



## DO OUR LANGUAGES DERIVE FROM BABEL? A BIBLICAL STUDY OF GENESIS 11:1-9

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### Abstract

This article examines the meanings of Genesis 11:1-9 to straighten out the general Christian understanding that the Tower of Babel story is about the origin of all world languages' development today. The qualitative research method uses a narrative hermeneutic approach of background, literary, context, lexical, and grammatical analysis. After analyzing the text, the authors find that Genesis 11:1-9 has historical and theological meaning. Historically, all nations and languages of the Ancient Near East derived from Babel, while theologically, God's people need to be faithful and obedient to His covenant. Thus, this study concludes that the general Christian understanding needs to be revised because the narrative only talks about the origin of all Ancient Near Eastern languages' development, not all of today's world languages. Furthermore, the readers must understand this story as Moses and the Israelites read it by emphasizing theological, not historical, records.

**Keywords:** Genesis; Babel; Tower of Babel; Ancient Near East; language development

### INTRODUCTION

Humans are social creatures, so everyone needs to relate and interact through a particular language. In other words, language can also be a means of communication. According to Ethnologue,<sup>1</sup> The number of world languages has reached 7,139 , with 142 language families and 7.6 billion speakers worldwide. However, no

one knows for sure about the origin and development of these languages.

Nevertheless, humans have speculated about the origin and relationship between languages for thousands of years. Usually, their conjectures are based on theological, ethnocentric, or taxonomic elements, such as observing the word "god" in various languages (Salmons and Joseph 1998, 2). Finally, countless

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<sup>1</sup> Ethnologue is a world language statistical company that provides the latest

developments in the number of languages, language families, and speakers.

stories, tales, or traditions emerge from multiple regions about these origins. One of these stories is the Tower of Babel found in the Bible, precisely in Genesis 11:1-9. Based on this text, the Bible records that the world once had one language, which later developed into many in Babel because of God's action.

Interestingly, of all the accounts, Christians generally believe the Tower of Babel story to be more accurate than any other story. This is rooted in the early view of Genesis 11:1-9. For example, the church fathers (Augustine of Hippo, 1886, 313), (Ephrem of Syria 1994, 148), and reformer (John Calvin, 1948, 332) state that this story is about the origin of all world languages' development. Hodge also avers that the 7,139 languages are derived from one ancestral language in Babel, passed down by divine intervention (Hodge, 2012, 70). Likewise, Oaks observes the suitability of language development from Genesis 11:1-9 with historical linguistics about language diversity and concludes that language confusion would have been gradual rather than immediate (Oaks, 2015, pp. 42–60).

However, linguists disagree with Genesis 11:1-9, which is the story of the development of all world languages. They also have not determined the location, time, and way the 7,139 languages were formed and evolved. This discussion is still a matter of debate among them for centuries. Warf even asserts that modern linguistic research cannot provide evidence for the single language spoken in Genesis 11:1-9 (Warf 2020, 77). Of course, this can be problematic because linguists do not support the general Christian understanding of the origin of all world languages' development from Babel. As a result, the truth or authenticity of the Tower of Babel story can also be questioned.

If this problem is left unchecked, the readers of this text may experience confusion as to whether the Bible or science is correct. In addition, if readers continue to understand this text as the origin of all world languages' development and even talk about it with others, this can lead to misunderstanding because this narrative cannot necessarily be understood that way. Therefore, this

study aims to determine the meaning of Genesis 11:1-9 and its implications for the general Christian understanding of the origin of all world languages' development. So, I submit a thesis statement that Genesis 11:1-9 is not a story about the origin of the development of today's languages, but rather Ancient Near Eastern languages only. It is also a reminder story for readers to prioritize God's mindset over theirs, even though it is good.

## METHOD

I use a socio-historical and grammatical-lexical approach to analyze and reveal the meaning of each verse. Because this study is library research, I utilize many documents to retrace various facts or collect data regarding the interpretation of Genesis 11:1-9 and language development, such as the New International Version (N.I.V.), *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (B.H.S.), Hebrew introductions, dictionaries, lexicons, commentaries, theological books, and relevant articles.

We also use data analysis techniques based on Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (Miles et al.,

2014, pp. 31–32), including data condensation, display, and conclusion. After collecting data, I select and analyze essential data from those written references with a narrative hermeneutical approach consisting of background, literature, context, lexical, and grammatical analysis. Genesis 11:1-9 is a narrative.

Then, I display them to reveal the historical and theological meaning of Genesis 11:1-9 through exegesis. After that, these two meanings are implied for the general Christian understanding that all today's world languages derive from Babel. The implication straightens out this inaccurate understanding. Finally, I conclude the whole process of this research and provide suggestions for the church or congregation as a closing.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Hermeneutic Analysis of Genesis 11:1-9

Before examining Genesis 11:1-9 specifically, I need to understand the book of Genesis. If I look at its authorship, this book was written by Moses for the exodus of Israel before or when they were

wandering in the wilderness to the land of Canaan in c. 1446-1406 BCE. This is reinforced by the arguments of scholars such as Nelson (Nelson, 1993, p. 4), Wright (Wright, 1946, pp. 4–5), Dyer, and Merrill (2001, 3). According to them, the reason is that Moses was a highly educated person in Egypt (cf. Acts 7:22), so he could have access to various ancient literature, dictionaries, and teachers to compile this book. So, at that time, Moses recorded the book of Genesis using written, oral, and divine sources from God directly (cf. Num. 12:8).

Moses used all these sources to design his writings with specific literary (genres). Longman states that Moses emphasized the historical narrative form of past events arranged chronologically (Longman, 2005, p. 62). Likewise, Baxter (1987, 16) and Hodge (2012) state there is no reason to believe it is a myth. However, Moses may have yet to pinpoint what happened because his recorded events were presumed, not proven. In addition, all historical writings were usually ideological, so Moses recorded and interpreted events. Thus, he did not write this book to prove history but to give theological

meaning to the Israelites as the first readers. That is why Longman calls “theological history” the genre of Genesis. (Longman 2005) Similarly, Oaks also says this book is a theological rather than a historical record, though it records actual history. (Oaks 2015)

With this theological history, Moses certainly has a historical and theological purpose, message, or meaning for the book of Genesis. Regarding its history, Wolf observes that this book was written as a prologue to the Bible because there is the origin of the universe, man, sin, Israel, and all the surrounding nations (1991, 104). Regarding theology, Hill and Walton suggest that this book was written to begin the story of the Israelites’ covenant with God (2010, 83–85). In other words, Moses recounted the long journey of establishing the covenant despite many obstacles. Not only that, but there are also specific minor messages that he wanted to convey about geographical information (the journey of the patriarchs), sociological (origin and tribal relations), and polemical (debates against Ancient Near Eastern views).

With these goals, Moses began to divide the book of Genesis from *toledot* formulas and content transitions. When viewed from the *toledo* formulas,<sup>2</sup> This book is divided into eleven small parts: the introduction (1:1-2:4), the descendants of Adam (5:1-6:8), Noah (6:9-9:29), sons of Noah (10:1-11:9), Shem (11:10-11:26), Terah (11:27-25:11), Ishmael (25:12-18), Isaac (25:19-35:29), Esau (36:1-37:1), and Jacob (37:2-50:26). When viewed from the content transitions, this book is divided into primeval history (chapters 1-11), which is universal and patriarchal history (chapters 12-50) which is specific.<sup>3</sup>

Concerning the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9, scholars have debated the location or position of this narrative with the Table of Nations descended from Shem, Ham, and Japheth in chapter 10 because it seems not chronological. Therefore, Hamilton answers this problem by

showing that chapters 5-11 have a “genealogy-narrative-genealogy” pattern (Hamilton, 1990, p. 344). This means that each narrative is placed between the same two genealogies, so it is unsurprising that the Table of Nations in chapter 10 precedes the Tower of Babel in chapter 11 because the genealogy must be written first.

Hodge also explains this well. According to him, Genesis 11:1-9 is a chronological record of the Tower of Babel event, while Genesis 10 details the result of this event. Genesis 11:1-9 tells how the event occurred, while Genesis 10 summarizes the consequences. This arrangement is correct because it is one of the narrative arts of the book of Genesis that is also commonly used in Hebrew literature (Hodge, 2012). So, similarly, (Archer, 1982, p. 88) and (Walton, 2014, p. 419) simplify that the Tower of Babel event in chapter 11 occurred before the scattering of the nations in chapter 10.

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<sup>2</sup> This is a formula that begins with the Hebrew phrase *אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת* (*’ēllē tōlādōt*), which has been translated in several ways, including “this is the account,” “this is the genealogy,” “this is the record,” “this is the family history,” and “these are the generations.” *Toledot* is always followed by a list of people’s names, except in its first occurrence in Genesis 2:4.

<sup>3</sup> Longman subdivides the second part into chapters 12-36, which are about the narrative of the patriarchs (Abraham et al.), and 37-50, which are about the story of Joseph. So, according to him, the book of Genesis consists of three major sections: primeval history (1-11), the narration of the patriarchs (12-36), and the story of Joseph (37-50). (Longman 2005; Mangum, Curtis, and Widder 2012)

Moses opened chapter 11 with the *vav*-consecutive ו “now.”<sup>4</sup> As the first letter to connect it, it is a conjunction between paragraphs to show the past tense narrative sequence (Pratico & Pelt, 2007, p. 233). So, the Tower of Babel in Chapter 11 is closely related to or cannot be separated from the Table of Nations in Chapter 10 earlier. Waltke, Mangum, Custis, and Widder also emphasize that both are related to the division of human groups, so they must be read together (Waltke et al., 2012).

Then, in verse 1 of the Tower of Babel story, Moses explained that the world had one language and an everyday speech. Interestingly, Moses affixed the definite article ה “the” to the noun כל־הָאָרֶץ “the whole world.”<sup>5</sup> This indicates that Moses and the Israelites already knew the meaning of “the whole world,” so the meaning cannot be interpreted according to modern readers’

understanding. Moreover, because the Tower of Babel story is included in primeval history, which is universal, the universality of this opening verse must also be seen from their understanding of “the whole world.”

They defined this term as simply the region in which they and the surrounding nations lived, i.e., the Ancient Near East (ANE), not the earth as a planet or the universe as I understand it today. The reason is that they needed to learn about other areas outside the area that they could reach at that time, considering that transportation facilities and infrastructure were still very ancient to explore faraway places. This is also reinforced by the opinion of (Barry, 2016) and (DeWitt, 1979, p. 17), who agree that “the whole world” includes the ANE, not the entire surface of the earth in the modern sense.

In addition, the immediate context (chapter 10) mentions many

<sup>4</sup> The *vav*-consecutive ו can mean “and, then, thus.” This *vav* is the first letter of the Hebrew verb וַיְהִי in the masculine third-person singular Qal, Imperfect from the root הִיָּה ‘to exist, to be, to happen.’ So, grammatically, this word can be translated as “and he happened.” However, the *vav*-consecutive ו with הִיָּה cannot be translated for some cases because it is only a temporal modifier that appears in many contexts. That

is, the verb וַיְהִי only signals the past tense for this narrative. (Pratico and Pelt 2007)

<sup>5</sup> It is a combination of the root word כל “all, whole, respectively” and אָרֶץ “earth, world, land, region” with the definite article ה “the.” Both are connected with *makeup*, so they are considered as one word. Therefore, grammatically, the noun כל־הָאָרֶץ can be translated as “the whole world.” (Holladay, 2000, p. 27)

places in ANE, such as the maritime areas of Cyprus and Mycenaean islands in the Mediterranean (vv. 1-5),<sup>6</sup> cities in Mesopotamia (vv. 10-12), Egypt (v. 13), cities of Canaan (v. 19), Elam (v. 22), Mesha, Sephar, and the eastern hill country (v. 30).<sup>7</sup> Crabben points out these places were in the ANE (Crabben, 2020). Ross also sees that “the whole world” could refer to the people who lived in the ANE (Ross, 2006). So, in verse 1, Moses wanted to tell his readers that all the ANE people spoke one language and an everyday speech in the beginning.

After that, Moses continued his story in verse 2 by introducing the main character implicitly through the third-person plural pronoun “they.” They are all descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, whom Moses

mentioned earlier in chapter 10. The reason is that the Tower of Babel story is still a part of the list of their descendants in the sons of Noah *toledo* (10:1-11:9) and included in the part of primeval history, which is universal. Thus, this “they” character that Moses texted also includes all the descendants of Noah’s three sons, not one of their descendants.<sup>8</sup>

DeWitt says that “they” were Sumerians who migrated from Anatolia or Ararat (DeWitt, 1979). The archaeologists’ consensus evidences that they migrated in c. 4500-4000 BCE with all their goods, livestock, and culture and became the first humans to occupy southern Mesopotamia. When viewed from the world timeline, the year is in the late Stone Age (Neolithic) to Copper Age (Chalcolithic), to be precise the Ubaid

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<sup>6</sup> Cyprus and Mycenae are two islands located in the Mediterranean Sea. The island of Cyprus is where the Hittites lived, while the Mycenaean islands are where the ancient Greek civilization of the same name took place in c. 1600-1100 BCE. The Mycenaean civilization was preceded by the Minoan civilization, which occurred in c. 3000-1450 BCE and existed when the Israelites came out of Egypt. Thus, “maritime peoples” can mean Greek. (Durant 1939, 11)

<sup>7</sup> We suspect that Mesha and Sephar are in the Arabian Peninsula because there is no place to refer to these areas even though there is a descendant named Sheba (10:7, 28), which is the same as the name of a city in the southern Arabian Peninsula. We suspect the eastern

hill country is a mountainous region of Zagros in modern Iran because the “eastern” cardinal direction can be interpreted as east of Palestine. (Huehnergard 2020)

<sup>8</sup> According to Hodge, they were not descendants of Ham or Nimrod, as many have argued because this rebellion in Babel was collective, not an exclusive one. So, then, the first center of Nimrod’s kingdom was not only Babylon but four cities at once (Babylon, Erech, Akkad, and Calneh). If Nimrod was the character Moses was referring to, Moses should have mentioned “four cities,” not a city. Therefore, it would make more sense if Nimrod founded the four cities after the Tower of Babel event. (Hodge 2012)

period (c. 6500-4000 BCE). This period is also marked by the absence of a single city that has been established,<sup>9</sup> Verses 1-2 are placed at this time.

Kramer adds that they were a big male-dominated family and lived together by upholding a family relationship full of love, respect, and obligation to one another (Kramer, 1963, p. 78). Based on this information, they were equal in social status because no particular person or group was in power then. Hodge also agrees that there was no indication of any specific power between them (Hodge, 2012).

Moses stated that they moved places, but he did not explain why. According to Snell, the increasing number of them caused the area to become increasingly crowded and needed to be more inhabited. In addition, the land was no longer fertile enough to plant, even though farming was their livelihood. This makes them have to find a new place that deserves to be lived. Keil and Delitzsch argue that their migration

route was from north to south or southeast, so they departed from Ararat to Mesopotamia, the land of Shinar (Keil & Delitzsch 1899, p. 119).

They chose this area because Shinar was a flat land or a vast fertile valley fed by the Tigris-Euphrates River system (Fausset et al. 1997, 23). Although it often floods during the rainy season, the overflow of mud caused by the flood made the soil fertile. Then, Shinar was also supported by a vast delta with waterways so that it had the potential to become a sizeable agricultural land (Liverani 2006, 25). Thus, in verse 2, Moses wanted to tell his readers that the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth used the same language and everyday speech. They were the original inhabitants of southern Mesopotamia, precisely the land of Shinar, who migrated from Ararat because the old land could not accommodate their increasing number and was no longer fertile.

Then, Moses continued the story by using their three

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<sup>9</sup> Archaeologically, prehistoric times are divided into four ages: Stone (Paleolithic et al.), Copper (Chalcolithic), Bronze, and Iron. Compare this with the patriarchs from

the Middle Bronze Age (c. 1900-1550 BCE) and Moses from the Late Bronze Age. (Kramer 1963)



cohortative<sup>10</sup> Invitations to (1) make bricks and bake them thoroughly, (2) build a city with its tower, and (3) make a name so they do not get scattered. However, the appearance of the first invitation is relatively early because the time gap between verses 2 and 3 is far. Verse 3 tells the baking of bricks, so it is more appropriately placed in the late Copper Age (Chalcolithic) to early Bronze Age to precisely the Uruk period (c. 4000-3100 BCE). The reason is that bricks began to be made by baking during this period. (Rosenberg et al. 2020) So, verses 1-2 are set in the Ubaid period, while verses 3-9 are set in the Uruk period.

About the first invitation, Moses needed to explain it because there were differences in building materials in Mesopotamia with Egypt and Palestine, where the Israelites lived. According to Walton, stone was abundant in Egypt and Palestine

for everyone to build a house foundation, while mudbricks were used for the layer above it. Therefore, baking techniques have yet to develop there. In contrast to the two, southern Mesopotamia did not have stones. That is why the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth developed a technology to make bricks from mud by baking them as a substitute for stone and heat tar as mortar, cement, or leak-proof coatings. (Walton 2014)

Interestingly, Moses used the Absolute Infinitive conjugation, which has the same root, to describe the making and baking of these bricks. (Keil and Delitzsch 1899) Regarding the invitation to make bricks, Moses wrote גִּלְבְּנָה לְבָנִים, which is rooted in לָבַן.<sup>11</sup> Regarding the invitation to bake them thoroughly, Moses wrote לְשַׂרְפָּה, which is rooted in שָׂרַף.<sup>12</sup> That is, Moses used the nouns לְבָנִים and לְשַׂרְפָּה as affirmations to emphasize or

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<sup>10</sup> The cohortative or volitional conjugation expresses a wish, request, command, intention, goal, or outcome in the first person singular or plural. So that it can be interpreted as “let/may me/us” in English. (Pratico and Pelt 2007)

<sup>11</sup> The verb גִּלְבְּנָה can mean “let us make bricks.” In contrast, the noun לְבָנִים can mean “bricks,” which is not translated by the N.I.V. Interestingly, the arrangement or construction of verbs with an accusative rooted in the same word is also used in the

*Enuma Elish*, the Akkadian creation text, precisely in the word *libittasu iltabnu* (Hebrew: גִּלְבְּנָה לְבָנִים). Therefore, this suggests a match between Genesis 11:1-9 and *Enuma Elish*, given that Hebrew and Akkadian are cognate. (Ross 1988)

<sup>12</sup> The verb וְנִשְׂרַף can mean “let us burn,” while the noun לְשַׂרְפָּה can mean “for baking, burning, a great fire.” In the N.I.V., the noun לְשַׂרְפָּה is translated as “thoroughly.” (Holladay 2000)

intensify the meaning of making and baking act (Pratico and Pelt 2007). In other words, they wanted to use this state-of-the-art building material.

About the second invitation, Moses needed to explain it because their agricultural, grazing, and fishing products in the land of Shinar began to develop rapidly over time. So, they succeeded in making their standard of living more advanced. As a result, the progress in these three sectors has led to urbanization (Pollock 1999, 50). Crawford states that they shifted from rural to urban areas because of high population growth, extensive irrigation, and abundant surpluses. Thus, this increasingly modern life became the backdrop for their city and tower-building projects (Crawford 2004, 75).

Of course, their city and tower were built with baked mudbricks and heated tar because their grand plan was essential. However, the price was relatively high because baking and heating must be done in a furnace and

require fuel (Walton et al., 2000, p. 62). Nevertheless, this difficulty did not prevent them from building the city and its tower because the purpose of the construction was to make them famous and not scattered throughout the ANE.<sup>13</sup> So, they were willing to pay dearly to achieve this goal.

About the third invitation, the goal was based on their two cultures, beliefs, or mindsets. First, they believed that the more people who remembered their name, the more secure their existence in the afterlife. This is unsurprising since the desire to make a name was common in ancient times.<sup>14</sup> After all, humans also have the instinct to be remembered by others after they die. Thus, Walton argues that the real purpose is to ensure their survival after death through others' memories, especially family members, at the funeral (Walton, 2016, p. 111).

Second, they also believed that if they lived a nomadic life, there was no one to care for their parents,

<sup>13</sup> The phrase "make a name" can mean making fame. In addition, Moses again recorded the phrase "the whole world" in verse 4. As explained earlier in verse 1, this term refers to the entire region of the ANE.

<sup>14</sup> An example is a king of Larsa named Warad-Sin, who told of his desire to be known by many people for repairing a

temple. In a royal inscription, he said, "I put my royal name there forever. In order to praise me in the future, I kept a basic inscription." The concept of self-recognition, common in ancient times, also became one of the attractions of God's promise to Abram to make his name famous (cf. Gen. 12:2).

grandparents, or grandmothers, prepare a proper burial for them when they died, and remember them when they were buried. As a result, the bond between ancestors, parents, and them will be severed. If it cuts off, they will be scattered, destroyed, and experience disasters. In other words, their existence was also threatened if their relationship was threatened. This is not surprising because they uphold family relations. After all, this fear is also natural because humans have the instinct not to be divided with their own family, community, or group.

The conditions at that time could also cause them to separate. According to Walton, they knew their numbers were growing, so they could compete for resources in the land of Shinar to meet their needs (Walton, 2014). If this was allowed, they could be separated into various places.<sup>15</sup> As a result, this situation prompted them

to establish a city through urbanization to enable more people to inhabit smaller areas so that they would not have to compete for survival there. This can prevent them from unwanted scattering.

Regarding its shape, Pinches says that the tower of Babel has the same characteristics as all the Mesopotamian towers: it is rectangular, made of brick and tar, built-in stages like steps, equipped with sloping stairs on each side that reach the top, and accompanied by a temple at the top and bottom as a place of religious ceremonies or storage of sacred objects/images.<sup>16</sup> Archaeologists call it a ziggurat after the Babylonian name *zigguratu* for a shrine or terraced tower.<sup>17</sup> Moses had also confirmed that the tower they were building was a ziggurat. This can be seen from the phrase “reaches to the heavens,” which is commonly used in much of Mesopotamian

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<sup>15</sup> This situation was also experienced by Abram and Lot, who are told in Genesis 13. Their livestock and possessions were numerous, and the shepherds fought with each other for land and water supplies for survival—finally, Abram and Lot, along with their wife and all he had, had to separate.

<sup>16</sup> Generally, ancient towers or temples had three stages, but some were the tallest with seven stages. (1979, 383)

<sup>17</sup> Etymologically, this name comes from the Akkadian or Asiro-Babylonian *zaqâru*, which means “peak, mountain peak, storied tower, build high.” This word was first used to measure the height of the mountain where Utnapishtim came out of his ark and offered sacrifices after the flood receded.

literature, especially Akkadian texts,<sup>18</sup> to refer to the ziggurat (Barry, 2016; Walton, 2016). That is why Fausset, Brown, and Jamieson define the phrase as a general figurative expression to denote a high measure (cf. Deut. 1:28, 9:1-6) (Fausset et al., 1997).

Although it looked majestic, they designed the tower with a slightly distorted religious concept because they began to degrade or imagine God's nature like humans. They believed He needed a ladder to move from place to place (heaven, earth, or the underworld). Not only that, but He also needed to be served, facilitated, and comforted with stairs, various utensils, and food in the upper temple. With this concept, they hoped that God could descend into the temple and city through the tower to bless them (Walton et al., 2000). So, according to Walton, in addition to making a name, the tower of Babel was also built to make it easier for God or His messengers to come down to the temple, receive offerings, and bless them, not to reach heaven, so there is no element of arrogance here.

(Walton 2016) Likewise, Von Rad also agrees that there is no indication of a desire to reach heaven ( Von Rad, 1972, p. 149).

Moses was continuing his narration, but this time, he used the term בני האדם “sons of men” (“the people” in the N.I.V.) to refer to these descendants even though he always used the personal pronoun “they” in the previous verses. According to Reyburn and Fry, that term emphasizes the difference between humans on earth as mortal inhabitants and God as the eternal Creator, considering He begins to appear in verse 5 (Reyburn and Fry 1998, 267). I suspect that Moses may have been disturbed by the Babylonian tradition, which said that Babel was built by the God Marduk and destroyed by the king Sargon in 2350 BCE when he captured the land of Shinar to establish his new capital city, Agade (Parrot, 1955, p. 37). Moses must have known this tradition from higher education in Egypt. Still, his information differed from the facts he recorded in the Tower of Babel story. Hence, he needed to assert through

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<sup>18</sup> One of the texts is *Summa Alu Ina Mele Sakin*, which means “If a City Lies on a High.” This text describes the calamity of

various cities or towers built high. (Walton, Chavalas, and Matthews, 2000)

“the people” that the founders of the city and its tower were ordinary humans, not the gods the Babylonians claimed to be (Bible et al., 2006).

Then, Moses recorded God’s word in verses 6-7. He used the pronoun “us” instead of “me” in these two verses. Of course, the “us” here does not mean that God is more than one; instead, He was speaking to the inhabitants of heaven. The reason is that the Ancient Israelites and Near Easterners understood the heavenly world like a royal palace. They believed that the inhabitants of heaven consist of one God as the king who sits on His throne and other divine creatures as His servants (Newsom, 1992, pp. 249–50), Barry (Barry, 2016), and Longman (Longman, 2005) also state that the pronoun “us” indicates that God was speaking to the heavenly hosts in the divine council, as in Genesis 1:26-27 and 3:22.

Through this heavenly conversation, the reader can see that the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth made a mistake that He had to punish them. According to Reyburn and Fry, the phrase “they have begun to do this” conveys that He was looking at their future full of

evil plans. He knew they would succeed in doing more remarkable than this project so that they would become more and more like Him and transcend the boundaries He had set for humankind. If left unchecked, His plan for humanity can fail (Reyburn & Fry, 1998).

In contrast, Ross (1988, 233) Merrill, (1991, 29) Hodge, (Hodge, 2012) Oaks, (Oaks, 2015), Fausset, Brown, and Jamieson (Fausset et al., 1997) explain that the conflict or problem here is a violation of His covenant or commandment to fill the earth (Gen. 9:1, 7; cf. Gen. 1:28), not the building of the city and tower. They deliberately opposed Him for their goals even though their ancestors must have passed on the covenant to them. Walton then also believes that their fault lies in their distorted religious concept, which is a shame because urbanization had made them like this. So, Moses explained that, ironically, their wish for God to come down to earth was true. Instead of a blessing, He just watched and even destroyed their project by confusing the language to cut off communication between them (Walton, 2014).

After that, Moses led his readers to the end of this story through *vav*-consecutive ו “so” in verse 8. With this conjunction, Moses emphasized God’s action in verse 7 over what He thought in verse 6 (Reyburn & Fry, 1998). Here, Moses proclaimed His punishment, which confused them with one another, and was forced to stop construction and scatter throughout the lands of the ANE. This moment is thought to have occurred during the expansion of Uruk, precisely in c. 3500-3100 BCE, because Snell says that some of the Sumerian scattered northward (like northern Mesopotamia), westward (like Syria), eastward (like Susa), and other regions at that time (Snell, 1998).

His comment is also evidenced by the discovery of ancient sites at Habuba Kabira and Jebel Aruda in the 1970s, which show cultural similarities between southern Mesopotamia, the cultural center of

Uruk, and other vast areas, from northern Syria to the modern Iranian highlands (Liverani, 2006). While Moses noted that the scattering was due to theological reasons, archaeologists still need to reach a consensus on the historical reasons.<sup>19</sup> Despite this, Crawford avers that languages probably developed during this time, so it is clear that His punishment did occur (Crawford, 2004). After the language confusion and scattering occurred, those who spoke Sumerian still settled in the land of Shinar to build civilization and the world’s first written human language around the year c. 3500-3300 BCE (Kramer, 1963). Moreover, there was a first ruler named Nimrod at that time, too (Gen. 10:8).<sup>20</sup>

In the end, Moses closed and concluded his narrative in verse 9 by giving the name Babel for the city they built. However, before that, Moses included the conjunction על-כן

<sup>19</sup> For example, Algaze argues that the Uruk expansion occurred because they wanted to obtain certain raw materials unavailable in southern Mesopotamia. Snell also agrees with him, adding that they left their settlements for trade purposes. In contrast, Butterlin states that they wanted to integrate their cultures with other people,

including language. (2001, 215) (Snell 1998) (2003, 386).

<sup>20</sup> He succeeded in establishing the cities of Babylon, Erech, Akkad, and Calneh as his first four kingdoms in southern Mesopotamia. After that, he moved to northern Mesopotamia to build big cities (Gen. 10:10-12). He is called a mighty hunter (Gen. 10:9) (Hodge, 2012).

“that is why,” to inform his reason for mentioning that name. This conjunction is a causality link to string together verse 8, the cause, and verse 9, the effect. So, the name Babel was given to the city because it was here that the punishment for the confusion of language and the scattering of people took place. Therefore, Reyburn and Fry point out that this last verse is the main focus or culmination of the story of the Tower of Babel (Reyburn & Fry, 1998).

Regarding the name, there are two exciting things. First, Moses used a pun (paronomasia) between the name בָּבֶל “Babel” and the verb בָּלַל “to mix, confuse” (Osborne, 2016). This indicates that the name Babel (or Babylon) is synonymous with the confusion of language experienced by the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, so they must be scattered (Jastrow et al., n.d.). Interestingly, the Assyrian inscription also mentions the name Babel, which means “the city of the dispersion of the tribes,” just as Moses defined this name (Easton, 2015, p. 122).

Second, Moses gave a different meaning than the average Babylonian understood when he wrote his story. Etymologically, the name Babel

comes from the Akkadian, Semitic, or Babylonian language *bāb-ilī*, which consists of the nouns *bāb*, “gate,” and *ilī*, “god.” So, the meaning is “gate of the god” (Jastrow et al., n.d.). In other words, humans were closer to God in Babel than elsewhere (Wenham, 2003, p. 47). Considering this understanding, they should have lived in harmony with God, but their relationship with Him was damaged due to disobedience to His covenant. That is why Moses distorted the meaning of the name from *bāb-ilī* to בָּבֶל instead of seeing Babel as a holy city.

Based on these two pieces of information, I conclude that Babel/Babylon symbolizes rebellion, resistance, pride, disloyalty, or disobedience to God. The distant context also says that the Old Testament prophets understood Babel/Babylon as a general representation of anti-theocracy. Hence, they used this name in their respective books to symbolize a godless man with great selfishness (Ross, 1988). Uniquely, this symbol is addressed not only to the descendants of Noah’s three sons but also to the Israelites if they were also

disloyal and disobedient to God, just like them (Osborne, 2016).

### **Interpretation of Genesis 11:1-9**

#### **Historical Meaning**

The first is the historical meaning: all ANE languages derive from Babel, where language confusion and people scattering occurred in the Uruk period. Suppose Genesis 11:1-9 is linked with the Table of Nations, which continues this story. In that case, I find that Moses wanted to answer questions about the origin or reason why all nations that the Israelites were familiar with were so widespread throughout the ANE and had different languages. Moses answered it in 11:1-9 using the term “the whole world,” which means the ANE, and 10:1-32 by listing all its included territories.

Through his narrative, Moses revealed or taught that all the ANE nations, including Israel, were one in the beginning. They came from the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, who spoke one language and lived in Babel, the land of Shinar. However, God multiplied their language and scattered them from

there. This is the origin of the formation of all ANE nations and their respective languages, which Moses revealed in Genesis 11:1-9.

In this regard, the information Moses gave in the Table of Nations and the Tower of Babel story can guide the Israelites to understand how they and other nations came to be with such diverse languages. It also helped them recognize themselves and the identity of each surrounding nation they faced or would face in the future. For example, they could understand the Egyptians who had enslaved them for hundreds of years, the Canaanites whose territories they would occupy according to God’s promise, and the Mesopotamians who would deal with them in the future. This became essential for the Israelites in binding a covenant with God to bring all these nations back to Him, considering they had their own beliefs due to the division in Babel.

#### **Theological Meaning**

The second is the theological meaning: the people of God (the Israelites) must hold fast to His covenant. Suppose Genesis 11:1-9 is related to its timing and the covenant



theme. In that case, Moses wanted to answer questions about the origin of the Sinai covenant through its immediate context in chapters 1-9. Moses explained that God had made a covenant with humans from the beginning, starting with Adam, who broke it so that he sinned until Noah was chosen as the next agent. However, the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth also violated it, so Abram became the next agent. God's covenant continued until Moses and the Israelites finally made a covenant at Mount Sinai (cf. Exod. 19). So, through his story, Moses showed one of the long journeys of establishing His covenant so that they could know Him and not repeat their ancestors' mistakes in binding that covenant.

In addition, I also find that Moses wanted to emphasize the need for faithfulness to God's covenant by obeying His laws. Ross says this story reminded them not to be arrogant by going against Him. If they humbled themselves before Him, He would exalt and make them a source of blessing to the world. Nevertheless, on the other hand, if they exalted themselves and even rebelled in every way, then He would humble them, and their existence would not last

long, as the Egyptians, Assyrians, and Babylonians later experienced. (Ross 1988) I agree with him because they had a covenant bond with God, and the Old Testament prophets always echoed this. So, if they were not faithful and obedient to His covenant, they were the same as rebelling or fighting Him so that His punishment would come.

In this regard, I see God's covenant as something that each of His people must prioritize. Therefore, Moses taught the Israelites not to prioritize their culture or thoughts that could lead them to disloyalty and disobedience to Him, as did the descendants of Noah's three sons. At least, I find two cultures or concepts from Genesis 11:1-9 that can be used as essential lessons for the Israelites.

First, humans want to guarantee the continuity of the afterlife. This is true and good. However, this natural desire can be a mistake if it is done by making a name to be famous so that everyone can remember their name after death. Those who think so live life by their efforts, not by the Torah or His words. So, the Israelites should avoid falling into this culture or the wrong mindset.

Second, humans want to live with their family, group, or community. This is undoubtedly good, but the problem is that togetherness is based on a desire to avoid the disaster that is thought to come if they live scattered. The reason is that it can make them override His mandate to fill the earth. If God had given that commandment in His covenant, they must obey it and not be able to oppose Him with this thinking. So, the Israelites must always put Him above all else, not their faulty concept of thinking (Wenham, 1987, p. 123).

In addition to emphasizing loyalty and obedience, Moses explained the consequences if they were not faithful and obedient to His covenant. Through this narrative, Moses made them aware that God would punish, curse, and create chaos and hostility among His rebels. This can be seen in the mention of the name בבל "Babel," which contains a pun with בלל "to mix, confuse."

The descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth had been called "Babel" or God's enemies for breaking His covenant to fill the earth, but the Israelites could also be

called that if they were unfaithful and obedient to Him. Thus, this text can serve as a reminder to them of God's judgment. Through reading Genesis 11:1-9, Moses must have hoped they would be careful so they would not be associated with that name. Later on, they were also reminded by the prophets of the great nations that opposed Him, but unfortunately, they continued to rebel so that God would scatter them all over the earth through exile, just like the descendants (Ross, 1988).

### **Implications of Genesis 11:1-9 in Viewing Language Development Historical Implication**

I see that Genesis 11:1-9 and the general Christian understanding match, alluding to language development in various regions. Thus, the similarity of this topic is not a problem. Nevertheless, the problem is the language's wide distribution, which is large enough to cover the entire face of the earth. This is where the Tower of Babel story's information differs from that understanding.

This narrative is considered the origin story of all world languages'

development. However, I disagree because its historical meaning indicates that the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth only spread to Anatolia, Elam, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Palestine, the Arabian Peninsula, Cyprus, and Mycenae, not to the rest of the earth globally as people understand it today. Thus, the setting is limited to the ANE because Moses and the Israelites knew only those areas. As a result, Moses also needs to explain whether language development extends to all continents

If Genesis 11:1-9 is considered the origin story of all world languages' development, then the setting should be the world known today. In addition, I also see that the distribution range that Moses did not describe can be traced and reconstructed to reveal the truth of this assumption. Unfortunately, this is very difficult or even impossible to do because shifts in the water level of the

Tigris-Euphrates River have eroded the sites and ancient records in the layers below. As a result, historical evidence of this development set in the Ubaid and Uruk periods has disappeared.<sup>21</sup> Not only that, a comprehensive and sizeable linguistic investigation is also needed for trace and reconstruction.

However, I do not rule out the possibility that this narrative might become the origin story of all world languages' development if and only if the direction of descendants' distribution from Babel is known, considering language developed along with the development of human civilization. I argue that if the scattering can be described in detail and it turns out that they did scatter across all continents, then Genesis 11:1-9 is a factual account that explains the origin of the development of today's 7,139 languages with 142 language families. Thus, the answer is correct:

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<sup>21</sup> The two earliest shreds of evidence that archaeologists have found are Šarkali-šarri's record, which mentions Babylon briefly, and Sharkalisharri's record of King Sargon rebuilding a ziggurat in the city of Babylon in 2250 BC. Based on these two sources, the city and tower of Babel were built before, so this discovery slightly strengthens the history of Genesis 11:1-9. Furthermore, we suspect Moses may have

used the destroyed literature to write the story of the Tower of Babel. Since the historical record of this event may have existed at that time, this also explains the reason Moses did not want to recount the event in detail. Instead, Moses designed a particular part to reveal the meaning behind the event to the Israelites.

All world languages were initially derived from one language in Babel, multiplied by God into many in the Uruk period, and developed until this day.

On the other hand, if the scattering can be described in detail and it turns out that they only scattered in the ANE, then Genesis 11:1-9 is a factual account that explains the development of the languages in Anatolia, Elam, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Palestine, the Arabian Peninsula, Cyprus, and Mycenae. Thus, this narrative is not the origin story of the development of today's 7,139 languages with 142 language families, but some specific languages or families there. This contradicts the views of Augustine, Calvin, Luther, and Hodge, who say that the Tower of Babel story is the origin of the development of all world languages.

Since there is no solid evidence as to whether the descendants actually scatter all over the face of the earth or only the ANE, I argue that all world languages' development did not necessarily derive from Babel, as narrated in Genesis 11:1-9. The obtained result is uncertain when viewed from the scattering location,

which is still blurry. However, by considering the historical meaning, I conclude that the general Christian understanding is incorrect because Genesis 11:1-9 describes the origin of all the ANE languages' development that Moses listed in 10:1-32 at that time. Of course, this new language from Babel was known to Moses and the Israelites because its historical meaning indicates that this story could guide them to recognize all nations and their languages.

In this regard, Huehnergard suggests what languages were formed in Babel and scattered in the ANE. According to him, God confused the one language of the descendants into Sumerian, Egyptian, and Semitic languages (Akkadian, Ebla, Ugaritic, Hebrew, Phoenician, Moabite, Ammonite, Aramaic, Edomite, Ancient Arabic). These languages were spoken by those who lived in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Canaan, possibly Mesha, and Sephar, located on the Arabian Peninsula. Then, Hittite, Pala, Luwi, Lydian, Phrygian, Media, Greek, and Cypro-Minoan languages were spoken by those who lived in Cyprus, Mycenae, and parts of Anatolia, Iran, and the plains of

Greece. Finally, the Hurric, Urartu, Hatti, Elamite, and Kass languages were spoken by those who lived in parts of Anatolia, Elam, and the Zagros mountains, or what Moses called the eastern hill country. In addition, other languages are not known today because there are certain parts of the literature whose languages cannot be understood by experts (2020, 342–50).

On the one hand, I agree with him because those places correspond to Moses' account in 10:1-32. On the other hand, I am afraid I have to disagree with the Moabite and Ammonite languages that are considered to have formed from Babel because Genesis 19:37-38 shows the birth of Moabite and Ammonite-speaking ancestors in Abram's time. There is a long gap between that birth and the Tower of Babel event. So, based on this fact, I conclude that the Moabite and Ammonite languages were formed long after the confusion and scattering occurred.

Then, I also comment on other unknown languages. This indicates that the languages formed in Babel were very much and cannot be confirmed all because of limited

historical evidence and knowledge of ancient languages. Nevertheless, the languages proposed by Huehnergard, except for Moabite and Ammonite, have provided a new perspective in understanding Genesis 11:1-9, especially regarding the origin of all ANE languages' development.

### **Historical Implication: Nostratic Theory**

One linguistic theory that can answer the issue of language development is the Nostratic Theory. Nostratic was the first language that allegedly evolved into many other small language families: Afro-Asiatic, Indo-European, Altai, Uralic, etc. Most ancient Near Eastern languages belong to the Afro-Asiatic family, so it can be assumed that the language God confused in Genesis 11:1-9 was Nostratic.

Many followers of this theory assert that Nostratic originated from an area in the Middle East. Regarding this location, U.S. linguist Allan R. Bomhard believes that it originated in Mesopotamia (Bomhard, 1998, p. 21). Warf also explains that a group of humans who lived in Mesopotamia during the Stone Age spoke Nostratic. Over time, they spread from their

home in Southwest Asia to various regions and gave birth to new language families (Warf, 2020). Kerns adds that some unique historical conditions led to the birth of many families of Nostratic languages (Bomhard, 1998).

Although linguists still debate this theory, the Nostratic theory is one of the most promising early language theories of all the world language classification theories that are currently controversial. That is why German linguists Franz Bopp and Dane Rasmus Rask stated that it remains the best theory of all the solutions linguists offer to explain early languages in the Middle East, even though not all linguists have approved it (Ramer & Michalove, n.d.).

Their opinions refer to the story of the Tower of Babel. The unique incident mentioned by Kerns is the language confusion they experienced in the city of Babylon, so there are more similarities here. However, I emphasize that further research is needed on this matter from a historical perspective. Due to the lack of information from this Nostratic theory, I still state that the one

language in Genesis 11:1-9 was divided into several Ancient Near Eastern languages, not all today's languages.

### **Theological Implication**

Apart from that, I provide one other solution to the general Christian understanding. I suggest that modern readers or interpreters understand Genesis 11:1-9 as Moses and the Israelites understood it: through a theological history lens. They did not emphasize every historical detail in this story but instead read it to know, understand, and apply God's meaning or message. Moreover, the historical record is so scanty that it is tough to see historical clarity in this narrative.

In this case, when someone reads or interprets this story, they need to emphasize its theological meaning besides its historicity. They must understand that all God's people are required to remain faithful and obedient to His covenants or commands. Of course, the people referred to here are the Israelites as the fir, who were readers and Christians because the Bible remains relevant for every age. I admit that the historical record can be observed, but

Moses wanted to convey the primary purpose or message through his narrative, namely its theological meaning. In other words, Moses recorded the story of the Tower of Babel to teach the Israelites about loyalty and obedience.

With this fact in mind, Christian readers or interpreters should not impose historical records on Genesis 11:1-9 so that the true essence, meaning, or message can be highlighted clearly. So, there is no understanding that this text is a story about the origin of the development of all world languages today. Sitorus emphasizes that readers or interpreters must respect the Bible's point of view when describing the event of language confusion and the descendants' scattering, namely the theology record.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, I suggest that Christians focus more on God's teachings that need to be applied by all His people rather than the historical sequence of events experienced by the descendants.

## CONCLUSION

After examining Genesis 11:1-9 and its meanings and implications, I came to two conclusions. First, Genesis 11:1-9 has historical and theological meaning. Regarding the historical meaning, all nations and languages of the ANE derived from the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, who spoke one language in Babel. This meaning was essential for the Israelites to recognize themselves and the surrounding nations they were facing or would face in the future. Regarding the theological meaning, the Israelites, as God's people, must remain faithful and obedient to His covenant, which was bound together on Mount Sinai. This meaning was also essential for them because they would be known as "Babel/Babylon" or God's enemies and experience confusion (בלל) if they were not loyal and obedient to Him.

Second, the general Christian understanding of Genesis 11:1-9, a story about the origin of all world languages' development, must be revised. Its historical meaning implies that this text is about the origin of all

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<sup>22</sup> He comments that the confusion of languages in Babel was not the result of human creation but a form of God's gift to

humans as His creation. Through this event, God wants to show that He is sovereign and has power over everything. (2018, 149)

ANE languages' development only in the Uruk period. Moses and the Israelites did not know any other area outside the ANE. I think the descendants' single language might have developed into all today's world languages. However, this opinion must be proven by extensive linguistic tracings and reconstructions because Moses only provided a few historical records in his narrative. Moreover, the evidence of this development has been washed away due to the Shifting water level of the Tigris-Euphrates River.

In addition, its theological meaning also implies that Christians should understand Genesis 11:1-9 just as Moses and the Israelites understood it from a theological history perspective, namely by emphasizing its theological, not historical, meaning. The reason is that this story's theological meaning is more dominant, prominent, and essential than its historical meaning. Thus, I advise all readers to be confident in establishing Genesis 11:1-9 as the origin story of all today's world languages before understanding the written language, literature, background, and context.

Apart from this, the church needs to apply its theological meaning: to remain faithful and obedient to God's words and prioritize His will, not a culture or mindset that is wrong, deviated, or considered suitable that can make them forget and violate His decrees.

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