the land of Chaldeans. And Abram and Nahor take wives. Abram's wife is

Sarai and Nahor's wife is Milcah, the daughter of Haran. We should note here that Nahor is performing leveret marriage. By taking the daughter of Haran, his brother, he is seeking to raise up children for his dead brother, seeking to maintain his name within the earth. Sarai, some have suggested, is the same person as Isker, the suggestion being that Abram is also performing leveret marriage for the sake of his dead brother. Thinking about the brother who has died and the importance of Lot, the son of Haran, to Abram, maybe we could think the symmetry between this and the story of Ham and his son Canaan.

Whereas Shem and Jetheth acted to maintain their father's honour, their brother Ham and his son Canaan were judged on account of Ham's sin. In the case of Terah and his sons, we see a different situation.

Abram and Nahor act on behalf of the dead brother and Abram takes into his household Lot, the person who's playing in many ways a similar role to the character of Canaan. But yet there's a problem because Sarai is barren. She has no child. The story is set up for what follows next. Terah, even before Abram is called, sets out from Ur of the Chaldees and goes to Haran. And when they arrive in Haran, they settle there and he dies in Haran. Haran is a different word from the name of the son, Haran, but the similarity does invite some sort of connection between the two. If we think about what happened in the earlier part of the chapter, there are people trying to make a name for themselves, trying to make some name that endures beyond their death. And maybe we could see some connection Haran. And we've already seen in the story of Genesis, the naming of cities after particular persons so that their names would not die out. This is a way of making a name for themselves.

[12 : 01] But yet the story of Abraham is a story of a name being made, but yet it will be God that makes the name great. Abram is also one who's concerned to maintain the name of his dead brother as an act of charity. He takes in his nephew as a result of it. In the same way Nahor takes the daughter of his dead brother in order to raise up descendants for his dead brother. There seems then to be a different ethos that is seen at the end of this chapter as we saw at the beginning in the story of the Tower of Babel. One question. The story of Genesis contains a number of different accounts of human attempts to usurp God's place or to gain some sort of divine power through technology, through some other means.

How does the Tower of Babel present us with a paradigm for thinking about such projects within our own day and age?