



Genesis - Chapter Eleven

I. Genesis 1:1-11:26 - Primeval History (continues/concludes)

I.e Genesis 10:1-11:9 - The Descendants of Noah's Sons (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Eleven

This chapter is the transition from Primeval to Patriarchal history. It commences with the well known account of the attempts by the population of Babel or Babylon to build a tower that would reach the heavens. When God saw their intent he thwarted their efforts by confusing their language, thus producing multiple language types that exist in the world from the former common language that mankind had previously shared. Because of this confusion the people scattered even wider across the earth.

There follows a more detailed account of the descendants of Noah's son Shem, showing that it was through this line that the Hebrew nation would be born from one patriarch Abram, who would later become known as Abraham.

The chapter concludes with an account of the initial calling of Abram's family from their home in Ur of the Chaldeans, with details of who travelled as far as the city of Haran.

I.e. ii. Genesis 11:1-9 - The Tower of Babel

This episode is significantly more important than its length suggests. It presents a unified humanity using all its resources to establish a city that is the antithesis of what God intended when he created the world. The tower is a symbol of human autonomy, and the city builders see themselves as determining and establishing their own destiny without any reference to the Lord.

The tower story may also be a polemic against Mesopotamian mythology. Eridu Genesis, a fragmentary text found at Ur, Nippur and Nineveh, describes the

goddess Nintur's calling for humanity to build cities and to congregate in one place. Her desire, according to this text, is that humans be sedentary and not nomadic. God demands just the opposite so that the earth would become populated.

¹ Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.

Genesis 11:1

The opening description of the whole earth having one language indicates that the present episode is not placed chronologically after the events narrated in Chapter Ten, which specifically mention nations and languages. This incident, however, may have occurred during the broad period covered in Chapter Ten, especially if it is linked to the naming of Peleg in 10:25, refer to the comment on 10:21-32.

² And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.'

Genesis 11:2-4

The land of Shinar. Shinar was a term used also of Babylon (10:10). The multiplied descendants from the ark came together to build a great city and a tower; they did so in rebellion against God's command to spread out over the earth.

They had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Using baked bricks and asphalt for mortar, men built a tower that was both strong and waterproof, even as Noah used the same material in waterproofing the ark (6:14). Later Moses' mother used the same material in waterproofing Moses' basket (Exodus 2:3).

Come, let us build ourselves a city, and let us make a name for ourselves. The Babel enterprise is all about human independence and self-sufficiency apart from God. The builders believe that they have no need of God. Their technology and social unity give them confidence in their own ability, and they have high aspirations, constructing a tower with its top in the heavens: *<<Even though they mount up high as the heavens, and their head reaches to the clouds, they will perish for ever like their own dung; those who have seen them will say, "Where are they?">>* (Job 20:6-7). This tower was real. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus said the tower of Babel still stood in his day and he had seen it.

Contrary to God's plan that people should fill the earth, the city-building project is designed to prevent the population from being dispersed over the face of the whole earth. By showing God's continued interest in his creatures, this episode provides the setting for the call of Abram out of this very region, to be the vehicle of blessing to the whole world.

⁵ The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶ And the LORD said, 'Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.' ⁸ So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

Genesis 11:5-8

With irony, the narrator points out that it was necessary for the LORD to come down in order to see the city and the tower. Acknowledging the potential danger of a unified, self-confident humanity (v.6), God intervenes by confusing their language so that they cannot understand one another. This has the desired effect of dispersing the people throughout the world (vv.8-9).

Nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Humankind has shown itself to be capable of marvellous advancements in science, technology and medicine, yet evil intent often seems to come to the fore in far too many examples in history.

Come, let us go down. The use of the first person plural is generally accepted as another reference to the Trinity: <<*Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness'*>> (Genesis 1:26a).

⁹ Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Genesis 11:9

This verse links the name of the city Babel, i.e. Hebrew *babel*, with the verb *balal*, which means 'to confuse, to mix, or to mingle.' But *babel* is also the name used in the OT for the city of Babylon. As a city, Babylon symbolises humanity's ambition to dethrone God and make the earth its own; refer to Revelation Chapters 17-18.

From there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. Think what it was like for a family to leave the area of Babel and go out by themselves. They must look for a suitable place to live, and once they found it, they must exist by hunting and gathering, living in crude dwellings or caves until they could support themselves by agriculture and taking advantage of the natural resources. Families would multiply rapidly, develop their own culture, and their own distinctive biological and physical characteristics influenced by their environment. In the small population, genetic characteristics change very quickly, and as the population of the group grew bigger, the changes stabilised and became more or less permanent.

The whole account of what happened at Babel with its anti-God dictator, its organised rebellion against God, and its direct distrust of God's promise shows man has not become any better since the flood. Time, progress, government, and organisation have made man better off, but not better. Now God will begin to make man better, and he will start as he always starts: with a man who will do his will, even if he does not do his will perfectly. This man would be the patriarch of the Jewish nation, Abraham.

This scattering of the people is also an illustration of what would befall God's chosen people who broke their covenant promises with him, yet he promised to reconcile them to himself again in time: *<<When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and return to the LORD your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the LORD your God has scattered you>> (Deuteronomy 30:1-3), <<You have made us like sheep for slaughter, and have scattered us among the nations>> (Psalm 44:11), and God will judge those who oppose his chosen ones: <<I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat, and I will enter into judgement with them there, on account of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations>> (Joel 3:2a).*

I.f Genesis 11:10-26 - Descendants of Shem

Resembling the list of Adam's descendants in 5:3-31, the present linear genealogy traces Noah's line through Shem down to Terah, the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. While the pattern is almost identical to that used in Chapter Five, the final element, 'Thus all the days of A were Z years, and he died,' is missing. Also, unlike Chapter Five, no additional information is inserted. Consequently, the list moves swiftly from Shem to Terah.

While the periods mentioned are still unusually long, they gradually become somewhat shorter. The length of time during which these men live is much shorter than is recorded for men living before the flood. This is similar to the pattern found in a clay tablet from the Mesopotamian city of Uruk, called the Sumerian King List; refer to the comment on 5:1-32. It was inscribed by a scribe during the reign of King Utukhegal, about 2100BC. It tells of kings who reigned for extremely long times. A flood then came, and subsequent kings ruled for vastly shorter times.

¹⁰ These are the descendants of Shem. When Shem was one hundred years old, he became the father of Arpachshad two years after the flood; ¹¹ and Shem lived after the birth of Arpachshad for five hundred years, and had other sons and daughters.

¹² When Arpachshad had lived for thirty-five years, he became the father of Shelah; ¹³ and Arpachshad lived after the birth of Shelah for four hundred and three years, and had other sons and daughters.

¹⁴ When Shelah had lived for thirty years, he became the father of Eber; ¹⁵ and Shelah lived after the birth of Eber for four hundred and three years, and had other sons and daughters.

¹⁶ When Eber had lived for thirty-four years, he became the father of Peleg; ¹⁷ and Eber lived after the birth of Peleg for four hundred and thirty years, and had other sons and daughters.

¹⁸ When Peleg had lived for thirty years, he became the father of Reu; ¹⁹ and Peleg lived after the birth of Reu for two hundred and nine years, and had other sons and daughters.

²⁰ When Reu had lived for thirty-two years, he became the father of Serug; ²¹ and Reu lived after the birth of Serug for two hundred and seven years, and had other sons and daughters.

²² When Serug had lived for thirty years, he became the father of Nahor; ²³ and Serug lived after the birth of Nahor for two hundred years, and had other sons and daughters.

²⁴ When Nahor had lived for twenty-nine years, he became the father of Terah; ²⁵ and Nahor lived after the birth of Terah for one hundred and nineteen years, and had other sons and daughters.

Genesis 11:10-25

These verses are generally a repeat from 10:21-31 with expanded information.

²⁶ When Terah had lived for seventy years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

Genesis 11:26

The regular pattern of the genealogy is broken with the naming of Terah's three sons. Before this, only the son through whom the linear genealogy is traced is specifically named in each generation. Abram comes first in the list because the ongoing family line is traced through him.

II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History

The narrative now moves from the general survey of humanity to the specific family from which Israel comes. The narrative style becomes severely matter of fact. The narrator devotes much more time to describing the lives of the characters: whereas Chapters 1-11 covers many generations in only 11 chapters, the patriarchal history deals with only four generations in 39 chapters. It begins with Abraham and goes on to his son Isaac, and Isaac's two sons Jacob and Esau; the final section focuses on Jacob's sons, especially Joseph. Here the specifics of being Israel are made clear: the land, the people, the blessing, and the calling.

The Sinai or Mosaic covenant, which the first audience for these chapters receives, will provide the setting in which Israel is to put these patriarchal promises into practice. Throughout these chapters the readers will see how God has preserved the members of his chosen family, whose calling it is to walk with him, to be the headwaters of a special people and to be the channel by which blessing comes to the entire world.

II.a Genesis 11:27-25:18 - Abraham

This new heading, identified by the expression 'Now these are the descendants of,' introduces the next main section of Genesis. These chapters focus on the immediate family of Terah. Special attention is given to Abram because the unique family line of Genesis is continued through him.

II.a.i Genesis 11:27-32 - Descendants of Terah

Various details pertinent to understanding the subsequent narrative are given: the death of Lot's father, Haran (v.28); the relocation of the family from southern to northern Mesopotamia (v.31); and the inability of Abram's wife to have children (v.30).

²⁷ Now these are the descendants of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot.

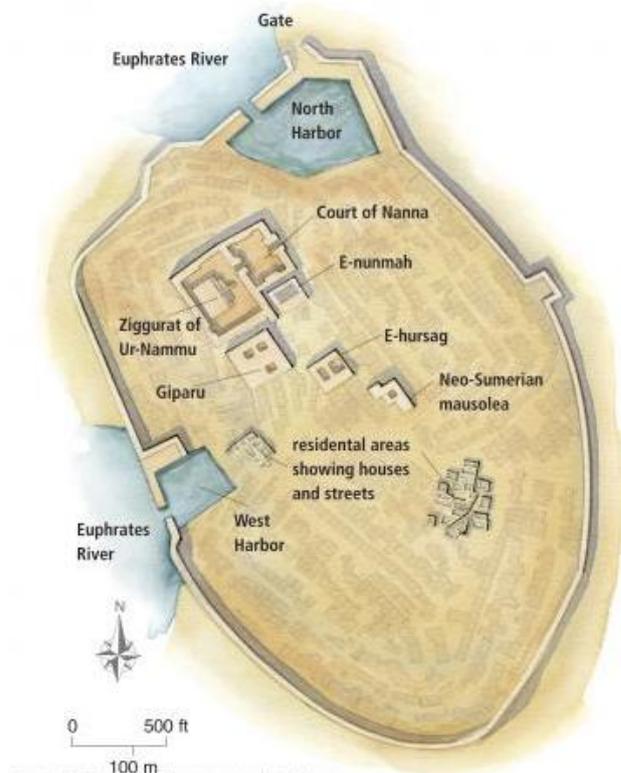
Genesis 11:27

Abram will later have his name changed to Abraham; refer to 17:5. Abram means ‘father’ and it must have seemed ironic to those meeting him to find that he remained childless for the first half of his long life.

²⁸ Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans.

Genesis 11:28

Ur of the Chaldeans is unquestionably the ancient city in southern Babylonia, the remains of which are located at Tell el-Muqayyar in modern Iraq.



The ancient city of Ur lies 186 miles or 300 km southeast of modern Baghdad on a bend of the original course of the Euphrates River. Major excavations took place at the site in 1922-1934 under the direction of Sir Leonard Woolley. Ur became an important city in Mesopotamia near the end of the third millennium BC.

The governor of Ur, a man named Ur-Nammu (circa 2113-2095BC), brought the city to great prominence. He took the titles ‘King of Ur, King of Sumer and Akkad.’

Thus was founded the Third Dynasty of Ur (2113-2006BC). This period was one of great peace and prosperity, the high point of the city’s existence.

This diagram of the city represents the Third Dynasty of Ur, and it includes a central palace and a temple complex. The latter has as its centre the Ziggurat of Ur-Nammu that is dedicated to the moon god Nanna. Ur was the birthplace of the Hebrew patriarch Abraham, and the plan represents the city that he would have been familiar with.

Archæological investigations by Leonard Woolley uncovered evidence of a highly developed urban culture in the time of Abram, a culture that developed around 2000BC. The term Chaldeans probably dates from the period 1000-500BC and has been added to distinguish this Ur from similarly named cities in northern Mesopotamia. Chaldeans refers to the Kaldu people who settled in southern Babylonia from about 1200BC onward.

²⁹ 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. ³⁰ Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.

Genesis 11:29-30

The name Sarai, which means 'contentious' is later changed to Sarah in 17:15. Sarai's barrenness is an obvious barrier to the continuation of Abram's family line. The initial barrenness of the patriarchs' wives is a recurring motif in Genesis; refer to 25:21 and 29:31.

³¹ 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.

Genesis 11:31

According to the Kultepe Texts from the 19th Century BC, i.e. texts composed by Assyrian traders who clearly understood such matters, Haran was an important crossroads and commercial centre in the ancient Near East.

Although Terah's ambition is to move his family from Ur to Canaan, they do not complete the journey but settle in northern Mesopotamia at Haran, the location in Turkey is now called Eskiharran or 'old Harran.' The spelling of the town name Haran in Hebrew is quite distinct from the name of Terah's third son.

This is the Bible's first reference to the land of Canaan. However the Ebla archives, found in northern Syria in the 1970s, contain clay tablets dating to circa 2300BC. They make mention of certain geographical places found in Scripture, such as Sodom and Zeboiim, two cities in the episode of the war of the kings (Genesis 14:1-16). In addition, the first time the name Canaan is used in extra-biblical literature is at Ebla, in tablets that predate the biblical writings by centuries.

³² The days of Terah were two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran.

Genesis 11:32

By way of completing this short introduction to Terah's family, the narrative records his death at the age of **two hundred and five**. If Abram was born when Terah was 70 years old (v.26), and if Abram was 75 years old when he departed for Canaan (12:4), then Terah died 60 years after Abram's departure ($70 + 75 + 60 = 205$). In Acts 7:4, however, Stephen says that Abram left Haran after the death of Terah. A simple way to resolve the chronological difficulty is to suppose that Stephen was following an alternative text, represented today in the Samaritan Pentateuch, which says that Terah died at the age of 145.

Abram Travels to Canaan (circa 2091/1925BC)

Abram was born in Ur, a powerful city in southern Babylonia. Abram's father, Terah, eventually led the family toward the land of Canaan but decided to settle in Haran. After Terah's death, the Lord called Abram to go **<<to the land that I will show you>>**, i.e. Canaan, which he promises to give to Abram's descendants.

