

Genesis 11

11:1 Now the whole earth had one language and few words. **2** And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. **3** And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. **4** Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

It is not surprising that there is only one language on earth since, according to the story, all the nations have descended from one family – all are children of Noah. One would expect members of a family to speak the same language. But what is surprising is this text contradicts Genesis 10:5, 20, 31 which had already explained the multiplication of languages as a natural process of humans spreading throughout the earth and attributing each language to the familial differences (which also is consistent with current linguistic theory and evidence). Genesis 11 sees the confusion of tongues among humans as God's reaction to a sinister plot by sinfully arrogant human beings. The contradiction does support the Source Theory notion that there were different authors for different portions of Genesis. The final editor of Genesis did not try to harmonize or gloss over inconsistencies and differences but rather accepts the differences as equally inspired by God. It is possible that the "source" who wrote the Tower of Babel story wanting to affirm the omnipotence of God attributes the multiplication of languages to an intentional act of God rather than allowing it to occur by natural human migration and geographic isolation. It may have seemed more pious to explain the many languages on earth as the result of God's intention rather than as an accidental result of random human choices.

"...as men migrated from the east..." The implication of the text seems to envision the entire human population *en mass* migrating and settling in this region. According to 10:32 this is part of the migration of humans following the flood. A trivia note: in Genesis 1-11, the only direction specifically mentioned is "east." This is the direction of the sunrise.

"Come, let us make bricks..." At this point in Genesis humans are determined to use their own ingenuity and technology to accomplish something great for themselves. The making of bricks is a heretofore unheard of technology in Genesis. The emphasis on building buildings is also a startling new occupation for the simplest of homes has not even been mentioned yet and now they are building towers. One noticeable feature of the early chapters of Genesis is the virtual total lack of reference to any kind of commerce, trade, craftsmanship, skills or industry. There is no mention of clothes, jewelry, furniture, basic tools, cooking utensils,

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or any of the other common features of human society. Brick making stands out as one of the rare exceptions in the narrative. In Exodus 1:14, when the Israelites are reduced to slavery at the hands of the oppressive Egyptians, they are forced into brick making and brick laying. The industriousness of builders of the tower of Ba'bel is closely related to enforced labor that the Jews suffer – brick work.

“let us build ourselves a city” The humans appear to be acting without any reference to God. God has not directed them in this project, nor have they sought God's blessing and approval for it. Is the story suggesting that not only are humans alienated from God, they no longer even remember their Creator? At this point in the narrative, divinity and humanity are on separate tracks no longer working in sync. Synergy between God and mankind last occurred with Noah. Both God and humans speak in the story but never to each other. Humans speak to each other, and God speaks within Himself. The humans show no awareness of God and do not even mention his existence. Dialogue between the Lord and His intelligent creatures has ceased to exist. God seemingly no longer has a role in the lives of the humans as they make their plans without Him, thus atheistically. From the human perspective their action looks good, but like Eve in Genesis 3 who saw the forbidden fruit as all good, the humans fail to take into account how God might judge their goal. The humans are basing their decision to build the city and a tower which reaches heaven upon their own ingenuity. They obviously believe they have the capabilities to do this thing. What is lacking is a discussion as to whether they ought to be doing this. Maybe this is the first incidence in human history in which technology and morality come into conflict. Because it can be done does not mean it should be done. Albert Einstein had mused that science tells us only what we can do, it can't tell us what we should do – that he felt is the purpose of religion. Humans are capable of doing many things through technology, but well reasoned discussions about the morality of these “accomplishments” is often lacking. What we are capable of doing and what we should be doing are not the same thing. Humans not only construct their cities and their science, they also decide they are capable of constructing their own ethics while denying God's existence. In effect they declare themselves to be God (or at least not in need of God or beholden to a

Creator). Humanity is saying humans alone are able to determine what is good and right based on their own presuppositions, self interests and prejudices. Any people or subgroup which does not allow open discussion of ethical issues blinds itself to its own faults, shortcomings, sins and limits. Truth and goodness are revealed when humans are open to admitting error, wrongdoing, and the limits of our knowledge. Thus we always need the voice of God's word from the past and also the voice of prophets in the present.

“Come, let us..” The humans demonstrate some unity, common mind, and willingness to work together. So far the text has not suggested any strife on a large scale between families, clans, towns, nations, peoples. But human unity, something many modern peoples crave, is not going to produce something of which God approves. Human unity does not lead to unity with God. So it should give us great pause when we hear Jesus say, “that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

The glory which you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you hast loved me” (John 17:21-23). Even with the coming of the God incarnate Christ and the Holy Spirit, has humanity progressed enough to be ready for international unity? Apparently God thinks so. Of course then different Christians at different times have tried to realize this unity in various ways – the one cup of the Eucharist with one bishop, or the one empire under Constantine with one God and one religion, or one holy, catholic and apostolic church with one heart and mind which voices one creed, or the one church under one Papal authority, or the broad and perhaps vague oneness of modern ecumenism.

‘...let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens...’ When God first made the humans, he planted a garden for them to live in (Genesis 2:8). When humans are left to their own devices, they build a city to live in. A city in Genesis is a place of human ingenuity. The first builder of a city was Cain the murderer of a human (Genesis 4:17). God did not command humans to build a city nor did He build one for

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them, rather He commanded the humans to fill the earth and subdue it and to have dominion over all the other animals. While building a city does not countermand God's order, city building tends to be done by excluding wild animals and curtailing their numbers within the bounds of city not spending time to develop a dominion over them. Some city building demands that the animals be exterminated within the precincts of the city and once the city is rid of the animals to treat most wild animals as vermin. God's idea of humans having dominion over animals and subduing the earth seems more related to ideas of farming, being park rangers, or natural resource managers. God did not speak of erecting buildings or fences or walls or barriers or gates. Cities were often built as a means of protecting a population. However, so far in Genesis there has been no mention of war or invasion of enemies. The human vision for what they should be doing is protecting themselves from nature having dominion over them! Humans had been created by God to subdue the earth (Genesis 1:28), and yet the flood certainly showed the humans that they in fact were at the mercy of natural forces and were no better off than dumb animals who were not rational. So perhaps the humans imagined by building a city they could protect themselves from God too. Did they imagine they could wall a capricious and angry God and unpredictable nature out of their city? Genesis 10:32 which leads into the Tower of Babel story says this is where the descendants of Noah spread out after the flood. Is the destructive flood what is on the mind of these men of Shinar? Is building a city the best plan they can come up with as a defense against the forces of God and nature? Perhaps the tower to heaven is being built so that if another flood occurs they can have a way to remain above the flood, or perhaps even escape into heaven from the flood. Or, is the Tower to heaven being built as a hoped for way to control God? Perhaps if they can control God's entrance into their city – if God has to come down through the Tower, they can somehow predict where and when God appears and thus control what He sees and does. But the humans' anthropomorphic thinking about God so limits their understanding of Him and underestimates His real power. God scatters the men in the imaginations of their hearts, bringing their plans to naught. Certainly a theme of Genesis 11 is man proposes but God disposes.

Jesus uses the imagery of the man who plants and vineyard and builds a wall around the vineyard and a tower in it as a parable about God who does all of this work in order to yield an abundant harvest (Mark 12). But Jesus doesn't see the building of this protected space as a place to live but rather a way to protect the grapes from harm so that they can produce an abundance of fruits. Jesus' own ideas about building buildings and cities may be best summed up in Mark 13:2 when asked about the great buildings that Herod had recently built, Jesus said, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down." Interestingly, John in the Book of Revelations envisions the final abode of all in God's kingdom as being a city not a garden planted by God. "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelations 21:2). But this city is not built by men, but is established by God. There is no tower reaching up to heaven, for the city itself comes down from heaven as God Himself does in Genesis 11:5.

"a tower with its top in the heavens" The heavens so far in Genesis seem to mean mostly the sky which is envisioned as some form of solid ceiling which stretches above the earth. In Genesis, heaven has not been described as the place where God dwells – the heavens are part of what God created in the beginning (Genesis 1:1) so they belong to the physical creation not properly as the "place" where God resides. The heavens might suggest the dividing wall which separates the created cosmos from the dwelling place of God. What exactly the builders thought they could reach is not clear. God's reaction seems to indicate that humanity's place is on earth, not in the heavens and so the Lord is determined to prevent the humans from realizing their plan. God has to this point not said that humans might attain heaven, even if they are righteous, or even after death. God had made a very orderly universe with separate realms for the appropriate beings – the earth for humans and mammals, the sky for the birds, the sea for the fish, heaven for His angels and Himself. The building of the tower seems to suggest to God that humans do not wish to respect His order, nor His realm. The crossing from one realm to another implies the greatest of chaos and threatens the order of the universe. One need only think of the parable of Laz'arus and the rich man in which Father Abraham explains to the

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rich man why those in heaven can't help those in Hades: "And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us" (Luke 16:26). There is an appropriate place for everything under heaven to paraphrase Ecclesiastes 3.

"Come... let us make a name for ourselves..."

The Church has tended to see the residents of Ba'bel as being sinfully arrogant, and in the hymns of Pentecost contrasts the confusion of tongues at

Ba'bel with the giving of tongues of fire at Pentecost which enabled the disciples to begin preaching to all nations. "The arrogance of those building the tower caused the languages to be confused of old; but now the tongues are gloriously enlightened by the knowledge of God. There God punished the infidels for their sin; but here Christ enlightens the fishermen with His Spirit! There the confusion of tongues was done in vengeance; here they are joined in unison for the salvation of our souls!" (From Matins on Monday of the Holy Spirit). The Holy Spirit's tongues of fire overcome the polyglot division which has divided humanity since the time of the tower at Ba'bel. There is a time and a good reason for humans to be able to communicate in a common tongue - when it is time to proclaim the Gospel.

"...make a name for ourselves..." Were these men thinking about making themselves immortal? Humans have long aspired for immortality. Did these men imagine by reaching heaven in a tower they could claim immortality for themselves - a lasting name? If so they have failed to understand the very role sin has played in bringing death into human existence. It is not reaching heaven that can give them immortality. Eternal life is related to holiness and requires an entirely different pursuit on the part of humans than building towers and demonstrating human prowess.

"... lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." Strangely the very rationale the men of Shinar use for building the tower becomes the result of their efforts. Whom did they feel threatened by? Why was being scattered abroad such a serious threat? Why did they believe they might be scattered? The story doesn't explain their fears, but it sets in

motion the events that lead to them being separated not only geographically but also linguistically.

"lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." One more indication that perhaps more than one hand wrote Genesis, in 10:32 the story says, "from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood." Chapter 10 envisions humanity spreading naturally across the face of the earth as the population grows. Chapter 11:4 portrays any spreading of the population in a threatening way - something humanity wants to avoid.

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5 And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built.

6 And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. **7** Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." **8** So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. **9** Therefore its name was called Ba'bel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

"And the LORD came down to see..." The Lord's descent to earth at Ba'bel results from His awareness of what the humans were doing. We (created, physical beings who are "not God") cannot comprehend how God, a non-physical divine being, knows about His creation or knows anything for that matter. The story introduces some ideas which really will make us stop and think about the Lord's way of knowing. Apparently God is "aware" of what the humans are doing, though the Genesis narrator doesn't tell us exactly how it is that God becomes aware of such things or how God "knows" anything about His creation. God/divinity is not completely transcendent but is immanent and able to interact with that which is "not God", namely creation. The story presents an idea that God had "heard" what the humans were up to but now decides "to see for Himself" (if we want to put it into human terms). The text presents an intriguing scenario – apparently God wants a closer view of what the humans are doing. So can God have a vague awareness of His creation without really being able to see or know what is happening on earth? Is He not able to see so clearly from heaven or are there some things He cannot see clearly from heaven? Why does the Lord need to come down to see? Is there some way in which God's vision is affected by distance? The anthropomorphic imagery of God provides us a basis for contemplating the mystery we know as God. We do not know how God who has no eyes "sees", but these verses would indicate that even God gets a better view of us when He is closer to humanity. (In Psalm 115:5, the Psalmist mocks idols which have eyes but do not see, whereas God, a totally incorporeal being has no eyes and yet sees perfectly clearly – His vision is not limited to or by eyesight!). The story also gives us some things to think about God as Judge. God apparently does not rely on hearsay evidence, He sees for Himself before He pronounces judgment. God is willing to get the full picture of what is happening before coming to a judgment. God is not capricious, nor does He rush to judgment. His judgments are fair, measured and reasonable. God judges not in His transcendent nature; rather, God forms His judgment in his intimate relationship with His "not God" creation, as a personal being. The Lord does not send "someone else" to look into the affairs and allegations of the humans, but comes Himself in order to know what judgment to render.

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“And the LORD came down...” In Exodus 3:7-8 we read, the Lord saying, “I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and **I have come down to deliver them** out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land...” In Genesis God comes down and scatters the brick makers to prevent them from further sinning against Him. In Exodus God comes down to the brick makers to save them from their slave masters and promises to lead them to a broad plain, just like where Ba’bel is located! In both cases God decides to interfere with human brick making, and to end the labor of which he disproves – in Genesis because He disapproves of the goal of these people free to do as they please, and in Exodus because He has heard the cry and suffering of His enslaved people and intends to free them.

If humans aspired to build a tower to reach the heavens, they have not reached their goal, for the Lord still has to “come down” to see the city and tower which humans are building. The puny efforts of humankind to reach the heavens by human technology and engineering “miss the mark” which is what the word “sin” actually means. The leaden literalism of the humans causes them to think of heaven as a location which they can reach by their own physical labors. A hard lesson is about to be learned – there is more to the cosmos than the physical. Heaven is not a physical place, nor is it located “somewhere” in the universe. The concrete thinking of humans has got to be changed so that they can come to understand the reality of the spiritual. Have the humans totally forgotten that they are spiritual beings, created in God’s image and having a soul where the Spirit of God abides? In the Genesis account, their theology is completely wrong. They have forgotten about their own spiritual nature and their anthropomorphic descriptions of God have caused them to think about God completely in human and physical terms. God comes down to see their city, but they apparently are incapable of seeing God. God is not communicating directly to any of the humans. The Lord’s thoughts recorded in this passage of Scripture are His inner thoughts. He is saying nothing to the men of the city. Is it possible that not only can they not see God, but they can not hear Him as well? In Isaiah 44, Isaiah warns the people what is the end result of making false Gods:

“They know not, nor do they discern; for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their minds, so that they cannot understand” (44:18). The result of making idols and having false ideas about god is that God closes your eyes and mind so that you cannot see or understand the living God. It is an ominous warning – close your mind to the truth about God and God will help close your mind to Him. The text however makes no reference to idols; if they are anything, these humans are portrayed as atheists. They live without belief in God.

“And the LORD said...” God is not talking to the humans, these are His inner thoughts. Some Patristic writers saw God’s musing within Himself as yet another sign of the Trinity. God is not talking to His lonesome self, but rather the Three Persons of the Trinity are communicating. In Judaism God is talking to the angelic hosts. Modern non-traditional scholars see in God’s talking ideas being adapted by the biblical writers from pagan sources, in this case the God talking with the gods. Genesis remains so totally monotheistic, that even if the story is taken from pagan sources, it is completely reworked to keep within the framework of the absolute monotheism of Judaism which knows there is only one God and His Name is YHWH.

God endeavors to stop what He sees as an evil plan. The confusion of tongues is interpreted by some Patristic writers as the way the merciful God prevented even worse sins from occurring. But once again, the humans will turn what is done for their own good, and done to help prevent them from committing even more sin, into another tool for further sin. The many languages on earth will give rise to endless wars and disputes. “So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind, but no human being can tame the tongue--a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so” (James 3:5-10).

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“...only the beginning of what they will do ...”
Though God blessed the humans to subdue the earth, there are apparently limits to what is acceptable to Him. The humans appear to be on the verge of again breaching that which distinguishes the Creator from the creation. Eve was not satisfied with being in God’s image and likeness and wanted to be like (equal to) God. Here too the story suggests humanity is bent on laying certain claims to that which has not been given them. Eve had all the fruit of the Garden to eat, but the only thing she is recorded taking and eating is the one thing forbidden to her. Here humans have an entire earth to subdue but they are intent on reaching heaven. And God sees this only as the beginning of the trouble. So, as He decided to prevent Adam and Eve taking fruit from the Tree of Life, now too God scatters the plans of humans in building a tower to heaven. The text does not tell us that the humans once more wanted to be like God, but their actions speak of a goal which God condemns as unacceptable in His eyes. Humanity continues to rebel against any limits being imposed on it. Humanity embraces entitlement thinking completely.

“...only the beginning of what they will do...”
Some very modern thinkers reflecting on the Babel story have suggested maybe God is not so much worried about Himself in this passage but is truly as a prescient parent concerned about what the humans might do in the future if one language unites them. Perhaps the multitude of languages helps establish barriers that protect humanity from the insatiable and uncontrollable grab for power that tyrants and despots might make if language barriers did not limit their pursuit of power and abuse. Hitlers and Stalins and modern terrorists would have found paths open to them to seize control of information and the hearts and minds of untold numbers if they were not hemmed in by people of other languages. So the polyglot created by God is perhaps for human protection not punishment.

“Come, let us go down...” These words in verse :7 seem out of place, in verse :5 God had already come down to see the city. Perhaps this is another sign of more than one source contributing to the story.

“And the LORD said...”let us go down, and there confuse their language...” In a passage very

reminiscent of Genesis 3:22-24 (where the LORD unhappy with [afraid of?] what the humans might attempt to do expels them from Paradise), God chooses to come down (some form of [pre-] incarnation?) and insure that the humans do not accomplish their goal and wreck even more havoc in the cosmos. God speaks, but to whom? Christian tradition has this as another witness to the notion of God as Trinity. Is God afraid of what His creatures might do? “This is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (:6). Is God’s sovereignty somehow threatened by what the humans can do? The God of this text is very anthropomorphic – He feels threatened by the puny efforts of a people whose goal could never be attained. But the fact that they thought they could reach the heavens (in a “Jack and the beanstalk” way) incites God to act against them. And this becomes the biblical explanation for why there are many so many different and incomprehensible languages on earth - it too is the result of human willfulness and sin. The fractioning of the human race into different people and languages and nations is portrayed as the continued downward slide of humanity, the effect of sin and the cause of future divisions on earth.

“confuse their language” God is again displeased with what He sees the humans doing. He has already accepted the fact that humans imagine evil in their hearts from their youth. God acts against the humans, but not against their tower. He doesn’t destroy the tower which might simply result in the humans trying again. Instead God decides to introduce division among the humans by confusing their languages. Does God imagine that somehow the confusion of language will curtail the spread of evil which lurks in the humans’ hearts? The Virgin Mary sings of God’s might and plan to deal with the evil imagination of the heart: “He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts” (Luke 1:51). God has promised never to destroy all the humans again, so He scatters them to prevent them from conspiring to do evil and He divides them by creating many diverse languages for them. But like the heavy metal mercury spilled on the floor this also will scatter the evil throughout the world and with no easy way to reunite the divided humanity.

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Kontakion Hymn of Pentecost: "When the Most High came down and confused the tongues, He divided the nations, but when He distributed the tongues of fire He called all to unity. Therefore with one voice we glorify the all Holy Spirit!" Christians traditionally have interpreted Pentecost as a reversal of the evil effects of the many tongues of Ba'bel on humanity.

"So the LORD scattered them abroad" Not only does God create confusion among the humans by creating many different languages, He also scatters them abroad as He did to Eve and Adam by expelling them from Paradise. Now God scatters the human from proximity to each other, moving them far apart so that they are separated both by language and geography which will soon give birth to cultural separation as well. God who originally blessed the humans to fill the earth, now scatters them in such a manner that they will be pitted one against the other. And instead of subduing the earth they will turn instead to subduing each other.

"...the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth..." The scattering of humans across the face of the earth and the rise of diverse languages will bring an end to the universal nature of the story unfolding in Genesis. Furthermore, humanity will lose its oneness and unity of focus after this event and become scattered not only geographically but also in terms of goals and agenda. Although the story has paid special attention to one lineage of people, it still has generally been the story of all people, of any people, of humanity and of being human. At this point in the story however Genesis will cease being the story of humanity and will concentrate its focus on the man Abram, toward whose birth the narrative was leading. Now the story is to become God working out His plan for the salvation of the world through Abraham and the Jewish people. But the scattered people of the world will be reintroduced into God's story at the Nativity of Christ: "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him" (Matthew 2:1-2). With the arrival of the Magi, we have the beginning of all the nations and people of the world realizing that they are indeed

part of the promise to Abraham and are to be recipients of God's special favor. God promised Abraham, "by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves" (Genesis 22:18). The Magi lead all the nations of the earth to come to worship Abraham's descendent and to enter into the eternal promise of God.

This scattering of people as an act of God in Genesis 11 contrasts with the more natural spread of the growing human population described in Genesis 10. This is certainly indicative of there being more than one "source" contributing to the Scriptures. The final editor of the Scriptures places both stories side by side in the Bible. He doesn't try to harmonize the stories nor did he choose between them. Neither should we. The final editor of the text accepts both versions – contradictions and all – as inspired by God. So should we. But what lesson are we to learn from the fact that texts with contradictions and inconsistencies get accepted into the Scriptures? One possible lesson is not to read these verses purely literally. Perhaps their true importance lies somewhere other than in the plain reading of the text. As many Patristic writers suggested, the text is telling us to dig deeper beyond the literal – don't reduce this text to a history lesson, it is about God's revelation. Seek out that deeper and more important meaning. Our work is to interpret the scriptures we have received, not to change them or ignore them or to eliminate their challenges and mysteries.

Some speculate that in the modern world there is a new single language which is uniting humanity together. It is the language of mathematics, which is the same in every culture and tongue. It has a logic which is not based in any one language but is universally recognizable. And it is sometimes said that the universal language of mathematics which dominates conversations around the world is closely linked to two other phenomenon. First there is the Internet which is based in computers which are completely based in the language of mathematics. The Internet has made global conversations a reality. The Internet whose foundation is in mathematics makes it possible for the humans to again work for a common language for the world. The other phenomenon related to math is finances and economics. It appears in the 21st Century world that one form of economics – capitalism – dominates the

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language of commerce. It is the bottom line which determines so much about what we think of things. Will math, the Internet and capitalism – the modern trinity unifying humanity cause some in the world to create a new Ba'bel? God has not forbidden humans from using their brains, but it has been His desire that knowledge will lead us back to Him.

10 These are the descendants of Shem. When Shem was a hundred years old, he became the father of Arpach'shad two years after the flood; **11** and Shem lived after the birth of Arpach'shad five hundred years, and had other sons and daughters. **12** When Arpach'shad had lived thirty-five years, he became the father of Shelah; **13** and Arpach'shad lived after the birth of Shelah four hundred and three years, and had other sons and daughters. **14** When Shelah had lived thirty years, he became the father of Eber; **15** and Shelah lived after the birth of Eber four hundred and three years, and had other sons and daughters. **16** When Eber had lived thirty-four years, he became the father of Peleg; **17** and Eber lived after the birth of Peleg four hundred and thirty years, and had other sons and daughters. **18** When Peleg had lived thirty years, he became the father of Re'u; **19** and Peleg lived after the birth of Re'u two hundred and nine years, and had other sons and daughters. **20** When Re'u had lived thirty-two years, he became the father of Serug; **21** and Re'u lived after the birth of Serug two hundred and seven years, and had other sons and daughters. **22** When Serug had lived thirty years, he became the father of Nahor; **23** and Serug lived after the birth of Nahor two hundred years, and had other sons and daughters. **24** When Nahor had lived twenty-nine years, he became the father of Terah; **25** and Nahor lived after the birth of Terah a hundred and nineteen years, and had other sons and daughters. **26** When Terah had lived seventy years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran. **27** Now these are the descendants of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot. **28** Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chalde'ans. **29** And Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sar'ai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. **30** Now Sar'ai was barren; she had no child. **31** Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sar'ai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chalde'ans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there. **32** The days of Terah were two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran.

“...became the father... two years after the flood...” The timing of the birth suggests no children were conceived or born during the year in which the flood gripped the earth. Is it possible that the sons of Noah and their wives remained chaste during the duration of the flood? Most of the Patristic writers who also happened to embrace monasticism believed Noah and his children all practiced abstinence from sex while in the ark during the nearly year long time of the flood.

Eber lives to be about half as old as Adam was when he died. Serug lives to be about one quarter as old as Adam was when he died. The longevity of the humans is in a pattern of decline. In verse :28 Haran dies before his father dies, one of the great traumas for any parent. It introduces into the story of the fallen world a new sorrow that mortality causes – the natural (non-violent) death of beloved children. Genesis 25:8 tells us that Abraham led a long and full life and dies at the ripe old age of 175. By the standards of his ancestors his life would have been measured as short, but by his generation that indeed was a considerable age to have reached. When Abraham was born there were 11 generations in his family tree alive – everyone from Noah to himself. When Abraham dies there are 7 generations alive including Abraham's children and grandchildren. Shem, Noah's son according to the genealogy outlived Abraham by 30 years, though after fathering Arpachshad two years after the flood, Shem plays no further role in the biblical history.

A genealogy is just a list of names. That would probably be a common summation of what many modern readers get out of the various family trees listed in Genesis. But in the ancient world, a name is not just a word. The name of any being reveals the very nature of the being. Every name is thus a revelation; every name is a thing, not merely pointing out the object to which it refers. The name reveals the meaning; it is the meaning itself, not just that which gets us to the meaning. Each name thus reveals and represents its reality. This is why the naming of the animals in Genesis 2 was such a significant story. It is why the genealogies are so important thousands of years after they were originally remembered; it also explains why the naming of the children in Genesis is of such importance. We, who are shaped by the mass industry of interchangeable parts, read the list of names and think anyone of those people could have

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been replaced by someone else. In the Scriptures however each name is a reality which had to have been present for the coming of the Messiah. This also explains why the Name of Jesus is so significant to the authors of the New Testament. "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11). In the Gospel, it is not merely His being the Messiah, which makes Him so important, but it is also his very Name which makes Jesus essential to us, to our relationship with God, and thus to our salvation. As Matthew reports the Gospel, the angel reveals of Mary that "...she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

When we read the genealogy in the Gospel According to St. Matthew (1:1-25) on the Sunday before Christmas, we might be tempted as Christians to say that in that whole list of births, there is only one birth that really matters – the Nativity of Jesus Christ. That narrow thinking would certainly miss the point of the scriptural text. The very reason all those names are preserved in Scripture is to show that all the births mattered, even those of nefarious characters, because they each were an essential birth in the history of humanity that led to the nativity of the Savior. In fact all the births are of the utmost importance as the birth of Christ would not have occurred without this exact history unfolding as it did. Of course in Orthodoxy, though Matthew's genealogy traces Joseph's ancestors, it really is the genealogy of Mary the Theotokos which is of genetic and human significance for the incarnate Word of God. All the births in the Scriptural genealogies are thus essential and matter for the salvation of the world. Furthermore in Christian thinking, the birth of every human since the time of Christ also is significant for the life of the world. No human ever conceived is inconsequential to the world, every single human conceived and ever human who is born matters to God and to the people of God.

Genealogies remind us that each of us, every human being is born into a world which already exists, and is born in relationship to other human beings. We are by nature relational beings. Genealogies place each human in the context of

humanity; giving each person a history and a place in the social order. They also serve the purpose of reminding us that in biblical terms, as relational beings, we are beings of love (where love is always directed toward the "other" and is not directed toward self interest). The Scriptures testify that God is love (1 John 4:8,16). For Christians this also refers directly to the fact that God is Trinity – a Trinity of Persons who dwell in love and whose relationship with one another is love. For humans true love then is not an emotion but an encounter with God (and in Orthodoxy we always encounter one of the Persons of the Trinity, never God-in-general). God as Trinity is a relational being and we who are created in His image and likeness are created as relational beings, created to be in God's image, created to love. Genealogies remind us of these truths that we are born into and experience the world through interrelationships with all other human beings, but especially with specific humans, normally our parents and family. We are by our births given context in the world, given a story, given a shared human nature and story.

This section of Genesis brings us to the birth of Abram, whom many consider to be the father of the great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Genesis offers that overarching meta-story which ties all of humanity together. It is a story that helps define our common human nature. We are all part of God's great unfolding narrative, and it is His story which gives our lives and our individual stories meaning. Many think that at the beginning of the 21st Century, the philosophical outlook which shapes our current understanding of the world is "**postmodernism.**" While the ideas of postmodernism are complex, as a philosophy it seems to accept the notion that there is no real way to "measure" the truth or validity of any story, since each person's life experience is true to them and can't be measured against any standard or canon as any one story is as true and valid as any other from the point of view of each person. Postmodernism would say everyone's story is true and right from some perspective and it would deny there is a shared human nature or shared human story to tie us all together. In some ways this philosophy is a theory of intellectual relativity. As in the theory of relativity in physics, "truth" is limited to the vantage point of the observer – time and space are all relative to the position, speed and direction of the

observer. "Perception" of an event is completely shaped by one's position relative to the event. Any one perception can be true for that observer but others seeing the same event from other positions relative to the event will see the event differently and yet their perception will be true for them. In postmodernism we may all share the same planet, but our lives relative to one another are not all that connected. There is no one perspective that is the correct perspective and so truth, right, wrong, good and evil vary from person to person. A movie which captures this quite well is the 2005 movie, CRASH. In that movie all of the characters live in the same city and their lives are tied together by a series of otherwise random events. However, despite being tied together by these events, none of the characters are aware of their connection to the others – only the viewer of the movie has the perspective of how they are all tied together. But for the characters, their lives are a series of accidental "crashes" into one another. The movie suggests that individuals longing for feeling some connection to others – longing to be sprung from the isolation and alienation of extreme individualism – "crash" into each other, sometimes intentionally just to feel alive or to get some sense that they belong to something greater than themselves. In certain ways this postmodern thinking is an intellectual Darwinism where all events that happen are ultimately random not giving direction to life, not serving any purpose, but definitely shaping present experience and the future of humanity. Like Darwinism, postmodernism, denies teleology (the idea that life purposefully moves toward some conclusion or end). The Bible certainly accepts teleology – there is a purposeful beginning to humankind and there is a God who is guiding the world and this God has a plan for the world which includes an ending toward which God is guiding things. The Bible offers the beginnings of the story, shapes the direction we are headed in, and offers some specific thoughts about how it all will end. In postmodern terms, the Bible offers a meta-narrative, a story that ties together all peoples, all lives, and all human stories. It is not one person's story, it is rather the story of everybody, a story that shows our common humanity. It is a story with a purpose, in which it is possible to discern right and wrong, good and evil, beginning and end. Each life is important, not random, and not meaningless. Even the use of typology or a prototype within the biblical narrative (that one story can somehow

foreshadow a later story and help us recognize and understand later stories) argues against pure postmodernism. Figurative thinking and symbolic thinking help us recognize patterns in life – they help us make sense of past historical events, they help us to recognize the significance of current events. They help us realize each life is not totally unrelated to all other lives. Each life contributes to the bigger picture, the tapestry or mosaic or narrative. No one life is self contained, no one life can measure the worth of all other things, because every life is part of a bigger whole, which is purposeful. Each life and each person's story will get measured and evaluated in terms of this bigger narrative, and it is this bigger picture which offers meaning to each life, no matter how great, how long, how short. The important insight of monotheism is that there is a meta-narrative; there is a way to understand all the individual stories, even if we can't fully grasp that meta-story yet – even if there is mystery, even if there are unresolved contradictions in the Scriptures which contain the revelation of this one God. The Bible contains in a written form the known elements of this revelation, and it gives us perspective on life, gives direction to life, gives meaning to life. The Bible also tells us that the world is confusing, and at times every bit as uncertain as postmodernism would affirm. The Bible does show us that events do occur which from our limited human perspective do appear to be random, unfair, inexplicable, and ambiguous. The Bible does take perspective – it traces history and humanity through particular peoples' lives, and does not pretend to be neutral or objective, but rather is either biased or ambivalent or both. Perhaps the most postmodern event in the Bible is when God creates light in Genesis 1:3. There was light – it had no source, no direction, it simply was. There existed no perspective in that verse, it is all about simply being. And since nothing else existed it had no direction, no goal, no purpose, and no movement. Even Einstein's relativity didn't exist in that event for light was all. The Bible however doesn't end with this directionless and perspectiveless light. That light serves to connect and illumine all else that exists. The Bible says this is the truth of humanity as well – we each are not merely individuals, but we are communal beings. We are created to be in communion with God and with each other. We are by nature beings of love (meaning we are by nature oriented toward others). Genesis tells us in narrative form the story of each of us and any

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of us and all of us. It reveals to us our humanness and thus our interdependency on all else that exists. It helps us realize there is a way, a direction, and it tells us we have lost that way, but it is still available for us to find. Genesis helps put us on that right path. Even the ambiguities in the story and the contradictions tell us we need to find a better perspective to understand what is. That gives us purpose, motivation, and direction – we need to move to that new perspective. And the Scriptures will help us find that way.

With the birth of Abram the Bible begins its clear focus on one particular people on earth. That the Bible was moving in this direction becomes all the more obvious in the chapters that follow in Genesis. Just as a Christocentric reading of the Old Testament reveals how the entirety of the Scriptures was moving toward Christ and in Christ finds its full meaning, so too with Abram the direction of the early chapters of Genesis becomes clear and pointed. God's plan for the salvation of His fallen creation is being put into motion and revealed. This becomes clear in the genealogy Matthew placed at the very beginning of his Gospel. Matthew does not trace Christ back to Adam, the first human, but rather he traces back the genealogy to Abraham, God's chosen servant, who is the father of Israel, the man with whom God makes an eternal covenant that is to be traced through his descendants, or more properly through a particular descendent: "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many; but, referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' which is Christ" (Galatians 3:16). In Orthodoxy we read Matthew's genealogy on the Sunday before Christmas because we do believe that Jesus Christ is the eternal fulfillment of the promise to Abraham. Immediately after Abraham had shown himself willing to sacrifice his son, the God-promised heir for whom Abraham had so hoped, the Lord said, "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice" (Genesis 22:16-18). Jesus is believed by Christians to be the fulfillment of God's promises and prophecy. All

the nations of the world are blessed through Jesus Christ, not just the nation of Israel. God's universal hope for all of humanity which is established with the creation of the first man Adam (the prototype of all humans) and whose fulfillment is promised through Abraham's descendent is accomplished in Jesus Christ (the new universal man, the prototype of the resurrected human). The genealogy of Matthew's Gospel offers the world the sense of the continuity in God's plan – the promise and the fulfillment are traceable through one Holy Tradition which is laid out in the Bible. In the Gospel according to Luke the genealogy is traced in the reverse order of Matthew. St. Luke begins with Jesus, the divine God-man who also is the new universal man and the new Adam, and traces His ancestry through David to Abraham, Shem, Noah, Seth and back to the first Adam who was the first universal man and the son of God. Thus Christ fulfills what God intended His humans to be from the beginning. The birth of Jesus is not merely the birth of a good or holy man. The birth of Jesus is the beginning of the universal salvation of all humans, the reunion of God and humanity, and the restoration of humanity to their original and God-given role to be mediator between God and all the rest of creation, and the fulfillment of God's promises to His chosen people. The Nativity of Christ is the restoration of humanity to humanity's God-intended role in the universe. Finally a human exists who has Godly dominion over the rest of creation.

"For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. It has been testified somewhere, "What is man that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels, you crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet." Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one" (Hebrews 2:5-9).

"Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he

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must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 'For God has put all things in subjection under his feet.' But when it says, 'All things are put in subjection under him,' it is plain that he is excepted who put all things under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one" (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).