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The Tower of Babel: The Dispersion of God's People

Stephanie Dixon

The book of Genesis is filled with stories of how God and God's creation interact. The book begins with the earth's primordial couple, Adam and Eve. It continues by telling the story of the couple's sons, Cain and Abel, and then moves into the story of the Great Flood and God's relationship with Noah. After the Flood there comes a short but infamous story: the story of the Tower of Babel. What immediately distinguishes this story from those which precede it is the impersonality of the encounter between God and God's creation. There is no main character with whom God communicates. Instead, God treats the whole of humanity. Though this could simply be a stylistic tactic of the storyteller it also might be an indication that this story has a different purpose than those which come before it. The preceding stories provide the reader with insight into human nature; establish truths about the interactions between human beings and other humans and also reveal human beings' perceived understandings of the nature of God. The story of the Tower of Babel, on the other hand, seems almost out of place in light of any of those purposes. One must read the Babel story with a different purpose in mind. Perhaps the story of the Tower of Babel is an ancient people's manner of explaining their perception of the world in which they live – specifically a diverse world filled with multiple successful cultures. Unlike many standard interpretations of the story of the Tower of Babel which paint the inhabitants of Babel as rebellious and prideful people who are punished by God for their sinfulness, this paper celebrates the success of the Babel civilization and insinuates God's confidence in them to fill the earth.

Before assuming that my interpretation is the right one or better than what many other Biblical scholars have discerned, I will give a synopsis of the opposing point of view. Many people interpret the story of the Tower of Babel as an interaction between God and creation – particularly God's punishment for sinful human pride. Some, like Bryon Sherwin, still see the function of the story as explaining the diversity of cultures in the world. He says, "It is possible to see the tower story as an etiological answer to the problem of how this linguistic diversity came about. In other words, the tower story explains not only *why* but also *how* people came to speak many languages – because God confused their language as

a punishment for building the tower. Until the tower, they spoke one language; and now they speak many because of God's punishment of the tower builders" (Sherwin 106). What interpreters, such as Sherwin, depend on, though, is that punishment is the reason behind the dispersion of humanity. Consequently, these interpreters also must establish a reason why humanity deserved to be punished. There are a number of explanations. Some say that the Tower builders were trying to penetrate heaven to challenge or even kill God. This reason is rationalized by the fact that the Tower builders were of the post-Flood generation. In light of their context, Sherwin says, "As a result of knowing that God destroyed virtually all life on earth, they came to the conclusion that they could no longer rely on God. For them, God was just too dangerous to have around. God could do it again, maybe not with water—because of the promise to Noah. The next time it could be with fire or earthquakes" (Sherwin 105). In what seems to be an effort at self-defense, the humans conspire to build a Tower with "its top in the heavens" so that they may either contain God in God's "rightful domain" or even go so far as to kill God¹ in order to protect themselves and protect their precious world (Pinker 90). If such were the intentions of the people, God would have to punish the humans for intruding on God's domain.

Another reason which scholars give for God's punishment (through dispersion) of creation has to do with God's disdain for urban life, or more specifically, for the consequences of urban life – namely opting for the "temporal over the lasting goals, for the artificial over the real, for the manufactured over the natural" (Sherwin 108). Scholars assert that these kinds of options devalue the human being and exalt commodities. God naturally places more value on God's own creation – nature, the earth, living beings – and expects humans to do the same. Aaron Pinker, explains that the sin of the Tower builders is essentially in the same category as the sin of Adam and Cain; reaching out to the artificial, to the man-made not the God-given" (Pinker 90). The Tower builders valued their own construction more than the world given to them by God, thus, God had to punish creation and re-assert God's ultimate authority.

One final sin identified by such interpreters of the Tower story describes the Tower builders' disobedience to God's command to "be fertile and multiply" (Genesis 9:1). By building a city and defining it with a Tower, God's creation was attempting to settle itself in one place and was blatantly ignoring the earlier story's command to disperse and fill the earth. As scholar, Jack McKeown says, "The

¹One midrash describes how the Tower builders "stood on the top of the tower and shot arrows into heaven to kill God, and how the arrows they shot up came down with blood on them, convincing the tower people that they had indeed murdered God" (Sherwin 105).

divine landlord does not approve of what his tenants are doing, mainly because they fail to recognize his authority. He exercises his authority by withdrawing their ability to communicate. The end result is that the human beings, once secure in the confines of Eden, are now scattered over all the earth" (McKeown 63).

Such interpretations are supported by precedented human behavior which has been demonstrated time and time again in the earlier biblical stories. As Pinker says, "Mankind's record to that point was purely negative. Man was expelled from the Garden of Eden for his misdeeds, and then largely wiped off the earth's surface for his transgressions" (Pinker 91). If man has been, at its essence, consistently sinful and notorious for acting counter to the will of God thus far, it is not a far leap or unreasonable presumption to imagine that the Tower builders' construction of the city and Tower of Babel is not approved of by God and God's response to the construction is a form of punishment.

Though these arguments have been defended and developed by multiple scholars, I still question their justification and assumption of sinfulness. If the actions of the Tower builders were truly despicable in the eyes of God and God found their construction so offensive that it was necessary to administer punishment, then given God's track record in punishments, why was the consequence for their sinfulness so mild? If God had once destroyed humanity completely why would God not at least destroy the Tower or the city but instead simply confound their language? Exploiting this weakness for the sake of entering the argument, I now offer my interpretation of the Babel story.

For reasons, probably stemming from personal bias and my preferred way to view God, the standard interpretation of the story of the Tower of Babel seems highly unappealing. The God who punishes Tower builders who seek to enter the realms of Heaven and attack a God that they can not trust is irrational and gratuitously punishes those who are incomparably inferior in terms of strength and power. The God who disperses humans who value their own creation over God's is immature and selfishly punishes humans so that God's glorious works are not overshadowed. Finally, a God who reprimands creation because it pridefully focuses on itself and seems to forget about God is insecure and desperate and nearly prostitutes himself in order to receive attention. In any of the three cases, great liberty must be taken and significant assumptions must be accepted in order to create sin worthy of God's punishment and even then, the sin and consequent punishment seem questionable.

If we put aside the theme of pride and punishment and instead focus more specifically on the meaning of the construction and the dispersion we may dis-

cover that the story of the Tower of Babel is really less about the Tower and more about explaining how the success of human creativity and God's utilization of that creativity for God's own purposes led to the diversity of languages, peoples and cultures in the world. Instead of seeing God's dispersion of the people of Babel as a "response to pride and an act of punishment" we might see it as "the intention of God all along", especially in light of God's command to be fruitful and multiply (Hiebert 31). As Pinker suggests, it could be "that the story of the Tower of Babel is actually a depiction of mankind at its best, an expression of God's towering pride in His creation of man—an affirmation that the human race is ready for the monumental task to be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it" (Pinker 89). This is the assumption that the rest of this paper will work from.

Drawing on Theodore Hiebert's analysis of the story, the first indication that the Babel story serves less as a tool for developing the reader's understanding of God's interaction with people and serves more importantly to explain the diversity of the modern world through the creative power of language is the text's deliberate linguistic composition. Hiebert begins, "This story is about language; in particular, it is about the existence of a single, uniform language spoken by all people (Hiebert 33). As the first sentence of the story emphasizes, "The whole earth had one language and the same words" (Genesis 9:1). The Tower builders' unadulterated unity through language is important because it is symbolic of the unity within the community – their unity in thought and action.

The action of the community is described in verses two through four which describes their intention to settle (v. 2), build themselves a city and a tower (v. 4), and avoid being scattered (v. 4). Despite the various interpretations which introduce ulterior motivations, "the actual motive for the human project, stated explicitly in the narrative, is the people's desire to stay in one place" (Hiebert 36). Though the text does state that humanity desires to "build... a tower with its top in the heavens" it is a far reach to assume that a tower "with its top in the heavens" means anything more than a tall tower. To insinuate that humanity wanted to literally build a tower that provided them an entrance to Heaven so that they might enter heaven and wrench God's power away from Him fills some substantial absences of asserted intention with specific actions. It seems inconsistent with the benign motivations – to settle and avoid being scattered – that have been explicitly asserted and also paint humanity in an unreasonably ambitious light. Why would people who are vocally intimidated by the thought of being scattered be so audacious as to assume that they could 1) build a tower as high as Heaven or 2) address God face to face?

Ellen Van Wolde supports the above interpretation of the story calling humanity's community building focus "horizontal ambition" (Van Wolde 100). As opposed to striving to thwart God by building "vertically" up towards God and Heaven, textual clues seem to affirm that humanity was more committed to establishing a city and protecting themselves from their fear of being disorganized, unsettled and susceptible to scattering. If any projection about the motives of the builders can be made, the most logical is that they intend to build a safe and stable place to settle and grow. Though Pinker admits that such horizontal ambition places the builders' focus "on the perpetuation of the human race, while in reality God has already guaranteed existence and expected population of the world," their misunderstanding of God's provision is simply that, a misunderstanding but not sin worthy of punishment (Pinker 92).

Further establishing humanity's construction of the Tower and the city of Babel as legitimate ventures and not affronts on God, we must address the issue of human pride which is, in some interpretations, inherent in the claim that the builders intended to "make a name" for themselves. Pinker finds the text to be crystal clear. He writes, "The text clearly states their intent: to build a city to settle and a tower to be an object of reference, well known and of fame, so that those who venture out, like shepherds, would find their way back" (Pinker 92). He reads necessity into the building of the Tower. This necessity is imaginably real considering that the probable economy of the builders includes shepherding and their vocalized fear and motivation for building the city is to avoid scattering. With a tall, large and unmistakable landmark such as a tower, those who might venture beyond the city can leave knowing that they will be able to find their way back. Hiebert says, "Viewed in light, the phrase 'let us make a name for ourselves' expresses no conceit of defiance but rather the impulse toward cultural homogeneity at the heart of the human project" (Hiebert 40). What Hiebert calls "cultural homogeneity" can simply be summed up as their desire to preserve their unity, one language and the same words.

There is debate about whether the builders of the Tower were aware of their post-Flood identity or more importantly of God's command to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth". Scholars who would defend the position stated in the first half of this paper use the post-Flood identity to prove that the Tower builders were consciously disobedient to God and therefore deserving of punishment in the form of forced dispersion. In contrast, there are two trains of thought which assume humanity's innocence – one assuming that they owned their post-Flood identity and one asserting their independence from it. Pinker argues first in favor of their innocence regardless of their knowledge of God's command. He says,

This is a story that reaches out to the roots of the human race, to the initial stages of its rebuilding following the destruction of the Flood. Here is a group of people, that is, all the people, speaking one language, each of whom had but a few possessions. They have proliferated enough to out-grow the dwelling space in the caves of Mount Ararat and the food that can be produced from its arable land. They are not a breakaway group; they are as yet too few to split, they think; and they are very concerned of being lost, of drifting away and losing contact. Though descendents of Noah, they start with a *tabula rasa* to a great degree, and have to rediscover almost everything by themselves (Pinker 95).

To a great degree, Pinker grants the Tower builders legitimacy for their raw human concerns. If they are essentially survivors of the greatest act of destruction the world has ever seen, Pinker grants them some flexibility in following God's command. Though God ordered for humanity to fill the earth, at this point in time, they may have felt that there simply were not enough of them to break out into small clans and maintain any hope or chance of actually surviving and successfully filling the earth. In their judgment they may have deemed it more appropriate to hesitate, increase their numbers and disperse at a later time.

Hiebert makes the other claim – that the Tower builders were not aware of their command to multiply and fill the earth – which is supported through studying the sources of the stories. He asserts that the two stories come from two different traditions or two different authors which were not in communication. The stories were not necessarily understood with respect to one another until the Bible was compiled at a later time. Hiebert says, “We may not take the people's wish to stay together... as a transgression of God's command to fill the earth” because “the story of Babel makes no reference to this command, even when God appears to diversity humanity and populate the earth” (Hiebert 56).

Whether the Tower builders knew about God's command or not, Hiebert's point that the command is never brought up in the story – even when God descends – brings up an important point. Regardless of the builder's knowledge, God does not remind humanity of the command or name disobedience to the command as something which is even under consideration. When God descends to earth in verse six, God's observation immediately addresses the “builders' cultural uniformity, not on their pride of imperial pretensions. God does not speak about the tower or its height, about the hubris of its builders, about their challenge to divine authority, or about their imperial power. Rather, what God notices first upon his descent and considers most remarkable is humanity's homogeneity” (Hiebert 43). God, in fact, nearly mimics the narrator's observation from verse

one saying, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language" (Genesis 11:6). Whether or not the builders were indeed disobedient seems irrelevant both in interpreters' eyes as well as in God's.

After commenting on the civilization's uniformity in speech and action God continues by recognizing the implications of such uniformity – namely, the construction of a tower and the formation of a city. God asserts, "and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them" (Genesis 11:6). Like interpreters who contribute to the position summarized in the first half of this paper, we might read a sense of defensiveness into God's comment. Some scholars assume that God's assessment is drenched in dread for what humans are capable of and a desperate need to subvert such evil. Though it would be unrealistic to pretend that humans, unified in voice and deed, are only capable of constructive acts like building a city or a majestic landmark, – think about Nazi Germany – it is also unfair to the builders of Babel to think that God might not have been the least bit impressed with the ingenuity and constructiveness that His creation demonstrated through cooperation and planning.

We must take into account the reality of how the construction of Babel must have played out as well as the timing for God's intervention. Pinker reminds us that the builders specifically say "Come let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly" (Genesis 11:3). He further explains,

If we assume that the bricks had to be dried for a year in the sun... it is clear, then, that the project took a number of years, and required much planning and organization. More importantly, it required discipline and dedication, perhaps a religious fervor to complete such an undertaking. The religiosity and piety of the builders of the Tower of Babel made them forego personal need or comfort for the sake of building a house for god (Pinker 97).

Pinker's observation makes two points. First, as he implies, the builders' dedication to a project that obviously took a considerable amount of time and hard work to complete is something to be admired and, – possibly more importantly to God – something to be used for God's purposes. Whether the dedication was directed toward God or not, God could take the exhibited character of the builders and re-form it to fit God's needs.

The second point which Pinker's observation suggests is that over the course of the many long years of construction, God never descended or intervened. God waited until after the Tower was built² and the city was reasonably established be-

²"It appears that the Tower was completed – nothing in the text intimates to the contrary. We are told that the building of the city was stopped, but not the Tower" (Pinker 97).

fore he came down to earth to inspect. Though the story implies that humanity's creation was so miniscule God had to descend even to see it, God, the omniscient, must have known what was going on in the world below but chose not to stop it. The non-intervention of God implies that God approved of what was going on or at least was curious enough about how it would turn out that He let it continue. Then, when God did finally descend, his comments, though not explicitly laudatory, also do not condemn the construction or express regret for letting it develop so far. In fact, the comments seem to imply that God is impressed with the humans' creativity. Pinker reads positive judgment into God's assessment asserting that, "Greatly pleased, God then stops the building of the city, and disperses them to use their skills to build more cities, to fill His world with people and civilization" (Pinker 97).

While Pinker's assessment is obviously biased towards a positive reading, it does not violate anything explicitly in the text. After acknowledging the potential which his creation possesses God confounds their language so that they will not understand one another (v. 7) and scatters humanity over all the earth (v. 8). God's recognition of human capability implies his subsequent supposition that "the human race, left to itself, is intent on preserving one uniform culture, and that recognition spurs God to action" (Hiebert 45). We will never know whether or not the people of Babel would have filled the earth by their own initiative, but, in terms of the purpose and meaning of the story, the hypothetical is unimportant.

What is significant is the kind of insight that the story gives us about the storyteller and those ancient peoples' understanding of the diversity they encountered in their world. The people who knew this story recognized the diversity in their world and not just the fact that there were many different people but that there were many extremely successful civilizations. The storyteller's perception of this was not that there were many different gods with their own people but that their one God was responsible for dispersing humanity throughout the earth and hoped for the success of all the people of the earth. In the first interpretation we still get the impression that God is responsible for the earth's diversity but by naming the dispersion as a punishment we also get the impression that diversity is not necessarily a good thing but is a consequence of human shortcomings. In the second interpretation, however, – the one which I prefer – the dispersal of human beings throughout the earth is, as Hiebert says, "the consequence of God's design for the world, not the result of God's punishment of it" (Hiebert 56). In this interpretation, diversity came into the picture as God's ultimate intention once God judged humanity capable of sustaining itself throughout the earth. Diversity is a natural

step in the process of development. "God's initial assessment of human efforts recognizes simply their initial success at preserving a common culture. God's subsequent introduction of cultural difference, through linguistic and geographical diversity, is presented as God's intention for the world and narrated in a straightforward fashion" (Hiebert 56). Seeing that God dispersed the people after He judged human competency affirms that God is intimately involved with creation – God knew that His creation was ready. The diversity in the world is then also, not haphazard but intentional and deliberate.

The story of the Tower of Babel is really less of a story about a tower and more of a story about humanity and diversity and God's involvement with both. The story offers an explanation of how and why the world is filled with diverse people and languages. Answering "how?" is easy because in any interpretation, the agent is obvious: God dispersed humanity throughout the earth. Answering "why?" is more complicated but, after careful consideration, it seems that humanity was scattered throughout the earth because God saw what human diligence and thoughtfulness could potentially produce. With one language and the same words, God's competent and creative humans were capable of successfully building a great tower and surrounding city. With more languages, more words and the resources of all the earth, God was confident that humans could take his commandment to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with unique, diverse and resilient civilizations. Thus, humanity was released from Babel by God's commission.

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