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The Tower of Babel

Laura Perrings

¹ Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ² And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' ⁵ The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶ And the LORD said, 'Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.' ⁸ So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹ Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

(Genesis 11:1-9)

The Tower of Babel, as told in the book of Genesis 11: 1-9, is a story that explains the origins of the different nations and languages. Some scholars claim that it is only a parable, and it is true that it differs from the Table of Nations immediately preceding it in Chapter 10 which offers an alternative explanation of how the nations and languages came to be through a genealogy. The difference in storytelling methods and details between Genesis ten and eleven may result from the Tower of Babel text being from the J tradition while the surrounding genealogical text is from the P tradition. Understanding the context for a work such as this story is very important for correct interpretation. Unfortunately, the history of this text is vague and I am uncertain of what the historical context for the story *is*. Amongst scholars there is very little consensus about the history. Some scholars argue that it was an actual historical event and others present evidence that it was written by later authors who saw the foolish

pride of the Babylonians in the grandness of their city and ziggurats and wrote a story to discredit them. I agree with Steven Reimer who argues that the ziggurats currently found at Babylon are not old enough to be the Tower of Babel if the story is about an actual historical event instead of being an imagined explanation for how things came to be (65).

Instead of attempting to present an argument for the proper historical context of this section of Genesis, I shall examine it in its context within the Bible. The situation of the story in the text is very important for understanding its significance and the Tower of Babel serves as the turning point in Genesis from prehistory to history. The story is not only about language, but also about the rapport between humans and God. The relationship between God and humanity changes after this event, with God dealing with one select group of people instead of the population as a whole. The story teaches today's readers about how to be in right relationship with God by demonstrating what *not* to do. Humans should be obedient to, and rely on, God, not attempt to reach him through buildings, and should respect each other. The story of the Tower of Babel is at once about human self-sufficiency, and about the attempt to bridge the gap between humans and God. Humanity is seen in a period when they are able to care for themselves, yet seek to find their purpose in something greater. Thus they built a bridge between themselves and the divine. The horizontal meets the vertical in this story. I will argue my interpretation of the story by discussing what the humans did that was wrong, how God punished them, how it was different than his previous punishments, and how the theme of human pride trying to equal God and our relationship with him is continued through the rest of the Bible and history.

To begin with, I first read this story expecting to learn something about the necessity of different languages, believing that the confusion of tongues was the main theme of the story. I thought it odd that the unity produced by a common language was a bad thing in God's eyes. God chose to disrupt the easy communication between the people, but surely if we could all speak the same language we would not have such a hard time communicating properly. With one language, the people could all communicate very easily. The words they used were very closely linked to the object, action, or idea that was referred to, so there would be very little confusion or opening for different interpretations (Bowker 33). The language used in Babel would have been restricted code with nuanced meaning that only people in the same close-knit community could understand (which in this situation was all of humanity). Restricted code is developed in a group in social solidarity. Today such code is found between close friends, family, members of the army, and in prisons (Bernstein 476).

I believe that communication is essential between people in order to promote understanding. God's decision to disrupt the common language and easy understanding seems puzzling from this perspective. However, a multiplying of languages may be necessary to avoid a kind of linguistic hegemony and cultural uniformity and limited perspective on the real world. Leon Kass suggests that a common language 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 further states that they would thus have a "common inner life, with simple words accurately conveying the selfsame imaginings, passions, and desires of every human being" (223). Such unity, he argues, can be dangerous because "speech is colored always by human perceptions, passions, interests, and desires," and because "it is a human creation and because it reflects human concerns" it "comes to hold greater sway with human beings than does the given world (that is God's original creation)" (Kass 223). If we all look at the world in the same way and understand it the same way, there is nothing to check it against in order to make sure that the perceptions are right. Therefore, God's "multiplication of languages...institute[ed] otherness and opposition, it is the necessary condition for national self-awareness and the possibility of a politics that will hear and hearken to the voice of what is eternal, true, and good" (239). A single entity, like Adam before Eve's creation, is too self-sufficient and does not have a proper self-awareness according to Kass and requires a differing opinion.

Since it appears that multiple languages and world views are necessary, it is also necessary to keep those different hermeneutical lenses in dialogue in order to understand each other, the world, and God as clearly as possible. As Kwok Pui-lan argues in her book *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, there is not one universal way in which we comprehend the world and the divine; instead there are myriad options from which to choose. The only way to reconcile these various interpretations is to enter into a dialogue with those who have different experiences in order to check and balance each other and discern the truth of the events more clearly through the build up of years of contextual interpretations. The goal with such an approach is to be able to learn to understand each other despite differences in language, race, gender, and ethnicity.

The story of the Tower of Babel results in God confusing the language of the people so that they are forced to separate and populate the wider world. Humanity needs to communicate in order to understand each other and our relationship with God, but we were not in right relation to God before he divided us as I will discuss later in my sections on human pride and the motives for building the city.

Such a closed linguistic community as that which built the city and tower could not facilitate fruitful spreading around the world. Elaborated code was necessary, meaning a more complex code than the restricted one, which can be understood by others outside of the community which produced it. Such a code “arises wherever the intent of the other person cannot be taken for granted” which means that “speakers are forced to elaborate their meanings and make them both explicit and specific” (Bernstein 476). As a necessary ingredient in communication using elaborated code, the speaker must “focus upon the experience of others as different from his own” (477). There needed to be a contrast between groups of people in order for there to be a need for elaborated code, and it frees the people from the confinement of their dominant language by allowing them to communicate with other people. Language then, was a means to an end in the story of the Tower of Babel and tied in another theme, that of the relationship with God. The relationship was best served when the humans were obedient to God and spread out apart from each other.

After the Flood, God commanded Noah and his descendents to spread over the earth and multiply. But in building the Tower of Babel the people were not obeying the order that they should “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth” (Gen. 9:1). The author of this story establishes that “the whole world had one language and a common speech” and that they were keeping close to each other (Gen. 11:1). The people traveled together instead of spreading out, and found a plain in Shinar where they decided to settle and build a city and a tower to “make a name” for themselves “and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11:4). According to archeological sources, the area in Shinar is not near any natural stone deposits where building material could be quarried. Thus the people had to use something else, and their material of choice was a new invention called a brick: “They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar” (Gen. 11:3). Most scholars agree that the phrase “make a name” for themselves refers to seeking fame and glory. Interestingly, they are not trying to make the name for their offspring, or even mention building it as a legacy for future generations; instead they are building it for the here and now. So, in a way, they are not obeying God’s command to be fruitful and multiply because they are more concerned with this brick building.

Additionally, the choice to build a city is an indication that they want to settle down. Although there weren’t deposits of natural stone in the Shinar plain, the land there (in the Euphrates valley) was very fertile, so one can deduce they plan to rely on agriculture for their sustenance (Kass 224). Earlier and later stories in

the Bible support an argument that God does not approve of urbanity but prefers for his people to wander because they will have to rely on him more for their well-being. By settling into an agricultural and city-oriented life, the people are expressing their independence and self-sufficiency, yet the tower they set about building is designed to be one that “reaches to the heavens” (Gen. 11:4). Why attempt to reach heaven and God if the people believe themselves capable of taking care of themselves? Traditionally, this has been interpreted as an indication that the people are attempting to reach heaven by means of their own efforts. Several motives for such an undertaking have been proposed by various scholars. It is possible that it is an act of pride, and threatens God’s power because they could become too god-like if they continued to work together. If they reached heaven, it may produce the same effect that God feared if Adam and Eve should eat of the tree of life in the Garden of Eden: “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live for ever” (Gen. 3:22). Another possible motive is that they are creating a form of high ground in case another flood comes (Pinker 90). I find this last argument unconvincing because surely if they sought high ground they could have settled either somewhere that was naturally higher or near to a source of natural stone to make the building easier and possibly sturdier. In conjunction with this idea, it has been posed as a possibility that the people were creating an artificial “high place” (normally a mountain) on which to worship various gods. Later stories of the Bible mention the “bad” kings who set up the “high places” where gods other than Yahweh are worshipped such as Jeroboam in 1 Kings 12:31, “Jeroboam built shrines on high places and appointed priests from all sorts of people, even though they were not Levites.” Several prophets and biblical writers express how deplorable these high places are in the eyes of the Lord even as the people continuously return to worship at them: “The people, however, were still sacrificing at the high places, because a temple had not yet been built for the Name of the LORD” (1 Kings 3:2). Conversely, some have argued that the tower was a military fortress and that the people sought to reach heaven so they could mount an attack.

I find the most promising understanding is that the tower was an attempt to be closer to God because the people realized that they needed him. In such a case, the lesson to the people is that it is “not the monumental achievements of human ingenuity, but only the human heart [that] can forge a link with God” (Pinker 95). Of these understandings, I also find it likely that the people settled down, perhaps in fear of yet another traumatic experience like the flood (since this occurs within

a lifetime of Noah's children), and began building a city, growing complacent and self-sufficient.

By settling in one place together and commencing construction of a large structure, mankind was not relying on God or populating the planet. Perhaps it was because they had become content and self-sufficient in their city that God decided to put an end to their project. The text hints at their complacency, "For wherever the Torah uses the term...[settled] it means that people are overly at ease" and "Rabbi Helbo said: 'Wherever you find contented satisfaction, Satan is active'" (qtd. in Plaut 85). Cities produce "civilization" and that means that a social hierarchy, militarization, and materialism will begin to flourish. As Reimer observes, "Exploitation, oppression, materialism, militarization, self indulgence, are all attitudes and practices that are condemned by Yahweh" (71). The desire of these ancient humans to make a name for themselves is evidence of the pride they feel in their own accomplishments. Previously, the word meaning "made" used in this instance was only used by God in creating the world, suggesting that the people are attempting to imitate the power of God in their creative efforts (Kass 231). Seeking fame was a means of honoring humanity more than they honored God (Richardson 128). The pride of humanity brought God's displeasure because it did not honor God. The lesson to be learned is that "when men boast of their own achievements, there results nothing but division, confusion, and incomprehensibility" (126). In certain versions of the text, the term for human is translated as "sons of Adam" which implies that the fault they are guilty of is similar to that of Adam, their ancestor. Adam's fault was eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thus disobeying God and attaining more knowledge than he was meant to have. The builders of the Tower of Babel were following in their predecessor's footsteps by failing to listen to God properly. As inevitably happens, humanity began to sin against God once again by refusing to comply with his will.

In response to the actions of the humans, God confuses their languages and causes them to scatter over the world. The tone of the language used in this part of the story is almost sarcastic in describing how God "came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building" (Gen. 11:5). One can interpret this to mean that the Tower that the humans were hoping would reach heaven is so small that God has to come down to see it properly, or, that by coming down he is demonstrating how insignificant the construction is (Jacob 78, Pinker 94). Additionally, God may desire to be present when he issues his punishment against their work, for "a judgement demands a personal and formal investigation of the facts" (Jacob 78). Upon surveying the scene, God remarks, "If as one people speaking the same

language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other" (Gen. 11:6-7). This statement echoes the human's call to join together in verse 3: "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly" (Gen. 11:3). In these verses either God is mocking the humans, or the humans were imitating God as they were in their choice of word for "make." Surely God's act of changing languages does not take nearly as much effort as the effort required from humanity to build a city. The result of the confusion of languages was logically that the people could no longer communicate, and they separated, leaving the city unfinished because they "stopped building the city" (Gen. 11:8). Thus the consequence of God's action was that his original command to the people was obeyed. Moreover, the people could not rely on themselves as they had in the city and had to rely more on God.

The motive for God's actions was to ensure that the people spread out and relied on him. Distressed by the human rebellion against his command, "God is afraid that the building will lead to human autonomy; such a development would call into question human finitude, which is inherent in being created by God" so he decided to ensure that they could not complete their task Westermann *Practical* 82). However, God's response is remarkably mild compared to his previous actions. Following shortly after the devastation of the Flood, God takes decisive action but does not kill any of the people and so is faithful to his promise of chapter eight verses 21-22 (Kselman 90). I think it likely that God's action here was more of a guiding shove than a wrathful strike. Confusing the languages forces the humans to separate and thus they must always be in dialogue with each other and work together to find the truth. This is a propulsion into "the beginning of a way of life that marks the transition from primeval event to history which begins in Gen. 12" (Westermann, *Practical* 555). This is not done according to the usual pattern, though. In the previous stories, God's judgments that have had profound effects on humanity are followed by acts of grace. In this case, however, there is no act of grace—no new promise by the end of the story (von Rad 152-3). The reader is left to wonder whether or not God still wants to work with humanity: "Thus at the end of the primeval history a difficult question is raised: God's future relationship to his rebellious humanity, which is now scattered in fragments. Is the catastrophe of ch. 11.1-9 final?" (152). These questions and concerns are laid to rest in the subsequent story about the calling of Abram. The punishment is not disastrously bad because the deed was not too bad. They are not killed despite the fact that they "defied God openly, yet, because they practiced brotherhood toward each other,

they were merely scattered” (qtd. in Plaut 128). No “man-made unity” can be the “basis of permanent peace on earth,” only by being in right relationship with God can there be peace (Richardson 128).

The position of the story in the Bible makes it a very significant one. The Tower of Babel is placed between what are traditionally viewed as the prehistory accounts of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and Noah and the “historical” accounts of Abraham and the Israelites. God’s relationship with humanity alters between these two sections of Genesis, and the Tower of Babel is the event that makes this happen. Prior to Babel, God had dealt with humanity as a whole, but mankind continuously disappointed by acting in a way God disapproved of. Adam and Eve ate the fruit, so God kicked them out, then Cain killed Abel, and God punished him by making him an outcast, and then all of humanity became so dissolute that God caused a great flood that killed all but Noah and his family. Once again, mankind is disobeying God, and they are punished by being forced to spread out across the earth as God desired. Subsequently, God chooses Abraham and through him and his people God will bless the rest of the world (Ramsay 31). Thus “the joining of prehistory and history...affords the biblical editors the opportunity to show the rise of Abraham and his descendents in the full context of God’s plan for mankind” (Plaut 79). The Tower of Babel allows prehistory and history to “dovetail” and show the alteration in God’s tactics (von Rad 153). The relationship between man and divine alters and it was “the dispersal of those who challenge the sovereignty of God” that led “to a new history of blessing inaugurated by God in the stories of the ancestors” (Kselman 84). The connection between humanity and the divine would continue in this same vein with the chosen people being the means of blessing the rest of the world until the coming of Jesus.

While humanity tried to create a bridge between the material world and the divine, Jesus, according to early Christianity actually *is* that bridge. Being fully human *and* fully divine, Jesus crosses the gap and alters the relationship again so that Jews and Gentiles alike can reap the benefits of God’s loving grace. According to the book of Ephesians, Jesus is the means of bringing all people together in unity:

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (that done in the body by the hands of men)— remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. (Ephesians 2:11-13)

The dream Jacob has of the ladder between heaven and earth is in a way a foreshadowing of Jesus' arrival because he would open communication between the divine and the human: "He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Gen. 28:12). The New Testament presents us with the fact that we are flawed humans, and we cannot reach heaven on our own by means of any physical structure we build. It is only through our hearts that we can know God, and, through Jesus, God made the ultimate atonement for our sins so that they should no longer keep us from knowing him. Christians seeking unity between humanity and God find it not in a man-made city but in Christ and a city built by God: "[Abraham] was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10).

For modern Christian readers this story still has a significant message to teach. Even today, people tend to stay in their comfort zones; they settle into one way of life and are unwilling to look at other possibilities just as the builders of Babel did. We still have the same problem of there being only one way considered to be correct by the dominant authority. Ideology determines how we think and act. Babel was an ideology that made the people feel safe, but God split the humans up and sent them back into the wilderness in a type of exile experience in order to remind them to rely on him. Human pride still builds towers to reach the heavens even without a common language, so the issue in the story is not merely that the people were building cities. The problem was that they were seeking self-sufficiency and independence from God instead of recognizing that he was superior to them. Despite the fact that Christians live in a post-Jesus world where people no longer need to be circumcised to be a chosen person of God, Christians still need to consciously choose to obey God and rely on him in daily life. As Jurgen Moltmann says in his book *Theology of Hope*, the promise of God is always in tension with the dominant order—the ideology—in order to call the people forward to something better and more in God. The promise that Moltmann envisions is never completely liquidated, so people are never able to rest complacently in the world they know but are always being inspired to act for something more. The people of Babel became content to stay with what they had in their city and did not work to try to build a better world or to know God—they had bought into the ideology. According to the story, then, Christians must embrace a kind of exilic experience in order to come into right relationship with God and the larger world.

Conclusively, the most valuable aspect of Genesis 11: 1-9 to understand is that the human relationship with God had once again become corrupt. Humanity's

pride led them to build a tower that they thought could rival God's own creative acts and reach heaven. In settling down to build a city, the people selected a fertile plain where they could sustain themselves with agriculture instead of wandering in the wilderness where they need to rely on God. Their ability to communicate directly with one another, since they all spoke the same language, meant that they shared a common understanding of the world and themselves, so there was no dissonant voice against which to check themselves. The building of Babel was a longing for God gone awry. Like Cain who so desires God's favor that he kills his brother, these humans thought they knew how best to know God, but ended up doing the opposite of what they were told. God's action in response was not so much a punishment as it was a means of accomplishing his will and reminding the humans in question that they cannot survive on their own but need God. The sons of Adam are sent out into the world and God chooses a select group with which to interact for the future.

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