

The Tower of Babel and the *Toledoth* of Noah's Sons

(Genesis 10-11)

Genesis 10 and 11:10-26 contain the genealogies of 1) Japheth, 2) Ham, 3) Shem's sons who are not the descendants that lead to Abraham, and 4) the descendants of Shem that lead to Terah's three sons: Abram, Nahor, and Haran. The genealogies or *toledoths* (Hebrew) prove that Noah's sons and their sons obeyed Yahweh's commandment to be fruitful and multiply. Strategically placed after 3) but before 4) is the narrative of the Tower of Babel. The Tower of Babel (or Babylon) narrative reveals that partial obedience is never acceptable to Yahweh, who twice communicated after the flood that humanity was to fill the earth (9:1). And, "As for you, be fruitful and multiply; Populate the earth abundantly and multiply in it" (9:7, NASB95). The reader should pause for a moment and remember that the rebuilding of the entire world's population began near the mountains of Ararat (8:4). Noah's sons received the same commandment that Adam received: be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. God desired that His image-bearers occupy all of His good earth.

According to the chronological order, the Tower of Babel rebellion must have occurred before Genesis 10:5. It states, "From these the coastland peoples spread in their lands, each with his own language, by their clans, in their nations." Notice the words "own language" and "nations" referring to ethnicities. This becomes evident when reading the verse in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament). In the Septuagint, the word for nations is *ethnos*. This is the Greek word from which we get ethnicities or races. The confusion of languages by God (or the creation of multiple languages) led to the formation of numerous nations or ethnicities. Nation, in this case, is not like the United States of America or even the modern state of Israel. God is the Author of the ethnicities we see today, including the Jews. This holds true for all ethnicities, as each traces its origin back to Noah and ultimately to Adam, the first image-bearer of God.

The narrative of Genesis 11:1-9, typically titled "The Tower of Babel," can be summed up in a single word: rebellion. In a unified act of defiance, the people of the earth chose to disregard Yahweh's command to populate the entire land. Instead of moving and occupying all corners of the earth, they decided to stay together and build a city for their glory, not God's. The reader can see this in the repeated use of 'us' and 'ourselves' in verses 3 and 5. This city, Babylon, is a city of man where God's mandates are not welcome. In some sense, this is the third fall in Genesis, following the falls in Genesis 3 and 9:20. The Tower of Babel was an attempt by humanity to reach the heavens, where the *elohim* (Hebrew, gods) reside.

With a bit of irony or sarcasm, verse 5 records that Yahweh had to "come down to see the city and the tower" that humanity had built to reach God. The tower man built was so insignificant that God could not see it. (Obviously, God sees everything.) This tower is just as inadequate to reach the throne of God as the fig leaves were to cover nakedness. After their fall, Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden, and in a similar fashion, Yahweh confused the people with language and created different ethnicities to exile (a forced absence) them from this city of man. The name Babel or Babylon comes directly from the verb to confuse. Throughout the rest of the narrative of the Bible, and especially in Revelation—the name Babylon represents an archetype of the city of man.

Earlier, we discussed this narrative's strategic placement just before Shem's descendants, leading to Terah. The rebellion at the Tower of Babylon is the backdrop for why Yahweh finds a new Adam, namely Abram, (subsequently named Abraham) from whom He will build a new great nation. The people exiled from the city of man are rebels. Yahweh is looking for a man who will follow Him, a disciple. Perhaps from a man committed to following Yahweh, Yahweh can build a holy nation (Exo 19:6) that will be a blessing to the nations forsaken, but not forgotten, at the Tower of Babel.

In Genesis 12, Yahweh calls Abram to go to a land that He would show him (12:1), and verse 4 records, "so Abram went." Yahweh has chosen another "Noah" with a different name in His ongoing commitment to saving the world from the fall. In and through this new holy nation (Israel), Yahweh will "bless all the families of the earth" (12:3) previously scattered (11:8). But what is this blessing? And how will it be given to the nations forsaken, but not forgotten, in the exile of the nations in Genesis 11? Yahweh's continued commitment to recovering what was lost at the Tower of Babel is ultimately seen in the commission (the mandate) His Son Jesus gave the church to make disciples in all the nations (Matt 28:19).