

# All Nations *and* Babel



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Gen. 9:18–11:9, Luke 10:1, Matt. 1:1–17, Luke 1:26–33, Ps. 139:7–12, Gen. 1:28, Gen. 9:1.*

**Memory Text:** “Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth” (*Genesis 11:9, NKJV*).

After the Flood, the biblical account shifts from a focus on the single individual, Noah, to his three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. The particular attention on Ham, the father of Canaan (*Gen. 10:6, 15*), introduces the idea of “Canaan,” the Promised Land (*Gen. 12:5*), an anticipation of Abraham, whose blessing will go to all nations (*Gen. 12:3*).

However, the line is broken by the Tower of Babel (*Gen. 11:1–9*). Once again, God’s plans for humankind are disrupted. What was supposed to be a blessing, the birth of all nations, becomes another occasion for another curse. The nations unite in order to try to take God’s place; God responds in judgment on them; and, through the resulting confusion, the people get scattered throughout the world (*Gen. 11:8*), thus fulfilling God’s original plan to “fill the earth” (*Gen. 9:1, NKJV*).

In the end, in spite of human wickedness, God turns evil into good; He has, as always, the last word. The curse of Ham in his father’s tent (*Gen. 9:21, 22*) and the curse of the confused nations at the Tower of Babel (*Gen. 11:9*) will, eventually, be turned into a blessing for the nations.

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 30.

## The Curse of Ham

**Read** Genesis 9:18–27. What is the message of this strange story?

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Noah's act in his vineyard echoes Adam's in the Garden of Eden. The two stories contain common motifs: eating of the fruit, resulting in nakedness; then a covering, a curse, and a blessing. Noah reconnects with his Adamic roots and, unfortunately, continues that failed history.

The fermentation of fruit was not a part of God's original creation. Noah indulged, then lost self-control and uncovered himself. The fact that Ham "saw" his nakedness hints at Eve, who also "saw" the forbidden tree (*Gen. 3:6*). This parallel suggests that Ham did not just "see" furtively, by accident, his father's nakedness. He went around and talked about it, without even trying to take care of his father's problem. In contrast, his brothers' immediate reaction to cover their father, while Ham left him naked, implicitly denounced Ham's actions.

The issue at stake here is more about the respect of one's parents. Failure to honor your parents, who represent your past, will affect your future (*Exod. 20:12; compare with Eph. 6:2*). Hence the curse, which will influence Ham's future and that of his son Canaan.

Of course, it is a gross theological mistake and an ethical crime to use this text to justify racist theories against anyone. The prophecy is restricted to Canaan, Ham's son. The biblical author has in mind some of the corrupt practices of the Canaanites (*Gen. 19:5–7, 31–35*).

In addition, the curse contains a promise of blessing, playing on the name "Canaan," which is derived from the verb *kana'*, meaning "subdue." It is through the subduing of Canaan that God's people, the descendants of Shem, will enter the Promised Land and prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah, who will enlarge Japheth "in the tents of Shem" (*Gen. 9:27*). This is a prophetic allusion to the expansion of God's covenant to all nations, which will embrace Israel's message of salvation to the world (*Dan. 9:27, Isa. 66:18–20, Rom. 11:25*). The curse of Ham will, in fact, be a blessing for all nations, including whichever descendants of Ham and Canaan accept the salvation offered them by the Lord.

**Noah, the "hero" of the Flood, drunk? What should this tell us about how flawed we all are and why we need God's grace every moment of our lives?**

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## The Genesis Genealogy

The chronological information about Noah’s age makes us realize that Noah serves as a link between the pre-Flood and the post-Flood civilizations. The last two verses of the preceding story (*Gen. 9:28, 29*) take us back to the last link of the genealogy of Adam (*Gen. 5:32*). Because Adam died when Lamech, Noah’s father, was 56 years old, Noah must surely have heard stories about Adam, which he could have transmitted to his descendants before and after the Flood.

**Read Genesis 10. What is the purpose of this genealogy in the Bible?**  
*(See also Luke 3:23–38.)*

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The biblical genealogy has three functions. First, it emphasizes the historical nature of the biblical events, which are related to real people who lived and died and whose days are precisely numbered. Second, it demonstrates the continuity from antiquity to the contemporary time of the writer, establishing a clear link from the past to the “present.” Third, it reminds us of human fragility and of the tragic effect of sin’s curse and its deadly results on all the generations that have followed.

Note that the classification of “Hamite,” “Semite,” and “Japhethite” does not follow clear criteria. The 70 nations foreshadow the 70 members of the family of Jacob (*Gen. 46:27*) and the 70 elders of Israel in the wilderness (*Exod. 24:9*). The idea of a correspondence between the 70 nations and the 70 elders suggests the mission of Israel toward the nations: “When the Most High divided their inheritance to the nations, when He separated the sons of Adam, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel” (*Deut. 32:8, NKJV*). Along the same line, Jesus sends 70 disciples to evangelize (*Luke 10:1*).

What this information shows us is the direct link between Adam and the patriarchs; they all are historical figures, real people from Adam onward. This also helps us understand that the patriarchs had direct access to witnesses who had personal memories of these ancient events.

**Read Matthew 1:1–17. What does this teach us about how historical all these people were? Why is knowing and believing that they were real people important for our faith?**

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## One Language

**Read** Genesis 11:1–4. Why were the people of “the whole earth” so keen to achieve unity?

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The phrase “the whole earth” refers to a small number of people, those alive after the Flood. The reason for this gathering is clearly indicated: they want to build a tower to reach the heavens (*Gen. 11:4*). In fact, their real intention is to take the place of God Himself, the Creator. Significantly, the description of the people’s intentions and actions echo God’s intentions and actions in the Creation account: “they said” (*Gen. 11:3, 4; compare with Gen. 1:6, 9, 14, etc.*); “let us make” (*Gen. 11:3, 4; compare with Gen. 1:26*). Their intention is explicitly stated: “‘Let us make a name for ourselves’ ” (*Gen. 11:4, NKJV*), an expression that is exclusively used for God (*Isa. 63:12, 14*).

In short, the builders of Babel entertained the misplaced ambition to replace God, the Creator. (We know who inspired that, don’t we? *See Isa. 14:14*.) The memory of the Flood surely must have played a role in their project. They built a high tower in order to survive another flood, were another to come, despite God’s promise. The memory of the Flood has been preserved in Babylonian tradition, albeit distorted, in connection with the construction of the city of Babel (Babylon). This upward effort to reach heaven and usurp God will, indeed, characterize the spirit of Babylon.

This is why the story of the Tower of Babel is such an important motif in the book of Daniel, as well. The reference to Shinar, which introduces the story of the Tower of Babel (*Gen. 11:2*), reappears at the beginning of the book of Daniel, in order to designate the place where Nebuchadnezzar has brought the articles of the temple of Jerusalem (*Dan. 1:2*). Among many other passages of the book, the episode of Nebuchadnezzar’s erecting the golden statue, probably on the same place in the same “plain,” is the most illustrative of this frame of mind. In his visions of the end, Daniel sees the same scenario of the nations of the earth gathering together to achieve unity against God (*Dan. 2:43, Dan. 11:43–45; compare with Rev. 16:14–16*), though this attempt fails here, as it did at Babel, as well.

**A famous secular French writer in the past century said the great purpose of humanity was to try “to be God.” What is it about us, starting with Eve in Eden (*Gen. 3:5*), that gets drawn into this dangerous lie?**

## “Let Us Go Down”

**Read** Genesis 11:5–7 and Psalm 139:7–12. Why did God come down to the earth here? What was the event that motivated this divine reaction?

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Ironically, although the men were going up, God had to come down to them. The descent of God is an affirmation of His supremacy. God will always be beyond our human reach. Any human effort to rise up to Him and to meet Him in heaven is useless and ridiculous. No question, that’s why, in order to save us, Jesus came down to us; there was, indeed, no other way for Him to save us.

A great irony in the Tower of Babel account is seen in God’s statement: “to see the city and the tower” (*Gen. 11:5*). God did not have to come down to see (*Ps. 139:7–12; compare with Ps. 2:4*), but He did so anyway. The concept emphasizes God’s involvement with humanity.

**Read** Luke 1:26–33. What does this teach us about God’s coming down to us?

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The descent of God reminds us also of the principle of righteousness by faith and of the process of God’s grace. Whatever work we may perform for God, He will still have to come down to meet with us. It is not what we do for God that will bring us to Him and to redemption. Instead, it is God’s move toward us that will save us. In fact, the text in Genesis talks twice about God going “down,” which seems to imply how much He cared about what was happening there.

According to the text, the Lord wanted to put an end to the people’s deep-seated unity, which—given their fallen state—could lead only to more and more evil. That’s why He chose to confuse their languages, which would bring an end to their united schemes.

“The schemes of the Babel builders ended in shame and defeat. The monument to their pride became the memorial of their folly. Yet men are continually pursuing the same course—depending upon self, and rejecting God’s law. It is the principle that Satan tried to carry out in heaven; the same that governed Cain in presenting his offering.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 123.

**How do we see in the Tower of Babel account another example of human hubris and how, ultimately, it will fail? What personal lessons can we take from this story?**

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## The Redemption of the Exile

**Read** Genesis 11:8, 9 and Genesis 9:1; compare these with Genesis 1:28. Why is God's dispersion redemptive?

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God's design and blessing for humans was that they would " 'multiply, and fill the earth' " (*Gen. 9:1, NKJV; compare with Gen. 1:28, NKJV*). Against God's plan, the builders of Babel preferred to stick together as the same people. One reason they said they wanted to build the city was so that they would not " 'be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth' " (*Gen. 11:4, NKJV*). They refused to move elsewhere, perhaps thinking that together they would be more powerful than they would be separated and scattered. And, in one sense, they were right.

Unfortunately, they sought to use their united power for evil, not good. They wanted to " 'make a name for ourselves,' " a powerful reflection of their own arrogance and pride. Indeed, whenever humans, in open defiance of God, want to " 'make a name' " for themselves, we can be sure it won't turn out well. It never has.

Hence, in a judgment against their outright defiance, God scattered them across "the face of all the earth" (*Gen. 11:9*), exactly what they didn't want to happen.

Interestingly enough, the name Babel, which means "door of God," is related to the verb *balal*, which means "confuse" (*Gen. 11:9*). It is because they wanted to reach the "door" of God, because they thought of themselves as God, that they ended up confused and much less powerful than before.

"The men of Babel had determined to establish a government that should be independent of God. There were some among them, however, who feared the Lord, but who had been deceived by the pretensions of the ungodly and drawn into their schemes. For the sake of these faithful ones the Lord delayed His judgments and gave the people time to reveal their true character. As this was developed, the sons of God labored to turn them from their purpose; but the people were fully united in their Heaven-daring undertaking. Had they gone on unchecked, they would have demoralized the world in its infancy. Their confederacy was founded in rebellion; a kingdom established for self-exaltation, but in which God was to have no rule or honor."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 123.

**Why must we be very careful about seeking to "make a name" for ourselves?**

**Further Thought:** Read Ellen G. White, “The Tower of Babel,” pp. 117–124, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“They decided to build a city, and in it a tower of such stupendous height. . . . These enterprises were designed to prevent the people from scattering abroad in colonies. God had directed men to disperse throughout the earth, to replenish and subdue it; but these Babel builders determined to keep their community united in one body, and to found a monarchy that should eventually embrace the whole earth. Thus their city would become the metropolis of a universal empire; its glory would command the admiration and homage of the world and render the founders illustrious. The magnificent tower, reaching to the heavens, was intended to stand as a monument of the power and wisdom of its builders, perpetuating their fame to the latest generations.

“The dwellers on the plain of Shinar disbelieved God’s covenant that He would not again bring a flood upon the earth. Many of them denied the existence of God and attributed the Flood to the operation of natural causes. Others believed in a Supreme Being, and that it was He who had destroyed the antediluvian world; and their hearts, like that of Cain, rose up in rebellion against Him. One object before them in the erection of the tower was to secure their own safety in case of another deluge. By carrying the structure to a much greater height than was reached by the waters of the Flood, they thought to place themselves beyond all possibility of danger. And as they would be able to ascend to the region of the clouds, they hoped to ascertain the cause of the Flood. The whole undertaking was designed to exalt still further the pride of its projectors and to turn the minds of future generations away from God and lead them into idolatry.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 118, 119.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 What example do we have from history, or even the present, of the trouble that can come from those who seek to make a name for themselves?
- 2 How can we, as a church, avoid the danger of seeking to build our own Tower of Babel? What are ways we might actually be seeking to do this, even subconsciously?