

## Lord of Heaven and Earth Genesis 11:1-9

*Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. <sup>2</sup> As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.*

*<sup>3</sup> They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. <sup>4</sup> Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name (shem) for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”*

*<sup>5</sup> But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. <sup>6</sup> The LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. <sup>7</sup> Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”*

*<sup>8</sup> So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. <sup>9</sup> That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.*

Last month was passed 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin wall. Karen and I took a two week mission’s trip to former East Germany just three years after the wall came down. The Boston Globe had these two pictures—a before and after—on their website.



You can easily see that the guard towers and lifeless communist stronghold has been replaced by a colorful, busy street. Here is a picture of Karen at the exact same location. You can see the construction tape and the area where the wall once stood. You know what the Berlin wall was called in German, right? It was called the ‘Berlin Mauer’. I’m not sure if I like sharing my name with the



world’s most recognizable communist landmark!

Our trip to Germany was my first experience being immersed in another language. It was an amazing experience with a wide variety of people and foods. Early in the trip Karen had turned

down the chance to eat little meatballs made out of liver—WOW—what a missed opportunity! One day we were invited to lunch in home of a German family who didn't speak any English and all the German that we knew was how to say our name or inquire about the location of the nearest bathroom. It was quite a shock when we sat down and found out that we were being served soup with a single, gigantic liver meatball in the middle of the bowl! It was a great trip and I actually enjoy slugging my way through a conversation when there are difficult language barriers, but I never would have been able to communicate at an effective level and I certainly would not have been able to share the gospel with them.

It makes one appreciate the rigors that cross-cultural missionaries face when they have to learn a new language. As soon as he gets back to China, Jacob will continue his Mandarin lessons so that he can communicate more effectively. Then when we read about how God confused the languages at the city of Babel, it makes me wonder why he did this. Wouldn't it have been far more simple to just have one language? As people began to populate the earth, it would have been inevitable for that one language to develop into slightly different dialects, but even over thousands of years all of the languages would have been quite similar. Wouldn't that have been easier to spread the Good News of the gospel with only a handful of languages instead of the 7,000 different languages that we have today? Every cross-cultural missionary needs to spend years learning a new language and many thousands spend their entire lives doing nothing but studying the language and translating the Scriptures into a native tongue. These 7,000 languages seem to be the number one barrier to spreading the gospel, yet we know that it was all God's idea in the first place! We know God did not make a mistake, so then why did he divide the languages and increase the difficulty of world evangelization?

We will spend the next three weeks answering that question, but first let me give you my premise. On the surface it may appear that the division of languages led to an enormous barrier to evangelism, but I think the Scripture is clear that just the opposite is true—God purposefully divided the languages so that the gospel would increase in effectiveness. Let me put it another way. While there was very real sin by the people building the city and tower and there was very real judgment from the Lord at the tower of Babel, inherent in the judgment was a blessing. There is my summary for the Babel story—the judgment was a blessing in disguise which in God's sovereign plan, facilitated the spread of the gospel throughout the languages of the world. The tower of Babel is a gospel story and we need to understand it in light of God's full revelation in Scripture.

We have a lot of work to do in this passage. Before we can understand that this is a gospel story, we must first make sure that we get the full details of these events and firmly mark them in human history. I will start with an apparent contradiction in the story. You may or may not have noticed this in the past, but I don't want you to be surprised if you find it one day because it is fairly obvious.

In the last two verses of chapter ten we read:

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

But the first two verses of chapter eleven almost seem to contradict what was just said. Now *the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.*

This raises two similar questions. Did the people have one language or many languages? Were they settled together or were they spread apart? The amazing thing about this apparent contradiction is the fact that these verses are right next to each other. In our Bible they are in two separate chapters, but in the original they would have just flowed together. It's not like you have to search the whole Bible to find this apparent contradiction. The author intentionally placed these two verses next to each other. Why would the Bible leave us hanging with this apparent contradiction? In order to answer this question, we have to take a few steps back and look at where we have come thus far in the book of Genesis. Let me ask you a trivia question. How many chapters are there in the book of Genesis? You will all be inclined to say that there are fifty chapters because that is how they were divided up thousands of years after they were written, but we forget that the original author put in his own chapter divisions. Moses divided this book into ten easily recognized chapters which all begin with the phrase, *this is the account of...*

2:4 This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

5:1 This is the written account of Adam's line

6:9 This is the account of Noah

10:1 This is the account of Shem, Ham and Japheth, Noah's sons

11:10 This is the account of Shem

11:27 This is the account of Terah

25:12 This is the account of Abraham's son Ishmael

25:19 This is the account of Abraham's son Isaac

36:1 This is the account of Esau

37:2 This is the account of Jacob

Now, let's zoom in on these chapter divisions. Recall that when we studied Genesis chapter five, I gave you seven reasons why the genealogy was vitally important. When you read the genealogy in the second half of chapter eleven you can easily recognize that these two genealogies are of the same type.

*Genesis 5:3-4 When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth. After Seth was born, Adam lived 800 years and had other sons and daughters.*

*Genesis 11:10-11 Two years after the flood, when Shem was 100 years old, he became the father of Arphaxad. And after he became the father of Arphaxad, Shem lived 500 years and had other sons and daughters.*

Do you see the similarities? Both genealogies are interested in precise ages and numbering of descendants. But when we read the genealogy in chapter ten we see that it is very different.

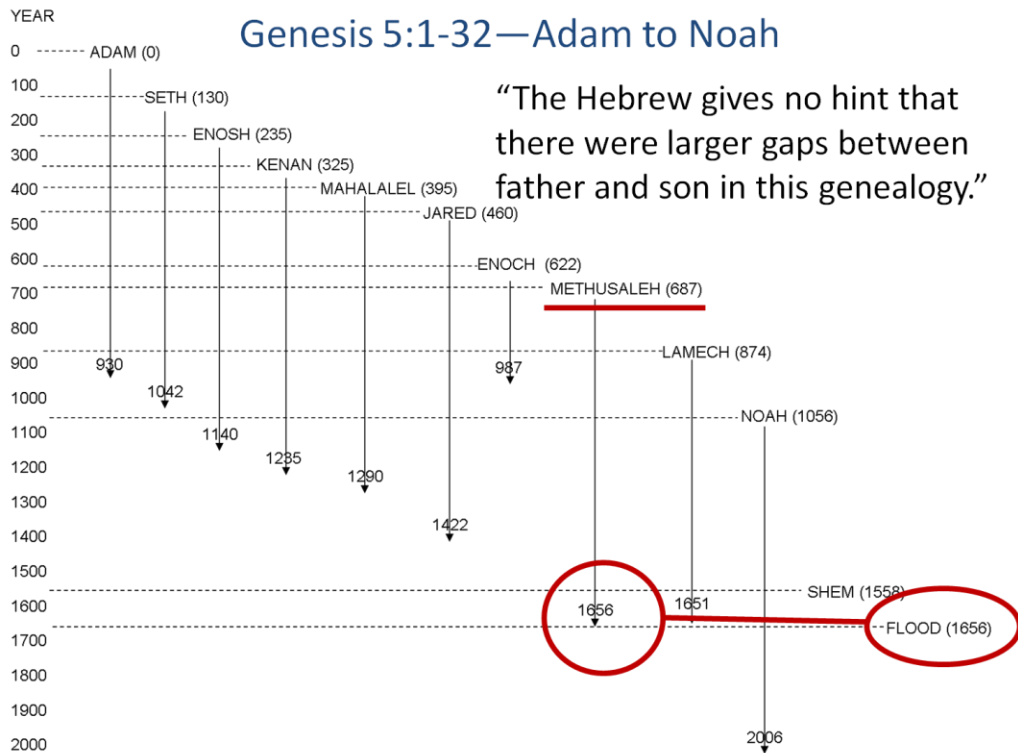
- 5:1    2. *This is the written account* of Adam's line  
5:1-32 Genealogy
- 6:9    3. *This is the account* of Noah  
9:18-28 Noah's drunkenness, Canaan's curse
- 10:1   4. *This is the account* of Shem, Ham and Japheth, Noah's sons  
10:1-32 Genealogy — DIFFERENT  
11:1-9 Tower of Babel — SAME
- 11:10 5. *This is the account* of Shem  
11:10-26 Genealogy

Genesis 10:6-8

*The sons of Ham: Cush, Mizraim, Put and Canaan. <sup>7</sup>The sons of Cush: Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Raamah and Sabteca. The sons of Raamah: Sheba and Dedan. <sup>8</sup>Cush was the father of Nimrod, who grew to be a mighty warrior on the earth.*

There is no mention whatsoever of ages. This genealogy is more of a description of some of the descendants and is not concerned with dates and ages of all of the descendants. Chapter ten is actually a long introduction into chapter eleven. In fact, as we'll see in just a moment, the events of chapter eleven fit into the very middle of chapter ten. The genealogies in chapter five and eleven are more of a chronological genealogy as opposed to chapter eleven which is a descriptive genealogy which is not interested in dates and chronology.

When we get a clear picture of these genealogies we can make a precise timeline.



We can immediately see something interesting—that Methuselah, the longest lived man in history, died in the year of the flood. Some of you may look at this timeline and think, “Now wait a minute here. I was always told that there were gaps in these genealogies.” You may have been told that when the Bible says that a certain man became the father this son, that the word “father” doesn’t necessarily mean a direct father and it could mean father, grandfather, great grandfather, etc.

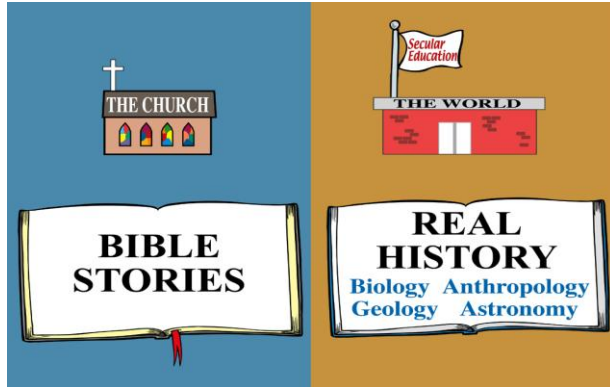
What you have been told for many years is a lie. No, actually, that is correct. To “beget” someone or to be his “father” can mean more than just a direct father at various places in Scripture. The Hebrew word for father can mean father, grandfather, great grandfather, etc. There are times when genealogies are not precise and can allow for more than one generation between the two names, but it most definitely only has one meaning in Genesis chapters five and eleven. These two genealogies are very precise in their numbering of ages. It is as if Moses created a timeline for us. He did everything except put in a chart form like I have done. Furthermore, the best conservative scholars come to the same conclusion. One commentary that I use was voted by a group of conservative scholars to be the very best commentary on the book of Genesis<sup>1</sup>. Here is what he has to say about these genealogies. “The Hebrew gives no hint that there were larger gaps between father and son in this genealogy”<sup>2</sup> In other words, just read it at face value.

If these chronologies are correct, it means that much of secular history is not correct in their dating of human civilization. How can this be true? Let me show you a chart of a Sumerian king list<sup>3</sup> which is dated around the time of Abraham.

King	Length of Reign
Alulim	28,800 years
Alagar	36,000 years
Emmenluanna	43,200 years
Emmengalanna	28,800 years
Dumuzi	36,000 years
Ensipazianna	28,800 years
Emmenduranna	21,000 years
Ubartutu	18,600 years
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>241,200 YEARS</b>

The length of reigns of these kings is obviously greatly exaggerated in order to show their greatness. Even secular historians know these are not true, but the point is that secular history is filled with gaps and endless contradictions. Why should we trust what the Sumerians, Babylonians or Egyptians have passed down as history more than we trust what God has passed down as history in his word?<sup>4</sup>

Why am I spending so much time on genealogies, dates and details? If we do not make these details clear, we will be inclined to think of them as mere Bible stories with little or no historical truth to them. You may remember this slide I showed a few weeks back. As Christians we easily fall into the notion that the church teaches Bible stories and the world teaches so-called “real



history.” We are led to believe that we can trust secular history but when the Bible is just a collection of morality tales. This false distinction between Bible stories and secular history is getting worse all of the time.

Therefore, as believers who say we believe the Scriptures, we need to reject the notion that secular history is reliable and Biblical history is not.

This is particularly difficult in the first eleven chapters of Genesis which even many Christians refer to as *primeval history*. Primeval history is a polite way of saying that all of this stuff happened so long ago that we really don’t know *when* it happened. And then it is a very small step indeed to go from saying we don’t know *when* it happened to saying we don’t know *if* it happened. This kind of thinking is happening all of the time in evangelical seminaries and churches. But because all of these people are evangelicals who claim to believe the Bible, they always make a disclaimer that sounds like this: We may not know when these things happened or even if they happened for sure, but we do know that they are true and God wants us to learn important truths from these stories.

For an example of what I am concerned about, watch this [video](#) of an Old Testament scholar talking about Adam. Where do you think this man teaches? Harvard, Princeton, some liberal university somewhere? Actually, he teaches at an evangelical seminary. Particularly disturbing was this quote. “I think you could only insist on the idea that there’s one historical Adam if you read Genesis one in a very, highly literalistic way.”<sup>5</sup> He doesn’t want us to read Genesis in a plain, literal sense because it is a mythical story, but he does want us to learn important truths from the story. Do you see where this kind of thinking will lead you? Let’s try out his style of Biblical interpretation on a nursery rhyme.

There was an old woman who lived in a shoe;  
She had so many children she didn't know what to do.  
She gave them some broth without any bread;  
She whipped them all soundly and sent them to bed.

Of course everyone knows that this woman and her children were not real people, but it doesn’t matter if it isn’t true. What does matter is what principles we can learn from the story.

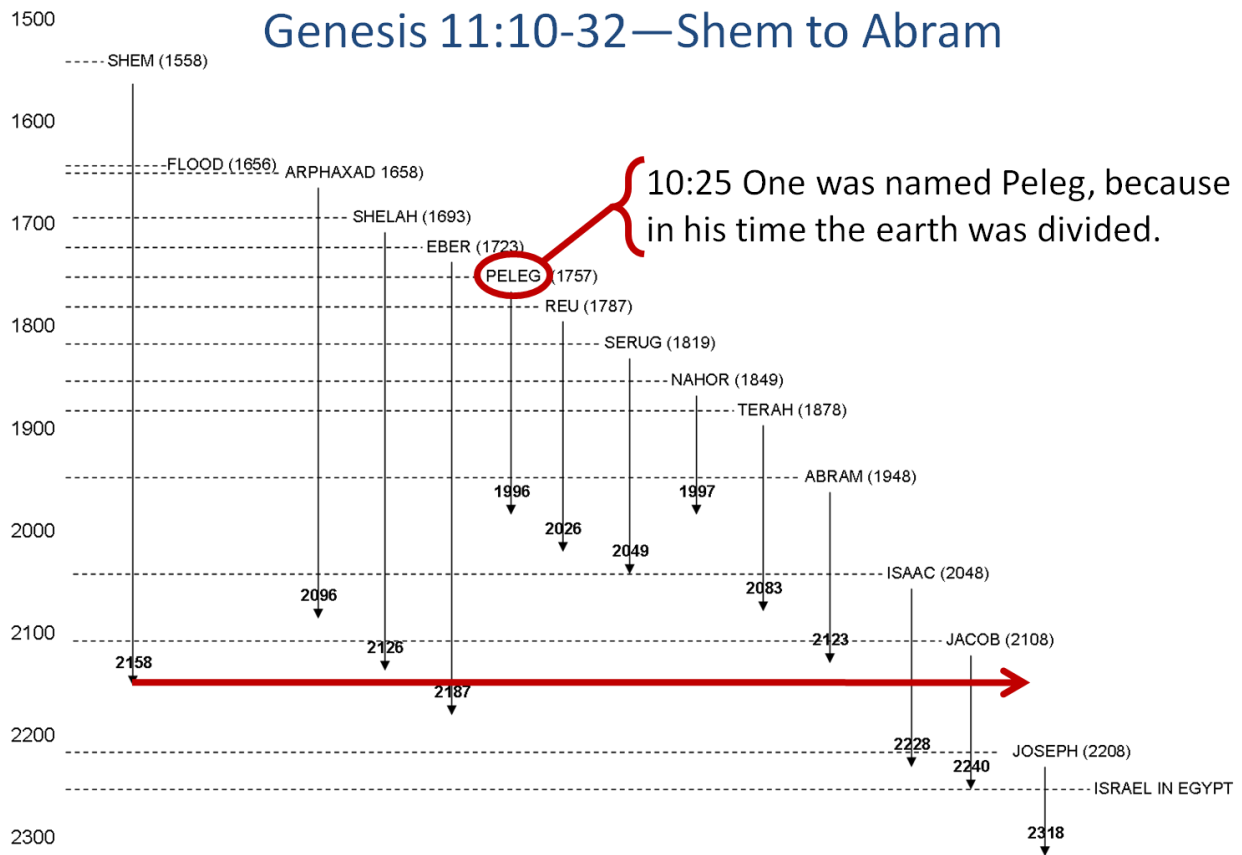
### **The Old Woman and the Shoe: A Case Study**

1. Make sure that you get help completing your application for housing assistance so you don’t have to live in a shoe.  
This principle teaches us how to treat the poor.

2. While children don't necessarily need the extra carbohydrates from the bread, the old woman should have added some vegetables for a more nutritional meal. This principle teaches us about issues related to public health.
3. Corporal punishment is highly frowned upon by social services, which may be the reason her application for housing assistance was rejected. This one gives us parenting principles that we can apply to our daily lives.

To be fair, many evangelical scholars and pastors who interpret the Bible in this way would say that my illustration is not fair because I used a nursery rhyme which is not inspired by God. That's a fair point, but if you are going to take the position that a story like Adam didn't really happen—it's just a myth—and you want us to learn something from the story, does it really matter if the story comes from the Bible or from Mother Goose? This is an extremely dangerous way of interpreting the Bible and if it wasn't so common in evangelical seminaries and churches, I wouldn't be spending so much time talking about it. Thankfully, most of this type of erroneous interpretation is limited to Genesis 1-11, which is why it is all the more important that we understand the right way of interpreting while studying these passages.

We have taken a little detour so we need to get back to the question we started with: Is there a contradiction between chapter ten and chapter eleven? Let me show you another timeline to help answer the question.



One interesting item to note is that Shem, who lived 600 years, was still alive when Jacob was born and he also outlived Abraham. Incidentally, the long lives of the first few generations of people after the flood may help explain how flood stories were able to spread throughout the world. The important item to point out concerns Peleg, the great, great grandson of Shem, who was born a hundred years after the flood. Genesis 10:25 reads, “One was named Peleg, because in his time, the earth was divided.” If you look at your little footnote in your Bible, it should tell you that the name Peleg means “division.” Something happened around the time Peleg was born that would cause his parents to give him the name “division.” Nathan and Kelli were just blessed with the birth of their second son, whom they names Solomon. Solomon is a great name, by the way, but I am guessing that Nathan and Kelli never considered giving him a name like “division.” This division was so significant that Moses thought we should be told this little fact about his name. What do you think might have happened at that time? I know some people, like our seminary professor friend on the video, claim that we are not supposed to interpret this literally, but if you take the plain sense of the passage, what division are they referring to?

Of course the most clear understanding is that the division of the earth in the days of Peleg referred to when God divided and scattered the people at the tower of Babel. Let me you how this all fits together. First of all remember that chapter ten and chapter eleven are all one section in the original. Moses intended for them to hang together tightly. Both of these two sections fall, as it were, in the “fourth chapter” of Moses.

10:1	4. <i>This is the account</i> of Shem, Ham and Japheth, Noah’s sons
	10:1-32 Genealogy
	11:1-9 Tower of Babel

Both chapters are under the heading which reads, *This is the account of Shem, Ham and Japheth, Noah’s sons*. Second, when you get to 10:25, “One was named Peleg, because in his time, the earth was divided,” this is our clue to jump to chapter eleven. In other words, the entire story of the tower of Babel in chapter eleven happened in the 25<sup>th</sup> verse of chapter ten. Then, when you get to 10:32, “From these the nations spread out over the earth after the flood,” it makes total sense because by this point in time, God has already scattered the people.

Let me explain it another way. In order of how it is written, the people are spread out and have many languages, but in terms of chronological order, these two verses are flipped around. First, the whole world had one language (Gen 11:1), then God scattered the people at the tower of Babel, then you arrive at the end of chapter ten with scattered nations and many languages. *These are the sons of Shem by their clans and languages, in their territories and nations. These are the clans of Noah’s sons, according to their lines of descent, within their nations. From these the nations spread out over the earth after the flood.*

Now *the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.*

This first message was a bit academic, but I don’t apologize for that. It is vitally important that we understand that these stories, especially in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, are real,



trustworthy history. If we do not establish this fact, when God says, “Never will I leave you or forsake you,” how do we know if we can trust this? When Jesus “I am with you always,” can we believe it? When Jesus promised, “I am coming soon,” is this a promise in which we can place our faith? Our very faith depends upon the historical, truthfulness of all of Scripture.

Rich Maurer  
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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bestcommentaries.com/category/genesis/>

<sup>2</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 1-15, Word Biblical Commentary, Word Books, Waco, ©1987, p. 133.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 1-15, Word Biblical Commentary, Word Books, Waco, ©1987, p?.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed explanation of the imprecision of secular history, see Unwrapping the Pharaohs by John Ashton and David Down, © 2006, Master Books, Green Forest, AK.

<sup>5</sup> And this one also: “I just personally don’t think that Genesis one and two prohibits the idea that there is a evolutionary process.”