

SESSION 63: A CONFUSED CONCLUSION (FINAL)

Genesis 11:1-9

March 9, 2025

PREFACE

Let's begin by reading the entire passage for this final session.

Read Genesis 11:1-9.

In our previous session I covered many of the mechanical details of the first four verses:

- the difference between “language” and “words” in v1;
- the controversy over east or west in the versions of v2;
- the building materials of v3;
- and the purpose and design of the “tower” built in v4.

Now let's dig a little deeper into v4, for it is the apex of the passage—and the source of most myth and misunderstanding of the Babel narrative.

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,

Why did St. Louis, Missouri, construct the “Gateway Arch”? Why did Bemidji, Minnesota, build the gargantuan statues of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox? Answer: To make a name for themselves and attract tourists.

Living in a country—indeed, a *world*—in which there are thousands upon thousands of cities, we might wonder, *What's the big deal about building a city.* But if it is true that this is taking place approximately one hundred years after the Flood, it makes perfect sense.

The ark landed in a mountainous region, and it would follow that they would immediately build rude shelters for the members of Noah's family. As the families began to grow, more shelters would be built, but it could very well have been that the setting was not suitable for a larger city—or even village. So at some point they decided to go looking for a more suitable location, one with room to grow and spread out.

They headed SE, probably following the two main rivers that descended in a southerly direction. Eventually, like the Mormons heading west and finding their “promised land” in Utah, the descendants of Noah deemed the plain of Shinar a suitable place to settle.

There is nothing wrong with a people seeking out a new home and building a community. But this verse is ripe with a picture of a self-centered people, a people who—remember, still within human memory of their being saved by Yahweh from the devastating Inundation—a people who are thinking more about “ourselves” (twice) than they are nurturing a humble relationship with God.

There is nothing in this verse to indicate that the tower had as its purpose to “reach up to God” or even replace Him. It clearly is meant to exalt themselves (“let us make for ourselves a name”), and the text just says that the top of this “tower” would be lofty—no doubt higher than anything ever made—certainly post-Flood. There is nothing in this verse that even suggests that it is the size or height of the tower that Yahweh finds objectionable. *Shamayim* (“heavens”) is the word we have seen before; it can mean God’s heaven, space, or just the sky overhead. It’s root just means to be lofty.

I find the most literal version of this verse in the NKJV:

And they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”

I would suggest that it doesn’t even mean they were building an edifice to a *new* god. Ziggurats *will* be used as a temple to a pagan god, but the purpose stated here is simply to build something impressive that will make a name for the city’s inhabitants. So even though the building materials are the same, perhaps it is a bit presumptuous to call this a ziggurat; it may be simply an impressive, tall building to mark this city out as something special, and unique for the time. There is no evidence whatsoever to imagine the tower was of extraordinary, astronomical, nose-bleed height.

lest we be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

It is not immediately evident what this portion of the statement has to do with their self-centered arrogance and rejection of God. But it does indeed become evident when we are reminded of God’s blessing and command to Noah.

Read Genesis 9:1, 6-7.

The people of this new city—just a few generations after the Flood and the explicit call from God to populate the earth—were saying, *No, we're not going to do that. We want to stay right here in one place and make ourselves famous as we worship ourselves. Our tall tower will stand as a monument to ourselves and our fame.*

v5

Then Yahweh came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built.

Here is another of the Bible's anthropomorphisms for Yahweh God. He need not "come down" to see what man is doing on earth, but the text emphasizes his level of intent interest.

We should not assume that "had built" implies completion. The perfect form of the Hebrew *bana* means "had built to this point." The NIVs capture this with "were building."

v6

And Yahweh said, "Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they have begun to do. So now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them."

While it may take *us* a moment to recognize their transgression, Yahweh spots it right off. The phrase "one people" is more evidence for the timeline we established in our previous session. One cannot look at the vast distribution of the various tribes, as illustrated in the map we have been using for several weeks, and see them as "one people" having "the same language" (lip). No, this scene in Chapter Eleven certainly predates that dispersal.

I am not comfortable with any of our modern versions of v6—especially the word "impossible" in "now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them." That sounds to me uncomfortably close to "they will be gods"—which is not at all what Yahweh is saying. I favor Leupold's translation:

And Yahweh said: Behold, the people are one and they all have one language, and this is merely the beginning of what they do, and now from nothing that they devise to do will they desist.

The Hebrew word translated “impossible” in our modern versions is *yibbaser* (yib-baw-TSAR); it means to clip off, and is commonly used for harvesting grapes—i.e., clipping the cluster from the vine—hence to cut off, restrain, withhold. William Wilson softens “impossible” slightly by translating this, “nothing will be too hard for them, whatever they may purpose to do.” The NKJV is best, in my opinion, with “now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them.” We might put this in our contemporary vernacular with, “Look at what they have already accomplished; there will be no holding them back now.”

Now in vv7-8 we have the steps of Yahweh to halt, to restrain, this insular people.

v7

Using language that echoes Genesis 1:26 (“Let Us make man in Our image...”), He first “confuses their language.”

“Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another’s language.”

As I have pointed out, here “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). For example the English word “bread” in French is pronounced *peh* (spelled “pain”); two very different sounds for the same vocabulary (“same words”, 11:1).

Now the triunity of God (“Us”) will go down to “confuse their language”; interesting word translated “confuse.” *Balal* (bah-LAL) is a root meaning to mingle, to mix together with oil, even to overflow with oil; by this mingling together one “confuses” the mixture—“to confound language by its pronunciation, or rather by the introduction of strange words, miraculously caused” (William Wilson).

v8

The result of this confusion of language was that all work on the city and the tower ground to a halt—of course: none of the workers could understand the others.

So Yahweh scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city.

We may imagine that once their language was confused they had no other recourse than to go their separate ways, migrating eventually as individual language groups to regions far and wide. And it may be that that was the earthly, human sequence; but the emphasis in the text is that “Yahweh scattered them.” And I’m not sure what to conclude from it, but I find the order of the two components of this verse interesting: First, Yahweh scatters the people, and, second, they stop building the city. One would think the order would logically be reversed.

But in any case, the result is an unfinished city and tower, and most if not all its citizens scattered to the four winds. This is the moment, I believe, that the various groups spread out to inhabit the locations we have seen on our map.

v9

Therefore its name was called Babel, because there Yahweh confused the language of the whole earth; and from there Yahweh scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

These people built the city and its tower for the expressed purpose of “mak[ing] a name for [them]selves” to the ultimate purpose of avoiding being “scattered over the face of the whole earth.” How did God express His displeasure with their intent? He made the “name” of their city—Babel/Babylon—a byword in the annals of history as well as future prophecy, to stand for all eternity as the name given to corruption and evil, and a rejection of God’s blessings. Later, to Abram, Yahweh will say, in effect, *I will be the one to make you a name:*

**And I will make you a great nation,
And I will bless you,
And make your name great;
And so you shall be a blessing; (Genesis 12:2)**

Then, to top it off, Yahweh did precisely what the people of Babel were trying to avoid: He scattered them across the earth.

If I am correct in the narrative order of chapters ten and eleven—setting the migration from Ararat to Shinar first, followed by the dispersal we see in our map—then this makes Babel/Babylon, as it were, the “navel” of this world. And how apt: It would be hard to imagine or contemplate a world more culturally, morally confused than ours is today.

IN CONCLUSION

The story of Babel in Chapter Eleven serves as a concise summary and conclusion for this first narrative of the Bible: the *First Things*. For what was their offense that drew Yahweh's judgment? They wanted to go their own way; they wanted to make a name for themselves; they wanted to set *themselves* on a pinnacle, rather than God—who just a short time before God alone had saved their family from a world-wide Inundation.

This has been the intent of man from the very beginning. Yahweh Elohim offered His creation sublime paradise, only to have the first couple fling it back in his face by believing the lie of Satan over the promise of God. He punishes Adam and Eve, but graciously withholds immediate death. Their firstborn son Cain makes a mockery of the Lord's sacrifice and out of jealousy and anger murders his own brother. Again Yahweh graciously exiles Cain instead of killing him outright. And in spite of that grace, Cain and his descendants turn away from Yahweh.

So God gives Adam and Eve another son—Seth—a new and righteous line from which will later spring Noah, “a righteous man, blameless among those in his generations” (Genesis 6:9), and a fresh start for mankind—another chance for man to be obedient and accept the blessings of God.

But by the time of Noah, humanity has become so corrupt that there is no recourse but to wash it all away and begin again (6:11-13). After the Flood, even as Yahweh accepts the burnt offering from Noah's altar and promises to never again wipe out “every living thing as I have done,” He also admits to Himself that “the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth” (8:20-21).

If God were one of us, this would be a turning point in the story—the sudden realization that no matter what good things are offered him, man will always gravitate toward evil. But of course, God is *not* one of us, and He is not just learning something He had never realized before. No, all this nauseating insistence of man to go his own way—to make a “name” for himself, rather than honor the name of Yahweh—was baked into the cake, as it were, from the beginning.

Man will stick to this pattern of behavior

- through Noah, his sons, the founding of cities of rebellion against God, Ninevah and Babel/Babylon;
- through Israel refusing to obey Yahweh's laws of blessings and good;
- through Israel's rejection of Jesus as the promised Messiah; and
- through our own times, and man's determination that his way is better than God's, that he has no need for a Savior; and yes,
- through even our own sin and small rebellions against the blessings of God in a righteous life.

In these opening chapters of God's word the pattern is set: His repeated offering of blessings by living in accord with His will being repeatedly rejected in favor of rebellion, sin, depravity, evil. This is the pattern set by our corporate parents; this is what is now bred into every human being born after them.

In God's most dramatic and precious gift to man—His own Son—man finally has the means by which he can have a relationship with his Maker. But until the day man loses the fallen flesh in which he was born, we still struggle *against* that flesh that calls us to go our own way, to set *ourselves*—just like the people of Babel—as the pinnacle of fame and importance.

We take away from this study the wonder and glory of God's creative genius, His longsuffering, His grace demonstrated from the very beginning. We also take away the disappointing behavior of His *human* creations. These are included in the narrative for our benefit—just as the repeated betrayals of Israel are included—to stand as negative examples for us today, as to what happens to a life that is disobedient, even antagonistic, toward his Maker.

For no apparent reason other than divine influence, I awoke Friday morning this week to the strains of that old classic, *Trust and Obey*, ringing through my head. And it would not go away—which is often a sign that God is telling me something. Here, I believe, is what we should put in our pocket and take home with us from this study of the First Things.

When we walk with the Lord
in the light of his word,
what a glory he sheds on our way!
While we do his good will,
he abides with us still,
and with all who will trust and obey.

But we never can prove
the delights of his love
until all on the altar we lay;
for the favor he shows,
for the joy he bestows,
are for them who will trust and obey.

Then in fellowship sweet
we will sit at his feet,
or we'll walk by his side in the way;
what he says we will do,
where he sends we will go;
never fear, only trust and obey.
(John H. Sammis; 1887)

We Christians like to use the word “faith” a lot; the concept of faith is almost always synonymous with “trust,” and an integral part of trust is “obedience” to the one in whom we are placing our trust. All of this speaks to God’s sovereign rule over our lives, and “the glory He sheds on our way” in turn. We have a share in His glory by obeying Him.

The reward is not just glory, but *joy*—as the familiar refrain says:

*Trust and obey, for there's no other way
to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*

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Refrain:
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