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## **CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

### **UNIT 6: BABEL AND THE NATIONS**

#### **BIBLICAL TEXT:**

Read Genesis chapters 10-11 carefully before reading the following background information.

#### **BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:**

The story of Babel (Genesis 11) and the “Table of Nations” that precedes it (Genesis 10) form a transition between the biblical accounts of worldwide and miraculous events – such as the creation and the flood – that seem to be described in a literary manner, and the localized and often everyday events – seemingly described in a literal manner – that follow in the record of Abraham and his descendants through the rest of the Old Testament.

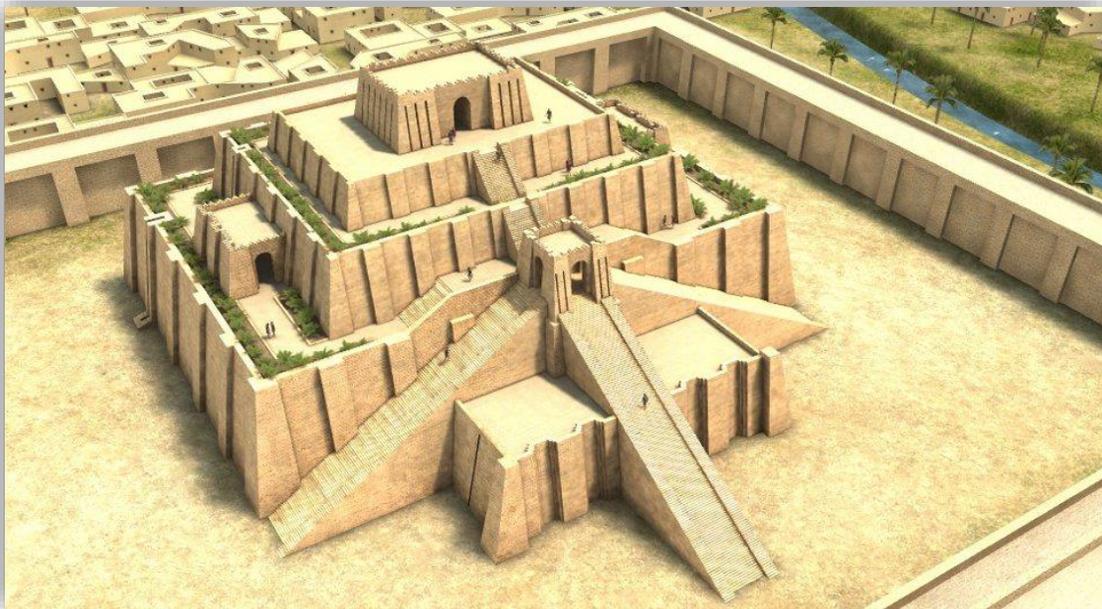
Not surprisingly, the relationship between the Genesis accounts and those of ancient Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq and the surrounding areas) continues through this transitional period because the setting of much of Genesis 10-11 is Mesopotamia itself. But despite the obvious Mesopotamian influence on the Babel narrative, the wider biblical story found in this section is unique. In Genesis 10 the divisions of most of humankind are mapped out in the Table of Nations which lists a total of 70 people groups or their individual founders. This number was symbolic of the concept of “totality,” as we see in many places in the Old Testament (the seventy elders of Exodus 24: 9; etc.) and in the New (Matthew 18:22; etc).

Nothing comparable to the biblical Table of Nations is known from the whole ancient world. While the genealogical lists of other civilizations concern themselves with the people of their own cultures, the Genesis list represents all nations as being important. This outward focus of Genesis 10 is heightened by the fact that Israel itself is not included in the Table of Nations. The list is, in fact, unprecedented in its apparent desire to give an overview of human cultures.

Yet the list is somewhat selective in the sense that it concentrates to some extent on the genealogy of the peoples with whom the nation of Israel would eventually interact. The descendants of Noah’s son Japheth are said to be spread from east to west across the north (corresponding roughly with the area of Eurasia); those of Ham lie to the south and west (corresponding mainly with Egypt and the Canaanite area); and the descendants of Shem are shown to be situated to the east and south (corresponding with Arabia and other areas of the Near East). It is important to stress that the list says nothing about racial divisions or differences and focuses instead on family and national relationships.

The story of the Tower of Babel is deeply rooted in the religious culture of ancient Mesopotamia. A number of Mesopotamian cities constructed large temple towers called **ziggurats** (see Note 1 below) that were not only raised platforms for the offering of sacrifices to the gods, but also functioned mythologically as stairways to heaven – or more precisely stairways *from* heaven. The towers were not meant to allow humans access to the heavens, but to allow the gods to use them to *come down to earth* to bless the people for their sacrifices. Mesopotamian kings left records extolling themselves for constructing such towers of baked brick (Genesis 11:3), and they were causes of individual and community pride.

Probably the best known of these Mesopotamian temple towers is the ziggurat of Ur – an ancient city about 190 miles (310 km) south of modern Baghdad in southern Iraq. The structure was built during the Early Bronze Age (twenty-first century BC or older). This tower originally measured 210 ft. (64 m.) in length, 148 ft. (45 m.) in width, and about 100 ft. (30 m.) in height. Although not the tallest ziggurat built, even this ten-story structure would certainly have seemed to reach into the heavens by ancient standards.



Artists reconstruction of the ziggurat of Ur. Image: Mozaik

In the Genesis description of the Babel event we read that the people desired to build a city with such a tower “that reaches to the heavens” (Genesis 11:4). The Hebrew is literally a tower with “head in the heavens,” and it is interesting that ancient clay tablets have been found in Mesopotamia that preserve a tradition of problems associated with such building. A text known as *Shumma Alu* (“If a city ...”) announces impending doom would come on any city or tower built with its “head in the heavens,” and states that any city built in this manner would be abandoned and become a ruin.

Mesopotamian texts also speak of a time when humanity spoke a single language. The story is preserved in the epic called *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*. This literary work speaks of a time when there were no wild beasts and people lived in harmony. The story also asserts that “The whole universe in unison spoke to [the god] Enlil in one language,” then human speech was changed and “contention” resulted. Although there is no mention of the building of a tower in the Enmerkar text, the theme of divine confusion of language is clearly described.

## UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

The Table of Nations found in Genesis 10 is an important turning point in the Old Testament. Just as the earlier chapters of Genesis showed the descent of all peoples from Adam, Genesis 10 stresses the descent of all people from Noah following the re-creation after the flood. The Table also includes a number of interesting details. Beginning at Genesis 10:2, listed in order of increasing importance due to proximity from ancient Israel's perspective, are the descendants of Japheth, then Ham, then Shem.

Japheth's descendants include several people-names that are historically recognizable such as Elisha – which has been linked to Cyprus in the Mediterranean – and others the Genesis account refers to as “the maritime peoples” who spread out into their territories (Genesis 10:5). The line of Ham's descendants includes both Egypt and the Canaanites – both cultures being important in later Israelite history – and the description of the line of Shem is important for the biblical story, as he is said to have been the ancestor of Eber (v. 21), the name from which the word “Hebrew” originates. This line led eventually to Abraham who, as we will see, became the father of the Hebrew people. The list provides clear indication that the roots of the Israelites (despite their later coming out of Egypt) were in Mesopotamia.

Of some interest in the Table of Nations is the discussion of Nimrod – the only individual singled out for comment in the whole list. According to Jewish and Christian tradition, Nimrod was the leader of those who built the Tower of Babel. These later traditions also established Nimrod's reputation as being a great rebel against God. For example, the first-century Jewish writer Philo interpreted the biblical statement that Nimrod was “a mighty hunter before the Lord” (literally “in the face of Yahweh”) to mean “in opposition to the Lord.” Comments such as this have led some Christian groups to build up a considerable mythology around the figure of Nimrod that asserts he was the founder of false religion and other evils that have continued to the present day. However, this is an example of reading things into the text that the Bible simply does not say. But that Nimrod was somehow important in his own age is clear from the length of the comment regarding him and the cities he founded, and the fact that the Bible uses the expression “land of Nimrod” as a synonym for Mesopotamia as late as the book of Micah (Micah 5:6).

Following the Table of Nations, the Genesis account then focuses on one particular city on the Mesopotamian plain and the story of the tower built there, and God's subsequent confusion of the peoples' one language into many different ones. The people are reported to have said “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:4).

There seem to have been two problems with what the people purposed to do. First, their desire to “make a name” for themselves seems to have been an attitude of pride. Soon after these events God promised Abraham that he would make his name great (Genesis 12:2), so the problem was evidently not one of having a great name or reputation, but of desiring it for selfish and self-aggrandizing reasons.

But the people's desire not to “be scattered” was obviously a clear rebellion against God's command to spread out and inhabit the earth (Genesis 9:1). Genesis tells us twice that as a result of their unwillingness to spread out into the world and their desire to congregate in one central area, God decided to “come down” to see the city (Genesis 11:5, 7) – a clear irony that ancient readers would have understood since the intended purpose of the Mesopotamian ziggurat towers was, as we have seen, for the gods to come down to earth (see Note 2 below). Also ironically, the punishment of the builders of the tower who desired to make a great name for themselves was that they were recorded in Scripture with a name of infamy (“Babel” sounds like the Hebrew word for “confused”) rather than one of glory (Genesis 11:9).

## KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

A striking aspect of the Genesis Table of Nations is that while the lists of other cultures usually focused only on their kings and leaders, the Genesis list encompasses all who were in the line of human descent. All people – both individually and as groups – are depicted as being worthy of record. Importantly, the list of nations shows God’s concern for, and blessing of, all peoples – not just the Israelites. The biblical account affirms that God is the God of all nations – a truly revolutionary concept for the ancient world where each culture believed in and worshipped its own gods who were believed to essentially ignore any other peoples.

Another central theological concept found within Genesis 10-11 is summed up in the old saying that “Man proposes but God disposes,” meaning that humanity may boldly propose great things, but God may not allow them to happen. While this principle has national and international relevance (Daniel 2:21; etc.), it also has individual application, as Proverbs 16:9 tells us and the apostle James elaborates:

Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” (James 4:13-15)

The principle of divine deterrence (where God preemptively deflects human plans) is first seen in the Babel story. Although Genesis tells us that God intervened in human affairs a number of times in early history, those interventions were always a result of what humans had done. The Babel story shows that God also sometimes involves himself in the plans for what humans want to do. This fact is stressed in Genesis when God says: “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other” (Genesis 11:6-7).

Of course we should not presume from these words that God’s knowledge and power are limited and that he must act preemptively, or that he is normally unaware of what is going on in the world except when he comes to see first-hand. The story indicates instead that God sees all, and that he can and does intervene in history at times as he thinks best for humankind.

A final theological lesson that we can glean from the accounts of Genesis 10-11 is that of the dangers of human unity. God does desire that as much as possible people live in moral and religious unity, of course, but even in those areas there are potential problems. All too often those who clamor for religious or moral unity desire a unity based on *their* religion or moral ideas. The Babel story certainly teaches us that God is very much aware of the problems inherent in ultimate political unity. A united world with all power concentrated in the hands of a few would be a dangerous place indeed. The stress placed on the many individual cultures found in the Table of Nations which forms the introduction to the Tower of Babel story is clearly a rebuttal of the single socio-political culture that was being attempted at Babel.

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\*Note 1: The Mesopotamian temple ziggurats were constructed of rubble or simple dried mud bricks with a casing of baked clay bricks (Genesis 11:3) which were more impervious to the elements. There were no rooms within these temple towers (apart from a small room at the very top which was furnished with a bed and table intended for the comfort of visiting gods), and their solid construction means that a number of the ziggurats have survived at least partially and can still be seen in what are now the nations of Iraq and Iran. Essentially, a ziggurat was a huge stairway.

\*Note 2: The expression “Come let us go down and confuse their language” (Genesis 11:7) represents the second occasion in Genesis where God speaks in the plural. As we saw in Unit 2, it could be that God was addressing a heavenly audience or the preincarnate Son of God. However, in Genesis 11 it may also be a further irony woven into the story, as God’s words effectively parody the words of the people “Come let us [go up]” (Genesis 11:4) as they sought to build a tower to the heavens.

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## **REVIEW AND REFLECTION:** (complete in your notebook)

**Basics:** What does the “Table of Nations” of Genesis 10 show us about God?

What was the purpose of the Mesopotamian ziggurat temple towers?

What were the two sins of the people of Babel who attempted to build a great city and tower?

**Looking Below the Surface:** Make a list of reasons why God did not want to allow the kind of unity people were attempting at Babel. What would the kind of world the people of Babel were trying to make be like?

**Everyday Applications:** Think about the story of the Tower of Babel as an analogy. What “towers” do we build in our own lives if we are not careful?

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