

Genesis 11:1-9:
The Tale of the Babbling Brutes of Babel

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Genesis
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Behind the Text

Genesis 11:1-9, commonly referred to as 'The Tower of Babel,' should be read as the conclusion of the genealogy begun in 10:1, 'The Table of Nations.' The reader learns what caused the dispersal of the various people groups around the world. It also highlights the contrast between God's grace and God's judgment, focusing primarily on God's grace through diversity in 'The Table of Nations.'¹ Bill T. Arnold, in his commentary on Genesis, writes, "The best explanation is that these materials have been intentionally dischronologized in order to arrange them thematically. The purpose of the arrangement is to highlight a 'spread of sin, spread of grace' theme throughout Genesis 1-11..."² Furthermore, reading Genesis 11:1-9 in contrast to Genesis 10 highlights the sin of disobeying God's first command to humans to fill the earth and multiply, found in Genesis 1:28 and 9:1 and 7.³

Because this passage uses Yahweh when referring to God, it most likely comes from the "J" or "Yahwist" history of Israel. In using God's personal name, this passage shows the close connection and interest that God has with events happening on his creation.⁴

Finally, in examining the geography of both 'The Table of Nations' and 'The Tower of Babel,' it points to a possible location in Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates river.⁵

In the Text

11:1 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.⁶

This passage answers the question of how so many languages occurred after the flood. Noah and his family were the only surviving people; this would account for one language with the same words. Joseph Coleson, in his commentary on Genesis 1-11 asks, "If this statement was true of the first few generations after the flood, what happened to bring about the multitude of human languages since that time?"⁷

Some have suggested that one language means a universal trade language or a *lingua franca*.⁸ For example, English is commonly used in official business transactions all over the world today. If this was true for the time period, then the Sumerian or Akkadian languages could have been possibilities.⁹ Verse six, however, states that "they are one people." "One people" opposes the concept of multiple groups with distinct languages but only one trade language.¹⁰ A Sumerian tradition also states that there was a unified group of people with a single language.¹¹

11:2 And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled

1 Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 119.

2 Arnold, *Genesis*, 119.

3 Ibid., 120.

4 Ibid., 118.

5 Ibid., 120.

6 All scripture translations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

7 Joseph Coleson, *Genesis 1-11* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2012), 288.

8 Arnold, *Genesis*, 119.

9 Coleson, *Genesis 1-11*, 288.

10 Ibid.

11 Arnold, *Genesis*, 120.

there.

While the NRSV uses migrated, journeyed or set out are other translations. Coleson uses “in their journeying” and also suggests “wandering.”¹² The word comes from the Hebrew root, “nasa.” It means means to pull out or to pull up, to set out, or to journey. In Assyrian it has a similar root of “nisu,” meaning to set out or withdraw.¹³ Other scripture passages using the same root have translated it with varied meanings: set, journeyed, set out, left, moved, wander, plucked, uproot.¹⁴

This people group moved from one area to another, eventually settling in the area of the plain of Shinar. Considering the suggestion of “wanderings,” it might mean that they could have been a nomadic group before they settled in one area, perhaps following animal herds or searching for farmable land. Noah and his family landed in the mountains of Ararat.¹⁵ His descendents could have moved through these mountains following food sources before migrating south to Shinar. Although Noah planted a vineyard in Genesis 9:20, which suggests the idea of staying in one area over several years and the passing on of a pre-flood farming knowledge to his descendents, he also lived in a tent. It was a non-permanent home which meant that he and his family most likely moved around the area.

“The east” demonstrates the author's perspective; the author of this passage would have most likely been from the area of Canaan and Israel. Shinar, and the mountains of Ararat where Noah's descendents would have journeyed from, were east of Canaan and Israel.¹⁶

Shinar corresponds to Mesopotamia. Archaeological discoveries of one of the earliest civilizations point to the Sumerians.¹⁷ These include traces of prehistoric village culture and wheel-made pottery. Discoveries also include the first example of writing on clay tablets from around 3100 B.C., recording trade of grain, beer, and livestock.¹⁸ This trade, and especially recording it in written form, indicate what could be an established settlement in Mesopotamia in the late fourth millennium B.C.

Moreover, some of the earliest accounts of the Gilgamesh stories date as far back as the late fourth millennium B.C. in Mesopotamia and Sumeria.¹⁹ These include stories of Utnapishtim, whose narrative closely resembles Noah during the flood. If Noah's descendants carried his story with them as they migrated to this area, finally settling in the fourth millennium B.C., some of the details may have changed over time with developments in Sumerian culture, the Gilgamesh Epic, and the Enuma Elish.

If Babel corresponds to a city in ancient Mesopotamia, it would make sense considering that Babel is the first established settlement mentioned in scripture after the flood. Mesopotamia is commonly referred to as the cradle of civilization. Shinar's description as a plain supports this possibility, in addition to Mesopotamia's geographical position southeast of the mountains of

12 Coleson, *Genesis 1-11*, 288.

13 Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (electronic ed.) (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000).

14 Thomas, R. L. (1998). *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek dictionaries : Updated edition* (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, Inc).

15 Coleson, *Genesis 1-11*, 233.

16 *Ibid.*, 288.

17 Paul Lawrence, *The Ivp Atlas of Bible History* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 22.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, Fully rev. and expanded 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2006), 21.

Ararat. Because of its resources, a wandering or migrating group of people might be encouraged to finally settle once discovering the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. It could be the case that Noah's descendants may have been the earliest Sumerians.

Archaeological, geographical, and literary evidence all suggest that Shinar is Mesopotamia.

With people settling in one place, they disobeyed God's command to Noah and his family in Genesis 9:1: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth."²⁰ God repeated it again in 9:7, as if to stress its importance to Noah. It was also the first command given to the first humans in Genesis 1:28: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." With the first humans on earth and with the first humans after flood, God desired them to spread all over the world and make use of its abundant resources. The people, however, opposed God's gift.

Allen S. Maller, in an article for the "Jewish Bible Quarterly" speculates on why they may have disobeyed God's command. He writes,

In the aftermath of a catastrophically destructive flood, many generations of humans were fearful and anxiety-ridden. They felt very weak and vulnerable; and they only wanted to huddle together in one place. Humanity did not want curiosity to lead people to explore other locations and thus promote change and development.²¹

11:3 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.

Coleson translates the beginning of this verse as "each man to his neighbor," stating that it "...hints at participatory democracy, both in the process of decision-making, and in the joining of the agreed-upon action(s)."²² In this verse, readers might see one of the earliest forms of local government as people recognize the power of making decisions and working together for a building project to benefit the city.

Burning bricks and using mortar demonstrates the engineering technology of early civilization after the flood. The people of this settlement used waterproof, fired, kiln-dried bricks, rather than sun-dried bricks; fired bricks would last a long time. The people who engineered the ziggurats in southern Mesopotamia used fired bricks for the outside of the structures.²³ These were also common building materials and techniques specifically used in Babylonia; the *Enuma Elish* discusses brick making for Marduk's temple.²⁴ One author writes,

Because the alluvial plains they occupied lacked the granite and limestone used by Egyptian builders, the Sumerians mass-produced clay bricks, typically baked and glazed, with which they constructed massive walls around their cities, which also featured large temple complexes honoring the city's patron deity.²⁵

20 Coleson, *Genesis 1-11*, 289.

21 Allen S. Maller, "The City of Babel and Its Tower," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (July 1, 2012).

22 Coleson, *Genesis 1-11*, 289.

23 *Ibid.*, 290

24 Arnold, *Genesis*, 120.

25 Stephen L. Harris and Robert L. Platzner, *The Old Testament: an Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 2008), 44.

After the flood, enough time has passed for a migrating, possibly nomadic, people to not only settle in the area of Mesopotamia, but also learn how to engineer buildings, large structures, and cities with quality bricks and mortar. A primitive government, trade systems, writing, and even a somewhat coherent, although pagan, religious system, may have been established by the time these building projects started. Once settled in Shinar, this could range from a few generations to several hundred years or longer.

11:4 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.”

Tower, as the Hebrew noun *mig-dal*, occurs commonly throughout scripture. It is not often considered in the sense of a religious monument, which is a possibility in 11:4, but rather it is commonly translated as a military or city fortification.²⁶ Judges 9:51 reads, “But there was a strong tower within the city, and all the men and women and all the lords of the city fled to it and shut themselves in; and they went to the roof of the tower.”

However, it is not exclusive to a military or city fortification, but it simply alludes to a high structure. For example, in Nehemiah this is considered a baking tower (3:11, 12:38) and also a raised platform such as a pulpit or stage (8:4). In Song of Solomon, it is considered a bed (5:13) and also compared to the neck (4:4, 7:5) as well as breasts (8:10).²⁷ In the context of Genesis 11:1-9, and considering ancient Sumerian culture, it could be a religious structure, such as a ziggurat which typically had a shrine dedicated to a deity at the top.²⁸ Saying that they desired to have the tower's “top in the heavens” means that its purpose might be a religious building where they will attempt to meet the divine.

The people who were going to build this tower also wanted to draw attention to themselves through its height, another possible meaning of having “its top in the heavens.” The Willis Tower in Chicago and the Empire State Building in New York are known all over the world. These are dwarfed by the famous Burj Khalifa in the UAE, almost twice the size of the Willis Tower. Nonetheless, the cities which built these structures have succeeded in making a name for themselves. In the ancient world, cities also used the size of their fortifications and structures to show their might. Although it was over one and half millennia later, Mycenae in ancient Greece was known for its large 'cyclopean' walls.²⁹ Coleson suggests that to have 'its top in the heavens' was probably an exaggeration; still, they wanted it to be a very tall building.³⁰

It most likely had a dual purpose. While it could have been a religious structure, the people who built it also made a name for themselves through its height. Even today, various religious groups might try to build the most beautiful church, temple, or mosque in an attempt to draw attention to themselves while also having it be a place of worship. St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City and the Church of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ in St. Petersburg, Russia are two world famous and beautiful churches.

However, in building the city and the tower they have selfish and prideful purposes.

26 Brown, *Lexicon*.

27 Ibid.

28 Harris, *The Old Testament*, 45.

29 William R. Biers, *The Archaeology of Greece: an Introduction*, 2 ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 67.

30 Coleson, *Genesis 1-11*, 291.

Ultimately, and whether or not it is a pagan religious building, they are doing it for themselves.³¹ If it is a religious temple, they are making it so that they can try to reach the divine on their own power, rather than humbling themselves before God. Coleson states, "...this statement of intention nevertheless stands as an unabashed expression of bravado, the opposite of responsiveness to and reliance upon God."³²

If the tower mentioned is a pagan ziggurat temple, it also shows how quickly a group of people turns from the true God and to their own idols. The theme of God's people forgetting his truth is common throughout scripture. Perhaps it was not so much insubordination to God's commandment, as it was simply forgetting God's commandment and looking to themselves instead; many generations had probably passed since God gave Noah his command. Ultimately, whether they forgot or it was direct disobedience, they still did not fulfill God's command.

Moreover, creating enough fired bricks for building both a city and a tower would require the facilities to consistently make bricks. Again, this points to an advancing settlement in Mesopotamia that could have been there anywhere from a few generations to over hundreds of years. Maller writes, "Manufacturing hundreds of thousands of bricks for very large building projects led to the first mass production factories."³³

11:5 The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built.

God assessed the city and tower building projects of the people. He wanted to see what they were doing on a very familiar level. The writer uses the personal name of God, Yahweh, demonstrating that God has a personal interest and connection to the people of the earth.³⁴

Coleson states, "Here, we may see (evaluate) God's move as an act of justice. God descended to investigate and evaluate at first hand, as it were, the activities on earth below that had drawn the attention of heaven above. No one would be able to accuse God of acting without first knowing the facts."³⁵ God considered all the data as a judge hears a case and reviewed the information before making a decision. Here, like the placement of 'The Table of Nations' before 'The Tower of Babel,' there is a positive focus on God's grace, both in evaluating a situation as well as being present in his creation.

11:6 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 will now be impossible for them.

God summarizes his evaluations in this verse. God recognizes the power people have when they work together for a common purpose; he also recognizes that when it is based in a selfish nature, no matter how noble the project, working together may result in great evil. God knows that apart from him, humanity is sinful, selfish, and prideful. God has already seen the evil results of this sin in the world before the flood.

The projects that they accomplish, although they may be impressive, will lead to evil unless they follow God's commands. Coleson states that a united humanity "would deny itself

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Maller, "The City of Babel and Its Tower."

34 Arnold, *Genesis*, 118.

35 Coleson, *Genesis 1-11*, 292.

nothing and could be denied by no one or nothing else” and that “they had to be stopped, for the good of all the earthly creation.”³⁶ Arnold writes that “The problem is not geography, but humanity itself.”³⁷

11:7 Come, let us go down, and confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.”

God decides on what his judgment will be; he will cast them all over the earth. This accomplishes two goals. First, God finally forces humanity to fulfill his command already given three times in Genesis. Second, God prevents a united, sinful humanity from traveling further down the road to evil once again.

11:8 So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

God enacts his judgment on humanity, enforcing his command. In one way or another, his desire for the world will be fulfilled; he asked the humans multiple times to follow his command, and after they disobeyed by building a united settlement, God forced the result he originally wanted. He scatters them all over the world.

In Genesis 10, the reader sees the various groups that God has scattered them into and where they have gone. Based on the geographical center of the rise of the Assyrian empire, Asshur, one of Shem's sons, probably stayed in the vicinity of Mesopotamia. Additionally, Ashur was a city in central Mesopotamia.³⁸

Finally, if this tower was a ziggurat dedicated to a pagan god, God's actions, at least at this point in history, put a halt to pagan worship. Pagan worship, although squashed like a single annoying gnat here, rises infernally multiple times over throughout the world's history.

11:9 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 all the face of all the earth.

While Arnold suggests that the origin and original meaning of the earliest form of the word, *babil(a)*, are unknown, Akkadians understood *bab-ilim* to mean 'Gate of God.'³⁹ Coleson translates the Akkadian as “The Gate(way) of/to God.”⁴⁰ The Sumerians also accepted this idea of a gate or gateway of God as a meaning for the city's name.⁴¹

Babel, however, does not mean to confuse. The writer uses a play on words to emphasize the irony of the location of where people met God, although not in the way they desired, and what happened after they encountered God.⁴² The Hebrew root for confused is *balal*, meaning to mingle, mix, confuse, or confound.⁴³

There is debate over whether Babylon is the same city as Babel, possibly built on top of

36 Ibid., 293.

37 Arnold, *Genesis*, 118.

38 Lawrence, *Ivp Atlas*, 18, 91.

39 Arnold, *Genesis*, 121.

40 Coleson, *Genesis 1-11*, 294.

41 Arnold, *Genesis*, 121.

42 Ibid.

43 Thomas, *Hebrew-Aramaic*.

the incomplete city's ruins. Arnold writes that the tower written about in Genesis 11:1-9 may be the temple or ziggurat of Marduk, called Esagil or "The House of the Uplifted Head." This was located close to another temple or ziggurat called Etemenanki, or "The House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth."⁴⁴ Others suggest that the tower in this passage is Etemenanki.⁴⁵ Both were temples in Babylon. However, verse eight states that construction stopped at the city and the tower after God scattered the people. The tower of Genesis 11:1-9 might be a predecessor to these Babylonian ziggurats.

While this city in Genesis 11:1-9 may be one of the earliest settlements of the Sumerian civilization, or even a pre-cursor to the Sumerian civilization, it is unknown if Babel is buried somewhere underneath Babylon. However, the root name and meaning suggests that it could be the same city. Archaeologists today would have a difficult time excavating through what is most likely over 5,000 years of history in Babylon before reaching a possible first city foundation and Babel. There has also been a rise in the water table since ancient times; the ruins of an uncompleted city and tower, whether laying underneath Babylon or somewhere else in Mesopotamia, would be further deteriorated and more difficult to discover.⁴⁶

In Egyptian history there is also an allusion to the idea that one of the elevated gods of their pantheon, Aten, scattered the people of the world with different languages. This inscription, part of the "Hymn to the Aten," was discovered at the tomb of Ay. It was built by Akhenaten who was Pharaoh from 1353-1335 B.C. The inscription reads, "They have separate languages, and varied natures as well. Their skins are different, for you have so distinguished the peoples."⁴⁷ Akhenaten ruled while the Israelites were living in Egypt, which could have been from the 17th or 16th century B.C to the 13th century B.C. While it would be interesting to speculate on whether Israelite theology and history influenced Egyptian or Akhenaten's theology at all during this time, there is hardly any evidence to support it even though the Hymn to the Aten has similarities to Israel's Yahweh. Genesis 41, though, hints that the Pharaoh during the time of Joseph, although he could be one of the foreign rulers of Egypt, may have recognized the true God at work.

The beginning of Exodus skips several hundred years of Israelite history in Egypt and a lot is unknown. Akhenaten's attempt to change the structure of the Egyptian pantheon did not last. Tutenkhamen reversed to the previous pantheon in 1333 B.C.⁴⁸ (OT Parallels 275).

From the Text

Building the city or the tower in and of themselves was not evil, but the people's purposes behind the construction revealed sin, selfishness, pride, and idolatry. These things can result in evil, especially with a united people. By scattering the people, God demonstrated grace. The people building this city and tower were not rooted in God's goodness; they were rooted in themselves.

God gave clear instruction to humanity to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. God gave humanity an amazing gift of a beautiful creation with great resources. Humanity did not listen; in this case, they banded together and attempted to build a city and most likely a pagan

44 Arnold, *Genesis*, 120.

45 Paul Bahn, *Dictionary of Archaeology*, Abridged ed. (n.p.: Penguin Books, 2004), 50.

46 Lawrence, *Ivp Atlas*, 19.

47 Matthews, *Old Testament Parallels*, 278.

48 *Ibid.*, 275.

monument. God has seen the evil that can occur in humanity when people are united for sinful purposes; he did not want to see evil repeat itself.

Kenneth Collins, in discussing John Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace, writes, "...Wesley describes 'the braking effect' that prevenient grace (and providence) has on human evil, in this instance, with respect to the hatred directed against the sons and daughters of God."⁴⁹ Randy Maddox states that "this doctrine deals with God's very first activity in fallen human lives" and allows for "...a renewed possibility of basic knowledge of 'divine things.'"⁵⁰ Through God's actions at Babel, the unified group of post-flood humans saw God and his grace. Ironically though, it was not exactly how they wanted to encounter God.

In God's grace, he gave the gift of languages.⁵¹ While this initially prevented people from coming together and kept them scattered over the earth, it also provides opportunity to learn to love and know people. When we learn languages, we learn to appreciate people's cultures. In the process, we celebrate diverse community with God's people all over the world. Maller states, "This geographical expansion was meant to promote linguistic, cultural and religious diversity, which in turn greatly enriched humanity's cultural, artistic and spiritual productivity."⁵²

God's judgment and actions in Genesis 11:1-9 are acts of love for his people and his creation. He forced humanity to finally accept the gift of the whole earth. Moreover, the reader learns that even when people disobey God's commands, God still brings about his will. God asks us to participate and work in his kingdom out of love; we can say yes and experience God's love, grace, and gifts. However, if we say no, we should remember that God will bring about his will for the kingdom anyway, possibly with unforeseen consequences.

Nonetheless, the theological and etiological lessons of Genesis 11:1-9 are most important, while also reminding humans of our own nature. While the city may have been named "Gate of God," it might be more appropriately called "Gate of God's Justice," especially for a people living in sin, selfishness, pride, and disobedience to God's direct command to fill the earth. It might also be called "Gate of God's Grace," considering the evil that God may have prevented there through the scattering of people, forcing people to make use of God's gift of the whole earth, and giving humanity the gift of languages.

49 Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 80.

50 Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1994), 88.

51 Coleson, *Genesis 1-11*, 295.

52 Maller, "The City of Babel and Its Tower."

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