

The Tower of Babel

In Genesis 11 we find the story of the Tower of Babel. Before we get into it, however, let's take a look at the context. Each story in the Bible takes place at a specific location and time, and both must be understood in order for the story to make sense. If you take a passage out of context you will almost certainly arrive at an erroneous conclusion.

First let's look at the **time**. The chapters immediately before Genesis 11 tell the story of the Flood, and the chapters after it tell the story of Abraham. We know that the Flood happened in 2348 BC, and we also know that Abraham was born 292 years after the Flood. This story, then, happened sometime between **2348 BC and 2056 BC**. Noah and his son Shem would have still been alive at this time, and the Flood would be a very recent memory. It would not be hard to look around and see evidence that God had just destroyed the entire world in a global catastrophe.

As far as **place** is concerned, the story happens in the land of Shinar. This corresponds to modern-day Iraq. One interesting fact to note is that the famous king Nimrod established his kingdom there:

Genesis 10:8: "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."

Another interesting thing to note is that the word Shinar could also be translated Babylon. The nation of Babylon, of course, is featured prominently throughout the Scriptures.

Let's dissect the passage section by section:

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

This story happened less than three centuries after the entire planet's population was wiped out by a Flood, leaving Noah and his family to repopulate the globe. It is easy to understand why there was **only one language**. After just three centuries, the surviving human population would have been quite small, and they apparently all lived in the same place. It would only be natural for everyone to use whatever language Noah spoke – after all, the entire race were his descendants, and he was still alive.

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."

Apparently the entire human population lived together **in a single community**. This is not very surprising. Remember, when Noah stepped off the Ark the entire planet was empty. When his children had children of their own they probably set up house right next to their parents, and then their children did the same, and so forth. (Think about it: the *entire planet* was empty. Your family was the only group of humans that existed, and at the time dinosaurs roamed the Earth. Would *you* want to live all by yourself?)

It seems that this group of people wandered from place to place, and in their wanderings they came across a plain in what is now modern-day Iraq. Since that piece of land looked good to them, they

decided to **settle down and build a city** instead of continuing to roam as nomads.

Genesis 11:3: “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 a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

As you can see, the people started making bricks. Once they had bricks they decided to build a city and a tower.

So far none of this is very surprising. It's not surprising that the human race would live together in the same place and speak the same language. It's not surprising that they would wander around looking for a good home. It's also not surprising that when they found a suitable spot they would decide to settle down and build a city.

What *is* interesting is their reason for doing this. They **did not want to be scattered** over the face of the whole Earth. This was actually an act of rebellion. You see, after the Flood the Lord commanded mankind to repopulate the planet:

Genesis 9:1: “And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.”

Now, I don't think this necessarily means that newlyweds had to leave their parents and wander to some uninhabited region as soon as they got married. But it does mean that God wanted the *entire* planet to be repopulated, and the human race was not interested in doing that. They didn't want to be scattered everywhere. They wanted to live together as a unit and leave the rest of the planet empty.

It can be seen from the text that they were afraid of something. Building the city was more than just an attempt to form a single community; it was a way to “**make a name**” for themselves. Only by “making a name” for themselves would they be able to avoid being scattered all over the planet. In essence, they wanted to *be somebody*. This raises the question: in whose eyes did they want to be famous and powerful? After all, they were the *only group of humans on the planet*. Who, exactly, was the big threat? Who were they worried was going to come and scatter them? What were they afraid of?

I think they were afraid of God. Genesis 10:8-10 tells us that the city of Babel was founded by Nimrod. Josephus records that Nimrod was a rebellious, wicked man who hated God for destroying the world in the Flood. He was determined to fight God and overthrow Him. Nimrod decided to build a tower so tall that if God send another Flood, He would be unable to wipe out mankind a second time. (The fact that God had promised to *not* send another worldwide Flood was apparently lost on him.) The city of Babel was an attempt to build a one-world government that was dedicated to fighting God.

God, of course, noticed what they were doing. He was not amused:

Genesis 11:5: “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.”

When God saw what they were doing He decided to take action. He saw that the human race was unified and that nothing was going to prevent them from carrying out their plan. So God came up with a brilliant way to scatter them over the face of the Earth: He confused their language. Since they could no longer understand each other they couldn't live together anymore, and had to split up.

It's worth noting that God did not have some angel carry out the sentence against them; instead He did it personally. It's very common for God to send angels or prophets to do His bidding, and it is very rare for God to come to Earth personally to execute judgment. The only other times God has done this are in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, and in the case of the Second Coming (where Jesus returns to judge the *entire world*). So for God to come to Earth to *personally* judge someone is a very serious matter. It is a sign that you are in big, *big* trouble.

God's strategy worked brilliantly. With the **language confounded** no one could work together, and so people were scattered over the whole world:

Genesis 11:8: "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."

The word Babel means **confusion**. Incidentally, this is where languages came from. After the Flood there was just one language, but when the Lord confused the languages it gave rise to the bewildering array of tongues that we see today. The fact that there are different languages is a direct result of divine intervention by God Himself. If Babel had never been built then the situation might be very different.

This story illustrates that God *does* govern in the affairs of men. He does not let mankind do whatever they want to do, nor does He passively watch from afar. God governs in history and guides it exactly where He wants it to go. This idea can be seen throughout the Scriptures:

Proverbs 16:33: "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord."

Proverbs 21:1: "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will."

Psalms 2:1: "Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?

2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his anointed, saying,

3 Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.

4 He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.

5 Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure."

The people of this world may rage against God and make plans against Him, but He who sits in the heavens laughs at them. As the people of Babel discovered, any attempt to defeat God is extremely foolish and is doomed to fail.