

Text: Genesis 10:1-11:26

Title: The Nations and Their Speech

Truth: God explains the origin of nations and languages.

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Introduction

Recall that there are 10 major sections in the book of Genesis; each is introduced with the phrase “this is the genealogy of...” After the death of Noah in 9:29, we have a new section in 10:1 which is traditionally called “The Table of Nations.” It shows us the origin of different national entities after the flood.

You may have a question regarding the order of chapters 10 and 11, because 10:5, 20, 31 mention “languages” or “tongues,” but chapter 11 describes the origin of different languages at the Tower of Babel. Is there a mistake here? Not at all. Chapter 11 explains the origin of the different nations listed in chapter 10. Chapter 10 is a summary, and chapter 11 offers further explanation. We will start with chapter 11 first.

I. The Tower of Babel, 11:1-9

A. Major take-aways: God explains to us the origin of languages and nations, and by extension borders, cultures, and unique features of physical appearance. He also shows how He forced the people of earth to obey His command in 9:1 to fill the earth (and 1:28, 8:17, 9:7).

B. We have already learned where the earth and universe came from; the origins of plants, animals, and humankind; of sin and death; of the world-wide judgment that occurred millennia ago, and the resulting geologic and topographical features of our globe. Now to answer the question “where did languages and cultures come from?” Today there are about 6,000 languages used in the world. Like our belief about the initial creation, we do not believe in an evolutionary approach to language where languages came about over the course of 150,000 to 200,000 years. With a brief time span less than 10,000 years to work with, the origin of so many

nations and languages needs to be explained, and the Bible covers it.

- C. Common Language. Verse 1 tells us plainly that there was only one language on the earth after the flood. Obviously, this must be the language that Noah and his family spoke. It may be that there were several different languages before that time, as there was over 1600 years from creation to the flood and quite a large population.
- D. Common Location. Verse 2 suggests that a large group of people was journeying together, and they decided to set up shop in Mesopotamia in the land called Shinar. This may have been most of the population at that time. The name of the city where they settled is Babel (confusion) and is the historical precursor Babylon.
- E. Nimrod was the leader of these people (10:8-10). His name may be related to *Ninurta*, the Assyrian god of hunting and warfare. This man was a powerful leader who ruled an early kingdom, some suggest as a tyrant, as well as a mighty hunter. We could only speculate on what kind of game he hunted. He may have been the leader of a large hunting party that worked together to take large animals. "The legendary Nimrod is also sometimes associated with the attempt to build the Tower of Babel. Because the tower resulted in the wrath of the Lord and proved a disastrous idea, *nimrod* came to have another meaning: 'a stupid person'" [4] or sometimes an idiot or jerk.
- F. Plan to Build a Tall Tower. Verse 3 shows that the people had building materials to make bricks and mortar. So, they thought in verse 4 to build a city and a very tall tower. They were shifting from a nomadic lifestyle to city dwelling. The tower they suggested was what today we call a *ziggurat*, a terraced tower with the lower layers bigger than the ones above them. People built such structures for the worship of pagan gods, like the Great Ziggurat still standing in Ur after 4,000 years, dedicated to the moon god [7].
- G. The people had two purposes for this building project. The **first** goal was to make a name for themselves. They wanted fame and renown because of the great project they had accomplished. They wanted to make a name or heritage that would last for future

generations. After a fashion, their name *did* last, but in infamy. They were exhibiting a corporate pride, not humility. The **second** and related purpose was that they did not want to be scattered over the face of the earth. The concentration of their efforts and power would enhance their fame and glory. But this concentration of people was in direct rebellion against God's command to fill the earth, thus spreading out over it. A possible **third** purpose for the tower that this tower represented idolatrous worship.

God's blessing only can rest on obedience, and disobedience is a sure way to arouse God's wrath. It did.

- H. God's Response to Their Plans, vv. 5-7. God viewed the work they were doing and explained that they would be able to accomplish it. They are united and share a single language. They "understand one another" and so, since two heads put together are better than one, they could make great progress toward their goals. In fact, the Lord said, "nothing that they propose to do will be withheld." It is not clear what else they might have proposed to do. However, the implication is that their combined intellectual powers and labor would be able to accomplish great feats. Such things, done for pride and fame, are dangerous to society.

We should not think of all huge modern infrastructure projects—united efforts of even much larger size than the Babel ziggurat—in a negative light. If people construct them to provide a useful resource such as water, or electricity, or transportation of goods, or protection from war and other similar things, that is good. If the motivation is not pride, or to rebel against God's express command, or to elevate idolatrous worship, then they can be good. However, some projects are not so clear-cut. Skyscrapers that vie for bragging rights of the tallest building, or monuments to individuals, or huge temples dedicated to false gods—these are just like the Babel ziggurat.

- I. God resolved to confuse their language, with one result that they would not understand one another. This would slow down the ambitious progress of their proud rebellion.

J. A result of the confusion of the languages was that the people were scattered all over the earth. They would now fill the earth, despite their initial rebellion against doing so.

The existence of people in all parts of the globe is attributable to this event. When you hear of the early residents of North and South America, and the “Alaskan land bridge” as an explanation for how they got here, think Genesis 11. (Do you suppose that these people knew how to handle sea vessels?)

K. Another result was that the people ceased building their great city.

L. The city became known as “Babel” which means “confusion.”

M. Lessons.

1. This passage teaches us that the origin of languages was not evolutionary but was supernatural. Several dozen proto languages were created at this point in history. After this, other variants would easily develop because of regional isolation.
2. A world with one language, culture, and government is *not* how God wants things to be—until the Kingdom of Christ. God set up the world with multiple nations to inhabit the entire globe. The impact of sin is restrained when people are not able to collude together in substantial numbers. Similarly, a single language is not the best setting for our world because it permits the people to engage in large God-defying endeavors. See Acts 17:26.
3. God’s people learn from this passage where Babylon came from. It started out in rebellion against God and will continue to do so until the last book of the Bible.
4. Review the major points at the start of this section.

II. The Table of Nations, 10:1-32

A. Main point: Verse 32, the origin of the nations of the world.

B. The lists of names in chapter 10 are daunting to read. Including Noah, there are about 73 names or nationalities listed. The genealogy is divided into three sections bracketed by an introduction in verse 1 and a summary in verse 32. This is a considerable number for such an ancient time—an extremely

valuable ancient historical record. Today there are 195 countries in the world. See the maps in the Genesis 10-11 Powerpoint.

- C. Take the opportunity to practice your reading! Do not just skip the names. It is helpful to slow down and break the words into their syllables to aid in pronunciation.
- D. Sons of Japheth, vv. 2-5. These peoples went north and west and probably included the Medes, Greeks, Celtic peoples, and inhabitants of modern-day Cyprus, Russia, Armenia, and Germany. Verse 5 identifies these as the “coastland peoples.”
- E. Sons of Ham, vv. 6-20. These folks populated northern Africa and the land of Palestine (Philistines, Canaanites, Amorites, and many of the Bible –ites that we encounter in the Old Testament). The most famous of all these people was Nimrod, who has four verses devoted to him in the text. He is called a mighty man, a mighty hunter, and he was a king of several cities starting with Babel and including Nineveh.
- F. Sons of Shem, vv. 21-31. These people were east of Babylon and in northern Arabia. Note that Abram moved out of Ur of the Chaldees to Haran, and then from Haran to present-day Israel. Ur was a wealthy Sumerian city east (and south) of Babylon in what we know as modern Iraq.

III. Genealogy of Shem, 11:10-26

- A. Main idea: God wants us to know where Abram (Abraham) came from, and in turn where the Jewish people came from. This is significant for the history of our redemption because *that* is integrally connected to the nation of Israel and ultimately to the Messiah.
- B. The name Eber in the list became the origin of the term *Hebrew*.
- C. The end of the genealogy has three named offspring of Terah. This difference indicates that these three will play a significant role.
- D. Of some interest is that in the genealogy of Luke 3:36, the name Cainan appears between Arphaxad and Salah (sometimes spelled Shelah). It appears that Moses intentionally omitted him from the Genesis genealogy, perhaps because he went astray into idolatry

[5]. We have mentioned before how genealogies can use the word “begot” as “had a descendant” instead of “had a direct son.” In addition, keep in mind the big picture purpose of the genealogy—to trace God’s plan to Israel, not to include every idolator in the family tree!

E. If you go back to the genealogy chart I created—the one with the years of birth and death [6]—you will see an interesting fact. Noah died 2006 years after creation. Terah was born 26 years before that. Abram was born 4 years after that. The nine generations of Shem, Arphaxad, Salah, Eber, Peleg, Reu, Serug, Nahor, and Terah all could have personally known Noah.

IV. References and Further Study

1. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Table_of_nations
2. www.biblebelievers.org.au/natindx.htm#Index%20-%20The%20Table%20of%20Nations (accessed 10/29/2022). This is an old-style website but has all the names listed in the table of nations and some explanations that may be interesting.
3. I count 73 names in chapter 10; there are 22 names up to verse 6, 30 up to verse 12, and 47 up to verse 18.
4. www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Nimrod
5. www.tbsbibles.org/page/luke3verse36
6. www.fbcaa.org/Docs/bulletins/GenCh5and11Genealogy.pdf
7. www.defense.gov/Multimedia/Photos/igphoto/2001116584/

Conclusion

God has not left us clueless about how we got here. Some of the most “boring” passages of Scripture are significant when it comes to questions that people might ask. “Where do I come from?” “Where do *we* come from?” “Where did the Jews come from?” “How old is the earth?”

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