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Tower of Babel

Al Klingler

And all the earth was one language, one set of words. And it happened as they journeyed from the east that they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to each other, “Come, let us bake bricks and burn them hard.” And the brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar. And they said, “Come, let us build us a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, that we may make us a name, lest we be scattered over all the earth.” And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the human creatures had built. And the Lord said, “As one people with one language for all, if this is what they have begun to do, nothing they plot will elude them. Come, let us go down and baffle their language there so that they will not understand each other’s language.” And the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth and they left off building the city. Therefore it is called Babel, for there the Lord made the language of all the earth babble. And from there the Lord scattered them over all the earth.

Genesis 11:1-9

The Tower of Babel story comes at the conclusion to the oldest theological tradition of the Book of Genesis which collectively makes up the creation story. The story of the Tower of Babel, found in Genesis 11:1-9 describes the origin of the multitude of languages. But the Tower of Babel narrative also mirrors themes in the rest of the Genesis 1-11 stories in which human actions and perspectives are balanced by those of God. The purpose of this research paper is to discuss the rich variations on the most obvious interpretation that have been proposed by scholars.

The simplest interpretation of the Tower of Babel account is that it describes the origin of languages in Divine punishment of the sins of humanity. The builders of the Tower of Babel are quoted directly in the text: “Come, let us build us a city and a tower with its tops in the heavens, that we may make us a name, lest we be scattered over all the earth” (Gen 11:4-5). The builders wanted to create a community centered in one city and their intentions were to build
“a tower with its tops in the heavens.” This has been understood as a metaphor for human arrogance because the builders of the Tower of Babel attempted to be at the same level as God. God becomes so upset at humanity’s disobedience that He punishes them by confusing their languages and spreading them all over the earth. This angle of criticism “viewed multiple cultures and languages as God’s means to confuse and punish people.” Humans overstepped the boundaries and limits that God had imposed on them and thus Divine intervention was required to correct human hubris.

While this is the common interpretation of the Tower of Babel narrative, interpretations of such short, ambiguous stories within the Bible are much more complicated. The text cannot be looked at through a small and predetermined lens that ignores the particular language translation issues and the historical differences that arise when analyzing Biblical stories. Therefore, seeing the story as God’s punishment of human pride would be an insufficient reading of the text. In fact, Robert Alter simply says that “the text does not really suggest that.” For example, he points out that the words, “Its top in the heavens,” is an exaggeration that describes high towers and is found in many Mesopotamian stories. Also, the practice of building structures to make a name for oneself is found throughout ancient Hebrew culture. To further this point, Hinne Wagenaar states, “the purely negative understanding of the dispersion (as punishment) does not fit the theological unfolding of the primeval history.” Therefore this story requires that more attention be given to its particulars in order to find a more knowledgeable and suitable interpretation of its meaning.

The Catholic author, Raymond B. Marcin, proposes a different critique. His central claim is that the true meaning of this story is that humanity should be humble and not rely on its own achievements in order to justify its existence. Instead of putting trust in these achievements as a way to create an image for itself, it must put trust in God who is the only one who truly sees its real image. Humans constantly try to use their achievements as a way to show their righteousness and virtue, but in fact, the only way to gain righteousness and virtue is to have trust in God. Marcin remarks that, “It is when we are about our noblest and, in the human sense, highest human accomplishments that we, paradoxically, are farthest from God.” Humans constantly try to overcome their finite limits and push beyond these limits to establish a sense of self-importance through their achievements. Yet, the story of Babel suggests that only through humility can humans achieve “a freedom and a love and a unity and a solidarity that surpass understanding.” This explanation of the
Tower of Babel narrative is a good starting point to begin investigating other interpretations in that its general conclusion is rather simple and relatively similar to other readings of this text.

Raymond Marcin’s conclusions are somewhat similar to Ellen van Wolde’s analysis of the text. However, there are differences that are important to note in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the story. Van Wolde’s reading of the Tower of Babel attempts to show a relationship with the Creation Story by locating the Tower of Babel in the context of a story about the larger complex environment, the earth. God caused the confusion of languages in the earth’s interest. The creation story shows us that human beings are not the only important beings in this world. In fact, the flood story (Genesis 6-9) suggests that God’s main concern is for the earth and seeing human evil He feels bad for making humans on the earth. Generally, when we read the story of Babel we read it through a human perspective. However, according to van Wolde’s viewpoint, “the earth, and not human beings, is presented as the subject with the language in the text.”

Justification for seeing the earth as the subject of the larger narrative, for example, is seen in Genesis 4 where the earth’s mouth opens up to take the blood of the murdered Abel. This story of Cain and Abel shares the same language that is used to write the Tower of Babel. In Genesis 4, God listens to the Abel’s blood that “cries out to [God] from the soil” (Gen 4:11). Van Wolde argues that it is the earth crying out to God; therefore, when we read the Tower of Babel, the word for ‘language’, which is literally ‘tongue’, is the earth’s ‘tongue’. This difference in translation allows for a completely different interpretation of the story. Van Wolde concludes her essay with this new explanation of the text: “In the story of dispersion God is the only one who acts on behalf of the earth: God listens to the earth’s tongue and shares the earth’s perspective. This is opposed to the present-day view that the earth is at our disposal.” Although this interpretation is different from the one seen by Raymond Marcin, there are a few key similarities that can be seen.

Both interpretations focus on the point that humans are not the end-all and be-all of the Genesis stories. Rather, humans are in relation with everything on earth. Seeing these stories only through the human perspective would be making the same mistake that the builders of Babel made, namely to ground reality the limited human experience alone. God does not share this human perspective and both authors make this explicitly clear:

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The true image of humanity is there for the viewing, but the viewpoint has to be God’s, not humanity’s own…humanity requires humility in order to be able to share in the viewpoint of God. –Raymond B. Marcin

The story of creation, the story of the flood and that of the dispersion show that God does not necessarily share the human perspective; God also, and perhaps more often, shares the perspective of the earth. –Ellen van Wolde

Placing these two quotes in relation with each other can help to provide even further insight into the nature of the Tower of Babel story. If we hold true God is the subject of the narrative, and that he “shares the perspective of the earth,” then sharing in the viewpoint of God would require humans to experience a sense of reality that is found in our relationship with the earth. Being in relationship with the earth, means we are in relationship with God. The humility that Marcin discusses would encourage us to put aside our self-centered ideologies and share the viewpoint of God. Similarly, for van Wolde, God’s viewpoint is in the perspective of the earth. Combining both authors’ interpretations allows us to develop a deeper understanding of the text that we would not have been able to see separately.

Marcin advises us to step outside of our human perspective in order to share in the viewpoint of God. The only way to do that is through a “self-denial” in which we ground our reality outside of ourselves. Although we are in a relationship with earth, it “does not mean that the human beings determine that what suits them is also best for the earth.” Therefore, by forgetting ourselves through humility, we will be able to ground ourselves in the experience of earth, which will allow us to “share in the viewpoint of God” (Marcin), who “shares the perspective of the earth” (van Wolde).

For the writer, then, the human built tower, meant to reach the heaven and make a name for the people, is insignificant from the perspective of God. This may imply, as Marcin and van Wolde suggest, that we cannot ground our lives in human creation, but in God’s creation…earth, not in humanly constructed reality but in the natural order. One interpretation of Genesis 11:1-9, then, is that it is a critique of the human desire to transcend our relationship to the Earth and thus reject the will of God for Creation. Yet, there are also other beliefs as to why the writer portrayed the Tower of Babel to be against the nature of God.

J. Rogerson suggests that the story of Babel may have been written during
the period when the Israelites were exiled in Babylom. If this were true, then “the story would be a condemnation of the greatness of Babylon, and a declaration of its nothingness compared with the might of the God of Israel.” Although the theme remains that the greatness of God is superior to human ideas of worth, the motive for the declaration of God’s importance changes. Now God’s greatness becomes a force against oppressive powers.

Rogerson is not alone in believing that this story was written during the Babylonian captivity of Israel in the Seventh Century B.C.E. J. Severino Croatto not only thinks that this story fits within the Israelite’s exile, but also believes this particular story to be “one of the most highly distorted by traditional readings.” Like Robert Alter, Croatto does not agree with the traditional interpretations that God’s action is punishment for humanity’s pride. He places the Tower of Babel story in a sociopolitical context in which the narrative fits the experience of the people of Israel. Croatto explains how “Gen 11:1-9 problematizes the unity of language, from the point of view of human hubris or excess, as an instrument of oppression.”

This message, according to Croatto, is that “unity is bad; division, as an expression of diversified and enriching cultures at all levels, is positive.” This interpretation changes the story from being an account of divine punishment for the sins of humanity resulting in the origin of language to a story written against the oppressive structures of Babylon. This can certainly be seen as a reoccurring theme within our own history, where one language has been repeatedly forced upon groups of people as a way to establish rule under a new regime. For example, in 1552, conquistador Pizarro’s conquest of the whole Inca Empire resulted in a new kingdom that forced a completely new way of life upon the Inca people, including the use of a new language. Accepting a new language is the most significant change that results in the abandonment of one’s own culture. As José Míguez-Bonino states in his article about the Tower of Babel, A Latin American Perspective: “To accept the new language meant to deny everything that gave meaning to their lives-stories, traditions, the ‘naming of things,’ the music of words, the sounds of life.” In the Biblical exile, the Israelites were pressed to conform involuntarily to the Babylonian way of life and this rejection of Babylonian hegemony is reflected in the Tower of Babel story. The writer describes what the Israelite’s God, Yahweh, will do to those who try to establish one universal way of life. God’s intervention in halting the building of the tower and dispersing the people is seen as God’s rejection of monolithic rule and culture.
The story is still about our attempt to create something universally preeminent and our failure in determining what is correct for the universal world. Many times humans believe that what works for one group of people, will work for another completely different group of people. The story of Babel tells us that humans cannot “build” greatness by unifying all of mankind into one nation. The writer is describing how God confirms,

A diverse humanity that can find its unity not in the domination of one city, one tower, or one language…. God’s action, then, is twofold: the thwarting of the project of the false unity of domination and the liberation of the nations that possess their own places, languages, and families.15

God is liberating the oppressed while preventing those attempting to establish a universal way of life, that is, intentionally or unintentionally, oppressing others.

In this interpretation the message is that diversity is a good thing. God does not want one way of life to exist on earth. Diversity is how God created us. When God created humans, for example, He created two different forms, man and woman, and thus only through diversity can we achieve unity. It is not that God wants diversity without unity, it is the opposite; God wants unity through diversity. As Brueggemann explains:

The reason God allows [differentiation] is that all parts of humanity look to and respond to God in unity. Here that unity is expressed as a dispersion all over the earth. The purpose of God is neither self-securing homogeneity as though God is not Lord, nor a scattering of autonomous parts as though the elements of humanity did not belong to each other.16

Unity is not found in a self-constructed human way, for if it were, the human structure of universality would surely be oppressive. Human’s attempts to unify the world only end in coercion and deny the majority of their unique way of life. Instead, unity is found in the many ways humans experience God. Our different experiences with the divine show us a universal thread that ties all of humanity together.

Comparative theologian Francis Clooney talks extensively about the different ways humanity experiences the divine. In an article discussing religious plurality Clooney says this about our human reality: “Reality is multidimen-
sional, and so there is neither need nor possibility to correct all models of reality and reduce them to a single, dominant one... The diversity of human religious paths mirrors the rich diversity of God’s own mystery. Clooney is describing how his own studies of comparative religions reveal a diversity of life that cannot be narrowed into one absolute universal reality. In fact, this diversity is essential to the understanding of God. While Clooney’s article says nothing about the Tower of Babel, his understanding of our diversity applies directly to the message found in Genesis 11. God and his creations do not consist of one universal being, but rather of a multitude of diverse beings. Attempting to “create” universality is going against the very nature of God.

The very act of God’s mediation is critical to the meaning of the story. The way in which we view God’s role in the story reflects our understanding of it. As discussed at the beginning of the paper, seeing God’s actions as punishment for human’s arrogance and pride is not a fully informed interpretation. In order to better understand the text and what it means, we must place the story within the context of Genesis stories. The story of Babel comes directly after the flood and the dispersal of Noah’s descendants. Within the two chapters of Genesis 9 and 10, the scattering of peoples is depicted as positive. God’s orders in these chapters reflect His stance given in the first chapter, “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28, Gen 9:1-2). From these chapters it is clear that God intended and wanted humans to disperse over the earth. Reading Genesis 11:1-9 as God punishing humans by confusing their languages and dispersing them over the earth would go completely against the idea of dispersion that we see in Genesis 1, 9, and 10. This is not to say that humanity did not make any mistakes. The sin of pride is certainly a problem that cannot be erased from the meaning of the text. But acknowledging humanity’s sin while seeing God’s actions as other than punishment requires further clarification.

Taking Marcin and van Wolde as correct in their interpretations that God is acting for the earth, and that the story is seen from the perspective of earth, then God’s intervention with the world is not to punish humanity but to save the world. Humanity’s mistakes require divine intervention that is compassionate to people and the earth. God knows that allowing humanity to ground itself in its own constructed reality is dangerous because humanly constructed systems of universality result in oppressive structures. God’s will from the beginning has been that humans experience reality in all the diversity of earth. Thus, God confuses languages and disperses people throughout the earth as a way to help the world. God’s actions here can be seen as liberating.
The oppressive systems that naturally develop from humanity’s social organizations are the structures from which God wishes to liberate the world. It is not that God wishes to liberate only mankind, but the whole earth. In Genesis 6:6-7, God grieved for the earth and regretted He made humanity. Even when God makes a covenant after the flood, His language leads us to believe His concern is for the whole earth: “I will not again damn the soil on humankind’s score. For the devisings of the human heart are evil from youth. And I will not again strike down all living things as I did. As long as all the days of the earth” (Gen 8:21-22). Marcin and van Wolde’s interpretations are very instructive but still the reading of the Tower of Babel as the captive Israel’s protest against dominating empire is gaining credibility. So what are we able to make of the story now?

Liberation for the earth means standing directly against the imperial structure of Babylon. For as God clearly states in the Tower of Babel story, “As one people with one language for all, if this is what they have begun to do, nothing they plot will elude them” (Gen 11:6). God’s concern in this story is to prevent an imperial, humanly constructed world from destroying the earth.

Ironically, these stories show us that the Divine is best experienced in the natural diversity offered by the earth. Adam and Eve were closest to God when they were coexisting with the earth and all of creation. As human civilization is seen evolving in the Genesis stories, God is becoming more and more removed. The reasons for interventions by God become less clear. Brian Murdock looks at the multitude of interpretations of the Tower of Babel story that developed in the Medieval Ages, and there we encounter similar stories that talk of God’s removal from our reality:

Of greatest interest in these medieval presentations of the story, though, is the de-emphasizing of the role of God, whose intervention in the Bible text is quite specific. In some versions He does visit the tower, but equally often sends angels, or brings about the sudden confusion of language whilst remaining more or less invisible. Of course human presumptuousness is condemned, but one cannot help being left with a sense of ambiguity. 19

This sense of ambiguity can be unsettling for people who find comfort in the predictability that our human reality attempts to provide. Yet, grounding our lives in this human representation of reality would be committing the same sins as the builders of the Tower of Babel.
Although the simplest approach to evaluating the story of Babel has been widely accepted, it has not done justice to all the particularities of the story. These have proven to be essential to our understanding of The Tower of Babel. The elementary interpretation concentrates on the surface value of the text presuming that God punishes human hubris. But a richer interpretation is formed by a combination of three analyses. First, God’s action was divine punishment for humanity’s sin of pride. Second, God takes the perspective of earth and acts on behalf of the well-being of the planet. Third, monolithic, humanly constructed institutions lead to oppression and it is liberating to embrace multiplicity and in our experience of a diverse human and natural world we experience God more fully.

Notes:
6 Ibid.
8 Ibid 157.
9 Ibid 156.
12 Ibid 222.
13 Ibid.
15 Ibid 16.
16 Brueggemann, 99
42

18 Wagenaar 408.


Works Cited


