

Exegetical Notes – Genesis 11:1-9

“Babel”

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(God’s command to Noah when Noah left the ark was to be “fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth (Genesis 9:1, 7). Chapter 10 shows how the descendants of Noah filled the earth. As the descendants increased in number they grew apart as people. Chapter 11 indicates that their differences were both political and linguistic.)

Verses 1-2

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. ² As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

- Noah’s descendant spread out over the earth (see Genesis 10).
- As descendants of one man, Noah, they had a common language. Distance and associations created differences in accent and idiom among them, but they were still able to communicate with each other.
- Some of Noah’s descendants settled on a plain in the area known as Shinar. While “scholars” argue over where Shinar actually was, its location is unknown.

Verses 3-4

³ They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

- The people who settled in Shinar reasoned that they needed to do something to protect their national identity from destruction. They felt that other people would conquer them militarily and carry them off to distant places. That they reasoned like this means that people were no longer friendly. Warfare existed among them. The people of the earth no longer trusted God nor did they obey Him.

- To protect their national identity, these people resolved to build a city using the latest technology, bricks and mortar, rather than stones laid on stones. This would show that they were advanced beyond other people.
- In the center of their city they would build a tower which reached to the heavens. Many ancient cities had such structures. As with modern skyscrapers, the height of these towers showed the superiority of those who built them. They showed how advanced the people were because they were able to build such a building. At the top of the “tower” would be a shrine to the god of the place, not to YHWH, the God of Noah.
- The phrase, “make a name for ourselves” (verse 4) explains the purpose of all this. The purpose is to show the other people how advanced and powerful the people of Shinar were. By their own abilities they had built all of this. Their neighbors had better leave them alone.

Verses 5-7

⁵ But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. ⁶ The LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

- YHWH knew that the people of the earth had grown away from dependence upon Him. In the generations since Noah, the people of the earth had become independent of Him and self-serving. They sought to aggrandize themselves not God.
- Their common tongue made it possible for them to move away from God more quickly. They would quickly take control of things into their own hands without regard to God, God’s word, or God’s way. Humanity was quickly reverting to the place where it had been before the flood. They needed to feel God’s judgment again.
- But God had limited Himself when Noah came out of the Ark (see Genesis 8:22). God is always faithful to His word (see 2 Timothy 2:13). Even though humankind is unfaithful to God, God will not be unfaithful to His promises. He would not destroy the earth as he had done before. But the proud condition of rebellious men had to be confronted.
- God’s judgment was the confusion of languages. Humans would no longer speak one language. Their ambition to control their own destiny would be limited by their inability to communicate with each other. They would be

limited in their ability to develop plans to prosper themselves and so ignore God.

Verses 8-9

⁸ So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹ That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

- The people who lived on the plain of Shinar were scattered over the earth. Perhaps they were conquered by an opposing city before they could complete the tower. Something happened which prevented them from completing their grand plans. They stopped building their city before it was finished.
- There, YHWH confused the languages of the nations of people on the earth as an act of judgment and to limit the imaginings of their wicked hearts.
- Though “scholars” argue that the purpose of this story is to explain the origins of languages, something far more important than that happens here. YHWH acts as a correction in the affairs of humankind. He makes it impossible for them to proceed in their rebellion without destroying the whole earth. Those responsible, humans, suffer for their rebellion.
- The word “Babel” sounds like the Hebrew word “balal.” It is the root of the Hebrew name Babylon.

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