

General Comments on Genesis 11-12

After the Deluge (ch. 6-8) the Lord says "I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done" (Gen. 8:21). The Lord states His prior tactic of annihilation of the wicked (e.g., the Noachide Deluge, the Jaredites) is no longer going to be practiced. Instead, the Lord adopts a different means of dealing with people. He now chooses to make specific covenants based upon lineage, and those covenants require Him to preserve that lineage.

This new covenant is made with Abram in ch. 12. However, in between the Deluge and the covenant with Abram appears a relatively brief text discussing the dissolution of the great city named Babylon. This text serves two purposes. First, it shows the Lord is keeping His promise to not annihilate the wicked outright, choosing to scatter them instead. Second, it shows why the Lord chose Abram to covenant with.

Comparison of thematic points from ch. 11 and ch. 12 makes it plain the Tower of Babylon account is intended to contrast with Abram's election.

| Action | Babel | Abraham |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Build | Tower to themselves | Altar to Lord |
| Name | Let us make a name for ourselves, their name lost | Lord will make his name great, he calls on the name of the Lord |
| Lord | Does not condescend to speak with them, rather He confounds their speech | Does condescend to speak with him, and they understand each other |
| Pronoun applied | "babel...balal" [confusion... confounded] | "bethel" [house of God] |
| Covenant? | No covenant made, cursed and scattered | Covenant made with him, promised concerning land and lineage |

Why did God elect Abraham? Because he was not like the people around him. While the Flood destroys wickedness from off the face of the earth, it quickly returns again. When it does return and whole societies are once again corrupted, the Lord chooses a righteous man to covenant with and establishes a lineage-based covenant.

General Comments on Genesis 11

The timing of the events discussed in the tower of Babel account is probably coincident with the events of 10:10 and 10:25. Chapter 10 details the genealogy of Japheth (v. 2-5), Ham (v. 6-20), and Shem (v. 21-31). Note the genealogy of each son ends with a statement to the effect "these are their families, languages, countries, and nations" (v. 5, 20, 31). The separation of populations and languages occurs sometime within the listed genealogies as by the end of them, there are differences in populations as expressed by language. But, the tower of Babel account starts in 11:1 by saying all were of one language. This suggests the tower of Babel account occurred at some point within the listed genealogies and not at the end of them. In other words, chapters 10 and 11 should not be read in a strictly linear chronological fashion.

Another point worth noting is this is the next account of human activity after the Deluge. In the Deluge, the people had become so evil they had to be destroyed, and creation was started anew. Creation is once again new, and rebellion begins to creep in again. In 9:1 the Lord tells Noah's children to multiply and fill the earth, but in 11:2-4 the people instead want to mass together and not fill the earth, as they do not want to spread out. The Lord must then take action to have His command fulfilled.

Identifying the polemical nature of the text, Nahum Sarna in Understanding Genesis (pages 69-70) states:

[The] Mesopotamian tradition, crystalized in the *Enuma Elish* epic ascribed the building of the terrestrial city of Babylon, together with its celestial counterpart, to the gods themselves at the creation of the world. The Bible, by transferring the founding of the city to post-diluvial times, is in this way tacitly combating the polytheistic myth. Moreover, it extends this anti-pagan polemic still further, by presenting the founding of Babylon as a disastrous alienation from God by indulging in deliberate word-play on the name of the city.

Babylon, Hebrew *Babel*, was pronounced *Babilim* by the Mesopotamians. The name is apparently non-Semitic in origin and may even be pre-Sumerian. But the

Semitic inhabitants, by popular etymology, explained it as two separate Akkadian words, *bab-ilim*, meaning "the gate of the god". This interpretation refers to the role of the city as the great religious center. It also has mystical overtones connected with the concept of "the navel of the earth", the point at which heaven and earth meet. The Hebrew author, by his uncomplimentary word-play substituting *balal* for *Babel* has replaced the "gate of god" by "a confusion of speech", and satirized thereby the pagan beliefs.

When reading the account of the Tower of Babel, we should bring the imagery of Lehi's vision of the great and spacious building (cf. 1 Ne. 8:26-28) into our understanding of the present text and see it as a reinterpretation and commentary on this story. Lehi's vision clearly presents the great and spacious building as an edifice of human pride, arrogance and contention that contrasts the humility and peace of the Tree of Life. This generally agrees with the presentation in the Genesis account of the Tower of Babel.

Additional discussion of the Tower of Babel is given in the Book of Mormon in Hela. 6:28 and Ether 1 (see also Omni 1:22 and Mosiah 28:17 for mentions of the Jaredite record and connection to the Tower of Babel).

Comments on Genesis 11

The chapter is in two parts, first the brief recounting of the great city Babylon being undone (v. 1-9), then a lengthy genealogy from Shem to Abram (v. 10-32).

1 AND the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. 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. 3 And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. 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.

5 And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. 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. 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.

v1-9 This section of text is a blatant anti-Babylon polemic. The text draws heavily on imagery closely associated with Babylonian culture and employs numerous word plays in the Hebrew (see the Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary on Genesis and Nahum Sarna's Understanding Genesis, pages 63-77, for a more complete discussion of these points, see also Everett Fox's comments on this passage).

The structure of the text is an antithetical parallelism with the actions of man, in v. 1-4, being counter-measured by the Lord, in v. 5-9:

- A - (v. 1-2) Same [one] language...same [one] speech
Man migrates upon face of earth
- B - (v. 3-4d) Let us...
They said to one another
A tower with its top in the sky
Let us build a city
- C - (v. 4e-f) Make a name for ourselves
Else we shall be scattered
- A - (v. 5-6) As one people with one language for all
Lord looks down up the earth
- B - (v. 7-8) Let us...
One another's speech
Go down
they stopped building the city
- C - (v. 9) It was called Babel
The Lord scattered them

In addition to the antithetical structure, note the story is told from the third-person perspective. The people are only identified as "they" and "them", never by name. The narrator refuses to identify them by name, which is an implicit insult in the Semitic tradition. The plain where the city is built is even identified, but never their names. They seek to make a name for themselves, but instead their names are lost. The only name applied to them, Babel, is pejorative and applied to them

after God confounds them. An Israelite, Moses, sees the event in a detached fashion and is casting aspersions on the Gentile nations whom God has scattered. God rejects these Gentile nations, and instead chooses Abram to be the father of His covenant people. The author is no disinterested third party when it comes to this commentary.

The narrative is not about God stopping one particular tower from being built on a particular occasion. Rather, it is intended as a presentation of God's general approach to dealing with a culture and attitude that creates these types of towers. Certainly, the story was based on a single historical event (cf. Ether 1:33-43), but the text is not particularly concerned with this. The time of this event is not explicitly identified, and it appears immediately before a genealogy but is never tied into that adjacent chronology.

Instead, it presents a general body of people in a general place at some point in time between Noah and Abram who want to build a city and great tower in order to promote themselves. God recognizes their hubris and reacts by making it impossible for them to communicate. He reduces their language to babble, and the result is their plans fall apart, the city is never finished and they end up scattered.

Exactly how the language is confounded is not stated, whether it was an abrupt miraculous shift or decay of their culture where between generations their differences became so great the society fell apart is not clear. What we are informed of is God affected them such that they could no longer communicate, and their society collapsed.

Given the lack of specific details, it is plain the intent of the text is to present God's policy statement on prideful men who rely on the work of their own hands rather than relying on Him. Was it applied in specific historically, and is it still being applied today? Certainly, but the specific details of historical application that inspired this text are not given to us in the present text. In fact, we learn more historical facts from Ether 1, which is only tangentially commenting on this event, than we do from the present text which is directly addressing the event.

With regard to this text being interpreted as an anti-technology polemical, this reading is unlikely. The primary issue being addressed is the pride of the people and not the object of the tower. The object itself is neutral. The Lord commands His people to build such mountain-like Temples to Him.

Furthermore, we see in the Book of Mormon the Nephites are always one step ahead of the Lamanites when it came to military technology and this is a blessing to them, until Nephi culture becomes decadent. Thus, the technological object is neither intrinsically good or bad, it is how people feel about it and what they do with it. The Tower of Babel is a symbolic edifice of the pride of the people, and as such, the Lord knocks it down.

v2 "the land of Shinar", the rhetorical connection to 10:9-10. These are the descendants of Nimrod, and they want to be mighty and renowned like he was. But, they do it the wrong way. Nimrod was a man who was mighty before the Lord. His descendants were not.

v3 It is ironic the men, made from the clay by God (cf. Gen. 2:7) here are seeking to build a way to get to God using clay. Clay is piling clay upon itself and can never get high enough to reach God.

"brick, burn them thoroughly", possibly a specific reference to the Epic of Gilgamesh, in the last few lines of [tablet 12](#), where Gilgamesh talks about the kiln-fired bricks of the walls and foundations of the great city Uruk.

v4 "A city...a tower", both are used by later authors to be indicative of hubris, cf. Isa. 2:12-15, Isa. 30:25, Ezek. 26:4-9, 1 Ne. 8:26.

"let us make us a name" or "to make a name for ourselves" (JPS). They want to be men of renown, like their father Nimrod, cf. 10:8-9. This is probably a specific polemical point addressing the end of the Epic of Gilgamesh. There, Gilgamesh is speaking with Urshanabi, looking on the walls of Uruk and the foundations of the great buildings there. In context, this is Gilgamesh showing the products of man's hands being the way for men to overcome their mortality.

"lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth", they are deliberately contradicting the Lord's command in 9:1 that they reproduce and fill the earth.

v7 "let us go down", despite the best efforts of man to reach God, God must still "go down". Man's inability to exalt himself

in such endeavors is manifest.

"confound their language", language is also used as metaphor for religion, so the confused, nonsensical babble is symbol of their confused, nonsensical religion, cf. Deut. 28:49, Isa. 19:18, Isa. 28:11, Isa. 33:19, 2 Ne. 32:2. The idea that one could build a tower tall enough to get into heaven is absurd to us today, but that particular edifice is only a symbol. Anything we do on our own which not in accordance with what God has said to us is no different from the Tower, no matter how pious it looks or how great the sacrifice appears.

10 These [are] the generations of Shem: Shem [was] an hundred years old, and begat Arphaxad two years after the flood: 11 And Shem lived after he begat Arphaxad five hundred years, and begat sons and daughters. 12 And Arphaxad lived five and thirty years, and begat Salah: 13 And Arphaxad lived after he begat Salah four hundred and three years, and begat sons and daughters. 14 And Salah lived thirty years, and begat Eber: 15 And Salah lived after he begat Eber four hundred and three years, and begat sons and daughters. 16 And Eber lived four and thirty years, and begat Peleg: 17 And Eber lived after he begat Peleg four hundred and thirty years, and begat sons and daughters. 18 And Peleg lived thirty years, and begat Reu: 19 And Peleg lived after he begat Reu two hundred and nine years, and begat sons and daughters. 20 And Reu lived two and thirty years, and begat Serug: 21 And Reu lived after he begat Serug two hundred and seven years, and begat sons and daughters. 22 And Serug lived thirty years, and begat Nahor: 23 And Serug lived after he begat Nahor two hundred years, and begat sons and daughters. 24 And Nahor lived nine and twenty years, and begat Terah: 25 And Nahor lived after he begat Terah an hundred and nineteen years, and begat sons and daughters. 26 And Terah lived seventy years, and begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

27 Now these [are] the generations of Terah: Terah begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begat Lot. 28 And Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his nativity, in Ur of the Chaldees. 29 And Abram and Nahor took them 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 the father of Iscah. 30 But Sarai was barren; she [had] no child. 31 And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran his son's son, and Sarai his daughter in law, his son Abram's wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there. 32 And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years: and Terah died in Haran.

v10-32 The genealogy of Abram. This genealogy follows the pattern of 5:3-32. There the genealogy traces Adam to Noah in ten generations. Here, the lineage is traced from Shem to Abram in ten generations. Note when the present text arrives at the tenth generation (v. 27-32) the level of detail regarding family composition increases considerably, thereby emphasizing the importance of this generation.

Shem's righteousness (cf. 9:23) is emphasized as he is presented as the father of the Semites in general and of Abraham in specific.

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