

## **Genesis 11:1-9** **The Tower of Babel**

Having spent the past three weeks looking at the Table of Nations, an elaborate, original, and unprecedented catalogue of the peoples of the then known world, we turn our attention today to that event which caused the dispersion of peoples into those known nations. This scattering was accomplished by the confusion of their common language. This act foiled the ambitions of those humans who sought to defy God and disobey His explicit instructions to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Genesis 9:1).

We should remark that this narrative is the final installment in Scripture regarding primeval history. Following this passage, the Bible moves on to the chosen line of Shem resulting in Abram, who would be called by God to,

“Go forth from your country,  
And from your relatives  
And from your father’s house,  
To the land which I will show you” (Genesis 12:1).

Abram’s obedience, contrasted with that of the inhabitants of the land of Shinar mentioned in this narrative, set the stage for the patriarchal history recounted in Genesis. From there the people of God went into slavery in Egypt, and then were restored to the land promised them. In the intervening years, the Israelites received the Law and became a nation. And all of the Old Testament follows.

But the narrative of the Tower of Babel does not look only forward. It also looks back into the futile attempt of Adam and Eve to usurp authority independent of the God Who created them. There is much in common between the hubris of the tower builders and Eve’s desire,

“<sup>4</sup>The serpent said to the woman, ‘you surely will not die! <sup>5</sup>For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ <sup>6</sup>When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate” (Genesis 3:4-6).

Eve, and Adam, wanted what they could not have. They defied the explicit command of God and sought to gain independence from His authority. The builders of Babel were likewise motivated. Even the setting of the two narratives is similar. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers which flowed out of Eden were part of the geographic formation known later as the plains of Shinar. So as the first chapters of Genesis relates, following the disembarkation from the ark, the descendants of Noah and his sons moved southeast into the lower Tigris and Euphrates River valley. This was a rich and relatively fertile land, and it seemed the perfect place in which to settle down and build a civilization.

### **Literary Structure**

Unlike the narrative of the Flood, the Tower of Babel has no comparative equal in the literature of the ancient Near East. Yet, there is a literary structure to this narrative which bears notice. The first four verses emphasize the human ambition. Verses 6-9 discuss the response of God. Verse 5 is the fulcrum upon which these verses hinge.

We can represent it visually like this:

“the whole earth used the same language” (v. 1)  
    “settled there” (v. 2)  
        “said to one another” (v. 3)  
            “come, let us make bricks” (v. 4)  
                “come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower” (v. 4)  
                    “the Lord came down” (v. 5)  
                        “the city and the tower which the sons of men had built” (v. 5)  
                            “come, let Us go down and there confuse their language” (v. 7).  
                                “they will not understand one another’s speech” (v. 7).  
                                    “scattered them abroad from there” (v. 8)  
  “the Lord confused the language of the whole earth” (v. 9)

The irony (dare we say sarcasm) of the writer that pervades this narrative is centered in the fact that despite the efforts of these humans to reach the heavens, the Lord chose to come down to witness their insignificant efforts.

### **Historical Context**

The Genesis narrative is too vague to provide much evidence for a particular historical setting. There were large structures built in the great Sumerian city of Ur by Ur-Nammu (r. 2062-2046 BC). Called *ziggurats*, they were pyramid-shaped buildings (either square or rectangular) with steps on each side. We do not know their precise use, but the expense involved in their construction must indicate that they served some greater purpose, such as administrative structures or worship centers. We do know that they were not personal residences, and they were not tombs (like the pyramids of Egypt).

### **A United People**

The writer begins by describing a united people. “<sup>1</sup>Now the whole earth used the same language and the same words. <sup>2</sup>It came about as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there” (v. 1-2). Having just studied the Table of Nations, we must remind ourselves that this is a case of intentional dischronolization on the part of the author. That is, the world of the Table of Nations obviously did not yet exist.

Instead, we have a world of one language and, apparently, one habitation. The verbiage used by the author emphasizes the oneness of mankind - “whole earth,” “same language,” “same words.” As we might expect, there are those commentators who argue that what is intended by the author is not the whole population of the planet, but rather these terms are a figure of speech for all the land of Mesopotamia.

However, since this narrative is tied to the Table of Nations, it seems best to understand it at face value, that is, this the author is referring to the entire known world.

When we consider what is meant by all the people using the same language, two alternatives present themselves. The first is that each people group had their own language, but also shared a common language. In other words, circumstances were much like the way Latin was the common language of the Roman Empire, or French the common language of Europe the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It seems that if this were the case, then the confusing of language that happens later is not really a *confusing* of a common tongue, but rather the *removal* of the ability to speak that tongue. A better, because perhaps simpler, approach is to consider that as the time period described is early in the development of humanity after the Flood, people simply spoke the same language.

Shinar is the land of Mesopotamia. Historically called Sumer, then later referred to as Akkad, the region was a natural place to settle after the Flood. We saw in the Table of Nations that Nimrod eventually established the cities of Babylon, Erech, Akkad, and Calneh there. Out of this area would arise Amraphel, king of Shinar, one of the eastern kings whom Abram would defeat in battle.

Curiously, in the context of the description of the land of Shinar as being located eastward, we are reminded of other passages such as,

“So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life”  
(Genesis 3:24).

“Then Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden”  
(Genesis 4:16).

“<sup>10</sup>Lot lifted up his eyes and saw all the valley of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere - this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah - like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt as you go to Zoar. <sup>11</sup>So Lot chose for himself all the valley of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus they separated from each other. <sup>12</sup>Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled in the cities of the valley, and moved his tents as far as Sodom”  
(Genesis 13:10-12).

“But to the sons of his concubines, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the east” (Genesis 25:6).

We need not make too much of this, but clearly there was something about the East that implied separation and, perhaps, being beyond the blessing of God.

## **Building Babel**

Next, the author turns to describing the aspirations of humanity. This will be contrasted with the actions of God later in the passage. We can notice that both begin with a speech of intention. Among the settlers, “<sup>3</sup>they said to one another, ‘come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.’ And they used brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar. <sup>4</sup>They said, ‘come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth’” (v. 3-4).

Even the building practices of the people are described. This may be because, at the time of the writing of Genesis, the Israelites and others around them such as the Canaanites used the plentiful natural rocks of Palestine to assemble their structures, not bricks. Besides, they had probably had enough brickmaking when slaves in Egypt. The technology of brickmaking was known to them (it had been developed a thousand years earlier), but was unnecessary. However, the use of fired bricks, set in tar, was common to the area under consideration, southern Mesopotamia. The author was simply educating his audience.

The word used to describe the building itself, *migdāl*, usually implies a tower or other fortified building, or even an entire fortified area (think Athenian acropolis).

“<sup>12</sup>Walk about Zion and go around her;  
Count her towers;  
<sup>13</sup>Consider her ramparts;  
Go through her palaces” (Psalm 48:12-13).

“The blow of his battering rams he will direct against your walls, and with his axes he will break down your towers” (Ezekiel 26:9).

Metaphorically, the word also refers to an attitude of pride, and as such, is something God hates and will destroy.

“Your heart will meditate on terror:  
Where is he who counts?  
Where is he who weighs?  
Where is he who counts the towers?” (Isaiah 33:18).

“<sup>1</sup>O Lord, You are my God;  
I will exalt You, I will give thanks to Your name;  
For You have worked wonders,  
Plans formed long ago, with perfect faithfulness.  
<sup>2</sup>For You have made a city into a heap,  
A fortified city into a ruin;  
A palace of strangers is a city no more,  
It will never be rebuilt” (Isaiah 25:1-2).

The hubristic aspirations of the builders is elaborated on by the writer when he adds that their goal was to build a tower “whose top will reach into heaven” (v. 4). There are many other Hebrew words that could have been used to describe a *tall* tower, but the intent here is to show figuratively the ego of the builders. The illustration was not soon forgotten. In describing the cities of the Canaanites, the fearful people claimed,

“Where can we go up? Our brethren have made our hearts melt, saying, ‘the people are bigger and taller than we; the cities are large and fortified to heaven. And besides, we saw the sons of the Anakim there’” (Deuteronomy 1:28).

Even the prophets appropriated the phrase,

And though she should fortify her lofty stronghold,  
From Me destroyers will come to her,’ declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 51:53).

Their clearly stated goal was to build such a building because it would bring them a great reputation, that it would “make for ourselves a name” (v. 4). They assumed such a building would provide security. They hoped that the reputation of their city as impregnable would spread to others who might be potential enemies. This was no small consideration. After all, they lived on the plain of Shinar. A flat, though fertile, plain provided easy access to invaders.

Another factor was that the city was located among the two great rivers of the area. Rivers were excellent for trading purposes, but they also provided easy access for potential invaders. A further stated goal of the builders was to prevent from being scattered. That is, they hoped to avoid either being driven from their homes or even taken into slavery. Simply put, they were trying to empower themselves. They wanted to be self-sufficient. Their understanding that they needed protection was valid; their method for achieving it was not.

### **Stopping the Building**

The narrative then turns to God’s response to this attempt of man to be self-sufficient. “The Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built” (v. 5). The irony of the writer is unmistakable. Though the people determined to build a tower that reached the heavens, God had to come down to see it. The author mocks the people whose tiny tower could not be seen from the throne of God. Naturally, we take this anthropomorphism as the literary device it is. We know that God *could* see the tower from heaven, and did not need to come down to view it more closely. Neither should we take the coming down of God as literal. He can act from heaven itself.

But, unlike the Flood narrative, God response is measured. He is not angered to the point of taking the extreme action of destroying all humanity. Rather, His reaction is more like that of the Garden, where He responds to the frailty of His people with correction and redirection. As the inhabitants of Shinar had done, God begins with the statement of intent, before he proceeds to action.

“<sup>6</sup>The Lord said, ‘behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them. <sup>7</sup>Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another’s speech’” (v. 6-7).

However, the irony of the writer cannot be understood as implying that God did not take the building of the tower seriously. God neither laughed at them, nor ridiculed them. Instead, He sought to destroy completely their aspirations.

The specific language used in Scripture is always worth attending to. In the present example, we see that in the Table of Nations, the word most frequently used was *gôy*, a word that emphasizes a geographic and political relationship. Now the writer uses *'am*, which means kinship ties. This reflects the particular concern of God. These people are so closely linked that they simply will not separate. Their entanglement is personal, and it will require an act of God to compel them to spread out.

God's response is, though, surprising. He does not destroy the tower. Instead He confuses their language. Had God simply used an earthquake, or some other even more clearly divine intervention to wreck the structure, the people might have simply begin to rebuild it again. God's solution was for the long-term. It was not about the tower, really, it was about His command to spread out and repopulate the earth. In this way, we can see that God was not acting simply out of a desire to punish. His motives were also preventative and beneficial. Only if humankind dispersed could it receive the blessings God had in store. As in Genesis 3, when mankind oversteps the boundaries allotted by God, God steps in to thwart such behavior. Man's attempts at self-exaltation will always come at a price. But as with us, God's correction is for our benefit, even though it might not seem so at the time.

### **Scattered People**

The narrative of man's futile attempt to gain what he wanted in violation of God's specific commands ends as we know it must. <sup>8</sup>"So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. <sup>9</sup>Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of the whole earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth" (v. 8-9). Notice that not only the building of the tower was halted, but the building of the entire city itself ceased. The culture of power was destroyed, and the people were compelled to do what God intended. The plan was set for Abram to fulfill God's purposes that "all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

The irony of the passage continues in describing how the people who had wanted to make a name for themselves did so, but the name they acquired was a name of shame. Forever, Babel would be the example of human arrogance abruptly rebuked by an omnipotent God. The etymology is not linguistic, but related to the incident described in the narrative. This understanding is found even in the oldest attested non-biblical name for Babylon, *ká-dingir-ki*, which means "gate of God."

## Takeaways

For the Mosaic community, the significance of this narrative is that it reminded them of the critical role played by Abram in the world of nations. Secondly, as the Israelites were preparing to enter the Promised Land of Canaan, it was also profitable to remind them of the power of their God over the worldly forces they were about to encounter. The cities of Canaan were seen by the Israelites as overwhelming fortresses.

“Nevertheless, the people who live in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large; and moreover, we saw the descendants of Anak there” (Numbers 13:28).

“<sup>1</sup>Hear, O Israel! You are crossing over the Jordan today to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than you, great cities fortified to heaven, <sup>2</sup>a people great and tall” (Deuteronomy 9:1-2).

This narrative also provides a striking contrast between the aspirations of man and the objectives of God. Man, lost in his self-achievement, offends God when he takes it upon himself to further his own plans instead of those of his Creator.

God’s actions of dispersing the peoples of the earth was not a punishment. As we saw when looking at the Table of Nations, this act was one of purpose and intent, not one of reaction. God designed history to bring to fallen humanity the blessings of Jesus Christ. The circumstances of that event involved a two millenium long history. As with the dispersion of the church following the persecution in Jerusalem described in Acts 8, God’s larger purposes were to be fulfilled in what seemed to be a negative event.

The Scriptures see a single people of God. They are not defined by nationality or language. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out on members of varying nations. In the revelation presented to him, John saw “<sup>9</sup>a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; <sup>10</sup>and they cry out with a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9-10).

As God promised Abram, “And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). We know that God does desire unity among His people. But that unity is not to be a unity of purpose or a unity of language. It was, and remains, a unity of calling as His sons and daughters. It is not the benefit of a social state, it is the gift of God.