
GENESIS 11:1 The whole earth was of one language and of one speech.

All the inhabitants of the earth, speaking one language and dwelling in one place, Gen 11:1, Gen 11:2, purpose to build a city and a tower to prevent their dispersion, Gen 11:3, Gen 11:4. God confounds their language, and scatters them over the whole earth, Gen 11:5-9. Account of the lives and families of the postdiluvian patriarchs. Shem, Gen 11:10, Gen 11:11. Arphaxad, Gen 11:12, Gen 11:13. Salah, Gen 11:14, Gen 11:15. Eber, Gen 11:16, Gen 11:17. Peleg, Gen 11:18, Gen 11:19. Ragau or Reu, Gen 11:20, Gen 11:21. Serug, Gen 11:22, Gen 11:23. Nahor, Gen 11:24, Gen 11:25. Terah and his three sons, Haran, Nahor, and Abram, Gen 11:26, Gen 11:27. The death of Haran, Gen 11:28. Abram marries Sarai, and Nahor marries Milcah, Gen 11:29. Sarai is barren, Gen 11:30. Terah, Abram, Sarai, and Lot, leave Ur of the Chaldees, and go to Haran, Gen 11:31. Terah dies in Haran, aged two hundred and five years, Gen 11:32.

Verse 1

The whole earth was of one language - The whole earth - all mankind was of one language, in all likelihood the Hebrew; and of one speech - articulating the same words in the same way. It is generally supposed, that after the confusion mentioned in this chapter, the Hebrew language remained in the family of Heber. The proper names, and their significations given in the Scripture, seem incontestable evidences that the Hebrew language was the original language of the earth - the language in which God spake to man, and in which he gave the revelation of his will to Moses and the prophets. "It was used," says Mr. Ainsworth, "in all the world for one thousand seven hundred and fifty-seven years, till Phaleg, the son of Heber, was born, and the tower of Babel was in building one hundred years after the flood, Gen 10:25; Gen 11:9. After this, it was used among the Hebrews or Jews, called therefore the Jews' language, Isa 36:11, until they were carried captive into Babylon, where the holy tongue ceased from being commonly used, and the mixed Hebrew (or Chaldee) came in its place." It cannot be reasonably imagined that the Jews lost the Hebrew tongue entirely in the seventy years of their captivity in Babylon; yet, as they were mixed with the Chaldeans, their children would of course learn that dialect, and to them the pure Hebrew would be unintelligible; and this probably gave rise to the necessity of explaining the Hebrew Scriptures in the Chaldee tongue, that the children might understand as well as their fathers. As we may safely presume the parents could not have forgotten the Hebrew, so we may conclude the children in general could not have learned it, as they did not live in an insulated state, but were mixed with the Babylonians. This conjecture removes the difficulty with which many have been embarrassed; one party supposing that the knowledge of the Hebrew language was lost during the Babylonish captivity, and hence the necessity of the Chaldee Targums to explain the Scriptures; another party insisting that this was impossible in so short a period as seventy years.

GENESIS 11:2 As they travelled east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they lived there.

Verse 2

As they journeyed from the east - Assyria, Mesopotamia, and the country on the borders and beyond the Euphrates, are called the east in the sacred writings. Balaam said that the king of Moab had brought him from the mountains of the east, Num 23:7.

Now it appears, from Num 22:5, that Balaam dwelt at Pethor, on the river Euphrates. And it is very probable that it was from this country that the wise men came to adore Christ; for it is said they came from the east to Jerusalem, Mat 2:1. Abraham is said to have come from the east to Canaan, Isa 41:2; but it is well known that he came from Mesopotamia and Chaldea. Isa 46:11, represents Cyrus as coming from the east against Babylon. And the same prophet represents the Syrians as dwelling eastward of Jerusalem, Isa 9:12 : The Syrians before, מִקְדֵּם mikkedem, from the east, the same word which Moses uses here. Dan 11:44, represents Antiochus as troubled at news received from the east; i.e. of a revolt in the eastern provinces, beyond the Euphrates.

Noah and his family, landing after the flood on one of the mountains of Armenia, would doubtless descend and cultivate the valleys: as they increased, they appear to have passed along the banks of the Euphrates, till, at the time specified here, they came to the plains of Shinar, allowed to be the most fertile country in the east. See Calmet. That Babel was built in the land of Shinar we have the authority of the sacred text to prove; and that Babylon was built in the same country we have the testimony of Eusebius, Praep. Evang., lib. ix., c. 15; and Josephus, Antiq., lib. i., c. 5.

GENESIS 11:3 They said one to another, "Come, let's make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar.

Verse 3

Let us make brick - It appears they were obliged to make use of brick, as there was an utter scarcity of stones in that district; and on the same account they were obliged to use slime, that is, bitumen, (Vulg). ασφαλτος, (Septuagint) for mortar: so it appears they had neither common stone nor limestone; hence they had brick for stone, and asphaltus or bitumen instead of mortar.

GENESIS 11:4 They said, "Come, let's build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top reaches to the sky, and let's make ourselves a name, lest we be scattered abroad on the surface of the whole earth."

Verse 4

Let us build us a city and a tower - On this subject there have been various conjectures. Mr. Hutchinson supposed that the design of the builders was to erect a temple to the host of heaven - the sun, moon, planets, etc.; and, to support this interpretation, he says וראשו בשמים verosho bashshamayim should be translated, not, whose top may reach unto heaven, for there is nothing for may reach in the Hebrew, but its head or summit to the heavens, i.e. to the heavenly bodies: and, to make this interpretation the more probable, he says that previously to this time the descendants of Noah were all agreed in one form of religious worship, (for so he understands ושפה אחת vesaphah achath, and of one lip), i.e. according to him, they had one litany; and as God confounded their litany, they began to disagree in their religious opinions, and branched out into sects and parties,

each associating with those of his own sentiment; and thus their tower or temple was left unfinished.

It is probable that their being of one language and of one speech implies, not only a sameness of language, but also a unity of sentiment and design, as seems pretty clearly intimated in Gen 11:6. Being therefore strictly united in all things, coming to the fertile plains of Shinar they proposed to settle themselves there, instead of spreading themselves over all the countries of the earth, according to the design of God; and in reference to this purpose they encouraged one another to build a city and a tower, probably a temple, to prevent their separation, "lest," say they, "we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth:" but God, miraculously interposing, confounded or frustrated their rebellious design, which was inconsistent with his will; see Deu 32:8; Act 17:26; and, partly by confounding their language, and disturbing their counsels, they could no longer keep in a united state; so that agreeing in nothing but the necessity of separating, they went off in different directions, and thus became scattered abroad upon the face of the earth. The Targums, both of Jonathan ben Uzziel and of Jerusalem, assert that the tower was for idolatrous worship; and that they intended to place an image on the top of the tower with a sword in its hand, probably to act as a talisman against their enemies. Whatever their design might have been, it is certain that this temple or tower was afterwards devoted to idolatrous purposes. Nebuchadnezzar repaired and beautified this tower, and it was dedicated to Bel, or the sun.

An account of this tower, and of the confusion of tongues, is given by several ancient authors. Herodotus saw the tower and described it. A sybil, whose oracle is yet extant, spoke both of it and of the confusion of tongues; so did Eupolemus and Abydenus. See Bochart Geogr. Sacr., lib. i., c. 13, edit. 1692. On this point Bochart observes that these things are taken from the Chaldeans, who preserve many remains of ancient facts; and though they often add circumstances, yet they are, in general, in some sort dependent on the text. 1. They say Babel was built by the giants, because Nimrod, one of the builders, is called in the Hebrew text גִּבּוֹר gibbor, a mighty man; or, as the Septuagint, γίγας, a giant. 2. These giants, they say, sprang from the earth, because, in Gen 10:11, it is said, He went, He הארץ ההוא מן הארץ ההוא min haarets hahiv, out of that earth; but this is rather spoken of Asshur, who was another of the Babel builders. 3. These giants are said to have waged war with the gods, because it is said of Nimrod, Gen 10:9, He was a mighty hunter before the Lord; or, as others have rendered it, a warrior and a rebel against the Lord. See Jarchi in loco. 4. These giants are said to have raised a tower up to heaven, as if they had intended to have ascended thither. This appears to have been founded on "whose top may reach to heaven," which has been already explained. 5. It is said that the gods sent strong winds against them, which dispersed both them and their work. This appears to have been taken from the Chaldean history, in which it is said their dispersion was made to the four winds of heaven, בארבע רוחי שמיא bearba ruchey shemaiya, i.e. to the four quarters of the world. 6. And because the verb פוץ brev eht esua phuts, or נפץ naphats, used by Moses, signifies, not only to scatter, but also to break to pieces; whence thunder, Isa 30:30, is called נפץ nephets, a breaking to pieces; hence they supposed the whole work was broken to pieces and overturned. It was probably from this disguised representation of the Hebrew text that the Greek and Roman poets took their fable of the giants waging war with the gods, and piling mountain upon mountain in order to scale heaven. See Bochart as above.

GENESIS 11:5 The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men built.

Verse 5

And the Lord came down - A lesson, says an ancient Jewish commentator, to magistrates to examine every evidence before they decree judgment and execute justice.

GENESIS 11:6 The LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is what they begin to do. Now nothing will be withheld from them, which they intend to do."

Verse 6

The people is one, etc. - From this, as before observed, we may infer, that as the people had the same language, so they had a unity of design and sentiment. It is very likely that the original language was composed of monosyllables, that each had a distinct ideal meaning, and only one meaning; as different acceptations of the same word would undoubtedly arise, either from compounding terms, or, when there were but few words in a language, using them by a different mode of pronunciation to express a variety of things. Where this simple monosyllabic language prevailed (and it must have prevailed in the first ages of the world) men would necessarily have simple ideas, and a corresponding simplicity of manners. The Chinese language is exactly such as this; and the Hebrew, if stripped of its vowel points, and its prefixes, suffixes, and postfixes separated from their combinations, so that they might stand by themselves, it would nearly answer to this character even in its present state. In order therefore to remove this unity of sentiment and design, which I suppose to be the necessary consequence of such a language, God confounded their language - caused them to articulate the same word differently, to affix different ideas to the same term, and perhaps, by transposing syllables and interchanging letters, form new terms and compounds, so that the mind of the speaker was apprehended by the hearer in a contrary sense to what was intended. This idea is not iii expressed by an ancient French poet, Du Bartas; and not badly, though rather quaintly, metaphrased by our countryman, Mr. Sylvester.

Some speak between the teeth, some in the nose,
 Some in the throat their words do ill dispose -
 "Bring me," quoth one, "a trowel, quickly, quick!"
 One brings him up a hammer. "Hew this brick,"
 Another bids; and then they cleave a tree;
 "Make fast this rope," and then they let it flee.
 One calls for planks, another mortar lacks;
 They bear the first a stone, the last an axe.
 One would have spikes, and him a spade they give;
 Another asks a saw, and gets a sieve.
 Thus crossly crost, they prate and point in vain:
 What one hath made another mars again
 These masons then, seeing the storm arrived
 Of God's just wrath, all weak and heart-deprived,
 Forsake their purpose, and, like frantic fools,
 Scatter their stuff and tumble down their tools.
 Du Bartas - Babylon.

I shall not examine how the different languages of the earth were formed. It certainly was not the work of a moment; different climates must have a considerable share in the formation of tongues, by their influence on the organs of speech. The invention of new arts and trades must give birth to a variety of terms and expressions. Merchandise, commerce, and the cultivation of the sciences, would produce their share; and different forms of government, modes of life, and means of instruction, also contribute their quota. The Arabic, Chaldee, Syriac, and Ethiopic, still bear the most striking resemblance to their parent, the Hebrew. Many others might be reduced to a common source, yet everywhere there is sufficient evidence of this confusion. The anomalies even in the most regular languages sufficiently prove this. Every language is confounded less or more but that of eternal truth. This is ever the same; in all countries, climates, and ages, the language of truth, like that God from whom it sprang, is unchangeable. It speaks in all tongues, to all nations, and in all hearts: "There is one God, the fountain of goodness, justice, and truth. Man, thou art his creature, ignorant, weak, and dependent; but he is all-sufficient - hates nothing that he has made - loves thee - is able and willing to save thee; return to and depend on him, take his revealed will for thy law, submit to his authority, and accept eternal life on the terms proposed in his word, and thou shalt never perish nor be wretched." This language of truth all the ancient and modern Babel builders have not been able to confound, notwithstanding their repeated attempts. How have men toiled to make this language clothe their own ideas; and thus cause God to speak according to the pride, prejudice and worst passions of men! But through a just judgment of God, the language of all those who have attempted to do this has been confounded, and the word of the Lord abideth for ever.

GENESIS 11:7 Come, let's go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."

Verse 7

Go to - A form of speech which, whatever it might have signified formerly, now means nothing. The Hebrew הבה habah signifies come, make preparation, as it were for a journey, the execution of a purpose, etc. Almost all the versions understand the word in this way; the Septuagint have δευτε, the Vulgate venite, both signifying come, or come ye. This makes a very good sense, Come, let its go down, etc. For the meaning of these latter words see Gen 1:26, and Gen 18:21.

GENESIS 11:8 So the LORD scattered them abroad from there on the surface of all the earth. They stopped building the city.

GENESIS 11:9 Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. From there, the LORD scattered them abroad on the surface of all the earth.

Verse 9

Therefore is the name of it called Babel - בבל babel, from בל bal, to mingle, confound, destroy; hence Babel, from the mingling together and confounding of the projects and language of these descendants of Noah; and this confounding did not so much imply the producing new languages, as giving them a different method of pronouncing the same words, and leading them to affix different ideas to them.

Besides Mr. Hutchinson's opinion, (see on Gen 11:4 (note)), there have been various conjectures concerning the purpose for which this tower was built. Some suppose it was intended to prevent the effects of another flood, by affording an asylum to the builders and their families in case of another general deluge. Others think that it was designed to be a grand city, the seat of government, in order to prevent a general dispersion. This God would not permit, as he had purposed that men should be dispersed over the earth, and therefore caused the means which they were using to prevent it to become the grand instrument of its accomplishment. Humanly speaking, the earth could not have so speedily peopled, had it not been for this very circumstance which the counsel of man had devised to prevent it. Some say that these builders were divided into seventy-two nations, with seventy-two different languages; but this is an idle, unfounded tale.

GENESIS 11:10 This is the history of the generations of Shem. Shem was one hundred years old and became the father of Arpachshad two years after the flood.

Verse 10

These are the generations of Shem - This may be called the holy family, as from it sprang Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the twelve patriarchs, David, Solomon, and all the great progenitors of the Messiah.

We have already seen that the Scripture chronology, as it exists in the Hebrew text, the Samaritan, the Septuagint, Josephus, and some of the fathers, is greatly embarrassed; and it is yet much more so in the various systems of learned and unlearned chronologists. For a full and rational view of this subject, into which the nature of these notes forbids me farther to enter, I must refer my reader to Dr. Hales's laborious work, "A New Analysis of Sacred Chronology," vol. ii., part 1, etc., in which he enters into the subject with a cautious but firm step; and, if he has not been able to remove all its difficulties, has thrown very considerable light upon most parts of it.

GENESIS 11:11 Shem lived five hundred years after he became the father of Arpachshad, and became the father of sons and daughters.

GENESIS 11:12 Arpachshad lived thirty-five years and became the father of Shelah.

Verse 12

And Arphaxad lived - The Septuagint bring in here a second Cainan, with an addition of one hundred and thirty years. St. Luke follows the Septuagint, and brings in the same person in the same way. But the Hebrew text, both here and in 1 Chronicles 1:1-28, is perfectly silent on this subject, and the best chronologists have agreed in rejecting this as a spurious generation.

GENESIS 11:13 Arpachshad lived four hundred three years after he became the father of Shelah, and became the father of sons and daughters.

GENESIS 11:14 Shelah lived thirty years, and became the father of Eber:

GENESIS 11:15 and Shelah lived four hundred three years after he became the father of Eber, and became the father of sons and daughters.

GENESIS 11:16 Eber lived thirty-four years, and became the father of Peleg.

GENESIS 11:17 Eber lived four hundred thirty years after he became the father of Peleg, and became the father of sons and daughters.

GENESIS 11:18 Peleg lived thirty years, and became the father of Reu.

GENESIS 11:19 Peleg lived two hundred nine years after he became the father of Reu, and became the father of sons and daughters.

GENESIS 11:20 Reu lived thirty-two years, and became the father of Serug.

GENESIS 11:21 Reu lived two hundred seven years after he became the father of Serug, and became the father of sons and daughters.

GENESIS 11:22 Serug lived thirty years, and became the father of Nahor.

GENESIS 11:23 Serug lived two hundred years after he became the father of Nahor, and became the father of sons and daughters.

GENESIS 11:24 Nahor lived twenty-nine years, and became the father of Terah.

GENESIS 11:25 Nahor lived one hundred nineteen years after he became the father of Terah, and became the father of sons and daughters.

GENESIS 11:26 Terah lived seventy years, and became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

Verse 26

And Terah lived seventy years, and begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran - Haran was certainly the eldest son of Terah, and he appears to have been born when Terah was about seventy years of age, and his birth was followed in successive periods with those of Nahor his second, and Abram his youngest son. Many have been greatly puzzled with the account here, supposing because Abram is mentioned first, that therefore he was the eldest son of Terah: but he is only put first by way of dignity. An instance of this we have already seen, Gen 5:32, where Noah is represented as having Shem, Ham, and Japheth in this order of succession; whereas it is evident from other scriptures that Shem was the youngest son, who for dignity is named first, as Abram is here; and Japheth the eldest, named last, as Haran is here. Terah died two hundred and five years old, Gen 11:32; then Abram departed from Haran when seventy-five years old, Gen 12:4; therefore Abram was born, not when his father Terah was seventy, but when he was one hundred and thirty.

When any case of dignity or pre-eminence is to be marked, then even the youngest son is set before all the rest, though contrary to the usage of the Scriptures in other cases. Hence we find Shem, the youngest son of Noah, always mentioned first; Moses is mentioned before his elder brother Aaron; and Abram before his two elder brethren Haran and Nahor. These observations are sufficient to remove all difficulty from this place.

GENESIS 11:27 Now this is the history of the generations of Terah. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Haran became the father of Lot.

GENESIS 11:28 Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldees.

GENESIS 11:29 Abram and Nahor took wives. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran who was also the father of Iscah.

Verse 29

Milcah, the daughter of Haran - Many suppose Sarai and Iscah are the same person under two different names; but this is improbable, as Iscah is expressly said to be the daughter of Haran, and Sarai was the daughter of Terah, and half sister of Abram.

GENESIS 11:30 Sarai was barren. She had no child.

GENESIS 11:31 Terah took Abram his son, Lot the son of Haran, his son's son, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife. They went from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan. They came to Haran and lived there.

Verse 31

They went forth - from Ur of the Chaldees - Chaldea is sometimes understood as comprising the whole of Babylonia; at other times, that province towards Arabia Deserta, called in Scripture The land of the Chaldeans. The capital of this place was Babylon, called in Scripture The beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, Isa 13:19.

Ur appears to have been a city of some considerable consequence at that time in Chaldea; but where situated is not well known. It probably had its name *Ur* אור, which signifies fire, from the worship practiced there. The learned are almost unanimously of opinion that the ancient inhabitants of this region were ignicolists or worshippers of fire, and in that place this sort of worship probably originated; and in honor of this element, the symbol of the Supreme Being, the whole country, or a particular city in it, might have had the name Ur. Bochart has observed that there is a place called *Ouri*, south of the Euphrates, in the way from Nisibis to the river Tigris. The Chaldees mentioned here had not this name in the time of which Moses speaks, but they were called so in the time in which Moses wrote. Chesed was the son of Nahor, the son of Terah, Gen 22:22. From Chesed descended the Chasdim, whose language was the same as that of the Amorites, Dan 1:4; Dan 2:4. These Chasdim, whence the Χαλδαιοι, Chaldeans, of the Septuagint, Vulgate, and all later versions, afterwards settled on the south of the Euphrates. Those who dwelt in Ur were either priests or astronomers, Dan 2:10, and also idolaters, Jos 24:2, Jos 24:3, Jos 24:14, Jos 24:15. And because they were much addicted to astronomy, and probably to judicial astrology, hence all astrologers were, in process of time, called Chaldeans, Dan 2:2-5.

The building of Babel, the confusion of tongues, and the first call of Abram, are three remarkable particulars in this chapter; and these led to the accomplishment of three grand and important designs:

1. The peopling of the whole earth;

2. The preservation of the true religion by the means of one family; and
3. The preservation of the line uncorrupted by which the Messiah should come.

When God makes a discovery of himself by a particular revelation, it must begin in some particular time, and be given to some particular person, and in some particular place. Where, when, and to whom, are comparatively matters of small importance. It is God's gift; and his own wisdom must determine the time, the person, and the place. But if this be the case, have not others cause to complain because not thus favored? Not at all, unless the favoring of the one for a time should necessarily cut off the others for ever. But this is not the case. Abram was first favored; that time, that country, and that person were chosen by infinite wisdom, for there and then God chose to commence these mighty operations of Divine goodness. Isaac and Jacob also received the promises, the twelve patriarchs through their father, and the whole Jewish people through them. Afterwards the designs of God's endless mercy were more particularly unfolded; and the word, which seemed to be confined for two thousand years to the descendants of a single family, bursts forth on all hands, salvation is preached to the Gentiles, and thus in Abram's seed all the nations of the earth are blessed.

Hence none can find fault, and none can have cause to complain; as the salvation which for a time appeared to be restricted to a few, is now on the authority of God, liberally offered to the whole human race!

GENESIS 11:32 The days of Terah were two hundred five years. Terah died in Haran.
