

The Bible in Context Ep 21: The Tower of Babel

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Welcome back to the Bible in Context. It's good to be back.

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I feel like it's been a couple weeks since we've done a recording. I know, yeah. For those of you who don't know, we do not get together every week to do this. Actually, we do. We try to record them in badges, though. It takes a lot of time to do this. So it's easier just to sit down and get it all done in one sweep. So where are we at today? So we just finished up with the story of Ham and Noah getting off the boat. And now we're going to dive into the genealogy that comes after Noah's flood and after Ham's sin.

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meet a couple of important characters, Abram and Sarai. Sounds like a plan, so... Well, sorry, wait. We're going to the Tower of Babylon first. Oh, okay. They come first. Yeah, gotcha, gotcha. So we're diving into Chapter 11 of Genesis, if you're trying to follow along with us. The Tower of Babel. Yeah, so first we'll take a look at this, the genealogy that comes before it, because it's going to set us up for the Tower of Babel.

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The genealogy that leads up to the Tower of Babel is in Genesis 10, it's often called the Table of Nations. I think the biggest thing is following Ham's line. These genealogies, we talked about how they're used to break up the narrative and to follow the different families. Ultimately, we're going to stick with Shem's family as we go through this line because we're going to go down to Abraham and on. I do have a sneaking suspicion about Peleg in, I think, 10:25 that maybe it's worth mentioning.

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the narrative he's named Peleg because in his days, Yahweh divided the nations. And so I kind of wonder if in that narrative it's referring to the Tower of Babel and they play the role of Yahweh's enemies.

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And we've kind of talked about how the enemies are sometimes likened to the waters of the sea serpent. And the sea serpent's head is crushed and divided. The seas are separated and divided. I can't help but wonder if there's like this little nod to like, hey, the waters were separated, the ruin and chaos were crushed and separated in the Tower of Babel narrative through the naming of Peleg. I can't guarantee that. But it's within the same context. And in Psalm, let me see.

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In Psalm 55 verse 9, David is speaking of his enemies, or the psalmist is speaking of his enemies, and refers to them as being divided, as P-leg, and he also says that Yahweh will confuse them.

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which is balah them, which is the word balah is not used in the Tower of Babel, but it's used as a wordplay with Babel in the prophets. And so it's possible that here the psalmist is interpreting Peleg's name as exactly what I'm saying. That may not be, it's just interesting enough to mention, I think. So here's another thing that I thought was interesting about Peleg is, so Eber, so that's the root.

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name of Hebrew. So Eber was the father of Peleg and then so he had two sons, Peleg and his brother Jokhtin. And then it goes on in this in Genesis 10 to give you the sons of Jokhtin, but it doesn't give you any of the sons of Peleg. But it's Peleg who is the seed of the woman that will eventually go to Abraham. I just thought that was interesting.

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that it cuts Peleg off, but it keeps going with Jacten here. Yeah, I just thought that was interesting. Yeah, that's kind of queuing you up for the Tower of Babel, and then it picks back up with Shem's genealogy after the Tower of Babel. Yeah, after the Tower of Babel, it goes back to Peleg. If you go down to Shem's descendants in chapter 11, starting in verse 10, generation is Shem, and it goes from Shem. And then, yeah, it follows it down to Eber for 16, and then Peleg. And this is the same, like if you go to the New Testament and the genealogies in Matthew and Luke, that's what you see, too.

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And it's interesting, so you've got the numbers that you have and you get to Shem's descendants in Chapter 11 after the Tower of Babel and you've got ten generations between Shem and Abram and this very much mirrors the Seth's genealogy and even the wording and the patterns and there's a lot of parallels but there's also ten generations from Adam to Noah and then

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You've got 10 generations from Noah to Abraham or Abram. And then from there, if you follow, and you can see this in the New Testament, there's six generations of seven.

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from Abraham to Jesus. And so Jesus starts off the seventh generation after Abraham. Yeah, and I guess here in Genesis, you get 10 generations from Adam and you get Noah. And so you get 10 more generations and you should be expecting Noah was a really important dude. Maybe Abraham's going to be just as important. Yep, yep. So you start to see this pattern. Well,

and then from there it goes to patterns of 14. So every 14th generation, there's an important person. In Matthew's genealogy? Yeah, both.

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Luke and I think if you go back into the Old Testament too. Okay. And there may be some doctoring of the genealogies when you come to the New Testament to get those numbers. Yeah, Matthew and Luke, people who go back in Luke, you have to cut out people to get that. So they're intentionally showing the numbers. They're picking the ones that are significant within the biblical story to highlight the theological significance of Jesus' ancestors and Jesus himself. Okay.

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So I think that's interesting, the way that the biblical authors in the New Testament designed their genealogies to show that Jesus is the beginning of the seventh seventh. Yeah. Yeah, and it's really just, they're making the point of, everybody knows they're doctoring the genealogies, they're not lying, but what they're doing through it is saying like, you know, Jesus had brothers, but...

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They're not the one in line of Adam the way Jesus is. He is the new Adam. Jesus' brothers can fold into him, but he is the new Adam. Yeah, yeah, he's very much setting it up to see that he's the next one who is the most important out of all of them. Yeah, so after these genealogies, or the first genealogy of Ham's line primarily, we get to the tower of...

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Babel. So you mentioned that Shem's line breaks off and we continue with Ham's line to kind of get us into the right dark mindset for the story that's about to come and then Shem's better line we'll pick up later and we'll follow the story of the Electwin there. But for now, we come to the people who were of one language in all of the earth. And doesn't it mean like one lip? Yeah, literally it's there of one lip and one word.

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Yeah. And wasn't it this idea that they were, it wasn't just that they spoke the same language, but they were kind of the same mindset even working together. Well, and there's actually an article by a guy named David Smith and it's called What Hope After Babel? Diversity and Community in Genesis 11, 1-9, Exodus 1, 1-14, Zephaniah 2, 1-13, and Acts 2, 1-13. I love how these scholars have to use a whole paragraph to put a title on their article. I know. At least it's thorough.

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You have no doubt what this article is going to be about. But it's really, it is a good article. And he suggests, I don't know if this is true or not necessarily, but he suggests that

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based on some Assyrian inscriptions that talk about being of one lip or being of one speech, that that phrase points to Assyrian domination of a people. So whenever they conquer another nation, they make them of the same speech. So this could potentially be putting domineering connotations onto this people. Now the reason I'm not so sure about that and the reason

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of a bunch of people's is because the text seems to...

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portray all the people as taking part in this sin. There's not like one oppressive nation and then a bunch of enslaved nations. Right. And that becomes more clear throughout the story. Yeah, because it does say that the whole earth had one language, like the whole land, but it doesn't necessarily mean they're not thinking globe. Yeah, that's what I wanted to bring up. I know that's just a pet peeve, but we think of earth and we think of the globe. Right. The word *erets*, it means land, so it just means all the land. Right.

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land can be relative. So if I'm looking out at a farm and I say all the land, I'm talking about that farm. Or they could be talking about the whole earth. This wasn't necessarily a reference to the whole earth, even though I think the text is trying to say all the people. Right, right. Yeah. That's good to point out. Alright, so what happens? Alright, so these people, they migrated.

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in the east. Some translations will say from the east. It kind of changes because the word there, the word there that's translated as east is a more unique conjunction of the word. And so there's some confusion on what it means. But basically, they are either coming from the east or they're in the east migrating around. Either way, they are in the eastern area, which if we know the biblical story to this point, Adam and Eve were exiled east,

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in with these people in the east. And yeah, you're going to see Lot go east also here in a couple chapters. Yeah, anytime there's exile there it's east. And even Israel, whenever they are exiled to Babylon, where is Babylon relative to Israel?

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East. It's interesting, I'm doing a text comparison to different versions of the Bible, and while the ESV says, and as people migrated from the East, it seems like the majority of translations are more as they journeyed East, or as men moved Eastward. Yeah, there's some confusion on what exactly the preposition on East there could mean, but by and large it's just saying that the people that were in the East, they were following that same exile motif. Right, whether

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coming from the east or they're going east, east is bad. Yeah, they're not in a good place. Right. And to make things worse, they're also in Shinar. Ah, yeah. So what's the significance of

Shinar? Shinar is the root of Babylon. That's the same place. So whenever you see Shinar, just think Babylon. And I think this was written...

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probably after the exile. And so the author here, and he expects us of his readers as well, that when he says Shinar and uploads Babylon into the context, it's bad. It's not like, oh, this is some neutral place long before they did their terrible things. Like no, this would basically be like if we wrote a story and then the Third Reich shows up in that story. Right. It doesn't matter when and where you are, you're going to think that's not good. Yeah. There's been several places that I've seen where a...

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it's obvious that the author here is assuming that his audience knows the future. Like for example, so there's this place in chapter 13 where Lot chooses to go east and there's this just parentheses that says this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. So it's obvious that he's expecting his audience to know about that.

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because that's not even been mentioned up to this point, but later on in the biblical narrative, we'll get to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. So yeah, there's definitely, I believe, like you're saying, there's places throughout this that the author is expecting us as readers to know what's already happened in the future.

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Yeah, they expect us to, they also expect us to be reading this multiple times. So by the time you've read the Bible the first time, hopefully you'll come back and read Shinar and Babylon and be like, oh boy, that's not good. Right. So what's the connection with Shinar and the last chapter in the genealogy? So the connection here to previous texts is in chapter 10 verse 10 where it says that Nimrod, like a mighty hunter before Yahweh, the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erek,

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So again, we see the connection here between Babylon and Shinar. That's where Babylon was founded by Nimrod, who is Ham's son, that follows that gopher Azazel kind of motif that we've talked about a little bit. Now, I do want to bring up real quick about the name, the Tower of Babel.

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Last time I said that I was going to refer to the Tower of Babel as the Tower of Babylon, and I was sticking to that, but I have called them both all throughout this. I've not stuck to it. But I wanted to talk about that name because Babylon in Hebrew is Babel or Bavel. It's whenever the Hebrew was translated into Greek that they called it Babylon, and that's where we get the English Babylon.

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So the Babylon or Babel later in the Old Testament is the same as the word Babel in the Tower of Babel. It's the Tower of Babylon. In our English translations, we don't carry that through and call it the Tower of Babylon or just call Babylon Babel in the rest of the Old Testament. And so we lose that connection, but we need to recognize that this is...

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the Tower of Babylon. This is the origin, according to the Bible, of the nation of Babylon, Israel's enemy. Yeah. Yeah. And Josephus, as I was doing studying on this, he's the one that was convinced that Nimrod had started the Tower of Babylon to kind of show up God, basically. Like, if you're going to try to flood this place again, we're going to have a place where we can get up out of the flood. You won't be able to destroy us again. That's interesting. That was Josephus. Yeah, I'm curious.

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But no, yeah, it's interesting where he I wonder where he draw those ideas from well, I mean, there's all sorts of different Oh, yeah theories on Nimrod. I mean, it's all like they I mean he became this bigger-than-life Character. Yeah, pretty sure he's like in the book of the Giants. Yeah That's he scrolls. Yeah, there's a lot of different nations that took this character Nimrod and turned them into this semi-god That was yeah all over the place. Yeah, do you want to talk about the the purpose of the the tower with the tower look?

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the tower for a little bit. So the tower is, and you mentioned this in your sermon about this, is that what would have been in the original audience's mind is a ziggurat, which is basically this pyramid kind of structure with a staircase going up. It's not a pyramid. Pyramids in Egypt, those are for a different function. They're different types of buildings. But yeah, it has a staircase going up and on top is this little kind of house, a little building or a little room where there might be something like a bed or just where they make food offerings, things like that.

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to draw a deity down to it and this deity would descend the staircase and go into the temple that is in front of it in this city. And this is being drawn largely from John Walton's book, Ancient Near Eastern Thought in the Old Testament. So that's a really good book for understanding this concept. So what they're doing is they're not trying to ascend to God to attack heaven or something like that or try to avoid another flood and get above the waters. They're trying to bring either Yahweh or maybe some other deity down to bless them.

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and to either manipulate Yahweh or rely on some other deity's power for their blessing instead of relying on Yahweh, period. So that's the purpose of this tower, this ziggurat, and the city that's around it. Cities were often designed with temples, I mean pretty much always with temples in them, so that's kind of the cultural idea already uploaded into this city and tower. Yeah, and there's a bunch of these ziggurats that are still standing even today in the Middle East.

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And some of them you can still find the temple at the base of them. Yeah. I mean Babylon, they were especially known for doing this. So this is right up their cultural alley. Like this reference would not be out of place to talk about Babylon being founded with the ziggurat. All right. So the purpose of the ziggurat was to bring God down to offer him something so that he would bless. So it's kind of this quid pro quo relationship that they're trying to create, whether it was like you said with Yahweh or with maybe potentially another...

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God that they were trying to manipulate and giving them a blessing and God does not like that. Yeah

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Yeah, I mean, and too they were looking for a, what they say, a name for themselves so that they're not dispersed. Now one thing with the dispersion, they were supposed to go out over all the land to be fruitful and multiply, subdue the earth, so this is likely their lack of fulfilling that command from Yahweh, that blessing. And then there's also the name. Now there's a few different things to consider with the name. I don't think there's a sure interpretation of the name, but often the name is linked to kingship.

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First of all, we're going to see that name in Hebrew, it's the word Shem. So Noah's son Shem, his name is name and then these people are trying to make a name for themselves and then Shem's great-great-grandson Abram, he gets a name from Yahweh, an everlasting name. So it's potentially linked to kingship because it's often in that context. They're pursuing their own authority, dominion, kingship in this land.

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with being remembered after death in your culture. Have you ever seen Coco? Yeah. Okay. You know where there's the old guy who's in the realm of the dead, his ancestors are forgetting him, and he kind of goes out of existence? That's – I don't know what kind of Mexican mythology or whatever that might be out of, but that's not a new idea. That's present even in this culture. That's why you see a lot of – I mean, just read a book on the quote-unquote cult of the dead in Israel. And there was very much an idea.

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of your ancestors having social continuity. They're still part of the community even after their death, and that's why you look after their bones. Their spirit is interacting in the community. You still offer food offerings to them, and it's not necessarily an act of worship in the same way you'd worship Yahweh, but still there's this idea of social continuity. And honor them and keep their memory alive. Right, yeah. And that's why the name is important, because you want to be remembered. Right. So they're wanting through this tower and whatever deeds.

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they may bring down to have social continuity and honor lasting into generations. Generations, yeah. As you were talking, I just started laughing to myself because I can just imagine like if today somebody's name was Name, like Shem, you introduce yourself to them. Hi, what's your name? Name. Who's on first? Yeah, exactly. That's what I'm thinking. I'm thinking it would go into like... What's on second? I don't hear something. It would be so confusing to have your name be Name, but it's significant in the biblical storyline.

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because, like you said, Abram, God would say to him, I'm gonna give you a name, a great name. Yeah, yeah, and a lot of these names, we've talked about this already, but they're word plays. They may not have the exact historical name that these figures may have had. And the author's fine with that, that's fine, he's kind of playing with it to make a theological point. Right, right, that doesn't bring down the authority or the authenticity of the Bible at all, it's just part of the way that the authors would try to communicate.

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So they're trying to, again, bring a deity down, and they're actually successful. They bring Yahweh down. He comes down to take a look at their building project, which, like you've even said, this is probably a slam that their tower to the heavens, God had to come down to it.

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Yeah, there's definitely some irony there that I think we're supposed to see. Oh, and that's something else I forgot to mention that the ziggurats were often talked about as having their head in the heavens. Right, which is the same language we have here. Yeah, so I mean this is definitely in the stream of ideas of a ziggurat. It's not something that we're trying to impose upon the text, but the culture is, it's already inherent within the culture of the text. Right, right. Yahweh comes down, he says, let us go down in verse seven and confuse their language.

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So that that led us it's interesting because there's again a couple different views we talked about this in Genesis 1 because God says let us make man in our image and we talked about how that very well might be a divine council scene where the Angelic, you know so to speak beings who help God run the world because God has given them authority to do so and once them on his council They may have been the ones present in that us in creation and also here and then we see again

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Again, we don't see this let us language happen in this story, but in Sodom and Gomorrah, God comes down with two other spiritual beings to see the evil in Sodom and Gomorrah. So he's coming down for the same reason with multiple people. It kind of maps onto the same let us go down to see what's going on in Babel. Right, right. Do you think there's anything to, is this meant to kind of mirror what happened earlier where the people, all the people were saying, come let us.

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make bricks." And so God is kind of mocking that. Oh yeah, yeah. I definitely think so. I mean, yeah, he's like, well, look at our plan. Let us go do all this stuff. It's like, okay, that's fine. I've got my own plan. It's a little better. Right. You definitely see this pattern already in Genesis, and we'll see it over and over where humanity just thinks that they're going to do what's wise in their own eyes and take things into their own hands, and it never ends well for them. And so this is just another example. Yeah. So God, despite

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disperses them over the face of the earth and they left off building the city. He confused their languages.

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We're going to come back to that in just a second because right after that it tells us that therefore the city was called Babel because there the Lord confused or bevelled the languages. So there's a little wordplay in the name. Now in Akkadian, the Babylonian language that these ziggurats were often named in, bevelled or bevelled, it means the gate of God. Well here it's linked with confusion. So again, this is just a direct slam on the Babylonian culture.

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their religious system, the way that they relate to their deities. Well, we have covered a lot of ground with, I think, the meaning of the Tower of Babel and some of the ancient Near Eastern context behind its significance. We still want to talk about, I think, what Yahweh is going to do through this as He scatters the people. So, we'll pick up with that next week and continue our conversation.