

A House for My Name

A Survey of the Old Testament

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Book of Beginnings

The Bible tells one story. It is a long and complicated story about events that took place over several thousand years, but even so it is one story. Like most good stories, the most exciting and important parts come toward the end. In this case, the most important part comes when Jesus is born, lives, dies on the cross, rises again, and ascends to heaven. But to know why Jesus comes and what He is doing when he dies and rises again, we need to know the story that goes before. A man kisses a sleeping woman in a wood and she awakes. That's a nice ending to a story, but if we don't know the woman is Sleeping Beauty and the man is Prince Philip, then we don't know the story very well. A beginning is nothing without an ending, but an ending without a beginning isn't worth much either. To tell the story of Jesus, we need to start with Genesis, the first book in the Bible, a book whose name means "Beginnings."

THREE-STORY HOUSE, GENESIS 1:1–2:4¹

The Bible's story begins by telling us about the world where the story takes place. In the Bible, the world is the real world that we live in, the world that God created. But the Bible describes the world in a particular way. In some places, the Bible describes it as a house. Talking to Job from the whirlwind, Yahweh asks,

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth!
Tell me, if you know understanding,
Who set its measurements, since you know?
Or who stretched the line on it?
On what were its bases sunk?
Or who laid its cornerstone,
When the morning stars sang together,
And all the sons of God shouted for joy? (Job 38:4–7)

Earth, and especially mountains, are set on “foundations” (Deut. 32:22; 2 Sam. 22:8, 16; Ps. 104:5) just like the foundations that hold up a house. Blue sky is stretched out above like a “tent curtain” (Is. 40:22). Pillars support the earth (Job 9:6) and heaven (Job 26:11). When God first appears in the Bible, He is building a house.

God makes His house through His Word and Spirit. All three Persons of God are working to build His house. The Father speaks and things are made. He says, “Let there be light,” and there is light. Other places in the Bible, we learn that the “Word” that makes the world is the “Word” that is God (Jn. 1:1–5). And this Word becomes man in Jesus. The Spirit is mentioned too in Genesis 1:2: “the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.” What does the Spirit look like when He “hovers” over the waters? In other places in Scripture, we learn that the Spirit makes His appearance looking like a cloud that sometimes glows with light.² The cloud that leads Israel out of the wilderness is the Spirit. He “hovers” over Israel, as He hovered over the waters, to make a new creation (cf. Deut. 32:11). Later, this same “glory-cloud” appears in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle and temple of Israel. And much later, the Spirit “hovers” in the form of a dove at Jesus’ baptism (Mt. 3:16), because in Jesus, God is again making the world new.

It takes God six days to build His house, six days that are just like our days with the sun coming up in the morning and going down in the evening. After that, God rests on the seventh day, a day known as the Sabbath day.³ During the first three days, God makes a three-story house by dividing one thing from another. On the first day, He divides light and darkness; on the second, He divides waters in heaven from waters on the earth and puts the sky or firmament in between, and on the third day, he divides the waters on the earth to make the dry land and the sea. The next three days, He fills up the three stories of His house. On the fourth day, He puts the sun, moon, and stars in the sky to fill up daytime and nighttime. On the fifth day, He creates birds to fly across the sky and fish to swim in the waters. On the sixth day, He makes Adam and animals that live on land. What's interesting is that the first three days match the second three days:

DIVIDING	FILLING
Day 1: light/dark	Day 4: sun, moon, stars
Day 2: waters above/below	Day 5: birds and fish
Day 3: waters/land	Day 6: land animals and man
Day 7: Sabbath	

And so, at the end of the six days of creation, God has finished a “three-story” house. Above is the “tent curtain” of blue sky, then the dry land, and finally the waters “below” the earth.

The Bible mentions this three-story house many times. In the second commandment, God forbids us to bow down to an image of anything in “heaven above, or on the earth beneath, or in the waters under the earth” (Exod. 20:4). That means we must not bow down to images of *anything*. “Heaven, earth, and sea” means “the whole universe.” Sometimes when the Bible mentions

the three-story house, it's not as obvious as it is in the second commandment. In Psalm 77:16–18, for example, we read:

The waters saw Thee, O God;
 The waters saw Thee, they were in anguish;
 The deeps also trembled.
 The clouds poured out water;
 The skies gave forth a sound;
 Thy arrows went here and there.
 The sound of Thy thunder was in the whirlwind;
 The lightnings lit up the world;
 The earth trembled and shook.

Each story of the house is mentioned. When the Lord appears, the waters tremble and shake with anguish. The Hebrew word for “anguish” can refer to the pain of a woman who is having a baby. When the Lord comes, the waters thrash about like a woman in labor. Then the Psalm describes the sky: God comes riding on clouds that are like a chariot, rumbling with thunder, and flashing with arrows of lightning. God is coming on the scene like a great warrior entering a battle.

Finally, the earth “trembled and shook” at the coming of the Lord. Waters, sky, and earth: God comes and the whole house begins to shake.⁴

When we read this Psalm, it sounds like the world is breaking apart. But that's not what the Psalm is talking about. Instead, it's talking about an event that happened in the Old Testament. At the end of the Psalm, we read this:

Thy way was in the sea,
 And Thy paths in the mighty waters,
 And Thy footprints may not be known.
 Thou didst lead Thy people like a flock,
 By the hand of Moses and Aaron (vv. 19–20).

The Psalm is talking about Israel's Exodus through the Red Sea, but it describes it as something that makes the whole universe tremble. Asaph, who wrote the Psalm, is telling us that the Exodus is a world-shaking event. We think that World War II is a big event, but the Psalm says that the Exodus is even bigger. When Israel is brought out of Egypt, the whole world trembles. And when God shakes the world, it means that God is making a new world (Heb. 12:26–27). In the Exodus, the cloud and “whirlwind” hover over the waters as the Spirit hovers over the waters at creation (Gen. 1:2). Out of the “anguish” of the waters, a new Israel, and a new world, is born.

Sometimes the Bible talks about a nation or empire as if it were the three-story house. Each nation is a “world.” Like the creation, a nation is built on “pillars.” In Hannah's prayer at the birth of Samuel, she looks forward to what the Lord is going to do in Israel:

He raises the poor from the dust,
 He lifts the needy from the ash heap
 To make them sit with nobles,
 And inherit a seat of honor;
 For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's,
 And He set the world on them. (1 Sam. 2:8)

Here the “pillars of the earth” are pillars that hold up the “house” of Israel (see Ps. 75:3). Nobles and other important people are the “pillars” of Israel, but in Hannah's day, the pillars are wicked men. Hannah looks forward to a time when the evil pillars will be torn down and the righteous will be set up as columns. Two decades later, Samson tears down the pillars of the temple of Dagon and, in the process, destroys most of the “columns” of the nation of Philistia (Judg. 16:23–31). When Samson brings down the “house” of Dagon, he also

brings down the “house” of Philistia. Hannah, it seems, has good reason to hope that the pillars will be shaken.

So, the world is a house, and each nation is also a house. And this is why the Bible sometimes seems to be talking about the fall of the universe when it’s talking about the fall of a nation. The plagues are attacks on the “three-story house” of Egypt. There are ten plagues, with the killing of the firstborn as the climax. The first nine are arranged in three sets of three plagues (all references are to Exodus)⁵ :

	FIRST CYCLE	SECOND CYCLE	THIRD CYCLE
WATER	1. Nile to blood	4. Flies (by water, 8:20)	7. Hail (ice)
LAND	2. Frogs (8:5–7)	5. Pestilence (land animals)	8. Locusts (10:5)
SKY	3. Gnats (flying)	6. Boils (9:8)	9. Darkness (sky)

Egypt’s water, land, and sky are being shaken until Egypt falls to the ground.

Sometimes the Bible focuses attention on only one of the floors of the three-story house. Sun, moon, and stars—which are set in the “upper room” of the universe—often picture rulers and kings. Already in Genesis 1:16, the heavenly bodies are described as “governing” the day and night. Isaiah the prophet talks about the sun, moon, and stars falling from the sky:

Behold, the day of the Lord is coming,
 Cruel, with fury and burning anger,
 To make the land a desolation;
 And He will exterminate its sinners from it.
 For the stars of heaven and their constellations
 Will not flash forth their light;
 The sun will be dark when it rises,
 And the moon will not shed its light. (Is. 13:9–10)

Like Psalm 77, it sounds as if Isaiah is talking about the end of the world. And he is, in a sense. But the world that's coming to an end is Babylon (Is. 13:1), not the whole universe. What Isaiah describes as the fall of the heavens is a prophecy of the collapse of Babylon as a "heavenly" power.

Very often the land pictures Israel and the sea pictures the nations (see Ps. 46:1–3, 6; 65:7–8). Isaiah talks about Assyria as an overflowing river that threatens Judah. The people of Judah have to decide between two rivers:

Inasmuch as these people have rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah,
 And rejoice in Rezin [king of Aram] and the son of Remaliah [Pekah of Israel];
 Now therefore, behold, the Lord is about to bring on them
 The strong and mighty waters of the [Euphrates] River,
 Even the king of Assyria and all his glory;
 And it will rise up over all its channels and go over all its banks.
 Then it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass through,
 It will reach even to the neck;
 And the spread of its wings will be the fulness of the breadth of your land, O Immanuel. (Is. 8:6–8)

Yahweh is the "river whose streams make glad the city of God" (Ps. 46:4), but Judah has rejected these waters, trusting in Aram and Israel for protection from Assyria. Because they have rejected the Lord's living water, the Lord will let the Euphrates overflow and engulf Judah. God is turning back creation as He did in Noah's flood: Instead of separating land and water, the water is now going to overflow the land.⁶

Jeremiah also compares the sea to the Gentile nations when he warns Judah that Babylon is coming to destroy her.

Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian emperor, is a sea monster who swallows up the Lord's people (Jer. 51:34–35). But the Lord will not allow Babylon to overflow His people forever: “Behold, I am going to plead your case and exact full vengeance for you; and I shall dry up her sea, and make her fountain dry” (v. 36). Though once a sea herself, Babylon will be overcome by the sea: “The sea has come up over Babylon; she has been engulfed with its tumultuous waves” (v. 42). This flood, strangely, turns Babylon into “a parched land and a desert, a land in which no man lives.” Though the Gentile sea monster has swallowed Judah, the Lord promises to “punish Bel [a Babylonian god] in Babylon, and I shall make what he has swallowed come out of his mouth; and the nations will no longer stream to him” (v. 44). The Lord is going to make Babylon vomit Israel back onto the land.

When God finishes building His house, it is “good” (Gen. 1:4, 10, 18, 21, etc.). But He doesn't want the house to stay exactly as it is. He makes a good house, but He wants it to get better and better. In the next section, we'll see how, instead of getting better and better, His first house is spoiled.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How is the world like a house?
2. How do the first three days of creation match the second three days?
3. What are the stories of God's three-story house?
4. What is Psalm 77 talking about? Why does it describe this event as if it were the end of the world?
5. How does Hannah's song compare Israel to a house?
6. What do the sun, moon, and stars represent? What is Isaiah talking about when he describes heavenly bodies falling from the sky?

7. What does the land often represent? What is the sea?
8. How does Isaiah describe the Assyrian invasion of Judah?
9. How does Jeremiah describe Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon?

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. What does Psalm 82:5 mean by “the foundations of the earth”?
2. Compare Genesis 1:2 and Genesis 8:1. Note that the word for “Spirit” is the same as the word for “wind.” In light of this, explain what’s happening in Genesis 8:1.
3. Notice the references to the three-story house in Revelation 8:1–13. Notice also that there are seven trumpets being sounded. Explain how this connects to Genesis 1.
4. Why is it significant that Noah’s ark has three levels (Gen. 6:16)?
5. If the land pictures Israel, what do land animals represent? Look at Psalm 77:20 and 80:1.

JUNIOR ARCHITECTS, GENESIS 1:26–28; 2:1–25; 6–9

Once God has made His three-story house, He puts Adam and Eve in it and gives them a job to do. In Genesis 1:26–28, God makes Adam and Eve in His “image and likeness.” An image is a copy, and Adam and Eve are created to be like God. As God is king of the whole creation, so Adam is to be king of the animals and birds, with Eve the queen at his side. Being like God also means that Adam is supposed to work as God works. As we have already learned, God builds the creation as His house, and Adam, as the image of God, is also to be a builder. This is what God intends when He says that Adam should be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it;

and rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every living thing that moves on the earth (Gen. 1:28).

Adam's job is to "subdue" and "rule." The word "subdue" is especially interesting. In the Old Testament, the same word is used to describe victory in a war, as when David "subdues" his enemies. And the word also means "subduing" someone to slavery (see Jer. 34:11, 16; 2 Chr. 28:10). When God creates the world, it is all good, so Adam does not have to "subdue" wicked enemies. Still, Adam has to work hard to subdue the world. Even before Adam sins, it is not easy to rule creation. Animals need training, trees are tough to cut, the earth is hard to dig, and rocks are hard to break. By working hard, Adam is to make creation a "slave." He is supposed to find new ways to use what God has made, so that the whole creation serves man more and more. In Genesis 4:22, we learn that Tubal-cain is "the forger of all implements of bronze and iron." He is the first to "enslave" the metals that God has created and make them useful. Today, thousands of years later, we are still learning new ways to "subdue" creation.

Of course, Adam's job is not only to make the world more useful for him, but also to make the world pleasing to God. God does not want Adam simply to have children; He wants Adam to have faithful, godly children who worship and serve Him. God does not want Adam to use iron to hurt other people; He wants Adam to use iron to make useful tools and musical instruments. Adam is the king of the world, but he is always a servant to a higher King. If Adam subdues the world as God commands, he will be building a house for God within the house that God has built for him.

When Adam is first created, he is put in the garden of Eden. The Garden is one of several different areas that God makes in the world. Remember that God initially makes a "three-story" world. In Genesis 2, we learn that the middle floor, earth, is

divided into three “rooms.” The Garden is only one of them. Genesis 2:8 tells us that the Lord God plants a garden “toward the east, *in* Eden,” which means that the Garden is on the east side of the land of Eden. Eden is larger than the Garden, and outside Eden there were other lands, which are named in Genesis 2:11–13. If Adam had taken time on the first day to make a map, he would have drawn a map with several areas: the Garden, the land of Eden, and the larger world.

It is interesting to notice how these three “rooms” of earth match up with the three “stories” of the universe. To see fully how this works, another portion of the creation has to be considered, namely, the “firmament.” Made on the second day of creation (Gen. 1:6), the firmament is not just the flat surface of the sky but the whole region that we call “outer space.” We know this because the sun, moon, and stars are “in” the firmament (Gen. 1:14–19). It is also called “heaven” (Gen. 1:8). This means that God created a world with two “heavens”: The heavens where God dwells and the visible heavens of outer space. When we add this to our picture of the three-story house, we see that the “attic” is divided into two sections.

With this in mind, we can compare the order of the universe to the map of the earth as follows:

WORLD	EARTH
Heaven	Land of Eden
Firmament	Garden
Earth	Land to East
Sea	Outlying Lands

We have already looked at some places in the Bible that compare the “earth” to the “land,” that is, the land of Palestine where Israel lives. We have also seen that the sea pictures the

Gentile world outside of Israel. How Eden and the Garden match with the two heavens isn't obvious yet, but we'll get to that in the next chapter.⁷ This picture implies that Adam's highest achievement will be to move from the garden into the land of Eden. He was not created to serve in the Garden only but to rule in the land.

We have learned already that the three-story house is mentioned in many passages of Scripture, and the same is true of the garden of Eden. After the fall, cherubim are placed at the gate of the Garden, which is on the east side (Gen. 3:24). This means the entrance to the Garden is toward the east. If you want to return to the Garden, you have to travel west, and moving east is moving away from the Garden. All through the Bible, east and west have this meaning. Cain is cast out of the land and wanders in Nob, which is east of Eden (Gen. 4:16). Lot moves east and settles near Sodom (Gen. 13:11). When Israel enters the land from Egypt, they circle around to Moab and cross the Jordan from the east. This shows that entering the land flowing with milk and honey is like returning to the Garden. Later, when Israel goes into exile, they are taken to the east, away from the land, and to return they travel west. In the New Testament, the wise men come from east to west, seeking the Garden and Jesus, the real Tree of Life (Mt. 2:1).

The Garden is on a mountain. The river that runs into the Garden comes from the land of Eden and then flows through the Garden (Gen. 2:10). Eden is on higher ground than the Garden, but since the water runs from the Garden to outlying lands, the Garden too is a high place. Ezekiel states this plainly. He prophesies against Tyre, describing the "prince of Tyre" as an Adam who is in the garden of God (v. 13) on the holy mountain of God (v. 14). Throughout the Bible, mountains and hills are places where God meets with man. During the

time between the collapse of the tabernacle and the building of the temple, Samuel conducts worship in “Ramah,” which means “high place” (cf. 1 Sam. 7:17). David brings the ark to Jerusalem and sets it in a tent on Mount Zion, and later, the Lord instructs Solomon to build His temple on a mountain in Jerusalem. Every time God meets with man on a mountain, it is a return to the Garden.

Adam has a job in the world—to subdue and rule it. In Genesis 2, he is given a job in the Garden. According to Genesis 2:15, he is to “guard” and “work” the Garden. Through much of the Old Testament, these words describe the work of priests. Priests are called to “guard” the Lord’s house (see Num. 1:53; 3:8), and the “service” of worship is often described using the same Hebrew word found in Genesis 2:15 (see Exod. 20:5; Num. 8:15; Deut. 7:4, 16). Adam’s job is not only to build for God in the world, but also to serve God as priest in the Garden. When God divides the earth into a “garden” and the “world” outside, He is pointing to the two jobs of Adam: king and priest. In the Garden, Adam meets with God and worships Him; in the world, Adam is to rule and subdue.

Water and trees, a man and woman on a mountaintop—these features of the Garden come up again and again later in the Bible. Throughout Genesis, the patriarchs, the forefathers of Israel, meet their wives by wells in oases. A servant from Abraham goes to the city of Nahor and finds a wife for Isaac while waiting by a well to water his camels (24:10). Jacob flees from the wrath of Esau and meets Rachel coming to get water from a well at Haran (29:1–12). Moses fights off the shepherds who attack Jethro’s daughters at a well in Midian and ends up marrying one of those daughters (Exod. 2:16–22). These are all garden scenes, with a man and a woman and animals at a well. This shows us that the patriarchs are new Adams, with their wives new Eves; they will be fruitful

and multiply, rule and subdue. This scene reappears in the New Testament when Jesus meets with the Samaritan woman at the well and discusses marriage with her (Jn. 4). Jesus is the new Jacob and the new Moses, but also the Last Adam, inviting Samaritans and Gentiles into the Garden and offering them the water of life.

For this same reason, we find the patriarchs preoccupied with digging wells. Isaac has to reopen wells of water that the Philistines stop up (Gen. 26:18–22). When he digs new wells, the herdsmen of Gerar contend about the water, so he moves to Sitnah, where there is another quarrel. Finally, they dig a third well, and here there is no dispute, which leads Isaac to say, “Now we can be fruitful in the land.” “Fruitful” reminds us of the command to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:26–28. Isaac has to dig wells because he and his animals and his family need water. But digging wells is also a sign that Isaac is like a new Adam who seeks for a well-watered place in the land, a place where he can be fruitful and multiply.

Though Adam is created good and given every privilege and blessing, he sins by taking the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam is allowed to eat from the tree of life, but he prefers to reach out for the tree that the Lord has forbidden. Adam’s sin occurs in the Garden, and it is a failure having to do with his priestly task. Called to guard the Garden, Adam lets in a serpent who tempts Eve while he stands by, watching (Gen. 3:6). Called to “serve” God in the Garden, he listens to the voice of Satan. Because of this, Adam and Eve are driven from the Garden and cherubim are set up to prevent their return (Gen. 3:24). All through the Old Testament, no man was ever able to return to the Garden. Adam messes up the world not just for himself but for everyone who follows him.

But God doesn’t leave mankind in that condition. Right away, God promises to send the “seed of the woman,” who

will crush the serpent's head and lead God's people back into the garden (Gen. 3:15). This is the first promise of a Savior in the Bible, and it shows us that the Savior will be a great warrior who will be victorious over Satan. But God does not keep that promise right away. The rest of the Old Testament is all about what God does to prepare for the coming of the Seed of the Woman.

Adam's sin is not the only sin that we find in the early chapters of Genesis. Cain kills his brother in the field, and because of his sin, he is cast out of the land and forced to wander in Nob to the east of Eden (Gen. 4:16). Genesis 4–5 trace the generations of Cain and Seth, a history that ends with the whole world full of wickedness (Gen. 6:5). Evil fills the world because the "sons of God" intermarry with the "daughters of men" (Gen. 6:2). The "sons of God" are the descendants of Seth, the faithful believers who fall into sin by marrying the women who have descended from Cain. The Lord responds by reversing the creation, flooding it with water to return it to its original condition (cf. Gen. 1:2). Thus, Genesis 3–6 record a series of "falls," moving from the Garden, to the land, to the world. Sin and death spread until the three areas of the original creation are spoiled and therefore have to be wiped away⁸:

PLACE	SINNER	SIN	JUDGMENT
Garden	Adam	Eats fruit	Cast out of Garden
Land	Cain	Kills brother	Cast out of land
World	Sons of God	Marry unbelievers	Cast out of world (Flood)

Of course, the Lord preserves Noah and his sons during the flood and then sends them out into a new creation. Noah is a new Adam. Like Adam, he is told to "be fruitful and

multiply and fill the earth” (Gen. 9:1). Yahweh promises that Noah will have successful dominion over the animals (Gen. 9:2) and forbids him to eat blood (Gen. 9:3–4). Yet, Noah also receives authority beyond Adam’s. The Lord gives Noah permission to execute murderers (9:5–6), and instead of being given a garden that the Lord has planted, Noah plants his own vineyard-garden (9:20). In the last episode of Noah’s story, we see him drinking wine and taking rest in his tent (9:20–21). Noah, whose name means “bringer of rest,” has brought the world from violence to Sabbath peace.

After the three falls and the ruin of the whole earth, God has given man a new start. But the stories of Adam, Cain, and the sons of God make us wonder, “How long will it last?”

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean for Adam to be the “image” of God?
2. What does “subdue” mean? What is Adam supposed to “subdue”? What is the result supposed to be?
3. Describe the map of the original creation in Genesis 2.
4. In what part of the land of Eden is the Garden? Why is this significant?
5. How do we know that the Garden was on a mountain? Give some examples of how this appears later in the Bible.
6. What is Adam’s job in the Garden?
7. In what ways is Adam’s sin a failure to be a priest?
8. What is the difference between Cain’s sin and Adam’s? Between Cain’s sin and the sin of the “sons of God”?
9. Explain how the flood is a “reversal” of creation.
10. How is Noah a new Adam? In what ways does Noah advance beyond Adam?

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Read Ephesians 1:21–23, noticing how Paul refers to Genesis 1:26–28. What is Paul telling us about Jesus?
2. Read Revelation 21–22. How is the city similar to the garden of Eden? How does it differ? What does this tell us about the direction of history?
3. How is the Song of Solomon related to the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2? See Song of Solomon 4:12–16; 5:1; 6:2.
4. Hebrews 5:14 speaks of the “mature” who have their senses trained “to know good and evil.” How does this verse help us understand the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” in Genesis 2?
5. Consider how the story of Israel in Judges, Kings, and Ezra-Nehemiah moves through the three areas described in Genesis 2 (garden and worship, land and brother, world and unbelievers).

BETWEEN BABEL AND BETHEL, GENESIS 11–12; 17; 35

As the apostle Peter teaches, the flood is the watershed between one world and another. It brings an end to the world that was formed out of water and by water and starts a new “heavens and earth” (2 Pet. 3:5–7). In the baptism of the flood, the world dies and rises again (1 Pet. 3:18–22). But the story of the “world that then was” sets the pattern for the history that follows. Just as sin ruined the world before the flood, so sin ruins the new world. Yet, where sin is great, God’s love and mercy is greater. When the new world is ruined, God immediately takes steps to set things back on track.

Genesis 10 lists the seventy nations of the new world that come into being after the flood. In chapter eleven, however, there is another “fall” of man at the tower of Babel.⁹ The story

in Genesis 11:1–9 follows what is called a “chiastic” outline, where the second half of the story matches the first half, in reverse order¹⁰ :

- A. The *whole earth* has one *language* (v. 1)
- B. Settled *there* (v. 2)
- C. Said to *one another* (v. 3)
- D. *Come, let us* make bricks (v. 3)
- E. Let us *build* (v. 4)
- F. *City and tower* (v. 4)
- G. Lord came down (v. 5)
- F'. *City and tower* (v. 5)
- E'. That man had *built* (v. 5)
- D'. *Come, let us* confuse (v. 7)
- C'. *One another's* speech (v. 7)
- B'. Scattered from *there* (v. 8)
- A'. Confused *language* of the *whole earth* (v. 9)

When God makes His appearance in the central section (“G”), everything changes.

The story of Babel focuses on the fall of one clan of Shem’s descendants. Genesis was not originally divided into chapters, so in the Hebrew Bible the story goes straight from 10:26–31 to 11:1–9. Genesis 10:30 describes the journeys of the descendants of Joktan and says that they settle in the “hill country of the east.” A few verses later, we learn that “they were journeying east” (11:2), and since it’s a continuation of the same story, “they” means the descendants of Joktan who have just been mentioned. Though Joktan’s descendants fall at Babel, this has consequences for the whole world, confusing the “lip” and scattering the nations who cooperate with the project. Just as the sons of Seth fall into sin with the daughters of Cain (Gen. 6:1–4), so here a faithful line of descendants, the line of Shem, joins with Nimrod (Gen. 10:10) to rebel and bring ruin to the

world. In Genesis 12, however, the Lord calls another Shemite, this time a member of the clan of Eber, whose seed will bring together the nations divided at Babel.

The Shemites who assemble at Babel want to build a tower that will not only become famous throughout the world but will also connect heaven and earth. Babel's tower, in other words, is a temple, and Babylonian books describe the building of a great tower, Esagil (which means "tower with its top in the sky"), as a "dwelling" for Babylonian gods.¹¹ Though in the east, in the land of exile from God's presence, the children of Joktan are trying to reestablish the Garden.¹²

But this house for the gods is built in rebellion. The men of Babel want to reach to heaven and make a name for themselves, not exalt the name of Yahweh. Besides, they disobey God's command to "fill the earth." They want to stay put, "lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." God's response to this rebellion is funny. Verse five says, "Yahweh came down to see the city and the tower." The "tower that reaches to the sky" is so far from heaven that the Lord has to "come down" to see it. "Seeing" in Scripture often means making a judgment (Gen. 1:4, 12, 18, etc.; Ps. 11:4). When the Lord draws near to "see," He is inspecting the tower and deciding whether or not it will stand.¹³ Their reason for building the tower is to avoid being "scattered," but the end result is that they are scattered more widely than they were to begin with. They want to make a name for themselves, but the name they receive is Babel, which means "confusion." The name "Babylon" means "gate of God," but the Old Testament name for these efforts to establish a gate to heaven is "confusion" and "folly."

The ruins of the tower and city of Babel loom in the background throughout the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God calls Abram immediately after the fall at Babel, and there

are a number of connections between Babel and Abram. The story of Babel is part of the genealogy of the Shemites, which begins in Genesis 10:21 and resumes in 11:10. Abraham comes at the end of this genealogy (11:27–32). The line of Shem takes a detour through Babel, but it ends with Abram.¹⁴ God's promises to Abram also reflect back on the story of Babel. The Babelites intend to achieve a great name, but Yahweh tells Abram that He will make his name great (12:2). At Babel, the Shemites hope to unite the whole world, but it is Abram who will be the father of a great nation. The true "United Nations" is found among the descendants of Abram.¹⁵

God makes two great promises to Abram, and both are connected with the promise that Abram's seed will build the true "Babylon." First, God promises Abram a "seed." This is the promise of a son, and it is a promise that seems impossible to fulfill because of Sarai's barrenness and her advancing age. Most of the stories about Abram have to do with his hope for a child. Lot is initially Abram's heir, and so their relationship has to do with the promise of a seed (Gen. 13–14, 18–19). Abram's decision to have a son by Hagar is also a response to the Lord's delay in fulfilling the promise of a son (Gen. 16). When Isaac is finally born, the Lord commands Abraham to offer Him as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah (Gen. 22), and Abraham obeys, believing that God will raise Isaac from the dead (Heb. 11:19).

This promise of the seed is part of God's response to the fall of the nations at Babel. Though Abram is not given the task of building God's house, having a son is the first stage in building God's house. In 2 Samuel 7, as we'll see in chapter four, the Lord answers David's plan to build a house by saying that He intends to build a house for David. What He means is that He will build David's family into the royal family of Israel. The house that God builds for David is a house made of people. Then the people that God makes into a house turn around and