Chapter 12: The End of the Beginning

Genesis 11

After ten chapters into the book of Genesis, humankind has not yet found a lasting solution to the problem of sin. Adam and Eve made for themselves loincloths of fig leaves to cover their shame (Gen. 3:7). Cain eliminated the competition of his righteous brother, Abel, by murdering him (Gen. 4:1–8). Cain's descendants innovated to create new wealth, new technology, and new culture, but multiplied the bloodthirsty violence of their forefather, Cain (Gen. 4:17–24). The godly line of Seth corrupted themselves by intermarrying with the offspring of Cain (Gen. 6:1–4). Even after God gave a fresh start to humanity by wiping away the excesses of its corruption through the Flood (Gen. 6:5–9:17), Noah and his family quickly fall back into the sin patterns that had originally doomed the human race (Gen. 9:18–29).

In Genesis 11, we read about one final attempt at solving all of humanity's problems: a construction project. The people living at Babel unite to build a tower that will reach up into the heavens, where God dwells (Gen. 11:4). They believe that if they can just build a taller tower, they will commend themselves to God. The project itself will fail miserably at its stated goals. Nevertheless, God brings out of this failure something that *will* solve all of humanity's problems. While the solution will not take full effect immediately, God raises up a man in Genesis 11 who will alter the course of human history forever.

Sin of the Babelites (Gen. 11:1–4)

After reading about the dispersal of all nations in Genesis 10, Genesis 11 begins on a note of unity: "Now the whole earth had one language and the same words" (Gen. 11:1). In fact, Genesis 11 explains the *immediate cause* of the dispersal of nations in Genesis 10. Remember how the creation story of Genesis 2 circled back, zoomed in, and retold the creation story from a different angle than in Genesis 1. In the same way, Genesis 11 is circling back, zooming in, and retelling the dispersal of nations from Genesis 10 after God's *re*-creation in the wake of the Flood. As we will see, however, the story of Babel does not only explain how different people groups ended up dispersing themselves across the whole earth and speaking different languages; this story also records the end of the first major period of human history. After the rebellion of Genesis 11, God will deal with the world in a drastically different way than he has up to this point.

The Sin of Babel

In order to appreciate why God would so radically shift his orientation toward the world after Genesis 11, we need to understand the serious nature of the sin of Babel. Is there something inherently wrong with building a skyscraper, or is something more insidious happening here? To help us answer that question, we need to analyze the clues that the narrator provides to help shape

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our judgment of this story, since some of these clues are small and seemingly insignificant.

First, the narrator tells us that this story happens "as people migrated from the east" (Gen. 11:2). At key points in the book of Genesis so far, the narrator has linked eastward movement with rebellion.[1] Yahweh drove out Adam and Eve from the entrance of the garden of Eden on the *east* (Gen. 3:24). Then, after Yahweh banished Cain to be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, the narrator told us that "Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, *east* of Eden" (Gen. 4:16). Later, when Abraham will offer the first choice of the land, Lot will choose for himself the Jordan Valley, journeying *east* to take possession of it (Gen. 13:11). In each case, eastward movement signals rebellion and a seeking a human version of the good rather than trusting God to provide his own blessing.[2]

Second, the narrator makes clear exactly that the good which the people at the Tower of Babel are seeking is to make a "name" for themselves: "…and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11:4). Earlier, the mighty men who lived during the days of the Nephilim before the Flood had been called the "men of the name" (ESV: "men of renown"; Gen. 6:4). This description did not merely communicate strength, but a very specific kind of strength: the prideful, wicked arrogance that triggered the Flood.[3] Ironically, God will bring the sinful ambition of Babel to shame and instead make the *name* of Abram great (Gen. 12:2).[4] Furthermore, the irony runs even deeper, since Abram is the descendent of Shem (Gen. 11:26), and "Shem" (שֵׁם; *šēm*) is the Hebrew word for "name." God alone can make someone's name great; human efforts to seek a great name apart from God will ultimately fail.

Third, even the creation of a "city" (Gen. 11:4) raises red flags of concern. This is the first discussion of city-building since reading earlier about the city that Cain disobediently built (Gen. 4:17).[5] In both cases, those who build the city do so in defiant self-assertion against God. Nevertheless, we cannot write off all city-building as a wicked enterprise, since God himself will later claim a city to put his name (Jerusalem; 2 Chron. 6:6), and since the Apostle John foresaw a day when God will eventually create a new Jerusalem in which God would dwell with his people (Rev. 21:2). Cities are not sinful in themselves; however, cities create opportunities for the rapid expansion of pride, arrogance, greed, and violence.

The Ziggurat of Babel

The way in which the citizens of Babel plan on making for themselves a name is through building "a city and a tower with its top in the heavens" (Gen. 11:4). In the ancient world, and especially in Mesopotamia where Babel was located, religious people built ziggurats that were built to resemble a step-ladder that the gods could use as a means of connection between the heavens and earth (cf. Gen. 28:12).[6] This tower that has "its top in the heavens," then, is built for explicitly religious purposes, to connect the people of Babel with God. What specifically, then, does God judge and reject about such a tower?

In part, such an undertaking was steeped in arrogant pride from the beginning. Derek Kidner captures the haughty spirit of this construction project:

> 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

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> 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 (4b).[7]

Kidner's commentary was published at the height of the space craze in 1967, only two years before the Apollo 11 mission where astronauts landed on the moon. As I write this at the end of 2016, the kind of "grandiose…ultimate achievement" projects have rapidly multiplied in the last fifty years. Whether the goal has been the invention of the personal computer, or the mapping of the human genome, or the advent of the smartphone, or the creation of a self-driving car, or the quest to cure cancer, or any other number of dramatic technological advances, humankind still boasts in our projects for innovation and achievement. In this way, humankind persists in wicked defiance against the Creator.

We should not think, however, that God is opposed to technology, whether in tower-building or elsewhere. God, after all, was the one who gave his blessing to the first humans that they might "subdue" the earth (Gen. 1:28), and to "work" the garden (Gen. 2:15). Just as God does not reject all city-building, so also God does not reject all architecture. Indeed, Proverbs 18:10 depicts the strength of God's name as a tower: "The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe." In fact, the use of "name" and "tower" in this proverb may subtly allude to the tower of Babel, and if so, then we gain some insight into the kind of pride that God judged at Babel. The Babelites pridefully wanted to provide strength and safety for themselves, rather than depending on the Lord for their strength and safety.

Some interpreters argue that the sin of the Babelites comes in their refusal to spread out on the face of the earth.[8] John Walton articulates two main problems with this interpretation:

> 1. When God told them to fill the earth, he was giving a blessing, not a command. It was a privilege, not an obligation, and could therefore not be disobeyed.
>
> 2. The means of filling the earth indicated in Genesis 1 and 9 was not by scattering, but by reproducing. The earth is no fuller when people spread out. The only way filling can be disobeyed is by refusing to be fruitful and multiply, and the text is clear that they are doing quite well in that regard.[9]

While God's punishment against Babel was to scatter them across the earth (Gen. 11:9), God does not identify the unity of the people *as* their sin, but as the factor that made their sin possible: "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them" (Gen. 11:7). God disperses them not because they should have dispersed themselves in the first place, but because dispersing them would prevent additional efforts at concentrated, unified sin. We will look more at this issue a bit later.

Still, this story is about far more than pridefully seeking a name, or seeking to amass strength and safety for oneself. This story is about human beings building their own tower to reach up into the heavens in order to control their access to God, which is blasphemous.[10] This story, then, symbolizes all human efforts to reach up to God in pride rather than waiting upon him to reach down to us. The Babelites do not believe that they are doing anything wrong. By building this tower, they believe

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that they will create a name for themselves in their victorious achievement. In this, they are not only arrogant in their assumptions, but they are simply mistaken. No one can force his way into the presence of God; God alone has the prerogative to summon whomever he will.

Judgment of the LORD (Gen. 11:5–9)

As we discussed earlier, this narrative does not condemn Babel as explicitly as we might want. In fact, we are never given a definitive reason about why Yahweh decides to take such drastic action by confusing the speech of the people and scattering them across the face of the earth. Instead, we must pay close attention to the clues wrapped in the narrative. This story is "a short but brilliant example of Hebrew story telling" which depends upon a particularly effective narrative device called *chiasmus* to communicate the verdict that the author wants us to understand.[11]

Chiasmus is a literary technique that gives structure to the narrative by matching elements on a first-in, last-out basis. In this passage, the chiasmus looks like this:

A "The whole earth had one language" (v 1)
B "there" (v 2)
C "one other" (v 3)
D "Come let us make bricks" (v 3)
E "let us build for ourselves" (v 4)
F "a city and a tower"
G "the LORD came down..." (v 5)
F1 "the city and the tower"
E1 "which mankind had built"
D1 "come...let us confuse" (v 7)
C1 "one other's speech"
B1 "from there" (v 8)
A1 "the language of all the earth" (v 9)[12]

By writing the narrative in this format, the author accomplishes a few different results. To start, this structure clearly contrasts the actions of the Babelites with the judgment of Yahweh, which demonstrates that the nature of Yahweh's response is in fact to judge the sins of the Babelites, even though we do not read an explicit statement that what the Babelites did was sinful. Along those lines, the contrast in the ambition of the Babelites and the judgment of Yahweh creates a deep sense of "irony and sarcasm…[in] the misspent efforts of the Babelites."[13] They sought to make a name for themselves, but Yahweh brought everything they did to ruin.

The LORD Came Down

Most importantly, identifying the chiastic shape of this narrative helps us to locate its center in the phrase, "the LORD came down" (Gen. 11:5). We should not think that this verse is telling us that Yahweh somehow was unaware of what was happening until he was able to come inspect this project for himself. Rather, this description provides a "prelude to judgment."[14] Additionally, there is a rich irony in Yahweh's coming down to see the construction of the Babelites, since the Babelites

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had believed that they could build a tower up into the heavens. Not only were they wicked to attempt to reach up toward God, but they also foolishly underestimated the chasm between themselves and God by an extraordinary degree. After all their progress, God must still *come down* from the heavens to see what they were doing. This "tower with its top in the heavens" is little more than an anthill in the sight of God.

Still, Yahweh takes the ambition of the Babelites seriously, saying, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech" (Gen. 11:6–7). As many have observed, this language of plural deliberation and decision-making sounds much like what Yahweh had said in Genesis 3:22 before expelling Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden: "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—". In both cases, Yahweh acknowledges the threat of human wickedness and moves to thwart it; however, there is also an element of care by stopping further damage. Allen Ross writes this:

> The similarity of style and wording to Genesis 3:22 is most striking. The potential for calamity is dangerous to the race, and God will prevent it. They will nullify the purposes of God in favor of their own purposes, which are within reach. They will be at liberty for every extravagance if they can think only of their own confederation.[15]

Indeed, recognizing the preventative mercy of this judgment also helps to explain the calm, dispassionate concern that we heard in Yahweh's words. He does not react with uncontrolled rage, but measured wisdom to thwart his creatures from throwing themselves headlong into wickedness and depravity.

The Babble of Babel

In order to prevent humankind from moving in perfect unity toward increasingly greater acts of rebellion, Yahweh confuses the speech of the people at Babel. This frustrates their ability to work together in "one language" of commonality, and it forces people groups to separate according to their respective languages across the face of all the earth, abandoning their construction project (Gen. 11:8). The story of the Tower of Babel, then, explains the means by which God scattered humankind across all the face of the earth (Gen. 11:9), as we read about in the table of nations in Genesis 10. Then, it is with another tragic stroke of irony that we read that the people of Babel did eventually make a name for their incomplete, abandoned city—albeit a "humiliating name":[16] "Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth" (Gen. 11:9).

The story of Babel is important not only within the narrative of Genesis, but for the entire Bible. First, Babel (later, Babylon) becomes the arch-enemy of the people of God. Not only will the king of Babylon carry away Abram's nephew Lot a few chapters after this (Gen. 14:1, 12), but later on the Babylonians will eventually carry off the nation of Judah into captivity (2 Kgs. 24–25). Babylon is not only *an* enemy to the people of God in its own right, but Babylon also becomes a symbol that encompasses *every* great enemy of the people of God. Babylon, as the representative of all wicked empires, is depicted as the golden head of the human statue of empires in Nebuchadnezzar's dream

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(Dan. 2:31–45), which is the reason that Peter could even refer to Rome as "Babylon" (1 Pet. 5:13)—that is, as most current manifestation of the same spirit of monstrous human unity against the Creator, and against the people of the Creator. It is not until the book of Revelation that we hear of the ultimate fall of Babylon before the coming kingdom of Jesus Christ, who reigns from the new Jerusalem (Rev. 18:2).

Second, the story of Babel explains the origin of so many languages out of a single origin from the family of Noah. These languages will become important later during the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit of God enables the apostles to preach the good news of Jesus Christ for the understanding of a great number of Jews gathered in Jerusalem who spoke a variety of languages (Acts 2:5–11). The scattered languages do not return to a single common language, but God instead redeems people from out of every language (Rev. 5:9).

Line of Promise (Gen. 11:10–32)

The judgment God brings on Babel, however, is unique in the story of the Bible that we have seen so far. This is a stark, blunt judgment of finality without any hope for the future held out as silver lining. Again, Allen Ross's comments are helpful, illuminating the severity of God's actions here in contrast with what we have seen previously:

> With this story the common history of all humankind comes to an abrupt end, as the human race is hopelessly scattered across the face of the entire earth. This fact makes the present narrative so different from those preceding it. In each previous judgment there was a gracious provision for hope, but in this judgment there is none. It does not offer a token of grace, a promise of any blessing, a hope of salvation, or a way of escape. There is no clothing for the naked sinner, no protective mark for the fugitive, no rainbow in the dark sky. The primeval age ends with judgmental scattering and complete confusion. The blessing is not here; the world must await the new history.[17]

And indeed, with the crashing end of judgment against Babylon, God also begins here the process of starting that "new history." He does not begin a new history by sending another flood to give his creation a fresh start, and he does not amend the promises that he has already made. Instead, God continues to raise up the promised offspring of the woman through the line of Shem.

The Generations of Shem

In Genesis 11:10–26, we read the next installment of the "generations of," this time reading the "generations of Shem" (Gen. 11:10). We had read part of Shem's genealogy in Genesis 10:21–31, but that genealogy had recorded the lineage through Eber's son Joktan (Gen. 10:25–26), whereas the genealogy here in Genesis 11:10–26 records the lineage through Joktan's brother Peleg (also the son of Eber; Gen. 11:16). In this lineage of the line of Shem through Peleg, then, we should notice two important factors. First, as we discussed above, the name "Shem" is itself the Hebrew word that means "name"—that is, that man's name is "Name." Right away, we should see the contrast between the "name" that the people of Babel were seeking for themselves, and the "name" that God himself raises up through the "generations" of the man named "Name." Additionally, the tenth generation of

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the man "Shem/Name" brings forth Abram (Gen. 11:26), to whom Yahweh will make an extraordinary promise: "I will bless you and *make your name great*" (Gen. 12:2).[18]

Second, this genealogy shares many literary features with the genealogy from Genesis 5, where we read of the godly lineage of Seth.[19] To start, the narrative follows a pattern of noting the age someone lives before fathering his son, and then the provides the statement that this person then lived a certain age, having other sons and daughters. Additionally, the emphasis in both these genealogies falls on the tenth generation; in Genesis 5, the tenth generation was Noah; here, the tenth generation is Abram. The only notable exception to the similarities between these two lineages is that we do not read the refrain, "and he died" at the end of each genealogical section in Genesis 11 as we had seen in Genesis 5.[20] Just as the godly lineage of Seth stood in contrast to the wicked lineage of Cain, so now the godly lineage of Shem (through Peleg) contrasts with the wicked lineage of Ham from Genesis 10. In both sets of genealogies, the narrative of Genesis continues to document God's protection and promotion for the offspring of the woman, even as the offspring of the serpent multiplies.[21]

The Generations of Terah

Still, the text does not allow us to think that the lineage of Shem is thoroughly godly. It would be more accurate to say that God raises up his godly people (who themselves have deep flaws!) *from* this line than to say that all the people born into this line consistently followed God. Accordingly, we read next about the "generations of Terah" (Gen. 11:27). Since Terah is the father of Abram (Gen. 11:26), the primary importance of this section is to set up Abram's story in three ways. First, we learn the origin of Abram's family from Ur of the Chaldeans, a city not too far down the road from Babel. This is important, since we will later discover that Abram's family worshiped false gods before Yahweh called Abram to follow him (Josh. 24:2). In fact, Terah's name may be related to the word for "moon," and "Several of Abram's relations have names that suggest adherence to lunar worship (cf. Sarah, Milcah, Laban), a cult that was prominent in Ur and Harran."[22] Right from the beginning, the Bible refuses to whitewash Abram. This text intentionally reminds us that Abram is called *out* of Ur of the Chaldeans by God's mercy alone rather than because of any merit on Abram's part.

Second, we learn important details about Abram's family: Abram's wife Sarai is barren (Gen. 11:30), and Abram has a nephew named Lot, who is the son of Haran (Gen. 11:27, 31). Third, we find here that Terah took Abram and Lot (along with their families) in an attempt to go to Canaan, but they instead stopped short and settled in Haran, where Terah died (Gen. 11:31–32; cf. Acts 7:2–4). All of these factors set the stage for the call of Abram that radically reorients the direction of human history forever.

The End of the Beginning

Thus we come to the end of the beginning of the world. God originally created, ordered, filled, and blessed his very good creation. When sin entered the world, creation lost its original goodness. Nevertheless, God has brought forth good out of the curse. We have seen judgment, curses, a Flood, the confusion of language, and exile. Through it all, however, God continues to bring forth the promised offspring of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent.

From this point forward, God will no longer accomplish his plan by dealing with the whole world in general. Instead, he will deal directly and exclusively with one man, Abram, and with that

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man's offspring. Whoever will be blessed must bless Abram, and whoever curses Abram, God himself will curse (Gen. 12:3). Ultimately, through Abram, God will bless all the families of the earth.

One era has come to an end, and another is just beginning. This new era will bring forth not only prophets, priests, and kings, but even a great Messiah who will be God's own Son. The offspring of the serpent will continue to rage against the people of God, following in the footsteps of Cain, their spiritual forefather (cf. 1 John 3:11–15). Through it all, though, God will glorify himself by bringing about good for his people as he prepares to bring forth a new heavens and a new earth, where God will dwell with his people forever (Rev. 21:1–4).

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean that the Babelites seek to make a *name* for themselves (Gen. 11:4)? What kind of name do you see people building for themselves today? What kind of name do you try to build for yourself? What kind of name does God promise to give to his people? Where do you need to abandon your own pursuit of a name to trust God to provide you a name?

2. What are the Babelites able to accomplish by their unity? What can human beings accomplish when they work together? As great as these achievements may be, why are we incapable of building a tower tall enough to reach up to God? What does the gospel teach about how God reached down to us? How is the gospel fundamentally different than every other religion?

3. How does the Lord judge the Babelites? Why does the Lord withhold any hope for salvation in his judgment oracle? What hope do we have apart from God's sovereign mercy toward us? In what ways are you most tempted to believe that you are able to be saved by your own works, apart from God's mercy? What does this story teach you about your chances for success?

4. Was Abram saved by his own works? On what basis does God save Abram? For what purpose does God choose Abram? How does Abram relate to the offspring of the woman? How does Jesus relate to Abram? If God no longer deals generally with the whole world, how does God intend to bless all the families of the earth through this one man?

Notes

1. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 238–39.
2. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 134–35.
3. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 467–68.
4. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 239–40.
5. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 352–53.
6. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 470–71.
7. Kidner, *Genesis*, 118.
8. For example, Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 233.
9. Walton, *Genesis*, 375.
10. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 239.

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11. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 234.

12. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 235. The word *chiasmus* gets its name from the Greek letter *chi* (X), since the chiastic pattern put in this format looks like the left side of the X.

13. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 469.

14. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 241.

15. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 246.

16. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 469.

17. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 242.

18. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 134.

19. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 248–49

20. One possible explanation is that the emphasis on the deaths of the people in Genesis 5 were written to serve as a contrast to the death-less departure of Enoch; here in Genesis 11, no one escapes death, so the age listed for each person is given with the assumption that the person died at that top age.

21. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 136–37.

22. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 252. On the spelling of Haran vs. Harran: in Hebrew, "Haran" is a straightforward transliteration into English letters. "Harran," however, is the modern spelling of a city in Turkey that most associate with the ancient city of Haran.

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