# Genesis, Parashat Noach, Essays

## The Chronology of the Flood

##### Nahum Sarna

As noted in the Comment to 7:6, two kinds of time reckoning are used in the Flood narrative. That based on precise dates informs us that the Flood lasted exactly 12 months and 11 days, including the first and last days. That based on intervals of days is not a complete system in itself; it does not tell us how many days elapsed after the ark rested on Ararat before the mountain tops became visible, or how many days it took after the dove finally failed to return for the earth to be fully dried out. The two modes of calculation are meant to be integrated.

If we now make a calculation taking into account the day formulas, the same result is achieved, provided a month is reckoned as exactly 30 days. This we may conclude since 7:11 and 8:4 state precisely that five months elapsed between the onset of the rains and the grounding of the ark, while 7:24 and 8:3 specify that period to be 150 days.

The following computation thus emerges: To the 150 days just mentioned must be added 74 days between the 17th of the seventh month (8:4) and the first day of the 10th month, when the mountain tops first became visible (8:5), another 40 days before the release of the raven (8:6-7), and a further 21 days for the three forays of the dove (8:10-12). This makes a total so far of 285 days, bringing us to the second day of the 12th month.

On New Year’s day, 29 days later, the waters on earth had begun to dry up (8:13), and it took another 57 days for the ground to be completely dried out by the 27th day of the second month (8:14). The addition of 29 and 57 to the 285 gives a grand total of 371 days. Taking 30 days to a month, this figure yields 12 months and 11 days, identical with the conclusion based solely upon the date system.

Of course, a calendar of the type presupposed here is eccentric, but in the ancient Egyptian calendar the year was, in fact, divided into 12 months of 30 days each, yielding 360 days exactly, with five extra days intercalated at the end of the year. In Babylon, too, in addition to the true lunar calendar, there was a schematic calendar composed of 12 months of 30 days.

## The Noachide Commandments

The notion of human responsibility and culpability and the idea of Noah’s righteousness must be grounded on the assumption that there existed a moral code that was regarded as universally binding. This assumption is essential to the biblical concept of the morality of God and the moral responsibility of man; if moral laws had not then existed, how could the generation of the Flood be punished for offenses? What would be the source of its moral obligations? The idea of the existence of a moral law that is binding on all humanity is understood in the eschatological judgment of the earth found in Isaiah 24. Verse 5 there reads: “For the earth was defiled / Under its inhabitants; Because they transgressed teachings, / Violated laws, / Broke the ancient covenant.”

Rabbinic theology, sensitive to this problem, insisted on the existence of a divine covenant with the whole human race made through the two fathers of humanity, Adam and Noah. In rabbinic parlance, this covenant is known as “the commandments given to the sons of Noah.” The term “sons of Noah” is simply a designation for the family of man, both before and after the Flood. Because Israel received an additional revelation at Sinai, which immeasurably expanded the obligations uniquely incumbent on the individual Jew, the description “son of Noah,” is, in effect, synonymous with “non-Jew.”

There is no rabbinic unanimity as to either the number of “Noachide commandments” or their contents; nor is there agreement as to which were given to Adam and which to Noah. The list that enjoys the widest consensus is as follows:

The prohibitions against (1) idolatry, (2) blasphemy, (3) bloodshed, (4) incest and adultery, and (5) robbery; (6) the injunction to establish courts of law; and (7) the prohibition against eating flesh cut from a living animal. These seven, all of which are given closer definition in respect to their applicability (BT Chullin 92a; Mishneh Torah Melachim 9.2ff.), are regarded as comprising the minimal moral imperatives essential to the maintenance of an ordered and wholesome society. Most of them would come under the heading of “natural law,” that is, they seem to be inherent in human nature and are rooted or founded in reason (cf. Yoma 67b).

However, in rabbinic theology the Noachide commandments are revealed law and the authority behind them is divine, not human. The formulation of Maimonides is: “Whosoever accepts the ‘seven commandments’ and carefully observes them, is among the pious ones of the nations of the world and enjoys a share of the hereafter—provided that he accepts and performs them because the Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He ordained them in the Torah and informed us through Moses our Teacher that the ‘sons of Noah’ were originally so commanded.” Maimonides then goes on to stipulate that if a non-Jew practices these commandments solely for philosophic reasons, he would not be considered among the pious gentiles who merit a share of the hereafter. This distinction in motivation is basic to rabbinic teaching because divine authority is considered to be indispensable to the preservation of a system of morality. The ultimate sanction for the values inherent in these laws is that they constitute the will of God. Rational processes are not regarded as sufficient incentives for right action.

## ]The Noachide Commandments

## BT Sanhedrin 56a

Our Rabbis taught: The children of Noah were charged with seven mitzvot: [establishing] courts of law, blasphemy, idolatry, sexual crimes [incest, adultery], bloodshed [murder], theft, [and eating] the limb from a live animal.

## Excerpted from the Encyclopaedia Judaica

While in the amoraic period the above-mentioned list of seven precepts is clearly accepted as the framework of the Noachide Laws, a variety of tannaitic sources indicate lack of complete agreement as to the number of such laws, as well as to the specific norms to be included. The Tosefta (Av. Zar. 8:6) records four possible additional prohibitions against

1. drinking the blood of a living animal;
2. emasculation;
3. sorcery; and
4. all magical practices listed in Deuteronomy 18:10-11.

The Talmud records a position which would add prohibitions against crossbreeding of animals of different species, and grafting trees of different kinds (Sanh. 56b). Nonrabbinic sources of the tannaitic period indicate even greater divergence. The Book of Jubilees (7:20ff.) records a substantially different list of six commandments given by Noah to his sons:

1. to observe righteousness
2. to cover the shame of their flesh;
3. to bless their creator;
4. to honor parents;
5. to love their neighbor; and
6. to guard against fornication, uncleanness, and all iniquity.

Acts (15:20) refers to four commandments addressed to non-Jews, “... that they abstain from pollutions of idols, from fornication, from things strangled, and from blood.” This latter list is the only one that bears any systematic relationship to the set of religious laws which the Pentateuch makes obligatory upon resident aliens (the ger ha-gar and ezrah).

## ‘Two versions’ and a palistrophe

##### Richard Elliott Friedman

### The P version:

This is the line of Noah. Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God. Noah begot three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with lawlessness. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah:

“I have decided to make an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you shall make it: the length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make an opening for daylight in the ark, and finish it within a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with bottom, second, and third decks.

“For My part, I am going to bring a Flood of waters on the earth, to destroy all flesh under the sky in which there is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, with your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of everything that creeps of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to stay alive. For your part, take everything that is eaten and store it away; to serve as food for you and for them.”

And Noah did so; according to all that God commanded him, he did.

Noah was 600 years old when the Flood came on the earth. In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst apart, and the floodgates of the sky broke open.

That same day, Noah and his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, went into the ark with Noah’s wife and the three wives of his sons, they and all beasts of every kind, all cattle of every kind, all creatures of every kind that creep on the earth, and all birds of every kind -- every bird, every winged thing. They came to Noah into the ark, two each of all flesh in which there was the breath of life. And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him.

The Flood continued forty days on the earth. The waters swelled and increased greatly upon the earth; and the ark drifted on the face of the waters. The waters greatly swelled upon the earth and they covered all the high mountains under the whole of the sky; fifteen cubits higher the waters swelled, covering the mountains. And all flesh that moved on the earth died -- birds, cattle, beasts, and all the things that swarmed upon the earth, and all humankind. And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days.

But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided. The fountains of the deep and the floodgates of the sky were closed. At the end of one hundred fifty days the waters had diminished; and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. The waters continued to diminish until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains were visible.

In the six hundred and first year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the waters began to dry up from the earth. In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. Then God said to Noah: “Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons’ wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh -- birds and animals and everything that creeps on the earth -- so that they may swarm on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.”

So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives. And every animal, everything that creeps, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out of the ark by families.

### The J version:

Then the Lord said to Noah, “Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. Of all clean animals, take with you seven pairs, a male and its mate; of the animals that are not clean, two, a male and its mate; of the birds of the sky also, seven pairs, male and female, to keep seed alive on all the earth. For in seven days’ time I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and I will blot out from the earth every living thing that I have created.”

And Noah did all that the Lord had commanded him. Noah, with his sons, his wife, and his sons’ wives went into the ark because of the waters of the Flood. Of clean animals, and of animals that are not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground, two of each, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, as God had commanded Noah. And after seven days, the Flood waters came upon the earth.

The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights; and the Lord Himself shut him in. And the waters increased, and raised the ark so that it rose above the earth. All in whose nostrils was the merest breath of life, all that was on dry land, died. He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the earth -- humans, cattle, creeping things and birds of the sky; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark.

The rain from the sky was held back, and the waters receded steadily from the earth. At the end of forty days, Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven; it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set its foot, and so it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still upon the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it to him into the ark.

He waited another seven days, and again sent out the dove from the ark. The dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a plucked-off olive leaf; and Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him any more. Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the surface of the ground was drying.

Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from his youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being as I have done. So long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”

### The Palistrophe

The entire text is a perfect example of a palistrophe; that is, a literary structure that turns back on itself, with the first item in the structure matching the final one, the second matching the next-to-last item, and so on. At the center of the structure is one item that stands alone. It is the pivotal element on which the structure depends, meaning that it is the pivotal element on which the story itself depends.

In the Flood narrative, there are 15 pairs of items, meaning that item no. 16 stands alone and is the point of the piece as a whole:

1. Noah (6:10a[[1]](#footnote-1)) 31. Noah (9:19)

2. His sons (6:10b) 30. His sons (9:18b)

3. The ark (6:14-16) 29. The ark (9:18a)

4. The Flood will come (6:17) 28. No flood ever again (9:11-17)

5. Covenant (6:18-20) 27. Covenant (9:8-10)

6. Food in the ark (6:21) 26. Food outside the ark (9:1-4)

7. Command to enter (7:1-3) 25. Command to exit (8:15-17 and 22)

8. 7 days of waiting (7:4-5) 24. 7 days of waiting (8:12-13)

9. 7 days of waiting (7:7-10) 23. 7 days of waiting (8:10-11)

10. Entry into ark (7:11-15) 22. Raven and dove leave ark (8:7-9)

11. God shuts Noah in (7:16) 21. Noah opens the window (8:6b)

12. 40 days (7:17a) 20. 40 days (8:6a)

13. Waters rise (7:17b-18) 19. Waters abate (8:5)

14. Mountains covered (7:19) 18. Mountain tops visible (8:4-5)

15. 150 days of rising waters (7:24) 17. 150 days of abating waters (8:3)

16. God remembers Noah (8:1)

## 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 Noahhide 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 *ziqqurat*, or Mesopotamian temple tower. The *ziqqurat* (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 ziqqurat 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 ziqqurat, 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.

Nmrod: 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].”

1. An “a” and “b” indicate the first half and second half of a sentence, respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)