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Hebrews' Interpretation of Genesis 1-11**

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## ***Humanity As City-Builders: Observations On Human Work From Hebrews' Interpretation Of Genesis 1-11***

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**Abstract:** Hebrews 11:10 claims that Abraham “was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (ESV). The Genesis narrative, however, seems devoid of any indication that Abraham was looking for a city, leading some modern interpreters to conclude that the author of Hebrews was allegorizing the Genesis narrative. On the contrary, reading Genesis 1–11 (the preceding context of the Abraham narrative) from the perspective of the author of Hebrews reveals details which indicate that he is making a valid inference from the text of Genesis. Specifically, the text of Genesis presents the city of Babel (Gen 11) as the antithesis of God's original plan for human flourishing. The author of Hebrews's reading of the Genesis narrative reveals his theological perspective on God's original purpose for humanity, which has several implications for how Christians should reconsider the divide often assumed between sacred and secular work.

**Key Words:** Hebrews 11, Genesis 1–11, Babel, work, city, Eden

### **Introduction**

Abraham's appearance in Hebrews 11 is unsurprising. Although there are counterexamples, Abraham is generally depicted as a man of faith in Genesis. The author of Hebrews utilizes Abraham, along with several other key Old Testament figures, as an illustration of persevering in faith while God's promises remain unsubstantiated (Heb 11:1, 13). What is surprising, however, is one of the ways in which the author of Hebrews illustrates Abraham's faith. He claims that Abraham “was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Heb 11:10). While most of the examples of faith in Hebrews 11 are rooted (even if only loosely) in the biblical narrative, this claim seems out of place. God promises Abraham land, descendants, and a great name. This city, however, to which Abraham is supposedly looking forward is absent from the Genesis narrative. From where did

the author of Hebrews draw his inference about this city? Several commentators have claimed that the author of Hebrews has succumbed to allegory at this point.<sup>1</sup>

Upon further review, however, there are some indications that should cause us to pause before agreeing that the author of Hebrews is allegorizing. Immediately prior to the beginning of Abraham's story is the account of the tower of Babel, which is the centerpiece of a large city. Cities appear at other points within Genesis 1–11 as well (4:17; 10:10–12). While none of these instances would qualify as a city whose designer and builder is God, their appearance in Genesis 1–11 is enough to warrant further investigation into the role of cities within the context of the Abraham narrative in order to see if any plausible solution arises which would explain how the author of Hebrews is reading Genesis.

This essay will investigate the possible role cities may have in Genesis 1–11 in order to discern if there is a basis for the author of Hebrews' claim that Abraham was searching for a city whose architect was God (Heb 11:10). It will demonstrate that the author of Hebrews intuitively discerned several features in the Genesis narrative which he interpreted to mean that God originally intended for humanity to construct a city in obedience to his command for them to fill the earth. Although humanity forfeited their right to build this city upon the earth, God continued to construct this city and will one day populate it with Abraham, his descendants, and those families who are blessed by Abraham (Gen 12:1–3). That is why the author of Hebrews claims that Abraham is looking forward to the appearance of this city. Although this reading of Genesis 1–11 is not immediately obvious, the text is written in such a way that this proposal for understanding Hebrews 11:10 is possible. This essay will begin by demonstrating that Babel (Gen 11:1–9) should be understood as the climax of human rebellion within Primeval History (Gen 1–11). It will then demonstrate that Babel is the antithesis of what God had originally intended at the beginning of creation. Finally, this essay will conclude by drawing several observations from the author of Hebrews' understanding of Genesis 1–11 related to work and human flourishing.

### **Babel as the Culmination of Human Rebellion**

This section will demonstrate that the city of Babel is the climax of human rebellion within Primeval History (Gen 1–11). It will begin by evaluating the presentation of Babel in Genesis 10–11. It will then examine the larger role Babel serves within Genesis 1–10.

1. See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964): 298 and James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh, U. K.: T&T Clark, 1948): 170.

## **Babel in Genesis 10–11**

While the main Babel narrative appears in Gen 11:1–9, this is not the first mention of Babel within Genesis. Babel first appears in Gen 10:10 in connection to Nimrod. This gives the reader some background information concerning Babel. While Gen 10:8–12 gives few details concerning most of the people and nations it discusses, it gives several details about Nimrod.

Genesis 10:8 says that Nimrod was a mighty man upon the earth and a mighty hunter before the Lord. Although this description may appear positive to the modern reader, it should most likely be taken as a negative evaluation of Nimrod. The description of Nimrod as a “mighty” man should give the reader an immediate cause for concern. The only previous appearance of mighty men were the Nephilim in Gen 6:4.<sup>2</sup> While Gen 6:1–4 contains several features which are difficult to understand, it is obvious that the Nephilim should be understood negatively since they are a precursor to the Flood. The description of Nimrod as mighty hunter “before the Lord” should also likely be taken negatively. Even though the expression “before the Lord” may seem positive in English, the Hebrew word לִפְנֵי (*lipnay*) can also have a negative connotation, such as “in opposition to.”<sup>3</sup> Given what else is known of Nimrod, the phrase “before the Lord” likely indicates that Nimrod opposed the Lord.

Genesis 10:10–11 says that Nimrod founded cities and expanded his kingdom. This is contrasted sharply by the rest of the people discussed in Genesis 10, who gradually settled into their own lands. These statements in Genesis 10:10–11 portray Nimrod building and expanding his kingdom through the use of violence and force.<sup>4</sup> This background information concerning Nimrod, whose kingdom began with Babel (Gen 10:10), should lead the reader to expect the worst as the narrative moves to the plain of Shinar and Babel in Genesis 11.

Genesis 11:1–9 fulfills the reader’s expectations. All of humanity migrates to the plain of Shinar and builds the city of Babel. This is clearly a defiant act of hubris as demonstrated by their desire to reach the heavens and make a name for themselves (Gen 11:4). Since “the heavens” is the dwelling place of God (Gen 19:24; 22:11, 15; Deut 26:15), their desire to reach “the heavens” is an attempt to equate themselves with God.

## **Babel in Genesis 1–11**

Genesis 10–11 certainly portrays Babel negatively, but these chapters only reveal part of the author’s portrayal. The reader’s understanding of Babel can be enhanced significantly by observing parallels between Babel and earlier portions of Primeval

2. K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2002): 450.

3. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, trans. John J. Scullion (London, U.K.: SPCK, 1984): 516.

4. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 448.

History. For example, there are several parallels between Babel and the city built by Cain (Gen 4:16–17).

**Table 1: Parallels between Cain’s City and Babel<sup>5</sup>**

<b>Cain’s City</b>	<b>Babel</b>
Cain moved east (Gen 4:16–17)	Builders of Babel moved east (Gen 11:2)
Cain feared wandering across the earth (Gen 4:14)	Builders of Babel feared being dispersed over the whole earth (Gen 11:4)
Cain built a city when he reached his destination (Gen 4:17)	Builders of Babel built a city when they reached their destination (Gen 11:4)
Cain’s city was founded by a violent man (Gen 4:4; cf. 4:23–24)	Nimrod, the founder of Babel, was a violent man (10:8–10)

In addition to these parallels between Babel and Cain’s city, there are also a number of thematic and verbal parallels between the Eden narrative (Gen 2–3) and Babel (Gen 11:1–9).

**Table 2: Thematic and Verbal Parallels between the Eden Narrative and Babel<sup>6</sup>**

<b>The Eden Narrative</b>	<b>Babel</b>
Adam and Eve wanted to be like God (Gen 3:5)	The builders of Babel wanted to be like God (Gen 11:4)
Use of divine plural (Gen 1:26)	Use of divine plural (Gen 11:7)
God’s distress over what man may do (Gen 3:22)	God’s distress over what man may do (Gen 11:6)
Adam and Eve were banished from the garden (Gen 3:24)	The people were dispersed from Shinar (Gen 11:8)

The parallels between the Babel narrative and earlier narratives emphasizes the depravity of the builders of Babel. They were as prideful as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They were as violent and aggressive as Cain. The author compares the Babel narratives with earlier ones within the Primeval History in order to demonstrate that a climax had been reached in human sin.<sup>7</sup>

5. These parallels can be found in Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 478 and John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992): 136.

6. These parallels stem from Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 467. Mathews also mentions a geographic parallel and multiple lexical parallels.

7. James McKeown concludes similarly. “Both human audacity and the severity of God’s punishment have reached a climax in the Babel narrative.” James McKeown, *Genesis, Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008): 72.

## **Humanity as City-Builders**

The preceding section demonstrated that the city of Babel represents the climax of human depravity for the author of Genesis. This presentation of Babel, however, does little to help us understand the thoughts of the author of Hebrews. Babel certainly was not a city whose designer and builder is God (Heb 11:10). Yet, even though Babel was not the city Abraham was waiting for, perhaps it contains the clue needed to understand how the author of Hebrews was reading Genesis 1–11 and the Abraham narrative. This section will demonstrate that Babel was not only the climax of human rebellion but also the antithesis of what God had intended in Genesis 1–2. God intended for humanity to build a city but not Babel.

### **Filling the Earth with a City**

In order to demonstrate that humanity was eventually to build a city, this section will examine a difficulty arising from the two creation stories at the beginning of Genesis. According to Gen 1:26–28 God gave humanity two mandates. They were to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth,” and they were also to “subdue [the earth] and have dominion [over every creature].” The Garden of Eden narrative, however, gives no indication that humanity was ever supposed to leave the garden. Genesis 2:8–15 indicates that God placed the newly created man inside the Garden of Eden for the purposes of working and guarding the land. Genesis 2:16 indicates that the garden was humanity’s food source. Nothing in Genesis 2 indicates that humanity should ever leave the garden to “fill the earth” or to “subdue the earth” as Genesis 1:26–28 mandates. Genesis 3 only increases the difficulty of the problem. The punishment for human sin was exile from the Garden of Eden (3:24).

How was humanity to fill and subdue the earth while remaining within the boundaries of the garden? The most likely explanation is that humanity was to expand the boundaries of the garden until it encompassed the whole earth.<sup>8</sup> This explanation indicates a correlation between subduing the earth (Gen 1:28) and working and keeping the garden (Gen 2:15). Humanity was to cultivate the ground surrounding the perimeter of the garden and bring it under their control, thereby continuously extending the boundaries of the garden. This also explains why the author includes the rivers and lands outside of the garden in Gen 2:10–14. These lands and the gold in them would be of little importance if humanity remained stationary in the garden. Since, however, humanity was supposed to extend the borders of the garden, the location and resources of these lands could eventually be very important.

8. See Greg Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology 17* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004): 81–82. Desmond Alexander quotes Beale approvingly. See T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem* (Nottingham, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008): 25.

Genesis 1–2 may indicate that humanity was eventually supposed to extend the boundaries of the garden to encompass the whole earth. Since they were also to fill the earth (Gen 1:28), perhaps eventually the need for a city would arise.<sup>9</sup> Building a city would also indicate that the earth had been subdued to the greatest degree.

### A Sanctuary-City

Just as sinful humanity eventually built Babel, perhaps humanity’s original purpose, before the fall (Gen 3), was to build a city. But what kind of city were they supposed to build? Gordon Wenham has demonstrated that the description of the Garden of Eden reveals that the garden is far more significant than an ordinary piece of Mesopotamian farmland. The Garden of Eden is presented as an archetypal sanctuary.<sup>10</sup> “Many of the features of the garden may also be found in later sanctuaries particularly the tabernacle or the Jerusalem Temple. These parallels suggest that the garden itself is understood as a sort of sanctuary.”<sup>11</sup>

**Table 3: Parallels between the Garden of Eden and Later Sanctuaries**

Parallels	Garden of Eden	Tabernacle	Temple
Hithpael form of הלך (hālāk)	Gen 3:8	Lev 26:12; Deut 23:15	2 Sam 7:6–7
Cherubim	Gen 3:24	Exod 25:18–22; 26:31	2 Kings 6:23–28
Entered by the East	Gen 3:24	Num 3:38;	Ezek 43:3
Tree of life/ menorah	Gen 2:9	Exod 25:31–35	

9. See Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 25. Also, readers of the Primeval History should note an important difference between filling the earth and being scattered haphazardly across. Filling the earth is a divine mandate (Gen 1:28). Being scattered across the earth is divine punishment (Gen 4:14; 11:8). The author uses consistent terminology for both. מלא (mālē) is used for “filling,” while פָּרַד (pārad) and פָּרַשׁ (pūš) are used for “spreading.” See the discussion of Carol Kaminski, who has determined that the Table of Nations (Gen 10) should not be understood as the fulfillment of the divine mandate to fill the earth (Gen 1:28 but specifically Gen 9:1) because of the differences in terminology. She contends that the nation of Israel is the fulfillment of this mandate (Exod 1:7). Carol Kaminski, *From Noah to Israel: Realization of the Primeval Blessing after the Flood*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 413 (London, U.K.: T&T Clark International, 2004): 11–12.

10. Gordon J. Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story,” in *I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood*, Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies, ed. R. S. Hess and D. T. Tsumara (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994): 19–24. John Walton offers a slightly different take on the Garden of Eden but shares many of the same conclusions as Wenham. See John Walton, “Garden of Eden,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003): 204–206.

11. Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism,” 19.

Priest/Levites	Gen 2:15 <sup>1</sup>	Num 3:7–8; 8;26; 18:5–6	
Precious Jewels	Gen 2:12	Exod 16:4, 33 (Num 11:7); 25:7; 28:9, 20	1 Chr 29:2

Wenham’s arguments have been accepted and expanded by several other scholars.<sup>12</sup> If the Garden of Eden should be understood as an archetypal sanctuary, then the city which humanity was to build as they filled the earth and expanded the borders of the garden should be understood as sanctuary-city. Such a city would certainly find its antithesis in the city of Babel.

### **A City Whose Designer and Builder is God**

This paper has so far demonstrated that Babel is the antithesis of God’s plan in Genesis 1–2 and that it is possible to read Genesis 1–2 in such a manner that anticipates humanity as builders of a sanctuary-city. One final link must be established before arriving at the view of the author of Hebrews. Since humanity rebelled against God and became builders of Babel instead of the sanctuary-city God intended, what has become of the city that God intended to be built and which Abraham was presumably searching? Evidence from the New Testament indicates that this city continues to be built and will one day replace the city built by sinful humanity. The author of Hebrews indicates that God himself continued to build the city for which Abraham was searching.

The thought pattern of the author of Hebrews finds parallels among other New Testament authors.<sup>13</sup> In John 14:2–3, Jesus says “In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” Apart from the shift from a city to a house,<sup>14</sup> this passage demonstrates remarkable continuity with the ideas of the author of Hebrews as proposed in this essay. God the Father and Jesus the Son were taking part in a

12. Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 20–31 and Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 66–80.

13. In addition to the passages cited here, citizenship in a heavenly city also appears in Paul’s letters. Paul writes in Galatians 4:25–26 “Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.” In Philippians 3:20, Paul writes “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. . . .” See Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 72–73.

14. Since the Garden of Eden is depicted as a sanctuary (as noted above), it is possible that the two authors are discussing the same idea with slightly different emphases. This seems to be an instance of diversity within a greater unity, which sometimes happens in biblical theology. For a discussion of the differences between diversity and contradiction within New Testament theology, see Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005): 34–42.



building project for the purpose of dwelling with their people. Revelation 21:10–11 says, “And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.” These verses coincide perfectly with the trajectory of Genesis 1–2 as interpreted by Heb 11:10. God has completed the construction of his city. All that remains is for his people, the remnant of humanity who have been reconciled to him through Jesus, to be reunited with him in the city which he built. Abraham’s faith is finally substantiated. The city which he was looking forward to has appeared.

## **Reflections upon Work and Human Flourishing**

The final section of this essay will reflect upon the previous study and draw implications from it concerning work and human flourishing. These implications are based upon the author of Hebrew’s theological reading of the Genesis narrative.

### **Sin Has Not Necessarily Changed Humanity’s Work Qualitatively**

God intended for humanity to build a city, yet because of sin, humanity became unfit to build God’s city. They continued, however, in their roles as city-builders and eventually constructed Babel, the antithesis to God’s originally intended city. Even though Babel is the antithesis of what God had intended, Genesis 11:1–9 does not disparage the city itself but the intentions of those who built it. The fact that humanity continued to build a city indicates some continuity between God’s original plan and the city which they constructed. This indicates that sin has not necessarily changed humanity’s work qualitatively.<sup>15</sup> Even as a great expanse of time has passed from these events recorded in Scripture to the present, the same continuity may still exist. Humanity has continued to refine its role as city-builders. In addition to towers, temples, and homes, we now build “microchips,” “automobiles,” and “consumer goods.”<sup>16</sup> If the analogy between the city God originally intended for humanity to build and Babel can be extended to the current era, then it is very likely that God’s city would include “microchips,” “automobiles”, and “consumer goods.” At least, there seems to be little reason to think that if humanity had not sinned and continued building God’s city that this city would not have included many elements found in our modern cities. Humanity would be engaging in many of the same occupations.

### **Christians Should Re-conceptualize Their Occupations as Their Sacred Work**

15. By “qualitatively,” I mean the *kind* of work that humanity will do.

16. I have placed “microchips,” “automobiles,” and “consumer goods” in quotation marks to indicate these are merely examples of the vast number of ways that humanity has refined its role as city-builders. Almost any occupation could be substituted for these three examples, their production, and commerce.

This previous observation demonstrates a correlation between secular work and sacred work that is often underappreciated within modern society.<sup>17</sup> Typically, pastors, missionaries, and other church workers are deemed to be the ones carrying out God's work upon the earth. This study has demonstrated, however, that there is a potential sacred element to many of the occupations undertaken by humanity. If "microchips," "automobiles," and "consumer goods" had a role in God's original intentions, then there is some sense in which those who engage in the production and commerce of these elements are filling a similar role they would have in God's city. They are fulfilling the role which God had originally intended for them.

### **Sin has Altered Humanity's Work Functionally**

The preceding two points have attempted to establish some continuity between God's original plan for human occupation and the resulting inherent sacredness of many human occupations. These two points, however, must be qualified in order to account for the presence of human sin. While sin has not necessarily changed human work qualitatively, sin has changed human work functionally.<sup>18</sup> The tower of Babel was constructed to be an idol of human sin. Even though it may have shared some affinities with the buildings in God's city, there was nothing sacred about the tower or the work done to build it. Similarly, "microchips," "automobiles," and "consumer goods" are often made in service to human sin. In as much as this is the case, there is nothing sacred about the production and commerce of them. Even though sin has not necessarily changed these things qualitatively as they would have appeared in God's city, sin has nullified any potential sacred function they may have had.

Sin has altered human occupations functionally in at least two other ways. First, Gen 3:17–19 indicates that humanity's subduing the earth will be much more difficult than God had originally intended for it to be. Instead of building God's city, much of humanity's work had to be focused upon survival in a world that was growing more hostile towards them. This same circumstance continues today. While the above observations have attempted to build continuity between what is considered to be secular work and sacred work, human sin does not always allow for this continuity to exist. It is difficult to see how occupations such as law enforcement and humanitarian aid would function in the world apart from sin because these occupations essentially seek to limit the effects of sin. Second, human sin has caused separation between humanity and God (Gen 3:24). God has provided a way for this separation to be reconciled through Jesus Christ, but this reconciliation can only occur when a person accepts the sacrifice Christ made on behalf of that person's sins and believes that God raised Christ from the dead to demonstrate the victory of Christ over sin and death.

17. By "sacred work," I am referring to work that has been ordained or intended by God. By "secular work," I am referring to any work that is not considered sacred.

18. By "functionally," I mean the role the work serves within society.

Furthermore, Jesus has mandated that his disciples share this gospel throughout the world (Matt 28:19–20). Humanity’s sin and their need to accept the gospel means that jobs which are traditionally associated with the church fulfill a more immediate sacred function than those that are traditionally considered secular. This observation should not, however, nullify the sacred aspect of these secular jobs. It only recognizes the priority of the work done in order to make disciples of Jesus.

### **Whatever You Do, Do Everything in the Name of the Lord Jesus**

The initial two observations of this section attempted to draw continuity between what is considered secular and sacred work. The third observation, however, has demonstrated that this continuity is not always possible because of the reality of human sin. How can Christians who work what are considered to be secular jobs fulfill God’s mandate to subdue the earth in a world that has been distorted by human sin? The apostle Paul provides the best path forward in Col 1:17 which says “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”<sup>19</sup> Every Christian should pursue their occupation as a testimony to what Jesus Christ has done upon the earth and as a means to glorifying God. The reality of human sin means that this will always be done imperfectly until the day when the earth is totally eradicated of sin. Christians, however, do not have to wait until then to glorify God through work.

### **Conclusion**

This essay has demonstrated that the city to which Abraham was looking forward (Heb 11:10) was the city that God continued building in the aftermath of humanity’s sin in the garden. In doing so, this essay has proposed that God originally created humanity to be city-builders. Even though the effects of human sin have often radically distorted how humanity subdues the earth through city-building, we should acknowledge what continuity we can between God’s original purpose and the current occupations Christians pursue in order to glorify God through our work on the earth.

19. C.f. 1 Cor 10:31