

# 10. Genesis 11



[1] And it happened that the whole world had one language and one vocabulary.

[2] And as they journeyed from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

[3] And each one said to his neighbour:

[4] ‘Come! Let us make bricks [lebênîm] and bake them thoroughly’

[And they used brick for stone and bitumen for mortar]

[5] And they said: ‘Come! Let us build for ourselves

[6] a city and a tower with its summit touching the heavens

so we will make a name for ourselves

lest we be scattered over the face of the earth’.

[7] THEN YHWH CAME DOWN TO SEE

[6-] the city and the tower

[5-] that the sons of the human being [‘âdâm] had built.

And YHWH said: ‘See! They are one people and they all have one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. Henceforth nothing will be impossible for them in what they promise to do.

[4-] Come! We will go down and confuse [balâl] their language there

[3-] so that each one will not understand the language of his neighbour’.

[2-] And YHWH scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth and they left off building the city.

For this reason they called its name BABEL,

[1-] because there YHWH confused [balâl] the language of the whole world.

And from there YHWH scattered them over the face of the earth.

Genesis 11:1-9

From  
Empire  
to  
Diversity

# Babylonian Empire

- [1] **And it happened that the whole world had one language and one vocabulary.**
- [2] **And as they journeyed from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.**
- [3] **And each one said to his neighbour:**  
**[lebênîm]**
- [4] **‘Come! Let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly’  
[And they used brick for stone and bitumen for mortar]**
- [5] **And they said: ‘Come! Let us build for ourselves**
- [6] **a city and a tower with its summit touching the heavens\_so we will make a name for ourselves lest we be scattered over the face of the earth’.**
- [7] **THEN YHWH CAME DOWN TO SEE**

[7] THEN YAHWEH CAME DOWN TO SEE

[6-] the city and the tower

[5-] that the sons of the human being [‘âdâm] had built.

And YHWH said: ‘See! They are one people and they all have one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. Henceforth nothing will be impossible for them in what they promise to do.

[4-] Come! We will go down and confuse [nâblâh] their language

[3-] so that each one will not understand the language of his neighbour’.

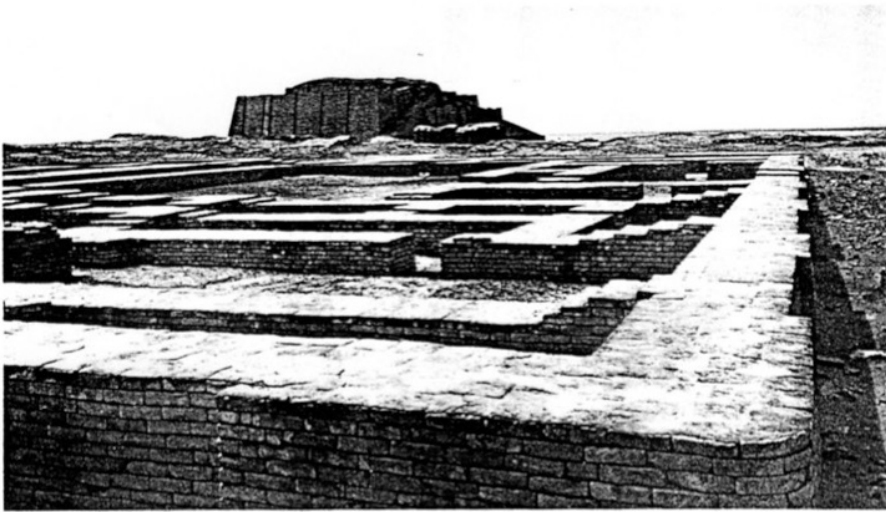
[2-] And YHWH scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth and they left off building the city. For this reason they called its name **BABEL**,

[1-] because there YHWH mixed up [balâl] the language of the whole world. From there YHWH scattered them over the face of the earth.

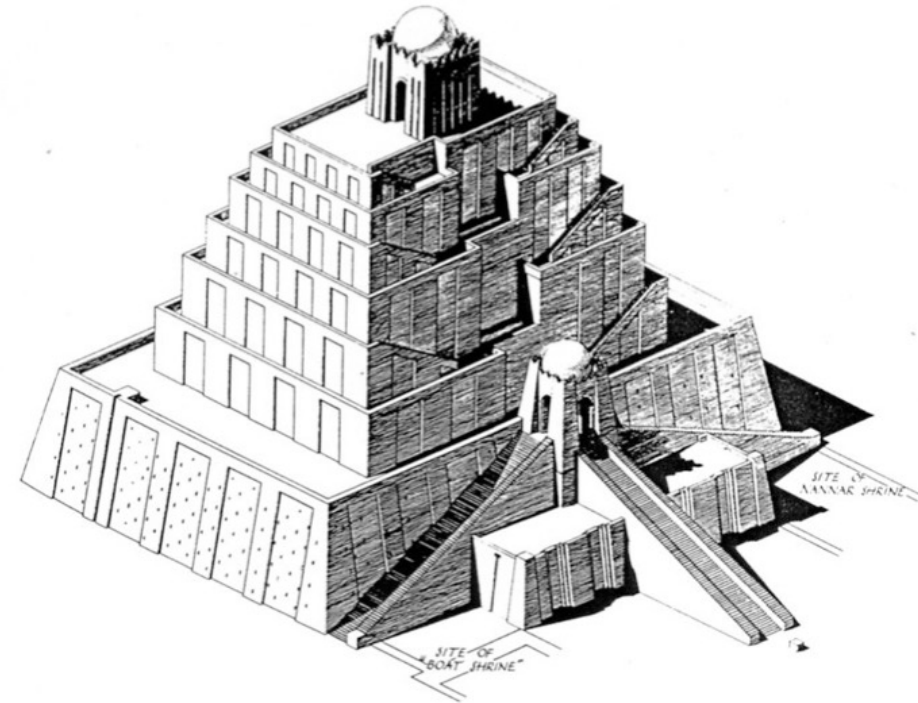
Reconstructed “Ziggurat” of Ur.

[=“Pinnacle” in Akkadian]

= artificial mountain for sanctuary to  
moon goddess : Nannar.



Artist's Impression:





The text is a condemnation of the pride and power of the kingdom of Babylon, attempting to crush subject peoples, including Judah.

In chapter ten we have been introduced to a list of many peoples, each with their own identity and language (see 10:5).

Babylon wants to impose its own gods and its own language on others, but God thwarts their efforts.

- The repetition of phrases in a reverse structure dramatises the truth that human action, when conceived without proper obedience to God, achieves the opposite result to that intended. The reversal comes from the action of God whose power cannot be usurped by mankind.
- They want to make a name for themselves (II:6). The name they make is confusion (babble) - a pun on the name Babylon.
- They are determined to reach the heavens by their own power, and to centre everything in Babylon. They fail.



- The satire on the death of the king of Babylon (Isaiah 14:13-15)
- ‘You said in your heart, “I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon; I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High.” But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit.’
- [Compare Ezekiel 28:2-9 on Tyre; and Ezekiel 31:1-14 on the pharaoh of Egypt]

- This story of Babel makes two links with history. Firstly there is the link with Babylon, and secondly, it is this confusion and scattering that God wishes to reverse when he calls Abraham out of the east to make him a great nation: 'All the tribes of the earth shall bless themselves by you' [Genesis 12:3].
- Abraham is chosen by God to show God's merciful design to call human beings out of the confusion effected by their sin into the sacred harmony of being God's holy people. Human beings cannot make their own way to heaven, but God can come down as he does on Sinai [Exodus 3 and 19].

The gathering together of mankind will happen in Jerusalem, not Babylon!

Isaiah 2:2-5 = Micah 4:1-5

‘In days to come the mountain of YHWH’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of YHWH, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” Out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of YHWH from Jerusalem.

Isaiah 2:2-5 = Micah 4:1-5 (continued)

He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in YHWH's light!'

## Zechariah 8:20-22

‘Thus says YHWH of hosts: “Peoples shall yet come, the inhabitants of many cities; the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, ‘Come, let us go to entreat the favour of YHWH, and to seek YHWH of hosts; I myself am going.’ Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek YHWH of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favor of YHWH.’

## Appendix. Linking Primeval Narrative and Patriarchal sagas (Genesis 11:10-26)

- The genealogy of Shem to Abram
- From the Priestly Redaction (6th Century Babylon) - God's blessing continues
- Transition from primeval narrative to the history of the patriarchs

- Like the genealogy from Adam to Noah (Genesis 5) : ten generations.
- The tenth of the earlier genealogy was Noah. The tenth here is Abram! Another new beginning!
- As in the earlier genealogy the numbers differ between the Hebrew, Samaritan and Greek versions. The sum total in the Hebrew MT is 390, in the Samaritan is 1041, in the Greek is 1270.
- Note the agreement with the Yahwist who also has Shem, Arpachshad, Shelah, Eber and Peleg (10:21-25).

**Genesis 11:10-19 – see Genesis 10:22-25 & Luke 3:34-35**

**These are the descendants of Shem.**

**When **Shem** was one hundred years old, he became the father of **Arpachshad** two years after the flood; and Shem lived after the birth of Arpachshad five hundred years, and had other sons and daughters.**

**When Arpachshad had lived thirty-five years, he became the father of Shelah; and Arpachshad lived after the birth of Shelah four hundred three years, and had other sons and daughters.**

**When **Shelah** had lived thirty years, he became the father of Eber; and Shelah lived after the birth of Eber four hundred three years, and had other sons and daughters.**

**When **Eber** had lived thirty-four years, he became the father of Peleg; and Eber lived after the birth of Peleg four hundred thirty years, and had other sons and daughters.**

**When **Peleg** had lived thirty years, he became the father of **Reu**; and Peleg lived after the birth of Reu two hundred nine years, and had other sons and daughters.**



Genesis 11:20-26 – see Luke 3:34-35

When Reu had lived thirty-two years, he became the father of **Serug**; and Reu lived after the birth of Serug two hundred seven years, and had other sons and daughters.

When Serug had lived thirty years, he became the father of **Nahor**; and Serug lived after the birth of Nahor two hundred years, and had other sons and daughters.

When Nahor had lived twenty-nine years, he became the father of **Terah**; and Nahor lived after the birth of Terah one hundred nineteen years, and had other sons and daughters.

When Terah had lived seventy years, he became the father of **Abram**, **Nahor**, and **Haran**.

Reu & Serug appear only in this genealogy.

Serug, Nahor and Terah are attested as place names, from the area near Haran in Syria.

## **Genesis 11:27-32 – the beginning of the sagas of the patriarchs**

**Now this is the story of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot.**

**Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans.**

**Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.**

**Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were two hundred five years; and Terah died in Haran.**

**There are problems in this association of Abraham with the famous city of Ur. As noted above Terah and Nahor are attested as place names, from the area near Haran in Syria. Furthermore Abraham is referred to as 'a wandering Aramean.'**

**(Deuteronomy 26:5)**

**P Genesis 11:10-26****J Genesis 10:22-25****Luke 3:34-36****SHEM****10:22****3:36**

son of Abraham,

**Arpachshad****10:22****3:36**son of Terah,  
son of Nahor,**Shelah****10:24****3:35**

son of Serug,

**EBER****10:21,24****3:35**son of Reu,  
son of Peleg,**Peleg****10:25****3:35**son of Eber,  
son of Shelah,**Reu****3:35**

son of Cainan,

**Serug****3:35**son of Arphaxad,  
son of Shem,**Nahor****3:34****Terah****3:34****ABRAM****3:34**

son of Noah, son of Lamech, son of Methuselah, son of Enoch, son of Jared, son of Mahalaleel, son of Cainan, son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God.

In the myths of the Ancient Near East, the story of the beginnings leads directly to the establishment of the monarchy. Their purpose was to provide a stable and divine foundation for the king's reign, supported by the cult. As we have already noted, the stories of the beginnings in Genesis do not take the form of myth. Their purpose is different.

The primeval narrative in Genesis does not reach a climax with king and cult. It introduces the patriarchs, the ancient ancestors of the people of Israel. The authors draw on stories handed down through the generations and re-tell them in terms that address the interests and concerns of their contemporaries.

Just as Christians read the Old Testament in the light of Jesus' revelation, so the people of Israel read these patriarchal stories in the light of the revelation given to Moses. They were a kind of 'Old Testament' for them in which they expected to find material that was a preparation for, but not always consistent with, their own religious practices as spelt out in the other books of the Torah.

This is particularly noticeable in the way God and God's relationship to human beings are portrayed in the patriarchal narratives. There is no sense of religious antagonism. Other nations are not rejected because they worship false gods. Everyone is assumed to be relating to the one God. This is true of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, but it is also true of Abimelech, a Canaanite king, and the Pharaoh of Egypt. Furthermore, God relates to people directly, without the mediation of priests or prophets. Cult is simple family cult, quite different from that prescribed in Mosaic Yahwism.

The patriarchal narratives are quite subtle theological reflections as they move from the 'once upon a time' portrayal of God in the primeval narrative, through the patriarchal period and up to the revelation to Moses.

Stories are meant to be listened to, not explained. Some explanation, however, is needed, because these stories found a fixed form some two and a half thousand years ago in a culture very different from our own. We are not simply listening to stories. We are reading an ancient report. Our hope is that, like the seeds discovered in the chambers of ancient Egypt, these stories will come alive again for us.

All we know of Abraham is from the texts we are about to read. There are no inscriptions, no documents outside the Bible, and no monuments that speak of him. Some of these stories may have inspired the people of Judah as they grew into a tribe, as they became a kingdom, as they found themselves caught between the aspirations of Egypt and the kingdoms of Mesopotamia, as they experienced the exile and were trying to rebuild after the exile. They have continued to inspire the Jewish people ever since. They were also sacred to those Jews who became disciples of Jesus and, through them, they have continued to be treasured as stories of the origin of the Christian community. Similarly for the people of Islam some centuries later. Let us, therefore, allow our imagination to be captured by these stories, in the hope that they may inspire us who 'share the faith of Abraham, the father of all of us'(Romans 4:16).



The stories that were handed down in the folklore and legends of Judah have been re-shaped to present Abraham as a model for those who are to be obedient to the Torah. Ezekiel tells us that those who stayed behind in Judah during the exile thought the land should remain in their hands: ‘the inhabitants of these waste places in the land of Israel keep saying, “Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many; the land is surely given us to possess”’(Ezekiel 33:24). The post-exilic authors want to show that Abraham is also the father of the returned exiles.

In reading these stories, we are in touch with the questions, the dreams, the hopes, the disappointments of post-exilic Judah. They have been through the destruction of their city and the terrible experience of exile. As they understood it, this was because they had broken the covenant made with Moses. It was important for them to remember that there was an older promise – an unconditional one given by God to the patriarchs: a promise made by God that transcended human fidelity or infidelity. Abraham believed it. So must they, for in their faith lay their hope.

Genesis 11:27-32 locates Abram and his wife Sarai in Ur of the Chaldeans

Abraham is linked to Shem through his father Terah (see Genesis 10:10-26), through Shem to Noah (Genesis 6:10), through Noah to Seth, and so to Adam (Genesis 5:1 - 6:8). The origins of the ancient father of Israel go back to the very beginnings of human history.

## Abraham 11:27 - 25:18

### Genesis 11:27-32

Now these are the descendants of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot. Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans. Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.

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