

A HISTORICAL READING OF GENESIS 11:1–9:
THE SUMERIAN DEMISE AND DISPERSION
UNDER THE UR III DYNASTY

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I. AVAILABLE OPTIONS FOR READING GENESIS 11:1–9

Three options are available for approaching the question of historicity in Gen 11:1–9: ahistorical primeval event; agnostic historical event; and known historical event. A brief survey of each approach will provide the initial impetus for pursuing a reading of this pericope as known historical event, and the textual and archaeological evidence considered in the remainder of this article will ultimately identify this known historical event as the demise and dispersion of the last great Sumerian dynasty centered at Ur.

1. *Ahistorical primeval event.* Robert Davidson in his commentary on the NEB text of Genesis 1–11 asserts, “It is only when we come to the story of Abraham in chapter 12 that we can claim with any certainty to be in touch with traditions which reflect something of the historical memory of the Hebrew people.”¹ Davidson’s opinion reflects the approach to Genesis 1–11 where the narratives are couched in the guise of primeval events that do not correlate to actual history. Westermann also exemplifies this approach when he opts for reading Gen 11:1–9 through the lens of inaccessible primeval event. Even though he acknowledges that the mention of the historical Babylon “is more in accord with the historical etiologies in which the name of a place is often explained by a historical event,” he hypothesizes that “such an element shows that there are different stages in the growth of 11:1–9.”² Speiser could also be placed in this category on account of the fact that he proposes pure literary dependence on tablet VI of the *Enuma Elish*.³ In his estimation the narrative is a reformulated Babylonian tradition and questions of historicity are therefore irrelevant.

The removal of a real historical referent from the narrative of Gen 11:1–9 signifies the major weakness of the ahistorical approach because multiple components of the narrative can be linked to known and even preserved

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¹ Robert Davidson, *Genesis 1–11* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973) 8.

² Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1984) 535.

³ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB 1; New York: Doubleday, 1964) 75.

historical realities. The land of Shinar (ancient Sumer), the construction style (Sumerian kiln-baked bricks and bitumen), and the tower with its top in the heavens (Sumerian ziggurats) all reflect real history in Mesopotamia. These parallels do not by any means ensure its historicity, but they do provide a reasonable degree of plausibility (as even Westermann himself recognizes), so that a rigorous pursuit for a historical referent should be made before settling on the ahistorical explanation.

2. *Undetermined historical event.* The agnostic approach to the narrative of Gen 11:1–9 avoids the dismissal of its historicity resident in the ahistorical position on account of the multiple points of contact with historical realities but refuses to isolate a particular historical time period for the recorded events. This position may be considered the most common approach in the history of the church and the most prevalent among evangelical scholars. Mathews typifies this camp with his explanation, “Although describing a historical event, the account cannot be confidently assigned to a specific historical period. . . . The account is too vague to determine the historical setting, even generally.”⁴ Apparently, the account is clear enough in recorded Scripture to be deemed historical, but not clear enough to assert a known historical referent. In refusing to pursue a known event, proponents of this approach fail to consider the archaeological findings and textual data that can further direct these events to a specific time period in ancient Mesopotamian history. More can be known about these events that lie behind the brief narrative of Gen 11:1–9 and an assertion of historicity should be followed up by an investigation of possible historical contexts.

3. *Known historical event.* The known historical approach that posits a particular time frame for the narrative of Gen 11:1–9 bases its conclusions on the combination of textual evidence (biblical and extrabiblical) and archaeological discoveries. First and foremost, the combined evidence provides basic chronological parameters outside of which the narrative would not be able to occur. Although proponents of Gen 11:1–9 as known historical event (Kidner, Kline, Reimer, Payne, DeWitt, and Walton) do not all agree on the exact time frame, they all do focus on the late fourth and/or third millennia as the possible period for the events to occur. Using various Sumerian texts, artifacts, and links to the Hebrew summation in Genesis 11 they pursue a plausible reconstruction of the historical events during this time period in the river basin of Mesopotamia.⁵ This general approach commends itself more than the ahistorical or agnostic approach by taking serious both the marks of historicity in the biblical text and the archaeological findings in the land to which the text refers. Therefore this article shall take up that pursuit and

⁴ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26* (NAC 1A; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996) 470.

⁵ Although it is theoretically possible (due to the unknown) for the historical referent to fall long before the third millennium, the evidence at this time suggests a date within the given time frame.

produce a plausible reading of Gen 11:1–9 within that general historical context.

II. THE PARAMETERS FOR DATING THE EVENTS OF GEN 11:1–9

As regards the earliest possible date for the historical events in the narrative, archaeological evidence does not permit a date prior to c. 3500 (± 200) BC. Northern Shinar (which became the region commonly called Babylonia in the second millennium BC) simply had not been settled before c. 5000 BC, and the rise of urbanism with its monumental structures did not materialize there until c. 3500 BC.⁶ The text of Gen 11:1–9 demands the kind of historical context where cities are dominated by a monumental structure raised high towards the heavens, and therefore must not predate c. 3500 BC.

Genesis 11:3 also demands a particular construction style: “And they said one to another, ‘Come, let us make bricks and burn them.’ Consequently for them brick functioned like stone and for them bitumen functioned like mortar.”⁷ These bricks are said to be hardened by fire (kiln-baked bricks) and held together by bitumen, a mastic produced by exposing crude oil to the air.⁸ Such a method for constructing architectural structures does not appear until 3100–3000 BC.⁹ So although *unbaked, sun-dried* brick can be identified in structures possibly dating back to the ninth millennium BC, John Seely has recently concluded, “The use of baked brick in the tower of Babel indicates very clearly, therefore, that it was not built before c. 3500 to 3000 B.C.”¹⁰ These

⁶ Marc Van De Mieroop, *The Ancient Mesopotamian City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 29. Hans J. Nessen, *The Early History of the Ancient Near East—9000–2000 B.C.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 56–59. Jean-Louis Huot, “The First Farmers at Oueili,” *BA* 55 (1992) 188–90.

⁷ Speiser interprets this comparison as “an explanatory reference about the building customs of the Babylonians” (*Genesis* 76). The narrator is specifically offering an explanatory comment here on the construction style of these Mesopotamian builders with regard to his audience. Whereas the audience’s local customs in Palestine involved stone and asphalt, the Mesopotamian region provided no such raw materials. Therefore, they had to make use of the plentiful clay and mud resources in the river basin.

⁸ The process indicated by the narrator reflects an expensive building technique that began to appear towards the end of the fourth millennium in Mesopotamia and became more common by the end of the third. The clay bricks that normally dried in the sun were now being fired in kilns to improve their durability and load-bearing potential. Crawford notes the prevalence of kiln-baked brick in the monumental construction projects of the final Sumerian Dynasty: “Until the Third Dynasty of Ur, the use of baked bricks was restricted to areas of maximum wear and tear like thresholds, and to the more important or prosperous buildings. Ur-Nammu, however, used them in large quantities in his building operations of the temenos at Ur, as did his successors.” Harriet Crawford, *Sumer and the Sumerians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 55.

⁹ Seton Lloyd, *Ancient Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1986) 9–13; Charles Singer, *The History of Technology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954) 1.462; Jack Finegan, *Archaeological History of the Ancient Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1977) 8. Jacquetta Hawkes argues from her archaeological survey that baked brick had no real place in major architectural structures until 3000 BC. Jacquetta Hawkes, *The Atlas of Early Man* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1976) 50, 76.

¹⁰ John H. Seely, “The Date of the Tower of Babel and Some Theological Implications,” *WTJ* 63 (2001) 17.

initial archaeological considerations delimit the earliest possible dating of Babel and its tower at the end of the fourth millennium BC.

In determining the latest possible date for the narrative, the *Toledoth* sequence of Genesis provides the *terminus datum*. The narrative of Gen 11:1–9 is presented as an event that happened prior to Abram’s birth and migration. Therefore, the *terminus datum* can be set by the approximate date of Abram’s sojourn. Based on an approximate date for Sodom’s destruction and the general chronology of Scripture for the periods of the patriarchs, Abram’s sojourn likely started at the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age c. 1900 BC (± 100).¹¹ Therefore the possible range of dating the historical events of the narrative in Gen 11:1–9 becomes c. 3500–1900 BC (± 100), with the greater probability of the events falling in the range of c. 3000–2000 BC (± 100).

III. A LOCAL OR UNIVERSAL EVENT?

The earliest possible date for the narrative around 3500–3000 BC raises a serious problem for the classic interpretation of the universal singularity of language for all humanity currently gathered in the land of Shinar. For example in a review of evidence from China, Japan, Australia, Thailand, North America, Mexico, and the surrounding regions of the Middle East, Seely observes, “We can say then that there is firm archaeological ground based both on radiocarbon dates and stratified sites to support the conclusion that long before the tower of Babel began to be built and all during the fourth millennium BCE, men were scattered over the entire globe speaking a multitude of different languages.”¹² Therefore placing the historical referent of Gen 11:1–9 at the end of the fourth or during the third millennium BC eliminates the possibility of the universal singularity of language and humanity.¹³ The episode cannot describe the origin of all languages but

¹¹ Sarna reads the Tower of Babel tale into the historical events of the founding of the First Babylonian dynasty in the 19th century BC: “The Bible has deliberately selected the mighty city of Babylon with its famed temple of Marduk as the scene for a satire on paganism, its notions, mythology and religious forms.” N. M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 74. Unfortunately, Sarna has failed to recognize that the details of the story do not match the growth of the Babylonian dynasty most notably under Hammurabi (c. 1800), and the link cannot be maintained on account of chronological information. DeWitt points out this latter weakness when he rejects this hypothesis on grounds that the historical referent in Gen 11:1–9 must predate Abram’s sojourn at the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age. Therefore, Sarna’s approach either does injustice to the biblical narrative or to the chronological parameters and thus cannot be maintained without degrading the historicity of Gen 11:1–9.

¹² Seely, “The Date of the Tower of Babel” 27.

¹³ Steve Reimer echoes the challenges that face a universal interpretation of Gen 11:1–9: “Through archaeological research it is clear that by the time the ziggurats were being constructed, distinct ethnic groups had used different languages for at least a thousand years. Even the Biblical record may reflect this early diversity in presenting the Table of Nations as a chart of ethnic diversity prior to the Tower of Babel account. To integrate the Tower of Babel with the Table of Nations is particularly problematic. . . . Another problem lies in the location of the event. Babylon, archaeologists observe, was established as a city a considerable time after written sources appear

rather a localized confusion of a major language in Mesopotamia—that is, the land of Shinar in Hebrew.¹⁴

The initial problem with a localized reading of the narrative typically focuses on אֶרֶץ. The Hebrew term אֶרֶץ is often skewed through an English translation that employs the word “earth” in such statements as “the whole earth used the same language and the same words” (NASB). Although the term can at times denote “a conglomerate of all the land regions on the planet” (as the writer perceives it) and therefore can acceptably be translated “earth,” the predominant use of אֶרֶץ in the Hebrew Tanakh refers to “a limited geographic region.” The better translation in almost every instance is “land.” The range of meaning for the English word “land” (a geographic region, a conglomerate of geographic regions, dry ground as opposed to sea, ground surface as opposed to sky, etc.) simply reflects the semantic range of אֶרֶץ more precisely. On the one hand, “earth” carries too many universal connotations in the global village of the twenty-first century, so that it is unable to account for the more geographically limited uses of אֶרֶץ. On the other hand, “land” has the versatility to account for limited geographic regions or for all land surfaces on the globe. The surrounding context of Gen 11:1–9 exemplifies this dynamic in the range of meaning for the Hebrew term אֶרֶץ.

Immediately preceding the use of אֶרֶץ in Gen 11:1–9 are the eight occurrences in Gen 10:5, 8, 10, 11, 20, 25, 31, and 32. The majority of its occurrences demand a translation of “land” with the denotation of a limited geographic region (Gen 10:5, 10, 11, 20, 31) and the remaining instances could arguably be rendered the same (Gen 10:8, 25, 32).¹⁵ Similarly, the next 17 instances after Gen 11:1–9 (11:28, 31; 12:1, 5, 6, 7, 10; 13:6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 15) in the following three chapters all refer to a limited geographic region. אֶרֶץ predominantly designates the “land” of Canaan which God promised to

in numerous ancient Near Eastern languages. For the separation of languages, even basic language groups, to have occurred at the city of Babylon, major changes would need to occur in the archaeological record.” Steve Reimer, “The Tower of Babel: An Archaeologically Informed Re-interpretation,” *Direction* 25 (1996) 65.

¹⁴ The basic land region of “Shinar” is generally accepted to be the Tigris-Euphrates basin of Mesopotamia, yet the titles for that region have been many throughout its millennia of civilizations because of the political turnover. At times in the third millennium the region could have been called Sumer, Accad, or Sumer and Accad based on the dominate dynasty of the day. Although Speiser advocates a direct link to Sumer (E. A. Speiser, “In Search of Nimrod,” *Eretz-Israel* 5 [1958] 32–36), the majority of scholars recognize the value in maintaining a geographical rather than political interpretation of the Hebrew term *Shinar*. For example, Westermann (*Genesis 1–11* 544), James R. Davilla (“Shinar,” *ABD* 5.1220), and Paul H. Seely (“The Date of the Tower of Babel and Some Theological Implications” 15) all link the title to the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in southern Mesopotamia. Although Gen 10:10–11 and Isa 11:11 allow us to distinguish the land of Shinar from Assyria to the northwest and Elam to the east, the general land region of Shinar should still be best described geographically so that the migration of Gen 11:2 results in the population growth of the Tigris-Euphrates basin of Mesopotamia.

¹⁵ Thrice אֶרֶץ is used in the plural אֲרָצוֹת to denote “lands” not “earths” into which nations associated with Noah’s three sons have been divided (Gen 10:5, 20, 31). Two times the “land” of Shinar (not the “earth” of Shinar) appears in the commentary on Nimrod (Gen 10:10, 11).

be the אַרְצָא of Abram's inheritance. In Gen 11:28 אַרְצָא is even used to represent the region associated with the city Ur "in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans." These prevalent references in the immediate context to limited geographic regions using the term אַרְצָא create sound reason for translating אַרְצָא-כָּל as "the entire land" and a definite probability for limiting the land region to the localized arena of Mesopotamia in Gen 11:1–9.¹⁶ However, factors beyond the mere occurrence of אַרְצָא must be given the determinative role for deciding each case. And in this case, the literary context just cited and the archaeological evidence cited beforehand (that position the events in Mesopotamia at a time when people already covered the earth and spoke various languages elsewhere) support the translation "the entire land" and the interpretation of Gen 11:1–9 as an event localized in the land of Mesopotamia.

1. *A period of migration in Mesopotamia.* In the most recent proposal of a localized Babel event, Steve Reimer highlights one significant moment in Mesopotamian history that is reflected in the biblical narrative and can therefore help situate its historical memory within Mesopotamian history.¹⁷

¹⁶ Even if אַרְצָא typically refers to specific land regions in the immediate context, the argument might be made that the explicit reference אַרְצָא-כָּל clearly communicates the *universal* context of the narrative. However, the next two uses of the expression אַרְצָא-כָּל (Gen 13:9, 15) demonstrate otherwise. They too refer only to the land of Canaan—a technique repeated in Deut 11:25; 19:8; 34:1. Deuteronomy 11:25 even provides an example from the Pentateuch where the author uses the full phrase אַרְצָא-כָּל-עַל-פְּנֵי as a limited indicator of the land of Canaan. So no particular construction attached to אַרְצָא guarantees a universal sense.

¹⁷ In Reimer's proposal, "[T]he Biblical account of the Tower of Babel recorded in Genesis 11:1–9 accurately reflects a series of prehistorical events which culminated in the fall of the Uruk 'empire.'" Reimer, "Tower of Babel" 65. The urbanization and sedentary lifestyle of the Uruk period (late fourth millennium BC) followed the migrating Ubaid period (early fourth millennium BC) where people from northern Mesopotamian villages moved south and east into the Sumerian plains to farm newly irrigated lands around the Euphrates river. In this Uruk period appears for the first time evidence of urban culture (social stratification, political regimes, and trade systems), architectural structures of monumental proportion (e.g. the "White Temple" constructed on a terrace more than forty feet high), and a massive city defense system (Uruk's Tell Warka in southern Iraq has a wall and defense system almost 6 miles long). Reimer has also theorized that the demise of the language and dispersion of its people in Genesis 11 matches the sudden collapse and disintegration of the Uruk urban culture and its uniformity—a cultural shift that gave way to the Dynastic period (early third millennium BC) dominated by smaller city states.

However, his reconstruction of a plausible setting for the events of Gen 11:1–9 is debatable at almost every point. Since he is dealing with preliterate cultures that are both dated and described according to ceramic styles, much speculation lies beneath his thesis. Particularly, if his interpretation of the "beveled rim bowl" is inaccurate, then the supposed social stratification of the Uruk period and the idea of an Uruk period itself collapses and disintegrates. And even if the Uruk period with its characteristics can withstand careful scrutiny, the emphasis on unity through language finds no special connection to a common language or dialect in the Uruk period nor to catastrophic events that led to its confusion (since no record of a language exists from this time period). Although his connection of Babel to the region (and not the city itself) that came to be called Babylonia is viable, the connection between the white temple in Uruk and the מִגְדָּל of Gen 11:4 whose "top is in the heavens" does not come close to the more plausible connection to great ziggurat towers that later spread throughout the land of Sumer. Thus a more convincing counterpart to the biblical narrative's localized events should be sought elsewhere.

A great period of migration during the fourth millennium BC occurred in Mesopotamia where inhabitants moved southeast and eventually developed an urban culture. The author of Gen 11:1–9 likely looks back to this time (the Ubaid period) in Gen 11:2 when the inhabitants were migrating. It is a significant correlation between the text and historical events that further supports reading the narrative as known historical event.

In Gen 11:2 the migration is depicted as moving **מִקְרָם**. The Hebrew **מִקְרָם** fundamentally creates an orientation to the east.¹⁸ The difficulty in determining the precise significance of this orientation depends on isolating the two parties being placed into this coordinating relationship. For example, Gen 2:8 records how, “The Lord God planted a garden in Eden **מִקְרָם**.” If the two parties in the relationship are the garden and Eden, then the verse should read, “The Lord God planted a garden toward the east side of Eden.” However, if the two parties in this coordinating relationship are Eden and the narrator, the verse should be translated, “The Lord God planted a garden in Eden which is in the east.” The same problem arises here in Gen 11:2. Are the two parties under consideration the beginning point of the journey and the point of settlement on the plain? Or is the narrator comparing his vantage point in Palestine to the general location of their migration? The questions cannot be answered with certainty, but the grammatical function of **מִקְרָם** (when compared to similar instances in the OT) may give support for the former interpretation.

Of the fourteen occurrences of **מִקְרָם** in the OT that denote direction, eight occurrences function adjectivally (Gen 2:8; 12:8[2x]; Num 34:11; Josh 7:2; Isa 9:11; Ezek 11:23; Zech 14:4) and six adverbially (Gen 3:24; 11:2; 13:11; Judg 8:11; Isa 2:6; Jonah 4:5). Only the latter group provides a grammatical similarity that would aid in understanding its function in Gen 11:2. Upon a closer look at these six verses, Gen 3:24, Judg 8:11, and Jonah 4:5 all share a specific syntax. Each verse uses **מִקְרָם** in conjunction with a subsequent prepositional phrase beginning with **ל** that serves to designate the second party in the relationship. Unfortunately, Gen 11:2 does not provide such direction, so the parallel is weak and offers no substantial assistance. Isaiah 2:6 also fails to provide assistance on account that it represents a unique use of **מִקְרָם** meaning “with eastern influences” that has no parallel in the rest of the Tanakh. Hence, the only remaining parallel for gaining direction in interpretation is Gen 13:11, and the similarity of syntax and word choice (not to mention textual proximity) proves its parallelism.

¹⁸ Zechariah 14:4 and Ezek 11:23 acknowledge the Mount of Olives to be **מִקְרָם** of Jerusalem. After Jonah preached to Nineveh, he left and sat down **מִקְרָם** of the city. And Gideon gained ground on his enemies by traveling **מִקְרָם** of Nobah and Jogbehah.

מִקְרָם can also refer to ancient times long ago (Neh 12:46; Ps 74:12; 77:6, 12; 143:5; Isa 45:21; Mic 5:1; Hab 1:12). These particular uses reveal a Hebrew mindset oriented towards the east. Among the cardinal directions, the Hebrew word for “east” was related to **קָרָם** meaning “to come or be in front of, meet, go before” and had become the direction in the front or at the head of all the others. From the perspective of Palestine also, the most ancient events including the creation of humanity and the garden all transpired in the east. Thus the cardinal direction came to describe the events that came at the head or in front of all else. The east could be equated with the most ancient and thus its uses in the eight verses listed above.

Genesis 13:11 combines עָסָה with מִקְדָּמָה to communicate how Lot traveled “eastward” after choosing the Jordan valley. In Gen 13:11 the parties put into a coordinating relationship by מִקְדָּמָה are the starting point, near Bethel (Gen 13:3), and the destination in the river valley. If this strong parallel created by the adverbial function of the prepositional phrase, the mutual combination of עָסָה and מִקְדָּמָה , and the proximity within the book of Genesis is suggestive of the proper reading in Gen 11:2, then the passage should be translated “as they were traveling eastward” from a point west of the central and eastern Tigris-Euphrates basin.¹⁹ According to Reimer, the inhabitants of Sumer do seem to have migrated southeast from northern Mesopotamia in the Ubaid period. The passage likely reflects this ancient *Abwanderung*.

This reference to the migration of these Mesopotamian inhabitants raises the question of the narrative’s exact referent. Does the episode in Gen 11:1–9 then refer to a construction event immediately following their development of urban culture on the Tigris-Euphrates basin in the Uruk period of the fourth millennium BC? This chronological question has to be answered with a presentation of the literary character of the narrative. If the narrative intends to provide a rapid succession of events in a brief period of time, then we should expect the construction and dispersion to follow immediately after the migration. However, if the narrative intends to summarize a long period of regional history, then the construction and dispersion could occur hundreds of years after the migration. Since the narrative fits no known clear-cut genre indicating a short or long period of history, the question must remain open until further historical investigation is performed. If a great dispersion following a period of construction can be located within the history of the Mesopotamian region, the historical data can answer the question about the period of time between the migratory Ubaid period and the period of dispersion and linguistic confusion.

At this point we must settle for the beginning point of the narrative: the Ubaid period of the early fourth millennium BC. In that period, village dwellers moved southeast along the river plains and eventually established viable urban centers on those plains as irrigation techniques empowered people to produce more than they consumed and thus support more concentrated populations. However, in order to determine the historical end point of the narrative the greater literary context of Genesis 10–11 must be investigated, and more specific features of the narrative must be tied to known customs and historical events.

IV. GENESIS 11:1–9 IN THE GENEALOGICAL SEQUENCE OF GENESIS 10–11

The placement of Gen 11:1–9 between the Table of Nations in Gen 10:1–32 and the vertical (linear) genealogy of Shem in Gen 11:10–26 creates a question

¹⁹ Wenham has likewise argued, “[T]he parallel with 13:11 suggests that ‘eastward’ would be an apt translation here.” He too recognizes the unique adverbial usage. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC 1; Waco, TX: Word, 1987) 238.

about its role in the *Toledoth* progression. Should Gen 11:1–9 be read as the event that launched the division of seventy people groups (Genesis 10) or a more isolated event in the line of Shem (Gen 10:21–11:26)? To answer this question we will look for guiding precedents in the genealogical and narrative sequences of Genesis 1–11. When we understand the purpose of the narrative in its literary context, we will be able to locate more accurately the historical time of dispersion that concludes the narrative of Gen 11:1–9.

1. *The sequence of genealogy and narrative in Gen 4:17–5:32.* In chapter four the progression of Cain’s genealogy is halted at Gen 4:24 and a jump backwards to Seth’s birth in Gen 4:25 precedes a movement further back to the beginning of creation in the genealogy of Adam to Noah in Gen 5:1–32. So the author of Genesis does give a precedent for reversion in his genealogical sequencing. This precedent may support reading Gen 11:1–9 outside of its immediate context of Shem’s descendants (Gen 10:21–11:26) and instead prior to the divisions of Genesis 10 as a sequential reversion. The return to Shem and the repetition of the first half of his descendants in Gen 11:10–17 may also lend credibility to such a non-chronological ordering of Genesis 10 before Gen 11:1–9.

However, Genesis 1–11 possesses no other chronological transpositions that would parallel such a maneuver in Genesis 10–11. The reversion after the section on Cain and his genealogy does take the reader back to an earlier starting point in the *genealogical sequence* (to Seth and then Adam) *but not to an earlier narrative* that chronologically precedes the section it follows. Thus the reversion in Gen 4:25–5:5 after Cain’s narrative and genealogy in Gen 4:1–24 actually mirrors better the connection of the narrative in Gen 11:1–9 to the subsequent genealogical sequence in Gen 11:10–26 that reverts back to Shem. So the parallel with Genesis 4–5 actually supports reading the Gen 11:1–9 narrative in the sequence of Shem’s genealogy and not as the historical cause of the seventy nations in Genesis 10.

2. *The sequence of genealogy and narrative in Gen 5:1–6:7.* If Genesis 4–5 does not present any reason for reading Gen 11:1–9 before Genesis 10, maybe the literary parallel with Gen 5:1–6:7 provides that evidence. The narrative of humanity’s sinfulness typified by the immorality of the “sons of God” does present itself *after* the genealogical sequence has progressed to Noah, and yet the historical events likely *precede* Noah’s generation. Therefore Gen 5:1–6:7 gives precedent for a narrative being placed out of chronological order within the genealogical sequence.

However, the events of Gen 6:1–7 do not come *before the entire genealogy* of Genesis 5. They likely show a developing problem at an unspecified moment between Adam and Noah. So again the literary parallel with Gen 5:1–6:7 reveals no precedent for a *narrative* in Genesis 1–11 being placed after a genealogy that it in fact precedes chronologically. It actually sets a precedent for placing a narrative after a genealogy in which it takes place—a position that will be argued below for Gen 11:1–9.

3. *Logical deduction and literary genre.* So if there is no precedent for reordering a narrative in the *Toledoth* sequences of Genesis 1–11, can any other evidence be mustered to bolster the popular interpretation of Gen 11:1–9 as the cause of Genesis 10? The most common argument for this interpretation arises from a logical deduction between the statements in Gen 10:5, 20, 31 and those in Gen 11:1, 6–9 about שָׁפָרָה and אֶרֶץ. If Genesis 10 reasons that people groups and land regions had been divided “according to their languages” and Gen 11:1–9 describes a time when כָּל-הָאָרֶץ transferred from one language in one location to many languages scattered across כָּל-הָאָרֶץ, then Gen 11:1–9 must be read logically prior to the division of humanity. In this reading the logical order supersedes the author’s literary sequence. Yet, this logical deduction assumes a certain significance for the Table of Nations in Genesis 10, namely that the author intended to communicate the actual sons of Ham, Japheth, and Shem who did not mix with one another but rather moved in strict isolation and settled in separate locations. The stylized presentation of Genesis 10 suggests the inadequacy of this assumption.

The Table of Nations likely does not present a straightforward descent of ethnic groups from individuals. The author has carefully selected seventy people groups known throughout his world and has attached them to one of the three sons of Noah as their descendants.²⁰ Although his presentation may assume that the postdiluvian world could link its roots to Noah’s three sons, it also suggests a compilation of known people groups according to a format matching the number of Jacob’s descendants who traveled to Egypt and according to an order that moves towards nations with greater relevance to Israel’s history.²¹ Commenting on other stylistic features such as the absence of ages and the inclusion of impersonal place names, Wenham likewise concludes, “These observations make it unlikely that all the names in this list should be regarded as eponyms, i.e. the putative ancestor of the group that bears the name. Some fit the description; others do not.”²² The genealogical connections mitigated through the language “sons of” and “fathered” should then be better understood as *general geographic connections*, not as the straightforward descent of ethnic groups from individuals. Therefore the logic that would read Gen 11:1–9 as the cause of all the divisions in Genesis 10 fails to be a logical deduction from the genre of the genealogy. Since Genesis 10 does not portray the literal descendants of each son in chronological progression, applying the cause-and-effect logic to its inexact relationships becomes tenuous and even presumptuous.

²⁰ The attachment of 70 descendants to a prominent figure is a traditional practice. Jacob (Gen 46:27; Deut 10:22), Gideon (Judg 8:30), and Ahab (2 Kgs 10:1) exemplify the practice. Note God’s words about the separation of the nations, “When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of man, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel” (Deut 32:8).

²¹ The movement from non-elect descendants to the elect line is paralleled in the discussion of the Cainites before the Sethites (Genesis 4–5) and Esau before Jacob (Genesis 36–50).

²² Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* 215.

4. *The narrative of Genesis 11:1–9 in Shem’s genealogical sequence.* If Gen 11:1–9 should not be logically set prior to and therefore become the cause of ethnic dispersion, then where in the genealogical sequence of Genesis 1–11 should the narrative be placed? Genesis 10:21–25 gives the necessary direction to answer this question. The narrative of Gen 11:1–9 falls between two genealogies of Shem: the horizontal of Gen 10:21–31 and the vertical of Gen 11:10–26. When comparing the two genealogies, one notices a sudden stop in Gen 10:25 with the mention of Peleg whose line is not continued until Gen 11:18. The first five generations of Shem (Shem, Arpachshad, Shelah, Eber, Peleg) are mirrored in both Gen 10:21–25 and Gen 11:10–17, but Genesis 10 halts the genealogical progression at Peleg and only expands upon his brother Joktan’s many sons. Yet, the author does not end Peleg’s line in Genesis 10 without comment. Based on the meaning of his name the author explains, “[F]or in his days אֶרֶץ was divided” (Gen 10:25). This cryptic comment is the only stated reason for the author’s cessation of his line until Shem’s vertical genealogy is taken up again after the narrative of Gen 11:1–9.

I would suggest that this intentional cessation at Gen 10:25 with its resulting commentary on events in Peleg’s day designates the appropriate context for the narrative of Gen 11:1–9.²³ The narrative represents divisive historical events that the author wants to link primarily to Shem’s descendants. He is emphasizing the effects of these historical events on the line of Shem that a few generations later would produce Abram—the receptor of God’s promise. The precedent in Gen 5:1–6:7 for placing a narrative after a genealogical sequence in which it occurs supports this reading. The author of Genesis intentionally placed the narrative of Gen 11:1–9 between a horizontal and vertical genealogy of Shem. He purposefully paused Shem’s line with Peleg whose days were remembered for the division of אֶרֶץ-לְכָל. And therefore Gen 11:1–9 should be read as a historical incident that directly relates to the line of Shem and the preparation of Abram to receive God’s promise and set out from the land of Ur. This conclusion enables us to focus our pursuit of the historical end point in the narrative to a particular time period in Mesopotamia.

V. DATING THE DISPERSION IN MESOPOTAMIA

The imprecise nature of the chronology in the horizontal genealogy of Genesis 10 and the vertical genealogy of Gen 11:10–26 prevents the acquisition of a precise date for Peleg and the dispersion, but it does provide some

²³ Viewing the events of Gen 11:1–9 as the universal stimuli of national divisions could still possibly be harmonized with the mid-genealogical occurrence in the days of Peleg. However, Peleg’s placement four generations past Shem chronologically occurs after every other name in the Table of Nations besides Joktan’s sons. This placement gives the impression that the other nations branched out separately and previously (even though the genealogy does not likely represent chronological sequence of individuals). The position of Gen 11:1–9 between two lists of Shem’s line also emphasizes the direct bearing upon Shem’s line rather than upon all peoples that are connected to all three sons of Noah.

tentative direction. If the five generations preceding Abram are to be interpreted as the actual bloodline of Abram with accurate records of life span, then Peleg would have been 191 years old when Abram was born. He would then have passed away on Abram's eighteenth birthday. Therefore the divisive events of Peleg's life could have fallen within the last century or two before Abram's birth. Of course, this reliance upon the relative precision of the last five generations of the genealogy between Shem and Abram does not have sound warrant,²⁴ but if it is generally indicative of the generational time gap between Peleg and Terah, the time frame of the linguistic confusion and population dispersion would narrow down to c. 2100–1900 (± 100) BC.

Now what events at the end of the third millennium and at the turn to the second millennium might match the narrative of Gen 11:1–9? A basic chronology of Sumerian civilization can help to pinpoint the period under consideration.

Sumerian Chronology²⁵

Halaf Period	5th Millennium
Ubaid Period	First Half of 4th Millennium
Uruk Period	3600–3100 (± 200)
Jemdat Nasr Period	3100–2900 (± 100) ²⁶
Early Dynastic (ED) Period	2900–2310 (± 100) ²⁷
Sargon the Akkad and the Agade Dynasty	2310–2190 (± 50) ²⁸
Invasion of Gutti Hordes and Dynastic Demise	2190–2110 (± 50)
Sumerian Dynasty at Ur III	2110–2000 (± 50)
Transition to First Babylonian Dynasty	2000–1850 (± 50)
Hammurabi	1800 (± 50)

²⁴ The genealogies of Adam to Noah and Shem to Abram follow a tenfold pattern about which Malamat commented, "The ante- and postdiluvian lines (i.e. Adam and of Shem, respectively), symmetrically arranged to a ten-generation depth, are undoubtedly the product of intentional harmonization and in imitation of the concrete genealogical model (cf. Mishnah Aboth 5:2)." Malamat, "King Lists of the Old Babylonian Period and Biblical Genealogies," *JAOS* 88 (1968) 165. However, Robert Wilson has challenged the certainty of Malamat's assertion of a standard ten-generation depth and himself concluded, "In dealing with the issue of the historiographic value of genealogy, no generalizations are possible." Wilson, "The Old Testament Genealogies in Recent Research," *JBL* 94 (1975) 189. In either study, artificial constructions matching traditional depths (Malamat) or contrived genealogies with literary functions (Wilson) have essentially replaced the historiographic value of the genealogies. These studies put into question any chronological derivation from the biblical genealogies.

²⁵ The Sumerian chronology is based on a composite of collected data from stratified materials at archaeological excavations and radio-carbon dating of those materials as well as working backwards from a stable point (± 50) in Hammurabi's reign in the First Babylonian Dynasty provided through astronomical observations of the day.

²⁶ Certain Sumerian chronologies question the individual existence of the Jemdat Nasr period since it possesses very few distinct markers from the adjoining periods.

²⁷ In the final century of the ED period, governors (*patesi*) from Lagash (e.g. Eannatum and Urukagina) and from Umma (e.g. Lugal-zaggesi) swapped dominance over southern Mesopotamia. Inscribed ritual vases even hail the empire of Lugal-zaggesi as extending "from the Lower Sea by the Tigris to the Upper Sea." Leonard Cottrell, *The Land of Shinar* (London: Souvenir, 1965) 197–98.

²⁸ Kramer has argued that the Sumerian period could be considered "weakened and crumbled" in the latter half of the third millennium with the rise of what he calls the Sumero-Akkadian

According to this approximate chronology, the Sumerian dynasty at Ur III and its demise (that eventually led to the first Babylonian dynasty) lie in the center of the suspected time frame. So we must test this time period and its major events in order to determine if it provides a fitting historical context for the customs, events, and end point of Gen 11:1–9.

1. *The Great Ziggurat in Sumerian culture and the Ur III Dynasty.* According to Crawford's observations about construction projects, the historical events of the period line up well with the narrative of Gen 11:1–9: "The Ur III period was one of great prosperity, with a booming economy allowing great reconstruction programmes to be initiated at all the major religious sites, most notably at Ur itself. . . . Archaeologically speaking, the most significant feature of the Ur III period is the magnificent monumental architecture."²⁹ The period began after the chaos of the Gutian hordes found structure again in the reign of Urnammu. Urnammu is remembered for restoring greatness to Sumer through restoring the great ziggurats at Ur and in many other Sumerian cities. The construction of one such ziggurat takes center stage in the narrative of Gen 11:1–9.

Genesis 11:4 reads, "And they said, 'Come, let us build for ourselves a city with a ziggurat whose top is in the heavens'" (וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִבָּה נִבְנֶה-לָּנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל) (וְרֵאשׁוּ בְשָׁמַיִם). Admittedly the common translation for *בְּשָׁמַיִם* has been "a city with a tower whose top is in the heavens."³⁰ However, good evidence warrants a special translation of *מִגְדָּל* in this context. The Mesopotamian historical context with its specific construction style suggests that the *מִגְדָּל* of Gen 11:4 be translated *ziggurat*. In the Hebrew language where no word specifically exists for a ziggurat, *מִגְדָּל* is the best lexical choice. Herodotus, the great historian, demonstrated the same linguistic dilemma when he chose the typical Greek word for defensive towers to describe the eight levels of the *ziggurat* in Babylon.³¹

The identification of *מִגְדָּל* with a Mesopotamian *ziggurat* becomes certain when the historical data are surveyed. Observe the building sequence in the *Enuma Elish*.³² The following excerpt contains Marduk's response after

period. "As a result of continued infiltration into the land, the Semitic Akkadians became ever more powerful, until, with the reign of Sargon, which may be said to mark the beginning of the Sumero-Akkadian period, the Sumerian period comes to a close." Samuel Noah Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Press, 1981) 243. Crawford appears to support this transition from her observations of personal names in the ancient documents: "It is possible to trace a steady increase in the number of Semitic names in the population during the third millennium and, apparently, a corresponding decrease in the use of the Sumerian language. Cooper has suggested that as early as the mid-third millennium spoken Sumerian was in decline." Harriet Crawford, *Sumer and the Sumerians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 21.

²⁹ Harriet Crawford, *Sumer and the Sumerians* 18.

³⁰ In the majority of the OT, *מִגְדָּל* refers to a defensive watchtower usually placed within the city walls or at the highest point in a vineyard.

³¹ Herodotus, *Histories* 1:181–83.

³² Nabopolassar's Neo-Babylonian reconstruction also mirrors this building sequence. André Parrot, *The Tower of Babel* (London: SCM, 1955) 19.

hearing how the Anunnaki desire to build him a shrine in honor of his defeat of Tiamat:

When Marduk heard this,
 Brightly glowed his features, like the day:
 “Construct Babylon, whose building you have requested,
 Let its brickwork be fashioned. You shall name it ‘The Sanctuary.’”
 The Anunnaki applied the implement;
 For one whole year they molded bricks.
 When the second year arrived,
 They raised high the head of Esagila equaling Apsu (the heavens).
 Having built a stage-tower as high as Apsu (the heavens),
 They set up in it an abode for Marduk, Enlil, Ea.
 In their presence he was seated in grandeur.³³

Genesis 11:3–4 repeats the exact same construction order and the goal of elevating “its top into the heavens (sky).”³⁴

This connection between earth and heaven by means of a temple mountain shooting up from the Sumerian plains is echoed in many ancient inscriptions. Nabopolassar’s *ziggurat* was intended to have a foundation “secure in the bosom of the nether world, and make its summit like the heavens.” King Samsuiluna also made “the head of his *ziggurat* . . . as high as the heavens.”³⁵ In Sumerian mythology the function of these temple mountains was critical. Since earth and heaven had been separated from an original unity, “[T]he *raison d’être* for Sumerian temple-towers was the reunion of heaven and earth.”³⁶ The 𒀭𒀬𒀭 of Gen 11:4 presumably served that purpose.

2. The demise and dispersion of the Ur III Dynasty. The Sumerian culture that began after the migration of the Ubaid period and resulted in an urban culture dominated by great cities with *ziggurats* that reconnected the gods to earth finally met its demise with the fall of its last great dynasty around the turn to the second millennium. King Urnammu and those who followed him represented the last great stand of Sumerian dominance.

³³ *ANET* 68–69.

³⁴ These observations have led Westermann to conclude, “There are therefore in the biblical narrative echoes of the formulas used at the foundation of the city of Babylon in *Enuma Elish*” (Westermann, *Genesis 1–11* 547). If his evaluation rests on similarities in construction style and goal, then Westermann’s “echoes” are undeniable, but Speiser’s theory of literary dependence is presumptuous. The process and goal are simply typical of the area and the time.

³⁵ John Walton, *Genesis* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 44–45.

³⁶ Dale S. DeWitt, “The Historical Background of Genesis 11:1–9: Babel or Ur?” *JETS* 22 (1979) 21. Commenting on the name of the *ziggurat* at Sippar “temple of the stairway to heaven,” Walton suggests, “[T]he *ziggurat* was a structure that was built to support a stairway. This stairway was a visual representation of that which was believed to be used by the gods to travel from one realm to another. It was solely for the convenience of the gods and was maintained in order to provide the deity with the amenities that would refresh him along the way” (Walton, *Genesis* 374). The idea of a stairway whose “top reaches the heavens” occurs in Jacob’s dream (Gen 28:10–17). There Yahweh stood at the top of the ladder and reiterated the promise to Jacob. The imagery may be taken directly from the theological significance of the stairway on the *ziggurat*. Jacob does refer to the area as “the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Gen 28:17).

During the reign of Shu-sin, the fourth king of the Third Dynasty of Ur, there began serious incursions into Sumer by Amorites from the Arabian desert. These inroads and attacks on Sumerian cities up and down the Euphrates valley were soon supplemented by attacks from the east by Elamites. The attacks ultimately led to the downfall of the Third Dynasty of Ur about 1960 BCE, the event that marked the political end of Sumerian civilization.³⁷

The tragic events of Ur's fall gave rise to grueling laments now preserved in *ANET* 457–463. The mourners attribute the destruction to divinity: “Enlil called the storm; the people groan.” They are devastated by the extent of the damage and the brokenness that they witness all around them. As a result of “the Subarians and Elamites, the destroyers,” people “were carried off” and “have been dispersed.” They looked back on their great city with all the glories that Urnammu and his successors had given it and lamented, “[M]y city has been destroyed, my house too has been destroyed; Oh Nann, Ur has been destroyed, its people have been dispersed.”

The linguistic connections to the account in Gen 11:8–9 (e.g. the language of dispersion) suggest the reasonableness of reading these events as their historical counterpart. Families split, people were displaced, and the upheaval of power and people brought greater integration of language and ethnicity to the Sumerian plains. The Sumerian culture that gave unity to the region received an irreversible blow. Crawford describes the severity of the impact of these events: “Sumer as an entity disappeared from history, never to reappear, the Sumerian language ceased to be used, and a great civilization was irretrievably damaged, even though two cities, Isin and Larsa, survived the devastation to hand on some of the old traditions.”³⁸

The details of the Sumerian demise around 2000–1960 BC do line up well with Gen 11:1–9, even though the narrator of Gen 11:8 records the demise with the brevity and perspective of one who is long separated from its impact and only concerned about its theological significance. Such disconnected summaries as “thus Yahweh scattered them from there across the face of the entire land” demonstrate the historical distance and theological priority. As Laurin notes, “It is true that he describes this as the active judgment of God, but this is simply the familiar Old Testament approach of ignoring secondary causes.”³⁹ In Israelite historical documentation, the earthly causes for providentially controlled events do not even have to be mentioned. The theological message of the story excuses the author from identifying the intermediary causes. But if our proposed historical referent of the Third Dynasty at Ur is upheld as the end point for the narrative material of Gen 11:1–9, then the Amorites and Elamites are the tools in the hands of divinity who scattered the people outside of the Sumerian plains.

³⁷ DeWitt, “The Historical Background of Genesis 11:1–9” 19.

³⁸ Crawford, *Sumer and the Sumerians* 27

³⁹ Robert B. Laurin, “The Tower of Babel Revisited,” in *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies: Essays in Honor of W. L. Lasor* (ed. G. A. Tuttle; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 143.

3. *The confusion of languages in conjunction with the Sumerian demise.*

The invasions heightened an existing clash of languages since as Kramer notes, "Sumerian was an agglutinative tongue unrelated to the inflected Semitic family of languages of which Hebrew forms a part."⁴⁰ Although the Semites had at times controlled parts of Sumer during the third millennium BC (with its strongest dominance coming under the great king Sargon I),⁴¹ "The disintegration and mixing of the language reached its climax with the invading Semites and the fall of Sumerian civilization corresponding with the overthrow of Ur III about 1960 B.C."⁴² The result of the invasions was exactly what the author of Gen 11:7 projected: "[T]hey will not understand one another's language."

The ancient Sumerian epic "Enmerker and the Lord of Aratta" relays a similar judgment by Enki:

In those days, the lands Subur (and) Hamazi, Harmony-tongued(?) Sumer, the great land of the decrees of princeship, Uri, the land having all that is appropriate(?), the land Martu, resting in security, *the whole universe, the people in unison, to Enlil in one tongue spoke*. Then a-da the lord, a-da the prince, a-da the king Enki . . . the leader of the gods endowed with wisdom, the lord of Eridu, *changed the speech in their mouths, brought contention into it, into the speech of man that (until then) had been one.*⁴³

The confusion of languages in this epic is attributed to a somewhat different cause, yet the similarities of a united language in the land of Shinar and its accompanying regions being broken by divine intervention echoes closely the biblical narrative. DeWitt comments on the tale of "Enmerker and the Lord of Aratta" saying, "In the text it is quite clear that at a not-too-remote point in the past a linguistic change occurred in which Sumer, once unified, experienced a breakup of language. We cannot, of course, date this with any precision. But the fact that the text comes from about the time of the fall of the Third Dynasty of Ur is suggestive of the connection."⁴⁴ The jealousy of Enki over the people's united communion with Enlil that led him to confound their speech may even be illustrative of Yahweh's desire to mix up the people's language so that their united commitment to foreign deities could disintegrate as well. However, the theological purpose of this narrative will be considered further below.

⁴⁰ Kramer, *Sumerians* 69.

⁴¹ J. Finegan demonstrates that the Old Akkadian period (c. 2360–2180 BC) saw the height of Semitic control over Sumer (J. Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959] 46). The slow penetration of Akkadian Semites into southern Mesopotamia that eventually led to their dominance in this period has led Payne to connect Gen 11:7–9 with the growing Akkadian influence in the first half of the third millennium (D. F. Payne, "Babel, Tower of," *ISBE* 1.382). However, his suggestion while accounting for the breakup of one united language in the land fails to account for the dispersion of the people. Although attestations to the Akkadian language do appear with greater intensity throughout the third millennium, few other factors match so well to the narrative of Gen 11:1–9.

⁴² DeWitt, "The Historical Background of Genesis 11:1–9" 20.

⁴³ Taken from lines 141–55 as translated in Samuel Noah Kramer, "The 'Babel of Tongues': A Sumerian Version," *JAOS* 88 (1968) 108–11.

⁴⁴ DeWitt, "The Historical Background of Genesis 11:1–9" 19.

VI. KNOWN HISTORICAL REFERENT:
THE RISE AND FALL OF SUMERIAN CULTURE

These dynamic events surrounding the Third Dynasty at Ur correspond more fully to the end point of the biblical narrative than any other moment in the probable time frame of the third millennium BC. The land of Shinar was united. Great building projects were undertaken. The people had the *lingua franca* of Sumerian written in the Cuneiform script. And in the midst of her growing prosperity, invaders attacked from all fronts and exiled the inhabitants to other lands. The people were scattered, and the *lingua franca* was confused by the permeation of foreign languages into a land now controlled by foreign speakers. No other time period can match so consistently the final events of Gen 11:1–9.

Likewise, the beginning point of the narrative that gave testimony to a historical memory of eastward migration in the Tigris-Euphrates basin matches the archaeological data for the Ubaid period. A nomadic population made the transition to a sedentary lifestyle once advances in irrigation techniques were developed. And more expensive and reliable construction techniques that involved baking mud bricks in kilns and sealing them with bitumen were developed by the early third millennium BC. All of these connections between text and historical reconstruction suggest the plausibility if not probability of reading the narrative of Gen 11:1–9 as a theologically charged, historical summary of the rise and fall of Sumerian culture in Mesopotamia from the fourth to the third millennium BC.

In this reading, the narrative of Gen 11:1–9 is not taken as a summary of successive events in a short period of time, but rather as a summary of events that occurred during two millennia. The erection of “a city with a ziggurat whose top is in the heavens” is not limited to one ziggurat but instead functions as a *prototype of the Sumerian culture* that developed in the Tigris-Euphrates basin from the Uruk period onwards. The construction summary in Gen 11:3–4 then represents the many cities spread throughout the land that boasted in their 2–7 story, man-made temple mountains. There is no need to connect the ziggurat with one city (e.g. Babylon, Ur, Uruk, Borsippa, etc.), but rather one should see it as representative of all the urban centers built around monuments honoring their patron deities. So although the final demise can be isolated to the cultural peak in the prosperous Ur III Dynasty, the time span of the narrative expands beyond that dynasty and back into the previous millennium in which the Sumerian culture and cult evolved.

Reading the narrative as a summary of events that typify the Sumerian culture over the course of two millennia is a more plausible reading than one might at first realize. If this narrative is a reflection of the historical memory of Hebrews who had passed down the history of their people, then the long time gap would certainly lend itself towards a summarized version of events in distant lands. The people and events would not surprisingly become stereotyped, and the role of Yahweh would be introduced on account of their faith. In this scenario, the story may have developed into its present form

much like today when great figures and events of the past are reduced in complexity and interpreted through a storyteller's perspectival grid. Yet this interpretive tendency leads us to our final question of the narrative's purpose in its literary context.

VII. PURPOSE OF GENESIS 11:1–9

Why exactly did Yahweh lay waste the united Sumerian culture? A fairly common interpretation would answer, "The sin of these tower builders is undoubtedly the sin of pride and pretentious humanism."⁴⁵ However, faithful men of God throughout Israel's history founded many cities and fortified them for protection without being condemned for their pride and damnable strides towards God's sovereignty. Some have suggested that God scattered the people throughout the land because they had directly countered God's command to "multiply and fill the land" (Gen 1:28; 9:1, 7), yet filling the land is a different matter than scattering across it.⁴⁶ Another suggestion for the people's error moves on to their desire to make a name for themselves.⁴⁷ However, the act in itself is not likely the problem since David made a great name for himself and built a great empire with God's approval.⁴⁸ So what

⁴⁵ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis 1–17* (NICOT 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 356. See also Frick who concludes that the construction project reveals "man's futile attempt to gain security apart from God through city-building." F. S. Frick, *The City in Ancient Israel* (SCLDS 36; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977) 208.

⁴⁶ Walton has given a careful reply to such proponents: "The means of filling the earth indicated in Genesis 1 and 9 was not by scattering, but by reproducing. The earth is no fuller when people spread out. The only way filling can be disobeyed is by refusing to be fruitful and multiply, and the text is clear that they are doing quite well in that regard" (*Genesis* 375). When Walton's argument is combined with the previous context of Genesis 10, seeing the cause of judgment in humanity's refusal to fill the earth becomes highly improbable.

⁴⁷ The Mesopotamian Gilgamesh made an enduring name for himself through his great projects at Babylon (*Epic of Gilgamesh* II:160). And Nebuchadnezzar inscribed, "[T]he fortifications of Esagila and Babylon I strengthened, and made an everlasting name for my reign" (Stephen Langdon, *Building Inscriptions of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, Part 1: Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar* [Paris: E. Leroux, 1905] 75). Further back in time, Gudea of Lagash had etched on a recently finished temple, "[O]n account of the great name which he made for himself he was received among the gods into their assembly" (John Barton and John Muddiman, *Oxford Bible Commentary* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001] 231). Throughout the numerous Sumerian hymns recovered from the reign of Urnammu, the great builder, the theme of a great name and its resulting security permeate their lyrics (DeWitt, "The Historical Background of Genesis 11:1–9" 22–23). Therefore the last era of Sumerian prosperity like its predecessors and successors sought with all its might to establish a great name through its extensive renovations and newly erected edifices.

⁴⁸ How is the making of a great name perceived in the OT? P. J. Calderone addresses this question in his comments on the combination of שָׁמַיִם and הַשָּׁמַיִם. "Shem, 'reputation' is used unrestrictedly with various verbs . . . but with 'sh it is confined to the king (2 Sam 7:9; 8:13), to Yahweh working wonders in Egypt (Jer 32:20; Is 63:12, 14; Dan 9:15; Neh 9:10; also Josh 7:9 with modification), and to the builders of the tower of Babel (Gen 11:4) who in some way are rebelling against God and trying to be like Him." From Calderone's analysis we find that king David provides the only other example of human beings described by שָׁמַיִם and הַשָּׁמַיִם. So what do we learn from a comparison of the builders in Genesis 11 to David's example in 2 Samuel 7–8?

The essential difference is that David's pursuit of a great name was met with God's approval. He earned himself a name through his military exploits (2 Sam 8:13) and received no condemnation

other factors in the narrative or in history made the pursuit of a great name improper?

1. *Playing God(s)*. The Sumerian dynasty not only pursued a name for themselves through the building of great *ziggurats*, but they also stepped far beyond their boundaries in relation to divinity. Naram-Sin, the most influential ruler from the Agade period, assumed divine status and took on the title “King of the Four Quarters of the World.” Subsequent kings of Sumer in the Ur III Dynasty followed suit (with the exception of the first king Ur-Nammu). The kings were encroaching upon the place of God. The biblical text appears to pick up on this encroachment with emphasis on a great *ziggurat* whose top reaches into the heavens. These monumental temple-towers claimed to reconnect heaven and earth. The gods could now descend, take a nap, and pick up a snack in their rooms on top, and then interact with the people. Divinity had been anthropomorphized, and the Third Dynasty promoted the cult that had done so.

During the religious revival under Ur-Nammu (a self-acclaimed servant of his god Sin), “He built widely, not only at Ur itself, where he rebuilt the sacred area and the great ziggurat of which the remains are still standing today, but also at all the other major sanctuaries in his kingdom.”⁴⁹ This reinforcement of a decrepit religiosity that was dragging God out of heaven, down to earth, and slowly blending him with the current ruler had an effect on the populace. Crawford comments, “The fall of the city of Ur about the year 2000 BC to the Gutian hordes was seen in contemporary thought as the end of civilisation itself. The defeat of Ib-bi-Sin, last king of the Ur III dynasty, was the defeat of one of the gods; his dynasty had been in supreme control of the Sumerian plain for more than a century and had presided over what was in many ways the peak of Sumerian achievement.”⁵⁰

In light of these factors we can conclude that the demise of the last Sumerian Dynasty comprises a strike against paganism (*pace* DeWitt, von Rad, Laurin). The fall of the Third Sumerian Dynasty at Ur was the fall of a religious system that had penetrated the whole land. Their success was perceived to be rooted in the favor of the patron deities that could be manipulated into supporting any human cause. Their defeat opened up a new world of possibilities that would be much needed when Abram came on the scene.

from Yahweh. The human builders of Gen 11:1–9, on the other hand, improperly made a name for themselves. Comparing the two examples brings out an important contrast. The emphasis of the Genesis narrative falls on the self-creation of a great name (cf. four first person common plural cohortatives and two reflexive expressions *לנ* that all emphasize the people’s self-production of their name and resulting security). The emphasis in the early years of David’s career (2 Samuel 7–8) highlights how “Yahweh helped David wherever he went” (2 Sam 8:13) in order to fulfill his promise, “I will make you a great name” (2 Sam 7:9). The comparison reveals that the attainment of a great name and a great empire are not wrong in themselves. Other factors in the narrative that specify how one attains that name (i.e. in cooperation with Yahweh or in opposition to Yahweh) actually determine the positive or negative assessment of those actions.

⁴⁹ Crawford, *Sumer and the Sumerians* 43.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

2. *Creating a culture in transition.* By the time Terah was born, Ur III of the last great Sumerian Dynasty was quickly becoming Ur of the Chaldeans. The strongly united Sumerian culture that rooted its success in the will of pagan gods and their divine rulers had been shaken. The land had been prepared for Abram to hear from the one true Elohim. Samuel Dershowitz, though not supporting a localized interpretation of the narrative, has likewise suggested, “[T]he intervention in the construction of the Tower of Babel may have been motivated by God’s desire to facilitate Abraham’s transition and discovery.”⁵¹ God’s judgment may have even been the impetus for Terah’s emigration (or exile?) towards the land of Canaan (Gen 11:31). In any case, the cultural upheaval and breakdown of a successful pagan dynasty (the height of Sumerian culture) captured in the judgment of Gen 11:1–9 created the transitional period necessary for Abram to encounter Yahweh while displaced in Haran, ensuring that the Elohim of Shem would be Yahweh (cf. Gen 9:26).⁵²

⁵¹ Samuel Dershowitz, “The Tower of Babel Revisited,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 22 (1994) 267.

⁵² The narrative of Gen 11:1–9 falls in one of the most unique sections of the Yahweh/Elohim interchange in Genesis. In Gen 10:1–17:2, the name Elohim disappears. After Gen 9:27 Elohim cannot be found again in any form until Gen 17:3 (even though many other descriptors for God are used in conjunction with Yahweh). In the gap between Gen 9:27 and Gen 17:3, Melchizedek refers to *אֱלֹהֵי עֵלְיוֹן* “God Most High” (Gen 14:18–20) and Abram identifies Yahweh with the “God Most High” *אֱלֹהֵי עֵלְיוֹן* that the king of Salem and Sodom knew (Gen 14:22). In his interaction with God about his heir to the promise, Abram also refers to Yahweh as *יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי* “Master Yahweh” (Gen 15:2, 8), and finally Hagar describes Yahweh as a “seeing God” *אֱלֹהֵי רֹאֵי* in Gen 16:13. In each of these instances in the “Elohim gap” of chapters 10–16, alternate references for God are *only used in conjunction* with the name Yahweh and *function as descriptors* (connecting God Most High to Yahweh, emphasizing Yahweh’s lordship, or highlighting God’s awareness of human need). No other name for Yahweh is used alone to refer directly to divinity as with Elohim in chapters 1–9. (Melchizedek’s stand alone references to *אֱלֹהֵי עֵלְיוֹן* are excluded since he did not know divinity by the name *יְהוָה*.)

A source-critical scholar may hypothesize from these observations that J crafted Genesis 10–16 (or at least all the narrative sections) rather than P, but such a maneuver misses the theological intentionality behind the word choice. Only a predisposition that supposes multiple sources *a priori* would assign the work to a J source before investigating authorial purpose. Such maneuvers do not reflect the respect for the other that literature demands. The author’s intentions must be respected at all costs. To discover the authorial purpose enacted in the present literary form, the precise relationship between *אֱלֹהִים* and *יְהוָה* as portrayed immediately before and immediately after the gap requires consideration.

Genesis 9:26 makes reference to Yahweh in what is the only instance in the entire chapter, and its significance goes far beyond a mere desire to vary the vocabulary. In the blessing given to Shem, Noah declares *שִׁם אֱלֹהֵי שָׁמ* *בְּרַחֲמָיִם*. Noah is declaring that Yahweh should be the *Elohim* of Shem. Shem and his descendants will not serve another god or other gods but will maintain a unique connection to the one true *Elohim*, Yahweh. Once this theological foundation has been established in the *Toledoth* sequence, Yahweh becomes the necessary title for the divine sovereign in every progressive event until Gen 17:3. In the Genesis 17 account of the covenant of circumcision, Yahweh introduces himself as *אֱלֹהֵי שָׁמַיִם* “God Almighty.” This deliberate introduction coming after the other designations for Yahweh in the “Elohim gap” of Genesis 10–16 ends a process of carefully identifying Yahweh as God Most High, the God who sees, the Master, and God Almighty. From that point forward, the author can return to an alternating use of *Elohim* and Yahweh apparently because a definitive conception has been formed in Abram about the one true *Elohim*. In accordance with the blessing of Noah from Gen 9:26, the line of Shem now wrapped up in Abram has come to recognize the great god generally—who is known to many under many names—in the one person of

The structural and stylistic parallels between Gen 11:1–9 and Gen 6:1–7 support this interpretation of the narrative's purpose. In both narratives humanity arouses a negative reaction from God, yet neither God nor humanity directly addresses the other. The lively dialogue common to the garden story (Genesis 3), Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1–17), and Noah and the flood (Gen 6:8–9:29) is replaced entirely with the alternating deliberation and activity of humanity and God. Gen 6:1–7 also comprises a prologue that sets the stage for the more extended narrative of God's chosen one Noah, which could direct us to take Gen 11:1–9 as a general prologue on the cultural setting into which Abram will enter. These structural and stylistic parallels may provide further reason for reading this transitional episode of "crime and punishment" *with what follows rather than with what precedes*.

From this literary perspective, Gen 11:1–9 describes a major cultural shift in the land from which Abram departs and rearranges society in such a way that Abram can more readily encounter Yahweh. Whereas the universal interpretation of Gen 11:1–9 turns the episode into an etiological explanation for the Table of Nations,⁵³ the localized interpretation recognizes its purpose in the cultural disintegration of Abram's fatherland. Connected to the divisive events in the days of Peleg, the narrative portrays the sinful times out of which God must bring his righteous one—much like Noah in the days when all men's hearts were evil. The narrative is forward-looking to the completion of Shem's ten-person genealogy and the arrival of Abram (not backwards to the Table of Nations in Genesis 10).

VIII. CONCLUSION

Genesis 11:1–9 need no longer be read as an unknowable historical event in the primeval past that launched the diversity of human languages, ethnic groups, and geographic divisions. As Seely has noted, "We discover from archaeological data that the event occurs too late in history to be the origin

Yahweh. With that foundation laid in the "Elohim gap" and that perspective now presupposed in Genesis 17, the name *Elohim* can again enter into the stories of Genesis.

In the context of the Yahweh/*Elohim* interchange, Gen 11:1–9 stands as one part of a greater whole. Yahweh is going to carry out his redemptive purposes through the line of Shem, and Gen 11:1–9 helps to prepare the stage onto which Abram will enter. The concern at hand is the recognition of the one true *Elohim*, i.e. Yahweh, and if an entire culture of people has taken improper strides against this purpose, then that culture must be corrected. The judgment of Gen 11:1–9 was necessary for Yahweh to establish himself as the *Elohim* of Shem, God Almighty over all.

⁵³ Those who make Gen 11:1–9 an etiological explanation for the Table of Nations see the whole orientation of the story as driving towards the dispersion of peoples and confusion of languages. The narrator only provides a brief picture of the actual events without extra commentary because of this etiological purpose. He emphasizes their unity of language (11:1), unity of place (11:2), and unity in construction with a fear of disunity (11:3–4). Then on account of divine judgment their fears are realized and their dispersal is memorialized with the name Babel. The contrast of one to many, unity to disunity, with a universal interpretation of בְּלִי שֵׁן (Gen 11:9) supports this etiological purpose.

of all languages on earth.”⁵⁴ And linguistically speaking, the diversification of languages is a slow process that does not match the sudden shift often read into Gen 11:1–9. The natural transition from a monoglot to a polyglot world requires time. So the age-old universal rendition of the “Tower of Babel” now shifts toward a known historical drama that transpired on the plains of the Tigris-Euphrates basin.

The Sumerian demise and dispersion of Gen 11:1–9 recounts the settlement and growth of Sumerian culture that reached its heights in the Ur III Dynasty and then suffered a tragic downfall at the hands of Elamite and Amorite invaders. Her great cities with their *ziggurats* whose tops reached into the heavens united by their *lingua franca*—now preserved in the Cuneiform script—were brutally attacked and demolished. Her people were sent into exile and her interlocked pagan cult was disrupted. But these terrible events had a redemptive purpose for the Hebrew historians. The Sumerian demise and dispersion created a culture in transition that readied Shem’s descendant Abram to meet Yahweh in a foreign land. The crumbling *name* of Urnammu’s dynasty gave way to the promise of a great *name* and a great nation coming to Abram (Gen 12:1–3).

⁵⁴ Seely, “The Date of the Tower of Babel and Some Theological Implications” 15.