

Commentary Highlights

Genesis 11:1-32

NAC	New American Commentary
PTW	Preaching the Word
BST	The Bible Speaks Today
GIG	Gleanings in Genesis
CAL	Genesis: Calvin's Commentary
SOG	The Story of God Bible Commentary
BKW	Genesis by Bruce K Waltke
KUR	Genesis by Abraham Kuruvilla
REC	Reformed Expository Commentary

****The views presented in these commentary excerpts may not reflect the general understanding of these passages as expressed by Faith Bible Church, but are presented to help us better understand the Scriptures and how various scholars have interpreted them****

(PTW) – The story of the Tower of Babel in chapter 11 can be organized into a chiasm:

A – “The whole earth had one language” (v. 1)		
B – “There” (v. 2)		
C – “Each other” (v. 3)		
D – “Come, let us make bricks.” (v. 3)		
E – “Let us build for ourselves” (v. 4)		
F – “A city and a tower”		
G – “The LORD came down” (v. 5)		
F’ – “The city and tower”		
E’ – “Which mankind had built”		
D’ – “Come...let us mix up” (v. 7)		
C’ – “Each other’s language”		
B’ – “From there” (v. 8)		
A’ – “The language of the whole earth” (v. 9)		

Man's Actions (vv. 1-4)

God's Actions (vv. 5-9)

Genesis 11:1-4

(PTW) – The phrases “one language” and “the same words” can be translated literally as “one lip” and “words, one.” These phrases stress “that the picture [painted in chapter 11] is universal, including all of humanity in original linguistic solidarity.”

(NAC) – “The solidarity of the people is highlighted by the recurring use of “one” in reference to their “one language” and “common [“one”] speech.””

(PTW) – The Hebrew text records that this group of people migrated together eastward. The designation of moving east is critical as it designates and foreshadows not simply their

physical movement, but their spiritual movement away from God and His blessing. “When Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden, cherubim guarded the entry at the “east of the Garden of Eden.” When Lot left Abraham, he traveled “eastward,” where he met disaster in Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham’s sons by his concubine Keturah were sent “away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country.” Jacob fled his homeland to “the land of the people of the east.” Here in the tower story the people’s eastern migration depicts universal rebellion. They have moved outside of the place of blessing.”

(NAC) – “By this spatial term (eastward) the narrative also conveys a metaphorical sphere, meaning the Babelites are outside God’s blessing.”

(NAC) – “Verse 2 may well be an intentional echo of Cain’s expulsion and punishment, resulting in a vagabond life. Cain, like the Babelites, settled for urban life...The introduction concludes “and [they] settled there.” This is not incidental to the account since “settled” is an antonym of the narrative’s key idea “scattered” and opposes the divine command directed to Noah and his offspring, “fill the earth.” Moreover, “settled” shows that the Noahic descendants had taken up permanent residence.”

(PTW) – The people, through Noah, moved eastward from Ararat to a plain “in the land of Shinar.” The Jewish Talmud designates this land as the “valley of the world.”

(PTW) – Here in the valley, the people “settled” down together and began to make a city for themselves through baked bricks and bitumen for mortar. “This quotation in effect mocks the would-be tower builders because sun-dried or kiln-baked bricks set with tar was a Babylonian invention, whereas Israel used stone and mortar. The implication is, “We use stone; they have only brick!” Only fools would choose brick in preference to good Palestinian stone.”

(KUR) – “All in all, cities are not looked upon favorably in the OT...It stands for independence, control, power, and mastery over one’s destiny; “city” is the epitome of self-sufficiency...The Babelites intention...was the self-manufacture of a great name, by their own resources, for their own glory, apart from God.”

(SOG) – The text indicates that these people were not yet settled, but were migrants and bedouins before they came together and settled in their hearts to settle down and build a tower. The place they settled named Shinar which may be a “reference to the alluvial plain between the Tigris and the Euphrates in what would come to be known as southern Mesopotamia.”

(BKW) – The phrase “settled there” “represents the theological opposite of God’s command to fill the earth (9:1).”

(NAC) – “The attempt of the Babelites to transgress human limits is reminiscent of Eve’s ambition.”

(BKW) – In describing the materials used to build the tower, “the narrator has to explain to his Israelite audience, who used readily available stone, the Mesopotamian building practice.”

(NAC) – “The aim of preparing the brickwork was to erect a “city and a tower.” Whereas “city” is repeated, v. 4 is the only appearance of “tower.” Some have rendered the nouns as a hendiadys, “city-tower.” Even if not a hendiadys, the point is well taken that the tower and city were not to be distinguished, for it was the “tower” that symbolized the purpose of the “city’s” construction.”

(PTW) – “The intent behind building a “tower in the heavens” was to join or displease God...The tower builders were clear about what drove them— “and let us make a name for ourselves.” Their desire to “make a name” was ominous because the only previous mention of name in this way was of the Nephilim, who were “the might men who were of old, the men of renown” (Hebrew, “men of name).” These men feared their names being lost with time and instead sought to make their name last throughout time, but there is only one name which is the name above all other names. “Their name would become a joke.”

(NAC) – “The builders confess their intentions at twofold: (1) to make for themselves a “name” and (2) thereby to avoid being “scattered” ...As the Babel narrative unveils, the “name” they achieve, however, is only “Babel” (“muddle”!). “Man certainly did not expect his project to take such a turn. He did not anticipate that the name he wanted to make for himself would refer to a place of noncommunication.””

(SOG) – “What kind of structure would this be? The best answer is likely a ziggurat, a stepped pyramid, once again well-known for this region. “These stepped structures were built in Babylonian cities to replicate the concept of a sacred mountain where human and divinity could commune. (J. McKeown)” The most famous Babylonian ziggurat was located in the city of Babylon and had the name *E-temen-an-ki* which translated from Sumerian means “the house of the foundation of heaven and earth.””

(BKW) – “Like Jacob’s staircase, the ziggurat mountain, with its roots in the earth and its lofty top in the clouds, served in mythopoeic though as a gate to heaven. This humanly created mountain gave humanity access to heaven and served as a convenient stairway for the gods to come down into their temple and into the city.”

(SOG) – In making a name for themselves, the people sought to build not just a tower but their reputation.

(BST) – “The tower is a sort of architectural symbol of humankind’s asserted greatness” (see Isa. 14:13-15).

(BKW) – “Since name connotes fame and progeny, these city builders are futilely attempting to find significance and immortality in their own achievements...This skyscraper is a symbol of their united titanic societal self-assertion against God, who commands them to “fill the earth.” These proud sinners, like Cain, fear both a loss of place in their isolation from God and perhaps from one another. Like him, they find their solution for meaning in an abiding city rivaling God.”

(BST) – “Here, once again, as in the Garden of Eden, as with Cain and with Lamech, as with the marriages of the sons of God and the daughters of humans, God given boundaries are being crossed; human beings are trying to grasp at what does not belong to them and to assert that no longer are they bound by the limits which God has set.”

Genesis 11:5-9

(KUR) – “As was noted, divine inspection reverses the flow of the narrative, just as “And God remembered Noah” reversed the literal flow of the flood. There, however, God’s move initiated rescue; here it announced judgment.”

(PTW) – Ironically, the large tower that was build “was so microscopic that the all-seeing omnipotent God had to come down to see. It was if God stooped down like a man on his hands and knees and lowered his face to the earth to see the great tower.”

(NAC) – “The necessary descent of God and the humanness of the enterprise, “that the men were building,” shows the escapade for what it was—a tiny tower, conceived by a puny plan and attempted by pint-sized people...The edifice can hardly outlast the mortals who built it, for such is the perpetual condition of man’s endeavors at sovereignty.”

(BKW) – The people’s common language was the “source of their strength and unity, symbolized by the tower.”

(NAC) – “Communication with its comforts has become their entanglement, for it has left them as a single people rather than the diversity of peoples the blessing had portended.”

(KUR) – “God is here concerned about the amplification of in in a mob environment. Not only is sin personal after the flood, amply proven by the misdeeds of Ham, it is augmented and intensified corporately when individuals act as “people.”

(NAC) – “This is reminiscent of the garden, where the first couple’s expulsion is designed to hinder what may happen if given access to the tree of life...It can hardly be that the heavens trembled because the ‘advancement’ of mankind in any way threatened celestial rule. But, on the contrary, God was troubled over the injurious consequences that would fall upon the human family if left unchecked.”

(PTW) – “God was not threatened by humankind’s corporate potential— “Oh no, if they band together, what shall I do?” Instead, he was troubled by what would happen to

humanity if the human family was left unchecked. They would build up a delusion of self-sufficiency through their false religion, corporate security, and political uniformity. They would throw off God and attempt to rule the universe. And in their delusion, they would never turn to God. Their Babylonian hearts would become impenetrable and irredeemable.”

(KUR) – Interestingly, “the Sumerians also believed that, at one point, all of mankind spoke the same language; apparently the gods subsequently confounded man’s speech. However, in the Sumerian version the rivalry that led to the confusion of tongues was between god and god; in Gen. 11:1-9, the confounding and scattering was a result of a conflict between God and man.”

(PTW) – The site and people of this tower “came to mean “mixed-up, confused,” signifying a place of meaningless babble, the site of alienation and scattering.”

(BST) – “As for any community in which God himself is banished from the centre, people very soon discover that there is nothing left to bind them to each other...When God, the Lord, disappears from the centre of community life, then the seeds of dispersal, of fragmentation, of loss of communication, are sown. There is no unity of fellowship in human community endeavours, unless they are bound together around a centre outside themselves.

(SOG) – “Once their language is confused, they are unable to carry out their intentions, and they begin to scatter again. Interestingly, the narrator connects the name of Babylon (Babel) with this event. He claims that the name derives from the confusion of their language based on the similarity in sound between the name Babel and the verb “to confuse” (*balal*)...They act out of pride and put themselves in the place of God who is the one who builds reputations and he promises he will do for Abraham. We can rightly speak of languages as the token of grace to the tower of Babel story.”

(BKW) – “Describing this building project as just having begun also has polemical significance. This counters the Babylonian creation myth that presents Babylon as founded as founded at the time of original creation.”

(NAC) – “Babel’s culture of “power” was now fragmented, permitting the diverse groups to realize their blessed potential, though admittedly by God’s initiative alone.”

(BKW) – In scattering the people from Babel, God is sovereignly accomplishing his intended purpose of filling the earth, it is a reversal of the people’s desire to “settle.”

(NAC) – In the case of “Babel” (*babel*) the name is phonologically related to the verb “confused” (*balal*), which occurs twice in the story. We remarked earlier that the Babylonians themselves understood their city to mean “gate of the gods.” Our author’s sarcasm bites at the Babelites’ deluded aim of obtaining a “name” through the erection of the city.”

(NAC) – For the Israelites hearing and reading these stories from Moses, “Canaan’s cities no doubt were attractive to the Israelite sons of Egypt’s slaves. It was the temptation of idolatry, a blatant rejection of the Ten Words, that especially spelled disaster for the Israelites. They were forewarned that their adoption of idolatry meant the “scattering” of the populace among the nations and the ruin of their cities. Just as the scattering meant ultimately the purging of the Babelites and their fulfillment of God’s will to “fill the earth,” the diaspora of Israel resulted in their final cleansing from idolatry. It was the exile that would pave the way for the ultimate restoration of the people whose affections once more would be turned toward their Sovereign Lord.”

Genesis 11:10-26

(SOG) – These verses “serve as a bridge between the first two major parts of the book of Genesis, the primeval history and the patriarchal narratives.”

(NAC) – In listing a genealogy immediately after the confusion at Babel the reader sees that “God’s grace once again supersedes human sin, insuring the continued possibilities of the promissory blessings.”

(BST) – “In this genealogy, the spread of the nations across the world, of which we read in chapter 10, is now narrowed down to the single line of Shem, the son of Noah’s blessing...God’s plan for all the families of the earth is linked to his blessing of one man, Abraham, who came from the line of Shem.”

(PTW) – God’s promissory “seed of the woman” seems to be lost as once again humanity seems to be in a downward spiral due to their ever-growing sin, so Moses takes time to remind his readers that God’s promise has not been lost but is continuing through the line of Shem. Just as in chapter 5, here there are 10 generations presented. However, while the descendants in chapter 5 all have the refrain “and he died” attached to their name (with the exception of Enoch), here in chapter 10 such a refrain is missing. Allen Ross suggests that this missing phrase subtly “stresses a movement away from death toward the promise, and it stresses life and expansion.”

(NAC) – “The startling omission of the death notice, however, does more than push the narrative ahead. It also is consistent with the optimism that the new era of Abraham brought. The absence of “death” is the author’s reflection on God’s patience toward sinful man.”

(PTW) – Particularly important is the intentional deletion of one of Eber’s two sons, Joktan. Instead, the line of the “seed of the woman” will flow through Eber’s other son Peleg. “This highlights the difference in the two inner branches of the Shemite family – one leading to disgrace and the other to grace.”

(NAC) – “What we learn from the relative ages of the patriarchs is the dwindling life spans of the patriarchs following the flood. Arphaxad’s life (438) is only two-thirds of his father Shem

(600), and Peleg's life (239) is about half of his father Eber (464). The same phenomenon occurs in the Sumerian King List, where the reigns after the flood, though still enormous compared to the biblical numbers, are dramatically lower."

Genesis 11:27-32

(PTW) – Concerning Sarai "we learn two things, first by the extraordinary omission of any information about her being a daughter of Terah and thus the half-sister of Abraham. Moses withholds this information so as not to ruin the suspense in chapter 20 when Abraham, in order to save his own skin, reveals to Abimelech that Sarai is his half-sister. Also, we learn that Sarai was barren – which sets up huge challenges that would come to Abraham's faith."

(PTW) – In this passage we see that Terah and Abraham were brought out of pagan moon worship. Joshua 24:2 tells us "Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor; and they served other gods." "Abram's family, including Abraham himself, were polytheistic idolaters. Their names come right out of the cult of moon worship. Terah's name is related to the word *yareah*, "moon" and *yerah* "lunar month." Sarai is the equivalent to the Akkadian *sarratu*, "queen," and was the name of the wife of the moon god Sin. Milcah is the same as the goddess *Malkatu*, a title of Ishtar, daughter of the mood god."

(KUR) – Opposed to the Babelites who moved eastward (away from God), "Terah and his family move from Ur to Canaan, a westward migration" (back toward God).

(PTW) – Taken by itself, you could infer from verse 31-32 that "Terah moved his family to Haran where he lived for some time and then died at age 205, after which God called Abraham. But neither Genesis nor the rest of the Old Testament or the New Testament allow this. Rather it was while Abraham was in Ur that he was called" (see Gen 15:7; Neh 9:7; & Acts 7:2-4). "The point here is that it was in the darkest Ur that Abram saw the glory of God and heard the call to depart and go to a land that God would show him. And he convinced Terah to leave with him. But when they got to Haran (another center of moon worship), Terah would not budge. So dutiful Abram bid his time until Terah's death, after which he was off again to the promised land. We say all of this to underline that Abram's obedience was a monumental act of faith. He was a pagan. He was advanced in years. He was prosperous and settled in his pagan world. He was the only one in his culture who heard God's word. But on the basis of hearing along, he risked everything to follow God."

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