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At the Crossroads of Biblical Studies and Linguistics: An Exegesis of Genesis 10:1-11 :9

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Contents

Abstract

In the book of Genesis, one of the longest genealogies in the Bible is followed by a narrative about a city and a tower called Babel located in southern Mesopotamia. In this account, God confuses the original common language of humankind at Babel, and from there, people spread throughout the world speaking their diverse languages. However, archaeologists and linguists have found that languages change gradually over time and that people began migrating across the world some 50,000 years ago from eastern Africa. At first glance, there seems to be a conflict here between the Bible and the sciences. But when one assumes that God accommodated to the biblical audience's Ancient Near Eastern context, doing an exegetical study of Genesis 10:1-11:9 can resolve this apparent conflict between science and faith.

I. Introduction

The biblical book of Genesis contains a multitude of stories that still speak from their
3,000-year-old context. Two stories follow the famous account of Noah's Flood: one of the
longest genealogies in the Bible and the episode about a city and a tower called Babel. At this
point in the narrative of Genesis, all humankind is descended from Noah and his family, so they
naturally speak the same language. In the story about Babel, God confuses this common speech,
and from this city and tower, people spread throughout the world speaking their diverse
languages. Although this passage has much to say about theology and humans' actions in
relation to God, it seems to conflict with the findings of archaeology and linguistics about human
migration and language change. The former says that people have inhabited the entire known
world for at least 10,000 years, and the latter says languages change on their own very gradually.

The biblical text claims that a worldwide flood wiped out all life on earth in recent
prehistory, and that all people alive today are descendants of those who survived it and migrated
from southwest Asia after Babel. Present-day archaeology, however, concludes differently.
Christian geologist David Young explains:

> Archeology has firmly demonstrated that the civilization described in Genesis 4 was in
> place by at least 6000 B.C., thus constraining the biblical deluge to a date more recent
> than that, and evidence associated with the Gilgamesh epic seems to imply that the
> biblical deluge would have to have occurred closer to 3000 B.C. Archeological evidences
> rules out the occurrence of a widespread deluge ten or twenty thousand years ago. Most
> of those who support the notion that a deluge occurred at that more distant date are
> seeking to establish the viability of an event that, even if confined to the Near East, could
> have destroyed the whole human race. But archeological investigations have established
> the presence of human beings in the Americas, Australia, and southeastern Asia long
> before the advent of the sort of Near Eastern civilization described in the Bible and thus
> long before the biblical deluge could have taken place.[1]

Uninterrupted human communities had been established across the globe before Noah's Flood,

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[1] Davis A. Young, *The Biblical Flood: A Case Study of the Church's Response to Extrabiblical Evidence*
(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 242.

and thus before the subsequent dispersion of peoples at Babel. Historical clues in the text date

the Babel event to not much earlier than 3,000 BCE, a date far too recent to explain human

migration from modern-day Iraq to Australia, Argentina, and Africa. However, this apparent

conflict between science and faith can be resolved by assuming that God accommodated to the

biblical audience's Ancient Near Eastern context. An exegetical study of Genesis 10:1-11:9,

then, is in order to show how to resolve this tension.[2] Afterward, an overview of historical

linguistics will be given followed by a synthesis of the text with this linguistic knowledge.

II. Exegesis of the Text

A. Context

Historical context. This paper is written under the assumption that Moses wrote the

Torah, that is, the first five books of the Old Testament. The book of Genesis is a component part

of the Torah, also known as the Pentateuch. But although Moses was responsible for writing

Genesis, the form of Genesis to Deuteronomy as seen today is the result of editing and updating

that Moses could not have taken part in, and that was finished after the Israelites had returned

from exile in Babylon.[3] For instance, Genesis 36:31 lists "the kings who reigned in the land of

Edom before any king ruled over the Israelites," and Deuteronomy 34 recounts Moses's death.[4]

Nevertheless, this paper does not accept the merits of the documentary hypothesis, which argues

that there were four authors of the Pentateuch and that a later redactor or editor put the pieces

together. This view draws from internal evidence (such as different words used for God's name),

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[2] Christians in the Evangelical tradition (the author of this paper's religious background) have often interpreted and applied the stories in Genesis literally. Therefore, Evangelical sources will primarily be consulted in order to show that it is possible to resolve the conflict in a way familiar to those in this tradition.

[3] Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn't Say about Human Origins* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2012), 26.

[4] The New English Translation (NET) will be used in this paper unless otherwise stated.

but no other evidence outside the text has been found to support it.[5,6]

So, since Moses was the author of Genesis, that means he wrote it not long after the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt in the middle of the second millennium BCE. Genesis is thus primarily a book of beginnings for its audience; it was the opening part of the Torah given to the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land, serving to explain where they came from and who their God was. However, Jews returning from exile in Babylon and their descendants were the audience of the Hebrew Scriptures, that is, the Torah and the works that follow it. When Genesis is read as the first part not just of the Torah but also of the Old Testament, it answers questions about identity a people in crisis would have asked: "Who are we? Who is our God?"[7] Christians, however, interpret these Scriptures slightly differently because they believe the Messiah, Jesus Christ, has come. In this hermeneutical approach, Genesis shows that all people need a savior and how God first began working toward saving humanity.

Literary context. There are various ways to topically organize the book of Genesis, but the writer specifically divides it into ten sections, each marked off by the Hebrew word תוֹדְלוֹת (*toledoth*), literally "generations."[8] Translators usually include this word in phrases like "This is the account of" or "These are the generations of," depending on the passage's content.[9] Old Testament scholar John Walton explains that the "contextual use of the noun suggests that it refers to the 'developments that arise out of...' [Adam, Noah, etc.] and in doing so introduces the

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[5] Young, 236-237.

[6] It is beyond the scope of this paper to adequately prove Mosaic authorship against the JEDP hypothesis.

[7] Enns, 32.

[8] Robert L. Thomas, ed., *The Strongest NASB Exhaustive Concordance* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004), 1489.

[9] Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990), 2.

next exigency."[10] This means whatever follows a *toledoth* can be a genealogy or, more generally, a narrative. This paper deals with the *toledoth* of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, which includes both genealogy, traditionally titled the "Table of Nations," and narrative, often called the "Tower of Babel." The *toledoth* of Noah (6:9-9:29) comes before this section of Genesis and tells readers about the flood narrative. After the author finishes the Babel narrative, he narrows his focus in the *toledoth* of Shem (11:10-11:26), tracing the ancestors of Abraham from Shem down to Terah.

Genesis is also commonly divided in chronological terms. The first eleven chapters, or rather the narrative from 1:1 up to the *toledoth* of Terah (11:27-25:11), make up "primeval history," and span thousands if not innumerable years. The rest of Genesis deals with "patriarchal history," or the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, and spans only a few hundred years but takes up the majority of the book.[11] The Shem-Ham-Japheth *toledoth* finishes primeval history and segues the narrative from the worldwide flood to Abraham's home in Mesopotamia.

Additionally, both Walton and commentator Victor Hamilton agree that the book can be split up geographically. Mesopotamia is the setting of ch. 1-11, Canaan of ch. 12-36, and Egypt of ch. 37-50.[12] Hamilton points out that Moses bookends the central Abraham-Jacob narrative with stories set in Mesopotamia and Egypt because the "ultimate reason for the election of Abraham is that the nations of the earth…might find the knowledge of God and his blessing."[13] The Babel narrative explicitly references Babylonia and leaves the reader there before God calls

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[10] John H. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2001), 40.

[11] Hamilton, 11.

[12] Ibid., 10; Walton, 40.

[13] Hamilton, 10.

Abraham out of the city of Ur to Canaan.

Before one looks at what immediately precedes and follows the Babel, one should see the narrative within the greater narrative of Genesis 1-11. Biblical scholar Gary Schnittjer outlines these chapters and reveals important parallels among its stories, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Parallels in Genesis 1-11.

The story	The repetition
water over earth (1:2)	flood (ch. 7-8)
creation/blessing (ch. 1)	new beginning/blessing (ch. 9)
fall/curse (ch. 3)	Noah drunken/Canaan cursed (ch. 9)
murder/wander (ch. 4)	tower/scatter (ch. 11)
genealogy of ten to Noah (ch. 5)	genealogy of ten to Terah (ch. 11)

Source: Gary Edward Schnittjer, *The Torah Story: An Apprenticeship on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006), 49.

Primeval history deals with a backstory that is told two times: a state of the world going from uncreation to creation, followed by a fall into sin going from bad to worse. Schnittjer shows the need to keep in mind how passages in the Bible harken back to events that have already happened. He maintains that the Babel narrative parallels the story of Cain. When this son of Adam kills his brother, Abel, he introduces murder into the post-Edenic world and foreshadows the wickedness that prompts God to "restart" creation with the Flood.

This major section on the Flood—Noah's *toledoth*—comes before chapter 10's long genealogy—referred to hereafter by its traditional title "the Table of Nations"—and chapter 11's Babel narrative. Because humanity has become so wicked, God decides to wipe them out with a worldwide flood and start over with Noah. The writer tells of an inundation in which only Noah, his family, and the animals on the ark survive. He chooses words and phrases that parallel Genesis 1 to show how the world is returned to a chaotic state of un-creation before being

created anew. After the waters recede, Genesis 9 lists Noah's children and states, "from them the whole earth was populated" (9:19). The author asserts that all people share the same origins, and ultimately that they are all made in the image of God. The *toledoth* of Noah ends with Noah cursing his grandson Canaan because Ham his son has seen his nakedness.

The *toledoth* of Shem and the one of Terah come after the Babel narrative. Shem's genealogy of ten names parallels the genealogy told in Genesis 5 that brings the story from Adam to Noah. Here the author takes his readers from Noah and his son Shem to Terah and his son Abram, later called Abraham. Just as God saved the world from judgment through Noah, so also will God use Abram/Abrabam to save all peoples. In chapter 12, he makes clear his universal mission: "...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (12:3b).

B. The Table of Nations

The author introduces this next section of Genesis, also known as the Table of Nations, with the *toledoth* formula explained above. Here, a genealogy follows this construction, but a narrative will come in chapter 11. Since 9:19 emphasizes that the whole world was populated from Noah's three sons, the scope of this section is worldwide. The second sentence (and the rest of the chapter) lets the audience know that God's blessing after the Flood is being fulfilled; Hamilton connects this back to 9:1 where God tells Noah and his sons, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth."[14] As chapter 10 makes clear, Noah's sons have numerous descendants who spread to all the corners of the world. The world has been re-created in the Flood, and humankind, as God's image-bearers, reproduces to have authority over the earth. But Moses uses this passage not to merely give a geography lesson to the Israelites; they were most likely already aware of the people groups described in chapter 10 and where they lived. Instead, he uses the

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[14] Ibid., 330.

genealogical structure to show that everyone shares a common origin and therefore has been blessed with the image of God as humans. Additionally, he uses the Table of Nations to prepare his audience for the Babel narrative. The genealogy describes the entire world as it was then known; the narrative explains why it got that way.

1. The Sons of Japheth (10:1-5)

¹ This is the account of Noah's sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Sons were born to them after the flood.

² The sons of Japheth were Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech, and Tiras. ³ The sons of Gomer were Askenaz, Riphath, and Togarmah. ⁴ The sons of Javan were Elishah, Tarshish, the Kittim, and the Dodanim. ⁵ From these the coastlands of the nations were separated into their lands, every one according to its language, according to their families, by their nations.

[10:1-4] The author discusses Japheth's descendants first, even though he is listed last in 10:1. He spends little time on Japheth's family since the peoples listed here lived in the "outer fringe of the known world" to the Israelites and would have had little contact with them.[15] This genealogy, rather than listing off direct father-son descendants, references peoples scattered across the Ancient Near East. For example, 10:15-17 lists people groups like the Hittites and Jebusites; "Cush, Mizraim, Put, and Canaan" in 10:6 are all geographic entities; and the formula "When X had lived Y years, he became the father of Z" does not show up here.[16] Moses does not intend the Table of Nations to be a literal, father-to-son genealogy, but a way of showing the connections among nations. He uses these connections to argue that all people are ultimately related to each other as humans made in God's image. Below, the names of Japheth's sons will be linked with the historical peoples to whom commentators believe they most likely refer. This

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[15] John C. Sailhamer, "Genesis," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1990), 99.

[16] Walton, 368.

approach will be followed for the rest of the paper's Table of Nations section.

Japheth's first son, *Gomer*, refers to the Cimmerians, nomads from southern Russia who settled in Asia Minor. *Magog*, with what little information available, seems to be another place "located somewhere in Anatolia," according to commentator Gordon Wenham. *Madai* refers to the Medes, a people who lived in the plateau of modern Iran. *Javan* refers to the Ionians, who lived on the west coast of Asia Minor, but later refers to all the Greeks. *Tubal* and *Meshech* refer to two groups of people who were located in eastern Anatolia. *Tiras*, the last name given, refers to the people who ultimately settled in Italy, the Etruscans, also called the Tyrrhenians.[17] These peoples represent the uttermost north and west of the ancient world, but Moses nevertheless includes them in this wide-reaching genealogy.

As Old Testament scholar John Sailhamer observes, the biblical author lists seven sons of Japheth as well as seven of his sons' descendants; "his intention is not to give an exhaustive list but rather a 'complete' list, one that for him is obtained in the number 'seven.' "[18] The number seven or multiples of seven represent completion: in chapter 10, Moses records seventy names to fully describe the world known to the ancient Israelites. *Askenaz*, the first of the sons of Gomer, refers to a land in Armenia populated by the Scythians. *Riphath* probably refers to another Anatolian people group. *Togarmah*, according to Hamilton, refers to an area "located near the upper Euphrates in Asia Minor." *Elishah*, the first of the sons of Javan, refers to the island of Cyprus. *Tarshish* has traditionally been associated with Tartessos—an ancient Phoenician port along the southern Atlantic coast of modern-day Spain—but, in Wenham's view, this city shows little connection with Greece (Javan) and may be too distant for the biblical writer. Wherever

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[17] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1987), 216-217; Hamilton, 332.

[18] Sailhamer, 100.

Tarshish was, according to Hamilton, it was "a place reachable only by ship," a point that 10:5 reinforces with its description of the "coastlands of the nations." *The Kittim* may refer either to Cyprus or one of its Phoenician cities, Kition. *The Dodanim* could either refer to the island of Rhodes (the Septuagint and 1 Chronicles 1:7 read *Rodanim*) or another people from modern-day Greece.[19] Following Sailhamer's approach, one sees that the biblical author listed two sets of *seven* descendants to indicate that he has completely encompassed all the people who lived in the coastlands

[10:5] In the closing statement for Japheth's sons, the biblical writer lists four ways of categorizing his descendants, terms that he repeats in summarizing the sons of Ham and Shem. The first, ארץ (*erets*) can mean either "earth" or "land," but the latter is the better option here as the context indicates division of peoples into specific groups inhabiting their respective territories.[20] The biblical writer uses *erets* in the introduction to the Babel narrative (11:1), but there he discusses the whole earth, that is, all of humanity. And when God calls Abram in chapter 12, he tells him to leave his "country" for the "land" he would show him—instances of *erets* that 10:5 as well as similar concluding statements in 10:20 and 10:32 foreshadow. The second category, ולשן (*lashon*), literally means "tongue" but, as a metonym, represents the concept of "language."[21] The third, המפשח (*mishpachah*), means "clan," but is translated "family."[22] *Mishpachah* in Israelite hierarchy was a subdivision of the tribe but a larger grouping

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[19] Wenham, 217-219; Hamilton, 332-334.

[20] Thomas, 1366.

[21] Ibid., 1415.

[22] Ibid., 1431.

than the household; it implied blood relations.[23] Finally, גוי (goy) means a nation.[24] This term has

a wider embrace than *mishpachah* does; it is equivalent to a modern country or a state with a

single ruler. It could include one or many ethnic groups.[25] This term foreshadows God promises

to Abram that he will make him into a great nation (*goy*) in 12:2. Moses uses these four terms not

only to link the sons of Japheth with those of Ham and Shem but also to prepare the reader for

the Babel and Abraham narratives to come.

2. The Sons of Ham (10:6-20)

> [6] *The sons of Ham were Cush, Mizraim, Put, and Canaan.* [7] *The sons of Cush were Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Raamah, and Sabteca. The sons of Raamah were Sheba and Dedan.*
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> [8] *Cush was the father of Nimrod; he began to be a valiant warrior on the earth.* [9] *He was a mighty hunter before the LORD. (That is why it is said, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the LORD.")* [10] *The primary regions of his kingdom were Babel, Erech, Akkad, and Calneh in the land of Shinar.* [11] *From that land he went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah,* [12] *and Resen, which is between Nineveh and the great city Calah.*
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> [13] *Mizraim was the father of the Ludites, Anamites, Lehabites, Naphtuhites,* [14] *Pathrusites, Casluhites (from whom the Philistines came), and Caphtorites.*
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> [15] *Canaan was the father of Sidon his firstborn, Heth,* [16] *the Jebusites, Amorites, Girgashites,* [17] *Hivites, Arkites, Sinites,* [18] *Arvadites, Zemarites, and Hamathites. Eventually the families of the Canaanites were scattered* [19] *and the borders of Canaan extended from Sidon all the way to Gerar as far as Gaza, and all the way to Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, as far as Lasha.* [20] *These are the sons of Ham, according to their families, according to their languages, by their lands, and by their nations.*

[10:6-7] This section begins with a construction a lot like the one in 10:2, where the

author states the son of Noah's name and then lists his children. *Cush* refers to, in Old Testament

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[23] Robert H. O'Connell, *"mišpāḥâ,"* in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 2, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 1140.

[24] Thomas, 1376.

[25] Daniel I. Block, "Nations/Nationality" in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 4, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 968.

scholar J. Daniel Hays's words, "the same continuous civilization that stretched along the banks of the Nile, south of Egypt, upstream of the Nile's cataracts, in what is now the modern country of Sudan."[26] *Mizraim* refers to Egypt, that ancient kingdom that ruled the Nile. *Put* refers to Egypt's neighbor to the west, Libya. *Canaan* refers to the land of the promise to which God would call Abraham. The author defines this region below in 10:15-19. Although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where the sons of Cush were, they most likely lived around the Red Sea (in Africa and Arabia) and to the south of the Arabian Peninsula. Two of Cush's sons connect backward and forward with Israel's history. One of the four rivers of Eden flowed through *Havilah*, where there evidently was gold (2:11), and *Sheba*, probably modern Yemen, became an important trading partner with Israel once Solomon became king. Even if the specific locations cannot be determined, there are nevertheless seven names that indicate completion, just like the other sub-lists of chapter 10 and the total number of seventy names.[27] This geographical genealogy of sorts brings the audience closer to home. Although Moses details both Israel's friends and her enemies, he associates them all as descendants of Noah.

[10:8-12] Nimrod comes in the middle of the entire Table of Nations; why is he so significant? Regardless of his identity, he is included to set up the Babel narrative since the city of Babel is listed as the place where his kingdom began. It is rather difficult to figure out who he really was, however. Historical options include an Assyrian king, an Egyptian pharaoh, or even Hammurabi, the Amorite king of Babylonia. As Walton concludes, "Nimrod was well known to the audience, but until more information surfaces his identity must remain obscure to us."[28]

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[26] J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 34.

[27] Hamilton, 336-337; Sailhamer, 100; Wenham, 221-222.

[28] Walton, 370.

Wenham, on the other hand, sees Nimrod as the archetypal Mesopotamian king, since in inscriptions they are portrayed as "especially fond and proud of their achievements in building and fighting, and some boast too of their hunting exploits."[29] The text describes Nimrod as a "mighty hunter" (10:9), a "valiant warrior" (10:8), and a builder of Assyrian cities. Regardless of his identity, the character here is a mighty ruler over Babylon, the focus of the Babel narrative to come.[30]

Moses takes the audience back to the beginning of chapter 6 when he describes Nimrod as "a valiant warrior." In that chapter, he recounts the notoriously-difficult-to-interpret tale of the Nephilim. In this short passage, the audience learns that the "the sons of God saw that the daughters of humankind were beautiful. Thus they took wives for themselves from any they chose" (6:2), and their children, the Nephilim, "were the mighty heroes of old, the famous men" (6:4). Whatever one's interpretation of this episode (be it angelic cohabitation, intermarriage between the lines of Seth and Cain, or royal polygamy), it demonstrates the spread of wickedness on the earth before the Flood (6:5). The word translated "mighty hero" in 6:4 and "valiant warrior" 10:9 is the Hebrew גבור (*gibbor*).[31] Although the writer does not appear to associate Nimrod with the wickedness narrated in 6:1-4, Wenham finds in this allusion another link with archetypal Mesopotamian kings, some of which "were credited with divine blood in their veins."[32] This connection depends upon interpreting 6:1-4 as describing children born from divine-human unions, but the argument has strength since the surrounding context identifies

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[29] Wenham, 222.

[30] Hamilton, 337-338; Walton, 369-371; Wenham, 222.

[31] Thomas, 1375.

[32] Wenham, 222-223.

Nimrod as a Mesopotamian monarch. Next, the audience learns of the realms of his kingdom: four Babylonian cities and four Assyrian cities. This geographic description sets the story up for what is to come: the Babel episode in the next chapter.

[10:13-14] Moses declines to elaborate on Put's children, instead continuing to Mizraim. He lists seven sons, again indicating completeness as he does when he lists those of Cush and his son Raamah (10:7). *The Ludites* and *the Anamites* have no clear referents, although they probably are located in Africa west of Egypt. *The Lehahites* refer to the Libyans. *The Naphtuhites* refer to a people in Lower Egypt, and *the Pathrusites* to one in Upper Egypt. *The Casluhites* probably refer to people in the Nile delta, and *the Caphtorites* refer to the island of Crete. Although the text says that the Philistines come from the Casluhites, Amos 9:7 compares the way God brought Israel out of Egypt with the way he "also brought the Philistines from Caphtor." Hamilton believes that the "Philistines came to Egypt by way of Crete," but even if this resolution is not correct, the Casluhites and Caphtorites are closely linked together.[33] The reference to the Philistines transitions the genealogy from Africa east to the Levant, where the author now turns.[34]

[10:15-19] These next five verses are placed, like the note on Nimrod, in the middle of this genealogy: they are of great importance to the Israelites because they detail the land promised to Abraham. They read like subsequent similar lists in the Old Testament that outline the nations that previously inhabited the land of Israel (e.g., Genesis 15:18-21 or Deuteronomy 7:1). The territory of these peoples stretches on the Mediterranean coast from Sidon in the north

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[33] Hamilton, 341.

[34] Hamilton, 340-341; Sailhamer, 101; Wenham, 224-225.

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to Gaza in the south, and on the east it stretches from Sodom[35] north along the Jordan River.[36]

[10:20] Like his concluding statement for the sons of Japheth in 10:5, the author's closing to the sons of Ham also lists four ways of categorizing them. However, rather than going from lands, languages, families, to nations, he moves from families, languages, to lands before ending with nations, a chiastic structure in which Hamilton finds no greater significance.[37] In this section on the sons of Ham, Moses takes considerable time to emphasize Egypt, Canaan, and Babylon—the three main nations that Israel deals with from the call of Abraham to the exile of Israel and Judah around a thousand years later.[38]

3. The Sons of Shem (10:21-32)

[21] And sons were also born to Shem (the older brother of Japheth), the father of all the sons of Eber.

[22] The sons of Shem were Elam, Asshur, Arphaxad, Lud, and Aram. [23] The sons of Aram were Uz, Hul, Gether, and Mash. [24] Arphaxad was the father of Shelah, and Shelah was the father of Eber. [25] Two sons were born to Eber: One was named Peleg because in his days the earth was divided, and his brother's name was Joktan. [26] Joktan was the father of Almodad, Sheleph, Hazarmaveth, Jerah, [27] Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah, [28] Obal, Abimael, Sheba, [29] Ophir, Havilah, and Jobab. All these were sons of Joktan. [30] Their dwelling place was from Mesha all the way to Sephar in the eastern hills. [31] These are the sons of Shem according to their families, according to their languages, by their lands, and according to their nations.

[32] These are the families of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, by their nations, and from these the nations spread over the earth after the flood.

[10:21] Finally, the biblical writer deals with the son of Noah that the Israelites would have been most interested to hear about: Shem, the ancestor "of all the sons of Eber," of Abraham, of the Israelites. Moses has come full circle in the Table of Nations, illustrating that

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[35] Sodom and the cities destroyed in Genesis 19 were possibly located near the Dead Sea.

[36] Hamilton, 341-343; Wenham, 226-227.

[37] Hamilton, 343.

[38] Sailhamer, 101; Wenham, 227.

everyone his audience was acquainted with shared a common origin in the sons of Noah, and thus shared the image of God. When he introduces the genealogy's final section, he describes Shem as Japheth's older brother but omits Ham. Sailhamer believes this is to "recall Noah's blessing of Shem and Japheth in 9:26-27, where there Canaan is also excluded."[39] But why would the oldest son be dealt with last, after Ham, the youngest? Wenham explains that "the chosen line is always dealt with last," offering as an example the treatment of Cain in chapter 4 before the genealogy of Adam to Noah via Seth in chapter 5.[40] Furthermore, placing the sons of Shem at the end brackets the Babel narrative with two Shem genealogies, one beginning with Eber's son Joktan and the other with his son Peleg (11:10-26). The key to understanding this section is, thus, *Eber* and his descendants; the audience would have immediately identified with this reference since " 'Hebrew' (עברי) is the gentilic of Eber (עבר)."[41] This is who they have been waiting to hear about.

[10:22-31] But before getting to Eber, the biblical author fills out Shem's family as he does with Japheth and Ham; he is marching toward seventy names, toward "totality and completion."[42] *Elam* refers to a land to the east of Mesopotamia, and although its language is not classified as Semitic, Elam is grouped under Shem because of its nearness. *Asshur* is Assyria, and *Arphaxad* could refer either to the land of the Chaldeans (i.e., Babylonia) or the city of Kirkuk in modern Iraq. *Lud* possibly refers to the Lydians of Asia Minor. *Aram* refers to the Arameans, who lived in modern-day Syria. Wenham argues that Moses lists four of Aram's sons

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[39] Sailhamer, 102.

[40] Wenham, 227.

[41] Ibid., 228.; Thomas, 1443.

[42] Walton, 367.

in 10:23 because the patriarchs frequently marry their Aramean relatives in Genesis.[43] Jacob, in fact, is called a "wandering Aramean" in Deuteronomy 26:5, so the Israelites would have identified with Aram in the Table of Nations' third part.

Next, the writer develops Eber's lineage through two of his sons. The first, Peleg, shows up again in the Shem to Terah genealogy in 11:10-26, so Moses ends here with him, leaving his audience anxiously waiting for the connection to be made with their ancestor Abraham. The writer offers an etymology for Peleg's name by linking it with the verb גלפ (*palag*), which means "to divide."[44] Similarly, in Genesis 5:29, Lamech names his son *Noah* (Hebrew נח [*Noach*]) in hopes that he would bring *comfort* (Hebrew נחם [*nacham*])—a play on words with the similar sounds.[45] Another etymology based on wordplay will come in the Babel narrative, one that explains the name of the city as a result of the story's events. The author says that in Peleg's days, "the earth was divided" (10:25) and quite possibly foreshadows the scattering of the whole earth recounted in 11:1-9. Still, chapter 11 talks of "scattering" instead of "division," so a link between the two narratives should not be made too hastily.[46]

Joktan, Peleg's brother, has thirteen sons, most of whom seem to be scattered across the Arabian Peninsula south to modern-day Yemen. With his descendants, the total number of names in the Table of Nations reaches seventy. In these verses, Moses traces the genealogy deepest with Eber's two children. Sailhamer finds a deeper significance of the diverging lines of Eber. He sees Moses "draw[ing] a dividing line through the descendants of Shem on either side of the city of

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[43] Hamilton, 344; Wenham, 228-230.

[44] Thomas, 1455.

[45] Ibid., 1434.

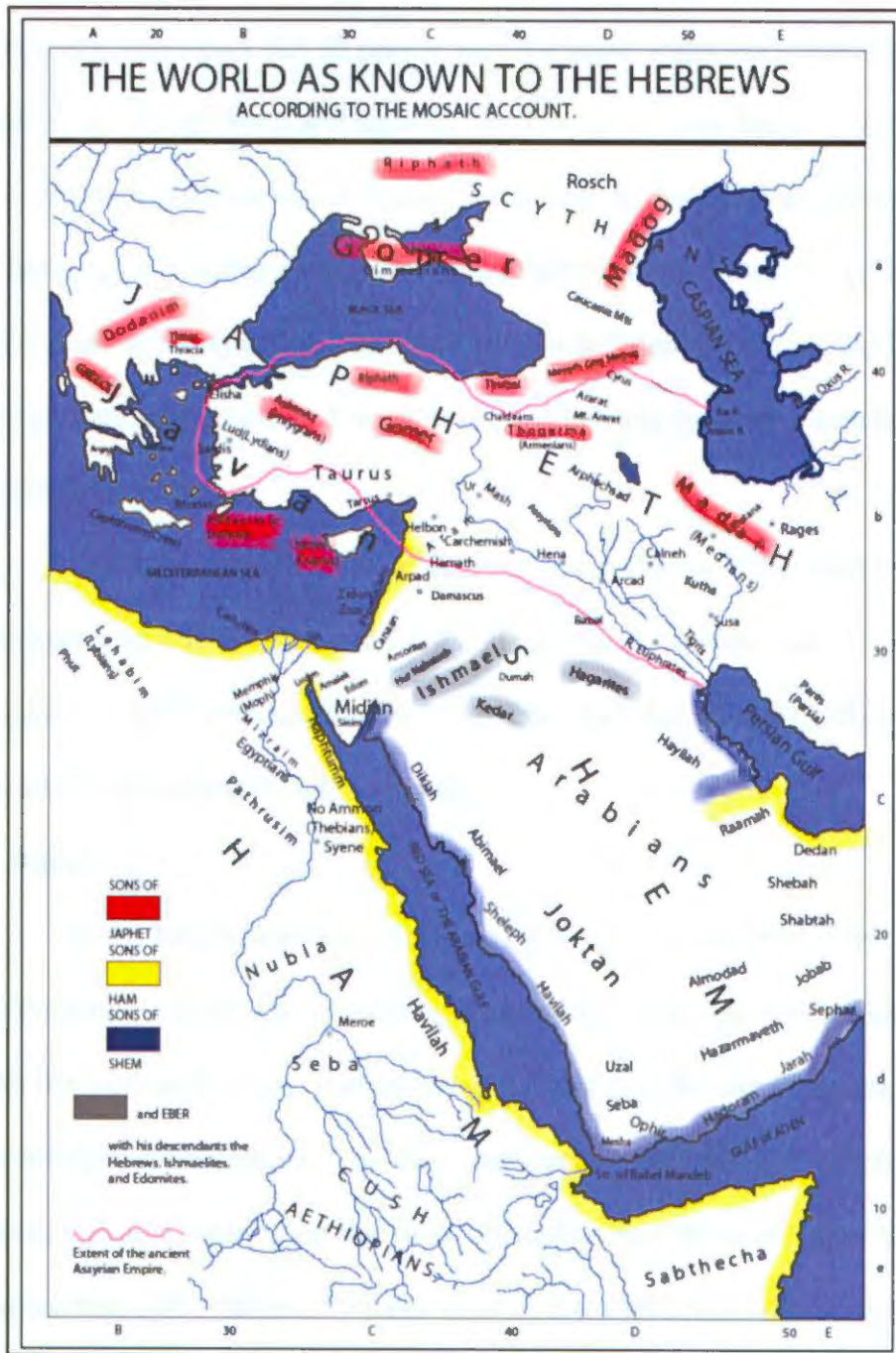[46] Hamilton, 344-345; Walton, 371; Wenham, 230-231.

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Babylon."[47] Eber's line in chapter 10 ends with Joktan right before the account of Babel, after which his line continues with Peleg and ends with Abraham. The text thus distinguishes between "those who seek to make a name (Shem) for themselves in the building of the city of Babylon (11:4) and those for whom God will make a name in the call of Abraham (Shem, 12:2).[48] At the end of this genealogy, Moses has prepared his audience to hear about the events at Babel.

[10:32] Now Moses has finished describing the entire world of the ancient Israelites. This ancient world extended in the east to Persia, in the west to Crete and Libya, in the north to Anatolia, and in the south to Arabia and Cush. Figure 1 below describes this ancient world.

[47] Sailhamer, 102.

[48] Ibid.

Figure 1. The world according to the Table of Nations.

But the author does not intend to tell a mere geography lesson; he intends to talk *about* the geography. He argues that all people have the same origin since they are all ultimately related to each other through Noah and his sons. He does not even mention the Israelites, even though he does highlight their ancestors. Rather, Moses creates for Israel a common starting point with all of her neighbors in this passage.[49] He additionally shows how God's post-Flood command to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (9:1) is fulfilled: the known world is filled with numerous descendants. The post-Flood world is now completely re-created with humans fulfilling their creational mandate.

The writer transitions from Table of Nations to the Babel narrative in 10:31 but also connects it back to 10:1. He tells of the Flood and the sons of Noah again, but in this instance he emphasizes their spreading out over the earth. With this phrasing, Moses anticipates what ultimately happens at Babel: scattering.

C. Babel

When Moses begins the narrative by stating that the whole earth (that is, humankind) speaks a single language, he seems to contradict what he just finished saying in chapter 10—that after the worldwide flood, humankind spread out over the earth "according to their families, according to their *languages*, by their lands, and by their nations" (10:20). However, he is really telling the same story twice; the Table of Nations tells the *what*, Babel tells the *why*. Although placing Babel after chapter 10 takes it out of line chronologically, it heightens the literary effect that Hamilton describes:

> By placing the Tower of Babel incident just prior to the patriarchal stories, the biblical
> writer is suggesting...that post-Flood humanity is as iniquitous as pre-Flood humanity....

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[49] Hays, 59; Hamilton, 346; Wenham, 242.

God now places his hope in a covenant with Abraham as a powerful solution to humanity's sinfulness. Thus problem (ch. 11) and solution (ch. 12) are brought into immediate juxtaposition, and the forcefulness of this structural move would have been lost had ch. 10 intervened between the two.[50]

Hamilton explains that Babel comes chronologically before the Table of Nations in order to contrast the "problem" at Babel with the "solution" of Abraham. This rearrangement should not worry modern readers of the text; instead, it should move them toward the call of Abraham where God begins his saving work for all humankind.

This passage forms one of the best examples of *chiasm*, or a parallel structure in which the elements of a piece of literature (be it poetry or narrative) mirror each other at the turn in the text. A chiastic structure follows the general pattern of A, B, C, D then C', B', A', where letters with prime symbols (') indicate corresponding elements in the story. Below is a table that demonstrates the Babel narrative's organization.

Table 2. Chiasm in the Babel Narrative.

A	All the earth used one language (11:1)
B	Settled there (11:2)
C	Said one to another (11:3a)
D	"Come, let's make bricks (11:3b)
E	Let us build for ourselves (11:4a)
F	A tower and a city" (11:4b)
G	Yahweh came down to see (11:5a)
F'	The city and the tower (11:5b)
E'	That the sons of men had built (11:5c)
D'	"Come, let us go down and confuse (11:7a)
C'	Their language, that they may not understand" (11:7b)
B'	Scattered from there (11:8)
A'	Confused the language of the whole earth (11:9)

Source: Schnittjer, 106.

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[50] Hamilton, 348.

The biblical writer pivots the whole narrative around God's entrance to the scene, and juxtaposes the story's events on either side of this fulcrum.

1. Introduction (11:1-2)

¹ The whole earth had a common language and a common vocabulary. ² When the people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

[11:1] In this first verse, the narrator not only looks back to the Table of Nations but also sets the stage for the action that follows. He begins by using a significant Hebrew word, ארץ (*erets*)—a term that can range from the soil, a country, every person, to the entire physical realm where people live.[51] The author intended to mean the latter option, since the passage's context precludes the other options. Sailhamer points out that *erets* forms part of the phrase *kol-ha'arets*, or "the whole earth."[52] Moses uses this construction elsewhere in Genesis, especially in the Flood narrative. Biblical scholar Paul Seely explains that the writer depicts this cataclysmic event as universal in scope because, in Genesis 7:19, he describes the Flood as covering "all the high mountains under the entire sky." Seely explains this construction, saying that in the Old Testament, "when the phrase 'under all the heavens' is added to the description, it does not refer to an area less than the entire earth *as it was then conceived.*"[53] He further argues that the Flood in the text was worldwide because the author of Genesis has the ark resting in the tall mountains of Ararat (10:4)—the ends of the earth, not merely Mesopotamia—and because it tells of the death of all people and of all birds, which could have flown away in a local flood (7:23).[54]

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[51] Thomas, 770; Christopher J. H. Wright, "'eres" in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 1, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 518.

[52] Sailhamer, 105.

[53] Paul H. Seely, "Noah's Flood: Its Date, Extent, and Divine Accommodation," *Westminster Theological Journal* 66, no. 2 (2004), 294.

[54] Ibid., 295-296.

Seely finds more evidence that Moses understood the Flood as worldwide. In Genesis 8:9 he tells his audience that water covered the entire earth; Noah's dove can find no place to land because water has completely submerged the earth. Once dry land does appear again (in a dramatic replay of the creation story), Noah and his family leave the Ark and receive God's blessing to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (9:1). Not long afterward, the writer says that from Shem, Ham, and Japheth "the whole earth was populated" (9:19), another instance of the *kol-ha'arets* construction. Seely sees this as another example that, to the ancients, the Flood was clearly worldwide in nature.[55]

What was this "whole earth"? The narrator has just finished explaining this in extensive detail; the audience learns of peoples living in southwest Asia and northern Africa in the Table of Nations that comes right before this account. But although modern Westerners are wise to the existence of humans in such far-off places as Tierra del Fuego in Chile or Australia, the ancient Israelites were not. With the resources and knowledge they had, they believed that the entire inhabited world stretched from the Peloponnese to Persia and from the Caucasus to Cush; this flat disk was thus surrounded by an ocean—the waters of chaos God tamed in the creation account—and no other land was believed to exist.[56] Nevertheless, with the "whole earth" of 11:1, Moses implies all people, a single group living together before the settling of the known world.

In contrast to the diversity of languages described in chapter 10 (10:5, 20, 32), in 11:1 only one is spoken. The Hebrew more literally says that the whole earth used "one lip and words, one," a tight symmetry but not necessarily a repetition of the same idea.[57] The word "lip" is

[55] Seely, 297.

[56] Paul H. Seely, "The Date of the Tower of Babel and Some Theological Implications," *Westminster Theological Journal* 63, no. 1 (2001), 26; John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006), 166.

[57] Hamilton, 350.

translated from שׂפה (*saphah*), and is another example of metonymy for language where one of the parts stands for the whole. Earlier in chapter 10 the writer uses the word *lashon* ("tongue") to mean "language" like he does *saphah* here.[58] And not only does he say that the whole earth had the same language, but also that they had the same words, or a common vocabulary. On 11:1, Seely concludes, "Since the flood and the sons of Noah are mentioned in Gen 10:32, it is natural to understand the next verse, Gen 11:1, as referring to a time shortly after the flood when everyone was speaking the same language."[59] Moses sets up for the audience a monolingual postdiluvian world before it diversified as shown in chapter 10 and the end of this narrative.

[11:2] The biblical author gives in this second verse more indication that the setting is universal. Although "the people" is not actually in the original Hebrew, translators have supplied it to make sense of "moved," a third-person plural verb like "found" and "settled."[60] In 11:5, the writer says that the "sons of men" (NASB) are responsible for this passage's actions, finally giving a subject for 11:2. Seely remarks, "If the account had been merely local, it probably would have spoken of particular sons like the 'sons of Heth' (Hittites, Gen 23:3) or the 'sons of Midian' (Midianites, Gen 25:4). The phrase 'the sons of the man' refers to mankind in general."[61] The Babel narrative thus deals with all humanity, and not merely a small group of them, before they migrate to inhabit the entire known world.

Moses mentions that the people move eastward and end up in Shinar, essentially Sumer

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[58] Thomas, 1485.

[59] Seely, "Babel," 23.

[60] Hamilton, 351.

[61] Seely, "Babel," 24.

or southern Mesopotamia.[62] It is possible he implies that people began near the land of

promise—Canaan—or Egypt. Interestingly, this region was also the backdrop for those to whom

he was writing. Throughout Genesis 1-11, a movement to the east indicates leaving God's

blessing. When the man and his wife are expelled from the Garden of Eden, God places

cherubim on the *eastern* side of it (3:24); and when Cain is punished for murdering his brother

Abel, he goes to live in the land of Nod, which is to the *east* of Eden (4:16).[63] Although eastern

movement in 11:2 foreshadows the judgment to come in 11:8, Hamilton does not see the

diversity of language that comes from building Babel negatively. Because the Table of Nations

precedes this passage, the *toledoth* of Shem, Ham, and Japheth displays "the themes of grace and

judgment."[64] In chapter 10, people are reproducing and filling the earth according to God's

blessing. In the Cain narrative, although God punishes Cain, he also protects him from the

retaliation of other people. And in the Flood narrative, although God destroys all living things, he

preserves Noah, his family, and the creatures on the Ark. Grace and judgment must be held

together, even in tension; however, the focus in the Babel narrative is on the latter theme.

2. People Speak (11:3-4)

> [3] *Then they said to one another, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly."*
> *(They had brick instead of stone and tar instead of mortar.)* [4] *Then they said, "Come,*
> *let's build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens so that we may make a*
> *name for ourselves. Otherwise we will be scattered across the face of the entire earth."*

[11:3] The narrator introduces dialogue into the passage with the people talking to each

other. Translation notes from the NET Bible argue that the literal Hebrew phrasing—"let us

brick bricks and burn for burning"—indicates "the intensity of the undertaking" of the Babel

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[62] Hamilton, 351.

[63] Sailhamer, 104; Walton, *Genesis*, 372; Wenham 238.

[64] Hamilton, 347.

project.[65] Furthermore, it indicates how important the project was. Seely says, "Baked bricks were very expensive in Mesopotamia because fuel was so scarce, and their use shows how committed the builders were to making a luxurious and impressive building."[66]

In the following parenthetical remark Moses mentions that the builders used brick and tar, materials uncommon in his audience's world. Walton explains, "The ready availability of stone in Palestine meant that it could be used by even common folks for building. Houses in Israel typically used stone for the foundation and mud brick for the superstructure. Burnt-brick technology was never developed because it was unnecessary."[67] This foreign method of building had to be made clear to the ancient Israelites, who would have normally used stone for their construction projects. Wenham sees a deeper significance to this note: "there is also an implied disparagement of Babylonian materials (we use stone; they have only brick!)."[68] As the chiasm forms, more negative contrasts like this will come in the second half of the narrative. This third verse also helps scholars place the Babel episode into historical time. Because baked bricks as well as tar (or *bitumen* in other translations) used for mortar do not appear in archaeological strata until 3500 to 3000 BCE, the historical roots of the story could not have occurred earlier than 3500 BCE.[69]

[11:4] Now the people decide what to do with their building materials. Although this

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[65] Translation note on Genesis 11:3, W. Hall Harris, III, ed., *The NET Bible*, Bible.org, http://net.bible.org/#!bible/Genesis+11:3 (accessed March 24, 2012).

[66] Seely, "Babel," 17.

[67] Walton, *Genesis*, 372.

[68] Wenham, 239.

[69] Seely, "Babel," 17-18.

passage is traditionally titled "The Tower of Babel,"[70] there is more to the project than just a

tower, for the writer mentions a city *and* a tower. Wenham thinks this is an example of

hendiadys (where a single concept is expressed using two words joined with "and"), but the

tower's description makes clear that the biblical author is dealing not merely with urban

development but with Babylonian theology, as the commentator points out.[71] The epithet, "with

its top in the heavens," does not necessarily refer to an invasion of or attack on heaven, but is an

ancient idiom much like the English "skyscraper" that denotes great height.[72] However, most

commentators agree that Moses is talking about a ziggurat in 11:4 because "throughout

Mesopotamian literature, almost every occurrence of the expression describing a building 'with

its head on the heavens' refers to a temple with a ziggurat."[73] Ziggurats, common stair-step

towers in ancient Mesopotamia, were surrounded by "public buildings...which were mostly

connected with the temple. Consequently, the city was, in effect, a temple complex."[74] These

ziggurats had stairways leading to a room at the summit where gods could dine and sleep on their

way down to earth. Walton summarizes the theology that a ziggurat implied, "the Tower of

Babel project is a temple complex featuring a ziggurat, which was designed to make it

convenient for the god to come down to his temple, receive worship from the people, and bless

them."[75] Later he says, "It went beyond mere idolatry; it degraded the nature of God by

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[70] See, for example, the section headings from the ESV and NIV translations.

[71] Wenham, 239.

[72] Walton, *Genesis*, 373.

[73] Ibid.; Hamilton, 352; Wenham, 238.

[74] Walton, *Genesis*, 372.

[75] Ibid., 374.

portraying him as having needs."[76] God calls Abraham from this poisonous environment in the chapter that follows, and Joshua 24:14 tells the Israelites to "put aside the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt and worship the LORD." By including the construction of a city and a tower, Moses begins to clarify the problem in the narrative. One of its facets is a wrong view of God.

Seely above dates the Babel narrative using its references to baked brick and tar, but since the account involves a ziggurat he is able to fine-tune this range of historical possibility. Such towers were first built in Mesopotamia 3500-3000 BCE, which corresponds well with the aforementioned data about the building materials. He gives a latest possible date as well, 2400 BCE, since texts say that Sargon destroyed Babylon in 2350 BCE. This provides a final range of 3500-2400 BCE for the Babel episode.[77]

Moses uses the first person frequently within the space of a single verse: "let's … ourselves … we … ourselves … we." But he more significantly retells the self-absorbed builders' twofold purpose in building. First, they want to make a name for themselves. In this context, "name" שֵׁם (*shem*) means more than a mere name of identification; it indicates reputation, or the kind that is widely-known: fame.[78] Hamilton believes "the completion of such a titanic building would bring a certain fame and immortality to its builders."[79] Evidently they had no name—the text finally refers to them as, simply, "the sons of man" in 11:5—but the point is that *they* are making a name for *themselves*. This foreshadows and contrasts with chapter 12

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[76] Ibid., 376.

[77] Seely, "Babel," 19.

[78] Allen P. Ross, "*šēm*" in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 4, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 147; Thomas, 1482.

[79] Hamilton, 353.

where *God* says that he will make Abraham's name great—by virtue not of what Abraham does but of what God does. In the Babel account, the writer narrates the reverse of what happened to the Israelite ancestor Abraham so that his audience can catch the distinction between the two.

Second, the people plan to build Babel in order to keep from being scattered. Seely offers a fascinating explanation for this:

> It is true that the builders felt a certain fear of being scattered; but the flood which their recent forefathers had survived was an epochal traumatic event. The survivors would be like the only eight people who survived a worldwide nuclear holocaust. An event like that would leave following generations with an undefined anxiety and fear which felt open to destruction just by virtue of being separated from the community.[80]

After undoing creation in the Flood, God recreates the world and Noah acts like a second Adam to repopulate it. God blesses him and tells him to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" as his image-bearers (9:1). The people have clearly multiplied, but they have remained in a single place and want to preserve this unity by building a city and a tower. They resist being scattered as the nations are in chapter 10. It is almost as if the world is left unfinished since humankind stays in Shinar rather than filling the world. This problem calls God's attention, leading to the turn of this passage's chiasm in 11:5.

3. God Speaks (11:5-7)

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

[11:5] The whole episode pivots at this verse, shifting from what the people say and do to what God says and does. The setting moves from earth to heaven, but not via the tower. It is impossible not to catch the irony here: the builders want to make a tower so high it scrapes the firmament above, so high it makes it easy for their god to come down. But God has to come

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[80] Seely, "Babel," 23.

down from heaven to see what is going on. By now, the people have made progress on their construction project and, as God realizes in 11:6, nothing seems to be in their way to stop them from completing the as-of-yet-unnamed Babel.[81]

[11:6] The chiasm continues to move in the opposite direction as God speaks in the episode. Echoing the introductory matter in 11:1, he remarks that the people have started their project because they share a common language. This characteristic that he points out foreshadows what he does in 11:8. He takes action against the common language. God decides to go down again in 11:7 because of what he sees happening already. Although many translations finish 11:6 with a foreboding mood,[82] the literal Hebrew is simply "all that they purpose to do will not be withheld from them."[83] What is "all that they purpose to do"? To build a city and a tower, to make a name for themselves, and to remain in Shinar (11:3). They have already begun work on the city, and God sees that they are making progress on their construction. If no obstacles come in their path, they will finish it.

[11:7] Moses uses another chiastic parallel in this verse. Just as the people say, "Come, let's" and talked about their building project, so also God says, "Come, let's" in reference to stopping the project. The builders want to make a structure that reaches up to heaven, but God wants to come down to earth. So, to foil their plans, he does not destroy the city or the tower (they could simply rebuild it) but instead confuses the common language, the root of the problem

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[81] Hamilton, 354; Walton, *Genesis*, 377-378.

[82] For example, the NIV says "then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them," and the ESV implies a potential future beyond Babel's completion, "And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them."

[83] Translation note on Genesis 11:6, W. Hall Harris, III, ed., *The NET Bible*, Bible.org, http://net.bible.org/#!bible/Genesis+11:6 (accessed March 24, 2012).

(11:6).[84] The Hebrew word translated "confuse" is לָלַב (*balal*), which ordinarily means "to mix."[85] In this context, the main characters—the people—speak a single language and thus enjoy such a unity that they embark on a grand construction venture to protect this unity and make their generation famous. With this simple act of mixing languages, the complete opposite happens.

4. Conclusion (11:8-9)

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

[11:8] The biblical writer heightens the irony that he started in 11:5. The people wanted to build a city and a tower so that they wouldn't be scattered, but this is the very thing that happens to them. This verse uses the same Hebrew word—פּוּץ (*puts*)—to describe God's action that the people use in 11:4 to talk about their reason for building the city and tower.[86] The builders' worst fears come true, and their construction plan collapses.

[11:9] Although the biblical writer has the passage pivot in 11:5, he brings it to its literary climax here with a final dash of irony. In 11:4, the people want to make a name for themselves by building their city and tower. That is exactly what happens; however, instead of gaining a name of fame they gain one of infamy: לָבַב (*babel*).[87] Throughout the Old Testament, the biblical writers use this same Hebrew word to refer to Babylon, that great city and empire of Mesopotamia. Due to scant archaeological evidence for this city existing prior to 2000 BCE, however, Walton is inclined to believe "that Babylon is mentioned as an indication of where the

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[84] Hamilton, 355.

[85] Thomas, 1371.

[86] Ibid., 1454.

[87] Thomas, 1367.

final result can be observed rather than as the name of the city they are building."[88] This

interpretation makes sense in light of the way names are used in the Bible. Biblical scholar Allen

P. Ross details the culture of the time:

> In telling the stories of antiquity, the narrators saw great value in analyzing the
> significance of the names in such a way as to unlock the meaning of the event. The
> people had vanished, but their reputations and contributions would remain in the memory
> of a name explained. Places remained intact, but it was their names that brought back to
> life the events that occurred there.[89]

Thus, the significance of the climax—the passage's conclusion—still remains in the *name* of

Babel. Mesopotamians explained this city's name as " 'gate [residence] of the gods,' *bāb-ilī*"

(Sumerian), but Moses offers an alternative etymology.[90] Connecting the name with the verb "to

confuse" (*balal*), the author counters the grandiose proposition that the gods dwelled in Babylon

by arguing instead that God himself frustrated the people's construction plans and grand attempt

to remain in one place by confusing their language. The wordplay on *b-l-l* with *b-b-l* creates a

popular etymology much like that offered for Peleg, a man who was named "because in his days

the earth was divided" (10:25).[91]

By the end of 11:9, the linguistic status of 11:1 and geographic one of 11:2 have been

completely reversed. Instead of humanity speaking a single language, God has confused it and

given rise to the multiplicity of languages described in the Table of Nations. And in place of

humanity living in a single location, God has scattered them across the face of the whole earth,

just as the Table of Nations also describes.

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[88] Walton, *Genesis*, 378.

[89] Allen P. Ross, *"šēm"* in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 4, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 149.

[90] D. J. Wiseman, "Babylon," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 4, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 430.

[91] Hamilton, 357; Walton, *Genesis*, 378; Wenham, 241.

III. Interpretive Options

Although Genesis is thousands of years old, its theological principles are timeless. The Table of Nations genealogy plainly shows that all people are of equal worth because they are all humans made in God's image; one group of people is not more important or more human than another. The Babel narrative emphasizes God-centered unity over and against self-centered unity. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann summarizes the thrust of the passage:

> This text suggests a different kind of unity sought by fearful humanity organized against the purposes of God. This unity attempts to establish a cultural, human oneness without reference to the threats, promises, or mandates of God....The narrative then is a protest against every effort at oneness derived from human self-sufficiency and autonomy.[92]

When one interprets the narrative in light of Abraham's story that follows, one clearly sees the contrast between people wanting to make a name for themselves and God deciding to make a name for Abraham.

Genesis 10:1-11:9 says much about theology, but it also paints in very broad strokes a unique picture of anthropology and linguistics. The text says that all humanity (that is, the ancestors of all living people), having been recently almost wiped out by the Flood, was living in a single place around 3000 BCE. Naturally these postdiluvian people spoke a single language; they descended from the survivors of a population bottleneck after the Flood and had remained together ever since. This situation changed, says the biblical author, when God confused this common language at the city and tower called Babel and scattered humankind across the earth. This act of intervention created the setting that the ancient Israelites were accustomed to at the time of Genesis' writing; the Table of Nations describes what they knew of their world.

However, Westerners in the 21st century live in a very different world than that of the ancient Israelites. Exploration, trade, and conquest over the past 1,000 years have expanded the

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[92] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 100.

world atlas from the map known by the biblical writer to the globe known today that stretches from Panama to Polynesia, and from the Cape of Good Hope to the Kamchatka Peninsula. Paleoanthropologists have come to a consensus that behaviorally-modern humans first emerged out of eastern Africa approximately 50,000 years ago and from there went on to fill Asia, Australia, Europe, and the Americas.[93] By the year 10,000 BCE, humans were living in Tierra del Fuego in far southern Chile.[94] Additionally, as will be detailed below, linguists have determined that languages change gradually over time as geographic dialects slowly distinguish themselves from each other.

At first glance, these two explanations for the state of the world seem to be in conflict. On the one hand, the ancient Israelite view (as recorded in the Bible) says that all people are descended from only three couples that survived the Flood, and that all people began to migrate across the earth ca. 3000 BCE from their home in southwest Asia. On the other hand, the findings of modern science conclude that humans originated in northeast Africa around 50,000 years ago, and that all people descend from an original population of about 5,000 humans.[95] Christians have resolved this apparent tension in three ways described as follows.

A. Literalist

Many interpreters throughout the years have taken the literalist route and completely accepted everything that the ancient Israelites believed about the physical world as literally true. Often this results from holding a rigid view of biblical inspiration often associated with inerrancy. For example, the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy "den[ies] that Biblical

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[93] Nicholas Wade, *Before the Dawn: Recovering the Lost History of Our Ancestors* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 31.

[94] Carl Zimmer, *Evolution: The Triumph of an Idea* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 371.

[95] Wade, 52.

infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. [It] further den[ies] that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood."[96] The CSBI, which sums up many views about inerrancy, precludes even considering scientific conclusions if they happen to conflict with "the teaching of Scripture" on such matters.

In 2011, Al Mohler, the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, expressed support for this position. Although the creation-evolution debate is peripheral to this paper's scope, Mohler's response to evolutionary creationism typifies the literalist approach to the text.

> I accept without hesitation the fact that the world indeed looks old. Armed with naturalistic assumptions, I would almost assuredly come to the same conclusions as BioLogos and the evolutionary establishment, or I would at least find evolutionary arguments credible. But the most basic issue is, and has always been, that of worldview and basic presuppositions….There is absolutely no reason that a Christian theologian should accept the uniformitarian assumptions of evolution. In fact, given a plain reading of Scripture, there is every reason that Christians should *reject* a uniformitarian presupposition. The Bible itself offers a very different understanding of natural phenomena, with explanations that should he compelling to believers.[97]

In essence, whenever there exists dissonance between "the teaching of Scripture" and what scientists have observed, measured, and deduced from the natural world, literalists throw out the latter in favor of the former.

While Brueggemann states that "at some point, the narrative was no doubt an etiology for the diversity of languages,"[98] a literal interpretation and application of the text concludes that the passage still does offer such an explanation. In this framework, the Babel narrative was the cause

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[96] "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," The Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics, http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/icbi.html (accessed April 2, 2012).

[97] R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "No Buzzing Little Fly — Why the Creation-Evolution Debate is So Important," AlbertMohler.com, January 5, 2011, http://www.albertmohler.com/2011/01/05/no-buzzing-little-fly-why-the-creation-evolution-debate-is-so-important/ (accessed April 2, 2012).

[98] Brueggemann, 97.

for the "diversity of languages" spoken today, or at least the ancient forms which they have since developed from. This interpretation links the dozens of language families catalogued by linguists—broad groupings of languages descended from a common source in the past—with the languages that God must have created at the dispersion at Babel. In 2008, the Young-Earth Creationist magazine *Answers* even offered a prediction: "the number of families will be reduced in the future to no fewer than the groups named in Genesis 10 where the Table of Nations appears. That list is by far the best one in existence; and the facts, as far as we know them, are consistent with the Bible."[99] These linguistic claims will be examined more closely in the following section.

The literalist interpretation, however, fails to take into account the differences between the ancient Israelite world and the 21st century. The literalist position imports from antiquity a prescientific way of understanding the world while completely disregarding the observations and work done by paleoanthropologists and linguists.[100] As the late Christian philosopher Arthur Holmes wrote in 1975, "All truth is God's truth, wherever it be found."[101] Literalism, however, only accepts *some* truth. Although it admirably holds a high view of God's word, literalism prevents a more nuanced interpretation of Genesis that respects God's message both in the text and in the natural world. Perhaps there is a better way to reconcile theology with science.

B. Concordist

Walton summarizes the essence of this next view: "Concordists believe the Bible must

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[99] John Oller, Jr., "More than PIE: Babel Explains Distinct Language Families," *Answers* 3, no. 2 (2008), http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/am/v3/n2/more-than-pie (accessed March 23, 2012).

[100] The merely descriptive word "prescientific" has been used rather than the disparaging "unscientific."

[101] Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975; rev. ed., 1987), 17.

agree—be in concord with—all the findings of contemporary science."[102] Concordism has

produced explanations like the Day-Age theory of understanding the creation account in Genesis

1 (where each of the six days represents thousands, if not billions, of years, to agree with the

current conclusion on the age of the universe) and the local flood interpretation of the Flood

account in Genesis 6-8 (where the Flood did not cover the whole earth, but instead was restricted

to the Ancient Near East world or even Mesopotamia, since there is paltry evidence for a

catastrophic global inundation).

In regards to this paper's passage of interest, the concordist approach argues that the

Babel narrative is not universal in scope, but instead deals with the local setting of Mesopotamia.

For example, Hamilton advocates this view and sees the "language of the entire world" as not a

single, universal language but a *lingua franca* or one language in common among many. To him,

this makes sense of the apparent discontinuity between the diversity found in the Table of

Nations and the initial unity in the Babel narrative.[103] Biblical scholar Dale DeWitt also

advocates this interpretation and connects the language of the builders with ancient Sumerian. He

argues, like Hamilton, that "the whole earth" in the Babel narrative is limited to Mesopotamia or

even just Sumer in the south. In addition to saying that chapter 11 must chronologically follow

chapter 10, DeWitt offers "local expressions" as proof for the local nature of the passage—

expressions like "the land of Shinar" and "city and a tower."[104] He attributes the language

confusion and scattering to the Third Dynasty of Ur's fall in 1960 BCE by invading Elamites

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[102] John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009), 17.

[103] Hamilton, 350, 358.

[104] Dale S. DeWitt, "The Historical Background of Genesis 11:1-9: Babel or Ur?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22, no. 1 (1979), 17.

who would have "scattered and dispersed the inhabitants of all Sumer."[105]

However, as stated in the exegesis section above, the passage indicates that "the whole earth" is universal in scope, based on the context from the Flood. Additionally, this view does not respect the biblical author's cultural milieu—the worldview of his original audience. Concordism, in Walton's words, "intentionally attempts to read an ancient text in modern terms" and ends up not reflecting "what the audience would have understood."[106] There exists, however, a more sensible approach that takes into account the ancient Near Eastern context of the Old Testament yet still accepts current knowledge about the past.

C. Accommodationist

One interpretive approach—literalism—takes the cultural setting of the text and awkwardly applies it to the 21st century, disregarding wholesale the work of anthropology and linguistics. The other—concordism—goes to the other extreme and twists Genesis into agreement with the findings of anthropology and linguistics. The *accommodationist*[107] view is the middle way between these two positions. Interpreters following this approach "read the text at face value" but nevertheless look to science to understand the natural world.[108] In this way, they argue that God accommodated his inspired message to ancient ways of thinking about the universe. Seely explains his thesis for the accommodationist view:

> In Gen 11:1-9 the revelation of God as Sovereign over the affairs of men was also accommodated to the writer's limited understanding of geography. That is, the writer was able to speak of "all the earth" having just one language because he had no knowledge of

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[105] Ibid., 25.

[106] Walton, *The Lost World*, 104-105.

[107] Note that this does *not* refer to interpreters accommodating or compromising the authority of Scripture to science, but of God accommodating his message to the worldview of the original audience, however prescientific it may have been.

[108] Ibid., 104.

the lands and peoples of the Americas, Australia, the Far East, or even of all of Africa or Europe. As far as he was concerned, the earth extended only from Sardinia to Afghanistan, and from the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula to the northern boundaries of the Black and Caspian Seas (Gen 10); and the descendants of Noah had not yet spread out over even this limited earth (Gen 11:4). The divine revelation of God was accommodated to the writer's limited understanding of geography and anthropology.[109]

In this view, it is assumed that just as God spoke to the ancient Israelites in the language they spoke, he also communicated to them in their ways of thinking—even if they do not necessarily harmonize with what is known to be true about the natural world. Thus, the text should not be used to preclude accepting the fact that humans had migrated across the globe before ca. 3000 BCE. However, this view accepts that the original audience would have read Babel as a universal event. Nevertheless, Christians can read and receive the message of Genesis and at the same time embrace what researchers have discovered.

So what have linguists discovered? That is the subject of this paper's next section. Below, historical linguistics, that is, the study of how languages change over time, will be briefly surveyed. Then this realm of knowledge will be synthesized with the accommodationist approach to Genesis 10:1-11:9.

IV. Discussion of Linguistics

In the eighteenth century, Western scholars began studying Sanskrit, the old language of the Hindu scriptures, and realized that there were remarkable similarities between it and ancient Greek and Latin, the classical tongues of Europe.[110] Spurred on by this discovery, linguists soon

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[109] Seely, "Babel," 32.

[110] Much of this section draws on knowledge of historical linguistics gleaned from the following sources: John Algeo, *The Origins and Development of the English Language*, 6th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2010), 49-77; Leonard Bloomfield, *Language* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1933), 3-20, 297-320; Victoria Fromkin, Robert Rodman, and Nina Hyams, *An Introduction to Language*, 9th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2011), 488-532; Hans Henrich Hock and Brian D. Joseph, *Language History, Language Change, and Language Relationship: An Introduction to Historical and Comparative Linguistics* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1996), 455-484; and Winfred P. Lehmann, *Historical Linguistics: An Introduction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1962), 1-15.

concluded that these three languages formed a "family" of languages called Indo-European. This grouping embraced not only Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin, but also most of the languages spoken from Portugal to Persia, including English, German, and French. Human speech is invariably a fluid thing, but linguists use the metaphor of family to describe similar languages and their varying forms in time. A *language family* is, simply, "a group of languages evolved from a common source."[111] Significant families include the Afro-Asiatic group, of which Hebrew, Arabic, and Berber are members, and the Sino-Tibetan family, which covers Mandarin Chinese, Tibetan, and Burmese.

This genealogy of languages, however, was not built in a day. It is the product of decades of work by linguists making "observations of regular sound correspondences among certain languages." They then interpret those observations to conclude whether those languages are closely or distantly related.[112] If there is sufficient data, they follow the clues left by regular sound differences between, for example, Spanish and Italian, to estimate how the parent language would have sounded. So much work has been done on the Indo-European family that truly exhaustive dictionaries like the *Oxford English Dictionary* will frequently list the proto-Indo-European form that the English word probably derives from.

Over the past two centuries, linguists have used the *comparative method* to reach the classification of languages that we refer to today. As the name would imply, this involves comparing the forms of equivalent words in various languages to find out if they derive from a common "parent" language spoken at one point in the past. Since people frequently borrow words from other languages for specialized fields, linguists select words from the basic

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[111] Algeo, 290.

[112] Fromkin, et al., 510.

vocabulary of each language, or terms that often deal with close family relations, parts of the body, or numbers.[113] Since speakers are unlikely to borrow such common words from other languages, words from the basic vocabulary make good candidates for comparison. After selecting these basic terms, linguists then compare them as in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Demonstrating the Comparative Method with European Languages.

	'one'	'two'	'three'	'head'	'mouth'
Norwegian	eːn	toː	treː	hoːvəd	mund
German	aɪns	tsvaɪ	draɪ	kɔpf	munt
French	œ̃	dø	tʁwa	tɛt	buʃ
Spanish	uno	dos	tres	kaβeθa	boka
Italian	uno	due	tre	testa	bokka
Greek	énas	ðyó	trís	kefáli	stóma
Russian	adʲin	dva	trvi	galavá	rot
Latvian	viens	divi	triːs	galva	mute
Finnish	yksi	kaksi	kolme	pæː	suː
Estonian	yks	kaks	kolm	pea	suː
Hungarian	edʒ	keːt	haːrom	ʃø	saːj
Basque	bat	bi	hiryr	byry	aho

Source: Adapted from Hock and Joseph, 457.

The languages in Table 3 from Norwegian to Latvian all belong in the Indo-European language family. Despite considerable differences in the grammar or pronunciation, these languages' basic words show remarkable similarities. Finnish, Estonian, and Hungarian, however, group together in the Uralic language family, while Basque is itself an *isolate language*, relating to no known language spoken today. Comparative work like that done in Table 3 has led linguists to condense the 6,909 languages spoken today down to 115 broad language families. These 115 groupings simply cannot be reduced any further given the evidence available to us today.

Literalists, as described above, combine this idea of language families with the biblical

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[113] Hock and Joseph, 463.

tale of Babel. In this account, the author tells of humanity enjoying a worldwide linguistic unity until God confused the language they held in common. Unable to communicate with each other, people scattered across the world from southern Mesopotamia, presumably in small groups that *could* understand each other. From there, humankind reproduced and "were separated into their lands, every one according to its language, according to their families, by their nations," as Genesis 10:5 says. In the literalist approach, interpreters connect upper-level language families with the primordial languages that God established at Babel. The families that historical linguists number today, in this view, correspond to those initial languages that caused the scattering.

This literalist hypothesis, however, falls apart not only because it does not respect the ancient Near Eastern context of Genesis but also the nature of historical linguistics. Since languages leave primarily oral evidence, especially those that lack writing systems, the comparative method can only work so far in tracing the relationships between those languages back in time. Therefore, one would be imprudent to assume that the state of historical linguistics in 2012 definitively rules out the existence of a much older "Proto-World," or primal human language from which all languages spoken today derive. As linguists Hans Heinrich Hock and Brian D. Joseph explain,

> Except in the case of trying to relate a signed language with an oral language, we can never prove that two given languages are not related. It is always conceivable that they are related, but that the relationship is of such an ancient date that millennia of divergent linguistic changes have completely obscured the original relationship.
>
> Ultimately, this issue is tied up with the question of whether there was a single or a multiple origin of Language, writ large.... And according to traditional comparativists, this question can be answered only in terms of unverifiable speculations, given the fact that even with the added time depth provided by reconstruction, our knowledge of the history of human languages does not extend much beyond ca. 5000 B.C., a small "slice" indeed out of the long prehistory of language.[114]

One should not commit a God-of-the-gaps fallacy and assume that God was responsible for the

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[114] Hock and Joseph, 496-497.

diversity of languages we see today, just because relationships have not been sufficiently proven to exist between all languages. As an introductory linguistics textbook explains in perhaps more lucid prose, this difficulty "may be an artifact of being unable to delve into the past far enough to see common features that time has erased. We cannot eliminate the possibility that the entire world's languages spring ultimately from a single source…which is buried, if not concealed, in the depths of the past."[115] It may be tempting to associate the confusion at Babel with the number of language families presently known. However, the worldwide confusion is probably an element of ancient thought that is unnecessary to cling to, especially for those living in the 21st century.

V. Conclusion

To the ancient Israelites, Noah's Flood was universal. In their minds, all people were descended from Noah, and these same people spoke a single language after the Flood. The dispersion at Babel thus explained to them the diversity in the Table of Nations where each tribe spoke its own language. Genesis 10 is the "what," and Genesis 11 is the "why" or "how." By the time the audience reached the Abraham narrative, a distinctly Israelite version of an ancient Near Eastern worldview had been established. When modern readers engage with Genesis 1-11, they can understand how the Israelites would have understood their world.

Nevertheless, practically all the sciences have invalidated much of this way of thinking. In terms of cosmology, the earth is not a flat disc floating on the waters of the deep, covered by a solid dome of water in which the sun, moon, and stars are fixed. In terms of geography, the world is not limited to an oval with borders at Greece, Persia, the Caucasus, and Arabia. In terms of biology and history, humans have existed far longer than 10,000 years across the planet. And in terms of linguistics, space, time, and society are the factors that drive languages to gradually

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[115] Fromkin, et al., 524.

change over time.

Divine accommodation, however, solves the problem of reading inspired Scripture while at the same time accepting science and archaeology. God spoke to the original Israelite audience using their language—which means much more than just using their words and grammar, but also using their culture, too. God was not trying to reveal modern Western-style science and history to his people; his message would simply never have been accepted. Instead, he worked through ancient ways of speaking and thinking in order to speak truth to a world in desperate need of help. One must remember that the narratives in the Old Testament are not, as Seely words it, a "VCR account" of historical events; one should not read ancient texts like modern journalistic reporting or history.[116] Rather, one should be aware that "biblical narrative itself is a theological interpretation of the events narrated," as Bible scholar Gary Schnittjer defines it.[117] Therefore, one should not read the text looking for what it records, but for the theology it communicates.

The ancient Israelites probably explained the diversity of languages with the Babel episode[118]; however, interpreters who live in an age of historical linguistics should set this notion aside. What they should focus on, however, are the reasons the text gives for the dispersion at Babel: humanity resisted God's command to fill the earth, choosing instead to remain together in a single place and build a city-tower complex for this purpose. Clues in Genesis link the Babel story with a historical reality that took place in southern Mesopotamia. The tower was most likely a sky-scraping ziggurat that not only was very tall but also in Mesopotamian thought was

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[116] Seely, "Noah's Flood," 303.

[117] Schnittjer, 14.

[118] Brueggeman, 97.

the place where the god dwelled and was cared for. Removed from God's blessing (the tower was built in the east), disobeying his command to fill the recreated earth (Genesis 9), and probably engaging in a false theology, the builders make God come down to their construction site. God sees that the people are being successful at their plan to stay in the same place and make a name for themselves apart from God's blessing, so he intervenes and initiates the filling of the earth, making it so they cannot coordinate their plan anymore.

To summarize the passage's theology: God's plans are global; he wants to rule the earth through humans, all of whom bear his image on this planet. But his plan is not for humans to create a self-serving oneness of similar, unvaried people; rather, he desires a unity of all people centered on him from across the globe.

Contemporary Christians cannot look to the Babel narrative for further explanatory power, however. Although the text makes universal claims, these must be understood as divine accommodation to an ancient worldview. The story is very probably rooted in a historical event in southern Mesopotamia, but given the text's language (urbanization, a ziggurat, and the use of brick and tar), the date for this occasion is far too recent to justify a dispersion of all humankind from Mesopotamia. This fact, nevertheless, does not undermine the basic truth of the story. There are many differences between westerners and the ancient Israelites, but the theological truth remains the same. Despite misgivings about its cosmology, Genesis is the *inspired* account. And within this inspired text are meaning, purpose, and theology that science can never give.

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