

Bible Study for March 24, 2021

[adapted from The Serendipity Study Bible]

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Read Genesis 11.1-9 [New English Translation with Footnotes]

The whole earth^[a] had a common language and a common vocabulary.^[b] ² When the people^[c] moved eastward,^[d] they found a plain in Shinar^[e] and settled there. ³ Then they said to one another,^[f] “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.”^[g] (They had brick instead of stone and tar^[h] instead of mortar.)^[i] ⁴ Then they said, “Come, let’s build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens^[j] so that^[k] we may make a name for ourselves. Otherwise^[l] we will be scattered^[m] across the face of the entire earth.”

⁵ But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the people^[n] had started^[o] building. ⁶ And the LORD said, “If as one people all sharing a common language^[p] they have begun to do this, then^[q] nothing they plan to do will be beyond them.^[r] ⁷ Come, let’s go down and confuse^[s] their language so they won’t be able to understand each other.”^[t]

⁸ So the LORD scattered them from there across the face of the entire earth, and they stopped building^[u] the city. ⁹ That is why its name was called^[v] Babel^[w]— because there the LORD confused the language of the entire world, and from there the LORD scattered them across the face of the entire earth.

Footnotes

- a. Genesis 11:1 **sn** *The whole earth*. Here “earth” is a metonymy of subject, referring to the people who lived in the earth. Genesis 11 begins with everyone speaking a common language, but chap. 10 has the nations arranged by languages. It is part of the narrative art of Genesis to give the explanation of the event after the narration of the event. On this passage see A. P. Ross, “The Dispersion of the Nations in Genesis 11:1-9,” *BSac* 138 (1981): 119-38.
- b. Genesis 11:1 **tn** *Heb* “one lip and one [set of] words.” The term “lip” is a metonymy of cause, putting the instrument for the intended effect. They

had one language. The term “words” refers to the content of their speech. They had the same vocabulary.

- c. Genesis 11:2 **tn** *Heb* “they”; the referent (the people) has been specified in the translation for clarity.
- d. Genesis 11:2 **tn** Or perhaps “from the east” (NRSV) or “in the east.”
- e. Genesis 11:2 **tn** *Heb* “in the land of Shinar.” **sn** *Shinar* is the region of Babylonia.
- f. Genesis 11:3 **tn** *Heb* “a man to his neighbor.” The Hebrew idiom may be translated “to each other” or “one to another.”
- g. Genesis 11:3 **tn** The speech contains two cohortatives of exhortation followed by their respective cognate accusatives: “let us brick bricks” (לְבַנִּים נִלְבְּנָה, *nilb^enah l^evenim*) and “burn for burning” (נִשְׂרַף לְשִׂרְפָה, *nir^efah lisrefah*). This stresses the intensity of the undertaking; it also reflects the Akkadian text which uses similar constructions (see E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* [AB], 75-76).
- h. Genesis 11:3 **tn** Or “bitumen” (cf. NEB, NRSV).
- i. Genesis 11:3 **tn** The disjunctive clause gives information parenthetical to the narrative.
- j. Genesis 11:4 **tn** A translation of “heavens” for שָׁמַיִם (*shamayim*) fits this context because the Babylonian ziggurats had temples at the top, suggesting they reached to the heavens, the dwelling place of the gods.
- k. Genesis 11:4 **tn** The form וְנַעֲשֶׂה (*v^ena’aseh*, from the verb עָשָׂה [*’asah*], “do, make”) could be either the imperfect or the cohortative with a *vav* (ו) conjunction (“and let us make...”). Coming after the previous cohortative, this form expresses purpose.
- l. Genesis 11:4 **tn** The Hebrew particle פֶּן (*pen*) expresses a negative purpose; it means “that we be not scattered.”
- m. Genesis 11:4 **sn** The Hebrew verb פָּצַע (*puts*, “scatter”) is a key term in this passage. The focal point of the account is the dispersion (“scattering”) of the nations rather than the Tower of Babel. But the passage also forms a polemic against Babylon, the pride of the east and a cosmopolitan center with a huge ziggurat. To the Hebrews it was a monument to the judgment of God on pride.
- n. Genesis 11:5 **tn** *Heb* “the sons of man.” The phrase is intended in this polemic to portray the builders as mere mortals, not the lesser deities that the Babylonians claimed built the city.

- o. Genesis 11:5 **tn** The Hebrew text simply has בָּנוּ (*banu*), but since v. 8 says they left off building the city, an ingressive idea (“had started building”) should be understood here.
- p. Genesis 11:6 **tn** *Heb* “and one lip to all of them.”
- q. Genesis 11:6 **tn** *Heb* “and now.” The foundational clause beginning with הֵן (*hen*) expresses the condition, and the second clause the result. It could be rendered “If this...then now.”
- r. Genesis 11:6 **tn** *Heb* “all that they purpose to do will not be withheld from them.”
- s. Genesis 11:7 **tn** The cohortatives mirror the cohortatives of the people. They build to ascend the heavens; God comes down to destroy their language. God speaks here to his angelic assembly. See the notes on the word “make” in 1:26 and “know” in 3:5, as well as *Jub.* 10:22-23, where an angel recounts this incident and says “And the LORD our God said to us.... And the LORD went down and we went down with him. And we saw the city and the tower which the sons of men built.” On the chiasmic structure of the story, see G. J. Wenham, *Genesis* (WBC), 1:235.
- t. Genesis 11:7 **tn** *Heb* “they will not hear, a man the lip of his neighbor.”
- u. Genesis 11:8 **tn** The infinitive construct לִבְנוֹת (*livnot*, “building”) here serves as the object of the verb “they ceased, stopped,” answering the question of what they stopped doing.
- v. Genesis 11:9 **tn** The verb has no expressed subject and so can be rendered as a passive in the translation.
- w. Genesis 11:9 **sn** *Babel*. Here is the climax of the account, a parody on the pride of Babylon. In the Babylonian literature the name *bab-ili* meant “the gate of God,” but in Hebrew it sounds like the word for “confusion,” and so retained that connotation. The name “Babel” (בָּבֶל, *bavel*) and the verb translated “confused” (בָּלַל, *balal*) form a paronomasia (sound play). For the many wordplays and other rhetorical devices in Genesis, see J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (SSN).

Questions to Consider

1. What experiences do you have with building projects or foreign languages? What frustrated you about them?
2. In our story from Genesis 1, why do they build this tower? Why is such unity wrong?

3. What does God do? Why? How would confusing their language fulfill God's covenant command in 9.1?
4. How is unity in Christ different from the unity at Babel?