

GENESIS

A Theological Commentary For Preachers

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To AK
the בְּכֹר
who gave
the צְעִיר
the eternal בְּרָכָה of Christ

PERICOPE 6

Genealogies and the Tower of Babel

Genesis 10:1–11:26

[Genealogies of the Sons of Noah; The Tower of Babel]

REVIEW, SUMMARY, PREVIEW

Review of Pericope 5: Genesis 6:9–9:29 deals with the flood, God’s discipline for mankind’s gross sin. With three subsidiary stories, the pericope notes three ways to avoid such disciplinary action: righteousness, intercession, and mankind’s authority to deal with sin. However, ongoing sin is not stemmed.

Summary of Pericope 6: This pericope describes what appears to be a genealogy sandwiching a narrative. In reality, however, it is a description of God’s blessing fulfilled in the multiplication and fruitfulness of humankind. Yet its return to its old ways of hubris and rebellion is poignantly described in the story of the Babelites (and, indirectly, in that of Nimrod). God punishes, but even his disciplinary action is a means to bring about his blessing.

Preview of Pericope 7: The next pericope (Gen 11:27–12:20) commences the Abraham Story (and the Patriarchal History). After the depressing end of the Primeval History, a new turn is taken: Abram is called, and blessings are promised. However there are hints that the patriarch is not completely obedient or faithful. Nevertheless, God’s promise of blessing remains sure.

PRIMEVAL HISTORY: *Creating for Blessing*

6. *Genesis 10:1–11:26*

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS OF PERICOPE 6

6 Mankind’s continual hubris and arrogant independence invite divine punishment that, though punitive, is nonetheless gracious, enabling God’s promised blessings for all to be fulfilled (10:1–11:26).

6.1 Despite the sins of mankind, God’s promise of blessing for all is fulfilled (10:1–32).

6.2 Mankind’s actions of hubris and arrogant independence invite appropriate divine punishment that, though punitive, is nonetheless gracious, enabling God’s promised blessings to be fulfilled (11:1–26).

6.2.1 *Mankind’s postdiluvian actions of hubris and arrogant independence—similar to its antediluvian pretensions—invite appropriate divine punishment.*

6.2.2 *The punitive action of God, keeping man in his rightful place, is nonetheless gracious, for it enables his promised blessings to be fulfilled.*

OVERVIEW

This pericope (Pericope 6) and portions of the previous ones (Pericopes 4 and 5) are characterized by narrative blocks bookended by genealogies¹:

Genealogy	5:32	Noah’s sons
Narrative	6:1–8	<i>Sons of God</i>
Genealogy	6:9–10	Noah’s sons
Genealogy	6:9–10	Noah’s sons
Narrative	6:11–9:17	<i>The flood</i>
Genealogy	9:18–19	Noah’s sons
Genealogy	10:21–31	Sons of Shem
Narrative	11:1–9	<i>Tower of Babel</i>
Genealogy	11:10–32	Sons of Shem

Notably, the two genealogies surrounding the Tower of Babel narrative are distinct in nature: 10:21–31 is segmented (or horizontal) with more than one person’s descendants being traced; 11:10–32 is linear (or vertical), with the line of one person (Shem) being followed down to Abraham. While the first five in the series of the sons of Shem are paralleled in both genealogies (Shem, Arpachshad, Shelah, Eber, and Peleg), 10:25 breaks away after the mention of Peleg (פֶּלֶג, *peleg*) and a hint of “division” (פָּלַג, *palag*; reflected in his name). The resumption of the genealogy of Shem through Peleg and onwards occurs at 11:10, after an exposition of the division and how it came about—the Tower of Babel account in 11:1–9. This is a deliberate placement of that narrative

1. Hamilton, *Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 350. The usual pattern of the genealogies in Genesis is to attend to the non-elect lines first, before focusing on the elect individuals and their descendants: Cain first (Gen 4), then Seth (Gen 5); Ishmael first (25:1–18), then Isaac (25:19–34). Likewise, here, Japheth (10:2–5) and Ham (10:6–20) are disposed of first, before the chosen line of Shem (10:21–31). Within this line of Shem, Jotkan is considered (10:26–30, leading up to the crowd at Babel) before Peleg, the elect (11:18–26, leading up to the patriarch Abraham). See Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 428.

between two genealogies.² Hamilton, who calls this effect-before-cause location of Gen 10 and 11 (the statement of division in Gen 10 coming before the account of such division in Gen 11) a “dischronologization,” observes that had Gen 10 followed Gen 11, the dispersed nations would have been viewed only negatively. In its current sequence, the pericope serves as a reminder that the divine mandate of 9:1, God’s command to man to be fruitful and multiply, has been fulfilled.³ God’s sovereignty in accomplishing his purposes is thereby emphasized. In sum, Gen 11:1–9, following upon a list of many nations of the world (“spread out” [10:5, 18, 32] in a “divided” world [10:25], with their various languages [10:5, 20, 31]), explains how this division and spread and variegation of languages occurred.⁴ Rather than this human disunion being merely adventitious, the reader learns that it was the consequence of divine judgment upon man. The description in 10:32 of nations “separated on the earth after the flood” was the direct result of God’s scattering (11:9). “Though not as catastrophic a sentence as that announced in 6:1–8, after the somewhat similar description of antediluvian man’s fertility [10:1–32; see 6:1], the tower of Babel again puts man’s intentions in question. He is not master of his own destiny. Indeed, in rebellion he must suffer God’s displeasure curtailing his grandiose dreams.”⁵ The god-complex of man, thus, had not changed; a similar attitude had resulted in the disobedience of the first human pair in the Garden of Eden.

6.1 Genesis 10:1–32

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS 6.1

6.1 Despite the sins of mankind, God’s promise of blessing for all is fulfilled (10:1–32).

NOTES 6.1

6.1 *Despite the sins of mankind, God’s promise of blessing for all is fulfilled.*

The pericope begins with the standardized formula that commences a new section of Genesis: “These are the generations [תּוֹלְדוֹת, *toldot*] of . . .” (as in 2:4; 5:1 [a variant]; 6:9; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; and 37:2). “After the flood” in 10:1 connects with what has preceded—9:28 has the same phrase.

2. Penley, “A Historical Reading of Genesis 11:1–9,” 703.

3. Hamilton, *Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 347. Moreover, “languages” is found in 10:5, 25, 31, *before* the narration of the division and generation of language diversity in 11:1–9—another dischronology. One also notices that Peleg only lived 239 years, whereas his grandfather, Shelah, lived for 433, and his father, Eber, for 464 (11:14–19). Did the sins of the people in his time, particularly the rebellion of the Babelites, impact their longevity? (Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 497).

4. In fact, “whole earth” in 11:1 is a précis of Gen 10; and both chapters share motifs: “scatter” (10:18 and 11:4, 8, 9), “land of Shinar” (10:10 and 11:2), “build” (10:11 and 11:4, 5, 8), “earth” (10:5, 8, 10, 11, 20, 25, 31, 32 and 11:1, 2, 4, 8, 9 [×2]), and “east” (10:30 and 11:2).

5. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 209.

PRIMEVAL HISTORY: *Creating for Blessing*

The genealogy of Gen 10 forms an integral unit bounded by an *inclusio*: 10:1 has תולדות, “sons of Noah,” “these,” and “flood”; and 10:32 has תולדותם, *toldotam*, “sons of Noah,” “these,” and “flood.”⁶ Genesis 10 begins with Noah’s sons listed in the order Shem–Ham–Japheth, but then proceeds to deal with these three in reverse order Japheth (10:2–5)–Ham (10:6–20)–Shem (10:21–31). The lineage of each commences with “the sons of X were . . .” (10:2, 6, 21), and ends with a formula that refers to families, languages, lands, and nations (10:5, 20, 31).

Of Gen 10, Cassuto wisely declares: “This chapter does not come to teach us ethnology, just as the first section of Genesis does not purport to instruct us in geology or paleontology or any other sciences.”⁷ There is more than just information that is provided here. The descendants of the sons of Noah are exactly seventy, not counting the Philistines parenthetically noted in 10:14. Seventy is a traditional figure for the number of one’s descendants: the goddess Asherah is said to have had seventy sons (II AB.vi, *ANET* 134); so also Jacob (Gen 46:27⁸), Gideon (Jdg 8:30), and Ahab (2 Kgs 10:1).⁹ There is thus an effort to portray Noah’s children as a perfect number—“an ideal creation.” There is clearly deliberate shaping of this list.¹⁰ “The Torah was concerned only to complete the number of seventy names, and to incorporate therein the names of the principal nations that were near to Israel, or were in some way connected with the Israelites, or were in some manner known to them.”¹¹ Notice that there is no mention of “Israel” in Gen 10; neither is there a hint of the covenant “people” (עַם, *am*) of God; rather “nations” (גוֹי, *goy*) echoes here. In a sense, this chapter is anticipating divine blessing upon *all*, as is explicitly noted in 12:3.

Wenham warns the interpreter not to assume that all the names refer to particular individuals: no ages are noted (as they are in the genealogies of Gen 5 and 11:10–32); some names are clearly places (Sidon, Sheba) or peoples (Ludim, Amorites); the formula for fathers begetting sons is quite flexible in Gen 10 (“sons of X were . . .”

6. As will be seen later, Gen 11 resounds with consonants related to “Babel” (בְּבֶלֶט, *babel*); 10:1 and 10:32 have another anticipatory example: “flood,” מַבּוּל, *mabbul*. Wenham suggests this section be called “From Flood to Babel” (*Genesis 1–15*, 209); a more assonant label would be “From *mabbul* to *babel*.”

7. Cassuto, *Genesis*, 174.

8. Also see Exod 1:5 and Deut 10:22, though all these texts show differences in specific details and names.

9. Moreover, Israel was governed by seventy elders during their wilderness wanderings (Exod 24:9; Num 11:24). Jesus also sent out seventy disciples (Luke 10:1–17).

10. Other evidence of this purposeful shaping include the following: Japheth has seven sons and seven grandsons (10:2–4); Cush (a son of Ham) has seven sons and grandsons (10:7); and Mizraim (another son of Ham) has seven sons (10:13–14). “Sons” occurs fourteen times, seven times in 10:1–7 and another seven times in 10:20–32.

11. Cassuto, *Genesis*, 180. See, for instance, 10:5, dealing with the line of Japheth; it mentions only the “coastlands of the nations,” assuming that there might have been other nations born of Japheth. Deuteronomy 32:8—with terms similar to those in Gen 10, such as “nations,” “sons,” and “separate” (see Gen 10:5, 32)—identifies the number of Gentile nations as seventy (“according to the number of the sons of Israel”), just as was the total of the children of Israel, evincing narrators’ inclination towards uniformity and parallelism, not to mention their penchant for “seventy.”

alternates with “X fathered . . .”); moreover, “sonship” and “brotherhood” could well designate a relationship by treaty or other design, and not necessarily by blood.¹²

The cameo of Nimrod (10:8–12), a son of Cush, is rather unusual in that he appears after five other sons of Cush *and* two grandsons have been mentioned—Nimrod is almost an afterthought. The first occurrence of “kingdom” in the OT is found in 10:10; Nimrod is thus the “first noted potentate” and a “champion hunter,” founding cities, spawning proverbs.¹³ His name might be linked to the root *מרד*, *mrd*, “to rebel,” perhaps foreshadowing in Shinar (10:10) what would later happen in that same location—rebellion (11:2). In fact, rabbinic commentary explicitly labels him so: “the wicked Nimrod, who incited the whole world to rebel against Me [Yahweh] during his reign” (*m. Pesah.* 94b).¹⁴ His description in 10:9 as a mighty hunter “before Yahweh” is probably a superlative (as in 30:8; 35:5; Jonah 3:3; etc., which also have “before God”), not necessarily expressing God’s approval of the man’s enterprises.¹⁵ Hom notes that the description of Nimrod as a hunter-king reflects the portrayal of Assyrian rulers; the description of Nimrod’s establishment of four cities (twice, in 10:10 and in 10:11–12), suggests “imperialist notions along the lines of the ‘four corners of the earth.’” The vocabulary of 10:8–12 is uniformly negative: the Hiphil of *הָלַל* (*hll*, “begin/become”) in 11:6 is clearly deprecatory, therefore it is likely to have the same connotation in 10:8 (as also in 6:1; 34:27; 49:4); “Babel” in 11:9 is negative and presumably so also in 10:10; Shinar is often a place of false religion (11:12 and 10:10; also Josh 7:21; Zech 5:11; Dan 1:2); “city” and its “building” in Gen 11:4, 5, 8 meet with God’s disapproval, and those words are found also in 10:11; as well, the assonance of the pretentious and vainglorious program of the Babelites (*עִיר וּמִגְדָּל*, *’ir umigdal*, “city and tower,” 11:4) with the last phrase of the Nimrod story (*הָעִיר הַגְּדֹלָה*, *ha’ir haggdolah*, “the great city,” 10:12). Cain, too, like Nimrod, was a “builder” of cities (4:17; found also in 10:11). All of this makes Nimrod’s exploits “retroactively reinforced as rebellious.”¹⁶

The many shared items of vocabulary between Gen 10 and 11 thus hint at a less than benign assessment of the lives and activities of those listed in the former; for instance “scatter” shows up innocently in 10:18 (and 9:19), but retrospectively, from the gaze of 11:4, 8, 9 where the word is used to picture divine judgment upon human hubris, Gen 10 may be viewed as pejorative. Also, “the earth” is found in both 11:1, 4, 8, 9 and in 10:8, 10, 11, tending to equate two negative accounts.

While there is, of necessity, some overlap between Shem’s genealogy in Gen 10 and that in Gen 11, the main difference is that in the former, a number of dead ends are

12. *Genesis* 1–15, 215. See also Num 21:25; Josh 17:11; 2 Sam 7:14; 2 Kgs 16:7; etc., that employ “son” in an almost metaphorical fashion.

13. Mathews, *Genesis* 1–11:26, 450.

14. Likewise, *Tg. Ps.-J.* on Gen 10:8; and *m. Hag.* 13a.

15. “Therefore it is said” (Gen 10:9) indicates a proverbial saying (as also in 1 Sam 19:24), suggesting that “before Yahweh” was more idiomatic than literal (Westermann, *Genesis* 1–11, 516).

16. Hom, “. . . A Mighty Hunter,” 67–68. Mathews observes that the righteous patriarchs, in contrast, were known for “building” altars for the worship of Yahweh, not cities (8:20; 12:7–8) (*Genesis* 1–11:26, 451).

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noted (a segmented genealogy); in the latter, the focus is upon a linear configuration leading from Shem to Abram (likewise, the genealogy of Gen 4 is segmented, while that of Gen 5 is linear). As was noted, Shem's line comes after Japheth's and Ham's, since it is the most pertinent to the narrative: it becomes the line of Abram. The importance of this lineage is noted right in its introduction that has an extra statement (10:21: "And also to Shem . . . children were born") that is absent in the introductions to the lineages of Japheth and Ham. Within Shem's descendants, Eber is notably mentioned in the introduction (10:21), as well as in his proper place as the son of Shela and the father of Peleg and Joktan (10:24–25). Therefore, while the Shemites are important, the Eberites are particularly important. "Eber," supposedly, is also the name from which "Hebrew" is derived (14:13; 39:12; 40:15; 41:12; 43:32; etc.).

In Gen 10, Peleg is noted, and then forgotten, after the comment about the division of the earth in his days (10:25); subsequently, in Gen 11, Peleg's line is traced all the way down to Abram. His name comes from the root פִּלַּג (plg) that means "to divide"; thus the wordplay: in the days of פִּלַּג, the earth was נִפְּלְגָה (*niplgah*, "divided," 10:25). Though not employed in Gen 11 to describe the division of the nations, Ps 55:10 does use the same word for the division of languages, hinting that what happened in Gen 11 was the cause of the earth's division.

In all of this, the promise of divine blessing in the form of fruitfulness and multiplication is being fulfilled to all peoples. While it appeared that Ham had not obtained Noah's blessing (9:25–27), in the genealogy of Gen 10, Ham is second only to Joktan in reproductive potential: Ham has 11 sons and grandsons; Joktan, 13 sons. God *does* bless, despite sin—whether of Ham, or of his descendant Nimrod, or of that permeating all of mankind. And God's blessings of fruitfulness and multiplication are fulfilled.

6.2 *Genesis 11:1–26*

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS 6.2

6.2 Mankind's actions of hubris and arrogant independence invite appropriate divine punishment that, though punitive, is nonetheless gracious, enabling God's promised blessings to be fulfilled (11:1–26).

6.2.1 *Mankind's postdiluvian actions of hubris and arrogant independence—similar to its antediluvian pretensions—invite appropriate divine punishment.*

6.2.2 *The punitive action of God, keeping man in his rightful place, is nonetheless gracious, for it enables his promised blessings to be fulfilled.*

NOTES 6.2

The *Enuma elish* has echoes of a Babel-like structure in "Babylon"/"Babili"—the Esagila, a "high" shrine to Marduk, complete with descriptions of brick-making, and with a "high ziggurat," all constructed by lesser gods, the Anunnaki (6.47–67¹⁷;

17. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 262–63.

“ziggurat” comes from the Akkadian *zaqaru* = “to raise up/elevate”). The “head” of the Esagila was said to have been raised—Esagila itself means “structure which raises the head.” This is parallel to the Babel tower whose “top” (רֹשׁ, *r’osh*, 11:4, which can also mean “head”) was intended to reach into the heavens.¹⁸ The ziggurat was likely to have been the Etemenanki (= “House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth”), of which, in the seventh century BCE, Nabopolassar records a repair being undertaken “to make its top vie with the heavens” (Nbp 1 i.30–40; iii.34–37).¹⁹ This historical and architectural parallel gives credence to the biblical account of Gen 11:1–9. Moreover, it is known that 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 (jealousy of one about the universal sway over mankind of the other); in Gen 11:1–9, the confounding and scattering was a result of a conflict between God and man.²⁰

6.2.1 *Mankind’s postdiluvian actions of hubris and arrogant independence—similar to its antediluvian pretensions—invite appropriate divine punishment.*

Gen 11:1–9 is structured carefully, paralleling the actions of man in the first half with the actions of God in the second.²¹ The turning point, and the midpoint of the narrative (*G* below), is the scene of divine inspection (“Yahweh came down to see,” 11:5), after which the actions of God meticulously dismantle the actions of man. Thus we have “men against God, God against the men: construction followed by destruction, construction may even be said to have invited destruction.”²²

18. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 471–72; Speiser, “Wordplays,” 317–23.

19. George, “The Tower of Babel,” 83–84. Herodotus, *Histories* 1.181–182, describes the Etemenanki as series of eight concentric towers, one on top of the other. Kass suggests that astronomy was carried out in these towers, primarily for the prediction of rain. “The Babylonian priests ruled the city on the basis of their knowledge—and divination—regarding heaven. The House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth thus sought to link the city with the cosmos, and to bring the city into line with the heavenly powers that be, or—perhaps, conversely [and perversely?]*—*to bring the power that be into line with the goals of the city” (*The Beginning of Wisdom*, 229–30).

20. Kramer, “The ‘Babel of Tongues,’” 111.

21. The layout of the narrative also alternates between indirect and direct discourse: indirect (11:1–2); direct (11:3–4); indirect (11:5); direct (11:6–7); indirect (11:8–9). See Baden, “The Tower of Babel,” 214.

22. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 28. The table is modified from Cotter, *Genesis*, 70, and Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 235. Words mirrored in the various units are italicized.

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A 11:1	the whole earth was of one language
B 11:2	Shinar ... there
C 11:3a	and the men said to one another
D 11:3b	“Come, let us make bricks” [נִלְבְּנָה, <i>nilbناه</i>]
E 11:4a	“let us build for ourselves”
F 11:4b	a city and a tower
G 11:5a	Yahweh came down to see
F' 11:5b	the city and the tower
E' 11:5c	which the sons of men had built
D' 11:6–7a	and God said “... Come, ... and let us confuse” [וְנִבְלָה, <i>wnבלah</i>]
C' 11:7b	“so that the men will not understand the speech of one another”
B' 11:8–9a	from there ... Babel ... there
A' 11:9b	the language of the whole earth ... whole earth

Assonances abound. The Shinar gang seem particularly prone to use the consonants *b* and *l* (consonants that make up בָּבֶל, *babel*, “Babel”) or others close related, such as *m*, *n*, and *p* (highlighted below)—“a constantly recurring melody,” “a kind of *leit-motif*, which accompanies the narrative almost from beginning to end, and reaches its climax in the explanation of the name *Babel*.”²³

... הָבָה נִלְבְּנָה לְבָנִים וְנִשְׂרַפָּה לְשִׂרְפָּה ... (11:3)
habah nilbناه lbenim wnisrפah lisrפah
“Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.”

... הָבָה נִבְנֶה־לָּנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל ... (11:4)
וְרֵאשׁוּ בַשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה־לָּנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן־נִפְזָר עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ:
habah nibneh-lanu 'ir umigdalah
wro'sho bashamayim wna'aseh-lanu shem pen-naputs 'al-pne kal-ha'aretz
“Come, let us build ourselves a city and tower,
and its top to the heavens, and let us make ourselves a name,
lest we be scattered on the face of the whole earth.”

Fokkelman observes that 11:3 “simply crackles with pairs”—cognate words used together for emphasis (highlighted).

... הָבָה נִלְבְּנָה לְבָנִים וְנִשְׂרַפָּה לְשִׂרְפָּה ... (11:3)
וַתְּהִי לָהֶם הַלְבְּנָה לְאֶבֶן וְהַחֲמָר הָיָה לָהֶם לְחֵמֶר:
habah nilbناه lbenim wnisrפah lisrפah
watthi lahem hallbenah l'aben whakhemar hayah lahem lakhomer
“Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.”
And they had brick for stone, and tar they had for mortar.

23. Cassuto, *Genesis*, 232–33. Indeed, these consonants appear later as well: בָּנוּ בְּנֵי (banu bne, 11:5); וְנִבְלָה (wnבלah, 11:7); וַיַּחַדְלוּ לְבָנֹת (wayykhdlu livnot, 11:8); and בָּבֶל . . . בָּלַל (babel . . . balal, 11:9). Also see *ibid.*, for alliterations of the letters ש and ל in this narrative. Moreover, as indicated in the table above, “let us confuse” (נִבְלָה, *nבלah*, 11:7) sounds remarkably like נִבְלָה (nבלah, “disgrace”), “the folly of the impious” (Gen 34:7; Deut 22:21; Josh 7:15; Job 42:8; Isa 9:16; Isa 32:6; Jer 29:23), which, indeed, it was in Babel. “The name ‘Babel’ thus stands forever as a reminder of the failure of godless folly” (Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 234–35).

He thinks this is deliberate: “The atmosphere in the human community is electrified by the intensive communication which leads to energetic plans: come on, let us do this! come on, let us do that! Standing in the unity of language . . . people exchange ideas. Like sparks they dart to and fro.”²⁴ Their plotting and scheming here is literarily depicted!

And sonic contrasts between their words and those of God are also apparent (see above: C and C'; D and D'; E and E'). Mankind goes east to build “there” (עשׂ, *shm*, 11:2) a tower whose top reaches the “heavens” (שמ״ם, *shmym*), to make a “name” (עשׂ, *shm*) for themselves (11:4). This was a concerted action by “all the earth” (11:1) to prevent scattering, in contradistinction to the command of God to fill the earth (1:28; 9:1, 7). So, in response, God confuses their language “there” (עשׂ, 11:7, 9), their “name” (עשׂ, 11:9) is called Babel, and they are scattered “from there” (משׁם, *mshm*, 11:8, 9) over “all the earth” (11:8, 9 [$\times 2$]), an appropriate fate meet for the felony.²⁵ And notably, “face of the earth” (פְּנֵי כְּלֵי־הָאָרֶץ, *pne kal-ha'arets*, 11:4, 8, 9) begins and ends with the consonants that make up פּוֹצֵץ (*puts*, “scatter,” in the same verses, 11:4, 8, 9).²⁶ All of this shows how divine action will be apposite for the human action—punishment equal to sin.

At the very beginning of the account, a negative note is struck. The eastward travel of the people in 11:2 is usually negative in Genesis: that was the direction of banishment of Adam and Eve (3:24) and Cain (4:16).²⁷ And this people settle in a valley (בְּקִעָה, *bq'h*, also “plain,” 11:2). Generally, valleys/plains were viewed negatively in ancient Israel (Num 14:25; 22:1; Ps 23:4; Jer 7:31; Ezek 37:1; etc.). God’s preferred locations for theophanies were mountains (Exod 17:6; 19:11; Deut 34:1; Ps 2:6); Jesus, himself, opted for mountains to engage in important activities (Mark 3:13; 6:46; 9:2; etc.). And, frequently, in the OT, God seems to have been against towers, perhaps because they were symbols of human hubris and megalomaniacal self-sufficiency: 2 Kgs 17:9; Isa 2:15; 30:25; 33:18; Ezek 26:4, 9. There is also the “ludicrous paradox,” in our Babel story, of constructing, in a valley, a tower reaching to the heavens!²⁸

Shinar, itself, does not appear in a good light, as was noted: it is associated with the sinister Nimrod (Gen 10:10), the grandson of Ham (10:6–8). In the two shameful acts that are noted after the flood, Ham is thus involved in some way (9:20–27 and 11:1–9). Moreover, the king of Shinar was an enemy of Abraham (Gen 14:1, 9); a mantle of Shinar was part of Achan’s loot (Josh 7:21); Shinar was where the epitome of wickedness, the woman sitting inside the basket, dwelt (Zech 5:7–11); and it was the center of

24. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 27.

25. “All the world’ assembles and the only result is that they are scattered ‘all over the world’; precisely what ‘all the world’ seeks to avoid happens, dispersion ‘all over the world’—another flash of the narrator’s dialectic irony” (*ibid.*, 16).

26. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 235.

27. East would also be the ill-fated direction in which Lot moves (Gen 13:11); Abraham sends his sons by Keturah to the east “away from his son Isaac” (25:6); Jacob moves to the east, chased away from home, hounded by his brother Esau (29:1). In contrast, an acceptable migration was that of Abraham—westward (12:4–6). On the other hand, if מִקְדֶּם, *miqqedem* (11:2), indicates “from the east,” it is still ominous: these folks are coming from the place of exile and quarantine.

28. LaCocque, “Whatever Happened,” 36.

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idolatry (Dan 1:2).²⁹ In fact, Sodom and Babylon/Shinar are connected, respectively, through the two descendants of Ham, Canaan (10:19) and Nimrod (10:8–10); also, in the stories of both towns, God comes down to see what was going on (11:7; 18:21), and disaster strikes soon thereafter. Isaiah 13:19 explicitly links Sodom and Babylon:

And Babylon, the beauty of kingdoms, the glory of the Chaldeans' pride,
Will be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.

The NT, of course, pictures Babylon, in Rev 18, as a wicked city. “City,” thus far, has shown up in reference to Cain’s establishment of a place to settle in (Gen 4:17), and in referring to Nineveh and its cluster of satellites (10:11–12); later it refers to Sodom (13:12; 18:24, 26, 28, and in Gen 19). All in all, cities are not looked upon favorably in the OT. “Whatever the city means, it seems to be linked, at least in these other cases, with violence, lewdness, and corruption.”³⁰ It stands for independence, control, power, and mastery over one’s destiny; “city” is the epitome of self-sufficiency.

Until Gen 11:4, “make” (עָשָׂה, *’sh*) had been used only of God; and thus far, “name” (שֵׁם, *shm*) had only been used of proper names. Now “name” is used in a different sense, and humans are “making” it for themselves. King David is said to have “made a name” (2 Sam 8:13), but in that case there was no question that he had divine aid in that endeavor (8:14; and 7:9 where God promises to “make his name” great; also see 2 Sam 7:26, where David states his goal that *God’s* name would be “magnified forever”). And in the beginning of the Abraham cycle, *God* promises to make the patriarch’s name great.³¹ The Babelites intention, on the other hand, was the self-manufacture of a great name, by their own resources, for their own glory, apart from God.

To make a new name for oneself is to remake the meaning of one’s life so that it deserves a new name. . . . At once makers and made, the founders of Babel aspire to nothing less than self-*re*-creation—through the arts and crafts, customs and mores of their city. The mental construction of a second world through language and the practical reconstruction of the first world through technology together accomplish man’s reconstruction of his own being. The children of man . . . remake themselves and, thus, their name, in every respect taking the place of God.³²

“[W]hereas human speech has previously been used for a variety of other purposes—naming, self-naming, questioning authority, shifting blame, denying guilt, expressing fear, boasting in song, spreading shame and ridicule, and blessing and cursing—speech is here used by human beings to exhort to action and enunciate a project of *making*, for the first time in Genesis,” enabling man to play Creator.³³ Indeed, the stress in

29. Ibid., 32.

30. Kass, “The Humanist Dream,” 642.

31. Yahweh intended, in Abraham’s line, to give what the Babelites had attempted to secure arbitrarily (Von Rad, *Genesis*, 155).

32. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, 231.

33. Kass, “The Humanist Dream,” 642. Strong explains that “when humans state that their motive for building the city and the tall tower is ‘to make a name for ourselves’ [Gen 11:3] . . . , it would be clear

11:3 on the utterly human creation of a “mountain” to reach the heavens—the making and burning of bricks, and the use for stone and tar for mortar—indicates that this is a flawed enterprise that will only fail.³⁴ Four first-person plural cohortatives (“let us make bricks”; “let us burn”; “let us build”; “let us make”; Gen 11:3–4) and the two reflexive expressions “for ourselves” (11:4) make the Babelites’ self-interest and conceit very clear.³⁵ First-person cohortatives were first used by God (1:26); now humans are using it, an usurpation, once again, of the divine language of creation.³⁶

Such an action on the part of men was an attempt to achieve god-like status, essentially the same engine that powered the sin of mankind in the Garden of Eden (3:5–6). Mathews notes the number of verbal similarities between that account in Gen 2–3 and this in Gen 11: “find” (2:20 and 11:2); “east” (2:8; 3:24 and 11:2); “see” (3:6 and 11:5); “head”/“top” (3:15 and 11:4); “build” (2:22 and 11:4–5); “make” (2:18; 3:1, 7, 13, 14, 21 and 11:4, 6 [×2]); “call” and “name” (2:19; 3:20 and 11:9); and divine plurality and self-reflection before punitive action (3:22–24 and 11:6–8). In fact, even the geographical setting for these two incidents may have coincided: the Garden’s proximity to the Tigris and Euphrates (2:14) is likely to have been in the same area as the “plain in the land of Shinar” (11:2). “Genesis 1–11 then has come full circle from ‘Eden’ to ‘Babel.’”³⁷ And these actions of human hubris invite divine punishment.

6.2.2 *The punitive action of God, keeping man in his rightful place, is nonetheless gracious, for it enables his promised blessings to be fulfilled.*

As was noted, divine inspection (“And Yahweh came down to see the city and the tower,” 11:5) reverses the flow of the narrative, just as “And God remembered Noah” (8:1) reversed the literal flow of the flood (see Pericope 5). There, however, God’s move initiated rescue; here it announced judgment. In *D* and *D'* above, לִבְנֵי (lbn, “make bricks,” 11:3) in the mouth of the people becomes נִבְלָה (nbl, “confuse,” 11:7) in the mouth of God: the consonants are literally reversed—lbn to nbl. “The reversal of the order of the sounds reveals the basic idea of the passage: The construction on earth is answered by the destruction from heaven; men build but God pulls down. The fact

to an ancient reader that humans were defacing the image of God and were, in essence, scratching off the name of God and replacing it with their own name. . . . [I]t was an act of hybris” (“Shattering the Image,” 632).

34. LaCocque, “Whatever Happened,” 35–36.

35. Penley, “A Historical Reading,” 711n48.

36. Gnuse, “The Tale of Babel,” 237. Kass notes that in the (relatively recent) context of the flood, a high place would have appeared safer than any other; hence, the tower alongside the city: “it is even imaginable that it might be intended as a pillar to hold up heaven, lest it crack open another time” (“The Humanist Dream,” 644). It was, if you can believe it, a bolstering of defenses against any future act of God. In fact, *b. Sanh.* 109a describes the enterprise of the Babelites as idolatry.

37. *Genesis 1–11:26*, 467 and 467n134. There are also a number of parallels with Cain’s story: sin, punishment and dispersion, urban life (4:17; 11:5); eastward migration (4:16; 11:2); “find” (4:14–15; 11:2); “dwell” (4:16; 11:2); “in the land of Nod” (4:16) and “in the land of Shinar” (11:2); fear of wandering (4:14; 11:4); and wanderings as punishment that resulted in protection and propagation (4:17–24; 11:1–9/9:1).

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that God's words are also in the form of man's words (as cohortative ["let us go down and confuse," 11:7]) adds a corroding irony to the passage."³⁸

That these builders' concerted efforts were absolutely puny is emphasized by the statement that Yahweh had to "come down" (11:5) to see the heights of their enterprise! In the eyes of God, the inhabitants of the earth "are like grasshoppers," and their works are paltry, indeed (Isa 40:22)—"a tiny tower, conceived by a puny plan and attempted by a pint-sized people." The laughable endeavor is emphasized in the description of its engineers: mere "sons of men" (Gen 11:5).³⁹ The Babelites goal was to reach the heavens, the habitation of God and, in Genesis, the place from where he speaks (19:24; 21:17; 22:11, 15); obviously, mankind's tower did not arrive anywhere near those lofty heights.

Here, as in the Garden of Eden, men act in disobedience to definite commands, Adam to the specific prohibition about the tree of knowledge, the builders of the tower to the post-diluvian command to be fruitful and multiply and to fill the earth. . . . in Adam's individual case, autonomy—choosing for yourself—is the opposite of obedience; in the builders' case, independent self-re-creation—making yourself—is the opposite of obedient dependence, in relation to God or anything else. The road from Adam to the builders of the city is straight and true.⁴⁰

But all the efforts of mankind were in vain; the very things they sought, centralization and security and a name, were lost in the divine scattering. Those who sought a "name" for themselves (11:4) did get one, but not what they expected; it was the "name" Babel (11:9), commemorating the failure, not success, of their "antitheocratical program."⁴¹

God's actions in the latter half of the narrative (11:5–9) ensure that these humans do not make plans (זָמַם, *zamam*) that "are beyond them"—בָּצַר (btsr, 11:6). In the Niphal, this verb is used elsewhere only in Job 42:2, where it asserts that no plan (מְזַמְמָה, *mzimmah*, from זָמַם) of Yahweh "is beyond" (בָּצַר) him.⁴² The similarity of these unique constructions suggest that there is only One who may plan without limits. In other words, the Babelites' transaction was arrogant, defiant, and rebellious.⁴³ For the first time in the Bible, the word "people" (עַם, *am*) occurs, in 11:6, in God's concern about their prideful ambitions; in Gen 10, the crowds had been labeled "nations" (גּוֹי, *goy*, 10:5, 20, 31, 32). In other words, God is here concerned about the amplification of sin in a mob environment. Not only is sin personal after the flood, amply proven

38. Ross, "The Dispersion of the Nations," 122.

39. Or mere "earthlings" (ibid., 131). Not that this is only comedy. While man might try, as the Babelites did, to ascend towards the divine, it is always God who has to come down to rescue man—a fundamental phenomenon of biblical theology (Gen 11:5, 7; Exod 19:11, 18, 20; 34:5; Mark 1:10; John 3:16–17; Gal 4:4; 1 Thess 4:16).

40. Kass, "The Humanist Dream," 647.

41. The derision is even more pointed, for the Akkadian name for Babylon, *babili/babilani*, meant "gate of the god(s)." Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 469; Ross, "The Dispersion of the Nations," 126.

42. These are the only two verses where these concepts occur together in the OT.

43. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 240–41. In fact, according to Wenham, the verb "to plan" (זָמַם) is exclusively used of God (Jer 4:28; 51:12; Zech 8:15) and of "nefarious human scheming" (Deut 19:19; Ps 31:13; 37:12).

by the misdeeds of Ham, it is augmented and intensified corporately when individuals act as “people.”

They had resolved “to make . . .” (עשה, *sh*, 11:4); God acknowledges that the egregiousness of their “doings” (עשה, 11:6 [×2]) will only get worse, and so he interrupts the proceedings, just as he did in 3:22. “[I]t 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.”⁴⁴

The desire to displace God from heaven, to make a name for oneself rather than allow God to do this, and to scheme without reference to his declared will, prompts one final judgment that will hobble man’s attempts at cooperation once and for all. . . . Far from being the last word in human culture, it [Babylon/Babel] is the ultimate symbol of man’s failure when he attempts to go it alone in defiance of his creator.⁴⁵

The postdiluvian humans had decided that their security and their growth in power and reputation depended on their homogeneity and concentration in one place; thus, the making of city and tower, symbolic of their vain affectations and their presumptuous defiance of God who had commanded them to fill the earth (1:28; 9:1, 7). Indeed, it would take God’s active intervention, the confounding of their languages and the scattering of these peoples, to fulfill his creation and post-flood mandate. That this is the thrust of the Babel story is evident in that the scattering of humanity is mentioned twice in the last two verses of the narrative (11:8, 9). The Babelites’ disobedience to the divine mandate to fill the earth (1:28; 9:1, 7) resulted in the scattering that ultimately—and ironically—fulfilled God’s command. Genesis 10:5, 18, 20, 30–32 show that the scattered nations did, in fact, fill the earth. Thus, even the dispersion was an act of grace, ensuring that mankind would attain the blessings earlier promised.⁴⁶

[T]he story of the scattering of the nations is actually the turning point of the book from primeval history to the history of the blessing. From this very confused and dispersed situation nations would develop in utter futility until God would make a great nation through one man who himself would be “scattered” from this alluvial plain to the land of Canaan. The blessings of final redemption and unification would come through his seed.⁴⁷

Pericope 6 closes with the list of the descendants, the תולדות, *toldot*, of “Shem” (11:10). But, unlike the Babelites, as Kass notes, Shem was one who had “gained a name for himself, not by pursuing it proudly but rather for his leadership in the pious

44. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 484.

45. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 245.

46. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 474. This act of “punitive grace” resembles the driving out of the first pair of humans from the Garden of Eden. Had they consumed of the tree of life, they, and the rest of humanity, would have been consigned to an eternal life distant from God, with sin ever-present, and no hope of redemption.

47. Ross, “The Dispersion of the Nations,” 127.

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covering of his father Noah's nakedness."⁴⁸ A positive outcome of this genealogy is therefore to be expected. There are similarities between this Shemite line in Gen 11 and that of Adam in Gen 5: both are hopeful, following a negative account of mankind's sin (Cain's murder and his dodgy descendants in Gen 4; the sons of Noah and the prideful endeavors of his Babelite posterity in Gen 10–11). Each genealogy has ten links; each provides the age of the individual upon the birth of a son, and the remainder of his years; each ends with a father who had three sons (5:32; 11:26). However, in Gen 11, the total number of years of each member is omitted, as also the recurring refrain "and he died"; instead there is "and he had sons and daughters" (11:11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 25). And in Gen 11, there are no extrapolations, as there were in Gen 5 about Enoch (5:22–24) and Noah (5:29), the emphasis of this pericope being the fruitfulness and multiplication of the line, in accordance with the promise and plan of God—a gracious and providential intervention on his part.

Later, Terah and his family move from Ur to Canaan, a westward migration (11:31). It is indeed possible, that this note is an intentional contrast to the eastward movement of the Babelites in 11:1. Calculating from Terah's age when he fathered Abram (70; 11:26), and his age at his death (205; 11:32), when the 75-year-old Abram left Haran (12:4) he actually left his father there—another deliberate move by Abram further westward, putting this patriarch in far better light than the tower-builders.⁴⁹

It is remarkable that Gen 11 begins and ends with a focus on "settling": both 11:2 and 11:31 employ the verb *ישב*, *yshb*. But the Babelites were settling in disobedience to the divine mandate and received, as a result, divine punishment; the Terahites (including Abram), on the other hand, were obedient to God in their settling, and are promised divine blessing. The contrast is stark, again pointing to the negative hue of the entire account of the Tower of Babel. In fact, it is through obedient Abram that the peoples of the earth would find blessing (12:3); this is further reinforced as one notes that "lands," "families," and "nations" in 10:5, 20, 31–32, reappear in 12:1–3, in God's call and promise to the patriarch. And God's promise to Abram is a magnificent one, in Gen 12, the chapter following the narrative of the Tower of Babel: "I will *make* you a great nation, and I will bless you, and *make* your *name* great" (12:2). After the Babelites attempting to make a name for themselves (11:1–4), God's blessing upon "Shem" (aka the "name") (11:10–26), and his promise of a "great name" for Shem's descendant, Abram (12:2), could not be more stark in contrast: human endeavor vs. divine endeavor.

The purpose of the Tower of Babel story is not to depict the etiology of the diversity of languages. Rather, following the account in the latter part of Gen 9 about the sin of the remnant that survived the flood, readers are made aware that Ham's transgressions were not an isolated case. The Tower of Babel narrative reinforces the sinfulness of post-flood humanity; they are as sinful as the pre-flood species. All of

48. "The Humanist Dream," 655.

49. Also the recurrent use of *יָלַד* (*yld*, "fathered"/"born") in 10:8, 13, 15, 21, 24, 25, 26, is reflected in *מוֹלֵדֵת* (*moledet*, "relatives") in 12:1. Abram's move constituted, for the most part, a significant sacrifice on his part.

mankind were sinners, with god-complexes, and afflicted by hubris and egocentricity. Divine judgment is inevitable for such conduct, yet, God's grace is also evident, and his promised blessings are beginning to be fulfilled.

SERMON FOCUS AND OUTLINES

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS OF PERICOPE 6 FOR PREACHING

6 Mankind's hubris—the making of a name for itself—prevents its experiencing God's blessings (10:1–11:26).

In this pericope, the last in the first major section of Genesis (Gen 1–11), mankind seems to have come full circle, i.e., back to the same problems that caused the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden—hubris.

It is also an appropriate prologue to the next major section of Genesis, the Abraham Story (Gen 11:27–25:18), that begins to focus upon a particular people, the children of Abraham, later to be the nation of Israel. Pericope 6 deals with nations at large and God's blessing upon them, even though they were consumed with conceit and were generally moving with an anti-God, anti-theocratic trajectory. So henceforth, God's attention would shift to a select group of people, through whom he would, in the future, bless *all* nations.

For the purposes of the sermon, it would be best to focus upon the events at Babel. The activities of the protagonists in that city, arrantly foolish in their aspirations, are actually intended to counter the mandate and blessing of God to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. Thus, unwittingly, their anti-God endeavors only injure themselves. God's punitive action of confounding their language and scattering them, while appropriate as retribution, ultimately serves to actualize his blessing for the nations of mankind.

Possible Preaching Outlines for Pericope 6

- I. God Endows Blessing
The fruitfulness and multiplication of mankind (10:1–5, 11–32)
Move-to-Relevance: God's desire is always to bless mankind
- II. Man Eschews Blessing
The sinister Nimrod and his rebellious enterprises: "mighty," "kingdom," "before Yahweh" (10:6–10)
The arrogant Babelites and their vain overreaching: making themselves a name (11:1–4)
Move-to-Relevance: How our hubris and independence actually diminish our experience of divine blessing
- III. *Be blessed: Let God give you a name!*
The blessing of mankind in the line of "Shem" (aka "name") (11:10–26)
How we can "allow" God to make us a name—humility, submission, etc.⁵⁰

50. Of course, this sermon (and every other) will need to provide specifics—concrete application, i.e., ways to begin achieving this goal. To a great extent, this is an exercise of pastoral wisdom and godly sensitivity, for it requires the preacher not only to understand the text and the ways of God's working, but also the listeners and where they may be lacking with regard to the theological thrust of the text.

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With a tweak or two, here is another possibility:

- I. God Blesses; Man Boasts
The fruitfulness and multiplication of mankind (10:1–5)
The sinister Nimrod and his rebellious enterprises: “mighty,” “kingdom,” “before Yahweh” (10:6–10)
- II. God Still Blesses; Man Still Boasts
The fruitfulness and multiplication of mankind (10:11–32)
The arrogant Babelites and their vain overreaching: making themselves a name (11:1–4)
Move-to-Relevance: How our tendencies are in this direction
- III. God Punishes; God Still Blesses
The consequences of hubris (11:5–9)
The blessing of mankind in the line of “Shem” (11:10–26)
Move-to-Relevance: God’s desire is always to bless mankind
- IV. *Let yourself be blessed!*
How we can be blessed by God—by avoiding boasting, being humble, submitting to God, etc.

Application essentially is direction as to how God’s people may take the first step(s) to align themselves to the demand of God in a given pericope. Thus, pericope by pericope, sermon by sermon, the people of God are gradually being aligned more and more to the will of God—they are becoming more Christlike.