



## THE TOWER OF BABEL (GENESIS 11:1-9)

By

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper will explore the significance of the account of the Tower of Babel recorded in Genesis 11:1-9 to determine whether it is a punishment of the LORD God for the arrogance and sinful natures of human beings or a work of God's Grace to expand their presence throughout the world as promised in Genesis 10.

### Literary Features

Genesis 11:1-9 narrative is divided into two parts, with an alternating chiasmic structure.<sup>1</sup> The human being words are contained within Genesis 11:1-4 and the Words of the LORD God are accounted in Genesis 11:5-9. This perspective emphasizes an important shift moving from human to divine God viewpoint<sup>2</sup> with the critical Genesis 11:5 verse hinging the two parts together.<sup>3</sup> Those perspectives are directly associated with each other's narrative with a contrast of viewpoints easily discovered:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 176.

<sup>2</sup> Johnny Cisneros, *Babel, Tower Of*, ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> H. Van Dyke Parunak, "Transitional Techniques in the Bible," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 (1983): 543.

### Human Beings

“One language and of one speech” (v1)  
“Go to, let us ...” (v3)  
“Let us build us a city and a tower” (v4)  
“Let us make us a name” (v4)  
“Lest we be scattered abroad upon the earth” (v4)

### LORD God

“People is one and have one language” (v6)  
“Let us go down” (v7)  
“Left off to build the city” (v8)  
“The name of it was Babel” (v9)  
“The Lord scattered them abroad” (v9)

Clearly, a comparison of the speech differences between human beings and the LORD God show a clear conflict in purpose; this must be figured strongly in the analysis of God’s perspective concerning this event. The tower narrative’s closeness to Genesis 12:2, where God tells Abram that He will make his name great, fully rising above what mere man could do is not a coincidence. While the builders of the tower saw the threat of scattering to limit their ability to make a name for themselves, the LORD God resolves that name-making issue as Genesis 12 unfolds.<sup>5</sup> Further, some Hebrew words sound phonetically similar and allude to a precise connection. For instance, some scholars like Dr. Wenham connect Hebrew word *nēbāl* used in Psalm 14:1 for the foolish denier of God to the name Babel *nābēlāh*; thus the name Babel connects to the “failure of godless folly,”<sup>6</sup> possibly lending further depth to interpretive discovery.

There is a small translation problem in verses Genesis 11:5-7 for some interpreters.<sup>7</sup> Some suggest that verse 5 shows God came down and viewed the doings of man in their construction of the city and tower, verse 6 shows contemplation or discussion by God, and then verse 7 records that He says “let us go down and confound their language.” Thus, if verse 7

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<sup>5</sup> Donald E. Gowan, *From Eden to Babel: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 1-11*, *International Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Erdmans Pub. Co., 1988), 118.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15, Vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 234-35.

<sup>7</sup> William David Reayburn, and Euan McG. Fry, *A Handbook on Genesis, Ubs Handbook Series* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1998), 256.

were to be translated to fit it seems that it would logically read “let us go down *again*.” It is a minor point of verse disagreement, and not necessarily important to the overall discovery of the LORD God’s intentions with regards to the city dwellers.

Also, there is some confusion about the confounding of languages. It can mean that people building the city and the tower were given different languages forcing them to congregate with like-kind in other places or it can mean that they were made to be unable to understand each other’s talk. It seems likely that it is not a development of languages, but rather, a confounding of language, forcing them to leave each other and populate the earth. This choice is based upon the analysis of the Hebrew word *lo yismeu* which is closer to *no understanding* rather than reflecting different languages.<sup>8</sup>

Although the ziggurats were well-known in the deserts in and surrounding Mesopotamia, the *Enuma Elish* mentioned them joyfully, and the Sumerians have a traditional story about when all men spoke the same languages, there are actually no known story parallels to the Tower of Babel in Near Eastern literature according to Dr. Wenham.<sup>9</sup> So, the contradiction between Genesis 10:5, 20 where different languages with different nations were recorded and Genesis 11:9 where there is just one language spoken by all creates a difficulty with interpretation is not supported by traditional lore. The contradiction can be left without analyzation, considered as local languages and dialects spoken in chapter 10 with international languages in chapter 11, considered as Chapter 11 coming before Chapter 10, but placed in that manner to stress God’s judgment against the Noahites, or it can be referenced as a general description in chapter 10 with more details given in chapter 11.<sup>10</sup> Or, this contradiction should

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 256-57.

<sup>9</sup> Wenham, 236.

lead the interpreter to alert upon this difference, and seek a resolution to this complication. The consideration of one language in Genesis 11:1-9 possibly speaks of more than a flashback of different tongues spoken by different nations,<sup>11</sup> and potentially becomes circumstantial evidence of something deeper within Scripture meaning than can be discovered by a casual interpretive effort.

Regardless, the location of the account of the Tower of Babel is purposefully placed between Genesis 10 with a recording of genealogy and Genesis 12 where God gives Abram a name established throughout the generations. This placement suggests to some scholars that Babel is the end of the primeval history and concludes the “prologue to the story of God’s saving work” according to Dr. Gowan.<sup>12</sup> Dr. Awabdy further expands the tower account’s location to be a specific connection between Primeval History and the creation of suspense concerning the “fate of the divine-human relationship,” that prepares the reader to partially resolve God’s further relationship with man through the receipt of narrative account of Abram and his father (Genesis 11:27 – 12:9).<sup>13</sup>

### Interpretive Ideas

Modern-day interpretations of the Tower of Babel seem heavily influenced by the artwork and illustrations of the narrative in cultural exhibits, as well as the mythical legends circulating and blending in early days.<sup>14</sup> More serious scholars debate the *Babel-Recension* myth focused upon the city of Babylon and how the tongues were confused and the *Tower*

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<sup>10</sup> *The Baker Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 21-22.

<sup>11</sup> J. W. Rogerson, *Genesis 1-11* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 1999), 75.

<sup>12</sup> Gowan, 115.

<sup>13</sup> Mark A. Awabdy, "Babel, Suspense, and the Introduction to the Terah-Abram Narrative," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 35, no. 1 (2010): 3, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0309089210365960>.

<sup>14</sup> Gowan, 115.

*Recension* theory that was based upon a ruined tower which tradition attached the dispersion of people.<sup>15</sup> The go-to textual theme to Genesis 11:1-9 often is expressed with the idea that the LORD God scatters primitive humankind because of their disobedience to build a secular kingdom higher than His;<sup>16</sup> often it seems that the separation of languages, scattering and isolating into separate communities become the focus of interpretive ideas.<sup>17</sup> Often, the making of a tower is portrayed as a fearful act of the people to prevent scattering, the blessing of the LORD God that is expressed through the act of scattering His people over the whole earth in Genesis 10.<sup>18</sup> It also explains the “etiology of linguistic diversity” that many commentators from ancient times to modern scholarship advocates.<sup>19</sup> This interpretation of major themes that focus upon human disobedience and the resulting creation of confounded languages and scattering seems consistent to Scripture truth through the examination of the contrast the people’s building the city and tower vs. the LORD God’s intentions in this matter.

#### The Compelling Evidence for the Ziggurat

The Ziggurat is the type of tower mostly accepted amongst scholars as the model of the one built at Babel. Its inclusion into the evaluation of God's intentions of possible punishment against the builders is compelling. If the tower structure is in fact a Ziggurat, then the ancient people’s purpose for building it must be analyzed for the LORD God’s reason to be known.

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<sup>15</sup> John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis, International Critical Commentary* (New York: Scribner, 1910), 223.

<sup>16</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 125-26.

<sup>17</sup> Skinner, 223.

<sup>18</sup> Eugene F. Roop, *Genesis, Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), 82-83.

<sup>19</sup> Byron L. Sherwin, "The Tower of Babel in Eliezer Ashkenazi's Sefer Ma'aseh Hashem," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (2014): 83, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001981052&site=ehost-live>.

There have been nearly thirty ziggurat structures found by archaeologists in the land of ancient Mesopotamia. The staged towers evolved seemingly from early temples, possibly deriving from accumulated ruins.<sup>20</sup> Scholars claim that the ziggurats found scattered throughout the land of Mesopotamia are constructed for the false deity of Babylon gods, and represent the concept of “seven heavens and earths” of ancient false god belief.<sup>21</sup>

The purposes for the Ziggurats in Mesopotamia are varied. Archaeologists usually determine their purpose through an examination of their location and the name given to each.<sup>22</sup> But, generally, ziggurats were used in cultic functions that housed deities; further, a cosmological connection symbolized the journey from earth to heaven upon a mountain that seemingly touched the dwelling places of the gods.<sup>23</sup>

Archaeological examinations of a specific Ziggurat located at Dur-Kurigalzu in Mesopotamia have convinced many that it is the remains of the Tower of Babel accounted in Genesis 11:1-9.<sup>24</sup> It stands 52 meters high, with a terrace around the 33 foot mark and its base is 69 by 67.6 meters, with stairs leading to the terrace.<sup>25</sup> It is made of the same type of stamped bricks that is likely represented in Scripture accounts. Most importantly for the analysis of Scripture, the purpose of its build is its dedication by Kurigalzu for the worship of the

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<sup>20</sup> John H. Walton, "The Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel Account and Its Implications," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995): 156.

<sup>21</sup> Peter James and Marinus Anthony van der Sluijs, "Ziggurats, Colors, and Planets: Rawlinson Revisited," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 60 (2008): 73.

<sup>22</sup> Walton, 160.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 160-61.

<sup>24</sup> R. Andrew Compton, "Dur-Kurigalzu," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

Sumerian god Enlil.<sup>26</sup> Enlil was the Mesopotamian false god of the earth that held power over the sky as the husband of the grain goddess Ninlil.<sup>27</sup>

### The Argument against Focus upon the Tower of Babel

There is one piece of evidence that must be considered with the tower Ziggurat. Some scholars now contend that the tower built in Babylon is not the focus of the account in Genesis; rather, the focus falls upon the building of the city itself. Old Testament professor Theodore Hiebert claims ancient Mesopotamia represents cultural diversity in the world that was first designed by God; thus, it is not a punishment at all, but the specific location for the different cultures to form outside the borders of the city.<sup>28</sup> Some scholars agree that the “Tower of Babel” should instead be titled the “City of Babel” because the tower is not the singular, central element within the Genesis account.<sup>29</sup>

Certainly, Genesis 11:1-9 does not focus just upon the singular act of building the Tower of Babel alone; rather, the building of the city is mentioned also in the account. However, it seems likely in literal Scripture reading that the Tower is the primary focus because it is that structure, within the city, that will reach its top into heaven (Genesis 11:4).

Along with Dr. Hiebert, there are a few scholars that are beginning to move away from the “pride-and-punishment interpretation of the Tower of Babel. Drs. Bernhard Anderson, Richard Elliott Friedman and Walter Brueggemann lean toward the account of Genesis 11:1-9

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Jamie A. Banister, "Enlil," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

<sup>28</sup> Theodore Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 1 (2007), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27638419>.

<sup>29</sup> John Dart, "Is the Tower of Babel Wobbling?," *The Christian Century* 124, no. 16 (2007): 11, <http://www.christiancentury.org/> (Publisher's URL:); <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001597098&site=ehost-live>.

as the explanation for “cultural diversification” rather than punishment.<sup>30</sup> But, modern-day Harvard scholar Dr. Ron Hendel remains skeptical of this new thought and argues that it speaks of the “ancient hubris” in a “critique of the greatness of Babylon.”<sup>31</sup> Dr. Hendel also connects the earlier Genesis 3:22a, “And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil.” as part of the exegesis for the Babel account that guides the reader to see mankind’s efforts foiled while God’s movement through Abraham makes greatness without mankind’s united efforts.<sup>32</sup> Further, Dr. Andreas Hock’s efforts to connect the Genesis 11:4 theme of the city and tower with Revelations 21:12-17, building of the Holy City, requires the recognition of the underlying human pride that is present in the Babel account.<sup>33</sup>

#### God’s Punishment or God’s Design?

Traditional Christian and Jewish belief supports the idea that the LORD God scattered disobedient, arrogant, little-god wannabes through the lands away from Mesopotamia, confusing their forward-movement toward united progress through their acts with disregard to His intentions.<sup>34</sup> An interesting point of Sheila Tuller Keiter is the like-kind speech of the builders of Babel to the Pharaoh that held the Egyptian people captive. The Babel builders said “Come let us make brick...” (Genesis 11:3) and the Pharaoh said “Come let us deal shrewdly

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Andreas Hock, "From Babel to the New Jerusalem (Gen 11,1-9 and Rev 21,1-22,5)," *Biblica* 89, no. 1 (2008 2008): 112, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001662062&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>34</sup> Dart, 11.



with them, so that they may not increase (Exodus 1:9-10).”<sup>35</sup> These particular words shared by both could possibly support a conclusion that both show an “enslavement and subjugation” of humans by humans, supported also by the brick and mortar images.<sup>36</sup>

The table of nations found in Genesis 10:1-32 must also be considered in the evaluation of God’s will concerning the scattering at Babel.<sup>37</sup> He did in fact publish the list of nations of the generations deriving from Noah’s sons forward. Many scholars suspect that this list should follow after Genesis 11; regardless, His sending of the generations with different languages throughout the world as recorded by this Table of Nations assumes this probably occurred after the Babel account.<sup>38</sup>

### Conclusion

It is impossible through this shortened study to determine whether the segregation and separation of people through the confounding of languages in the city of Babel were punishment or advancement by the LORD God. Certainly, if the Tower of Babel becomes the focus of interpretation, and that tower is determined to be the Ziggurat constructed for the worship of false idols and deities, then it can be easily concluded that the LORD God’s response was one of angry punishment. However, if the focus is upon the building of the city of Babel, and the need of the LORD God to scatter the people so His direction of mankind’s growth can proceed through the generations of Abraham, punishment is excluded, and advancement of God’s will be the probable conclusion. Possibly, if the consideration of the

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<sup>35</sup> Sheila Tuller Keiter, "Outsmarting God: Egyptian Slavery and the Tower of Babel," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2013): 201, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001947072&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> *The Baker Illustrated Bible Commentary*.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

city builder's as displaying prideful arrogance, then the LORD God's scattering was judicial. But, if the LORD God was teaching the people a new way of thinking and living to prepare the stage for Abraham, then His scattering was for a different reason entirely, probably to develop his promise captured in Genesis 10. Regardless, the account of the building of the city and tower, with the resulting scattering of the people, did in fact end the creative actions of the LORD God, and began moving His created world into the realm of a beginning generations of a people that were His chosen, eventually leading to the salvation of believers through Christ Jesus.

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