

PREFACE

Over the last few weeks we have laboriously worked our way through Chapter Ten, with its many lists of Noah's descendants. We have systematically considered the distribution of *families* after the Flood, but we have paid scant attention to *time*—that is, *when* did all this distribution of families take place? So to approach this epochal moment in the history of man that we find in Chapter Eleven—the distribution of *languages*—we must back up just a little and find its place and time in antiquity.

Not unlike the composition of its brother, The Revelation, the composition of Genesis does not follow a strict chronological path in its narrative. One passage might overlap another, or even predate an earlier passage, or postdate one coming after. Ancient writers did not always compose their narratives in a strictly linear fashion—one to which we are more accustomed. This does not represent inaccuracy; it is just a different way to compile the various pieces of history. While not inaccurate, it can present a challenge for us in interpreting the larger picture.

So let us see if we can work out the chronological placement of Chapter Eleven in relation to Chapter Ten.

Coming after Chapter Ten, we immediately assume that the story related in Chapter Eleven occurred *after* the dispersal of Noah's descendants in Chapter Ten. But that is not the case.

Leupold makes two statements that, at least initially, gave me pause:


1. "The time of this event [the erection of the tower of Babel] is about one hundred years after the Flood, since Peleg...was born one hundred years after the Flood."
2. "...it must be recalled that practically the whole human race participated in this project [the building of the tower]."

Let's look at these statements in turn, but we must combine our conclusions for each to determine the chronology of these two chapters.

PELEG

As I pointed out in our previous session, an important division occurs in the two sons of Eber: Peleg and Joktan. Through Peleg will come Abraham; through Joktan, Babylon.

I found it interesting that in Chapter Ten, Moses does not include the line out of Peleg—even though he is the most important branch—yet includes a long list of Joktan’s sons. Sailhamer helped clarify this for me—which also helps us understand how the two chapters work together.

According to the list in 11:10-26, we see that the arithmetic confirms Leupold’s first statement. 

To ensure that the calculations were accurate, I asked Linda to do the arithmetic for me.

Read Genesis 11:10.

Working through the subsequent years for each generation, we come up with Peleg being born 101 years after the Flood. Why is this important for our understanding of the Babel narrative? Leupold makes the logical conclusion that the “division” in 10:25 refers to the division and disbursement of 11:7-9.

Read Genesis 10:25.

Read Genesis 11:7-9.

So looking solely at the chronology, the *dating* of this, the conclusion is that the events chronicled in Genesis 11:1-9 occurred about 100 years after the Flood. Is that sufficient time for the various families to populate the earth as seen in the map we have been using? I think not. Is it sufficient time for the sons of Noah to migrate from Ararat to the Shinar region and begin building the city that would become Babylon? Yes.

“The Whole Human Race”

As to Leupold’s second statement, it makes sense if we agree with the first. It is estimated by people smarter than I that in those one hundred years the population of the earth would have grown to about 30,000 persons—certainly enough to found a city, and sufficient to begin construction of “a tower,” but insufficient to populate the coverage we see in our map.

I want to return to 10:10 and Nimrod for just a moment.

Read Genesis 10:10-11.

In Session 60 I said,

Here is the first empire, and it begins with Babel/Babylon. We may deduce from the text that since v11 says that Nimrod “built” Nineveh, he may not have literally *built* Babel, but just conquered an existing city and made it his own.

We don’t know the age of Nimrod, only that he was a grandson of Ham; his name is set apart from his five (listed) brothers, probably because of the larger impact he had on civilization. But we don’t know if he was an older or younger brother. It could very well be that Nimrod conquered the city that had been founded by the line from Shem through Arpachshad, Eber, and Peleg.

Now, one more look at v25 in Chapter Ten.

Read Genesis 10:25.

Verse 30 tells us that this line’s

settlement extended from Mesha as you go toward Sephar, the hill country of the east.


This is followed in v2 of Chapter Eleven with

And it happened as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

Sailhamer: [Verse 30 gives us] the location of the settlement of the [Joktan] line, but narratively it serves to connect the line of Joktan with the account of the building of Babylon that follows [11:4]. The link is made by means of the key term “mountain of the east” [or “hill country of the east”].

Sailhamer continues,

The narrative is less interested in the exact location than it is in the association with the “eastward” of 11:2, the location of the “plain of Shinar” where the city of Babylon was built.

Here once again we have two different translations with which to contend. The LSB, NASB, and NIVs have in v11:2, “they journeyed east” or “eastward”; the ESV and KJVs have, “from the east.” Each translation of the Hebrew can be grammatically correct, but the context of this passage, along with translations of the same in earlier passages in Genesis  would seem to make “eastward” correct here. (Both Leupold and Sailhamer agree that it should be “eastward,” that is, *to* the east, not *from* the east.)

e.g., 3:24—Adam and Eve's banishment from the Garden—and 4:16—Cain's banishment to Nod

As we can see from the map, Shinar from Ararat is actually more south than anything else, but is also just slightly SE.

In addition to the grammar, consistently in Genesis, “when man goes ‘east,’ he leaves the land of blessing...and goes to a land where the greatest of hopes will turn to ruin” (Sailhamer).

One more piece of evidence: How does Chapter Ten end?

These are the families of the sons of Noah, according to their generations, by their nations; and out of these the nations were separated on the earth after the flood. (emphasis added)

In v25 Peleg's name means “division” (a noun); in this verse, v32, the word translated “separated” or “spread out” means “divided” (*parad*, a verb). After examining all this minutia, let's now put this all together into a narrative form.

The Narrative

After a little over a year of the Inundation, the ark comes to rest on a mountain in the Ararat region.

The family of eight disembarks; Shem is the oldest son of Noah at 98 (11:10) and Noah is about 601 years old (7:6). We do not know how long the three sons and their immediate families remained in the Ararat region, but approximately 100 years later we find all of Noah's descendants in the region of Shinar. We get this time span by counting the generations from Arpachshad—probably not Shem's oldest son—to Peleg (11:10-17), “for in his days the earth was divided” (10:25)—and all, of course, speaking the same language.

This would mean that the various branches of the family did not disperse across the globe from Ararat, but from Babel/Babylon. And, frankly, if one looks at the map, Shinar presents as a far more central location than Ararat for the eventual distribution of the descendants.

And now we are ready to dig into Chapter Eleven.

Read Genesis 11:1-4.

Let's begin with a very good summary quotation from H. C. Leupold.

Leupold: If, then, the account as a whole shows the confusion of tongues to be the outgrowth of human presumption and disobedience, the practical lesson of the story must be primarily this, that the present resultant confusion that is upon us must serve as a constant reminder of the inclination of the human heart to arrogance and disobedience. The multiplicity of languages upon the face of the earth is a monument not to human ingenuity but to human sin.

v1

Now the whole earth had the same language and the same words.

Before we can understand the change that will occur at the command of Yahweh, we need to understand what was in place prior to that.

The word translated "language" is *sapah* (saw-FAH), meaning, literally, "lip". This may be a reference to dialect, or sound, expressing that, for example, "the lips of all were shaped alike in uttering words" (Leupold). The word translated "words," or "speech" is *dabarim* (da-BAWR in the plural), and I think is best understood to mean "vocabulary"—all used the same words to express a thought.

v2

And it happened as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

I admit: This business of east or west in this passage is slippery, hard to hold on to. Perhaps v10:30 is more critical to this than we might originally think.

Now their settlement extended from Mesha as you go toward Sephar, the hill country of the east.

The emphasis there seems to be more about *location*, than *direction*. For example, if we live somewhere in North America, and we intend to visit a friend who lives in South Korea, this means we will be traveling to the “Far East.” If we travel *west* to Europe first, to visit another friend in France, before continuing on to South Korea, we have traveled in a westerly direction but our ultimate destination is to the *Far East*. That is what I believe v10:30 is saying—i.e., *The sons of Joktan settled in “the hill country of the east.”*

We must also admit that, in contrast, v11:2 seemingly speaks of *direction* rather than *location*—although one might also stretch it to read as if it fits our above illustration.

At the same time, however, if the KJVs and the ESV are correct (“from the east”—i.e., traveling *from* the east in a westerly direction), then we must ask: precisely from *where*?

Ultimately the question of direction must give way to geography: the ark landed in Ararat, and the people migrated from there to the Plain of Shinar. Period.

...and settled there.

If one goes to Iraq today, one might wonder what about this region could have possibly attracted these people to it. Except for the areas near the two rivers, it is little more than barren desert. Today’s Baghdad is on the Tigris, rather than the Euphrates, but it is the same general area.

But we forget: that area has not always looked as it does today. This area *would* have been inviting, being far more fertile than it is today.

v3

Then they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and they had tar for mortar.

Mud brick was and remains a common building material in the Middle East. I remember, when we were in Egypt in the early eighties, driving past a miserable hovel near the side of the road made of mud brick—or perhaps even just dried mud—still occupied by a family.

Mud bricks would typically have been *sun* dried, and did last for surprisingly considerable periods in a region with little rain. In fact Linda and I saw ruins of walls still standing in some temple precincts, constructed from unfired mud bricks.

The bricks mentioned in v3, however, are not sun dried, but *kiln* dried—burned thoroughly. The text is literally “let us burn to a burning,” which everyone interprets to mean “bake them thoroughly,” as the NKJV has it. So these would be more akin to modern bricks, sufficiently hardened to be used for substantial construction.

Unlike the immediate Mediterranean area, such as Canaan, Greece, Crete, or Cyprus, there was not sufficient stone for construction, hence the need for bricks. Lacking also the material for mortar, they again used what was available: bitumen, or tar.

v4

And they said, “Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, lest we be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

With these materials they built a city and began work on a central tower—a ziggurat, a temple dedicated for worship to the local god. This would not be a pyramid in the Egyptian 4th Dynasty fashion or design, but somewhat similar to the design of the very first pyramid for the 3rd Dynasty king Djoser (c.2686-2613 BC), a *stepped* pyramid.

But the Egyptian pyramids were only elaborate and massive tombs; the ziggurat would be a majestic place of worship—not a tomb, but a temple.

In our next session we will finish our look at the first nine verses of Chapter Eleven—and complete our study of the First Things.

SESSION 62

Getting Things in Order Genesis 11:1-9

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