Bibliotheca Sacra 138 (1981) 119-38.
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Studies in the Book of Genesis

Part 4:

Voir les paassages surlignés en jaune

The Dispersion of the Nations in Genesis 11:1-9

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Introduction to the Passage

THE NATURE OF THE ACCOUNT

The narrative in Genesis 11:1-9 describes the divine intervention among the human family to scatter them across the face of the earth by means of striking at the :heart of their unity- their language. A quick reading of the passage shows that the predominant idea is not the tower of Babel but this scattering.

If the point is not simply the tower, then this passage does not present, as some have suggested, a Hebrew adaptation of the Greek Titans storming heaven to dislodge God. Rather, the characteristics of the people in this story are anxiety and pride through their own gregariousness.[1] The tower, on the one hand, is born from the people's fear of being scattered across the earth; and on the other hand it is an attempt to frustrate God's plan to fill the earth (Gen. 9:1).

The sin. Since the story has the trappings of a judgment narrative in which Yahweh interrupts mankind's misguided activities and scatters them abroad, it may be assumed that the antithesis of this scattering must be the sin. The major error was not the building of a city, but the attempt of the race to live in one City.[2] Therefore it appears that the human family was striving for unity, security, and social immortality (making a name) in defiance of God's desire for them to fill the earth.

Divine punishment. It is important to keep in mind that the "judgment" was not the destruction of the city but of the lan-

guage that united the people. It was shattered into a multiplicity of languages so that the common bond was destroyed.[3] Thus the text is demonstrating that the present number of languages that form national barriers is a monument to sin.

Divine prevention. Since the people's purpose was to make a name for themselves and to achieve power through unity, the apostasy of the human spirit would shortly bring the race to the brink of another catastrophe such as the Deluge. By frustrating their communication and dividing them into nations, it is evident that "it is the will of God, so long as sin is present in the world, to employ nationalism in the reduction of sin."[4]

For ages people have restricted themselves to native manners and customs and regarded diverse languages of foreigners with great horror.[5] Thus Israel was delivered from a people of "a strange language" (Ps. 114:1) and was frequently warned of destruction by a fierce nation whose language would not be understood and whose deep speech could not be comprehended (Deut. 28:49; Isa. 28:11; 33:19; Jer. 5:15). The language barrier brought sudden fear and prevented unification.

Ringgren summarized the twofold aspect of Yahweh's intervention in Genesis 11 as divine reaction to pride.

> Theologically, the building of the tower in Gen. 11 is interpreted as an act of human arrogance and rebellion against God; accordingly, Yahweh intervenes against its builders and scatters them over the whole earth. This action of God is both punishment and a preventive measure; it prevents men from going too far in their pride.[6]

Later prophets would draw on this narrative, recording the very beginnings of the divisions as they looked to the end of days when God Himself would unify mankind once again. Zephaniah 3:9-11 appears to be constructed antithetically to this passage with its themes in common with Genesis 11:1-9: the pure speech (i.e., one language),[7] the gathering of the dispersed people (even from Cush),[8] the removal of pride, and the service in the holy mountain. The miracle on the day of Pentecost is often seen as a harbinger of that end time.[9]

LITERARY ANALYSIS OF THE PASSAGE

The literary style of the narrative shows an artistic hand ordering the material in such a way as to mirror the ideas from the Babylonian background of the story as well as to contrast by means of antithetical parallelism the participants in the story. To such literary art, repetition and parallelism are essential.

Antithetical balance. In the antithetical parallelism of the narrative ideas are balanced against their counterparts. The story begins with the report of the unified situation at the beginning (11:1) and ends with a reminder of that unity and its resultant confusion for the scattering (11:9). This beginning and ending picture is reflected in the contrast of the dialogues and actions: 11:2-4 describes what the humans proceeded to do; 11:5-8 describes how Yahweh turned their work aside (beginning with the contrastive, "But Yahweh ... ").

Within these balanced sections many elements support the antithetical arrangement. As seen in the Hebrew, verse 1 is balanced with 9, 2 with 8, and 3 with 7, and the narrative turns at verse 5.[10]

Poetic devices. The mechanics of the writer can also be seen in the heavy alliteration and sound play throughout the account. First, the writer enhances the meaning of the ultimate word play (the בָּבֶל/בָּלַל ["confuse"/"Babel"] exchange) by his sounds. The letters ב, ל, and נ, culminating in the word בָּבֶל; are frequently used. Verse 3 reads הָבָה נִלְבְּנָה לְאָבֶן; לָהֶם הַלְּבֵנָה. Verse 4 has הָבָה נִבְנֶה־לָּנוּ. In verse 5 are the words בָּנוּ בְּנֵי; and verse 7 has וְנָבְלָה. In verse 8 the sounds continue with וַיַּחְדְּלוּ לִבְנֹת. And in verse 9 is the anticipated culmination of the sounds in בָּבֶל ... בָּלַל.

There also appears to be a play on the key word of the passage, פוּץ ("scatter"). The word is frequently followed by the phrase, "across the face of the whole earth," פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ, which, interestingly, begins with the letter פ and ends with ץ, thus reflecting פוּץ.[11] Other alliterations involve פֶּן/פְּנֵי; הַלְּבֵנָה/לְאָבֶן; and שָׁם/שֵׁם.

Second, the wordplays in the passage strengthen the ideas. Bullinger calls such wordplays "paronomasia" which he describes as the employment of two words that are different in origin and meaning, but similar in sound and appearance to emphasize two things by calling attention to the similarity of sound.[12] One is placed alongside the other and appears to be a repetition of it. Once the eye has caught the two words and the attention concentrated on them, then one discovers that an interpretation is put on the one by the other.

While this description gives the general nature of wordplays, it is too broad for distinguishing the types of wordplays within the group known as paronomasia. To be precise, it should be said that paronomasia involves a play on similarity of sound and some point in the meaning as well; those that have no point of contact

in meaning are best classified as phonetic wordplays such as assonance, rhyme, alliteration, or epanastrophe.

This distinction becomes necessary in the exegesis of the narrative. In verse 3 is the exhortation, נִלְבְּנָה לְבֵנִים, "let us make bricks" (literally, "let us brick bricks"). Immediately there follows a second exhortation: נִשְׂרְפָה לִשְׂרֵפָה, "let us burn them hard" (literally, "let us burn them for burning"). These are paronomasias in the strict sense since they offer a sound play and are etymologically connected.

However, the key play in the passage is not strictly paronomasia since there is no connection etymologically between בָּבֶל and בָּלַל. It is a phonetic wordplay. The people would say that the name was called "בָּבֶל" because Yahweh "made a babble" (בָּלַל the language.

All these devices enhance the basic antithetical structure of the passage. Fokkelman illustrates this by connecting the paronomasia of verse 3, נִלְבְּנָה לְבֵנִים, with the response of God in verse 7, נָבְלָה, in a sound-chiasmus:[13]

L	B	N	"let us make bricks"
N	B	L	"let us confuse"

The reversal of the order of the sounds reveals the basic idea of the passage: The construction on earth is answered by the destruction from heaven; men build but God pulls down. The fact that God's words are also in the form of man's words (as cohortative) adds a corroding irony to the passage. God sings with the people while working against them.[14]

The same point is stressed with שֵׁם, שָׁם, and שָׁמַיִם. To bring everlasting fame (שֵׁם) they unite in one spot (שָׁם) as the base of operations for their attainment of fame which they make conditional on the encroachment of שָׁמַיִם, the abode of God. What drives them is hubris. What calls out the nemesis of Yahweh from heaven (שָׁמַיִם) and scatters them from there (own) is also hubris.[15] The "brackets" on the text illustrate this poignantly: what "all the earth" sought to avoid, namely, dispersion "all over the earth," happened (cf. v. 1 and v. 9).

SETTING FOR THE PASSAGE

The Babylonian background. That this passage has Babylon in mind is clear from the explication of the name "Babel" in verse 9. The first time this term was used was in the Table of

Nations in Genesis 10 where the beginning of the kingdom was recorded in the exploits of Nimrod from Cush (10:10). Not only is there this direct reference to proud Babylon, but also other evidences show that the background of the story was Mesopotamian. Speiser says, "The episode points more concretely to Babylonia than does any other portion of primeval history and the background that is here sketched proves to be authentic beyond all expectations."[16]

Babylon was a thing of beauty to the pagan world. Every important city of Babylonia was built with a step-tower known as a ziggurat (*ziggurratu*).[17] In Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon itself, in the area of Marduk's sanctuary known as E-sag-ila, "the house whose head is raised up,"[18] there was a seven-storied tower with a temple top that was known as E-temen-anki. This structure, measuring 90 meters by 90 meters at the base as well as being 90 meters high, became one of the wonders of the world.[19] The tower was a symbol of Babylonian culture and played a major role in other cultures influenced by it.[20]

The first of such towers must be earlier than Nebuchadnezzar's, for his were rebuildings of ancient patterns. Cassuto maintains that this reference must be to E-temen-anki (although he suggests that the occasion for the tradition giving rise to the satire would come from an earlier time, from the Hittite destruction of Babylon).[21] Speiser does not agree. He points out that it cannot be E-temen-anki, which cannot antedate the seventh century. Therefore this account must be centuries earlier than E-temen-anki.[22] Since Esarhaddon (seventh century) and Nebuchadnezzar (sixth century) were the first since Hammurabi to build such works, the biblical reference in Genesis 11 must be to a much earlier Babylon.

So while the actual Neo-Babylonian Empire's[23] architecture *cannot* be the inspiration for this account, one must conclude that their buildings were rebuildings of some ancient tower located in the same area.

But when the literary parallels concerning this architecture are considered, some very significant correspondences to the narrative are noted.

First, there is a specific connection of this story with the account of the building of Babylon, recorded in the Akkadian *Enuma Elish*, tablet VI, lines 55-64:

> When Marduk heard this,
> Brightly glowed his features, like the days:

"Like that of lofty Babylon, whose building you have requested,
Let its brickwork be fashioned. You shall name it the sanctuary."
The Anunnaki applied the implement;
For one year they molded bricks.
When the second year arrived,
They raised high the head of Esagila equaling Apsu.
Having built a stage tower as high as Apsu,
They set up in it an abode for Marduk, Enlil, Ea;
In their presence he adorned it with grandeur.[24]

Within this passage are several literary parallels to the biblical narrative. Line 62 reads, "They raised the head of *Esagila mihrit apsi*," *(sa Esagila mihrit apsi ullu rest [su]*). Speiser notes the word play of *ullu resisu* with *Esagila*, which means "the structure which raises the head," explaining that it evokes a special value for the Sumerian name, giving it a significant meaning in Babylon.[25] Thus he concludes that *resam ullum* became a stock expression for the monumental structures of Babylon and Assyria.

Speiser shows that *apsu* is a reference to the heavens. He allows that it often means "the deep," but that cannot be correct in the light of line 63 which says, "when they had built the temple tower of the upper (*elite*) *apsu*" (*ibnuma ziggurat sa apsi elite*). In line 62 then, *mihrit apsi* must be "toward heaven," and *apsu* must be celestial and not subterranean.[26]

A second important element is the bricks. The Hebrew text in Genesis 11:3 describes the brickmaking with a cognate accusative construction. Once the bricks are made, the tower is made. Speiser observes that the bricks figured predominantly in the Babylonian account where there is a year-long brick ritual.[27] The Babylonian account not only records a similar two-step process (making bricks in the first year and raising the tower head in the second), but it also has a similar construction, using a cognate accusative, *libittasu iltabnu* (Hebrew: נִלְבְּנָה לְבֵנִים). In fact, the Hebrew and Akkadian words are cognate. The similarity is striking.

So in *Enuma Elish* and Genesis there are at least three solid literary connections: the making of the tower for the sanctuary of the gods, with Genesis reporting the determination to build the tower and city in rebellion to God; the lofty elevation of its head into the heavens, with Genesis recording almost the same reference; and the making of the bricks before the building of the city, with Genesis describing the process with the same grammatical construction.

Another correspondence is reflected in the great pride of the builders. One of the purposes of the Babylonian creation epic at its composition was to show the preeminence of Babylon over all the cities of the country, and especially the supremacy of Marduk over all deities. They were so pleased with themselves that they considered Babylon to be a celestial city, prepared by the Anunnaki gods and made for Marduk on behalf of his victory over Tiamat. It then became the pattern for the earthly city (*Enuma Elish*, tablet VI, lines 113-15). In fact Babylon, that metropolitan city for so many peoples, claimed to be the origination of society, their city having descended from heaven.[28] Herein is the immense pride of Babylon.

Therefore with this world-famous city and tower culture claiming to be the heavenly plan and beginning of creation, the record in Genesis 11 is a counterblast and a polemic.[29] To communicate this most forcefully, the text employs literary elements of that ancient, traditional theme preserved in the Babylonian culture, but the contents and thrust of the message differ remarkably.[30]

The differences are pointed out in part by Vos.[31] First, Genesis implies that nothing like this had ever been built before by man, but the ziggurats represent traditional workings. Second, Genesis presents the building as evidence of their disobedience, but the Babylonian work was for the purpose of worshiping a local deity. Third, Genesis describes this as the work of one united race of people that became the basis of the scattering and confusion into languages and tribes, but the ziggurats were man-made mountains of a national group (their towers were the symbol of their culture). Also these towers developed gradually over the centuries after the diffusion and scattering.

So Genesis, in setting forth the account of the divine intervention at Babel in the ancient past, deliberately alludes to the arrogance of Babylon that was represented in their literature. The result is a satire on the thing of glory and beauty of the pagan world. The biblical writer, having become familiar with the vainglorious words in the traditions of Babylon, weaves his account for the purpose of deriding the literary traditions of that ancient city and establishing the truth. In fact traditions from Mesopotamia recorded the ancient division of languages as well. The Sumerians had recorded that there was originally one language since everyone came to worship Enlil with one tongue (*Enmerkar Epic*, lines 141-46).[32]

Cassuto suggests a collection of satirical ideas that would have given rise to the Genesis narrative, and he paraphrases them as follows:

> You children of Babylon ... you called your city Babel--*Babili*, "Gate of god," or *Bab-ilani*, "Gate of gods"--and your tower you designated "House of the foundation of heaven and earth." You desired that the top of your tower should be in heaven.... You did not understand that, even if you were to raise the summit of your ziggurat ever so high, you would not be nearer to Him than when you stand upon the ground; nor did you comprehend that He who in truth dwells in heaven, if he wishes to take a closer look at your lofty tower, must needs come down.... Your intention was to build for yourselves a gigantic city that would contain all mankind and you forgot that it was God's will to fill the whole earth with human settlements, and that God's plan would surely be realized.... You were proud of your power, but you should have known that it is forbidden to man to exalt himself, for only the Lord is truly exalted, and the pride of man is regarded by Him as iniquity that leads to his downfall and degradation--a punishment befitting the crime....
> On account of this, your dominion was shattered and your families were scattered over the face of the whole earth. Behold, how fitting is the name that you have given to your city! It is true that in your language it expresses glory and pride, but in our idiom it sounds as though it connoted confusion--and confusion of tongues heard therein, which caused its destruction and the dispersion of its inhabitants in every direction.[33]

Babylon was the prototype of all nations, cities, and empires that despise God's instructions and raise themselves in pride.[34] Babylon represented man's megalomaniacal attempt to achieve world peace and unity by domestic exploitation and power. They would be brought down in confusion; herein was the warning to the new nation of Israel: any disobedient nation would be abased and brought low in spite of her pride, ingenuity, and strength.

The "Babylon" motif became the common representation for the antitheocratical program. Later writers drew on this theme and used the name as a symbol for the godless society with its great pretensions. Isaiah 47:8-13 portrayed Babylon's pleasures, sins, and superstitions. Isaiah 13:19 pictured her as "the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldeans' pride"; and Isaiah 14:13 describes her sinful arrogance in exalting her throne above the Most High in the heavens only to be brought low. Jeremiah also predicted the cup of vengeance on this arrogant city (Jer. 51). Daniel recorded her persecutions against Judah. And Revelation 17-18 applies the theme to the spiritual Babylon in the escha-ton, showing that it was her sins that reached heaven and

brought the catastrophe to her, thus preparing the way for the true celestial city to come down to earth.[35]

The setting in the primeval narratives. The present story of the scattering is part of the primeval events of Genesis which give a picture of man in open rebellion to God and of God intervening in judgment on each situation.[36] The scattering of the race from Babel forms the capstone to the primeval history of the human race.[37] This development of mankind is accurately described by Kidner.

> The primeval history reaches its fruitless climax as man, conscious of new abilities, prepares to glorify and fortify himself by collective effort. The elements of the story are timelessly characteristic of the spirit of the world. The project is typically grandiose; men describe it excitedly to one another as if it were the ultimate achievement--very much as modern man glories in his space projects. At the same time they betray their insecurity as they crowd together to preserve their identity and control their fortunes.[38]

So it is with this story that the common history of all mankind comes to an abrupt end, which leaves the human race hopelessly scattered across the face of the entire earth. It is this that makes the present narrative so different from those preceding it: In each judgment there was a gracious provision for hope but in this judgment there is none. It does not offer a token of grace, a promise of any blessing, a hope of salvation, or a way of escape. There is no clothing for the naked sinner, no protective mark for the fugitive, no rainbow in the dark sky. There is no ray of hope. The primeval age ends with judgmental scattering and complete confusion. The blessing is not here; the world must await the new history.

In view of this, the story of the scattering of the nations is actually the turning point of the book from primeval history to the history of the blessing. From this very confused and dispersed situation nations would develop in utter futility until God would make a great nation through one man who himself would be "scattered" from this alluvial plain to the land of Canaan. The blessings of final redemption and unification would come through his seed.

The beginning of Genesis 11 presupposes a linguistic unity and localization comparable to the beginning of Genesis 10. Since the Table of Nations in Genesis 10 describes the many families of the earth "after their families, after their tongues, in their lands, in their nations," and Genesis 11 describes the

divine intervention to scatter them, the question is how this story of the dispersion is compatible with the Table. They appear to be reversed chronologically.

Most modern scholars follow the critical view that Genesis 11 is independent of the ethnographic Table and is fundamentally irreconcilable with it.[39] However, this is not seen as a major obstacle, for as von Rad states, "The chapters must be read together because they are intentionally placed next to each other in spite of their antagonism."[40] So while critical scholars are bothered by the antagonisms, they recognize that the two chapters are complementary in referring to the same scattering.

The Table of Nations gives absolutely no explanation for the scattering, but "that the author was intending right along to treat of the confusion of tongues appears from 10:25."[41] There it is stated that in the days of Peleg ("Division") was the earth divided. Writers have explained this division as some sort of tribal split,[42] or some piece of trivia about conditions at the time, such as; for example, irrigation ditches.[43] The word פֶּלֶג is often used for trenches and irrigation ditches, but the implication of the Table is toward universal events.[44] It is worth noting that the root word occurs in Psalm 55:9 (Eng., 10) for a moral division: "Destroy, 0 LORD, and divide (פַּלַּג) their tongues" (author's translation here and throughout the article). The prayer is that God would break apart their counsel into contending factions, an end that is comparable to the story of the division of the nations. So the point of contact appears to be the birth of Peleg (and thus his naming) in Genesis 10.[45] At that point the incident of chapter 11 would have happened, causing the people to spread out into the earth until they settled in their tribes as described in chapter 10. Chapter 11 is the cause; chapter 10 is the effect.

The passages are arranged in a manner consistent with Genesis. The broad survey is given first; the narrowing and selection and/or explanation are given afterward .[46] The order is thematic and not chronological. The choice of this reversed order is a stroke of genius. Jacob stated it well: "The placement of chapter 10 before this one is a special refinement. The absurdity of the undertaking becomes obvious if we know the numerical nations into which mankind should grow."[47]

THE PURPOSE OF THE DISPERSION NARRATIVE

It should be clear by now that the story of the dispersion is a sequel to the Table of Nations and is designed to explain how the

nations speak different languages in spite of their common origin and how they found their way to the farthest corners of the earth. The major theme of the passage is the dispersion of the nations because of their rebellious pride and apostasy in uniting at Babel. But the story is more than an explanation of the scattering; it is an explanation of the problems due to the existence of nations.

It was at Babel--that city founded by Nimrod, a descendant of Ham through Cush; that city known for its pride and vanity; that seat of rebellion toward the true God and pagan worship of the false gods--that Yahweh turned ingenuity and ambition into chaos and confusion so that the thing the people feared most came on them and that their desire to be men of renown was suddenly turned against them. For the Israelite nation the lesson was clear: If she was to survive as a nation, she must obey God's will, for the nation that bristles with pride and refuses to obey will be scattered.[48] Thus the account of the scattering at Babel has a theological significance for God's people.

Exegesis of the Passage

PROLOGUE (11:1)[49]

The first verse informs the reader that the entire race had a common language, thus showing that this beginning is parallel to 10:1. Knowing the previous arrangement of the scattered nations in chapter 10, Jacob explains that a tone of irony is already sounded in this verse.[50]

The whole earth (= the inhabitants) had one "lip" (שָׂפָה to indicate speech)[51] and one vocabulary (דְּבָרִים to indicate the content of what was said). The point of this prologue is clear: The entire race was united by a common language.

MAN'S PROCEDURE (11:2-4)

Settlement (11:2). The narrative records that the human family migrated "off east" (מִקֶּדֶם) and settled in the region of ancient Babylon. The verb used to describe their journey (נָסַע) carries the sense of bedouins moving tents by stages. This wandering continued in an easterly direction from Armenia until they settled (וַיֵּשְׁבוּ) in Shinar where they found a plain. This "valley of the world," as the Talmud calls it, became the designated place for the nomads-turned-settlers.

Resolution (11:3-4). The resolve of the race comes in two stages: in verse 3 they made bricks, and in verse 4, motivated by

their initial success, they moved to a grander scale by building a city with a tower. Bush follows Josephus in designating Nimrod as the leader of this founding of Babylon.[52]

In their zeal for societal development, alliance, and fame, and with all the optimism of a beginning people, they began to organize their brickmaking. They were an ingenious lot, for they lacked the proper stone and clay and had to make do with makeshift materials.[53] The writer's attitude toward this comes across in an appropriate pun: they had no clay (חֹמֶר) but they used asphalt (חֵמָר). Jacob suggests the effect of this assonance sounds like a child's play song.[54]

Met by initial success they advanced to a greater resolution: "Come, let us build. . . ." Couched in the same grammatical construction as the preceding resolve, their words display that they would use the materials made to make a city "with a tower. "

The circumstantial clause draws the reader's attention to the tower. Once built, this tower would provide the pattern for fortresses and acropolises for others.[55] Building it with its top in the heavens may reflect the bold spirit of the workers, even though it is hyperbolic language used to express security (cf. Deut. 1:28).

The purpose of their building venture was fame. They wished to find security by arrogantly making a name--a desire that is satirized in verse 9. But their desire to be renowned was betrayed by their fear of the oblivion of dispersion. Richardson observes this motivation.

> The hatred of anonymity drives men to heroic feats of valour or long hours of drudgery; or it urges them to spectacular acts of shame or of unscrupulous self-preferment. In the word forms it attempts to give the honour and the glory to themselves which properly belongs to the name of God.[56]

Thus the basic characteristics of culture are seen here: underlying anxiety (the fear of being separated and disconnected) and the desire for fame (a sense of security in a powerful reputation).[57]

THE INTERVENTION OF YAHWEH (11:5-8)[58]

The investigation (11:5-6). The second half of the passage reflects the first, beginning with Yahweh's investigation of the city and the tower which the humans had begun to build. The description, written so anthropomorphically, describes

Yahweh's close interest and participation in the affairs of man.[59] He did not need to come down to look at their work (in fact His coming down implies prior knowledge). Procksch clarified this by pointing out that "Yahweh must draw near, not because he is near-sighted, but because he dwells at such tremendous height and their work is so tiny. God's movement must therefore be understood as a remarkable satire on man's doing."[60] Or in the words of Cassuto one could say that no matter how high they towered, Yahweh still had to descend to see it. Yahweh's coming down does not alone strike this note of satire. The parallel construction of the cohortatives (11:7) reflects their plans made earlier.[61] The point to be made is clear: The tower that was to reach the heavens fell far short.

The purpose of His coming down was "to see" the work. This is the second anthropomorphic expression in the line and announces that He will give the city a close investigation. The narrative is filled with condescension. In referring to them as בְּנֵי הָאָדָם ("sons of the earth"), he shows them to be *earthlings*. This strikes at the heart of the Babylonian literature which credited the work to the Anunnaki gods. The work, according to Genesis, was terrestrial, not celestial.

Verse 6 records the results of that investigation: "And Yahweh said, `If as one people all having one language they have begun to act this way, now nothing that they propose to do will be out of their reach.'" The similarity of style and wording to Genesis 3:22 is most striking. The potential for calamity is dangerous to the race, and God will prevent it.[62] The verb חָלַל is used here; the beginnings of man are commonly counterproductive.[63] They will nullify the purposes of God in favor of their own purposes which are within reach. They will be at liberty for every extravagance if they can think only of their own confederation.

The resolution (11:7). Continuing to speak, Yahweh says, "Come, let Us go down and confound their language so that they cannot understand one another."

The internal difficulty concerns the relationship of the word נֵרְדָה ("let Us go down") with וַיֵּרֶד ("But [Yahweh] came down") of verse 5. The critical approach is to divide the two elements into strata, but that is not a satisfactory solution.[64] Dillmann simply saw a return to heaven first, then a reflection (comparing 3:22), and then the coming in judgment.[65] This may be the simplest way of understanding it. Cassuto takes וַיֹּאמֶר, "and He said, "as an explanatory connection of contemporaneous actions: "But

Yahweh came down ... thinking וַיֹּאמֶר literally, 'saying') ... they are one ... let us go down...."[66]

The second verb describes the actual purpose: "let Us confound."[67] It was this confusion [בָּלַל] that led to the diversity of their understanding and thus to their dispersion. Bush explains how this would come about.

> This was to cause a dispersion of the multitudes congregated at Babylon; an end which did not require for its accomplishment the instantaneous formation of new languages, but simply such a confusion in the utterance of the old, as should naturally lead to misapprehension, discord and division. The dialectic discrepancies, however, thus originating, though perhaps not very great at first, would become gradually more and more marked, as men became more widely separated from each other, and by the influence of climate, laws, customs, religion, and various other causes, till they finally issued in substantially different languages.[68]

Once the understanding of one another was confounded, the division would be effected.

The effect (11:8). "So Yahweh scattered them from there across the face of the whole earth, and they ceased building the city." Their greatest fear (v. 4) came on them.[69] The place of unity (שָׁם) became the place of dispersion (מִשָּׁם). Their view was toward centrality; God moved them universally. The result of this dispersion meant that the city was unfinished as they had planned it. The rebellious race as a unified people did not fulfill their goal.

EPILOGUE (11:9)

In a marvelously clever "etymological" word play, verse 9 announces, "Therefore [that is why] its name is called Babel, because there Yahweh confused the lip [language] of all the earth and scattered them across the face of the whole earth."

The formula עַל־כֵּן with קָרָא is quite common as an explanatory inference from a reported event and is used most often with place names.[70] Here it introduces the meaning given by the Israelites for Babylon. The word בָּלַל provided a satirical meaning of "confusion" for the proud Babylonians' name.[71] The story shows how this gate of the gods fell far short of expectations, ending in confusion and chaos.

So Yahweh scattered them across the face of the earth. The text need not imply that the confusion was immediately reached nor the scattering instantaneous. The narrator fixed this point from which the division of the peoples and the languages would begin and move ever farther.[72]

Conclusion

Irony is seen in the beginning and the ending of this passage. The group at Babel began as the whole earth (11:1), but now they were spread over the whole earth (11:9). By this the lesson is clarified: God's purpose will be accomplished in spite of the arrogance and defiance of man's own purposes. He brings down the proud, but exalts the faithful.

The significance of this little story is great. It explains to God's people how the nations were scattered abroad. Yet the import goes much deeper. The fact that it was Babylon, the beginning of kingdoms under Nimrod from Cush, adds a rather ominous warning: Great nations cannot defy God and long survive. The new nation of Israel need only survey the many nations around her to perceive that God disperses and curses the rebellious, bringing utter confusion and antagonism among them. If Israel would obey and submit to God's will, then she would be the source of blessing to the world.

Unfortunately, Israel also raised her head in pride and refused to obey the Lord God. Thus she too was scattered across the face of the earth.

Notes

1 B. Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis*, ed. and trans. Ernest I. Jacob and Walter Jacob (New York: KTAV" Publishing House, 1974), p. 79. Luther felt this story gave rise to the story of the giants trying to expel Jupiter (Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works, Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 6-14* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960], p. 211.

2 Hugo Gressmann, *The Tower of Babel* (New York: Jewish Institute of Religion Press, 1928), p. 3.

3 Delitzsch explains that the primitive language through this intervention "died the death from which comparative philology is incapable of awakening it" (Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis,* trans. Sophia Taylor [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 18991, p. 355).

4 Harold G. Stigers, *A Commentary on Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), p. 129.

5 A. Dillmann, *Genesis, Critically and Exegetically Expounded* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897), p. 387.

6 *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* s.v. "Babhel," by Helmer Ringgren, 1:467.

7 Spoken of in the singular, the "pure lip" must mean the language barriers will be broken down to make one universal tongue. The second idea in the expression means that their speech will be cleansed.

8 The Bible uses this word for both Ethiopia and the Kassite power. What the connection is remains a matter of debate. In this connection, the similarities between Ethiopic and Akkadian are interesting for speculation.

9 Derek Kidner, Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 110.
10 Fokkelman diagrams it as follows:

A כָּל־הָאָרֶץ שָׂפָה אֶחָת (v. 1)
B שָׁם (v. 2)
C אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ (v. 3)
D הָבָה נִלְבְּנָה לְבֵנִים (v. 3)
E נִבְנֶה־לָּנוּ (v. 4)
F עִיר וּמִגְדָּל (v. 5)
X וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה לִרְאֹת (v. 5)
F' אֶת־הָעִיר וְאֶת־הַמִּגְדָּל (v. 5)
E' אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם (v. 5)
D' הָבָה . . . וְנָבְלָה (v. 7)
C' אִישׁ שְׂפַת רֵעֵהוּ (v. 7)
B' מִשָּׁם (v. 8)
A' (כָּל־הָאָרֶץ) שְׂפַת כָּל (v. 9)

(J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* [Assen Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1975], p. 22). In verse 1 is the strong statement of one language for the race. In verse 9 Yahweh confused them. In verse 3 they spoke to one another, but in verse 7 they were not able to understand each other. In verses 3 and 4 is the workers' double cohortative, and in verse 7 is Yahweh's cohortative mirroring their words. In verse 4 the people wish a tower in the heavens, and in verse 7 Yahweh comes down from heaven. In verse 4 they desire a name; in verse 9 the name is called Babel. In verse 4 they fear scattering; in verse 8 they are scattered (U. Cassuto, From Noah to Abraham, trans. J. Abrahams [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 19641, pp. 230-34).
11 While some may find such a discussion fanciful or strained, it cannot be ignored. There is in good literature a clear choice of words and a deliberate juxtapositioning of phrases to reflect and enhance the ideas. The style in this section and in much of Genesis 1--11 has been a prime factor in distinguishing this section from the second part in Genesis, namely, chapters 12-50.
12 E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (1898; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), p. 307.
13 Fokkelman points out that the fact that one word is the word with a prefix and the other is the root itself in no way destroys the effect of the sound of these letters which are played on six times in the story (Narrative Art in Genesis, pp. 14-15).
14 Ibid., p. 14.
15 Hubris on the positive side is pride, megalomania, a wanting to be like God, and an overstepping of one's bounds. On the negative side it is the fear of having to live without safety and existential security, of being lonely and vulnerable. So their hubris leads them to act impiously and brings down God's judgment. It is crime and punishment, both of which are caused by pride that oversteps bounds (Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, p. 16; see also Donald E. Gowan, *When Man Becomes God: Humanism and Hubris in the Old Testament* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1975]).
16 E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1964), p. 75. It is riot to be inferred from this statement that Speiser holds a conservative view of this Scripture.
17 It is necessary to say at the outset that it is not that the writer saw a ziggurat and composed a myth about the origin of languages, and that this myth somehow found its way into the Book of Genesis. Rather, Genesis implies that such towers

had not been built before this and this would be quite unique (Howard F. Vos, *Genesis and Archaeology* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1963], p. 47).
18 Emil G. Kraeling, "The Earliest Hebrew Flood Story," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 66 (1947):282.
19 Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham*, p. 227; Andre Parrot, *Ziggurats et Tour de Babel* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1949); Merrill F. Unger, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954), p. 47; *Encyclopedia Biblica*, s.v. "Babylon," by A. Oppenheim, 2:28.
20 Gressmann, *The Tower of Babel*, pp. 15-19. Gressmann thought the tower structure was related to their understanding of the world with God at the pinnacle, the door of heaven, and man on the slopes of the artificial mountain. The entire world rested on the breast of the underworld. Thus it was fitting for this to be included in primeval events. Most would view it as an artificial high place of worship erected on the plain.
21 Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham*, p. 228. Cassuto is (unnecessarily) assuming that the traditions demand a city and a tower in ruins. The judgment passage, however, says absolutely nothing of that at all. The most that is said is that this project was not completed.
22 E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, p. 75. This argumentation is used here simply to show the difficulty in ascribing the identification to E-temen-anki even if one were to take the late date of the composition in accordance with a J document.
23 E. A. Speiser, "Word Plays on the Creation Epic's Version of the Founding of Babylon," *Orientalia*, n.s. 25 (1956):317-18. Speiser shows that there is a chronological problem with the date of J and E-temen-anki, but then he adds in his argumentation that other temples also had the -anki element in the name, such as Borsippa's which was E-ur-me-imin-anki, "house of the seven preceptors of heaven and earth," so that we are not limited to one reference that first fits the idea with -anki. His point is that the source was literary and not monumental (architectural).
24 James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 60. Speiser, who translated the Akkadian myths and epics for Pritchard's work, states at the outset that the majority of the scholars would assign Enuma Elish to the Old Babylonian period on internal evidence alone. Unger explains that it was composed in the days of Hammurabi in the mold of political and religious propaganda to show the preeminence of Babylon and supremacy of Marduk. "However, the poem itself, though one of the literary masterpieces of the Babylonian Semites, goes back to much earlier times. It is clearly based upon the earlier traditions of the Sumerians, the non-Semitic precursors of the Babylonian Semites in lower Babylonia" (Unger, *Archaeology arid the Old Testament*, p. 27).
25 Speiser, "Word Plays," p. 319. He compares this to other and similar phrases to show that they did it frequently.
26 Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), p. 48. Heidel had the same difficulty attempting to render it "deep." Speiser says, "I was equally at sea in translating “equaling apsu. "' Speiser alludes to *Enuma Elish*, tablet IV, lines 142-45, where *apsu* = *samamu* (Speiser, "Word Plays," p. 319).
27 The making of the first brick was a trial ordeal before the gods and was to be accomplished by the king. The ceremony of the bricks was to be a sign that the service was offered to the gods (Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 272-74).
28 *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, s.v. "Bbhel,"byH. Ringgren, 1:467. Ringgren suggests that the metropolis with so many peoples (= lan-

guages) was natural for such an account of the dispersion.
29 Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham*, p. 227.
30 It seems clear that the story did not originate in Babylon. There is no exact correspondence, but that is to be expected since it is a travesty on Babel. Gressmann thought the story came from Babylon to the Assyrians and was brought to the Israelites by the Arameans, but that is unlikely (Gressmann, *The Tower of Babel*, p. 5). There were stories of the glories of Babylon with all the towers and cult mountains even in Palestine (Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, trans. John Marks [London: SCM Press, 1972], p. 146). Later it would be recorded by the classical writers: Diodorus 2.7; Herodotus 1.178; Strabo 16.1.5; and Pliny 6.121.
31 Vos, *Genesis and Archaeology*, p. 47.
32 S. N. Kramer, "The 'Babel of Tongues': A Sumerian Version," in *Essays in Memory of E. A. Speiser*, ed. W W Hallo (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1968), pp. 108-11; George Smith, *The Chaldean Account of Genesis* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Co., 1876), p. 160.
33 Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham*, pp. 229-30. Cassuto has attempted to reconstruct the type of satirical material behind the passage by relating the passage to the time when Babylon was sacked by the Hittites. The idea of the message as a polemic (against what the Israelites would have known Babylon claimed for herself as opposed to the truth) is an accurate presentation of the message, but Cassuto does not treat the text with precision. In the first place, Genesis presents it as a universal judgment on the race collected in Shinar and not one group of people scattered by the Hittites. True, Cassuto is looking for some occasion and the Hittite invasion is a happy one for him. However, that is unwarranted. Second, there is no hint whatsoever that the city and the tower were reduced to rubble. They were just not completed. Third, the text is not saying that all the languages could be spoken there but that one was once in the beginning and God confounded it. Cassuto's attempt to take a naturalistic explanation to the occasion for the text weakens it.
34 Alan Richardson, *Genesis I -XI: Introduction and Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1953), p. 124.
35 Kidner, *Genesis*, p. 111.
36 Ryle observed that "we are led to suspect that the mystery of the origin of distinct languages belongs to the dim obscurity of the infancy of the human race, an infinitely remote and prehistoric age" (Herbert E. Ryle, *The Book of Genesis* [Cambridge: University Press, 1914], p. 144).
37 Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 143.
38 Kidner, *Genesis*, p. 109.
39 John A. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910), p. 224. Skinner was quick to add that the inconsistency is not such that would hinder the collector of traditions from putting the two in historical sequence.
40 Von Rad, *Genesis*, pp. 147-48.
41 H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1942), 1:381.
42 Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, p. 220.
43 This is suggested by Driver who follows Sayce in the suggestion (S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* [London: Methuen & Co., 1913], p. 130).
44 Josephus referred the dispersion to the time of Peleg and related the whole story to the efforts of Nimrod (*Antiquities of the Jews* 1.146, and *Apion* 1.19). Most traditional scholars have followed this line.
45 According to Genesis 11:10, 12, 14, and 16 Peleg was in the fifth generation after the Flood. At this time, according to Keil, there could have been 30,000 people on the earth. That may be a bit generous, but even a conservative estima-

tion turns up enough to satisfy the passage. Certainly not all the tribes listed in chapter 10 need to have been existing at Babel (C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, trans. James Martin, 25 vols. [reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 19681, 1:176).
46 For example, Genesis 37 records the sale of Joseph into Egypt. The story line of Genesis 38 traces the family of Judah into further generations. Chapter 39, however, traces the account of Joseph from his sale into Egypt. The same could be posited for chapter 1 (the total survey of creation) and chapter 2 (the selective discussion of the main elements of the creation, viz., man and woman). The princes of Edom (chap. 36) are also discussed in some development before the narration returns to the story.
47 Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible*, p. 80.
48 The concept of dispersion or scattering of peoples was an ancient one. Kitchen deals with the idea of exile and scattering in the ancient literature to show that the concept was real (fearfully real) for Israel (Kenneth A. Kitchen, "Ancient Orient, 'Deuteronomism,' and the Old Testament," in *New Perspectives on the Old Testament*, ed. J. Barton Payne [Waco, TX: Word Books, 1970), pp. 1-24).
49 Cassuto entitles the first half of the narrative, "Many Are the Plans in the Mind of Man" (Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham*, p. 238).
50 Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible*, p. 79.
51 Isaiah 19:18 describes those who speak the language of Canaan; Isaiah 33:19 portrays the foreigners with deep speech and stammering tongue; Ezekiel 3:5 describes the people as deep of lip i(= strange speech) and heavy of tongue (= hard language). The lip, mouth, or tongue were frequently employed in metonomy to represent the speech or the language.
52 George Bush, *Notes on Genesis*, 2 vols. (reprint, Minneapolis: James & Klock Publishing Co., n.d.), 1:183.
53 Making bricks to replace the unavailable stones would further feed the pride of the people who would rise above their difficulties. These bricks (libittu) are mud bricks (*Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, s.v. "*libittu*").
54 Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible*, p. 77.
55 Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 146. Several examples of this are seen in Judges 8:9; 9:46; 2 Chronicles 14:6; and Isaiah 2:15.
56 Richardson, *Genesis I -XI*, p. 128.
57 Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 145.
58 Cassuto called this section, "It Is the Purpose of the Lord That Will Be Established" (*From Noah to Abraham*, p. 244).
59 Midrash Pirke of R. Eliezer (c. 14) records ten comings down of the Lord: Paradise, Babel, Sodom, the Bush, Sinai, twice at the Rock, twice at the Tabernacle, and once in the last day. The coming down was viewed as Yahweh's revealing of Himself. It is seen in Scripture as the divine intervention breaking through the course of events (Exod. 19:20; 34:5; Num. 11:25; 12:5); however, one should also see Exodus 3:8 and Numbers 11:7 (for deliverance and blessing).
60 Cited by von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 145.
61 Consequently, this writer takes the waw antithetically: "But Yahweh came down" - in contrast to their efforts to ascend.
62 Throughout these verses the divine mood is not anger for depravity but rather laughter at foolishness (Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible*, p. 79). Kidner observed that the note of foreboding marks a father's concern and not a rival's. He shows that it is like Christ's words in Luke 23:31, "If they do these things in a green tree . . . " (Kidner, *Genesis*, p. 110). It is better to have division than to have collective apostasy in unity and peace.
63 Compare Nimrod's beginning with kingdoms and Noah's beginning with viniculture.

64 The two-recension theory bypasses the issue. It still remains a surprise that a "redactor" would leave such an incongruity unrevised (Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham*, p. 246).
65 Dillmann, *Genesis*, p. 393.
66 He offers as examples for this construction Genesis 26:22 ("thinking, for the LORD now ...") and Exodus 2:10 ("she named ... reflecting. .(Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham*, p. 246).
67 The word "Us" is taken here as a plural of majesty as in the earlier chapters of Genesis. For a discussion of its use with verbs, see Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Meaning of 'Let Us' in Gn 1:26," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 13 (1975):58-66.
68 Bush, *Notes on the Book of Genesis*, p. 179.
69 See Exodus 1:12 and 1:10 for a similar situation. The Egyptians were afraid Israel would multiply, but the more they attempted to stop it, the more they multiplied.
70 Burke 0. Long, *The Problem of Etiological Narrative in the Old Testament* (Berlin: Alfred Topelmann, 1968), p. 3.
71 The name in the Achaemenid literature came to mean "the gate of God" (Bab-ill), or perhaps "the gate of the gods." In Persian it is Babirus. In Sumerian it is KA.DINGIR.K(A). The idea that Babylon was one of the oldest cities (Gen. 10:10) was current in Babylon itself, for the name is believed to have been proto-Euphratian and part of the heritage of the earliest pre-Sumerian or Semitic etymology.

The Encyclopedia Judaica (s.v. "Babylon, "p. 31) mentions this as the view of B. Landsberger and refers the reader to *Die Serie ana ittisu* (1937) for the discussion. The first mention of Babylon in cuneiform texts is from the period of the Third Dynasty of Ur when it was a provincial government.

Bush illustrated how the connotative meaning carried by saying that there can be no doubt that the Latin words *balbus* ("stammerer") and *balbutio* ("stammering") derive their origin from Hebrew בָּלַל, or, by the doubling of the first radical, *balbel*, *bilbel*, from which latter form of the word comes ~n, closely related to the English and German babble. The Greek (3aQ(3aQ6g (by commutation of liquids for *balbalos*), "barbarian," primarily signifying a person of rude or outlandish pronunciation, is doubtlessly referring to the same root (Bush, Notes on Genesis, 1:178). *The Oxford English Dictionary* (s.v. "babble"), however, says of babble that "in none [of these languages] can its history be carried far back; as yet it is known in English as early as anywhere else.... No direct connexion with Babel can be traced; though association with that may have affected the senses. "
72 Figart suggests that this point would be the logical place for the development of races to begin. The text of Genesis 11:6 makes a point of the unity of the race ("one people"), but according to Genesis 10 they are dispersed according to families, nations, tongues, and lands. He says, "Again, if God intervened and miraculously changed man's looks, as well as his language, then there is no need to account for these changes through isolation, environment, or culture. This is not to dismiss the known effects of these three factors; we have already shown some possible changes. Yet, if God did the initial changing of genetic structure, then those other factors were only modifying means within the limits set by God. As a matter of fact, this is all they could be in any interpretation" (Thomas O. Figart, A Biblical Perspective on the Race Problem [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973], p. 45). Figart then proceeds to mention places in Scripture where God does intervene and change the structure of mankind (the Fall and the Rapture). He concludes that the silence of the Table concerning Negroid and Mongoloid peoples is to be related to the purpose of the Table, that is, the relationship of Israel to her neighbors (p. 49).

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