

Introduction

Three hundred and fifty years after the flood began, Noah died (Gen 9:28–29). Then, the scene shifted to seventy descendants of his three sons (Gen 10:1). The Table of Nations consists of a carefully crafted theological assertion,¹ rather than a comprehensive list.²

Signifying completeness,³ Japheth had seven sons and seven grandsons (Gen 10:2–5).⁴ Among the offspring of Ham are seven sons of Cush and seven sons of Mizraim (Egypt) (Gen 10:6–7, 13–14). Fourteen peoples are listed in Shem’s line down to the sons of Eber (Gen 10:21–25).⁵

A “son” (*ben*) can refer to a direct descendant, to distant offspring in a family lineage, or even to a person who signed a treaty.⁶ Some of the names in the Table of Nations represent specific men, while others signify people-groups or even locations.⁷ These peoples represented the major nations known to Israel which scattered across coastal areas, North Africa, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Palestine.⁸

By citing their linkage through Noah, this genealogy emphasizes the fundamental unity of those dwelling in the Ancient Near East (ANE).⁹ Yet, it also distinguishes between them in terms of their geographic locations, ethnicities, and political affiliations.¹⁰ Similarities of speech occurred across ancestral lines.¹¹ Although some exceptions exist, the Shemites lived as nomads, Hamites dwelt in cities, and the sons of Japheth lived along the distant coasts of the Mediterranean.¹²

Japheth’s sons included people-groups who had little contact with Israel (Gen 10:2–5).¹³ They lived to the north, spreading from Asia Minor to the Greek islands.¹⁴ Ham’s descendants included Israel’s nearest neighbors (Gen 10:6–21).¹⁵ Not only did they surround Israel,¹⁶ conflict often erupted between them.¹⁷ Typically, their cities represented the apex of social and political civilization in the ANE.¹⁸ These peoples lived in Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Arabia, and Mesopotamia.

The name “Nimrod” means “We shall rebel.”¹⁹ His empire encompassed all of Mesopotamia, from Babylon to Assyria. He achieved his power by military invasions, not merely by spreading peacefully into new regions.²⁰ The term used to describe him (*gibor*)

¹Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 162.

²Walton, *Genesis*, 367.

³Ryken, Wilhoit, and Reid, “Seven,” *DBI*, 775.

⁴Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 213.

⁵Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 164–5.

⁶H. Haag, “בן” (*ben*), *TDOT* 2:145–59, 150, 152.

⁷Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 165.

⁸Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 214.

⁹Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 163.

¹⁰B. Oded, “The Table of Nations (Genesis 10) – A Socio-Cultural Approach,” *ZAW* 98 (1986): 14, [Http://www.elamit.net/depot/resources/oded1986.pdf](http://www.elamit.net/depot/resources/oded1986.pdf).

¹¹Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 243.

¹²Oded, “The Table of Nations (Genesis 10)–A Socio-Cultural Approach,” 22, 30, [Http://www.elamit.net/depot/resources/oded1986.pdf](http://www.elamit.net/depot/resources/oded1986.pdf).

¹³Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 214.

¹⁴Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 334–5.

¹⁵Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 219.

¹⁶Matthews, Chavalas, and Walton, *IVPBBCOT*, Gen 10:29.

¹⁷Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 168.

¹⁸B. Oded, “The Table of Nations (Genesis 10)–A Socio-Cultural Approach,” *ZAW* 98 (1986): 28, [Http://www.elamit.net/depot/resources/oded1986.pdf](http://www.elamit.net/depot/resources/oded1986.pdf).

¹⁹Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 338.

²⁰Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 169.

refers to someone of surpassing might who has accomplished great deeds,²¹ to the point that even God acknowledged his abilities (Gen 10:8–12).²²

Consistent with Noah's curse, the genealogy of Canaan does not feature seven descendants. However, this did not affect his fertility.²³ Canaanites inhabited portions of the eastern Mediterranean (Gen 10:15–19).²⁴ Today this area lies within Israel, part of Syria, and Lebanon.²⁵

One line of descent receives considerable attention.²⁶ Although Eber lived at least three generations after Shem, his name occurs in the introduction.²⁷ His prominence likely derives from the link with the designation "Hebrew."²⁸

The division which occurred in his son's lifetime appears to refer to what occurred at Babel (Gen 10:25; Gen 11:1–9).²⁹ Peleg's descendants include the line of Abraham, through whom God would bring salvation to the world (Gen 3:14–15; Gen 11:18–26; Gen 12:1–3; Matt 1:1).³⁰

Thus, the Lord chose Israel as one nation among seventy to represent all humanity.³¹ Seventy contains ten sevens, the number signifying perfection.³² According to the *Mishnah*, the Israelites wrote all the words of the Mosaic law on an altar "in seventy languages" (*m. Sotah* 7.5). This implies that God holds all people-groups accountable, whether they view him as their Lord or not (Cf. Amos 9:7).³³

By sending out seventy missionaries years later, Jesus expressed his concern for every people-group in the world (Luke 10:1–2).³⁴ We all share a common origin, lending inherent dignity and value to everyone, for we all bear God's image, even after the fall (Gen 1:26–28; Gen 5:1–4).³⁵

A Plain in Shinar

1) Gen 11:1–2: The account of the city and tower in Babel brilliantly employs several literary devices, such as alliteration and double meanings. Just as with Noah's flood (Gen 6:10–9:19), this story appears as a chiasm, with the emphasis falling upon "The Lord came down" (F):³⁶

²¹H. Kosmala, "גַּבָּר" (*gabar*), *TDOT* 2:373–82, 373.

²²Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 169.

²³Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 330–1.

²⁴Walton, *Genesis*, 368.

²⁵Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 221.

²⁶Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 227.

²⁷Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 343.

²⁸Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, "עֵבֶר" (*ēber*), *BDB*, 720, <https://archive.org/stream/hebrewenglishlex00browuoft#page/720>.

²⁹Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 231.

³⁰Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 163.

³¹Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 214.

³²Ryken, et. al., "Seventy," *DBI*, 775–6, 775.

³³Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 174.

³⁴Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 411.

³⁵Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 346.

³⁶Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 234.

- A All the earth had one language (Gen 11:1)
 B They settled there (Gen 11:2)
 C They said to each other (Gen 11:3)
 D Come, let us make bricks (Gen 11:3)
 E A city and a tower (Gen 11:4)
 F The Lord came down (Gen 11:5)
 É The city and the tower (Gen 11:5)
 Ð Come...let us confuse (Gen 11:7)
 Ć They don't understand each other (Gen 11:7)
 Ĕ They dispersed from there (Gen 11:8)
 Á The language of the whole earth (Gen 11:9)³⁷

This last biblical narrative of primeval history parallels the account of the fall (Gen 3:1–13, 22–24) and the Lord's judgment upon humanity due to the violence of the sons of the gods (Gen 6:1–7).³⁸ Moses began by stating, "And it happened that all the earth [had] one language and one [set of] words. And they journeyed on the side of the East, and they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they remained there."

"The whole earth" could depict this as the universal experience of humanity.³⁹ However, several other possibilities exist.⁴⁰ In Hebrew, the same word denotes "earth" and "land" (*erets*). We cannot ascertain which meaning the author intended apart from the context of the passage.⁴¹ This event may include only the people of that region.

Except for Gen 10:32, the genealogy of Shem's descendants occurred just prior to this verse (Gen 10:21–31). Possibly, some of them settled in Sumer, where this narrative took place.⁴² On the other hand, people throughout the region may have utilized a trade language to facilitate communication, much like English serves people in disparate countries today.⁴³ In these cases, Gen 11 would follow the Table of Nations (Gen 10) in chronological order.

However, this account may indicate that Noah's sons had not yet separated into their people-groups.⁴⁴ In this view, Moses returned to a time before the Table of Nations existed.⁴⁵ After all, Gen 10 does speak of people-groups divided by clans and languages.⁴⁶ Many commentators view this passage as a flashback depicting the division of the world during Peleg's lifetime (Gen 10:25). Even after the flood cleansed the land of injustice, the earth's inhabitants remained tainted by sin (Gen 6:11–14; Gen 7:19–22; Gen 9:20–22).⁴⁷ By traveling "on the side of the East,"⁴⁸ these people moved far away from the promised land of Moses's era.⁴⁹ Similarly, God cast Adam and Eve out of Eden to the east (Gen 3:22–24).⁵⁰ After Cain murdered his brother, the Lord banished him to a land east of Eden (Gen 4:8–

³⁷Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 176.

³⁸Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 242.

³⁹Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 178.

⁴⁰Walton, *Genesis*, 371–2.

⁴¹J. Bergman and M. Ottosson, "עֶרֶץ" (*erets*) *TDOT* 1:388–405, 393.

⁴²John H. Walton, "The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications," *BBR* 5, no. 1 (1 September 1991):155–75, 173, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

⁴³Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 350.

⁴⁴Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 240.

⁴⁵Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 350.

⁴⁶Walton, *Genesis*, 371.

⁴⁷Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 175, 177.

⁴⁸Brown, Driver, and Briggs, "עֶרֶץ" (*min*), *BDB*, 577–83, 578, <https://archive.org/stream/hebrewenglishlex00browuoft#page/578>.

⁴⁹Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 238.

⁵⁰Walton, *Genesis*, 372.

16).⁵¹ The Table of Nations depicts some of Shem’s descendants as living in the east (Gen 10:30).⁵² However, that appears to be in Arabia.⁵³ In general, living in the east connotes that one does not experience God’s blessing (Gen 13:10–13; Gen 25:5–6; Gen 29:1).⁵⁴

That the wanderers “found” (*matsa*) a place to settle implies they had sought a suitable place to live.⁵⁵ In the middle of the fourth millennium BC, flood waters drained from southern Mesopotamia into the river system over the course of several hundred years.⁵⁶ This resulted in a broad, flat plain,⁵⁷ making the land desirable for new habitations.⁵⁸

Over the course of time, the name of this region changed from Sumer to Akkad to Babylonia.⁵⁹ Today, it lies near Baghdad in Iraq.⁶⁰ Understanding the culture and history of southern Mesopotamia sheds crucial light upon the events in this chapter.⁶¹ A Neolithic society called the “Ubaid culture” was the first to dwell in this area (6th–4th millennium BC).⁶² Sumerian literature cites Eridu as the oldest city. It dates to the late 6th millennium BC.⁶³ According to a 6th century BC Babylonian creation account, “All the lands were sea...Then Eridu was made.”⁶⁴ Close to 3700 BC, the Ubaid culture disappeared, replaced by an urban civilization.⁶⁵ By 3000 BC, a plethora of small villages, towns, and cities loomed over these plains.⁶⁶

a) Read Gen 11:1–2. Who do you think was involved in this migration? Why was dwelling in the East significant? How does the archaeological record reflect the biblical account?

Let Us Bake Bricks

b) Gen 11:3: The people who moved to Shinar (Gen 11:1–2) devised a plan. Moses reported, “They said to one another, ‘Come now, let us make bricks and let us burn them thoroughly.’ And they had for themselves brick for stone, and bitumen they had for mortar.”

Construction materials in Mesopotamia differed greatly from those available in Egypt and in areas close to Israel. By the end of the fourth millennium BC, Mesopotamians

⁵¹Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 238–9.

⁵²Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 352.

⁵³Gary H. Oller, “Mesha (Place),” *ABD* 4:708.

⁵⁴Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 178.

⁵⁵S. Wagner and H.-J. Fabry, “*מַצָּא*” (*matsa*), *TDOT* 8:465–83, 467.

⁵⁶Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 172, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

⁵⁷Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 239.

⁵⁸Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 172, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

⁵⁹Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 351.

⁶⁰James R. Davila, “Shinar (Place),” *ABD* 5:1220.

⁶¹Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 155, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

⁶²Jean-Claude Margueron, “Al Ubaid,” Paul Sager (Trans.), *ABD* 1: 141–2.

⁶³Jean-Claude Margueron, “Eridu (Place),” *ABD* 2:573.

⁶⁴Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation, 2nd Ed.* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1:10–12, 62, https://oi.uchicago.edu/sites/oi.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/shared/docs/misc_genesis.pdf.

⁶⁵Margueron, “Al Ubaid,” 1:142.

⁶⁶A. Kirk Grayson, “Mesopotamia, History of: History and Culture of Babylonia,” *ABD* 4:755–77, 757.

produced kiln-fired bricks for erecting temples, palaces, and other important buildings.⁶⁷ Kiln-fired brick readily absorbs water. Therefore, the masons used bitumen, a natural asphalt, to penetrate the adjacent surfaces.⁶⁸ This made a building stronger than stone.⁶⁹

Bitumen was a costly mortar, and kiln-firing took much longer than sun drying blocks of mud.⁷⁰ The scarcity of fuel added to the expense of this method.⁷¹ Therefore, even the grandest buildings used sun-dried brick for the interior walls.⁷² Ancient people often reused brick from abandoned structures. Consequently, most monumental architecture from this period no longer exists, apart from the rectangular foundations.⁷³

Nevertheless, the expensive materials which the immigrants to Shinar used hint at what they constructed.⁷⁴ Enuma Elish depicts Babylon as a place of rest and for Marduk's glory as a reward for defeating Tiamat, the cosmic water monster. After the battle, Marduk's fellow gods said:

“Now, O lord, thou who hast caused our deliverance, what shall be our homage to thee? Let us build a shrine whose name shall be called ‘Lo, a chamber for our nightly rest’; let us repose in it! Let us build a throne, a recess for his abode! On the day that we arrive we shall repose in it.” When Marduk heard this, brightly glowed his features, like the day, ‘Construct Babylon, whose building you have requested, let its brickwork be fashioned. You shall name it “The Sanctuary.”’

“The Anunnaki [gods] applied the implement. For one whole year they molded bricks. When the second year arrived, they raised high the head of [the tower] Esagila equaling Apsu [, the depth of the primordial waters]. Having built a stage-tower *as high as Apsu*, they set up *in it* an abode for Marduk, Enlil, (and) Ea. In their presence he was seated in grandeur...

“After they had achieved the building of [the tower] Esagila, all the Anunnaki [gods] erected their shrines. The three hundred Igigi) (heavenly spirits)...all of them gathered, the lord being on the lofty dais which they had built as his abode. The gods, his fathers, at his banquet he seated, ‘This is Babylon, the place that is your home!’”⁷⁵

People in the Ancient Near East (ANE) believed that the god who owned a temple inhabited it through the presence of an idol made in the god's likeness. If the god approved of the craftsman's work, he entered the statue.⁷⁶

After constructing a throne for the moon god Nanna in Ur, the king wrote this (ca. 1828 BC):⁷⁷

“I, Kudur-mabuk, humble shepherd, who stands in supplication for the shrine Ebabbar, when the gods...had given to me, on account of my order by the supreme decree of the gods Nanna and Utu, the true scepter suitable to lead the people...On account of this, as I made an ardent prayer...shining star(s) radiance...a...awe-inspiring...throne [was inlaid] with red gold...a

⁶⁷Walton, *Genesis*, 372.

⁶⁸J. Connan, “Use and Trade of Bitumen in Antiquity and Prehistory: Molecular Archaeology Reveals Secrets of Past Civilizations,” *Philos Trans R Soc Lond B Biol Sci*, no. 354 (29 January 1999): 33–50, 33, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1692448/>.

⁶⁹Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 164, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

⁷⁰Walton, *Genesis*, 372.

⁷¹Paul H. Seely, “The Date of the Tower of Babel and Some Theological Implications,” *WTJ* 63, no. 1 (1 September 2001): 15–38, 17, https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/tesd_hildebrandt/otesources/01-genesis/text/articles-books/seely_babel_wtj.htm.

⁷²John F. Robertson, “Temples and Sanctuaries: Mesopotamia,” *ABD* 6:372–76, 372–3.

⁷³Jean-Claude Margueron, “Babylon (Place),” *ABD* 1:563–5, 565.

⁷⁴Walton, *Genesis*, 372.

⁷⁵Speiser, trans., “Enuma Elish (The Creation Epic),” in *ANET*, 6:49–72, 68–9. Italics original.

⁷⁶Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*, 109.

⁷⁷William W. Hallo, ed., *The Context of Scripture: Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World (COS2)*. (Leiden; New York; Köln: Brill, 2000), 251.

statue of the god Nanna [whose] fo[rm] was fashioned correctly... A pair of protective genii ...[giving] good omens[...], being there daily...I set up on either side of it. I fixed them there here at the perimeter of that throne (area with their...stretched out towards the statue of me praying, as if (making) new *šuilā* prayers and entreaties.”⁷⁸

Inhabitants of the ANE considered worshiping an idol equivalent to adoration of the god whom the image portrayed. While it might not have looked exactly like the god, it could accomplish the deity’s work, including the protection of the city (Cf. Gen 1:26–28).⁷⁹

Read Gen 11:3. How does the brick-making technique used by those who moved to Shinar help us date this event? What do the types of construction materials imply regarding what they were building? Why would people in the Ancient Near East want a temple in their midst?

A Stairway to Heaven

c) Gen 11:4: The immigrants to Shinar (Gen 11:1–3) said, “Behold, let us build for ourselves a city and a tower with its top into the heavens. And let us make for ourselves a name, lest we be scattered on the surface of all the earth.” God took pleasure in Jerusalem. Therefore, he does not view constructing a city as inherently evil (Ps 48:1–3; Ps 69:34–36; 1 Ki 11:13).⁸⁰

However, the Lord hates human arrogance (Prov 8:13; 2 Ki 19:28).⁸¹ Nevertheless, he did not destroy Cain’s creation even though he named it after his son in an act of hubris (Gen 4:16–17). Consequently, understanding urbanization in Mesopotamia helps us to determine the nature of God’s concern with this endeavor.⁸² Early Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) cities were not primarily residential areas.⁸³ Instead, they functioned as public facilities for religious and economic development.⁸⁴ In some cases, the entire city consisted of a temple complex.⁸⁵

For example, the goddess Gula, also known as Baba, owned 11,000 acres in the city of Girsu. Her estate produced barley, wheat, vegetables, dates, dairy products, oil, fish, wool, hides, and reeds. This necessitated employing agricultural workers, bricklayers, carpenters, smiths, spinners and weavers, bakers, butchers, and those who worked with animals.⁸⁶ As a result, temples also operated as storage and distribution facilities (1 Chron 28:11–12; Neh 10:34–39).⁸⁷

⁷⁸Kudur-Mabuk, “Warad Sin (2.101B),” in *COS2*. ed. William W. Hallo; trans. I. Kärki and D. R. Frayne, 251–2.

⁷⁹Walton, *Genesis*, 130.

⁸⁰Walton, *Genesis*, 376.

⁸¹Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 183.

⁸²Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 167, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

⁸³Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 179.

⁸⁴Walton, *Genesis*, 372.

⁸⁵Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 179.

⁸⁶Robertson, “Temples and Sanctuaries: Mesopotamia,” *ABD* 6:374.

⁸⁷William A. Ward, “Temples and Sanctuaries: Egypt,” *ABD* 6:369–72, 371.

People built Eridu for this reason:⁸⁸

“[The goddess of birth] Nintur was paying attention, ‘Let me bethink myself of my humankind, (all) forgotten as they are; and mindful of mine, Nintur's, creatures let me bring them back, let me lead the people back from their trails. May they come and build cities and cult-places, that I may cool myself in their shade; may they lay the bricks for the cult-cities in pure spots, and may they found places for divination in pure spots!’”⁸⁹ The goddess ordered the construction of a city for her benefit.

General assemblies administrated early ANE cities.⁹⁰ Their members viewed what happened on earth as a reflection of the activities of the gods. This form of collaborative government affected religious beliefs.⁹¹ Therefore, people believed a divine assembly ruled over the universe.⁹² Mesopotamian divine councils included at least fifty-seven major gods and goddesses.⁹³

According to Enuma Elish, the gods responded to the rebellion of the water goddess in this way:

“They made ready to leave on their journey, all the great gods who decree the fates. They entered before Anshar [the god of heaven], filling [Ushshukinna, the Chamber of Destiny]. They kissed one another in the Assembly. They held converse as they [sat down] to the banquet. They ate festive bread, poured [the wine], they wetted their drinking-tubes with sweet intoxicant. As they drank the strong drink, [their] bodies swelled. They became very languid as their spirits rose. For Marduk, their avenger, they fixed the decrees.”⁹⁴

This divine council determined the fate of the gods and of everyone on earth.⁹⁵ Yet, these gods operated as even the worst of people do, reflecting humanity’s image (Cf. Gen 1:26).⁹⁶

Typically, “towers” (*migdal*) in the Old Testament refer to defensive battlements or watchtowers (Judg 9:50–53; 2 Sam 22:47–51; 2 Ki 9:17–18).⁹⁷ However, we have scant evidence for such architecture in Mesopotamia.⁹⁸ Equally imposing edifices in that region consisted of specialized temple structures.⁹⁹ “Ziggurat” appears to be an Akkadian term related to the verb “to be high.” No comparable buildings existed in Canaan.¹⁰⁰

Within a Mesopotamian temple complex, the ziggurat featured prominently.¹⁰¹ The earliest examples date to the late fifth millennium BC.¹⁰² These structures narrowed as they

⁸⁸Jean-Claude Margueron, trans. by Paul Sager, “Eridu (Place),” *ABD* 2:573.

⁸⁹Thorkild Jacobsen, “The Eridu Genesis,” *JBL* 100, no. 4 (1 December 1981): 513–29, 515.

⁹⁰Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 168, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

⁹¹E. Theodore Mullen, Jr., “Divine Assembly,” *ABD* 2:213–7, 213.

⁹²Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 168, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

⁹³Mullen, “Divine Assembly,” *ABD* 2:215.

⁹⁴Speiser, trans., “Enuma Elish (The Creation Epic),” in *ANET*, 3:129–38, 65–6.

⁹⁵Mullen, “Divine Assembly,” *ABD* 2:213.

⁹⁶Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 169, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

⁹⁷Walton, *Genesis*, 372–3.

⁹⁸Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 179.

⁹⁹Paul Zimansky, “Art and Architecture: Ancient Near Eastern Architecture,” *ABD* 1:408–19, 411.

¹⁰⁰Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 156, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

¹⁰¹Walton, *Genesis*, 373.

¹⁰²Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 157, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

rose into the sky,¹⁰³ lending a sense of infinite height as one stood at the base.¹⁰⁴ The dimensions of their bases ranged from twenty to ninety meters per side.¹⁰⁵ A letter from a visitor to the twenty-first century BC ziggurat in Ur depicts the wonder elicited by these monumental sites.¹⁰⁶

Ziggurats depict a clear relationship between ancient structures, urban planning, and religious beliefs.¹⁰⁷ Often, their builders erected them over earlier shrines while leaving some rooms available for temple functions.¹⁰⁸ A small chamber at the apex included a bed and a table.¹⁰⁹ People often painted the exterior of those small shrines with blue enamel to blend them with the heavenly dwellings of the gods.¹¹⁰

The cult celebrating the erotic relationship between Dumuzi and Inanna gained prominence in the city of Uruk.¹¹¹ Sumerians believed the continued fertility of their land depended upon the ritual reenactment of the marriage, death, and resurrection of Dumuzi. However, the rite centered upon cultic prostitution, rather than human sacrifice.¹¹² Inanna's ziggurat included a bridal chamber where a priestess engaged in mystical marriage with the king to renew the land's fertility. Only then could the soil produce abundant crops and the king renew his military strength.¹¹³

Surprisingly, those who constructed ziggurats filled the core of the main structure with dirt, rendering it unusable.¹¹⁴ Critically important, a staircase ran from the top to the bottom.¹¹⁵

Notably, the people building the tower in Shinar sought to make a tower with its top reaching into the heavens.¹¹⁶ While their desire to make a name for themselves reflects some hubris,¹¹⁷ this reflects standard terminology for ziggurat builders.¹¹⁸ Large platforms raised the bases of these temples high into the sky.¹¹⁹

Babylonian theology accounts for this architectural trend.¹²⁰ People constructed ziggurats to represent sacred mountains which connected heaven, the earth, and the underworld.¹²¹ The staircases permitted the gods to descend into the realm of humanity.¹²² Therefore, these temple towers enabled people to contact the gods.¹²³

¹⁰³D. Kellermann, “מִגְדָּל” (*migdal*) *TDOT* 8:69–73, 72.

¹⁰⁴Cheryl A. Thurlby, “File: Great Ziggurat of Ur.JPG,” Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Great_Ziggurat_of_Ur.JPG.

¹⁰⁵Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 157, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

¹⁰⁶Michael Taylor, “Letter from Iraq: The Ziggurat Endures,” http://archive.archaeology.org/1103/letter/american_soldier_ur_iraq.html.

¹⁰⁷Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 157, 165, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

¹⁰⁸Paul Zimansky, “Art and Architecture: Ancient Near Eastern Architecture,” *ABD* 1: 408–19, 411.

¹⁰⁹Walton, *Genesis*, 373.

¹¹⁰Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 179.

¹¹¹Pritchard, *ANET*, 638.

¹¹²Healey, “Fertility Cults,” *ABD* 2:792.

¹¹³Healey, “Fertility Cults,” *ABD* 2:792.

¹¹⁴Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 164, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

¹¹⁵Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 179.

¹¹⁶Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 353.

¹¹⁷Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 177.

¹¹⁸Walton, *Genesis*, 373.

¹¹⁹Zimansky, “Art and Architecture: Ancient Near Eastern Architecture,” 1:411.

¹²⁰Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 239.

¹²¹Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview*, 273.

¹²²Robertson, “Temples and Sanctuaries: Mesopotamia,” 6:375.

¹²³Robert P. Gordon, “Babel: Tower of,” *NIDOTTE* 4:428–30, 428.

According to the Eridu Genesis, “When the royal scepter was coming down from heaven, the august crown and the royal throne being already down from heaven, he (the king) regularly performed to perfection the august divine services and offices, laid the bricks of those cities in pure spots.”¹²⁴

Since ziggurats were usually built for one specific god, important cities might contain several of these structures. However, the patron deity of each municipality received the most prominent tower.¹²⁵ By looming over the surrounding buildings, a ziggurat assured the inhabitants of the god’s ability to enter their presence.¹²⁶ Usually, people built a temple next door as a place for worship, indicating that a ziggurat was intended only for the god’s use.¹²⁷

Some of the names of ziggurats emphasize their intended purpose. For example, the one later erected in Babylon was called, “The House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth.” One in Larsa was named, “The House of the Link between Heaven and Earth.”¹²⁸

An Akkadian myth recounts the journey of the goddess of death’s deputy from the underworld. It says:

“Namtar ascended the long staircase of the heave[ns]. When he reached the gate of [the gods] Anu, Enlil, and Ea, [An]u, Enlil, and Ea looked at him and (said), ‘[Wh]y dost thou come, Namtar?’ [He replied,] ‘Your daughter has sent m[e] with these words, “Seize that god and bring (him) to me!”’¹²⁹

The stairs of a ziggurat—in this case, one called, “Temple of the Stairway to Pure Heaven” in Sippar—enabled the goddess’s emissary to travel from the place of the dead to earth and then to the heavenly realm before making the return trip.¹³⁰ Priests provided food at the top of the ziggurat to refresh the traveling god.¹³¹ They hoped that the deity would then stop by the temple next door to receive the adoration of his people and give them his blessing.¹³² Such practices reflect the weaknesses of the Babylonian concept of gods.¹³³ In contrast, the Lord has no needs (Ps 50:7–15; Amos 5:21–24; Acts 17:22–26).

Understanding this cultural information helps us to comprehend the nature of the offense committed by those who migrated to Shinar. Simply building a monumental edifice did not trigger God’s wrath. What they constructed implied that the creator of the universe cannot survive without the assistance of humanity.¹³⁴ They reduced the Lord to their likeness.¹³⁵

Some commentators hold that the immigrants’ desire to avoid scattering contradicts God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen 1:28–30; Gen 9:1).¹³⁶ Yet, the Lord spoke those words in blessing, not as a command. Furthermore, that mandate involved reproduction, not merely spreading apart. According to Gen 10, they succeeded in that regard.¹³⁷ People belonging to nomadic and semi-nomadic societies tended to scatter by

¹²⁴Jacobsen, “The Eridu Genesis,” 518.

¹²⁵Walton, *Genesis*, 373.

¹²⁶Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 179.

¹²⁷Walton, *Genesis*, 373.

¹²⁸Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 179.

¹²⁹O. R. Gurney, trans., “Nergal and Ereshkigal,” in *ANET*, 5:14–17, 511.

¹³⁰Walton, *Genesis*, 374.

¹³¹Matthews, Chavalas, and Walton, *IVPBBCOT*, Gen 11:4.

¹³²Walton, *Genesis*, 374.

¹³³Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 169, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

¹³⁴Walton, *Genesis*, 377.

¹³⁵Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 169, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

¹³⁶Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 178.

¹³⁷Walton, *Genesis*, 375.

necessity.¹³⁸ For example, the sizes of Abraham’s and Lot’s flocks forced them to separate to find enough resources (Gen 13:5–7).¹³⁹

Urbanization permitted people to specialize into different trades, enabling them to pool resources and increase productivity.¹⁴⁰ By erecting fortified cities, they could also resist attacks.¹⁴¹ Therefore, the immigrants to Shinar sought to avoid dispersing by building a metropolis.¹⁴²

Read Gen 11:4. Why did people living in the ANE build cities? How do the architectural specifications of ziggurats fit with Babylonian theology? Do you make a similar error by molding God into your image when thinking about him? How can you combat that tendency?

A Deity Descends

d) Gen 11:5–7: Verse five comprises the center of the chiasm) in Gen 11:1–9.¹⁴³ Thus, this sentence forms the hinge of this account which altered human history.¹⁴⁴ This scene involves God’s heavenly council (Cf. Gen 1:26).¹⁴⁵ In keeping with the rest of Genesis, the Lord inspected human activity. Then he rendered judgment (Gen 3:8–19; Gen 4:9–16; Gen 18:20–21; Gen 19:24–25).¹⁴⁶

Moses reported, “And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of humanity (*adam*) had built. And the Lord said, ‘Behold, [there is] one people and one language for all of them, and this they began to do, and now nothing will be unattainable for them, all of which they purpose to do.’”

The ziggurat accomplished what the builders intended (Gen 11:4). A deity did indeed descend to them, even though he did not require the staircase.¹⁴⁷ However, their activity achieved much different results than they anticipated.¹⁴⁸ Just as in Gen 3:8–9, God already knew what the inhabitants of Shinar had done.¹⁴⁹ This passage highlights the Lord’s omnipotence and his sovereignty, in contrast to the vulnerability of the descendants of Noah (Gen 10:32).¹⁵⁰

¹³⁸Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 167, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

¹³⁹Walton, *Genesis*, 375.

¹⁴⁰Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 167, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

¹⁴¹Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 353.

¹⁴²Walton, *Genesis*, 375.

¹⁴³Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 354.

¹⁴⁴Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 236.

¹⁴⁵Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 240.

¹⁴⁶Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 180.

¹⁴⁷Walton, *Genesis*, 377–8.

¹⁴⁸Walton, *Genesis*, 377–8.

¹⁴⁹Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 240.

¹⁵⁰Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 180.

By using the word *am* for “people,” Moses emphasized their common descent from one male ancestor.¹⁵¹ They were indeed “sons of Adam.”¹⁵² Utilizing a single language increased their unity and effectiveness, enabling them to work together to build the city and a ziggurat.¹⁵³ Their attempt to make a stairway for a god to descend denigrated God’s capability.¹⁵⁴ The Lord recognized that these settlers crossed a firm boundary,¹⁵⁵ degrading his divine name.¹⁵⁶

Permitting this project to continue would produce dire consequences.¹⁵⁷ Humans would persist in infringing upon divine prerogatives.¹⁵⁸ Therefore, the Lord revealed himself in all his glory and holiness, far above all mortal attributes.¹⁵⁹

The builders had exhorted each other, saying, “Come, let us make bricks (*nilbenah*)” (Gen 11:3). In contrast, God employed word play with mocking irony.¹⁶⁰ He said, “Come now, let us go down and let us confuse (*nabelah*) there their language so they cannot understand a man’s language [from] his companion.” Concerning the identity of “us” in this verse,¹⁶¹ God was speaking to his heavenly court of angels (1 Ki 22:19–20; Job 2:1; Ps 89:5–7).¹⁶² This also aligns with the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) concept of a group of deities who confer to make decisions.

Enuma Elish describes a heavenly council in this way): “They made ready to leave on their journey, all the great gods who decree the fates. They entered before Anshar [the god of heaven], filling [Ubshukinna, the Chamber of Destiny]. They kissed one another in the Assembly. They held converse as they [sat down] to the banquet...For Marduk, their avenger, they fixed the decrees.”¹⁶³ This divine council determined the fate of the gods and of everyone on earth.¹⁶⁴

Some scholars object that it debases God to have him consult with created beings like angels (Isa 40:13–14). Yet, this is not something he must do, but rather how he chooses to operate (Gen 3:22–24; Gen 18:16–19; Gen 19:1).¹⁶⁵ Inviting the angelic court to assist him in confusing the tongues of the people-groups meshes well with the responsibilities of these heavenly beings.¹⁶⁶ According to other Old Testament texts, the Lord entrusted them with the care of the nations apart from Israel (Deut 32:8–9; Dan 10:13, 20–21; Dan 12:1).¹⁶⁷

On the surface, the method God chose to disrupt their plans seems surprising.¹⁶⁸ However, destroying the ziggurat would have failed to correct the root of the problem.¹⁶⁹ The

¹⁵¹W. Von Soden and E. Lipiński, “אָם” (*am*) TDOT 11:163–77, 165. Moses used the term *leom* (<https://archive.org/stream/hebrewenglishlex00browuoft#page/522>) (people) to emphasize the divergence between Jacob and Esau in Gen 25:23.

¹⁵²Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 240.

¹⁵³Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 180.

¹⁵⁴Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 240.

¹⁵⁵Walton, *Genesis*, 377–8.

¹⁵⁶Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 170, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

¹⁵⁷Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 354.

¹⁵⁸Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 177.

¹⁵⁹Walton, *Genesis*, 377–8.

¹⁶⁰Robert P. Gordon, “Babel, Tower of, Theology,” *NIDOTTE* 4:428–30, 428.

¹⁶¹Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 180. The first volume of this series explores this issue at length in the exegesis of Gen 1:26.

¹⁶²Walton, *Genesis*, 129.

¹⁶³Speiser, trans., “Enuma Elish (The Creation Epic),” in *ANET*, 3:129–38, 65–6.

¹⁶⁴Mullen, “Divine Assembly,” *ABD* 2:213.

¹⁶⁵Walton, *Genesis*, 129.

¹⁶⁶Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 241.

¹⁶⁷Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10–34:12*, 796.

¹⁶⁸Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 355.

¹⁶⁹Walton, *Genesis*, 378.

builders could have simply constructed another tower for the gods to reach down to them.¹⁷⁰ By demolishing their ability to communicate, the people could not continue to live in unity.¹⁷¹ In the ANE, people correlated the failure of a city with abandonment by its patron god.¹⁷²

According to the Lament for Sumer and Urim:

“[The god] An frightened the very dwellings of Sumer, the people were afraid. Enlil blew an evil storm; silence lay upon the city. Nintur bolted the door of the storehouses of the Land. Enki blocked the water in the Tigris and the Euphrates. Utu took away the pronouncement of equity and justice. Inana handed over victory in strife and battle to a rebellious land. Ningirsu poured Sumer away like milk to the dogs. Turmoil descended upon the Land, something that no one had ever known, something unseen, which had no name, something that could not be fathomed. The lands were confused in their fear. *The god of the city turned away, its shepherd vanished.*”¹⁷³

The concept of a language which encompassed the known world occurs in a twenty-first century BC Sumerian Epic.¹⁷⁴ According to Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta:

“In those days, there being no snakes, there being no scorpions, there being no hyenas, there being no lions, there being no dogs or wolves, there being no (thing) fearful or hair-raising, mankind had no opponents—in those days...(in) the (whole) compass of heaven and earth the people entrusted (to him) could address [the god] Enlil, verily, in but a single tongue.”¹⁷⁵

This work also addresses the confusion of languages.¹⁷⁶ It continues:

“In those days...having lordly bouts fought, having princely bouts fought, and having royal bouts fought, did Enki, lord of abundance, lord of effective command, did the lord of intelligence, the country’s clever one, did the leader of the gods, did the sagacious omen-revealed lord of Eridu, estrange the tongues in their mouths as many as were put there. The tongues of men which were one.”¹⁷⁷ This myth from Uruk appears to reflect an event from late in the fourth millennium BC.¹⁷⁸

Read Gen 11:5–7. Why didn’t the ziggurat work in the way that its builders intended? Who carried out this judgment? How do ANE texts reflect what happened in Babel? How do you picture the outcome of this event?

¹⁷⁰Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 355.

¹⁷¹Walton, *Genesis*, 378.

¹⁷²Mark A. Awabdy, “Babel, Suspense, and the Terah-Abram Narrative,” *JSOT* 35, no. 1 (1 September 2010):3–29, 25, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0309089210365960>.

¹⁷³Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford, “The Lament for Sumer and Urim,” lines 58–68, <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.2.3#>. Italics mine.

¹⁷⁴Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 236.

¹⁷⁵Thorkild Jacobsen, trans., “Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta” in *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World (COS)* (ed. William W. Hallo ed.; Leiden; New York: Brill, 1997) lines 135–40, 1:547.

¹⁷⁶Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 174, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

¹⁷⁷Jacobsen, trans., “Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta,” in *COS*, lines 141–55, 1:547–8.

¹⁷⁸Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 175, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

Dispersed over the Face of the Earth

e) **Gen 11:8–9:** In this final scene on the Plains of Shinar, the people experienced what they had worked so hard to avoid (Gen 11:1–7).¹⁷⁹ Moses reported, “Then the Lord caused them to be dispersed from there over the face of all the earth. And they ceased building the city.” This passage skips directly from God’s plan to the outcome of the cataclysm.¹⁸⁰ No longer able to communicate clearly with each other, the people naturally scattered.¹⁸¹

Then, Moses added a final comment. He wrote, “Therefore, its name was called Babel, because there Yahweh confused (*balal*) the speech of all the earth, and from there Yahweh caused them to be dispersed over the face of all the earth.” Those who intended to make a name for themselves succeeded, but not as they had hoped.¹⁸²

It appears that the oldest form of the name of the city was Babila. The Babylonians shifted the name slightly to *Bab-ili*, a meaning equivalent to “Gate of God.”¹⁸³ The identity of the one who gave the city a name similar in sound for the verb *balal* remains unclear.¹⁸⁴ Perhaps Nimrod founded it (Gen 10:8–12).¹⁸⁵ The best evidence places the date for Babel’s construction sometime in the fourth millennium BC.¹⁸⁶ However, since the original city failed, the confusion of tongues may have occurred centuries earlier.¹⁸⁷ Shifting water tables in the Euphrates River destroyed the archaeological strata, making a precise date based upon artifacts impossible. If this was indeed where the events of Gen 11 occurred, the city likely remained uninhabited for over a millennium.¹⁸⁸

According to tradition, Sargon I erected the city of Akkad over the ruins of Babel (ca. 2400 BC).¹⁸⁹ The earliest written documentation citing the city of Babylon consists of an inscription from the Akkadian ruler Shar-kali-sharri (ca. 2250 BC).¹⁹⁰ It says, “In the year in which Szarkaliszarri laid the foundations of the temples of the goddess Annunitum and of the god Aba in Babylon.”¹⁹¹

During the second and first millennia BC, Babylon reigned as the most famous metropolis in the Ancient Near East (ANE).¹⁹² Rome during the Middle Ages provides a good parallel in terms of Babylon’s importance.¹⁹³ In effect, Babylon signified the ANE culture of that era.¹⁹⁴ Nebuchadnezzar II (634–532 BC) rebuilt the temple tower in Babylon.¹⁹⁵ His military success and wealth enabled him to pursue grand construction projects (Dan 4:28–30).¹⁹⁶ He called the ziggurat he built Etemenanki (“The House that is the

¹⁷⁹Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 241.

¹⁸⁰Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 356.

¹⁸¹Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 170, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

¹⁸²Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 357.

¹⁸³Helmer Ringgren, “בָּבֶל” (*babel*), *TDOT* 1:466–9, 466–7.

¹⁸⁴Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 357.

¹⁸⁵Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 181.

¹⁸⁶Matthews, Chavalas, and Walton, *IVPBBCOT*, Gen 11:3.

¹⁸⁷Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 171, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

¹⁸⁸Walton, *Genesis*, 378.

¹⁸⁹D. J. Wiseman, “Babylon in the Old Testament,” *NBD* 110–2, 110.

¹⁹⁰Paul Delnero, “Babylon: Myth and Truth, an Exhibit at the Pergamon Museum,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 71, no. 3 (1 September 2008):181–4, 182.

¹⁹¹University of California at Los Angeles, “Agade Szarkaliszarri,” <http://cdli.ucla.edu/tools/yearnames/HTML/T2K4.htm>.

¹⁹²Margueron, “Babylon (Place),” *ABD* 1:563.

¹⁹³Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 178.

¹⁹⁴Margueron, “Babylon (Place),” *ABD* 1:563.

¹⁹⁵Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 237–8.

¹⁹⁶Grayson, “Mesopotamia, History of: History and Culture of Babylonia,” *ABD* 4:765.

Foundation of Heaven and Earth”).¹⁹⁷ This structure formed the landing site for the god Marduk.¹⁹⁸ Vegetation growing at the top of the ziggurat may have constituted the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.¹⁹⁹

Genesis 11:1–9 ridicules Babylon’s origin,²⁰⁰ making it synonymous with wickedness.²⁰¹ Hebrew prophets alluded to Babylon’s history when speaking against her kings. These rulers exalted themselves as gods (Isa 14:3–6, 12–17; Jer 51:53).²⁰² This stigma continued in the New Testament era, although by that time Babylon no longer functioned as a world power. Instead, the city name appears to cryptically refer to the dominant force of that age: Rome (1 Pet 5:13; Rev 14:6–8; Rev 17:1–6, 9).²⁰³

Here the primeval history of Genesis reaches its end.²⁰⁴ With the exception of a few individuals, Gen 4–11 reveals the deep corruption of humanity. Not until the call of Abraham several millennia later would the world obtain hope for redemption (Gen 12:1–3).²⁰⁵

Read Gen 11:8–9. In what sense was “Gate of God” an accurate name for Babylon? Why did the people of Babel scatter? How far did their migration extend? Why was this necessary? What does this text teach us about God’s purposes?

The Spirit Descends

2) Acts 2:1–3: This chapter inaugurates what Jesus promised the apostles after his resurrection (Luke 24:45–49; Acts 1:4–11; Luke 24:50–53).²⁰⁶ Indeed, Christ continued to orchestrate events on earth even after his ascension into heaven (Acts 2:22–36).²⁰⁷ Luke’s account begins by reporting on the activity of the disciples, stating, “And when the day of Pentecost had arrived, all of them were together in one place.”

The word translated as “had arrived” (*symplēroō*) also means “was fulfilled.”²⁰⁸ By employing this verb, Luke hinted at the importance of what occurred on that day (Cf. Luke 9:51).²⁰⁹ At last the true purpose of the Feast of Pentecost came to fruition: the reaping of the first fruits of the new age in salvation history (Acts 2:41–47; Rom 8:23).²¹⁰ From this time

¹⁹⁷Robertson, “Temples and Sanctuaries: Mesopotamia,” *ABD* 6:375.

¹⁹⁸Kellermann, “מִגְדָּל” (*migdal*), *TDOT* 8:72.

¹⁹⁹Grayson, “Mesopotamia, History of: History and Culture of Babylonia,” *ABD* 4:765.

²⁰⁰Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 178.

²⁰¹Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 245.

²⁰²Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 353.

²⁰³Duane F. Watson, “Babylon (Place),” *ABD* 1:563–6, 565.

²⁰⁴Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 245.

²⁰⁵Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Babel Account and Its Implications,” 170, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_1995_09_Walton_TowerBabel.pdf.

²⁰⁶Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, 164.

²⁰⁷Alan J. Thompson, *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus: Luke’s Account of God’s Unfolding Plan* (ed. D. A. Carson; NSBT; Nottingham; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos; InterVarsity Press, 2011), 50.

²⁰⁸Arndt, Danker, and Bauer, “σμπληρώω” (*symplēroō*), *BDAG*, 959.

²⁰⁹William J. Larkin Jr, *Acts* (IVPNTCS; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), Acts 2:1, electronic ed.

²¹⁰Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 131, note 7.

forward, the Holy Spirit marked God’s people with his intimate presence (John 14:16–27; Rom 8:9–11; 2 Cor 1:21–22).²¹¹

Pentecost (*pentēkostē*) means “fiftieth.”²¹² On the fiftieth day after the early harvest festival—which had coincided with Passover (<http://www.jewfaq.org/holidaya.htm>)—Israelites presented the first fruits of the barley harvest to the Lord (Lev 23:15–21).²¹³ The Old Testament (OT) calls this celebration “the feast of weeks” or “the day of the first fruits” (Exod 23:14–17; Exod 34:22; Deut 16:1, 9–12).²¹⁴ Just as Passover foreshadowed the redemption to come by Christ’s death and resurrection, so the Feast of Weeks preceded the first fruits of the salvation we enjoy (Rom 8:16–17; 2 Cor 1:21–22).²¹⁵

By the time of Christ, many Jewish people associated this festival with a commemoration of Moses receiving the law at Mount Sinai. This was due to the close dates on their calendar (Exod 12:17–18; Exod 19:1).²¹⁶ Thus, the timing of this event implies that life in the Spirit supersedes living according to the Mosaic law (Rom 7:4–6; Rom 8:1–4; Gal 5:18).²¹⁷ The Essenes of Qumran performed the rites of a Feast of the Renewal of the Covenant on the same day as Pentecost (1 QS 1:16–2:25).²¹⁸

On that Pentecost, Jesus began a new covenant for the last days (Acts 2:14–21).²¹⁹ Many Israelites viewed the age to come this way:²²⁰

“[The hea]vens and the earth will listen to his Messiah, and none therein will stray from the commandments of the holy ones. Seekers of the Lord, strengthen yourselves in His service! All you hopeful in (your) heart, will you not find the Lord in this? For the Lord will consider the pious and call the righteous by name. Over the poor his spirit will hover and will renew the faithful with his power. And he will glorify the pious on the throne of the eternal Kingdom, he who liberates the captives, restores sight to the blind, straightens the b[ent]” (Ps 146:7–8).²²¹

Likewise, when the apostles asked Jesus about restoring the kingdom to Israel, he had responded by saying, “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you” (Acts 1:6–8).²²² Christ linked the arrival of the kingdom of God with the coming of the Spirit.

As Jesus instructed them before his ascension, his followers—both male and female—were meeting together regularly in Jerusalem.²²³ Most likely, this occurred in the upper room where they had celebrated the Last Supper (Luke 22:7–22; Acts 1:12–15).²²⁴ Luke wrote, “And it happened suddenly: from heaven a noise like a rushing, violent wind. And it filled the whole house where they were sitting, and there appeared to them divided tongues, just like fire. And it settled on every one of them.”

²¹¹Ajith Fernando, *Acts* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 90.

²¹²Arndt, Danker, and Bauer, “πεντηκοστή” (*pentēkostē*), *BDAG*, 795.

²¹³Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 130–1.

²¹⁴F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 49–50.

²¹⁵Larkin, *Acts*, Ac 2:1.

²¹⁶Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts: Expanded Digital Edition* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), Acts 2:1.

²¹⁷Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 131.

²¹⁸Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 54, https://archive.org/stream/pdfy-Uy_BZ_QGsaLiJ4Zs/The%20Dead%20Sea%20Scrolls%20%5BComplete%20English%20Translation%5D#page/n109.

²¹⁹Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:1.

²²⁰Keener, *IVPBCNT*, Acts 2:1–4.

²²¹Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 4Q521, Frag. 2, 244–5, https://archive.org/stream/pdfy-Uy_BZ_QGsaLiJ4Zs/The%20Dead%20Sea%20Scrolls%20%5BComplete%20English%20Translation%5D#page/n469.

²²²Keener, *IVPBCNT*, Acts 2:1–4.

²²³Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:1. The verb “were meeting” occurs in the imperfect tense, which refers to a continuous or repetitive action in the past.

²²⁴Larkin, *Acts*, Acts 2:1.

Visual and auditory signs accompanied this supernatural event.²²⁵ Typically, the same Greek word (*pneuma*) denotes wind, breath, spirit, and the Spirit.²²⁶ The relatively rare word Luke used here (*pnoē*) refers strictly to wind or breath. However, it can have the nuance of the “breath of life,” as in the Greek translation of Gen 2:7 and in Acts 17:25.²²⁷ Even so, this rushing wind arrived with, and symbolized, the Holy Spirit.²²⁸ The noise was “like” (*hōsper*) a rushing, violent wind, not an actual gale.²²⁹

Jesus used a similar analogy in his conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:1–8). When the Spirit came, he arrived with power.²³⁰ Sound filled a dwelling large enough to seat 120 people.²³¹ In the OT, the Lord usually arrived with a wind (2 Sam 22:7–11; Ps 104:1–4; Ezek 1:4).²³² The phrase commonly translated “cool of the day” (*leruakh hayom*) in Gen 3:8 also means “wind of the storm.”²³³

Concerning Babel (Gen 11:1–9), Josephus (37–100 AD) reported, “The Sibyl also makes mention of this tower, and of the confusion of the language, when she says thus, ‘When all men were of one language, some of them built a high tower, as if they would thereby ascend up to heaven, but *the gods sent storms of wind* and overthrew the tower.’”²³⁴

During Israel’s exile, Ezekiel received a vision foretelling God’s restoration of his people.²³⁵ When Ezekiel prophesied to the wind, it entered the dry bones covered with flesh, reviving them with new life from the Spirit (Ezek 37:1–14).²³⁶

Like Luke’s description of the wind, he called the divided tongues (*diamerizō glōssa*) “like” fire.²³⁷ The imagery connotes flickering flames.²³⁸ God’s presence often resembled fire (Exod 3:1–4; Exod 40:33–38; Dan 7:9–10). When the Lord delivered the law to Moses, the entire mountaintop blazed (Exod 19:16–19; Exod 24:17–18).²³⁹ Such fire could portend judgment (Lev 10:1–2; Num 16:1–2, 35; Isa 66:15–16; 1 Cor 3:10–15). Yet, flames also effected purification (Num 31:21–23).²⁴⁰

The Jewish philosopher Philo (20 BC–40 AD) wrote this regarding Moses’s reception of the law:

“And a voice sounded forth from out of the midst of the fire which had flowed from heaven, a most marvelous and awful voice, *the flame being endowed with articulate speech in a language familiar to the hearers*, which expressed its words with such clearness and distinctness that the people seemed rather to be seeing than hearing it. And the law testifies to the accuracy of my statement, where it is written, ‘And all the people beheld the voice most evidently’ [Exod 20:18]. For the truth is that the voice of men is calculated to be heard; but that of God to be really and truly seen.

²²⁵Larkin, *Acts*, Acts 2:1.

²²⁶Arndt, Danker, and Bauer, “πνεῦμα” (*pneuma*), *BDAG*, 832–6, 832.

²²⁷Eduard Schweizer, “πνοή” (*pnoē*), *TDNT*, 6:453.

²²⁸Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 50.

²²⁹Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 132.

²³⁰Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 50.

²³¹Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:2.

²³²Larkin, *Acts*, Acts 2:1.

²³³Walton, *Genesis*, 224.

²³⁴Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 1.118,

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0146%3Abook%3D1%3Awhiston%20chapter%3D4>. Italics mine.

²³⁵Keener, *IVPBCNT*, Acts 2:2.

²³⁶Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 50.

²³⁷Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 132.

²³⁸Arndt, Danker, and Bauer, “διαμερίζω” (*diamerizō*), *BDAG*, 233–4, 233.

²³⁹Keener, *IVPBCNT*, Acts 2:3.

²⁴⁰Keener, *IVPBCNT*, Acts 2:3.

“Why is this? Because all that God says are not words, but actions which the eyes determine on before the ears. It is, therefore, with great beauty, and also with a proper sense of what is consistent with the dignity of God, that the voice is said to have come forth out of the fire; for the oracles of God are accurately understood and tested like gold by the fire.

“And God also intimates to us something of this kind by a figure. Since the property of fire is partly to give light, and partly to burn, those who think fit to show themselves obedient to the sacred commands shall live for ever and ever as in a light which is never darkened, having his laws themselves as stars giving light in their soul. But all those who are stubborn and disobedient are forever inflamed, and burnt, and consumed by their internal appetites, which, like flame, will destroy all the life of those who possess them.”²⁴¹

Israel’s prophets proclaimed that their messiah would come with fire. He would purge all unrighteousness and purify his people (Isa 4:2–6; Isa 9:1–7; Mal 3:1–6).²⁴² John the Baptist identified Jesus as the one they sought (Matt 3:11–14).²⁴³

Luke engaged in word play by calling the flames “tongues of fire.” Their appearance coincided with the disciples’ ability to communicate in languages unknown to them.²⁴⁴

Likewise, when the Holy Spirit descended upon Israel’s camp, seventy elders began prophesying (Num 11:23–29). Later in this chapter, Peter cited the fulfillment of Joel’s prediction as evidence of the arrival of the last days (Joel 2:26–32; Acts 2:17–18).²⁴⁵

This visual manifestation of the Spirit rested upon each one of the believers in that area.²⁴⁶ All God’s people, ranging from the eleven apostles to the lowest slave, received the presence of the Spirit.²⁴⁷ Unlike the arrival of God at Sinai, neither fear nor trembling ensued (Exod 20:18–21). Instead, the recipients declared the mighty deeds of God (Acts 2:5–11).²⁴⁸ By his Spirit, God transformed Peter from a man who denied knowing Jesus to an orator who spoke powerfully in Christ’s name (Luke 22:54–62; Acts 2:22–36).²⁴⁹

a) Read Acts 2:1–3. Why did all the believers gather in Jerusalem? What made the feast of Pentecost the appropriate time for the Holy Spirit to arrive? How did this event fulfill OT expectations? What change did the arrival of the Spirit make in the disciples? How does the presence of the Spirit affect your life?

Speaking Other Tongues

b) Acts 2:4: Luke continued his report on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–3). He wrote, “And all were filled of the Holy Spirit, and they began to speak other tongues even as the Spirit was

²⁴¹Philo, *On the Decalogue*, in *The Works of Philo*, 3:11.46–9, 146–7, <https://archive.org/stream/theworksofphiloj03yonguoft#page/146>. Italics mine.

²⁴²Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:3.

²⁴³I. Howard Marshall, “Acts,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids; Nottingham: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), 531.

²⁴⁴Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:3.

²⁴⁵Marshall, “Acts,” *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 531.

²⁴⁶Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:3.

²⁴⁷Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 132.

²⁴⁸Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:3.

²⁴⁹Fernando, *Acts*, 90.

giving them [the ability] to speak.” Being filled with the Spirit empowers us for the Lord’s use. He enables us to bear witness via acts of service or speaking (Luke 1:13–17; Acts 4:5–13, 29–30; Acts 9:17–22; Acts 13:8–12).²⁵⁰

The verb which Luke used here (*pimplēmi*) conveys greater intensity than another word which also means “be filled” (*plēroō*).²⁵¹ Elsewhere in Acts, Luke employed the phrases “receiving the Spirit” and “being baptized by the Spirit” as synonyms for “being filled” (*pimplēmi*) (Acts 1:4–5; Acts 10:44–48; Acts 11:15–18).²⁵²

Paul used the verb *plēroō* when he admonished believers to be continually filled with the Spirit,²⁵³ resulting in giving thanks and mutual submission (Eph 5:18–21).²⁵⁴ Thus, someone already filled with the Spirit (*pimplēmi*) can receive renewed or added filling (*plēroō*) for a special task, for harmony with people, and for communion with God (Luke 4:1–14; Acts 6:1–8; Acts 7:55–60).²⁵⁵

In Greek, a “tongue” (*glōssa*) can refer to the physical organ, an established language, or an ecstatic religious utterance.²⁵⁶ Paul commanded that those in congregations who “speak in tongues not of humanity” should do so only in the presence of an interpreter (1 Cor 14:1–19).²⁵⁷ The adjective “other” (*heteros*) tongues confirms that Luke referred to existing languages.²⁵⁸

During the Feast of Pentecost, the Spirit enabled the believers to speak in human languages unknown to them.²⁵⁹ Aside from that day, the Lord has not granted speaking in tongues as a universal spiritual gift (Cf. 1 Cor 12:4–11, 27–31).²⁶⁰ This event began a new era in God’s kingdom,²⁶¹ a reversal of what transpired in Babel (Gen 11:1–9).

Read Acts 2:4. In what way did the experience of believers on the day of Pentecost differ from what happens today? What effect does being filled with the Holy Spirit have upon a person? How did you initially experience being filled by the Spirit? When are you especially aware of the Spirit’s presence?

A Bewildered Crowd

c) Acts 2:5–8: Here the scene shifts to those outside the building where the disciples gathered (Acts 1:12–14; Acts 2:1–4).²⁶² Luke reported, “And there were in Jerusalem Jewish people residing, devout men (*aner*) from all the nations under heaven. When this sound occurred, the

²⁵⁰Gerhard Delling, “πίμπλημι” (*pimplēmi*), *TDNT* 6:128–34, 130.

²⁵¹Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:4.

²⁵²Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 133.

²⁵³Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, 94.

²⁵⁴Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 133.

²⁵⁵Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 133.

²⁵⁶Arndt, Danker, and Bauer, “γλῶσσα” (*glōssa*), *BDAG*, 201–2.

²⁵⁷Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 52.

²⁵⁸Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 132–3.

²⁵⁹Larkin, *Acts*, Acts 2:1.

²⁶⁰Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 132–3.

²⁶¹Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 132–3.

²⁶²Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:5.

crowd gathered, and they were bewildered because each one was hearing them speaking in his own language.”

The verb which Luke employed (*katoikeō*) can mean “to live in a locality for any length of time.”²⁶³ Therefore, the people mentioned here could fall into several categories.²⁶⁴ Some resided there permanently after returning from the nations where their ancestors had been exiled (Cf. Acts 6:9).²⁶⁵ Pious retirees often wished to live their last days in Jerusalem and be buried there.²⁶⁶ Supporting this, Greek inscriptions appear on one-third of the burial boxes found in that city.²⁶⁷

As one of the three required feasts (Exod 23:14–17), a significant number of visitors celebrated Pentecost in Jerusalem.²⁶⁸ Some scholars estimate that approximately a million pilgrims attended that festival each year.²⁶⁹ Only in Jerusalem could they participate in the rites which God commanded (Num 28:26–31; Deut 12:10–14).²⁷⁰

Among New Testament authors, only Luke used the word translated as “devout” (*eulabēs*) (Luke 2:25–32; Acts 8:1–2; Acts 22:12).²⁷¹ It seems to refer to those who kept the Mosaic law.²⁷² Although the widespread inclusion of gentiles did not occur until later (Acts 10), these pious Jewish men in Jerusalem represented the known world (Acts 2:9–11).²⁷³ A crowd gathered when the people heard Christ’s disciples speaking their local languages.²⁷⁴

According to Luke, “They were amazed and astonished (*syncheō*), saying, ‘Behold, are not all these speaking Galileans? How are we hearing each one his own language in which we were born?’” Luke used the same word (*syncheō*) to describe the reaction at Pentecost which appears in the Greek translation of Gen 11:7).²⁷⁵ This allusion—coupled with the abundance of people-groups with various languages and dialects—points to an intentional linkage with Gen 10–11:9.²⁷⁶

Israelites easily recognized a Galilean accent (Luke 22:59).²⁷⁷ People from Galilee tended to drop certain letters, which could lead to difficult communication.²⁷⁸ That contributed to the perception of that region as a backwater.²⁷⁹ Yet, the disciples expressed themselves clearly in tongues known only in far-off parts of the world.²⁸⁰ Even today, God continues to use those whom society devalues to accomplish great things by his Spirit (1 Cor 1:26–31).²⁸¹

During the seventh century BC, Aramaic became the language of Israel, Syria, and Mesopotamia. It remained the primary spoken tongue of Israel through the period of the early church.²⁸² Alexander the Great’s army introduced Koine Greek throughout the Ancient Near

²⁶³Arndt, Danker, and Bauer, “κατοικέω” (*katoikeō*), *BDAG*, 534.

²⁶⁴Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:5.

²⁶⁵Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: a Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 135.

²⁶⁶Fernando, *Acts*, 88–9.

²⁶⁷James D.G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem: Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 246, note 21.

²⁶⁸Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 53.

²⁶⁹Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:5.

²⁷⁰Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 54.

²⁷¹Result of Logos 7 word study on “εὐλαβής” (*eulabēs*).

²⁷²Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:5.

²⁷³Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 55.

²⁷⁴Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 54.

²⁷⁵Result of Logos 7 word study on συγγέω (*syncheō*).

²⁷⁶Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, 202.

²⁷⁷Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 54.

²⁷⁸Larkin, *Acts*, Acts 2:5.

²⁷⁹Fernando, *Acts*, 89.

²⁸⁰Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 54.

²⁸¹Fernando, *Acts*, 97.

²⁸²Stephen A. Kaufman, “Languages: Aramaic,” *ABD* 4:173–8, 173.

East as far as the Indus River in the latter half of the fourth century BC.²⁸³ Those living closer to Rome, from Spain to France, spoke Latin.²⁸⁴

Except for merchants and international traders, people expected those native to Jerusalem to understand only Hebrew, Aramaic, and perhaps Greek (Acts 21:37–40).²⁸⁵ At Pentecost, worshipers from far-flung parts of the world heard relatively uneducated people proclaim God’s great deeds in their local tongues (Cf. Acts 4:13).²⁸⁶ Peter declared that this miraculous speech resulted from the Lord granting the gift of prophecy to his disciples (Acts 2:16–18).²⁸⁷

The Lord suddenly removed the communication barriers which he erected in Babel (Gen 11:1–9).²⁸⁸ In Shinar, confusion reigned because the speech of others became indecipherable. At Pentecost, bewilderment arose due to a clear transmission of information.²⁸⁹ This event led to the formation of a new segment of humanity, the church of God.²⁹⁰ The Lord had begun to fulfill his promise to Abraham (Gen 12:1–3).²⁹¹

Read Acts 2:5–8. Who was in Jerusalem? Why were people shocked by this event? How does it relate to what happened in Babel?

Babel Reversed

c) Acts 2:9–12: After recounting the event at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–8), Luke listed three people-groups followed by nine regions of the world and then another two people-groups. He reported the crowd’s words as, “[We are] Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and those residing [in] Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt, and the parts of Libya near Cyrene, and those visiting from Rome—Jewish people and proselytes—Cretans and Nabataeans. We hear them speaking in our tongues of the greatness of God.” Overall, this series of locations begins in the east and moves counterclockwise,²⁹² with Judea appearing in the middle (Cf. Ezek 5:5).²⁹³

When the Jewish historian Josephus (37–100 AD) wrote his Table of Nations based upon Gen 10, he gave Judea a similar placement.²⁹⁴ A German map from 1581 illustrates this

²⁸³Gerald Mussies, “Languages: Greek,” *ABD* 4:195–203, 197.

²⁸⁴F. F. Bruce, “Languages: Latin,” *ABD* 4:220–2, 220.

²⁸⁵Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:7–8.

²⁸⁶Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:7–8.

²⁸⁷Keener, *IVPBBCNT*, Acts 2:4–13.

²⁸⁸Fernando, *Acts*, 90.

²⁸⁹Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 136.

²⁹⁰Fernando, *Acts*, 90.

²⁹¹Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, 164.

²⁹²Larkin, *Acts*, Acts 2:5.

²⁹³Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:8.

²⁹⁴Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 1.122–39.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0146%3Abook%3D1%3Awhiston+chapter%3D6>.

concept of Jerusalem as the center of the world.²⁹⁵ Luke mentioned Rome far to the west before returning close to the point of origin in Jordan.²⁹⁶ All these nations contained significant Jewish populations.²⁹⁷

In the eighth and seventh centuries BC, Assyria exiled Israelis across the Euphrates River to Parthia, Media, Elam, and Mesopotamia (2 Ki 17:6, 22–23).²⁹⁸ Babylon added to their numbers in the sixth century BC (2 Ki 24:10–16). Although Cyrus of Persia authorized the exiles' return to Judah in 539 BC, many Jewish people remained in their new lands (Ezra 1:1–6; Ezra 2:64–65; Esth 3:6).²⁹⁹ Cappadocia, Pontus, Phrygia, and Pamphylia all fall within modern Turkey. Paul covered much of this territory during his first missionary journey (Acts 13–14).³⁰⁰

In ca. 213 BC, the Seleucid king Antiochus III wrote this letter:³⁰¹
 “Having been informed that a sedition is arisen in *Lydia and Phrygia*, I thought that matter required great care; and upon advising with my friends what was fit to be done, it hath been thought proper to remove two thousand families of Jews, with their effects, out of

Mesopotamia and Babylon, unto the castles and places that lie most convenient; for I am persuaded that they will be well-disposed guardians of our possessions, because of their piety towards God, and because I know that my predecessors have borne witness to them, that they are faithful, and with alacrity do what they are desired to do.

“I will, therefore, though it be a laborious work, that thou remove these Jews, under a promise, that they shall be permitted to use their own laws. And when thou shalt have brought them to the places forementioned, thou shalt give everyone of their families a place for building their houses, and a portion of the land for their husbandry, and for the plantation of their vines; and thou shalt discharge them from paying taxes of the fruits of the earth for ten years; and let them have a proper quantity of wheat for the maintenance of their servants, until they receive bread corn out of the earth; also let a sufficient share be given to such as minister to them in the necessaries of life, that by enjoying the effects of our humanity, they may show themselves the more willing and ready about our affairs. Take care likewise of that nation, as far as thou art able, that they may not have any disturbance given them by anyone.”³⁰²

Egypt had hosted a Jewish population since the early sixth century BC (Jer 44:1). Their numbers swelled after Alexander the Great conquered that country and founded Alexandria in 331 BC.³⁰³ Philo (20 BC–40 AD), a native of Alexandria, reported, “Jews who inhabited Alexandria and the rest of the country from the Catabathmos on the side of Libya to the boundaries of Ethiopia were not less than a million of men.”³⁰⁴

Cyrene served as the capital of a Roman province in modern Libya.³⁰⁵ Josephus (37–100 AD) wrote this about Ptolemy I (ca. 367–282 BC), “When he was desirous to secure the government of Cyrene, and the other cities of Libya, to himself, he sent a party of Jews to

²⁹⁵University of Southern Maine, “Die Ganze Welt in ein Kleberblatt Welches in der Stadt Hannover Meines Lieben Vaterlandes Wapen,” <http://www.oshernmaps.org/search/zoom.php?no=315#img0>.

²⁹⁶Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:8.

²⁹⁷Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 136.

²⁹⁸Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 55–6.

²⁹⁹Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 55–6.

³⁰⁰John B. Polhill, *Paul and His Letters* (Nashville: B & H, 1999), 100.

³⁰¹Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 57.

³⁰²Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 12.3.4,

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0146%3Abook%3D12%3Awhiston%20chapter%3D3%3Awhiston%20section%3D4>.

³⁰³Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 57.

³⁰⁴Philo, “Against Flaccus,” in *The Works of Philo Judaeus* (trans. Charles Duke Yonge; London: H. G. Bohn, 1854–90), 6.43, <https://archive.org/stream/worksofphilojuda04phil#page/60/mode/2up>.

³⁰⁵W. Ward Gasque, “Cyrene (Place),” *ABD* 1:1230–1, 1230.

inhabit in them.”³⁰⁶ Luke mentioned Jewish people from Cyrene fairly often (Luke 23:26; Acts 6:9; Acts 11:19–20; Acts 13:1).³⁰⁷

The visitors from Rome likely consisted of Jews born in there.³⁰⁸ A Jewish colony began in the empire’s capital in the second century BC.³⁰⁹ By the time of Christ, 10,000–60,000 Jews resided in Rome.³¹⁰ They worshiped in at least eleven synagogues.³¹¹ At the end of Luke’s report in Acts, Paul reached the capital (Acts 28:16, 30–31).³¹² Some of these visitors at Pentecost may have returned to Rome testifying to Christ’s resurrection, as the Jews there heard the news prior to Paul’s arrival (Acts 28:17–22).³¹³

Suetonius (ca. 69–130/140), a Roman historian, noted that Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in 49 AD because they “were continually making disturbances at the instigation of one Chrestus.”³¹⁴ Most likely, this refers to the preaching of the gospel by Christians from a Jewish background.³¹⁵ The emperor’s death five years later automatically repealed the edict (Acts 18:2; Rom 16:3).³¹⁶

Luke added a note that these Romans included “both Jews and proselytes.” Proselytes (*proselytos*) consisted of gentiles who fully converted to Judaism.³¹⁷ The final steps to become a proselyte included circumcision for men, ritual purification in a bath, and the offering of a sacrifice at the temple.³¹⁸ Not surprisingly, more women chose to join the Jewish faith. Men tended to remain at the lesser rank of “God-fearers.”³¹⁹ Jews in Rome seem to have sought converts more fervently than those living elsewhere.³²⁰

Concerning adult converts, the satirist Juvenal (ca. 55–127 AD) complained: “Then there are those that, blessed with a father who reveres the Sabbath, worship only the clouds in the sky and its spirit, who draw no distinction between the pork from which their father had to abstain, and human flesh, and *who swiftly rid themselves of even their foreskins*. It’s their custom to ignore the laws of Rome, the Judaic Code being that which they study, adhere to, and revere; the Pentateuch, the mystic scroll handed down by Moses.”³²¹

The rationale behind Luke’s pairing of Cretans (Caphtorim) and Nabataeans, a subset of Arabs, appears to come from the Greek translation of the name of Ishmael’s oldest son Nabaioth (Gen 25:12–13).³²² That would make both nations descendants of *Mitsraim* (Egypt)

³⁰⁶Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.44,

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0216%3Abook%3D2%3Awhiston+section%3D4>.

³⁰⁷Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 57.

³⁰⁸Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:9–10.

³⁰⁹Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 57.

³¹⁰Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:9–10.

³¹¹Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 58.

³¹²Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 136–7.

³¹³Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:9–10.

³¹⁴Suetonius, “Divus Claudius,” 25.4,

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0132%3Alife%3Dcl.%3Achapter%3D25>.

³¹⁵ Dunn, “Romans, Letter to the,” *DPL*, 852–3.

³¹⁶ Keener, “Romans Situation,” *IVPBBCNT*, Rom.

³¹⁷Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 58.

³¹⁸Paul F. Stuehnenberg, “Proselyte,” *ABD* 5:503–5, 504.

³¹⁹Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 58.

³²⁰Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 58.

³²¹Juvenal, *The Satires* (trans. A. S. Kline; 2011), 14:96–103,

http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/JuvenalSatires14.htm#anchor_Toc285119331.

³²²Brannan, et al., *The Lexham English Septuagint*, Gen 25:13.

(Gen 10:13–14). Consequently, people regarded them as related nations in Jesus’s day,³²³ although current linguistic evidence indicates otherwise.³²⁴

Nabataeans lived in an area from the Red Sea to the Euphrates River, with Petra as their capital.³²⁵ They played an enormous role in the intertestamental history of Palestine by supporting the Maccabean Revolt.³²⁶ In Jesus’s era, Herod Antipas divorced the daughter of a powerful Nabataean king to marry Herodias (Mark 6:17–18).³²⁷

By the time of Christ, Jewish people had spread throughout the known world. According to Philo, Herod Agrippa I (41–44 AD) wrote this:

“Concerning the holy city...[it] is my native country, and the metropolis, not only of the one country of Judaea, but also of many, by reason of the colonies which it has sent out from time to time into the bordering districts of Egypt, Phoenicia, Syria in general, and especially that part of it which is called Coelo-Syria, and also with those more distant regions of Pamphylia, Cilicia, the greater part of Asia Minor as far as Bithynia, and the furthest corners of Pontus. And in the same manner into Europe, into Thessaly, and Boeotia, and Macedonia, and Aetolia, and Attica, and Argos, and Corinth and all the most fertile and wealthiest districts of Peloponnesus.

“And not only are the continents full of Jewish colonies, but also all the most celebrated islands are so too; such as Euboea, and Cyprus, and Crete. I say nothing of the countries beyond the Euphrates, for all of them except a very small portion, and Babylon, and all the satrapies around, which have any advantages whatever of soil or climate, have Jews settled in them.”³²⁸

When considering Luke’s rationale for including these names, some scholars point solely to the return of Jews to Israel (Cf. Isa 11:11).³²⁹ Many experts note the similarity between this list in Acts 2 and the Table of Nations (Gen 10).³³⁰ The Lord gathered individuals from the scattered nations of Gen 10–11:9 and enabled them to hear the gospel in their own languages.³³¹ In a sense, God fulfilled Acts 1:8 at Pentecost.³³² Soon the good news would spread even further, reaching even the gentiles (Acts 10).³³³ They, too, received the message of Christ’s sinless life, sacrificial death, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of the Father (Acts 13:44–49; Acts 15:12–18; Phil 2:5–11).³³⁴

Given the close literary connection between the Table of Nations, the events of Babel, and God’s promise to bless all people-groups through Abraham (Gen 10:1–12:3), Luke’s incorporation of all three themes in Acts 2:1–11 seems deliberate.³³⁵ On that day in 30 AD, the Lord reversed his act of judgment which fell upon Noah’s descendants in Babel.³³⁶ Through the Spirit’s power, the language barrier dividing humanity fell (Acts 2:37–47).³³⁷

³²³Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:11.

³²⁴David F. Graf, “Nabateans,” *ABD* 4:970–3, 970.

³²⁵Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 58.

³²⁶Graf, “Nabateans,” *ABD* 4:970.

³²⁷Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 58–9.

³²⁸Philo, “On the Embassy to Gaius,” in *The Works of Philo Judaeus* (trans. Charles Duke Yonge; London: H. G. Bohn, 1854–90), 36.281–2, <https://archive.org/details/worksofphilojuda04phil/page/160>.

³²⁹Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:8.

³³⁰Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:8.

³³¹Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, 202.

³³²Larkin, *Acts*, Acts 2:1.

³³³Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, 164.

³³⁴Schnabel, *Acts*, Acts 2:11.

³³⁵Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, 165.

³³⁶Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 59.

³³⁷Fernando, *Acts*, 91.

God began to assemble one body of people from a multiplicity of nations, races, and tongues: the church of God (Eph 3:1–11; Rev 5:6–10; Rev 7:9–12).³³⁸

Read Acts 2:9–11. Who was in Jerusalem during Pentecost? Why were these people astonished to hear people from Galilee speaking in their languages? How did Luke incorporate the themes of Gen 10–12:3 into his account? Why do you think he did this? What does Acts 2 teach us about relationships among those who are living by the Spirit?

3) As we have reached the end of Moses’s account of primeval history, discuss some of the insights you have gained from Gen 4–11. How has this study affected your life?

³³⁸Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, 165.