

The Tower of Babel

DAVE BAST

There is a lot of discussion and controversy these days on the subject of refugees and immigrants. It is true, people groups are on the move throughout our world today; often fleeing terrible situations or conditions in their own homelands; and they are meeting a mixed reaction in the countries they are trying to enter. So, where did all these different peoples come from? Why is there so much ethnic tension in our world? We will explore those questions today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, we are now at the end of a five-part series on the first eleven chapters of Genesis; the early stories from prehistory: How the world began, and how sin entered the world and God's response to it. One of the themes I think that we have seen emerge from these stories is sin and then judgment, but also grace that emerges in God's treatment. He could have just thrown everything over and wiped everything out. We saw in the last program about the flood, that he almost did that, but he turns from grief to grace...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And is a merciful God who puts his bow in the sky.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the other thing that we have noticed, Dave, in these first eleven chapters...and of course, Genesis makes a major switch when you get the Genesis 12, where we begin the story of Abram and Sarai, and then the story of Israel from there...but the other thing that is true of Genesis 1 through 11 is that these stories are put here to sort of help us make sense of the world we live in—where did things come from?

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, sometimes you see this in children's books. Why does an elephant have a long trunk? Why does the giraffe have a long neck? And so, you get some of these stories; those are usually just fanciful, made-up stories to explain how elephants got long trunks and giraffes long necks; but they are origin stories. How did this become the way it did? Genesis dealing with much more important topics than elephant trunks...why are we the way we are? Why do brothers fight with each other? Where does all of this come from? And that is part of what we get in early Genesis. It is telling us where all of the bad stuff, for one thing, came from; but also, why is there still good stuff around?

DAVE BAST

Right; so, what we are going to look at today is where the nations came from, and how they came to be, and how is it that we look at foreigners often with...well, even that word: foreigner...you know, that is sort of off-putting, isn't it? Interestingly, as you look at...and we move now to Genesis 10 and 11...as you look at those two chapters, you find two very different accounts of how the different nations and tribes and ethnic groups came into being. So, in Genesis 10 it is the story of the descendents...it looks like one of these dry, dull genealogy chapters that the Bible tends to feature from time to time; and the Hebrews were terribly interested in genealogies—they thought they were really important. We are much less so; it is lots of hard names to us; but, it is the story in Genesis 10 of the descendents of Noah's three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and what you see there is a kind of spreading out gradually...a migration of different tribal groups, all told from the perspective of ancient Israel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so, let's listen to this from Genesis 10, starting at verse 31. This is the account of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, Noah's sons, who themselves had sons after the flood.

³¹These are the sons of Shem by their clans and languages and their territories and nations. ³²These are the clans of Noah's sons according to their lines of descent within their nations. From these, the nations spread out over the earth after the flood.

So, that is Genesis 10...

DAVE BAST

Right; we skipped most of the names, so...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that is right, we skipped...but the idea being, they started in one place and then they spread out and they moved. They moved, and they had children and children had children and nations developed and they spread out over that part of the earth gradually.

DAVE BAST

Right; I mentioned a moment ago that it is told from the perspective of Israel; so, if you look at how the tribes are described, or the nations, some are to the north, so they are Hittites, and there are even Greeks mentioned, although not by that name, and those are the descendents of Japheth; and then to the south the descendents of Ham include Egypt and Cush and what we would call today Sudan; and then, in between are the Semites, or the children of Shem, of whom Israel will be one.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so, that is the story we get there in Genesis Chapter 10—this gradual descent...and you are right, Dave; I mean, Israel, of course, would see itself as sort of the main reference point in how they would see that. Where did we also come from? Well, we are the sons of Shem, and then you get this and this and this over there. So, a gradual migration of peoples...of filling the earth bit by bit by bit. That is sort of the picture we get there; now, of course, once we get to Genesis 11, we get a different story.

DAVE BAST

Right; interestingly, it is quite similar to the story that paleontologists would tell.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

You know, there was originally a fairly small human population, and it began to spread gradually, maybe from Africa.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And...I don't know that it is necessary to say this on this program, but we can take note of something. There has been, in history, a terrible misuse of something in early Genesis by racists...

DAVE BAST

Yes, the curse of Ham...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; Ham is the one who, you know, saw his father naked in his tent when he was, you know, drunk; and so, you know, he cursed Ham, and we are told the descendants of Ham are the ones who, as you said, Dave, moved more into Africa itself: Egypt, Sudan, and so forth and so on. And so, there has been this tale that the Bible itself sanctions black people as second class because of the cursing of Ham; and racists, and the Ku Klux Klan, and others have exploited that verse in history, that the Bible itself sanctions some sort of, you know, racism. And that is, of course, absolutely not true. Whatever we make of the curse of Ham, it was *not* meant to be some enduring indictment of people with dark skin...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And perhaps that is worth noting.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I think it is. It is total rubbish. At any rate, when we come to Genesis 11, we arrive at a very different explanation of how the nations and tribes came into being; and I think it is fascinating to compare these two, because it is a pointer to the fact that maybe we should read Genesis 11 as theology rather than as history; that we should interpret it perhaps not literally but figuratively, or look for the deeper message that God is trying to convey in the story of the Tower of Babel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, that is a pretty important message, as we will see in just a moment, because what we are going to see when we move into Genesis 11, Dave, is a setup that is going to last throughout the entire Bible, and even all the way through the book of Revelation ultimately. To read this theologically is very, very important, and it ends up being a vital piece of biblical theology, which is going to endure throughout the rest of scripture. So, we will turn to Genesis 11 in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we just said we want to get right to Genesis 11, the familiar story of the Tower of Babel, so let's hear what it says.

DAVE BAST

So... ¹Now the whole world (we read) had one language and a common speech. ²As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. ³They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. ⁴Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves. Otherwise, we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁵But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building; ⁶and the Lord said, “If as one people speaking the same language, they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. ⁷Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.” ⁸So, the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹That is why it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world, and from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

DAVE BAST

So, as this story begins, and...it is just such a great story, it is so beautifully told, with subtlety and power...but we find people are moving...they are on the move. Just like Genesis 10 said, there are these migrations, and some people here are moving to the east...that would be to the east of Israel...and they settle in a plain called Shinar, which is another word for Babylonia. So, these are the Babylonians, who found a city, and the city is Babylon.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as we said in the previous segment, Dave, this is setting up a pretty important piece of theology that will endure through the Bible, all the way to the book of Revelation, where you have two great cities: the city of Zion—the city of God—the city of Israel, Jerusalem—the dwelling of God; and the city of Babylon, which is the anti-god; and of course, in the book of Revelation Babylon stands for all that is evil, all that opposes God’s Messiah, all that opposes the Church. This is an early biblical pointing to Babylon as the anti-god sort of a place. Of course, Israel will be exiled to Babylon eventually, and so, it keeps coming up in various ways...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But symbolically, it is the anti-god state of mind.

DAVE BAST

It is the world...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

In the negative sense; you know, the Bible uses the term *world* in several different ways. God loves the world, meaning people; but the world as it is organized, human-society-organized, anti-god, secular, rejecting God and the rule of God—the will of God—the way of God—that is Babylon. So, this is where the city is founded, and it is technologically sophisticated, you’ll notice. They have learned how to make bricks, and they have gotten tar for mortar because there is no stone in this region, it is sand, but they have taken their natural resources around them, and they are able to build a city; and in the city, they can even make a tower; again, because this is Babylon that tower is a very specific kind of structure.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, and if you or any Israelite who read this story, or for all the years before Genesis was written down...it was an oral tradition...anybody who heard this story, they would know exactly what this is. It is what is called a ziggurat, which was a structure in Babylon...most of us are more familiar with the pyramids of Egypt...well, you can kind of picture that, except it’s all got steps around it...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It's got notches; so...

DAVE BAST

Sort of like a Mayan pyramid in Central America.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so, it is like a...well, to quote an old rock ballad, it is a stairway to heaven. It is essentially something you could climb to mount up to heaven to kind of claim your own superiority over the world. So, this is probably a ziggurat. They decide to build it so that they can have a unifying point. Of course, again, if you think of that in terms of Babylonia, the enemy of Israel, that is what, I think, the Israelites would have heard and read in Genesis 11.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; it is a stairway, as you say, and these great pyramid structures—these ziggurats—did have a stairway leading up to the top, and the priest would ascend there, or perhaps the king, or the magi would climb so they could look at the heavens and study the stars; again, this is Babylon, so it is a home...a center...of astrology and astronomy sort of mixed together. What it really amounts to is an attempt to reach heaven from earth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

As they say, we want the top of the tower to reach to the heavens; and they also explain why they want to do this. It is to make a name for ourselves, or else we might be scattered through the earth. Very interesting to me, because it sounds like, on the one hand, pride: We want to be big; we want to be important; we want to make a name for ourselves; and on the other hand, fear: if we don't do this, maybe we will lose our strength—we will lose our power.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But above all, it is all done without any reference to any god; so, we are going to make a name for ourselves, instead of being under the thumb of any god. So, it is a self-aggrandizing project—it is worshipping human technology, which, I think, has a lot of relevance for today, Dave. I mean, again today with leaps in technology over the last thirty years, and major global forces like Google, these tech companies and the like, we are still kind of making a name for ourselves by the great things we can do. In fact, as we record this it was just recently that Apple Computers became the first company in the world that was worth a trillion dollars. That is outrageous; but again, some of it can still be seen as sort self-aggrandizement.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is kind of pride, but it is also self-salvation. I mean, they want to be able to hold themselves together and create their own future. Talk about modern parallels, as you raise this question or this issue, Scott. It is so clear that many things are going on of a similar nature today...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Where people think that they can use technology...and even banish death?! I mean, it sounds crazy, but there are people who are investing millions and millions of dollars...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Oh, sure.

DAVE BAST

To try to create human life that is immortal; and you know, they think that is heaven.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

But actually, the literal definition of everlasting life apart from God—that's not heaven, that's hell!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, exactly. So, they are doing all this work without reference to God, but God does exist, the Bible says, and he notices, and he sees it; and so, he comes down and he...

DAVE BAST

Yes, I love that line: He comes down to take a look; as if he had to. You know, human language applied to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is also the great irony here. They are building this thing up to heaven, and God, who is in heaven has to stoop to take a look at it. It is still so small, God has to get a magnifying glass and go: What's this? Oh, good heavens! Look what they are doing! So, I am going to confuse their language...so, Babel—Babel is bababa...you know, sort of a confusion; and so, he creates languages so that suddenly the people who had understood each other just fine when they said: Could you bring me that trowel so I can lay some pitch down here? All of a sudden they are sounding: blub-blub-blub...it is a different language, and they cannot work together anymore, and so they scatter.

DAVE BAST

Which, if you stop and think about it, might strike you as odd...an odd thing for God to do, because, you know, isn't God all about community and bringing people together and overcoming differences? There is even a verse in the New Testament where the Apostle says: He is not a god of confusion, but of peace...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

But here he very much is a God of confusion. So, you might ask: Why does he do that? Why would he do that? And the answer clearly, it seems to me, is God is not going to let them continue with a project that he knows won't work. In fact, he knows it is going to end badly...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

These attempts of humankind to get ever-advanced technology and do ever more...you know, look at atomic energy...and yes, okay, you can say there are some peaceful uses, but look at the destructive power that it has. It can literally obliterate the earth. So, God is going to put a stop to this as an act, really, not so much of

judgment but of mercy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; ultimately, God does want to bring people together, and he will bring people together, but on his terms, not on our own human, sinful terms; and in fact, that turn toward God reuniting people is what we want to look at as we close the program in a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are looking at the last of our stories from Genesis 1 through 11...the story of the Tower of Babel; and we have seen how humans in Babylon, in the world, the anti-god society, have undertaken this great building project. They are going to save themselves; they are going to make a name for themselves; and God looks down on it and he says: Huh-uh; no, you are not. I am going to stop you from doing this, because I know where it is leading, and it is not going to do you any good. So, that is the basic story, but there are overtones pointing back to this story throughout the rest of the Bible, aren't there?

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is not the last stairway to heaven we are going to see; and in fact, if you fast-forward almost twenty chapters or so...not quite...25 chapters or so into Genesis 28, we read this very interesting story about a man named Jacob, who is on the lam; he is fleeing his parents because he had just deceived his father. He lays down with a stone for a pillow, as we know in Genesis 28, and he had a dream.

¹²Jacob had a dream, in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it; ¹³and there above it stood the Lord, and he said, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac."

DAVE BAST

So, a very interesting story. There is, in fact, a stairway that connects heaven and earth, but it is not one constructed by human hands; it is something that God reveals in this dream that Jacob has in a place that he comes to call Bethel, or the House of God. This is a holy place, a place where Jacob is given a glimpse in a vision of the connection between heaven and earth; but even that is the end or the last stairway to heaven that we find in the Bible.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and in fact...and here is something we often miss...but there is a very interesting reference to Jacob's ladder, as it is sometimes called...there is a very interesting...somewhat oblique...you could easily miss it...to Genesis 28; and it comes in John Chapter 1.

DAVE BAST

So, here is that story. Jesus is just in the process of calling his first disciples. ⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathaniel approaching, (John writes) he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸"How do you know me?" Nathaniel asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you when you were still under the fig tree, before Philip called you." ⁴⁹Then Nathaniel declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel." ⁵⁰Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than that. ⁵¹Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we miss this, but Jesus is...first of all, he sees Nathaniel...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And he says: Here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit. And as a friend of mine, a Bible commentator said: Jacob, of course, in Genesis was the great deceitful one—full of guile and deceit initially, before he changes later in his life, after God wrestles him into submission at the River Jabbok. So, what Jesus is saying to Nathaniel is here is an Israelite with no Jacob in him.

DAVE BAST

Yes, he is the anti-Jacob.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; but, these angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man...Jesus is saying: I am Jacob's ladder—I am the Lord God; and this time I have come down the ladder myself...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And now am human; I am one of you. So, Jesus is saying: I am God. I am the God Jacob saw. I am the living ladder, and I have come down now to reunite heaven and earth.

DAVE BAST

Yes; Jesus is the bridge—he is the link—he is the means of salvation—he is the one who will join heaven to earth; and as you say, he came down the ladder, and in that beautiful, famous verse from John 1...earlier in John 1...the Word became flesh and tented among us—took up his dwelling place among us. So, he has come down as a human, and he will stay human; and he is the permanent bridge, who links heaven and earth; and what that means, is that God will use Jesus in his plan, ultimately, to re-gather the nations and join them into one; and so, we come...after the ministry of Jesus, after his death on the cross for the sins of the world, and then he rises again in triumph and he ascends into heaven; and he pours out the gift of the Spirit on his followers.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and guess what? In Acts 2, no sooner does the Holy Spirit make each living person who receives the Spirit a living temple of God, and what happens? Well, let's read it from Acts 2:

⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

⁵Now, there were staying Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven; ⁶and when they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷Utterly amazed, they asked, "Aren't these people speaking all Galileans?" ⁸Then how is it that each of us hears them in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, parts of Libya near Cyrene, visitors from Rome...basically, in other words, everybody...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And they were amazed because they said: What does this mean? So, now they are confused, just like the people at Babel were confused, but they are confused by how unified they are; because how is it that the language barrier that we saw introduced in Genesis 11 is now being undone in Acts 2?

DAVE BAST

The greatest thing about the miracle of Pentecost isn't so much the tongues of fire and the sound of the wind and all that, it is the power of the Spirit to enable these simple Galilean disciples to proclaim what Luke calls

the mighty acts of God in the languages of all the people who have gathered; and incidentally, going all the way back to Genesis 10, and that table of nations we referred to...you know, the people who went north...people east, people west, people south...they are all represented in the table of nations in Acts 2, including people from Egypt and people from Africa and people from Rome; and all of them are brought back together, because God does not go back...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

He is not going to kind of re-impose one common speech on everybody. God always moves forward; and what he is going to do is take up this wonderful bouquet of human culture and human languages, and the things that make us who we are—the things that are so fundamentally important—the things that tend to divide us because of sin and fear and xenophobia (fear of the stranger)—but God is going to transform all that, through Christ, and in the power of the Spirit, to create one new humanity.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it all comes together at the end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, and the great songs we hear in Revelation 5, 6, and 7, where all the nations are gathered before the throne of the Lamb, and with one voice and in one language, they sing to the Lamb upon the throne. That is the ultimately undoing of Babel—that is our ultimate hope; thanks be to God.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork* today. We are your hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue to dig deeply into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives.

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