

The Tower of Babel (11:1–9)

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Translation

¹ The whole earth had^a one language and one kind of speech,^b

² When they journeyed^a in^b the East, they found a plain in the country of Shinar and they settled there.

³ They said to each other, "Come,^a let us make^b bricks and bake^b them^c thoroughly."^d So they had bricks for stone and asphalt for mortar,^d ⁴ Then they said, "Come,^a let us build for ourselves^b a city and a tower^c with its top in the sky^c to make for ourselves^b a name, lest we are scattered^d over the face of the whole earth."

⁵ Then the LORD came down to^a see the city and the tower which mankind had built.

⁶ The LORD said, "Since^a they are one people and they all^b have one language and this is the beginning^c of their activity, now^d lest nothing they plot^e to do be beyond^f them, ⁷ come,^a let us^b go down and mix^c up their language there so that^d they cannot understand each other's language."

⁸ Then the LORD scattered^a them from there over the face of the whole earth and they stopped building the city.^b

⁹ Therefore its name was called^a Babel, because there the LORD mixed up the language of the whole earth and from there the LORD scattered^b them over the face of the whole earth.

Notes

1.a. The verb, 3 masc. sg impf. הִיָּה, does not agree with the term "earth." So Gispén suggests it agrees with כָּל "whole"; Westermann, that it anticipates וַיְהִי at the beginning of v 2.

1.b. G adds πάντων "for all."

2.a. **ב** + inf constr 3 + **נסע** masc. pl. suff.

2.b. G, Vg take **מקדם** as “from the East,” but many modern commentators cite 13:11 in support of translating it “eastward.” The former translation is more natural, but clearly the issue depends on where the people are supposed to have come from before arriving in Babylon: “in the East” leaves the issue undecided.

3.a. **הבה**, probably impv. from **יהב** “to give,” has become purely hortatory (*SBH*, 57).

3.b. 1 pl. coh **שרפ/לבן**.

3.c. “Them” understood from previous clause. Note how the two clauses complement each other (*SBH*, 98).

3.d-d. Note chiasmus “was ... bricks // asphalt ... was,” tying the two aspects of the event together (*SBH*, 20).

4.a. **הבה**; cf. 11:3a.*

4.b. **לָנוּ**: the doubled letter *l* is euphonic, *daghë forte conjunctivum*, and is found following *eh* on words whose first syllable is stressed (*GKC*, 20f; Lambdin, 208). “For ourselves”: so-called ethical dative, used to emphasize the significance of an action for a particular subject (*GKC*, 119s).

4.c-c. Verbless circumstantial clause (*SBH*, 85).

4.d. 1 pl. impf. qal, **פּוֹץ**.

5.a. **ל** + inf, expressing purpose (*GKC*, 114g).

6.a. Cf. use of **הנה** to introduce subordinate clause (Lambdin, 169–71), and parallel construction in 3:22.

6.b. 3 + **כל** masc. pl. suff.

6.c. Inf constr hiph 3 + **חלל** masc. pl. suff.

6.d. On use of **ועתה**, cf. H. A. Brongers (*VT* 15 [1965] 289–99).

6.e. 3 masc. pl. impf. qal, **זמם** (*GKC*, 67 dd).

6.f. 3 masc. sg impf. niph, **פּוֹץ**.

7.a. Cf. use of **הבה** in vv 3, 4.

7.b. “Let us,” echoing v 4 and analogous usage to 1:26; cf. discussion there.

7.c. 1 pl. coh, **בלל** (*GKC*, 67 dd).

7.d. Unusual for **אשר** to introduce final clause, but cf. Exod 20:26 (Joüon, 186f).

8.a. Waw consec + 3 masc. sg impf. hiph פּוֹץ.

8.b. SamPent, G add “and the tower,” assimilating to vv 4–5.

9.a. Lit., “one called,” 3 masc. sg “he called” being used for indefinite subj (*GKC*, 144d, Joüon, 155e) cf. 16:14; 19:22.

9.b. 3 masc. sg pf hiph 3 + פִּיִּי masc. pl. suff.

Form/Structure/Setting

The tower of Babel is a short but brilliant example of Hebrew story telling. The compositional techniques have been thoroughly explored by Cassuto, Fokkelmann, Kikawada, and Auffret. Word play, chiasmus, paronomasia, and alliteration are just some of the devices used to unify and accentuate the message of the tale.

Its beginning and end are marked by an inclusion—“the whole earth had one language” (v 1) ... “the language of the whole earth” (v 9)—and semantically “a plain in the country of Shinar” (v 2) corresponds to “Babel” (v 9). The overall arrangement of the story has parallels elsewhere in the primeval history. The double וַיְהִי opening of vv 1–2 matches 4:2b–3, while הֵן “since” plus וְעַתָּה “now” plus a final clause (vv 6–7) parallels the similar conclusion in 3:22. The etiological “therefore” עַל־כֵּן (v 9) echoes the concluding comment of 2:24. These features of the narrative show that the tower of Babel narrative is very much at home in the primeval history and bears several of the hallmarks of the style of these chapters.

Furthermore, the narrative builds towards the explanation of the name of Babylon, Babel. As elsewhere in Genesis (cf. Adam, Noah, Eve), a proper name is pre-echoed in the story long before the word itself is heard. As soon as the men of Babylon, start speaking they use words that contain the consonants *b* and *l*, or *p* and *m*, phonetically close to *b*, e.g., *nilbēnāh lēbñm* “let us make bricks,” *nibneh-llānū* “let us build for ourselves,” and *nābēlāh* “let us mix up.” Some words just rhyme with *bābel*, e.g., *lāhem*, *āreš*, *wayyāpeš*, *yibbāšer* (though it should be remembered that the Masoretic pronunciation may not be identical with that in use in biblical times). It should be noted that many of these phonetic allusions to Babylon also contain *n*. This makes the contrast between man’s *nilbēnāh* “let us make (bricks),” v 3, and God’s *nābēlāh* “let us mix up,” v 7, the more dramatic. The LORD literally mixes up *nilbēnāh* through his judgment. Indeed, *nābēlāh* sounds very like *nēbālāh* “the folly of the impious.” The name “Babel” thus stands forever as a reminder of the failure of godless folly (cf Ps 14:1).

Other key words that lend unity to the narrative are *šām* “there,” *šēm* “name,” and *šamayim* “heaven” (vv 2, 4, 7, 8, 9). The phrase “face of the earth” also seems to echo the word “scattered,” and the people’s fear anticipates God’s judgment (vv 4, 8, 9) for “face ... the earth” *pēnē* ... *hā.āreš* begins with *p* and ends in *š*, just as does *pš* “scatter” (vv 4, 8, 9).

The narrative itself falls into an introduction, five brief scenes, and a conclusion.

v 1	Introduction
v 2	Scene 1: The travels of mankind
vv 3–4	Scene 2: Human plans to build a city and tower
v 5	Scene 3: Divine inspection visit
vv 6–7	Scene 4: Divine plans to frustrate mankind
v 8	Scene 5: Mankind is scattered: building stopped
v 9	Conclusion: What Babel means

It is particularly obvious how scene 2 (human plans) matches scene 4 (divine plans). Note the introductory הִבֵּה “come” in vv 3, 4, 7. Similarly, in scene 1 mankind’s journeyings halt, but in scene 5 they resume. Scene 3, God’s inspection visit, is the turning point in the sequence.

As already noted, verbal inclusions link the introduction (v 1) and the conclusion (v 9). A similar use of key words enhances the scenic parallelism. The whole narrative can be viewed as cast in parallel panels.

v 1	“one language”	v 6	“one people”
	“one kind of speech”		one language”
v 2	“there”	v 7	“there”

v 3	“each other “		each other”
v 4	“build ... a city”	v 8	“building the city”
	“name”	v 9	“its name”
	“lest we are scattered over the face of the whole earth”	vv 8, 9	“the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth”

But it is possible also to see the narrative as a palistrophe, or extended chiasmus.

- A “The whole earth had one language” (v 1)
- B “there” (v 2)
- C “each other” (v 3)
- D “Come let us make bricks” (v 3)
- E “let us build for ourselves” (v 4)
- F “a city and a tower”
- G “the LORD came down . . .” (v 5)
- F¹ “the city and the tower”
- E¹ “which mankind had built”
- D¹ “come... let us mix up” (v 7)
- C¹ “each other’s language”
- B¹ “from there” (v 8)
- A¹ “the language of the whole earth” (v 9)

This simultaneous use of parallel panels and palistrophe is remarkable and unusual. Another good example is Gen 17 (cf. S. E. McEvenue, *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer*, 157–59). It should be noted that v 5 stands right outside the parallel panels and constitutes the turning point in the palistrophe. This verse, scene 3 on our analysis, is the hinge or crossover point in the story. It both looks back to what has been done and forward to what is to come.

- Scenes 1–2: Human deeds
- Scene 3: Inspection of the city and tower which mankind had built
- Scene 4–5: Divine actions

Scene 3 is the decisive divine intervention that reverses the tide of human history. It is comparable to “And God remembered Noah” in 8:1. Like 8:1, v 5 occurs at the midpoint of a story and heralds the undoing of what has gone before: there the flood waters start to fall; here the building stops. In both stories the palistrophic pattern serves to underline the fundamental inversion that takes place in the events; but whereas in 8:1 God intervenes to save mankind in Noah, here the LORD steps in to frustrate human scheming. The similar phraseology in the human and divine speeches and particularly the exchange of *נִלְבְּנָה* “let us make bricks”

into *נִבְלָה* “let us mix up” also serve to express most vividly the total reversal that has taken place.

Unlike the case with the flood story, no good Near Eastern parallel to the tower of Babel story is known. But as with Gen 2–3, certain oriental motifs seem to have been drawn on to create our present narrative. The great ziggurats of Mesopotamia were a well-known feature of its landscape. In particular *Enuma Elish* celebrates the building of Babylon and its temple tower, and Sumerian tradition tells of a time when all men spoke or will speak the same language. Nowhere else do we know of a story that combines these ideas in the way that Genesis does, nor do extra-biblical sources look on these events with the biblical perspective.

The mention of the universal world language comes in the Sumerian epic “Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta.” As translated by Kramer and Cohen, lines 136–40 look back to a golden age when “there was no snake, ... no scorpion ... no fear, no terror. Man had no rival.” In that period “the whole universe, the people in unison, to Enlil in one tongue spoke” (ll. 14546). But it continues:

Enki ... the leader of the gods
changed the speech in their mouths
brought contention into it,
Into the speech of man that (until then) had been one

(ll. 150–56).

Though Kramer held that this text “puts it beyond all doubt that the Sumerians believed there was a time when

all mankind spoke one and the same language,” Alster (*RA* 67 [1973] 101–9) and H. Schmökel (*NERTOT*, 87) argued that this text is really looking forward to a time when all mankind would speak the same language, the Sumerian language. This would be closer to Zeph 3:9 which looks forward to an age when God “will change the speech of all peoples to a pure speech.”

The interpretation of this Sumerian text is fraught with difficulty, but on either view the tower of Babel story can be seen as an interesting comment on earlier tradition. On Kramer’s interpretation, the OT is offering an alternative explanation of the diversity of languages. Genesis is affirming that the diversity of languages represents a divine judgment on mankind and is not the product of rivalry between the gods Enlil and Enki. Here, as in the flood story, Genesis explains things in terms of a moral monotheism, whereas Mesopotamia saw things in terms of polytheistic competitiveness.

Alster’s view of the earlier tradition suggests that Genesis may be making a different point: the Sumerian gods saw the diversity of languages as undesirable because men were thereby prevented from joining in the worship of the great god Enlil, but Genesis holds that the confusion of languages is a divine antidote to human arrogance. Whereas Mesopotamia saw the human condition as improving, Genesis sees it as deteriorating. On Alster’s view, the Sumerian epic is vaunting the superiority of Sumerian civilization because one day the Sumerian language, the chief expression of that culture, will be adopted by all peoples. And certainly the Hebrew story is adamant that this is not so. Far from being a cultural and religious Mecca, Babylon epitomizes the folly of humanistic culture. This comes out very clearly in its comments on the tower-building. According to the Babylonians, their temple was constructed as “a likeness on earth of what he has wrought in heaven” (*EE* 6:113). Indeed, the Esagil was built by the lesser gods, the Annunaki, as a dwelling place for the great gods Marduk, Enlil, and Ea.

The Annunaki wielded the hoe;
 For one whole year they moulded its bricks.
 When the second year arrived
 they raised the head of Esagil, a replica of the Apsû.
 They built the lofty ziggurat of the Apsû
 and established its ... as a dwelling for Anu, Enlil and Ea.
 (*EE* 6:59–64, W. G. Lambert’s unpublished translation)

According to Speiser (*Genesis* 75) the mention of brick-making and a “tower with its top in the sky” in Gen 11:3–4 echoes *Enuma Elish*’s description of the building of the Esagil. But as already pointed out (see *Introduction*, p. xliv, and *Form/Structure/Setting*, p. 8), it is unlikely that Genesis is directly dependent upon *Enuma Elish*. Nevertheless, it was a commonplace of Babylonian thought that temples had their roots in the netherworld and their tops reached up to heaven (W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 327, nn. 83–84). So although Gen 11 is unlikely to be addressing *Enuma Elish*’s account of the building of the Esagil, it may well be mocking Babylonian boasts about their temples. Their fancy brickwork and their vaunted height are something to laugh at. Babylon shows man’s folly, not his wisdom, man’s impotence before the judgment of God.

When the present story could have been composed is uncertain. The temple tower called Etemenanki, which was associated with the Esagil, was built in the neo-Babylonian period by Nebuchadnezzar. It is therefore usually surmised that Genesis is referring to an earlier structure, perhaps erected in the old Babylonian period, which fell into ruin under the Cassites. Another possibility, suggested by von Soden, is that the Genesis story reflects the earlier building efforts of Nebuchadnezzar I (1123–1101 B.C.), whose great constructions came to an abortive end and hence became an occasion for jest and legend. Clearly, a number of motifs have been integrated in this narrative, which is usually assigned to J on the grounds of its obvious similarities with other J material in Gen 2–10. But whether it is possible to recover any earlier literary sources within 11:1–9 is doubtful. Gunkel’s view that two parallel accounts, one of city-building (vv 1, 3a, 4a, 6a, 7, 8b, 9a), the other of tower-building (vv 2, 4a, 3b, 5, 6b, 8a, 9b), have been combined in this chapter is now generally abandoned. However, Seybold (*VT* 26 [1976] 453–79) has suggested that one basic story (vv 2–4a, 5–6a $\alpha\beta$, 6a δ –7, 8b–9a α) has undergone two slight expansions. The first (1, 6a γ , 9a β) he attributes to J; the second (4b, 8a, 9b) to the redactor who integrated chap. 11 into the rest of Gen 1–11. Basically, he wishes to attribute most of the remarks about the confusion of language to J, though this is already mentioned in v 7, and the remarks about the dispersal of the nations to the final editor. While such a view of the editorial process is less unlikely than Gunkel’s, it does scant justice to the careful arrangement and the interplay of ideas and sounds that make this narrative such a finely crafted piece. In this passage it seems difficult to distinguish between author and editor, and the sources of his composition can only be indicated in the most general fashion by comparing it with other oriental traditions.

Comment

1 As introduction, “The whole earth had one language and one kind of speech” sets the scene for the subsequent narrative. “The whole earth,” here, as in 9:19, denotes all the inhabitants of the world. “One language” is literally “one lip,” שִׁפָּה. For a Sumerian parallel to the idea that at one time all mankind spoke the same language, see above *Form/Structure/Setting*. “One kind of speech” is literally “words, one.” The plural of אֶחָד “one” occurs in only four other passages. In 27:44; 29:20; Dan 11:20 it means “a few” (days); in Ezek 37:17, “one.” The latter sense seems more likely here. The narrative is not drawing attention to mankind’s limited vocabulary, “few words,” but to their unity of speech. It essentially parallels “one language.”

2 Scene 1, mankind’s journey, “When they journeyed in the east.” “Journey” נָסַע is often used of the patriarchal and Exodus wanderings (cf. 12:9; 33:17; Exod 12:37; 14:19). “In the east”: the parallel with 13:11 suggests that “eastward” would be an apt translation here. This would be a possible rendering, if we suppose that mankind is seen as emigrating from Ararat to Mesopotamia (cf. 8:4), though in this case “southward” would have been more exact geographically. However, elsewhere in Genesis מִקְדָּם, when used adverbially and not as a preposition, means “in the east” (2:8; 12:8; cf. Isa 9:11 [12]). Here and in 2:8, the people are “east of Canaan.” Traveling east of Eden was the judgment on Adam, Eve, and Cain (3:24; 4:16), and the mention of similar journeyings here may be intended as a reminder of mankind’s earlier sentence. “They found” probably expresses their relief that they can now settle down (cf. 26:17; Judg 17:8–9). “Plain,” בְּקָעָה, is usually a broad flat valley, like the Jordan valley near Jericho (Deut 34:3) or Esdraelon near Megiddo (2 Chr 35:22); here it refers to the even broader, flatter plain of Mesopotamia. “Shinar”: cf. *Comment* on 10:10. “They settled there”: cf. 11:31. As in Terah’s case, settling down is but the prelude to great upheaval!

3–4 The second scene allows us to hear the people planning their project. Nowhere is the fulfillment of their dreams described, although v 3b, “they had bricks for stone ... mortar,” and v 5, “which mankind had built,” indicate that they did make some progress.

3 The builders’ words are replete with ironic hints of the ultimate failure of their project. As already noted, the Hebrew words for “make bricks,” “for stone,” and “build for ourselves” contain the consonants *n*, *b*, *l*, which spell “mix up” (v 7) or “Babel” (v 9) and evoke the word “folly,” *nēbālāh*. In particular, the people’s express purpose in building, “to make a name, lest we are scattered over the face of the whole earth,” is precisely what they fail to achieve. For ultimately the LORD does scatter them (vv 8, 9), and the name given to their construction commemorates their failure, not their success.

“Let us make bricks.” Elsewhere this phrase is used only of the Hebrews making bricks in Egypt (Exod 5:7), but it is common in Akkadian. Indeed, *Enuma Elish* talks of molding bricks for a year to build the Esagil. The second clause, “bake them thoroughly,” while not such a clear pre-echo of Babel as the previous clause, contains the consonants *n*, *l*, and *p* (close to *b*).

“So they had bricks for stone and asphalt for mortar” is a brief aside introducing the narrator’s point of view and the approach of Israelites to building material. It is, of course, an accurate comparison of building techniques in Israel and Mesopotamia. The former used stone and mortar (בְּנֵי אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם denotes potter’s clay as well as mortar), whereas the latter used bricks (usually sun-dried, but here no doubt special kiln-baked bricks are meant) and asphalt, produced by exposing crude oil to the air. But this is more than a technical note on differences in ancient building methods; there is also an implied disparagement of Babylonian materials (we use stone; they have only brick!). And the whole comment combines a tight chiasm: “for them brick” // “asphalt for them,” with ingenious word play: *lēbēnāh/lē. aāben//haḥēmār/lahōmer*. Again it makes use of the significant *n*, *b*, *l*.

4 The focus returns to the deliberators in Shinar. The purpose of their brick manufacture now becomes clear—to build a city with a tower (“city and tower” is probably hendiadys). The tower is to be so high that “its top is in the sky or heavens.” Here the allusion to Babylonian theology is most obvious. Not only does their mutual exhortation “let us build for ourselves” contain those letters *n*, *b*, and *l*, but the main temple in Babylon was called the Esagil, i.e., the house with the raised head. From a purely human viewpoint, building a tower as high as the sky is an audacious undertaking, but it seems likely that Genesis views it as a sacrilege. For the sky is also heaven, the home of God, and this ancient skyscraper may be another human effort to become like God and have intercourse with him (cf. 3:5; 6:1–4).

“To make for ourselves a name.” Again the people’s ambition suggests impiety. God promised to make Abram’s name great (12:2) and also David’s (2 Sam 7:9, fulfilled in 2 Sam 8:13). But elsewhere in Scripture it

is God alone who makes a name for himself (e.g., Isa 63:12, 14; Jer 32:20; Neh 9:10). Mankind is again attempting to usurp divine prerogatives.

“Lest we are scattered over the face of the whole earth.” Cf. *Form/Structure/ Setting* above on the use of *p* and *š* in this clause. Possibly the desire to congregate in one place should be seen as a rejection of the divine command “to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth” (1:28; 9:1). But from a dramatic point of view, the irony of the story is certainly heightened: what man did his utmost to prevent, he is condemned to suffer by the decree of heaven (vv 8, 9).

5 Scene 3. The action now switches to heaven. Structurally and thematically, this scene marks the turning point in the story. With heavy irony we now see the tower through God’s eyes. This tower which man thought reached to heaven, God can hardly see! From the height of heaven it seems insignificant, so the LORD must come down to look at it! “He sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers” (Isa 40:22). God’s descent to earth to view the tower is no more proof of the author’s primitive anthropomorphic view of God than is God’s asking Adam and Eve where they were hiding in the garden an indication of his ignorance. It is simply a brilliant and dramatic way of expressing the puniness of man’s greatest achievements, when set alongside the creator’s omnipotence.

6–7 Scene 4. The LORD’s words are an obvious take-off on man’s words in vv 3–4. Man says, “Come, let us make bricks” (*niḇbēnāh*): God says, “Come, ... let us mix up” (*nābēh*). In v 3 the people speak “to each other”: in v 7 the LORD prevents them from understanding “each other.” Man tries to build “a tower with its top in the sky” (*šāmayim*) to make “a name” (*šēm*). God descends “there” (*šām*) to confuse their “language” (*šēpātām*). Men fear they will be “scattered over the face of the whole earth” (v 4), while the LORD is concerned that “nothing they plot to do will be beyond them” (v 6).

6 The structure (note the introductory הַי “since” and וְעַתָּה “now”) and sentiments closely resemble 3:22, “Since man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil, now lest he reach out ... and live for ever.”

“Since they are one people.” “People” אָמִים are characterized by common racial descent, whereas a “nation” גּוֹי is more of a political entity with common institutions, land, and, usually, language binding it together (*TDOT* 2:426–27). To say that “they are one people” is to underscore the message of the previous chapters that all mankind is descended from Noah and Adam.

But having “one language” makes this narrative prior to chap. 10, when the various nations of the world were established, each with their different tongue (10:5, 20, 31), a situation already intimated by the narrator in 11:1.

“This is the beginning of their activity.” As eating of the tree of knowledge could have been just the prelude to eating from the tree of life, so building the tower, an arrogant undertaking in itself, may be the forerunner of yet further trespass on the divine prerogatives: “nothing they plot” will “be beyond them.” “Be beyond them”:

the niph'al of בָּצַר is used in only one other passage, Job 42:2—“no purpose of thine can be thwarted”—again in conjunction with the root זָמַם “to plot, purpose.” This Job parallel suggests that only God may plan without limit. Man is not supposed to emulate his creator in this way. Indeed, the verb “to plot” tends either to be used of God (e.g., Jer 4:28; 51:12) or of nefarious human scheming (Deut 19:19; Ps 31:14[13]; 37:12).

7 “Come, let us go down and mix up.” On the use of “us,” cf. *Comment* on 1:26 and, in a very similar context, 3:22. It would be particularly appropriate for the LORD to invite the angels to assist in confusing the nations, for to their care were entrusted all the nations except Israel, the LORD’s special possession (Deut 32:8–9). “Go down”: it is pedantic to see this as contradicting v 5. Compare the similar remark in 18:21, “I will go down to see whether they have done according to the outcry.” In both passages the LORD knows what has been going on. Coming down to Babel or Sodom is a prelude to judgment.

“Mix up” (*nābēlāh*): see earlier discussion of the word play with *niḇbēnāh/ nēbālāh/bābel*. “Each other”: cf. v 3.

8 Scene 5 describes the final frustration of mankind’s plans. What they most feared—dispersal (v 4)—befalls them, and their grandiose construction project is halted. Expulsion from one’s former home marks the conclusion to the fall and to the Cain and Abel narratives as well (cf. 3:24; 4:16). “They stopped building the city.” The tower is not mentioned because it is the name of the city that is the focus of the narrative. To see the cessation of building and the dispersal of the nations as incompatible motifs is to miss the profound grasp of culture that this story exhibits. Without mutual communication through a common language it is impossible for men to cooperate either commercially or socially. Towers cannot be built nor communities live together unless those concerned can understand each other.

9 This is the conclusion to which the whole narrative has been driving: “Therefore its name was called Babel.” For similar concluding “therefores,” cf. 2:24; 4:15. Though this looks like a typical etiological formula

rather loosely tacked onto the preceding narrative, the repeated phonetic allusions to Babylon in the previous verses makes this an untenable view. The whole story is built up to explain the word “Babel” and to characterize it as under divine judgment.

The Babylonians understood Babel to mean “the gate of the god.” The Hebrews liked to suppose it to mean “mixed up, confused.” Here, as often in the OT, it is clear that the etymology offered is a popular one, an interpretation of a name based on a similar sounding word, not a scientific etymology explaining the verbal roots; cf. Moses (Exod 2:10), Samuel (1 Sam 1:20). The same is probably true of the Babylonians’ own etymology “gate of the god” (so Gelb). בבל “mix up” occurs only here and in v 7 with this meaning: in the sacrificial law it apparently means “smear” “moisten” with oil, e.g., Lev 2:4 (KB, 128).

The narrative is rounded off with a double reference to “the language of the whole earth ... the whole earth,” which makes a literary inclusion and striking contrast to its opening, “the whole earth had one language.” The tower of Babel was intended to be a monument to human effort: instead it became a reminder of divine judgment on human pride and folly. Similarly, the multiplicity of languages and man’s dispersal across the globe points to the futility of man setting himself against his creator.

Explanation

The modern interpreter finds the juxtaposition of the table of nations (chap. 10) and the tower of Babel story incongruous. On the face of it, they offer two incompatible accounts of the origins of the nations and their different languages. But the very fact that the author of Genesis included both shows that he regarded the material as complementary, not contradictory. The dual mention of “flood” (*mbi*) and “Babel” (10:1, 10, 32; 11:9) and the other key-words, e.g., “scatter,” “build,” “land,” shows how the two narratives have been brought into mutual relationship and shed light on each other.

The table of the nations, unique in world literature, paints a basically positive, or at least neutral, picture of the relationships between the nations. All are linked genealogically to the sons of Noah, so all men are ultimately brothers of each other. Were that the end of the story, the reader would conclude that the sons of Noah lived in brotherly concord, fulfilling God’s command to fill the earth and subdue it.

The very much shorter tower of Babel story corrects this interpretation. Mankind is seen organizing and arrogating to himself essentially divine prerogatives: he builds a tower to reach to God’s dwelling in heaven; he tries to make himself a name and he schemes on his own account. Whereas God wanted man to fill the earth, he seeks to congregate in one town, Babel. And it is in Babel that the LORD confuses human speech, so that all the descendants of Noah can no longer live together and cooperate on anti-God projects. The tower of Babel story is the last great judgment that befell mankind in primeval times. Its place and function in Gen 1–11 may be compared to the fall in Gen 3 and the sons of God episode in Gen 6:1–4, both of which triggered divine judgments of great and enduring consequence.

There is a recurring pattern in Gen 1–11 of a positive episode’s being succeeded by a negative. The creation of the earth, which was very good (Gen 1), is followed by the fall and Abel’s murder (chaps. 3–4). The prosperity of the long-lived antediluvians (chap. 5) is followed by intermarriage with divine beings and the flood (chaps. 6–8). The renewed covenant with Noah is succeeded by his drunkenness and the curse on Canaan (chap. 9). The same sequence is evident here in the quite positive table of nations and the highly judgmental account of Babel.

The table of nations falls into three sections, dealing in turn with the descendants of Japhet, Ham, and Shem. It would be wrong to imagine that this table lists all the nations known to ancient Israel, for it cannot be coincidence that exactly seventy descendants of Noah’s sons are listed here, on a world scale prefiguring the seventy sons of Jacob who went down to Egypt (46:27).

Within this table, the nations farthest removed from and of least consequence to Israel, the sons of Japhet, are mentioned first (10:2–5). No details of these peoples or their history are included, just their names. Insofar as they can be identified, the sons of Japhet seem to lie to the north and west of Israel, e.g., Cyprus, Greece, and Turkey.

The second group, the sons of Ham, includes nations of much greater consequence to Israel. There are a number of peoples listed of whom we know as little as some of the Japhetites, e.g., Raamah, Anamim, but they also include Israel’s most dangerous rivals in the ancient world, the Babylonians, the Egyptians, and the Canaanites. Linguists and anthropologists, on grounds of race and language, would describe as Semitic (i.e., sons of Shem) some of the people listed here as sons of Ham. But as often observed, race and language do not make up the most important principle underlying the classification of the nations in Gen 10: the sons of Ham are those who are under Noah’s curse (9:26–27). Though Canaan was the primary target of that curse, it was Ham, the wayward son, who prompted the curse, and consequently Israel’s greatest enemies are listed here. Their classification as Hamites indicates that the table of nations is not really so uncommitted as it may

first appear.

Further examination of the sons of Ham section reveals that the author of this chapter has a particular interest in them. Two verses (vv 6–7) list with telegraphic brevity eleven descendants of Ham; then the genealogy backtracks to introduce Nimrod (vv 8–12), another of Ham’s grandsons. This notice about Nimrod, “a champion hunter before the LORD” and founder of the major cities of Mesopotamia, takes a full four verses, an indication of the prime importance of this area as far as Genesis is concerned. Nimrod’s achievements as warrior, city-builder, and hunter epitomize the ideals of Mesopotamian heroes, particularly their kings. The epithet “champion” may suggest a claim to supernatural parentage (cf. 6:4) which would be another point of contact with Mesopotamian ideology. Nimrod’s name is not explained here, but it may be translated “we shall rebel,” an apt characterization of the motives of the builders of Babel according to 11:1–9. Here Babel/Babylon is simply called “the prime of his kingdom,” not necessarily reflecting the antiquity of Babylon, but certainly its status as the first city of Mesopotamia.

Southern Mesopotamia, Ur of the Chaldaeans, was the original home of Terah and Abram (11:28, 31). Harran in northern Mesopotamia (cf. Nineveh, Ashur, Calah [10:11]) was the area to which Terah migrated and where he subsequently died (11:32). To this latter area the patriarchs returned to find wives among other members of their clan (24:4, 10; 28:2, 10). The other pole of the patriarchal wanderings was Egypt, which is also picked out for extended treatment in 10:13–14. Finally, the goal of the patriarchal wanderings, the promised land of Canaan, is mentioned among the descendants of Ham. Vv 15–20 list first some of the traditional inhabitants of the land, including Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Girgashites, and Hivites. Then a brief definition of the boundaries of the land is added, from Sidon in the north and Gerar in the southwest, to Sodom and Gomorrah in the southeast. In the context of 9:25–26 (the curse on Canaan) and chaps. 18–19 (the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah), the inclusion of these details must be seen as deliberate. They explain just who are the Canaanites on whom judgment will fall.

Finally, the table deals with the elect line of Shem. By and large, the sons of Shem are peoples with whom Israel has good and positive relations. The Aramaeans (v 23) provide several brides for Abraham’s family (cf. chaps. 24, 28). Arpachshad, Shelah, and Eber were ancestors of Terah. Indeed, vv 24–25 are a typical trailer for the next section of Genesis, the genealogy of Shem (11:10–26), and the mention of Peleg in whose “days the earth was divided” anticipates and serves to place the tower of Babel episode chronologically. Finally, the sons of Yoqtan (vv 26–30), insofar as they can be identified, seem to be Arab tribes. Sheba is listed in 25:3 among Abraham’s grandsons and was of course one of Israel’s allies in the reign of Solomon (1 Kgs 10:1–13). These descendants of Shem then appear to be Israel’s future allies. The inclusion of Assyria and Elam is unexpected, if the classification of a people as a son of Shem implies a positive attitude toward them by Israel. Either a different Assyria is meant, or a Sinaitic tribe perhaps, or its inclusion may indicate the early date of this material.

“From these the nations spread out in the world after the flood” (10:32) rounds off the table of nations and, by echoing its opening (10:1) with another mention of the flood, frames the whole account with a double reference to universal judgment. Despite all its progress and expansion recorded in chap. 10, mankind is still haunted by the specter of divine wrath. The word “flood” (*mabbul*) evokes these associations and adumbrates the key word of the next story, “Babel.”

With the tower of Babel we come to the last of the great tales of universal judgment that punctuate the primeval history. Its content, literary structure, and terminology parallel at many points the other stories of this genre in Gen 1–11. We have noted the palistropic arrangement of material, its dramatic scenes, and the vivid anthropomorphisms used to express an exalted view of an omnipotent and sternly moral creator, features that are just as obvious in the garden of Eden and the flood stories.

As elsewhere in Gen 1–11, there is in this narrative a strong polemic against the mythic theology of the ancient world. Often this polemic is implicit rather than explicit. Only ancient hearers and modern scholars familiar with Mesopotamian accounts of the flood can appreciate the world of difference between the characterizations of Noah and Utnapishtim or between the LORD and the gods of Mesopotamia who cower before the flood and swarm like flies around the sacrifice. But Gen 11 throws discretion to the winds: the assault on Babylonian pretensions is open and undisguised. The tower of Babylon stands as a monument to man’s impotence before his creator, and the multiplicity of human languages is a reminder of divine retribution on human pride.

With a knowledge of Mesopotamian mythology, Genesis’ attack can be seen as even sharper. Man’s inability to speak a common language is, according to one understanding of the Enmerkar epic, to be ascribed to the mischief-making of Enki, the leader of the gods. The moral motivation of the Hebrew account is completely missing. Texts like *Enuma Elish* make it clear that the tower of Babel story is also a spoof on oriental beliefs about the Mecca of Mesopotamia, the Esagil. The temple of Marduk in Babylon was supposed to have been built by the Annunaki gods with specially prepared bricks. Its name, “house with the uplifted head,” reflects its claim to have reached the heavens. But Genesis unmercifully batters these claims. It was,

first, only a human building, and who would chose brick in preference to good Palestinian stone? And as for its vaunted height, so far short of heaven did this so-called skyscraper fall that God could hardly see it: he had to come down to look at it!

But though man's highest achievement was pathetic in God's eyes, the motives that prompted his efforts were horrific. The desire to displace God from heaven, to make a name for oneself rather than allow God to do this, and to scheme without reference to his declared will, prompts one final judgment that will hobble man's attempts at cooperation once and for all. The confusion of languages prevents community living and technological cooperation: people cannot trust or work with those they do not understand. The name "Babel/Babylon" does not mean "gate of the god," as the Babylonians held, but "confusion," and it evokes the similar sounding words "folly" and "flood." Far from being the last word in human culture, it is the ultimate symbol of man's failure when he attempts to go it alone in defiance of his creator.

On this note of fierce condemnation of mankind's sinful folly, focused in Babylon, the primeval history is virtually at an end. The genealogy of Shem 11:10–26 is usually assigned to the primeval history, but it serves more as an interlude, bridging the gap between those primeval events that have shaped and continue to shape the destiny of every man and the patriarchal history. We still live in a world where language differences impede cooperation and curb man's repeated attempts to achieve technological mastery of his fate and the totalitarian control of other men. But after the flood there was a new beginning for mankind: the mandate to be fruitful and multiply was renewed. The rainbow shone in the sky as a guarantee that the earth would never again be destroyed in a flood. But the tower of Babel is not followed immediately by a hopeful sequel; the years roll on without a hint of renewal. The last word is Babel. It is as if to say, man must leave Babel, its proud dreams and its God-defying ways, if there is to be hope. And it is with Terah and Abram departing from Ur in southern Babylonia that the saving history of the patriarchs begins.

Throughout Scripture, Babylon is seen as the embodiment of human pride and godlessness that must attract the judgment of almighty God.

Isaiah seems to recall the Genesis story when he says of the king of Babylon,

"You said in your heart,
I will ascend to heaven;
above the stars of God
I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far north
[i.e., in the divine council]
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds
I will make myself like the Most High.
But you are brought down to Sheol,
to the depths of the pit" (14:13–15).

Genesis links the fate of Sodom with that of Babylon, first, by making both sons of Ham, via Canaan and Nimrod respectively, and, second, by saying in both instances that God came down to see what was going on (10:10–19; 11:7; 18:21). This comparison is made more directly in Isa 13:19 where it is said:

And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms,
the splendor and pride of the Chaldaeans
will be like Sodom and Gomorrah
when God overthrew them.

Isaiah's prophecies against Babylon are taken up and reapplied to the neo-Babylonian empire in Jer 50–51. Similarly, the book of Daniel paints a picture of the glamour of Babylon, the head of gold (Dan 2:38), the tree whose top reached to heaven (4:8 [11], 19 [22]). But the image with the golden head was smashed and the tree was hewn down. At Belshazzar's feast the hand wrote, "Mene, Mene, Tekel and Parsin ... God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end.... That very night Belshazzar the Chaldaean king was slain" (5:25–30).

If Babylon symbolizes the accumulated wickedness and impiety of mankind (cf. Zech 5:5–11), final salvation comes only through its destruction, but in the meantime the righteous must escape from it. Isa 47 proclaims the desolation of Babylon, while 48:20 urges

Go forth from Babylon, flee from Chaldea,
declare this with a shout of joy ...
The LORD has redeemed his people Jacob.

Primarily this return from Babylon is viewed as a second exodus, a deliverance from a latter—day Egypt, but

the imagery of Abraham's pilgrimage is also evoked in these prophetic appeals. No doubt those who returned from exile in 537 B.C. and subsequently were inspired by such prophecy.

The NT also takes up the picture of Babylon, the great harlot, the persecutor of the people of God and the incarnation of human pride and vice. The saints are encouraged both to "come out of her" (Rev 18:4) and to rejoice at the prospect of her destruction (Rev 18:20), for her fall will immediately herald the last judgment and the establishment of the kingdom of God (Rev 20–22). In that day all the redeemed will unite in the worship of God. Zephaniah 3:9 seems to envisage an end of the confusion of Babel when he says,

At that time I will change the speech of the peoples
to a pure speech
that all of them may call on the name of the LORD
and serve him with one accord.

And Luke evidently looked on the day of Pentecost when all could understand each other's speech as a sign of the last days when all who call on the name of the LORD shall be saved (Acts 2:8–21). The hopelessness of man's plight at Babel is not God's last word: at least the prophets and NT look forward to a day when sin will be destroyed and perfect unity will be restored among the nations of the world.

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