

# The Primeval History

LESSON  
FOUR

## THE RIGHT DIRECTION



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# The Primeval History

## Lesson Four

### The Right Direction

#### INTRODUCTION

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I recall a time when I was teaching in the Ukraine, and had only a few minutes to reach my destination by Metro. I rushed to the station, ran down the stairs and jumped on the train just as the doors were closing. It was going to be a ride all the way across town, so I sat back to catch my breath and relaxed for a few minutes. Then after a while it suddenly dawned on me. I had taken the train going in the wrong direction! Now naturally, the next metro station was miles away, and it took forever to reach it. By the time I got turned around and started back, it was clear that I was going to be very late. I can remember thinking to myself, “Well, this situation isn’t all I had hoped it would be, but at least now I’m going in the right direction.”

I guess that’s the way it is in most areas of life. Our situations are never perfect, and most of the time they’re not even close. We face lots of problems and challenges everywhere we go. Yet, we all know that it is still better at least to be going in the right direction, rather than the wrong way.

We have entitled this lesson “The Right Direction,” and in it we are going to explore Genesis 6:9–11:9 where we will discover the direction God established for his people to follow after the great flood in the days of Noah. As we will see, in these chapters of the primeval history, Moses gave the people of Israel a clear direction to pursue. It may not have been all that they wanted, but it was ordained by God to bring them toward great blessings. And this portion of the primeval history is very important for Christians too, because we should be following this same direction as well.

Our study of Genesis 6:9–11:9 will divide into three parts: first, we will examine the literary structure of these chapters; second, we will explore their original meaning by discerning why Moses wrote this material for Israel; and third, we will look to the New Testament for guidance in applying these chapters to our lives. Let’s begin our study of the right direction by exploring the literary structure of these chapters.

#### LITERARY STRUCTURE

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Genesis 6:9–11:9 is a large portion of the primeval history, and it may be outlined in a number of different ways. For our purposes, we have segmented these chapters into two main parts. The first section includes 6:9–9:17, and we have entitled it “The Flood of Deliverance.” In this part of Genesis, Moses described the flood of Noah’s day. The second part of this material is Genesis 9:18–11:9, which we have entitled “The New Order.” It describes several crucial events that took place after the flood, and which set enduring patterns that characterized the world after the flood. To gain a better understanding of the literary pattern of these chapters, we will look into both of these

major parts. Let's begin by examining the structure of the story Moses wrote about the flood of Noah's day.

## **FLOOD OF DELIVERANCE**

In recent years a number of interpreters have noticed that the story of Noah's flood displays a relatively clear literary pattern. Although it is possible to describe this pattern in a number of ways, in this study we will point out how these chapters form a symmetrical five-step drama.

### **Initial Covenant**

The first step of this narrative appears in Genesis 6:9-22, and we will call it the "initial divine covenant" with Noah. In this portion of the narrative, Moses noted that Noah was a righteous man in a world that had gone sour. God spoke to Noah and revealed why he planned to destroy the human race. We read these words in Genesis 6:13:

**So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth" (Genesis 6:13).**

Yet, the first step of this narrative also tells us that God planned to start over again by delivering one man and his family, namely, righteous Noah. To assure Noah of his intention, God entered into an initial covenant with Noah. In Genesis 6:17-18, we read that God said these words to Noah:

**Everything on earth will perish. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark — you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you (Genesis 6:17-18).**

At the beginning of the flood narrative, God swore a covenant oath to rescue Noah and his family from the coming flood. This covenant secured Noah's deliverance, and established him as the head of a new humanity after the flood.

Now that we have seen how the flood story opens by focusing on God's initial covenant with Noah, we should turn to the last portion of the story which balances the first, 8:20–9:17, which we have entitled the "enduring divine covenant" with Noah.

### **Enduring Covenant**

As our title suggests, in this passage God returned to Noah after the flood and made another covenant with him. God decided to give humanity the opportunity of a new order in the world. As we read in Genesis 8:22:

**As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease (Genesis 8:22).**

To establish the certainty of this new course, God entered into a second covenant with Noah at the end of the flood narrative in Genesis 9:11-15.

**I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth... I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind (Genesis 9:11-15).**

So we see that the story of Noah's flood ends with the covenant promise that a flood will never again destroy the earth, and with God setting his bow in the clouds as a sure sign that he would never forget this promise. This closing covenant promise points to the great importance that Noah had in the primeval history. He was the mediator of a covenant, a covenant which extended to all future generations.

With the opening and closing sections of this story in mind, we are in a position to explore the inner workings of the flood narrative. The middle portion moves from God's initial covenant to the new order of the final covenant in three main steps.

### **Escape from Water**

The second step of this narrative appears in 7:1-16, which we have entitled Noah's "escape from water." This material is rather straightforward. Noah prepared the ark and brought animals of every kind into it, and floodwaters began to burst into the world, but Noah, his family, and the animals he had gathered were safely sealed in the ark.

### **Exit to Dry Land**

The fourth section of the story of Noah's flood forms a dramatic counterpoint to the second step. It describes Noah's exit to dry land in Genesis 8:6-19. After the flood had begun to subside, Noah longed for dry land to appear so that he could leave the ark. After a period of waiting, dry lands appeared and God commanded Noah to leave the ark, just as he had previously ordered him to enter it.

### **Divine Remembrance**

Now we are in a position to look at the center, or turning point, of this narrative, Genesis 7:17-8:5, which we have entitled the "divine remembrance" of Noah. These

verses begin with a description of the flood raging and destroying every living thing on earth. But by the end of this section, the flood has begun to subside.

Now, at the very heart of this section is a simple but profound sentence which indicates why God began to calm the raging flood. In Genesis 8:1 Moses wrote that in the midst of the storm:

**God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded (Genesis 8:1).**

In great mercy, God did not forget the covenant he made with Noah and those with him. He remembered the passengers of the ark, and moved on their behalf against the raging flood.

This outline of Noah's flood brings to light the primary concerns of the story. Moses wrote about the flood as a story of deliverance. Although judgment came on the wicked of the earth, Moses' chief concern was to show that through Noah God brought humanity into a world of tremendous blessings.

Now that we have explored the first portion of Genesis 6:9–11:9, we should turn to the second major section, the new order, in Genesis 9:18–11:9.

## NEW ORDER

Moses' account of the new order in chapters 9–11 divides into two basic units. On the one hand, Genesis 9:18–10:32 focuses on the sons of Noah. On the other hand, Genesis 11:1–9 concern the defeat of the city of Babel. Although these passages may seem unrelated at first, we will see that they actually work together to create a pattern for the new order of the world. They set forth the central features of world history from that time forward. Let's look first at the account of the sons of Noah and the contribution it makes to this portrait of the newly ordered world.

### Sons of Noah

Moses' record of the sons of Noah in chapters 9–10 of Genesis consists of a title and two main sections. In 9:18–19 we find a title which indicates that this portion of Genesis focuses primarily on Noah's three sons, and how they were distributed over the earth.

In line with this title, Moses' record of Noah's sons divides into two main sections. In the first place, the story in 9:20–29 sets forth distinctions among the sons. And in the second place, 10:1–32 describes the distribution of Noah's sons and their descendants. It will be helpful to look at these sections separately.

Chapter 9:20–29 is that well-known passage in Genesis that speaks of the curse on Ham's son Canaan. Listen to what Moses wrote in Genesis 9:24–27:

**When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to him, he said, “Cursed be Canaan!” ... He also said, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem! ... May God extend the territory of Japheth” (Genesis 9:24-27).**

Put simply, this narrative reports the events that led to a major distinction among the descendants of Noah. Noah cursed Canaan, the son of Ham. Canaan would be the lowest of slaves to his brothers. Yet, Noah pronounced blessings on his other sons Shem and Japheth, because they had treated him with respect.

Moses included this story in his description of the new order after the flood because the entire human race came from the three sons of Noah. The distinctions made here led to the dynamics of human relationships seen from this time forward in biblical history.

This outlook on the distinctions among Noah’s sons is confirmed by chapter 10: the distribution of Noah’s sons. Looking to the generations which came long after the days of Noah, in Genesis 10, Moses gave a sample listing of the places where the descendants of Ham, Shem, and Japheth went throughout the world. According to Genesis 10, the Japhethites occupied territories to the north, northeast, and northwest of Canaan. With a few exceptions, the Hamites moved toward Northern Africa, and the special son of Ham, namely Canaan, dwelled in the land of Canaan, Israel’s Promised Land. The Shemites or Semitic people largely occupied the territories of the Arabian Peninsula.

The record of Genesis 10 is highly selective and designed to provide only general patterns of migration. But these general patterns were enough for Moses to illustrate some long-term patterns that characterized human interaction in the new order after the flood.

Now that we have seen the literary structure of Moses’ attention to Noah’s sons in Genesis 9–10, we are in a position to look at the second portion of the new order after the flood: the defeat of the city of Babel in 11:1-9.

## **Defeat of Babel**

The story of the tower of Babel divides into five symmetrical dramatic steps. The first step of verses 1 and 2 begins with the vast majority of humanity together. But by contrast, this narrative ends in verses 8 and 9 where we learn that God dispersed humanity over the earth as he confused human language. Just how did humanity move from being together with one language to being scattered and having many languages? The middle portion explains what happened.

The second step of verses 3 and 4 reports a plan which the people had. They intended to build a city with a great tower reaching to heaven so that they would be famous for all time and utterly invincible. Nevertheless, the fourth step of this narrative in verses 6 and 7 balances this human plan by reporting God’s counter-plan. God called his heavenly army to attack the city by confusing the language of the people and thereby to stop the construction of the city and its tower.



The turning point of this story appears in verse 5, where God investigated the city and its tower. Once God saw the city and the proud plans of its inhabitants, he determined to bring an end to the city of Babel.

So we see that according to Moses, life after the flood was far from the paradise we might have expected. On the contrary, the account of Noah's sons shows that the new order includes complex interactions among different groups of human beings. It also includes more defiance of God, as well as God's eventual defeat of those who defy him. Although these structures of the new order may seem strange to our modern ears, we will see that they spoke rather plainly to the experiences of the Israelites to whom Moses first wrote these chapters.

Now that we have seen the literary structure of Genesis 6:9–11:9, we are in a position to ask a second question: Why did Moses write this account of the flood and the resulting new order? What lessons was he teaching the Israelites as they followed him toward the Promised Land?

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## ORIGINAL MEANING

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Needless to say, we can be sure that Moses wrote about Noah's flood and the course of the new order to inform Israel of the facts of this period of primeval history. Yet, his record is far too selective and oriented toward particular themes to think that this was all he had in mind. Moses wrote not just to report the past, but to guide Israel in his own day as well.

We will unfold Moses' purpose by looking at three portions of Genesis 6:9–11:9: first, we will examine the original meaning of the flood narrative; and then we will turn to Moses' record of Noah's sons; and finally, we will give attention to the original implications of the last portion of the primeval history — the defeat of Babel. Let's look first at the ways Moses related the flood of Noah to the experience of Israel in his day.

### FLOOD OF DELIVERANCE

To discern Moses' use of the flood narrative, we will look at two aspects of the story: first, the connections he established between the flood and the exodus; and second, the implications of these connections for Israel. Moses established connections between the flood and his own day by portraying Noah in ways that closely resembled his own life and ministry. Now, to be sure, the lives of Noah and Moses were different in many ways, and these differences should not be ignored. Yet, it is also evident that Moses purposefully depicted Noah so that his Israelite readers would see Noah as a precursor or foreshadowing of Moses.

## Connections

There are at least eight significant connections between Noah and Moses. In the first place, Moses drew a connection between himself and Noah in the motif of violence. You will recall from Genesis 6:13 that Noah's flood came because the world was filled with violence. As Exodus 1–2 make clear, the Egyptians had inflicted much violence on the people of Israel prior to the call of Moses. Moses' deliverance from Egypt came in response to the violence inflicted on the people of Israel. So, the work both of Noah and of Moses was to deliver from violence.

A second association appears in Moses' use of the term "ark." The Hebrew word for Noah's ark throughout Genesis 6–9 is *tevah* (תִּבְיָה). Interestingly enough, the only other place where Moses used the term *tevah* was in Exodus 2:3,5. There he referred to the basket in which his mother placed him as an ark, or *tevah*. Although Noah's ark was mammoth while Moses' ark was very small, Moses pointed to the fact that both he and Noah had been delivered from watery deaths by means of an ark, or *tevah*.

In the third place, the importance of divine covenants also establishes Noah as a precursor of Moses. As we have seen, according to Genesis 6:18 and 9:11-17, Noah entered into covenant with God on behalf of the entire human race. But of course, we know that one of Moses' primary services to Israel was to mediate a divine covenant. As Exodus 19–24 illustrate so well, Moses was chosen to lead the people of Israel into a special covenant with Yahweh as they came to Mount Sinai.

The central role of judgment through water also establishes a fourth connection between the two men. In Genesis 6–9, God delivered Noah and his family by taking them safely through a flood that destroyed the wicked of the earth. And in much the same way, as Exodus 13–15 tell us, Moses brought Israel out of Egypt by passing through the waters of the Red Sea, which waters in turn destroyed the army of the Egyptian oppressors.

In the fifth place, God sent wind to drive back the waters in both the days of Noah and the days of Moses. As we have read, according to Genesis 8:1, God sent a wind to drive back the waters of Noah's flood. Similarly, according to Exodus 14:21, at the Red Sea, "the Lord drove back the sea with a strong east wind."

A sixth connection appears in the emphasis put on animals. As Genesis 6:19 tells us, God commanded Noah to bring animals into the ark. On no less than four occasions, the book of Exodus mentions the many animals that left Egypt with the Israelites. Just as God ordained for Noah to bring animals into the world of his day, God also ordained that Moses should bring animals into the Promised Land.

Seventh, the theme of divine remembrance also joins Noah and Moses. You will recall that in Genesis 8:1, as the waters raged in the days of Noah, God acted on Noah's behalf because he remembered him. God had made a covenant with Noah that he would bring him safely through the flood, and he remembered that covenant. In much the same way, God declared to Moses that he delivered Israel from Egypt because he remembered his covenant. Listen to what God told Moses in Exodus 6:5:

**Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant (Exodus 6:5).**

Divine remembrance played a vital role in the flood and in the exodus.

Finally, the blessing of nature also associates Noah with Moses. Noah brought the human race into a new world where God promised there would be a lasting and stable natural order that would benefit humanity. In a similar fashion, Moses told Israel that in the Land of Promise, nature would remain constant and beneficial in much the same way.

With these connections between Noah and Moses in mind, we are in a position to see the implications of these parallels for the nation of Israel. Why did Moses establish these connections?

## Implications

To grasp the original implications of this material, we must remember that the people of Israel had seriously rebelled against Moses, questioning his authority and the wisdom of his program of exodus and conquest. These challenges to his ministry led Moses to establish connections between himself and Noah.

God had used Noah in the flood of deliverance to redeem humanity from horrible primeval violence and to re-establish the human race in a new world of great blessings. And in much the same way, God had chosen Moses to deliver Israel from the horrible violence of Egypt and to bring Israel into a new world of the Promised Land. Moses' design for Israel was so similar to the flood of Noah that no one could rightly deny it had come from the hand of God.

Now that we have seen the original meaning of the flood of deliverance, we should turn to Moses' record of the sons of Noah in Genesis 9:18–10:32.

## NOAH'S SONS

Why did Moses include this material in his primeval history? What was his purpose in bringing these matters to Israel's attention? To examine this portion of Moses' record, we will look at three issues: first, his special focus on Canaan; second, the theme of conflict; and third, the implications of these motifs for Israel. Consider first the way that Moses gave attention to Canaan.

## Canaan

You will recall that Noah awoke from his drunken sleep and realized that Ham had dishonored him, and that Shem and Japheth had honored him. Now it would seem only reasonable for Noah to have been angry with Ham and to have cursed him, just as he blessed his other sons. But this is not what happened. Listen to the entirety of what Noah said in Genesis 9:25-27:

**“Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.”  
He also said, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem! May Canaan be  
the slave of Shem. May God extend the territory of Japheth; may**

**Japheth live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be his slave”  
(Genesis 9:25-27).**

As we see in this passage, Shem and Japheth received appropriate rewards for their righteousness, but Ham was not even mentioned here. Instead, it was Canaan, the son of Ham, who received Noah’s curse.

When we look carefully at this story, we see that Ham serves a different role than his brothers. In short, Ham has little significance apart from the fact that he was the father of Canaan. Notice the way Moses wrote of Ham in this narrative. In 9:18 we read:

**The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan) (Genesis 9:18).**

The same identification appears in 9:22 as well:

**Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness (Genesis 9:22).**

In many respects, Ham fades into the background of this story and his son Canaan takes his place alongside Shem and Japheth.

With Moses’ special emphasis on Canaan in mind, we may turn to a second concern that appears in his treatment of the sons of Noah — conflict in the new order after the flood.

## **Conflict**

The theme of conflict plays a major role in Moses’ attention to Noah’s sons. To miss this theme is to miss the most important aspect of the story. The idea of conflict also appears in Genesis 9:25-27:

**“Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.”  
He also said, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem! May Canaan be the slave of Shem. May God extend the territory of Japheth; may Japheth live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be his slave”  
(Genesis 9:25-27).**

Notice how Moses stressed the certainty of conflict by repeating Canaan’s curse three times in this passage. In verse 25, he pronounced the curse that Canaan would be the “lowest of slaves,” or the lowest kind of slave imaginable. In verse 26, Noah predicted that Canaan would be the slave of Shem. And in verse 27, Moses added that Canaan would become Japheth’s slave as well. Through this repetition, Moses stressed the fact that Canaan would certainly be conquered by his brothers.

Beyond this, it’s important to note that these verses portray Shem as the principal victor over Canaan. In verse 27, the words “may Japheth live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be his slave,” may be better translated, “may Japheth live in the tents of Shem so that Canaan may be his slave.” Noah’s idea seems to be that Canaan will

become subservient to Japheth only to the extent that Japheth joined forces with Shem. In effect, Moses believed that Shem was to take the lead in subjugating Canaan.

So we see in this passage that Moses established an important feature of the new order after the flood, which could hardly have been expected. He understood that the future of humanity would entail a dramatic conflict in which the descendants of Shem would subjugate the descendants of Canaan.

In light of Moses' attention to Canaan and the theme of conflict, we are able to see the original implications of Noah's sons for ancient Israel.

## Implications

Why did Moses include these events in his record of the new order after the flood? Well, Moses had a very specific reason for describing the new order in this way. The conflict between Shem and Canaan spoke directly to the needs of his Israelite audience. It addressed a crucial dimension of their lives.

The key to understanding Moses' purpose appears in Genesis 10:18-19. After listing some of the descendants of Canaan, Moses wrote that:

**Later the Canaanite clans scattered and the borders of Canaan reached from Sidon toward Gerar as far as Gaza, and then toward Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, as far as Lasha (Genesis 10:18-19).**

These rather specific geographical references were familiar to Moses' Israelite readers. The descendants of Canaan, or the Canaanites, had settled in the region that stretched north to south from Sidon to Gaza, and to the region of Sodom and Gomorrah. Moses was especially concerned with those descendants of Canaan who had settled in the Promised Land. As the Shemite nation specially called by God, the people of Israel were to move into this land of the Canaanites and to claim it as their own.

So we see that Moses' account of the sons of Noah was not simply designed to give an account of the past. It was designed to give a background to Moses' call to Israel to move forward into the conquest, just as God had ordained in the primeval history. As a result, the Israelites who resisted Moses' call to take the land of Canaan were not simply resisting Moses. They were actually resisting the plan of God, the order that God had established for the world after the flood.

Now that we have seen how the accounts of the flood and of Noah's sons apply to the original Israelite readers, we should turn to our third focus: Moses' original intention when writing about the defeat of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9.

## DEFEAT OF BABEL

To grasp how Moses wanted the Israelites to apply the story of Babel's defeat to their lives, we will look into three aspects this passage: first, Moses' description of the

city; second, his description of Yahweh's victory; and third, the implications for the Israelites as they moved toward the Promised Land. Let's look first at the description of the city.

## City

We should note that the name of the city, Babel, corresponds to the city which later came to be known as Babylon. By the time of Moses, the city of Babylon was well known in the Ancient Near East. It had been a center of civilization for many years, and its reputation had reached mythic proportions. So when Moses wrote about a place called Babel after the flood, his Israelite readers would have immediately recognized this place as the primeval origin of a great urban center.

## Victory

A second important aspect of Genesis 11:1-9 is the way in which Moses described Yahweh's victory over this great primeval city. At several points in this story, Moses displayed the grandeur of God's victory by contrasting the outlooks of the inhabitants of Babel with his own true outlook. For example, consider the way Moses handled the theme of scattering, or in Hebrew, the verb *puts* (פִּיֵּץ). On the one hand, the inhabitants of Babel were deeply concerned with the possibility that they might be scattered. In 11:4 we find that they built the city so that they may "not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

But by contrast, Moses reported twice that God did precisely what the people of Babel did not want to happen. In 11:8 we read that:

**The Lord scattered them ... over all the earth (Genesis 11:8).**

And again in 11:9 we find that:

**From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth (Genesis 11:9).**

Frequently in the Old Testament, the term "scatter" has the very negative connotation of utter defeat in battle. Defeated soldiers are scattered as their enemies chase them away, slaughtering them as they flee. And this is the connotation in this story as well. Moses presented this story as an account of an astonishing victory for Yahweh. Yahweh called his heavenly host to war against the city of Babel, and to chase away its fleeing inhabitants across the face of the earth.

Another way in which Moses contrasted his outlook with that of the inhabitants of Babel was with respect to the size of the city and its tower. According to Genesis 11:4, the inhabitants of Babel wanted a tower that reached to the heavens, the place of their gods. But Moses scoffed at this idea. Instead, in Genesis 11:5 he wrote that:

**The Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building (Genesis 11:5).**

The Hebrew word *yarad* (יָרַד), which is here translated “came down,” has a rather specific connotation in this story. God did not simply notice the city; he did not even simply come to the city. Instead, whereas the inhabitants of Babel wanted to build a tower that reached to the heavens, Moses insisted that Yahweh had to come down from the heights of heaven just to see the city. So we see that Moses jeered at the pretense of the inhabitants of Babel. From Yahweh’s point of view, this city was little more than a tiny speck.

Finally, we should note how the defeat of Babel led Moses to deride the reputation of this primeval city. The inhabitants of the city called it Babel. In the languages of Mesopotamia, the term *babel* meant “the gate of god.” This name expressed the belief that their ziggurat actually formed a gateway to the gods, and that they were secured by the powers of heaven.

But Moses had a different viewpoint on the name of the city. Since Yahweh had severely defeated Babel, the city was clearly not the gate of God. So, what then did the name mean? Moses’ strikingly sarcastic answer appears in Genesis 11:9:

**That is why it was called Babel — because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world (Genesis 11:9).**

To understand Moses’ sarcasm in this verse, we need to understand how he played with the sounds of two Hebrew words. First he said, “That is why it was called Babel.” The Hebrew word for “Babel” is simply *babel* (בָּבֶל), a Hebrew version of what the Mesopotamians called that place. But then Moses explained that the city had this name because the Lord confused human language there. The Hebrew word translated “confused” is *balal* (בָּלַל), which sounds similar enough to *babel* in Hebrew that Moses’ sarcasm worked. He reviled the ancient city by saying that the real reason it was called Babel was because of *balal* or confusion took place there. So, from Moses’ point of view, the name “Babel” was appropriate for this place, not because it was the gate of God, but because it was a place of confusion, confusion for the whole world. Through this sarcasm, Moses utterly reversed the awesome reputation that Babel had in his day. He led the Israelites in delightful laughter as he told them that the victory of their God Yahweh had made a joke out of the greatest city of primeval history.

With the description of the city and Yahweh’s victory in mind, we are in a position to see the implications of this story for the people of Israel as they moved toward the Promised Land.

## Implications

As we know, at Kadesh Barnea, Moses sent spies into the land of Canaan who returned with bad reports. They claimed that Israel could not conquer the land of Canaan

because the forces there were too great. As a result, the Israelites turned away from the conquest and spent the next forty years wandering in the wilderness. It was only when the next generation came to adulthood that Moses was ready to move Israel against Canaan once again.

One aspect of these bad reports helps us understand the significance of the defeat of primeval Babel. Listen to what the spies said about the cities of Canaan as reported in Deuteronomy 1:28:

**The people are stronger and taller than we are; the cities are large, with walls up to the sky (Deuteronomy 1:28).**

Unfortunately, most modern translations of this verse fail to draw the connection between this description of the Canaanite cities and the tower of Babel. When the spies spoke of “walls up to the sky,” the term for “sky” is the Hebrew word *shamayim* (שָׁמַיִם), which is often translated “heaven.” In fact, it is the same term used about the tower of Babel when it is described as “a tower that reaches to the heavens” in Genesis 11:4. In both cases, the idea was that the cities were invincible because they reached to the heights of heaven.

So it is that Moses drew a connection between the primeval city of Babel and the cities of Canaan. The Israelites thought that the walls surrounding the cities of Canaan reached to heaven, much like those who built the tower at Babel thought that their ziggurat had reached heaven. This connection between the city of Babel and the cities of Canaan brings Moses’ purpose to light. Put simply, the Canaanite cities before the people of Israel may have seemed to reach to heaven, but they were still no match for the power of Yahweh. In the primeval days, Yahweh moved against the greatest city known to humanity, whose tower supposedly reached to heaven as well. Yet, this primeval city, which was greater than any city of Canaan, was easily destroyed by Yahweh.

Just as God had delivered the human race into a new order through the primeval flood, he had delivered Israel from Egypt. And just as God had ordained conflict between Shem and Canaan, Moses was leading Israel toward the land of the Canaanites. And just as God defeated the great city of Babel, he would soon give victory to Israel against the cities of Canaan. From these chapters of the primeval history, the people of Israel should have understood that to follow Moses toward the Promised Land was to move in the right direction.

So far, we have seen the literary structure and original meaning of Moses’ record of Genesis 6:9–11:9. Now we are ready to ask a third question: what are some of the ways we should apply this material to our lives today?

## MODERN APPLICATION

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In our usual fashion, we will approach the question of modern application by following the New Testament’s description of the three stages of Christ’s kingdom. We will look first at how the flood of deliverance and the resulting new order apply to the inauguration of the kingdom in the first coming of Christ. Then we will turn to the



relevance of these matters for the continuation of the kingdom throughout the history of the church. And finally, we will examine how the New Testament applies this portion of the primeval history to the consummation of the kingdom when Christ returns in glory.

As we approach the final chapters of Moses' primeval history in this way, we will discover that the New Testament extends Moses' original purpose for Israel into the three stages of Christ's kingdom, his work in the past, in the present and in the future. Let's look first at the ways in which the New Testament views these themes in light of the first coming of Christ.

## **INAUGURATION**

In the inauguration of the kingdom, Christ accomplished a great salvation on the behalf of his people in ways that corresponded to the themes Moses emphasized in Genesis 6:9–11:9. We can see these connections in at least two ways: the covenant which Christ mediated, and the victory he accomplished.

### **Covenant**

On the one hand, Christ brought deliverance to his people by means of a covenant that rescued them from the judgment of God. As we have seen, Noah played a special role as the mediator of a covenant, and Moses drew upon this fact as he explained his own ministry to Israel. In a similar fashion, the New Testament teaches that Christ is our deliverer because he mediated a new covenant when he came to this earth.

All too often, Christians fail to realize that Christ came to this earth when God's people were under divine judgment. Because Israel so flagrantly violated the covenants of the Old Testament, in 586 B.C. the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the people of Israel never fully recovered from foreign domination. But the prophet Jeremiah predicted that God would redeem a people out of the fire of exile by establishing a new covenant in the future. In Jeremiah 31:31 the prophet announced:

**“The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah”  
(Jeremiah 31:31).**

As most Christians know, the New Testament teaches that Jesus came to this earth as the mediator of this new covenant. Jesus himself acknowledged this role for himself when he spoke to his disciples at the Last Supper. As we read in Luke 22:20, he told them:

**This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you  
(Luke 22:20).**

So we see that just as Noah delivered from judgment as the mediator of a divine covenant, in the inauguration of the kingdom Jesus delivered those who trusted him from judgment by mediating the new covenant through his blood, which he shed on the cross.

## Victory

In addition to bringing a new covenant, Jesus' earthly ministry fulfilled the theme of victory in holy war. Moses' focused on the theme of holy war as a part of the new order after the flood. He established that the new order of the world required Israel to move forward into the conquest of Canaan, and he assured them of a great victory. In comparison, listen to the way Paul described Christ's victory at the inauguration of the kingdom in Colossians 2:15:

**And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Colossians 2:15).**

As we see here, Jesus' victory in his first coming was not political, but spiritual. Jesus' death and resurrection initiated the defeat of the evil powers and spiritual authorities that ruled over the world in his day. His work of redemption made a public spectacle of them much like Yahweh had made a spectacle of the primeval city of Babel, and later had destroyed the great cities of Canaan.

In this sense, Jesus not only delivered through his new covenant, but he was also victorious over the spiritual forces of darkness in his death and resurrection. Followers of Christ look to Christ's earthly ministry as the beginning of the final victory promised long ago in the book of Genesis.

As we should expect, the New Testament does not simply relate the themes of Genesis 6:9–11:9 to the first coming of Christ. They also apply to the continuation of the kingdom, the time in which we now live.

## CONTINUATION

The New Testament describes the time between the first and second comings of Christ in at least two ways that relate to the last chapters of Moses' primeval history. These perspectives relate directly to the importance of baptism and spiritual warfare in the Christian life. As we live the Christian life in this age, we come into contact with the significance of Noah's flood and the new order established after that flood.

## Baptism

One New Testament passage in particular describes baptism in connection with the flood of deliverance in Noah's day. Listen to what the apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:20-22:

**God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also — not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand — with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him (1 Peter 3:20-22).**

In this remarkable passage, Peter directly connected every person's experience of salvation during the continuation of the kingdom to the flood of Noah's day. He began by noting that Noah and his family were saved through water. Their deliverance through water opened the way for humanity to enter a renewed world of blessing.

But also notice that Peter drew a direct relationship between the water of Noah's flood and the Christian life by focusing on baptism. He said that the water in Noah's day symbolized, or anticipated the water of Christian baptism. As we have seen in this lesson, the water of Noah's day cleansed the world of horrible corruption and opened the way for a new beginning, much like Moses' passing through the Red Sea removed the tyranny of Egypt and brought a new beginning for the nation of Israel. Well, in a similar way, the water of baptism cleanses believers of their sins and grants them a new beginning of everlasting life in Christ.

Now we must note carefully that 1 Peter 3:21 states that baptism saves only in the sense that it is the pledge of a good conscience toward God. In other words, mere washing with water during baptism does not save anyone. Instead, it is only as baptism is the pledge of a heart forgiven and cleansed from sin by faith in Christ that it symbolizes salvation. So it is that the New Testament applies the flood of deliverance in Noah's day to the continuation of the kingdom by asserting that every time an individual comes to Christ in saving faith, he or she is taken through the cleansing water of baptism and into a new life, much like Noah was brought through the flood into a new world.

## **Spiritual Warfare**

As we have seen, however, Moses' primeval history indicated that the water of Noah's day delivered humanity into a holy war. Moses originally drew attention to this fact to encourage Israel to conform to this new order by moving into the conquest of Canaan. In a similar fashion, the New Testament applies this teaching to the continuation of the kingdom as it describes the spiritual warfare every believer faces. Listen to the way Paul put the matter in Ephesians 6:11-12:

**Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:11-12).**

This and other New Testament passages plainly teach that Christians today are at war with evil. Unfortunately, many Christians today fail to embrace this dimension of their spiritual lives, much like the Israelites following Moses tried to avoid the conquest of Canaan. But the New Testament's perspective is clear. We must join in this spiritual battle. As Paul put it in Ephesians 6:13:

**Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand (Ephesians 6:13).**

If we don the armor of God, we will be victorious in our spiritual warfare.

So we see that just as the New Testament connects Noah's deliverance through the flood to our deliverance through baptism, it also teaches that just as the primeval world was delivered to warfare, Christian baptism delivers us to engage in spiritual warfare every day of our lives.

## CONSUMMATION

In light of the way the New Testament applies the last chapters of the primeval history to the inauguration and continuation of the kingdom, it is not surprising to discover that the consummation of the kingdom is also described in terms of Noah's flood and the warfare of the new primeval order.

### Final Cataclysm

New Testament writers made these connections by describing the return of Christ in glory as the final cataclysm and the final battle. In 2 Peter 3 we find an explicit association of Noah's primeval flood with the return of Christ in glory. Listen to the way Peter began his discussion in verses 3-6.

**You must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed (2 Peter 3:3-6).**

In this passage Peter corrected scoffers who pointed to the uniformity of the order of nature as proof that Jesus would not return. They believed that from the time of creation, everything had remained uniform. Nothing had ever disrupted the world from the way God had made it in the beginning. And since nothing had ever changed, they believed that nothing ever would.

But Peter appealed to Moses' record of Noah's flood to prove otherwise. God created the world in the beginning out of water, but during the days of Noah, the world was destroyed by a flood. A major cataclysm had occurred in the history of the world. God had intervened and destroyed the world in the days of Noah. But listen to Peter's conclusion in 2 Peter 3:7:

**By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men (2 Peter 3:7).**

Put simply, Peter argued that just as the primeval world had come to an end through the flood, the present heavens and earth would come to an end at the return of Christ in judgment. To be sure, this time, judgment will come by fire and not by water, but we can be sure that when God decides to act against sin in the world for the final time, it will be through a great cosmic destruction, much as it was in the primeval flood.

In this way, the New Testament teaches us to view the return of Christ in terms of Noah's flood. In the days of Noah, the wicked were judged and removed from the earth by a great cosmic upheaval. In an even greater way, when Christ returns in glory, there will be a cataclysm that utterly disrupts the world as we know it. The wicked will be removed from the earth, and all who follow Christ will be delivered into a grand and eternal new heavens and earth.

## **Final Battle**

As we have seen, however, in the primeval history Noah's flood was accompanied by conflict and war between the people of God and the enemies of God. In line with this association, the New Testament also describes Christ's return as a final cosmic battle. Listen to the way the apostle John wrote about the return of Christ in Revelation 19:11-16:

**I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS (Revelation 19:11-16).**

In spectacular language of apocalyptic vision, John declared that the return of Christ would be a worldwide battle in which Christ himself would appear and destroy all of his

enemies. The glory of an eternal victory will come to those who have trusted Christ for salvation, but judgment and destruction will fall upon those who have rejected him.

So we see that the New Testament presents the consummation of the kingdom of Christ as the ultimate experience of God's victory over evil. God remains determined to establish his kingdom against all foes. When Christ returns in glory, this divine purpose will be fully realized. The wicked will be destroyed and the people of God in Christ will enjoy eternal victory and peace in the new heaven and new earth.

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## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson we have looked at Genesis 6:9–11:9. In this portion of Scripture, Moses revealed the right direction for the people of Israel to follow as he led them toward the Promised Land. We have seen the literary structure of these chapters, and how Moses designed them to encourage Israel to move forward with confidence toward the conquest of Canaan. And we have also seen how the New Testament applies these themes to the three stages of Christ's kingdom.

As we face the struggles and challenges of living for Christ in this fallen world, we must take to heart the message which Moses gave the people of Israel long ago. In Christ, God has delivered us from the tyranny of sin, just as he delivered the primeval world through Noah. But he has also set us on a path that requires a period of conflict and struggle as we wait for the day when Christ brings ultimate victory to his people. Until that time, we know that the world in which we live is not yet perfect, but we can be sure that following Christ in his spiritual battle for the world is going in the right direction.

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