

# Genesis, Chapter 10, Essays

## *The Tower of Babel: from destruction to dispersion*

**Lippman Bodoff**

It is commonly thought that the Tower of Babel was a rebellion against God. But if that was all there was to it, why wasn't it enough for God simply to destroy the tower? What does God's creating a multiplicity of languages and scattering the people across the face of the earth have to do with it? And why is the Bible so mysterious in explaining the motives of the tower's builders? The text in Gen. 11:4 merely says, cryptically: "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed across the whole earth."

As the Artscroll commentary summarizes the midrash: "... [the deeds] of the generation of the Dispersion are veiled."

The simple interpretation of the story, according to many commentators, is that the scheme of concentrating the population in one place was contrary to God's will that many nations multiply and inhabit all parts of the world, which was the Divine master plan of creation. I believe this is the core of this story and its message, which I propose briefly to develop in the rest of this article.

### **Background Texts**

Gen. 1:27-28 recounts that God created humanity in God's image, "male and female He created them," and blessed them: "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it...."

Gen. 9:1 and 9:7 contain a similar idea, in the form of a commandment to Noah and his descendants (i.e., humanity) after the Flood: "And you ... teem on the earth...." (9:7) The commentators deduce from this last phrase that God implanted in humanity, as a necessary ability to fulfill this command, a love of homeland wherever it may be. Having now given mankind the seven Noahide Laws, and commanded it to multiply and spread out across the face of the earth, God assures through the covenant of the rainbow—assures mankind that it will never face total destruction again by flood or any other catastrophe. It is safe, therefore, to procreate, to spread out and populate the world, and to develop a love and attachment for your homeland.

### ***The "Rebellion"***

At this point, with the whole world before mankind to develop, having a blueprint for morality and justice and the assurance of no further flood or other catastrophe to destroy all that it would build and create in the future, you would think that the rest of world history would be "smooth sailing." But, in fact, that is not what happened. Some 100 years after the flood, before the nations were separated in their respective lands across the earth, at a time when all the world's inhabitants still spoke one language—which is understood to be Hebrew—a concerted, oppositional response developed to God's plan for mankind to disperse over the earth and form different communities, societies, nations, and cultures. I believe there were three elements in this opposition, or rebellion, against God's plan.

First, at its simplest level, there were skeptics who were fearful that there might be another flood, despite the "Rainbow Covenant"; the best solution to that danger was for humanity to stay together in a large metropolis with access to tall buildings (of which the tower was the prototype) with others

as necessary to support the needs of a growing population. But to spread out into widely separated, thinly populated societies would make mankind vulnerable to disaster, if another flood or catastrophe should threaten. It is human nature, as we know from bitter experience, to plan the future based on the past. So a tower was the obvious answer to the next flood. The leader of this rebellion against God, in the form of distrust of His promises and rejection of His command to disperse over the earth, was Nimrod, whose name (in Hebrew) comes from the root m, r, d, meaning to rebel.

Second, there was a more direct, confrontational argument against the Divine plan, based not upon the fear that someday humans might sin and God would decide that another flood or catastrophe was necessary but rather upon the premise that being together would make for a better, more efficient world. Resources would be plentiful for all, activities would be more efficient, there would be fewer cultural clashes of all types, less fighting, and fewer wars—i.e., “the trains would run on time” argument, with everyone united. Language is culture and one culture would be beneficial to all.

Third, there was the insidious aspect of this scenario—perhaps intended, perhaps unintended. Non-dispersal would inevitably lead to conformity, dependence on a ruler to make decisions for all, the absence of freedom to act or think differently—the independence and freedom of thought and action that requires political mechanisms to resolve disputes and differences that are fundamentally inimical to dictatorial rule. This motive of dictatorial uniformity, of ideological control over society, was implicit in the statement, “Let us make a name” (Gen. 11:4)—exactly, one name, one form, one formula, one religion, one political party, one ruler. As one commentator astutely observes, the goal was to gain mastery over the entire human race. The tower, of course, was not just a symbol of the power of the centralized ruler, the focal point for everyone’s attention as the source of what to do and what not to do, what to think and what not to think, a seductive weapon to draw near into this dictatorship over the masses, with one culture, one religion, one politics, one solution for all, but also a vehicle of observation and control over the masses from that central locus of power.

I suggest these three aspects of rebellion because they seem to me to be realistic forms of rebelling against God, rather than the simple notion, in some midrashic sources, that the rebellion was literally to build a structure that would allow man to ascend to heaven and wage war against God, and even take His place and dwell in heaven.

### ***God’s Response***

God’s response was, therefore, far more sophisticated than simply destroying the tower as often as it would take to discourage that effort permanently. God was not interested in simply making a power statement, and rejecting the silly—when you think of it—attempt of mankind to wrest power from God. He was interested in making a statement as fundamental as how the world should operate and develop over history.

Language is culture, and by causing the physical dispersion that resulted from the sudden appearance of many languages that prevented completion of the tower, He also achieved His primary goal—which was also of benefit to mankind. This was the establishment of a multiplicity of cultures and nations, of ideas and activities to conquer nature, disease, poverty and whatever would afflict mankind after the heady days when the entire world was temporarily united in a scheme whose terrible outcome of mass uniformity could not be foreseen or comprehended. Variety breeds progress; uniformity breeds stagnation and decline. We know from biology what too much insularity

and in-breeding breeds: disease drives out health.

A second goal was to erase tyranny. We know from history what tyranny and too much political and social uniformity breeds: misery, the corruption of power, war, and ultimately decline, all resulting from the failure to be nourished by the cultures of other nations. We know that institutions that seek universal power and control, to impose an ideology over the world, first doom the nations so subjected and subjugated and end by being destroyed themselves. This was the theme of the political history of the 20th century. This was the character of Nimrod, who did not seek to form or to influence nations, but to dominate and control, by might and power, all of humanity. Universalistic ideologies are inherently intolerant and aggressive in preserving what they consider the only truth. Judaism, from its inception, tied its religion to its own nationhood and homeland, to avoid the hubris that there was only one way to find God. Western civilization separated Christianity from nationhood in the 17th century, only after the religious wars that ensued after the Protestant Revolution had drained Europe to exhaustion. Islam never made the separation, although there is evidence that it may be slowly struggling now to do so.

There is, I believe, a third reason why God caused mankind to divide into many languages, cultures and nations, and not remain just one. As Genesis recounts, God saw that even after the Flood, most of mankind, as an inevitable aspect of the blessing of free will, would be drawn to evil without a model to show the way to the Divine message of ethical monotheism. This tendency, in fact, became immediately evident with the actions of Noah's son, Ham, and his grandson, Canaan, when they saw Noah drunk and naked and failed to treat him in this condition with the proper respect. Already, therefore, it was clear that there was little hope for such a model emerging from a humanity with one language and one culture; it would soon inevitably decline in character to its lowest common moral denominator. Instead, God determined that one nation would have to be assigned the task of carrying the message of ethical monotheism to the world—a nation that would agree to be subject to a far more detailed code of behavior than the seven Noahide Laws, a nation born of slavery and suffering that would assure that this code would be maintained, interpreted, applied and lived with justice and compassion. That nation, of course, was to be assigned the divine language of Creation—Hebrew—the language that would signify, through the Torah, its historic destiny. All that was required was for God to find an individual from that Hebrew-speaking group who would be worthy of becoming the father of the new nation of Israel, that would assume this burden. That person, as we know, was Abraham, who believed in a single, righteous Divine Creator, a person who God trusted would pass on this message of ethical monotheism to his children.

Imagine, on the other hand, the morally weak world of the Dispersion, and its progeny, entrusted with interpreting God's future code of human behavior, the Torah, with justice and compassion—a world of scheming, aggression and continued totalitarian leadership. As it was, the Israelites were forced to accept their role—first, by their founder and father, Abraham, when he was told by God that his people would be born in slavery in order to learn to appreciate freedom; again, at Sinai, when the nations of the world could not accept the burdens of God's new code, and Israel had to be forced to do so; and later, when they voluntarily re-affirmed their continued future adherence. Indeed, soon after Sinai, the sin of the Golden Calf was so serious that God proposed to Moses to wipe out Israel and start a new nation from Moses. Only Moses's petition to God to maintain His faith in Israel as the carrier of the Divine message of ethical monotheism, through Israel's kings, prophets and priests, caused that nation to survive.

All of this was at stake when Nimrod and his popular supporters sought to make the world one

nation, one language and one culture, in perpetuity. The world owes God its unending gratitude that He rejected this misguided and dangerous idea.

Did God do any more than hasten the inevitable dispersion of the people to other places and climates, where they would have inevitably developed their own languages and cultures? Probably not, but when we think of the lengths to which totalitarian regimes have gone to keep people within their borders, from the biblical period Egyptians to the 20th-century East Germans, it was no small thing to force the issue, to hasten the dispersion without the years of fear, oppression and tragedy that would have been experienced by those seeking to get away from the monolithic rule envisaged for the “nation of the tower.”

One of the most powerful statements ever written on the unique value of freedom of the press, of speech and religion—of culture—for each nation, wherever it may reside, as the expression of the unique talents, abilities, ideas and practices of that nation, was written by the Maharal, Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, in the 16th century, more than half a century before the far better-known great English poet, John Milton, in his *Areopagitica*. Maharal argued that nothing comes from suppressing ideas that a ruler finds unpopular or objectionable; indeed, it is a sign of weakness to suggest that the received wisdom of the ruler or the populace itself is too unstable to withstand scrutiny. In this, Maharal was simply repeating, for a powerful, non-Jewish ruler, perhaps—in some ways, like Nimrod a few thousand years earlier—the Jewish “take,” the biblical view of many cultures being allowed, encouraged, to strive and thrive in God’s creation and make it a better place for themselves and, ultimately, for all of humankind.

Moreover, Maharal’s arguments for Jewish cultural autonomy and its freedom, as a nation, from outside censorship and suppression, also imply that other nations can benefit thereby from Jewish culture, and the Jewish nation can benefit thereby from the cultural contributions of other nations.

It is time—it is always time—for Jews to tap into their history; in the uniqueness of their origins, they may find some lessons for their creative survival as a people and as a nation.

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## ***Encyclopaedia Judaica: The Tower of Babel***

BABEL, TOWER OF, the edifice whose building is portrayed in Genesis 11:1–9 as the direct cause of the diversity of languages in the world and the dispersion of mankind over all the earth. According to the preceding narrative, mankind after the flood was descended from one common ancestor, Noah. The story of Babel thus explains how the descendants of this one man came to be so widely scattered and divided into separate nations speaking so many different languages.

The story relates how, at the time when all men still spoke one language, there was a migration from the East to the plain of Shinar (Babylonia). At this site it was decided to build a “city and a tower with its top in the sky” so that the builders would be able to make a name for themselves and avoid being scattered over the entire world. However, their building project was frustrated by the Lord who confounded their language. As a result, mankind was distributed over the face of the earth. The unfinished tower was called Babel, a name which was explained by its resemblance to the Hebrew verb *bll* (“to confuse”), since here the Lord “confounded the speech of the whole earth.”

Scholars agree that the edifice referred to in Genesis 11 is clearly a *ziggurat*, or Mesopotamian temple tower. The *ziggurat* (from Akk. *zaqaru*, “to raise up,” “elevate”) was the central feature of the great temples which were built in all important Mesopotamian cities. Rising in progressively smaller, steplike levels from a massive base, these towers ranged from three or four stories to as many as seven and were ordinarily constructed of crude sun-dried bricks covered with kiln-fired bricks. Clearly, the writer of the account in Genesis 11 was familiar with the building techniques of Mesopotamia, since he is at pains to point out that bricks and bitumen were used in the construction; that is in contrast to the stone and clay which were the common building materials in Canaan.

The particular *ziggurat* described here was formerly identified with the tower of Ezida, the temple of the god Nebo (Nab-) in Borsippa, a city southwest of Babylon. However, the discovery at the end of the 19th century of Esagila, the great temple of Marduk in Babylon, has led most scholars to agree that it is the tower of this temple which inspired the writer of Genesis 11. This *ziggurat*, which was called E-temen-an-ki, “house of the foundations of heaven and earth,” rose to a height of about 300 feet, and contained two sanctuaries: one at its base, which was 300 feet square, and one at its summit. The tower was probably constructed at the time of Hammurapi, but was damaged or destroyed several times and repaired by Esarhaddon (seventh century b.c.e.) and Nebuchadnezzar II (sixth century b.c.e.), among others. It is interesting to note that the Babylonians believed that Esagila was built by the gods, thus making the statement in Genesis 11:5 “... which the sons of men had built,” particularly meaningful, since it may be understood as a polemic against this belief. This tower, which was the object of such pride among the Babylonians, was the product of strictly human endeavor which can be quickly and easily destroyed in accordance with the Divine Will. In fact, it is quite likely that it was the sight of the ruins of Esagila (which was destroyed in the mid-16th century B.C.E with the destruction of Babylon by the Hittites) which inspired the creator of the Tower of Babel narrative.

Although it is clear from the story that the work on the city and tower displeased the Lord, the specific sin of the builders is nowhere mentioned. Many scholars believe that it was the presumption of these men in thinking that they could build a tower with “its top in the sky,” and their conceit in wanting “to make a name” for themselves, which incurred the wrath of the Lord. Others believe that their goal was to storm the heavens and that it was for this sin that mankind was punished.

Modern scholars (already anticipated by R. Samuel ben Meir) have pointed out that the desire to remain together in one place was in direct conflict with the divine purpose as is expressed to Noah and his sons after the flood: “Be fertile and increase and fill up the earth” (Gen. 9:7) and was, therefore, an affront to God and so necessarily doomed to failure. It is hardly likely that the expressed wish to “make a name for ourselves” could be construed as sinful, since a similar phrase is used in connection with the divine promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:2). Further, Babylonian temple inscriptions frequently refer to the “making great” of the name of the king under whom the particular temple was built or repaired, thereby demonstrating that this formula was commonly used in such instances and need not be understood as expressing an inordinate desire for fame. As for the phrase “with its top in the sky,” it has been noted that there are several examples of Babylonian temple inscriptions which describe buildings as reaching to heaven so that the phrase should be understood not as an expression of the presumption of these people or of their desire to ascend to heaven, but rather as a borrowing by the biblical writer from the technical terminology of Mesopotamian temple inscriptions with which he was evidently familiar. According to this interpretation, the sin of these people was, therefore, not presumption or a desire to reach heaven and gain fame, but rather an attempt to change the divinely ordained plan for mankind.

A new link to an ultimate cuneiform background of the Tower of Babel narrative has been provided by a Sumerian literary work, no doubt composed during the third Dynasty of Ur, which states that originally mankind spoke the same language, until Enki, the Sumerian god of wisdom, confounded their speech. Though the reason for the confusion of tongues is not stated, Kramer has suggested that it may have been inspired by Enki’s jealousy of another god, Enlil. Hence, in the Sumerian version it was a case of the rivalry between two gods, whereas in the Bible the rivalry was between God and man (see below “The Meaning of the Story”).

The etymology of the name Babel given in this narrative is a contrived one, used ironically. The Babylonians understood it to mean “the gate of the god” (*bab-ilim*), thereby endowing the city with additional honor and importance. By a play on words, the Bible has given it a pejorative sense, making the pride in this city seem almost ludicrous.

The Tower of Babel narrative is a turning point in history, as understood by the Bible, in that it signals the end of the era of universal monotheism which had existed since the beginning of time. Since the divine election of Abraham and his descendants immediately follows, it must be tacitly assumed that the incident led to the introduction of idolatry into the world.

[Myra J. Siff]

### ***The Meaning of the Story***

The bridge which some modern writers have constructed between the single short clause “and fill the earth” in Genesis 1:28 (or 9:7) and the account of the vain attempt of an early generation of men to avoid dispersal in Genesis 11:1–9, is superior homiletics but (quite apart from the finding of source analysis that the one belongs to document P and the other to document J) unsound exegesis. Genesis 1:28 reads as follows: “God blessed them [namely, the human beings, male and female, whose creation has just been narrated in the preceding verse] and God said to them, ‘Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that move about on earth.’” This purports to be, and is, not a command but a blessing; moreover “and fill the earth” is preceded by “be fertile and increase.” It is absurd to read into it a wish of God that the human species shall spread over the earth otherwise than as, with increasing

numbers, its own interests may dictate. And in 11:1–9 there is nothing to suggest that the human population has already attained such a figure that there is a need for a migration of colonists to realms beyond the confines of the plain of Shinar; and neither is there a word in 11:1–9 about that being the Deity’s motive in bringing about the dispersal. Instead, there is an explicit declaration of an entirely different motive by no less an authority than the Lord himself, who explains to the divine beings, verses 6–7; “If this is what, as one people with one language common to all, they have been able to do as a beginning, nothing they may propose to do will be beyond their reach. Come, let us go down, etc.” It takes a willful shutting of the mind to avoid hearing the same anxiety lest man should wrest complete equality with the divine beings (or worse) in these words as in the Lord’s earlier explanation to the same audience, in 3:22, of his motive in driving man out of the Garden of Eden: “Now that man has become like one of us in knowing good and bad [i.e., in being intellectually mature, the first evidence of which was his newfound modesty], what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever!” Once, to obviate the danger of further baleful results from cooperation between man and snake, the Lord set up a barrier of enmity between them (3:15); now, in order to eliminate the threat of disastrous consequences from the cooperation of men with each other, he is erecting among them barriers of language and distance.

[Harold Louis Ginsberg]

### ***In the Aggadah***

The biblical account of the Tower of Babel is singularly brief and vague (Gen. R. 38). The prevailing opinion of the rabbis is that it was designed to serve the purposes of idolatry and constituted an act of rebellion against God (Sanh. 109a; Gen. R. 38:6; et al.), for which reason they also associated Nimrod (“the rebel”) with its building (Hul. 89a). Many additional reasons are also suggested, among them the fear of a recurrence of the flood and the need to guard against such a recurrence by supporting the heavens or by splitting them so that waters would drain away slowly from the earth’s surface (*Ma’asim al Aseret ha-Dibberot*; cf. Sanh. 109a). According to Josephus they were trying to dwell higher than the water level of the flood (Ant., I, IV). In this way the builders thought they would be spared, believing as they did that God had power over water alone (Pd-RE 24). At the same time the rabbis laud the unity and love of peace that prevailed among them (Gen. R. 38), as a result of which they were given an opportunity to repent, but they failed, however, to seize it (*ibid.*). Various opinions are expressed as to the punishment which the builders incurred (Tanh. B., 23). According to the Mishnah (Sanh. 10:3), they were excluded from a share in the world to come. In the view of one *amora*, their punishment varied with the differing aims that inspired them; those who thought to dwell in heaven being dispersed throughout the world, those who sought to wage war against God being transformed into apes and demons, and those bent on idol worship being caught up in a confusion of tongues (Sanh. 109a). One-third of the tower was destroyed by fire, one-third subsided into the earth, and one-third is still standing. It is so high that to anyone ascending and looking down from the top, palm trees look like locusts (*ibid.*). This *aggadah* testifies to the existence of ruins at that time, which were popularly believed as being of the Tower of Babel. *Aggadot* about the tower are also to be found in Josephus and in the apocrypha (cf. Jub. 10:18–28), while several of its motifs are much discussed in Hellenistic Jewish literature.

[I.T.-S.]

## *From the midrash*

### **As related in Sefer Ha'agadah**

*The reason I am citing these midrashim is that I'd like us to discuss why the rabbis created each. What was in their heads? We tend to think of midrashim as fairy-tales; even I refer to them as such. They are not fairy tales, however; they serve a purpose and the idea here is to discern what that purpose is.*

#### **The Tower**

“Let us build us a city and a tower with its top in heaven” (Gen. 11:4). They said: Once every 1,656 years, the firmament topples. Come and let us make supports for it [under each of its four sides].

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The tower had seven levels on its east and seven on its west [and took an entire year to climb]. The builders brought the bricks up on one side and came down on the other. If a man fell down and died, no heed was given to him. But when a brick fell down, they stopped work and wept, saying, “Woe unto us! When will another be brought up in its stead?” When Abram son of Terah passed by and saw them building the city, he cursed them in the name of his God: “O Lord, confound their speech, confuse it!” (Ps. 55:10).

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“Come, let us make brick...and for them a small brick grow to the size of a foundation stone, and a handful of slime became a heap of mortar” (Gen. 11:3). So greatly did their work prosper, said R. Huna, that a man laying one brick found that two bricks had been laid; another plastering one row found that two rows had been plastered. ***[Their work prospered? Why would the rabbis concoct such a positive story?—Shammai]***

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R. Eliezer said: Who is more reprehensible—he who says to the king, “Either you or I in the palace,” or he who says, “I and not you in the palace”? Clearly he who says to the king, “I and not you in the palace,” is the more reprehensible. Thus, the generation of the flood said to Him, “What is the Almighty that we should serve Him? And what profit should we have, if we pray unto Him?” (Job 21:15).

But the generation of the dispersion of mankind said: It is not for Him to choose for Himself the worlds above and give us those below. Come, let us make us a tower, place an image on its top, and put a sword in its hand, and it will seem that it is waging war against Him.

Consequently, the generation of the flood [which sought to displace God]—of them, no remnant survived; whereas the generation of the dispersion of mankind [which sought to share God's power with Him]—of these, a remnant did survive.

Besides, the generation of the flood was steeped in malfeasance, as is said, “They remove the landmarks, they carry off flocks and pasture them” (Job 24:2). Therefore no remnant of them survived. But the latter generation, because they cherished love for one another, as is said, “And the whole earth was of one language” (Gen. 11:1)—of them, a remnant did survive.

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## ***Nimrod and Abraham***

“[The animals’ prostrating themselves before Nimrod’s garment made all think] he was a mighty lord” (Gen. 10:9). R. Judah said: The garment of glory that the Holy One made for Adam and for his wife was with Noah in the ark. When they left the ark, Noah’s son Ham took it, brought it out with him, and bequeathed it to Nimrod. Whenever Nimrod wore it, all cattle, beasts, and fowl, upon seeing the garment on him, would come and prostrate themselves before him. Now, human beings supposed that the greatness of Nimrod’s own strength brought about such adoration, and so they made him king over them. Whereupon he said to his people, “Come, let us build us a city and a tower” (Gen. 11:4).

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When our father Abraham was born, a star rose in the east and swallowed four stars in the four corners of heaven.

Nimrod’s wizards said to him: To Terah, at this hour, a son has been born, out of whom will issue a people destined to inherit this world and the world-to-come. With your permission, let his father be given a house full of silver and gold, on condition that his newly born son be slain.

Nimrod sent word to Terah, saying: Last night a son was born to you. Now give him to me, that we may slay him, and I will fill your house with silver and gold.

Terah said: “I reply with a parable that will make you understand my anguish. A horse was told, “Let us cut off your head, and we will give you a barnful of barley.” The horse replied, “You fools! If you cut off my head, who will eat the barley?” So, too, if you slay my son, who will make use of the silver and gold?”

King Nimrod said: From what you say, I gather that a son has indeed been born to you.

Terah: A son was born, but he died.

Nimrod: My offer was for a live son, not a dead one.

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[After Abraham destroyed his father’s idols, itself a midrashic fantasy,] Terah took hold of Abraham and turned him over to Nimrod.

Nimrod asked Abraham: Are you Abraham son of Terah?

Abraham: Yes.

Nimrod asked: Do you not know that I am Lord of all [the heavenly] works—sun, moon, stars, and planets—and that all men go forth at my pleasure? Now, you—how dare you destroy what I hold in awe?

In that instant the Holy One gave Abraham the capacity to argue ingeniously, so that he answered Nimrod: May I, with your permission, say something that will redound to your greatness?

Nimrod: Say it.

Abraham: It is the way of the world that, from the day the world was created until now, the sun goes forth in the east and sets in the west. Tomorrow, bid the sun to go forth in the west and set in the east, and I shall bear witness for you that you are indeed Lord of the world. More: If you are Lord of the world, surely all hidden things are known to you. If so, tell me now what is in my heart and what I intend to do.

The wicked Nimrod stroked his beard in perplexity.

Abraham said: Be not perplexed—you are not Lord of the world. You are the son of Cush. If you were Lord of the world, why could you not deliver your own father from death? The truth is, as you did not deliver your father from death, so will you not deliver your own self from death.

Nimrod summoned Terah and asked him: What judgment shall be imposed on your son Abraham, who destroyed my divinities? None other than burning. Then he turned back to Abraham and said: Bow down to fire, and you will be saved.

Abraham: Perhaps I should bow down to water, which quenches fire.

Nimrod then said: Very well, bow down to water.

Abraham: If so, I should bow down to a cloud, which is laden with water.

Nimrod: Then bow down to a cloud.

Abraham: Perhaps I should bow down to the wind, which scatters the cloud.

Nimrod: Then bow down to the wind.

Abraham: Let me rather bow down to man, who withstands wind.

Nimrod: You are playing word games with me. I bow down to nothing but fire, and I am about to cast you into the midst of it—let the God to whom you bow down come and save you!

They immediately took Abraham out to cast him into an open fire. They bound him hand and foot, and put him on the stony ground. Then they surrounded him on all sides with wood—five cubits wide on every side, and five cubits high—and set the wood on fire.

Just then Terah's neighbors and townsmen came by, tapped him [jeeringly] on the head, and said: What a great and bitter shame! This son of yours, who you have been saying was to inherit both this world and the world-to-come—Nimrod is burning him in fire!

At once the Holy One's mercies crested and He came down and saved Abraham.

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When wicked Nimrod cast our father Abraham into the open fire, Gabriel spoke up to the Holy One, "Master of the universe, may I go down and cool the fire, to save the righteous man from burning in it?" The Holy One replied, "I am the Unique One in My world, even as he is the unique one in his. It is fitting that the Unique One deliver the unique one." But since the Holy One does not hold back the reward of any creature, he said to Gabriel, "Yours will be the privilege of saving three of his descendants [Shadrach, Mishach, and Abednego]."

# The Beginning of Wisdom, Chapter 8

*Leon R. Kass*

## **BABEL: THE FAILURES OF CIVILIZATION**

The story of the city and the tower of Babel, told economically in the first nine verses of Genesis 11, is the last episode in the biblical narrative prior to God's call to Abraham. As everybody knows, God disrupts the building of the city, confounding the speech of the builders and scattering them into many nations spread abroad upon the face of all the earth. After this event, God will abandon efforts to educate all of humankind all at once; instead, He will choose to advance His plan for human beings by working first with only one nation. After Babel, the Bible will turn directly to its main subject, the formation of the nation of Israel.

In keeping with its pivotal place within the text of Genesis, as the end of the beginning, the story of Babel represents something of a completion. Read historically, as part of an ongoing temporal narrative, this tale of the universal city completes the account of the universal human story, with human beings living largely on their own and without divine instruction. Read philosophically, as part of an unfolding anthropology, this reflection on language, technology, and the first (prototypical) city exposes fully the core of civilization and man as a rational and political animal. Read morally, as part of a search for wisdom regarding how to live, this report of human failure prepares and encourages us to pay attention when, in the immediate sequel, God undertakes to educate Abraham in the new way of righteousness and holiness.

As the capstone of the universal human story, the tale of Babel also revisits and extends the consideration of several important themes treated earlier in Genesis: the status of heaven; the ambiguous power of speech, reason, and the arts; the hazards of unity and aloneness; the meaning of the human city and its quest for self-sufficiency; and man's desire for fame and immortality. The Tower of Babel that reaches toward heaven recalls the Bible's sustained opening polemic against orienting human life toward the heavens (see Chapter One); the beginning of the beginning demoted the standing of the heavenly bodies; the end of the beginning rejects the way of life that is centered upon them. The Babel builders' uses of language and technology confirm the hazards of human speech and human artfulness, first exposed in Genesis 2-3 (see Chapter Two). The singular and undivided human city revisits, on the social-political plane, the problem of Adam's aloneness (see Chapters Two and Three) and extends our thinking about the moral ambiguity of cities and civilization, with their proud pursuit of self-sufficiency (see Chapter Four). The Babel builders' desire to make a name for themselves echoes the concern with fame and glory that characterizes the dangerous Heroic Age (see Chapter Five). Finally, the anti-Mesopotamian spirit of this entire section of Genesis—see, for example, the account of the Flood (Chapter Five)—is made explicit in this mythic story of the rise and fall of Babylon, the greatest Mesopotamian city. It is astonishing how much is packed into this little tale. Here it is, in its entirety....

On first encountering the story, prior to careful reflection, any reader who is not already committed to defending everything God does is likely to find the tale troubling. For the building of the city and tower appears at first glance to be an innocent project, even a worthy one. It expresses powerful human impulses, to establish security, permanence, independence, even self-sufficiency. And it is accomplished entirely by rational and peaceful means: forethought and planning, arts that transform the given world, and cooperative social arrangements made possible by common speech

and uniform thoughts. Babel, the universal city, is the fulfillment of a recurrent human dream, a dream of humankind united, living together in peace and freedom, no longer at the mercy of an inhospitable or hostile nature, and enjoying a life no longer solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. According to the story, however, God finds this humanist dream a nightmare. Taking strong objection to the city of man, He thwarts its completion by measures designed to make it permanently impossible. Why?

Given that the human beings want the city but God does not, our first impulse is to think that the answer depends on knowing God's reasons or seeing things from His point of view. Of this, all that we know for now is contained in God's remark, no doubt uttered with a negative judgment, "Now nothing will be restrained from them which they have imagined to do" (11:6). God, it seems, sees the likely success of the project but does not approve it. He apparently does not approve of the prospect of unrestrained human powers, exercised in support of unlimited imaginings and desires. He seems to be worried both about man's boundless capacity to dream up grand projects and, even more, about man's ability, sustained by unity of speech and purpose, to realize them. More generally, He may not like the absence of reverence, the vaunt of pride, the trust in technique, the quest for material power, the aspiration for self-sufficiency, the desire to reach into heaven—in short, the implied wish to be as gods, with comparable creative power. From God's point of view, the city of man is, in its deepest meaning, at best a form of idolatry and self-worship, and at worst a great threat to the earth. Why do People Suffer?

But why should readers—especially, modern enlightened or wisdom-seeking (that is, philosophical) readers—take God's view of the matter? Should we not cherish the hopes of our fellows, those first dreamers of the humanist dream? After all, we are told, all mankind without exception thought the project right and good. Absent a meddling God, would there be any reason to disagree? And if, as many of our contemporaries believe, a meddling God is truly absent, would there not be every reason to revive the dream? If there is no city of God, the city of man is not only not idolatry—it becomes our last best hope.

A careful study of the biblical story suggests that this view is mistaken, that God's judgments and actions regarding Babel are entirely fitting, and on grounds accessible to human reason. Pondering the building of Babel, in the context of what precedes and follows, wisdom-seeking readers may well come to see it from God's point of view.

### ***THE CITY IN CONTEXT***

We must first locate the story of Babel in the larger context of human beginnings. As we have already seen, the early chapters of Genesis take the reader vicariously through four alternative conditions of human life: first, simple innocence (in the absence of human self-consciousness); second, life without law—anarchy—based on internalized knowledge of good and bad; third, life under the primordial law, when man emerges from what later writers will call the state of nature; and fourth, the dispersion of peoples, each living under its own law or customs. Let us briefly revisit these human alternatives.

First is the condition of simple innocence, pictured in the Garden of Eden. Innocence is destroyed when human beings, their desires enlarged by newly used powers of mind, exercise their autonomy and take to themselves independent knowledge of good and bad; judgmentally self-conscious, they immediately discover their nakedness, and thus their shame and wounded pride, which they artfully attempt to clothe over. This end of innocence is, literally, the expulsion into the real world, where

human beings live according to their own lights and judgments of good and bad, without imposed law (see Chapter Two). In this second state, we encounter Eve's proud birth of Cain; Cain's sacrifice, wounded pride, jealousy, and murder of his brother; the line of Cain and the line of Seth, and their ill-fated interbreeding after Adam died in the tenth generation; and the world degenerating into riotous and lewd behavior. The Flood completes the dissolution of this anarchic world (see Chapters Four and Five).

The third state appears after the Flood with Noah—righteous and simple Noah, the first man born into the world after Adam dies—when God institutes a new order based on law and covenant. An externally imposed law—to begin with, *No murder*—is now administered and enforced by human beings but with divine sanction, against the background of a world order guaranteed to be not hostile to human aspiration by God's covenant never again to destroy the earth (see Chapter Six). This new state of primitively lawful society was to have been transmitted universally, from fathers to sons, but it was not successfully perpetuated even for one generation: Noah's drunkenness and the irreverent conduct of one of his sons made universal transmission impossible (see Chapter Seven). Dispersion of peoples and election of one, under the direct leadership of God, thus becomes the next plan, featuring the nation that begins with Abraham, a people that will be called to carry God's way as a light to all the nations.

One way to speak about this series of states is to say that God keeps trying new plans after the old ones fail, in many cases making concessions to unavoidable and undesirable human weaknesses (for example, in the permission to eat meat granted with Noah). But a better way is to say that, by this means, we the readers learn that those other imaginable human possibilities—innocence, anarchy, universal perpetuation of law and covenant through natural lineage—have been tried and have failed, which is to say, *they are terrestrially impossible*. We are educated to believe that the human spirit of righteousness is not strong enough to rule from within but needs outside instruction, legislation, and help. The story of the city and tower of Babel is the culmination of this sequence: it shows the impossibility of transmitting the right way through the universal, technological, secular city.

The more immediate background for the builders of Babel is the Flood. Through this universal cataclysm, human beings encountered the full destructive force of brute nature. After the Flood, God promised, "Never again"; but it is reasonable to surmise that the memory of the deluge weighed at least as heavily as the hearsay report of God's promise not to repeat it. God's first postdiluvian command to Noah, to spread out and fill the earth with people, might have been a terrifying prospect under the circumstances. The connection of Babel to the antecedent Flood is in fact hinted at by the very last words of Genesis 10, the words immediately preceding the story of Babel:

These are the families of the sons of Noah, after their generations, in their nations; and of these were the nations divided in the earth *after the flood*. (10:32; emphasis added)

Genesis 10 is, altogether, another and gentler account of the division of mankind, answering in its way the questions How came there to be many nations? And How came there to be many tongues? The answer of Genesis 10 is genealogical, beginning with the three sons of Noah, their descendants reflecting to some degree their own very different characters. As people multiplied and spread abroad, different families grew into diverse national populations, each speaking its own tongue, each

in its own land.<sup>1</sup> Among the descendants of Ham, the irreverent son, we find one man who is, in this version, connected with Babel. Nimrod, whose name means “rebelliousness,” was “the one who began to be a mighty man upon the earth.” He was “a powerful hunter in the face of God,” and for this he became famous; he was also the founder, presumably by conquest, of an empire of cities in the plain of Shinar, and the beginning of his kingdom was Babel (10:8-10). By means of a large kingdom, Nimrod attempts to overcome by force the division of mankind. We should not be too quick to blame him: if what lies behind the human world is only chaos and instability, man must make his own order. Human ordering is the theme of the story of Babel.

### ***RATIONAL ANIMAL, POLITICAL ANIMAL: SPEECH AND THE CITY***

The project of creating order, the meaning and goal of Babel, is rooted in *logos*. Speech and language, reason and the arts are at the heart of the story. In keeping with its subject matter, the story of Babel is itself a wonderfully artful narrative and the words it uses are most carefully chosen. Poetic craft and linguistic subtlety are enlisted to sound an alarm about language and craft. To take full advantage of the text, we must proceed very slowly, looking at every word with care.

*And all the earth was of one language and one speech.*

The story of Babel begins with all mankind united as a single, harmonious group, or as God says later, as “one people.” Unlike the previous chapter’s account of the differentiation of peoples, descending from the very different sons of Noah (who, though of one family, were not of one mind), this story begins with the entire human race, united and whole. Indeed, the text accentuates the unity by exaggeration, identifying all mankind as “all the earth.” The project that human beings are about to undertake is not the work only of Nimrod and the line of Ham; it is a universal human project. This is the first clue that Babel is not just any city but is *the* city, the paradigmatic or universal city, representing a certain universal human aspiration.

*Of one language.*

The unity of the human race was linguistic or logical, not merely genealogical.

This means more than sharing uniform sounds and symbols—speaking, say, Aramaic rather than Greek; it means sharing the view of the world embedded in a language. It means sharing a common understanding of the world that any pure language implicitly contains. And because language also bespeaks the inner world of the speakers, sharing one language means also a common inner life, with simple words accurately conveying the selfsame imaginings, passions, and desires of every human being. To be “of one language” is to be of one mind and heart about the most fundamental things.

But where does this one language come from? It is strictly a human creation. It appears to come

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<sup>1</sup> This naturalistic or gently genealogical account fits with a widely held, if unsophisticated, view of the world’s diversity: people speak different languages because they live in different lands. Their native tongue is tied to their native land. Their native land is their native land because that is where they and their ancestors were born (that is, had their nativity). The rightness of this natural, gentle, and seemingly innocent claim to land, tongue, and nationhood—the root of national pride and territoriality—will later be challenged by the text, as are many things regarded as good because natural. When God sets out to start His own nation, He will begin by uprooting His founder (Abram) and bringing him as a foreigner to the Promised Land, his title to which will not be natural or genealogical, but rather providential.

unaided, directly from the human mind. As we learn from the Garden of Eden story, man's first creative and distinctly human activity is naming the animals. Whatever name man selected became each animal's name. Beginning with this seemingly innocuous activity, human reason gradually creates in speech a complete linguistic world, layered over but distinct from the given, natural world. This second, shadow world, though it was invited by the articulated natural world, gains independence from it. The word is not the thing; the map is not the territory. True, language may point to and reflect the given world. But because speech is colored always by human perceptions, passions, interests, and desires, the world as captured in language is necessarily partial—both incomplete and biased—and ever-pregnant with the human impulse to do something to it. Language therefore conveys less the world as it is than it does the self-interested and humanly constructed vision of that world.

The merely constructed character of language does not, however, imply weakness. On the contrary, language, because it is a human creation and because it reflects human concerns, comes to hold greater sway with human beings than does the given world (that is, God's original creation)—especially when, as here, human beings come to take language for granted. The one-language unity of humankind means that the humanly constructed reality of speech has become pervasive and, as it were, second nature: "The language of 'adam has become entrenched, institutionalized, universal; all humans are fluent in it and no other. Its words are a currency of universal acceptance. They can be depended upon at all times and in all situations....The humanly constructed vision of reality provided in language is unchallenged and essentially unchallengeable." In unity of outlook there is strength—or so it does seem.

#### *Of one speech.*

The unity of the human race and its humanist dream are predicated on the trustworthiness of language. Yet in the narrative, the immediate sequel to "of one language" subtly hints that language—and thus the human construal of the world—might be less reliable than we are inclined to believe. The human beings were not only of one language, they were also "of one speech." Almost as if the text were deliberately trying to deny the possibility of linguistic unity and clarity just asserted, the meaning of this phrase is notoriously difficult to grasp. The Hebrew words are hard to translate because there is a grammatical paradox regarding number: the plural noun *devariym*, "words;" is modified by the generally singular adjective "one" ('achad), but "one" is here written as a plural: '*achadiym*. A variety of interpretations have been offered: "few words," implying simple thoughts and communication; "many words but one speech," implying a single plan; or "single words" or "one set of words," read as a synonym for a single language. But we wonder whether the strange construction, with the impossible plural of "one;" might be a literary hint that the human beings' confidence in their language was somewhat misplaced.<sup>2</sup> It might suggest, in addition, that these people were confused about the being of the one and the many, and in particular about the existence and unity of the highest One. Such confusion might, in the end, jeopardize the apparent simplicity, singleness of purpose, common understanding, and intelligibility of their thought.

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<sup>2</sup> There are, truth to tell, two other places in Genesis where this paradoxical plural of "one," '*achadiym*, is used, in both cases to modify *yamim*, "days," and where the obvious meaning is "a few" days (27:44 and 29:20). Yet it is also true that in both cases there is confusion: what is said to be "a few days" is in fact a much longer period of time (indeed, years).

*They found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they settled there.*

Though mankind was told (after the Flood) to disperse and fill the earth, the human race chose rather to settle in one place, a fertile plain in the land of Shinar (that is, in the Euphrates valley), that could accommodate and sustain them all. A fertile plain very likely suggests agriculture, not hunting and gathering; agriculture suggests settlement, rather than wandering, and also forethought, fences, and the arts. It also requires a keen dependence on heaven—on sun and rain—a matter to which we shall return.

*And they said, [each] man to his neighbor, “Come, let us make bricks [literally, ‘brick bricks’].”*

As the story more than hinted from the start, the project for building the city depends on human speech: “And they said.” But whereas human speech has previously been used for a variety of other purposes—naming, self-naming, questioning authority, shifting blame, denying guilt, expressing fear, boasting in song, spreading shame and ridicule, and blessing and cursing—speech is here used by human beings to exhort to action and to enunciate a project of making, for the first time in Genesis. “Come” (or “go to”: *havah*) means “prepare yourself,” “get ready to join in our mutual plan.” Each man thus roused his neighbor to the joint venture: “Let us make.” Hortatory speech is the herald of craft. And craft enables man to play creator: God, too, had said, “Let us make.”

God’s creation of the world, we recall, also began with speech, divine speech that summoned the world into being. In the paradigmatic—but wholly unique—case of the creation of light (on Day One), there was absolutely no difference between the divine utterance and the thing called forth: *yehi ‘or*, “Let light be”; *veyehi-‘or*, “And [ve] light was” (1:3). This divine speech and the creature that it summoned were perfectly and completely identical; word and thing, deed and product were exactly the same. But in all subsequent acts of creation, God had to struggle to make the deed equal to the speech, just as He struggles continually by means of His commandments to make human deeds correspond to what He deems fitting and good. If God Himself has difficulty, right from the start, in making His will and His word effective, we have every reason to believe that no human speech will ever be perfectly embodied in the resulting human action. Yet we also have reason to believe that this fact will not keep human beings from trying to play God.

*Make bricks [literally, brick bricks] and burn them thoroughly [literally, burn (them) to a burning]; and they had brick for stone and slime they had for mortar.*

Far from the mountains where stones could be had, the men found no ready-made blocks for building, so they started by making their own materials, from scratch. This is the Bible’s first mention of bricks. Were bricks, or permanent houses, known previously? It is unclear: even after the flood, Noah dwelt in a tent. The very idea of bricks is itself an invention, a creative act of the resourceful human mind.<sup>3</sup> And how and from what does one make bricks? From the ground, from the moistened dust of the ground, by means of fire. Fire is universally the symbol of the arts and crafts, of

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<sup>3</sup> The Bible here again takes issue with Mesopotamian teachings, which are replete with accounts of the divine origin of brick making. In one account of the founding of Babylon, told in the Akkadian creation myth *Enuma Elish*, the gods themselves mold bricks for a whole year, providing the materials for the building of the city. Such innovations, according to Scripture, are of purely human provenance, and their goodness is therefore, to say the least, open to question. Indeed, one should read the entire story of Babel as, among other things, a parody of the Babylonian tales that glorify cities, temples, and towers and in which the gods take the lead in all these artful constructions.

technology. Through the controlled use of fire's transforming power, human beings set about to alter the world, presumably because, as it is, it is insufficient for human need. Imitating God's creation of man out of the dust of the ground, the human race begins its own project of creation by firing and transforming portions of the earth.

But there is a difference between the two "creations." In creating man, God had breathed life into the ruddy earth (*'adamah*) to create *'adam*, the ruddy earthling. In contrast, the earthlings here burn the ruddy earth into ghostly and lifeless (white) brick: the word for brick, *levenah*, comes from a root, *lavan*, meaning "white." In this subtle way, the text already hints that man's creative project is in fact a reversal of God's creation of man, and that its result may well be deadly.

*And they said, "Come, let us build [nivneh] for us a city with a tower with its top [or head] in the heavens."*

Like so much of modern technology, the means precede and generate their own ends: "Now we have bricks. What can we make with them?" Bricks now in hand, the proudly creative imagination proceeds to a new plane: it projects a city with a tower. The meaning of the city is inextricably linked with the meaning and presence of the tower; conversely, the meaning of the tower is inextricably linked with the nature and meaning of the city.

Some insight is available through tales of other cities in Genesis. Before Babel, there are only two references to cities. Cain, after killing his brother, Abel, is told by God that he would be a fugitive and a wanderer. But as we noted in Chapter Four, Cain settles in the land of Nod and, presumably out of fear, builds there a city, a refuge, once he has a family; and he names that city for his firstborn, Enoch. (The line of Cain includes the founders of the arts and crafts, implicit in civilization.) After the flood there is also a brief mention of the great city of the Assyrians, Nineveh, with its cluster of satellite cities (Genesis 10:11-12), whose wickedness Jonah will much later be sent to reprove. Later we will learn about the supremely wicked Canaanite city of Sodom, destroyed by God. Whatever the city means, it seems to be linked, at least in these other cases, with violence, lewdness, and corruption. But none of those features appear tied to the city of Babel—at least not yet—which proceeds through peaceful cooperation under the rule of reason.

The city—every city—is a thoroughly human institution, with settled place and defined boundaries, whose internal plan and visible structures all manifest the presence of human reason and artfulness. The city affirms man's effort to provide for his own safety and needs, strictly on his own. Standing up against the given world, it affirms man's ability to control and master the given world, at least to some extent. Although the city stands as a memorial to the ingenuity and success of those who have gone before, at any given moment the city is an expression of the human effort at self-sufficiency, at satisfying by human means alone all of the needs and wants of human life. Born in need, the human city, by meeting and more than meeting the needs of its builders, proudly celebrates the powers of human reason.

Perhaps the most celebrated passage on the origins and nature of the city is provided by Aristotle near the beginning of the *Politics*....[His argument] roots the city in human need and defines it by self-sufficiency [and] is supported by a second argument, which roots the city in human speech: the city, the ground of self-sufficiency, is the natural home of human beings also because it is the embodiment of, and stage for, human speech and reason. Because men have speech, they live in cities, not just in herds or swarms. "Man[," says Aristotle, "] is by nature a *polis*-animal...."

Speaking animal, rational animal, artful animal, political animal, animal distinguishing good and

bad, and opining about the just and the unjust—it is all one package: man becomes truly human only when he lives in a *polis*, providing for himself and ruling himself by his own light of reason, through speech and shared opinions about good and bad, just and unjust. Though the biblical author almost certainly did not read Aristotle’s *Politics*, he seems to share a similar view of the meaning of the city—though not of its goodness. Precisely what Aristotle celebrates, Genesis views with suspicion.

More directly and pointedly under biblical suspicion would be the Mesopotamian teachings about the city, almost certainly the intended target of the present story about Babel, a clear stand-in for Babylon, the most famous city in Mesopotamia. Unfortunately, we have no Babylonian equivalent of Aristotle’s *Politics*, nor any thematic treatment of the meaning of civic life. But in the Gilgamesh epic there is mention of a city to which the present story almost certainly refers, albeit silently. Of special interest is the connection of the city to the heroic aspiration:

In the first tablet of the Gilgamesh, the hero begins as the king of a great city whose foundation is also made of *burnt bricks*. At the end of his voyage, when he has lost his last chance for the immortality of the gods, Gilgamesh returns, only to realize that his true immortality had already been ensured by *the name he had made for himself* founding the city of Uruk, *the city of burnt bricks*.

The biblical story of Babel, in contrast, has neither king nor hero; all humanity joins equally in founding the city. Yet as we shall soon see, in the biblical understanding a concern with “making a name” remains central to the purpose and meaning of the humanist city.

And what of the tower? How is this connected with the meaning of the city? The context of the Flood suggests a connection with safety: the tower is an artificial high ground providing refuge against future floods and a watchtower for the plain; it is even imaginable that it might be intended as a pillar to hold up heaven, lest it crack open another time. These suggestions, however plausible, do not go far enough. To this we must add what we know of the historical city of Babylon and its tower, the famous ziggurat Etemenanki, in the temple of Marduk. Marduk was the chief god of Babylon. Originally he seems to have been a god of thunderstorms, but according to the epic poem *Enuma Elish*, he rose to preeminence after conquering the monster of primeval chaos to become “lord of the gods of heaven and earth,” the supreme ruler of all nature, responsible, among other things, for the motion of the stars and for fertility and vegetation. Translated from the Sumerian, the name of the tower, Etemenanki, means, “House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth.” The tower, part of the city’s temple, is a human effort to link up heaven and earth. According to some accounts, the Babylonian tower was intended to pave a way for a divine entrance to the city; yet even granting such an aspiration, the project is not unambiguously pious. For unless the god or gods explicitly command such a gesture, the tower—any such conduit—must be seen as a presumptuous attempt to control or appropriate the divine, to bring the cosmic origins down into one’s own midst, to encompass the divine within one’s own constructions. What appears at first glance as submission is in fact, at least partly, an expression of pride.

But there is probably more to the Babylonian tower than its name and its connection with Marduk. The ziggurats of Babylon had more straightforward, even rational interests in heaven—heaven understood, quite literally, as the place of the sun, moon, and stars, and as the source of rain. Babylon was the place where human beings first began to study the stars and to plot and measure their courses. The towers would, almost certainly, have been the favored sites for astronomical observation. In Babylonia, astronomical observation was not undertaken for the restful and

disinterested contemplation celebrated by the Greek philosophers, but for an apprehensive yet patient scrutiny and measurement of the motions of the heavenly bodies, in the service of calculation, prediction, and control—and not least regarding the coming of rain. The Babylonian priests ruled the city on the basis of their knowledge—and divination—regarding heaven. The House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth thus sought to link the city with the cosmos, and to bring the city into line with the heavenly powers that be, or—perhaps, conversely—to bring the powers that be into line with the goals of the city. In more ways than one, the towered city is, in principle, “cosmopolis.”

Not every human city has a ziggurat. But every human city orients itself on the basis of some intuition about the cosmic whole. Without some instruction to the contrary, human beings will eventually be inclined to look up to nature and, especially, to the heavens, for heaven is the home of those visible powers that matter so much to the life of the city, especially as the city rests on agriculture. In this respect, too, the city of Babel is a natural city, a city oriented toward cosmic nature even as it seeks to predict and, to a degree, control nature here on earth.

*And let us make for us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of all the earth.*

The city is a mixture of pride and fear. Its origins, quite likely, are in fear. This immediately postdiluvian population has better reason than most to know and fear nature’s wildness and inhospitality and to shrink from standing unarmed and dispersed before the powers that be. Having (at best) hearsay knowledge of God’s promise to Noah (no more floods, no total destruction), these men are inclined rather to trust to self-help for protection against the state of nature and the wide open spaces. They find strength in numbers and unification, and in their ability cooperatively to craft a home in the midst of an indifferent—not to say hostile—world.

But what began in fear grew in pride. Human imagination and especially human craft are its nourishment. Whereas animals pursue their aims thoughtlessly using their own inborn powers, human beings take pride in exercising those powers that come to them as a result of their own devisings. Working from the ground up, men make bricks from the dust of the earth by the transforming power of fire. Lowly materials in hand, their ambition soars as they conceive next to build a city and a tower, with its top in heaven. The city and tower express the human conquest of necessity, human self-sufficiency, and independence. Above all, the sky-scraping tower—whatever its explicit purpose—stands proudly as a monumental achievement of proud builders, to serve their everlasting glory. The anticipatory vaunt of the builders—“Let us make us a name”—shows the towering pride, though the fear of dispersion (“lest we be scattered abroad”) has not been altogether extinguished.

What is this wish “to make us a name”? The verb “to make,” *asah*, has previously been used only by God, either to announce His own makings or to command Noah’s building of the ark, or, once, by the narrator to report God’s making of coats of skins. The word “name,” hitherto used in relation to particular names, acquires here a new sense for the first time in Genesis. Adam had named the animals, named himself and the woman as woman and man (*’ishah* and *’ish*), and later renamed the woman Eve, honoring her powers as the mother of all life. People give and receive names that are significant (Noah, for example, the first person born after the death of Adam, gets a name meaning both “comfort” and “lament”). Fame and renown are sought, and some men even boast of their deeds (for example, Lamech, who is the poet of his own heroism). But the aspiration to make a name goes beyond the desires to give oneself a name or to gain a name—that is, beyond the longings for fame and glory earned by great success.

To make a name for oneself is, most radically, to “make that which requires a name.” To make a new name for oneself is to remake the meaning of one’s life so that it deserves a new name. To change the meaning of human being is to remake the content and character of human life. The city, fully understood, achieves precisely that. Through technology, through division of labor, through new modes of interdependence and rule, and through laws, customs, and mores, the city radically transforms its inhabitants. At once makers and made, the founders of Babel aspire to nothing less than self-*re*-creation—through the arts and crafts, customs and mores of their city. The mental construction of a second world through language and the practical reconstruction of the first world through technology together accomplish man’s reconstruction of his own being. The children of man (*‘adam*) remake themselves and, thus, their name, in every respect taking the place of God.

*But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man [or children of Adam: beney ha’adam] were building.*

At its midpoint, the story of Babel shifts from the human point of view to God’s; but in making the shift, the narrator identifies the builders of the city as “the children of Adam.” This could be a simple euphemism for human beings: sons of man, playing at being God. But it also connects the protagonists of this last pre-Abrahamic story with their oldest and paradigmatic ancestor, whose name is, in fact, not a proper name at all but rather the generic name for the entire species. The term “children of Adam” assimilates the meaning of the project of Babel to the first activities of the first man: not only his naming of the animals but his project of appropriating autonomous knowledge of good and bad. Here, as in the Garden of Eden, men act in disobedience to definite commands, Adam to the specific prohibition about the tree of knowledge, the builders of the tower to the postdiluvian command to be fruitful and multiply and to fill the earth. The comparison of the two acts is apt, for in both cases the very deed means disobedience: in Adam’s individual case, autonomy—choosing for yourself—is the opposite of obedience; in the builders’ case, independent self-*re*-creation—making yourself—is the opposite of obedient dependence, in relation to God or anything else. The road from Adam to the builders of the city is straight and true.<sup>4</sup>

Civilization suffers, perhaps, when compared with the innocence and contentment of Eden; but when men come face-to-face with hostile nature or hostile men in a state of nature, the city appears as a remedy and the universal city a dream of deliverance, peace, and prosperity. In Babel, the universal city, with its own uniform language, beliefs, truths, customs, and laws, the dream of the city holds full sway in the hearts and minds of its inhabitants. Protected by its walls, warmed and comforted in its habitats, and ruled by its teachings, the children of Adam, now men of the city, neither know nor seek to know anything beyond. Contentment reigns, or so it does seem.

### **UNITY AS ESTRANGEMENT: THE FAILINGS OF SUCCESS**

Can such a project succeed? Can such a city, if successfully founded, long endure? Even leaving

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<sup>4</sup> As the end of the Garden of Eden story itself makes clear (and as we argued in Chapter Two), the so-called fall of man is in fact a bittersweet rise into civilization. God’s announced future for our race—the so-called sentence pronounced in Genesis 3:14-24—embraces separation from the animals, self-consciousness, division of labor, rule and obedience, agriculture and bread, clothing and the arts, concern with good and bad, and the longing for immortality and lost innocence—in a word, civilization. There, disobedience (that is, the choice for independent knowledge of good and bad), fully spelled out, is shown to be a choice for civilization. Here, non-obedience directly and explicitly takes the form of civilization.

God's judgment and intervention out of consideration (for the time being), can the humanist city succeed? There is some reason to be doubtful. For one thing, the goal of reaching heaven with the tower is impossible.... More fundamentally, the unity of mind that inspired the project of the city could hardly be expected to survive the division of labor that brought the city into being. The oneness of human life would very likely be replaced by the many ways of life, as masons and carpenters and farmers and metalworkers acquired different and competing interests. Yet God's single comment would seem to imply that the project would, or at least could, succeed as conceived....God strongly suggests that the city is feasible. Its failings, if any, are intellectual or moral or spiritual, not practical. They are the failings of success.

The first and most obvious failing is the matter of piety. What do the men revere? To what do they look up? At first they may look up, quite literally, to heaven, to the powers that be—the sun, moon, and stars. But implicit in the attempt to know, exploit, and control these powers—through calculation, divination, and perhaps sacrifices—is their belief in their own superiority. The aspiration to reach heaven is in fact a desire to bring heaven into town, either to control it or, more radically, to efface altogether the distinction between the human and the natural or divine. In the end, the men will revere nothing and will look up to nothing not of their own making, to nothing beyond or outside themselves, in part because they will see no eternal horizon. Content with and confined within the cave, they will forget about the truly enduring realm beyond....

Second among their failings, the men refuse to look not only up but down. They seem willfully to forget and deny their own mortality. Unlike Cain, who named his city for his son, the men of Babel want a name for themselves here and now ("Let us make a name for ourselves"), and give no thought for their offspring. Rational, but proudly unreasonable, these self-made makers forget their animality and the need for procreation. Though called to be fruitful and multiply, they fly from procreation and pour all their energies into a constructed civic heroism. Mind and craft, they implicitly believe, can thoroughly triumph over necessity and mortality.

Third are several failings regarding the crucial matter of standards. In their act of total self-creation, there could be no separate and independent (non-man-made) standard to guide the self-making or by means of which to judge it good. The men, unlike God in His creation, will be unable to see that all that they had done is good....

Even more important, there could be no moral and political standards sufficient for governing civic life and of guiding the proper use of power and technique. Power and technique are ethically neutral: they can be used both justly and unjustly. Worse, technical prowess, precisely because of its transformative power, creates the illusion that one can do without justice and morality. The omniscient city lacking in justice is a menace, both to itself and to the world. Even assuming that the inhabitants wish to be just, where will the builders of Babel find any knowledge of justice, or, indeed, of any moral or political principle or standard?

Perhaps they will look up to the heavens. But looking to the heavens for moral guidance cannot succeed; the heavens may, as the Psalmist says, reveal the glory of God, but they are absolutely mute on the subjects of righteousness and judgment. One can deduce absolutely nothing moral even from the fullest understanding of astronomy and cosmology. Not even the basic prohibitions against cannibalism, incest, murder, and adultery—constitutive for all decent human communities—can be supported by or deduced from the natural world. (As we argued in Chapter One, this is a major reason why the Bible, devoted to instruction in righteousness, begins by denying the divinity of everything we see around us, and especially of the heavens.) To repeat, from the point of view of

righteousness—indeed, for all -ethical and political purposes—cosmic gods are about as useful as no gods at all.

The intelligentsia and the astrologer-priests of Babel know perfectly well the moral silence of the cosmic gods, but they are not without resources. The builders can build whatever is wanted. They will, accordingly, construct their own standards of right and good; but by this device they ultimately degrade the people they mean to serve. For if right and good are themselves human creations, if they have no independent meaning, justice eventually loses all claim upon the soul. The natural longings for the right, the noble, or the good that might arise in human beings could only be treated with contempt: the soul would be fed instead with artificial and arbitrary substitutes, cast forth by the human “makers of values...”

Fourth among the failings is that all speech loses its power to reveal the world. Carrying only its humanly constructed meanings, language, which was to begin with a self-consciously imperfect attempt to mirror and capture being, becomes, when taken for granted, a hermetically sealed shadow world cut off from what is real. To be sure, speech can still express human intention and serve practical purposes, as stipulated meanings, commonly agreed to, are communicated from one person to the next. One can still say, “Come, let us build,” and, “Pass the hammer.” But speech can no longer be used for inquiry, for genuine thought, for seeking after what is. When the units of intelligibility conveyed in speech have no independent being, when words have no power to reveal the things that truly are, then speech becomes only self-referential, and finally unintelligible. Even the name one makes for oneself means nothing.

Finally, and perhaps the worst failing of all, there is no possibility in such a city of discovering all of the other failings. The much-prized fact of unity, embodied especially in a unique but created “truth” believed by all, precludes the possibility of discovering that one might be in error....Self-examination, no less than self-criticism, would be impossible; there...would be mass identity and mass consciousness but no private identity or true self-consciousness... Unity and homogeneity in self-creation are compatible with material prosperity, but they are a prescription for mindless alienation from the world, from one’s fellows, and from one’s own soul....

The self-sufficient and independent city of man means full estrangement and spiritual death for all its inhabitants. One must thus reconsider the earlier judgment that the project of the builders could in fact succeed as planned. Over the long haul, could mutual understanding survive or cooperation flourish in the presence of spiritual, moral, and intellectual decay? Would not the meaninglessness of speech eventually foster, all by itself, the confusion that is Babel? Does God intervene only to push matters quickly to their logical conclusion, to make manifest, all at once, what was implicitly fatal and fated in the project from the start...?

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### ***CODA: A COMMENT ON BABEL, BIBLE, AND MODERN LIFE***

Before embarking on the journey with Abram, we pause to catch our breath and to take stock. We lift our noses out of the text and take a brief look around. Though in practicing our exegesis we aspire to be faithful readers, we do not permanently suspend our critical judgment. For we are seeking wisdom, after all, and not merely familiarity with the meaning of the text. We wonder about the meaning of the story and its relevance for us.

Did the failure of Babel produce the cure? Has the new way succeeded? The walk that Abram took led ultimately to biblical religion, which, by anyone’s account, is a major source and strength of

Western civilization. Yet, standing where we stand, at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (more than 3,700 years later), it is far from clear that the proliferation of opposing nations is a boon to the race. Mankind as a whole is not obviously more reverent, just, and thoughtful. And internally, the West often seems tired; we appear to have lost our striving for what is highest. God has not spoken to us in a long time.

The causes of our malaise are numerous and complicated, but one of them is too frequently overlooked: the project of Babel has been making a comeback. Ever since the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when men like Bacon and Descartes called mankind to the conquest of nature for the relief of man's estate, the cosmopolitan dream of the city of man has guided many of the best minds and hearts throughout the world. Science and technology are again in the ascendancy, defying political boundaries en route to a projected human imperium over nature. God, it seems, forgot about the possibility that a new universal language could emerge, the language of symbolic mathematics, and its offspring, mathematical physics. It is algebra that all men understand without disagreement. It is Cartesian analytic geometry that enables the mind mentally to homogenize the entire world, to turn it into stuff for our manipulations. It is the language of Cartesian mathematics and method that has brought Babel back from oblivion. Whether we think of the heavenly city of the philosophes or the posthistorical age toward which Marxism points, or, more concretely, the imposing building of the United Nations that stands today in America's first city; whether we look at the World Wide Web and its WordPerfect, or the globalized economy, or the biomedical project to re-create human nature without its imperfections; whether we confront the spread of the postmodern claim that all truth is of human creation—we see everywhere evidence of the revived Babylonian vision.

Can our new Babel succeed? And can it escape—has it escaped?—the failings of success of its ancient prototype? What, for example, will it revere? Will its makers and its beneficiaries be hospitable to procreation and child rearing? Can it find genuine principles of justice and other nonartificial standards for human conduct? Will it be self-critical? Can it really overcome our estrangement, alienation, and despair? Anyone who reads the newspapers has grave reasons for doubt. The city is back, and so, too, is Sodom, babbling and dissipating away. Perhaps we ought to see the dream of Babel today, once again, from God's point of view. Perhaps we should pay attention to the plan He adopted as the alternative to Babel. We are ready to take a walk with Abram.