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THE TOWER OF BABEL

Genesis 11:1 – 9

In Genesis 10:1-11:9, we have the Table of Nations, and also the event that led to their dispersion. Seventy families are named in the Table of Nations, all descendants of the three sons of Noah. God had commanded the families of Japheth, Ham, and Shem to be scattered throughout the earth. They were scattered, but not because they obeyed God.

Now, this narrative is a literary arrangement, not a chronological one. Moses did not write according to time, but to a theme. In Genesis 10, he gives us the broad survey of the scattered nations. Then here in Genesis 11:1-9, he returns to the event that led to their scattering. This means that sequentially, the incident at the Tower of Babel occurred before the nations were dispersed.

The scattering of the nations is also implied in Genesis 10:25, where the “earth divided” was not an earthquake, but the division of the human race into nations, and also the division of the Semites into the elect line and the non-elect. Eber had two sons, Peleg and Joktan. Through Peleg, Eber became the father of the Hebrew race, which are the Israelites. The non-elect are the descendants of Joktan, which are the Arab tribes.

There are two parentheses in this section. The first parenthesis is Genesis 10:8-12, and Genesis 11:1-9 is the second one. Both are related. The one in Genesis 10 introduces us to Nimrod, whereas this one in Genesis 11 informs us of Nimrod’s leadership that brought the division and dispersion of the nations. For the first main point of our study, we must return to Genesis 10:8-12, which is about…

I. The Rebel of Babel.

Genesis 10:8-12 “8 And Cush begat Nimrod: he began to be a mighty one in the earth. 9 He was a mighty hunter before the LORD: wherefore it is said, Even as Nimrod the mighty hunter before the LORD. 10 And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. 11 Out of that land went forth
Asshur, and builded Nineveh, and the city Rehoboath, and Calah, 12 And Resen between Nineveh and Calah: the same is a great city.”

Nimrod was the son of Cush, the descendant of Ham (Genesis 10:6). Nimrod had the reputation as a “mighty hunter,” not of game animal but as the conqueror of men.

The name Nimrod means “we shall rebel.” Nimrod was the first empire-builder in history, and Babel was the first city in his kingdom. In Genesis 10:10-12 we have the names of the other cities that Nimrod built. According to Micah 5:6, Asshur or Assyria belonged in “the land of Nimrod.” Nimrod was the forefather of the future Assyrian and Babylonian empires that invaded the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah.

The kingdom of Nimrod was located in “the land of Shinar.” Shinar is in Mesopotamia. Nimrod built his cities as the monuments of human pride. Babel was built to defy God, not to glorify God.

Nimrod the “mighty hunter” had characteristics similar to Cain. After God cursed Cain to become a fugitive and a nomad for the murder of Abel his brother, Cain wandered for a time and then he built a city, which he named after his son. Before Nimrod, the Cainite civilization built cities and were skilled in metallurgy. Like Cain and Nimrod, Nebuchadnezzar, the latter king of Babylon, brimmed with pride and boasted of his own greatness for the city he built (Daniel 4:30). God immediately judged Nebuchadnezzar for his pride by making him grovel in the grass like a beast.

Now we come to Genesis 11 about…

II. The Rebellion at Babel.

Genesis 11:1 “And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.”

Since Noah and his family were the only survivors of the worldwide Flood, the entire human race spoke only one language. The words translated “one language” means “one lip,” and “one speech” means “one vocabulary.”

According to Genesis 9:28, Noah lived another 350 years after the Flood. The preacher of righteousness would have continued to teach his sons and their children about God the Creator, and how that God judged the earth by destroying the people that lived in great wickedness. Noah’s sacrifices to God on the altar also demonstrated to his family that an atonement was needed for their sins because of their common descent from Adam. They would all have understood Noah because of their common language.

However, the Flood did not remove the sin nature of humanity. Their memories of the Flood judgment also began to dim. In Genesis 9, Noah sinned when he became drunk with wine. Ham, his youngest son, sinned when he shamed Noah for his drunkenness and nakedness. Now after migrating from the mountains of Ararat where the ark came to rest, the descendants of Noah will rebel against God.

Genesis 11:2 “And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there.”
The phrase “journeyed from the east” does not mean that the people travelled west. Rather, they travelled eastward. How do we know? We know because Ararat is in the region of Turkey and Armenia, and the land of Shinar is located southeast of Ararat.

Note the theology in the geography. Eastward is often depicted in the book of Genesis as the wrong direction, the direction that points to trouble, rebellion, and sin against God. When God expelled Adam and Eve from Eden, He placed the cherubim as guards at the entrance in “the east of the garden” (Genesis 3:24). When Lot left Abraham, he “journeyed east” toward Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 13:10-12). Abraham’s sons by his concubine Keturah were sent away “eastward, unto the east country” (Genesis 25:6). Then when Jacob fled his home country, he went to “the land of the people of the east” (Genesis 29:1). Now we see the post-Flood people again heading east.

When the people arrived in Shinar, they stopped and “dwelt there.” Shinar is on a flat plain in a valley in Mesopotamia. The Talmud calls this place “the valley of the world.” The people decided to set up home in this place.

Genesis 11:3-4  “3 And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for morter. 4 And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

There were no significant number of stones in Shinar, so the people used the asphalt or bitumen in the area to make bricks for their construction. They used the bricks to build their city and a tower. This was a gigantic project.

Why did they build the city and the tower? They were united in rebellion against God. God gave the people a clear and simple command to be scattered throughout the earth, but they refused to obey. Instead, the people followed their leader, Nimrod, and they said to God, “We shall rebel.”

They gave three reasons for their rebellion. First, they built a tower that the top “may reach unto heaven.” A second reason for the people to build the city and the tower is to make a name for themselves. Instead of giving glory to God, they sought glory for themselves. The third reason for the city and the tower is fear. The people were afraid of being scattered.

There are two views about the building of this tower. Was this a watchtower and a fortress for the defence of the city? Since the city was built on a plain, the tower served as a lookout for potential enemies. But if the tower was not built for defence, was it built for religion? The Hebrew word translated “tower” (“migdal”) does not have to be religious in nature, but the context and the history of Mesopotamia point toward religion.

Let me offer three reasons why the tower of Babel was built for a religious purpose.

First, the Bible traces all false religions to Babylon, and Babel is early Babylon. According to Henry Morris, “The essential identity of the various gods and goddesses of Rome, Greece, India, Egypt, and other nations with the original pantheon of the Babylonians is well established. [In fact], Nimrod himself was apparently later deified as the chief god (‘Merodach’ or ‘Marduk’) of Babylon.” (Quoted by James Montgomery Boice, Genesis: An Expositional Commentary, p. 422).
The second reason why the tower was built for religion is its height. We read in Genesis 11:4 that the desire of the people was to build a tower “whose top may reach unto heaven.” In ancient times, the people worshipped their deities in the hills or mountains, in the belief that the high ground put them closer to their gods. The land of Shinar in Mesopotamia was flat ground, so they built ziggurats as substitutes for the hills and the mountains. The tower of Babel was the prototype ziggurat.

Ziggurats were common structures in the important cities of ancient Mesopotamia. A ziggurat is a temple tower, similar in profile to the step pyramid of Egypt. Like the pyramids, the ziggurat was a four-square structure. Instead of sloping sides, the ziggurat was built with a succession of terraces, each smaller than the one below. Access to each terrace was by stairways or ramps. On the topmost terrace, an altar was set up for worship.

In the Babylon of Nebuchadnezzar, there was a seven-storey temple tower known as E-temen-anki. This structure had a four square base of ninety metres, and its height was also ninety metres. This structure was one of the wonders of the ancient world.

The third reason involves astrology. Astrology, which is the study of the zodiac, originated in Babylon. The Chaldeans, who were inhabitants of Babylon, first developed the zodiac by dividing the sky into sections and giving meanings to each on the basis of the stars that are found there. A person’s destiny is said to be determined by whatever section of the sky or “sign” he is born under. The Magi or wise men that followed the star to Bethlehem to look for the infant Messiah were astrologers, and they came from Mesopotamia.

From Babylon, the practice of astrology passed to the Egyptians. The Egyptians built their pyramids according to certain mathematical relationships to the stars. The Sphinx also has astrological significance. It has the head of a woman, symbolizing Virgo, the virgin, and the body of a lion, symbolizing Leo. Virgo is the first sign of the zodiac, Leo the last. So the Sphinx (which incidentally means “joining” in Greek) is the meeting point of the zodiac, the first and the last. The priests of Egypt believed that their nation was the starting point of the earth in relation to the zodiac.

Without a doubt, the Israelites who lived in Egypt for over four hundred years knew about astrology from the Egyptians. But God warned His people against astrology. For example, we read in…

Leviticus 19:31 “Regard not them that have familiar spirits, neither seek after wizards, to be defiled by them: I am the LORD your God.”

Deuteronomy 18:10-14 “10 There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, 11 Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. 12 For all that do these things are an abomination unto the LORD: and because of these abominations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee. 13 Thou shalt be perfect with the LORD thy God. 14 For these nations, which thou shalt possess, hearkened unto observers of times, and unto diviners: but as for thee, the LORD thy God hath not suffered thee so to do.”

Notice in the biblical warnings that astrology, or the observing of “times,” is linked to demonism or Satanism because Satan and his demons were actually worshipped behind the
cover of the signs or planets. God’s warning to His Old Testament people about astrology also apply to Christians in the New Testament. According to the apostle Paul in…

Romans 1:21-22  “21 Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. 22 Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools,”

Christians are to be directed by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, and not be guided by the stars of astrology. Becoming fascinated by the stars and following astrology exposes us to the control of Satan. We should fix our eyes on the Scriptures wherein we find the will of God, and live for the Lord!

We can be sure that Satan and his demons were present in the religion of Babylon. So this tower was built for religion.

III. The Result of Babel.

Genesis 11:5  “And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.”

The expression that God “came down to see” is an anthropomorphism. God is described as though He were a man. But let us be clear that God does not need to investigate anything, or to discover anything. The omniscient and omnipresent God does not need to make discovery trips. God knows everything always!

Nevertheless, that God “came down to see” proves that the tower of the rebels was not high enough. For the rebels to build a tower to reach the heavens summarizes the philosophy of human religion. Human religion requires people to work and earn their way up to Heaven. But human religion is a failed philosophy because it is always futile effort for sinners to reach God. Instead, salvation according to the Scriptures is God reaching down to sinners through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Genesis 11:6-7  “6 And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. 7 Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.”

God did not restrain the people from their building project because they were a threat to Him. Also, God is not against human progress or the use of technology that glorify Him. But God “restrained” the people because their rebellion beginning at Babel would increase. How so?

With a common language, the people could communicate their rebellion effectively and swiftly. We recall that before the Flood, the Sethites and the Cainites became one people and they increased greatly in wickedness, which provoked God to judge them. Now at Babel, the unity of the people in their rebellion would bring them again to the brink of judgment. Thus as an act of grace, God confounded their language. To “confound” means to “confuse.”

Here we see a play on words. In the Babylonian tongue, Babel means “the gate of the gods.” The top of the ziggurat was their gateway to the gods. But in Hebrew, the word Babel means “the confusion of languages.”
Genesis 11:8-9  “8 So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. 9 Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.”

God confounded the people through their speech, so that they were unable to communicate with one another in one language as they once did. The confusion of their language frustrated their attempt at unity, so they abandoned their building project of human pride and rebellion against God. From Babel, God scattered the people according to their tribes to other parts of the earth, just as He had commanded them to do.

Conclusion

The sin of the people is not for their building of the city or the tower. They sinned because they disobeyed God to be scattered throughout the earth.

Friend, the will of God is always fulfilled. We can obey the will of God and be blessed, or rebel against His will and suffer the punishment. Heed the counsel of the wise man in…

Proverbs 19:21 “There are many devices in a man’s heart; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand.”

A second lesson for us is a warning about pride. “The primeval history reaches its fruitless climax as man, conscious of new abilities, prepares to glorify and fortify himself by collective effort. The elements of the story are timelessly characteristic of the spirit of the world. The project is typically grandiose, men describe it excitedly to one another as if it were the ultimate achievement – very much as modern man glories in his space projects. At the same time they betray their insecurity as they crowd together to preserve their identity and control their fortunes.” (Derek Kidner, Genesis, p. 109). An appropriate word to describe the attitude of the people at Babel is hubris. Hubris is extreme, arrogant pride. This account teaches us that those who exalt themselves shall be abased (Matthew 23:12).

“The Babylon motif became the common representation for any anti-theocratic program. Later writers drew on this theme and used the name as a symbol for the godless society with its great pretensions. Isaiah 47:8-13 portrayed Babylon’s pleasures, sins, and superstitions. Isaiah 13:19 pictured her as “the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldeans’ pride,” and Isaiah 14:13 describes her sinful arrogance in exalting her throne above the Most High in the heavens, only to be brought low. Jeremiah also predicted the cup of vengeance on this arrogant city [chap. 51]. Daniel recorded her persecutions against Judah [chap. 3]. And Revelation 17-18 applies the theme to the spiritual Babylon in the eschaton, showing that it was her sins that reached heaven and brought the catastrophe to her, thus preparing the way for the true celestial city to come down to earth…” (Allen P. Ross, Creation and Blessing, p. 241-242).

The prophet Zephaniah drew on the Genesis account, about the dispersion of the nations and the confusion of their language, and looked ahead to the end of the age when God Himself would unite humanity again.
Zephaniah 3:9  “For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent.”

A major reversal of the confusion at Babel occurred on the Day of Pentecost, when people of different tongues gathered in Jerusalem to observe the Jewish feast. In Acts 2, Peter preached the Gospel to the crowd, and the Holy Spirit enabled those that He regenerated to understand the sermon and be saved through faith in Christ. What is the Gospel?

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the message of His death, burial and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). By believing that Christ suffered on the cross and died to pay the penalty for your sins, and that He was resurrected to life after three days and three nights in the grave (thus proving God’s acceptance of Christ’s sacrificial death), God will forgive you of your sins and save your soul from everlasting death in hell.

Salvation is not earned through human effort or merit.

Ephesians 2:8-9  “8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: 9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Friend, the people at Babel were not the only rebels against God. As sinners, we are all rebels against God. In Romans 3:11-12, we read that none seeks after God, and “they are all gone out of the way.” Look now to the Lord Jesus Christ in faith and ask God to be gracious to save you!

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