

### The Tower of Babel

Chapter 11 is the last before the introduction of Abraham. It begins with the tower of Babel, which is yet another instance of God overruling the plans of men, so that his own purposes are served.

We begin by asking where and when this took occurred. The place is clear, at least as to name: *As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there* (11:2).<sup>1</sup> As for when, enough time has passed for there to be at least one migration after the landing of the ark.

To go further, we need to compare this with chapter 10. Here, we read: *Now the whole world had one language and a common speech* (11:1). Previously, we have ... *the maritime peoples spread out into their territories by their clans within their nations, each with its own language* (10:5). These statements are consistent only if the tower of Babel occurred before at least some of the Table of Nations.<sup>2</sup> That is, the two chapters are not in chronological order. We have seen this before as early in chapter 1, when despite the use of “days” to organize the events of creation, the events are clearly not all given in chronological order. In both cases, there is no indication that this troubled early readers, who apparently had different expectations about such matters.

The picture of life in subsequent verses is entirely consistent with life in southern Mesopotamia in early times. The region is singularly lacking in quarries, and so mud brick is the natural building material. Firing the bricks (*bake them thoroughly*, 11:3) was apparently a costly and time-consuming step, and so this was done only for special purposes. Again, archeology can confirm that petroleum products were used at least to cement the foundations of buildings (*tar for mortar*).

*Come, let us build ourselves a city* (11:4). We need to remind ourselves what was meant by a city at that time. The society was agrarian, and so most people would have lived outside the city, where they could work the land. For the most part, the city buildings would have been communal structures such as granaries, rather than residences. And there would typically be a tower. Mesopotamia is known for its *ziggurats*, pyramidal structures roughly like the Egyptian pyramids, though differing in size, steepness, and function.<sup>3</sup> As far as function goes, as best we know from contemporary documents, they were not used by men at all – they were intended to accommodate the gods, as a kind of a platform for them. (The temples in which to worship the gods were placed next door.) It has been suggested that the first settlers of the area came from more mountainous regions, and were recreating the mountain tops that would be the natural dwelling place of gods. This is certainly consistent with the migrants starting out in mountainous Ararat. Moreover, a platform for the gods could with justice be called *a tower that reaches to the heavens* – even though modern readers would certainly form a quite different mental picture.

We now come to the stated purpose, *so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth*. In response, *the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building* (11:5). We note the deliberate irony here: the builders intended to reach to the heavens, but God needs to come down to earth to see what they had done. Taken at face value, God’s response is that this would be but the first of many such ventures: *If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them* (11:6). However, the phrasing, and even more God’s stated intent to oppose the plans of the people (11:7), make it clear that this prospect was viewed unfavorably. Since no explicit reason for this unfavorable judgment is stated, three suggestions have been made:

- The problem is pride: the people want to make a name for themselves, by means of *a tower that reaches to the heavens*. There may even be an element of deliberate confrontation with God.
- The problem is disobedience. The people want to avoid being scattered, contrary to God’s instructions to be fruitful and multiply and – this is the critical point – fill the earth.
- The problem is the ziggurat itself. It is an inherently pagan structure – God will provide his own instructions for places that he will grace with his presence, such as the tabernacle and the temple.

All three reasons are plausible on their face (and not necessarily mutually exclusive), and objections can be raised to all of them. We are left with having to say that we do not know for certain why, specifically, God scattered the people, only that it was in service of his own purpose.

<sup>1</sup> Shinar is of uncertain location, but it is likely somewhere in Mesopotamia.

<sup>2</sup> There is some indication that it might have taken place in the time of Peleg (10:25).

<sup>3</sup> The tall circular towers often shown in old illustrations of the tower of Babel would almost certainly have been beyond any building technology of the time.

At this point, we should deal with a topic that has come up before: the use of plurals in God's statements. "*Come, let us go down...*" (11:7). This way of speaking appears several times in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, and each time it raises the same concerns. Some people see this as a remnant of a polytheistic understanding of God, taken from earlier accounts and imperfectly removed. Others see this as an indirect reference to the trinity, or perhaps to an angelic host. My own view is that this is mostly a reflection of Hebrew grammar. The Hebrew word customarily used for God, *Elohim*, is formally a plural, though it is not always used that way. As in many matters, we do not have certainty on all points here. On the other hand, these first chapters are, among other things, an emphatic rejection of polytheism and the associated origin myths, so we can be quite confident that there is no half-hidden polytheism lurking in the text.

God's intervention is, in a sense, indirect. Rather than explicitly enforce the dispersal of the people of the city, he *confuse[d] their language so they will not understand each other* (11:7). No indication of the reason for this indirect choice is stated. It was, however, effective: *the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city* (11:8).

Although the popular picture of this event is an instantaneous change,<sup>4</sup> nothing in the text indicates the time scale. Indeed, if we picture a slow process, it accords very well with what we know of language, specifically the tendency of languages to break up into dialects that are sometimes mutually incomprehensible.<sup>5</sup> This would certainly make cooperative efforts, such as building a tower, less likely.

Verse 9 also brings up a peripheral matter common in Genesis. The NIV footnote states the matter succinctly: *Babel* sounds like the Hebrew for *confused*. Understood this way, "That is why it was called Babel" is unexceptional. We have commented in earlier matters that such connections are particularly helpful to listeners,<sup>6</sup> because it helps to fix important names in the mind with the proper associations. However, to a modern reader such an assertion sounds like a statement of etymology, and as etymology it is at best doubtful. The conclusion is not that Genesis is unreliable, but that it cannot be pressed to give information about matters that it was never intended to treat.

We note in passing that this confusion of language provides a context for the multiplicity of languages mentioned in chapter 10. It is my belief that this was deliberate.

### From Shem to Abram

Chapter 10 presents the lineage of all three of Noah's sons, and emphasizes that of Shem by treating it last. Chapter 11 confirms that this line is the principle interest of the narrative by taking it up again. 11:10-17 repeat the material of 10:22-25, but with considerably more detail. This takes us down to Peleg,<sup>7</sup> where we find the branch of the family line that was omitted in chapter 10. This genealogy, starting with Reu (11:18), continues down to Terah.

As with Adam and Noah, Terah has three named sons: *Abram, Nahor and Haran* (11:26, 27). Note that Nahor shares a name with an ancestor (11:22), and plays no further role in the story. Haran dies, but his son Lot will play an important role in Abram's life. We are in the privileged position of knowing in advance that Abram is the son of interest, but there are indications already. One of these is the specific mention that his wife *Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive* (11:30). This is obviously a matter of importance in that society, the more so here in the context of giving family lines. Again, because we already know the story, we know that being childless is in fact central to the narrative.

Chapter 10 spoke of migrations (10:5) in a very broad way. Here, we see individual people involved in migrating. Terah and some of his family planned to migrate *from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan* (11:31). Chapter 11 tells of only the first leg of this move, from Ur, in southern Mesopotamia, to Harran, in northwest Mesopotamia.<sup>8</sup> The text makes clear that they stayed at this intermediate point for a considerable length of time: *when they came to Harran, they settled there* (11:31).

Abram does, eventually, move on to Canaan – but that is another story.

<sup>4</sup> For an extended dramatic (and comic) picture of this kind of sudden intervention, see the banquet scene in C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, chapter 16.

<sup>5</sup> Modern communications, starting with radio, and modern transportation work against this tendency. It has been said that previously in rural England, a man could not buy boots in the next town (because his dialect would not have been understood).

<sup>6</sup> Note that there would be far more early hearers than early readers.

<sup>7</sup> Note that the sons of Peleg's brother Joktan are given, but not the sons of Peleg.

<sup>8</sup> This was on the direct path to Canaan. The straight-line route would have gone through deserts, and was quite impracticable.