

• Nations with many languages

After the flood separate tribes established distinct identities in the 'fertile crescent'. ¹ God was bringing nations into being but this also involved the bringing into being of distinct languages. The clans that became small nations in the 'whole earth' developed different languages and soon could not communicate with each other. Genesis 11:1–9 refers to a period that is covered by the genealogy of Genesis 11:10–32 which must amount to about 3000 years. The change was not necessarily a miracle of a few seconds.

¹ Genesis 10:1

The Rise of the State

• Ordained by God

We are watching **the rise of the 'state', which is another institution ordained by God**. Different nations are coming into being speaking different languages. We have seen how **marriage** was part of creation. And we may have noticed how God operates with families. The **family** of Noah was rescued with Noah, and the writer has drawn attention to the way in which both Enoch and Noah began families. These are structures of society through which God works. Now we have another one of these structures; nations are ordained by God too. Genesis 10 has referred to many small nations; now Genesis 11:1–9 goes into the linguistic side of the matter.

Division in the human race

• Human arrogance grows

God restrains sin by allowing division in the human race. Genesis 11:1–4 pictures a further growth in human arrogance. We have seen it several times before. Men and women wanted to be like God ¹ but brought disaster into humankind. Then there was a further attempt to break out of the realm in which God had put them. They became vulnerable to '*angels who did not keep their position*'. ² Again it led to terrible disaster and God brought the flood to wipe humankind off the face of the earth in that area. Now something similar is happening again. What will God do this time?

¹ Genesis 3:5

² Jude 6

After the flood Shem's people had one language. ¹ Unity is a powerful source of effectiveness. Even without God a united people had great potential for achieving their hopes, but the hopes of these people were arrogant. They moved eastwards from the area of Ararat and reached the broad flat plains of the Mesopotamian valley between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris. 'Shinar' ² is in the region of (or identical to) Sumeria or Mesopotamia.

¹ Genesis 11:1

² Genesis 11:2

• United rebellion against God

Soon a powerful civilisation has arisen and again – for the third time in the book of Genesis – they want to ascend into heaven and get into God's paradise. A new kind of brick, and the strong adhesive that can be made from Sumerian soil, gives them a new idea. ¹

¹ 11:3

They started making a tower. Again the human race is inventive, but uses its inventiveness in the interests of ambition to become like God and satisfy a desire for fame. They want to maintain their unity but their aim is to overthrow the scattering that God has imposed on the nations ('*Fill the earth!*', says 1:28 and 9:1). To the new civilisation 'Babel' meant 'Gate of God'. To a Hebrew speaker it sounded as if it meant 'Confusion'. The people wanted a gateway into the presence of God; our writer says 'All they got was confused languages and confused nations!'

• Selfish striving for a great name

The people of Shem have been given another chance but being given a 'second chance' by God brought no great change. They did not want to be scattered. They wanted to get into heaven in their own way, and were

striving to get glory and a name for themselves, uniting in rebellion against God.

• *Pathetic attempts to get to God*

• *God's response*

God is continually watching over the sinfulness of humankind.¹ He comes down to investigate. They were trying to get **high** to God, but so pathetic are their attempts God has to come **down** to even see it!

¹ 11:5

God blocks all attempts to get to paradise that do not involve faith. God was not willing for humankind to get to the dwelling-place of God in any way except through Jesus, the seed of Abraham. In order to curtail the sinful ambitions of the human race God introduces nations and gives them different languages. It will never be possible for the whole world to reach unity. Again and again, failures in communication block the way to worldwide unity. Languages restrain man from being as united as he wants to be. They prevent a successful worldwide anti-God movement. This linguistic and multinational distinctiveness hinders men and women from successfully rising against God. Maybe it always will.

• *Abraham – God's way to a great name*

At the first rebellion of humankind ¹, God excluded them from Eden. At the second rebellion ², God brought the flood. Now in a third rebellion, what will God do? The rest of the Bible will tell us the answer. He will start afresh with Abraham and through Abraham send Jesus in whom all nations will be blessed. Through Abraham God will provide the very thing that the human race wanted, a name for itself. *'I will make your name great'*, God will say to Abraham, and 'a name' in the book of life will be the Christian's reward.

¹ Genesis 3

² Genesis 6

Reversal at Pentecost

• *Unity through grace*

The day of Pentecost is the reversal of the incident at Babel. Once again a representative selection of the world's nations were present (Acts 2:5; comparable to Genesis 11). Before 'languages' were given to divide, now 'tongues of fire' are given which gives 'languages' or 'tongues' and Babel is reversed! Before a united people were divided by diversity of language; now they ask *'How is it each of us hears them in his own language'*?¹ If before it was a miracle of division, Pentecost was a miracle of unity – the very thing the early peoples wanted! But this world-wide unity comes through grace, not through nature, through God's coming down, not through man's climbing up. We never do climb up! When all is over and sin and wickedness and death and Hades are all thrown into the lake of fire, the new Jerusalem will come down (Revelation 21:2) and paradise will be restored.

¹ Acts 2:8

• *God's coming down – not man's climbing up*



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