

## From the Tower to the Upper Room

**Genesis 11:1-9 HCSB** At one time the whole earth had the same language and vocabulary. (2) As people migrated from the east, they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. (3) They said to each other, "Come, let us make oven-fired bricks." They had brick for stone and asphalt for mortar. (4) And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky. Let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth." (5) Then the LORD came down to look over the city and the tower that the men were building. (6) The LORD said, "If, as one people all having the same language, they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. (7) Come, let Us go down there and confuse their language so that they will not understand one another's speech." (8) So the LORD scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth, and they stopped building the city. (9) Therefore its name is called Babylon, for there the LORD confused the language of the whole earth, and from there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

“shām” 𐤑𐤅 (“there”)

I would like to point out the redundancy of the adverb “shām” 𐤑𐤅 (“there”) in vv. 2, 7, 8 and 9 (where it occurs twice).

- **Genesis 11:2 HCSB** As people migrated from the east, they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled **there**.
- **Genesis 11:7-9 HCSB** Come, let Us go down **there** and confuse their language so that they will not understand one another's speech." (8) So the LORD scattered them from **there** over the face of the whole earth, and they stopped building the city. (9) Therefore its name is called Babylon, for **there** the LORD confused the language of the whole earth, and from **there** the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

The Holy Spirit, through Moses, appears to be depicting Babylon as *the* place where every human achievement was considered possible and yet where everything went horribly wrong. It's as though Babel is the microcosmic powerhouse of all the peoples that existed.

Remember Frank Sinatra's song "New York"?

Start spreading the news,  
I'm leaving today.  
I want to be a part of it -  
New York, New York.

I want to wake up in a city,  
That doesn't sleep,  
To find I'm king of the hill- ah-  
Top of the heap.

My little town blues  
Are melting away  
I'm gonna make a brand new start of it  
In old New York.  
If I can make it there,  
I'd make it anywhere

It's up to you,  
New York, New York.

You could almost hear some yokel from Eridu, Uruk, or Ur whistling this tune while plodding across the Fertile Crescent, on his way to imagined fame and fortune in Babylon.



<sup>1</sup>This story is told against the obvious *intended* background of a sprawling cosmopolitan city with a towering ziggurat, and it is that intention that most pictures of the tower portray. Eventually, however, the tower only reached a ridiculously low height when compared with the initial purpose of the builders. In fact, the wordplay (Babel/Babylon) that comes at the end of the narrative interests me in that the city is named but the tower itself remains anonymous. It's as if it never reached a sufficient height to be even considered worthy of a name!

The difficulty lay, not with the people's desire to build, nor with the advancement of technology that often accompanies such projects, but in humanity's basic hubris in completely disregarding what Elohim had commanded.

- **Genesis 1:27-28 HCSB** So God created man in His own image; He created him in the image of God; He created them male and female. (28) God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth."
- **Genesis 9:7 HCSB** But you, be fruitful and multiply; spread out over the earth and multiply on it."

The Lord God had twice commanded us to fill the earth, to spread out over the face of the earth. Notice in both these passages the contrasting use of "fruitfully multiply" and "fill the earth" in Genesis 1 or in Genesis 9 "fruitfully multiply" and "spread out". Clearly the Lord wanted us to not only have large families but to spread out geographically.

<sup>2</sup>Here I and many other theologians respectfully differ with the translators of the HCSB. I believe the appropriate translation should be "eastward" as opposed to "from the east." They translate the same Hebrew phrase correctly in:

- **Genesis 13:11 HCSB** So Lot chose the entire Jordan Valley for himself. Then Lot journeyed eastward, and they separated from each other.

So, why they chose to make this "from the east" here I don't know.



Perhaps they were influenced by the notion (and that is all that it is) that these were post-diluvian descendents of Noah who had still been living around Mt. Ararat in eastern Turkey or Armenia who were trying to return to their ancestor Noah's original home. I don't know, but I can assure you I'll ask Dr. Blum who is the HCSB's general editor.

Regardless, Genesis 11 tells us that humanity found this beautiful valley in the land of Shinar, where the mouths of the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers supplied a

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.tei-c.org/Talks/2004/Wuerzburg/Whither/babel.jpg>

<sup>2</sup> Image source: Answers.com - Babylon

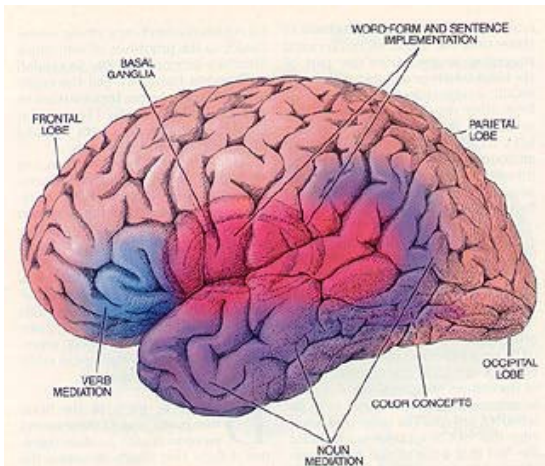
constant supply of year-round fertility, and decided to set up shop. Look carefully at the language.

- **Genesis 11:4 HCSB** And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky. Let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

God said, "Spread out". Humanity responded "Let's do what we can lest we be spread out!" Whatever God's will was, we know that it was "for their welfare and not for disaster, to give them a future and a hope," (Jeremiah 29:11) and that it was "good, pleasing and perfect" (Romans 12:2). What are some reasons God could have had to command humanity to avoid concentration?

1. A single communicable disease could wipe out all of humanity.
2. A single physical disaster like an earthquake or flood (as had already happened) could destroy them all.
3. All of humanity located in a single place would place an overwhelming strain on the ecological resources at hand.
4. A large population tends to amplify the sin of the group. Think Los Angeles, Las Vegas, New York City...

Whatever His thoughts, He thought it was important enough that He brought the whole process to a grinding halt by simply...



...tweaking a small part of their brains.<sup>3</sup> The result? One guy asks for a brick in a language that the guy making the bricks can't understand. The guy mixing mortar misunderstands the appropriate ratio of clay to straw because the superintendent speaks yet another language! Chaos reigned and the whole idea of "unity through better architecture" went right out the window.

Now I want you to turn to another passage where language was also very important. To set the stage would you look at:

- **Acts 1:4-8 HCSB** While He was together with them, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the Father's promise. "This," He said, "is what you heard from Me; (5) for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." (6) So when they had come together, they asked Him, "Lord, at this time are You restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (7) He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or periods that the Father has set by His own authority. (8) But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Jesus said, "I want you to start in Jerusalem but I don't want you to stay there. I want you to go out to Judaea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. BUT...I want you to do it my way. I want you to do it empowered by the Holy Spirit." This time the disciples listened and obeyed. Let's look at the results. Please turn to:

- **Acts 2:1-11 HCSB** When the day of Pentecost had arrived, they were all together in one place. (2) Suddenly a sound like that of a violent rushing wind came from heaven, and it filled the whole house where they were staying. (3) And tongues, like flames of fire that were divided, appeared to them and rested on each one of them. (4) Then they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dhushara.com/book/brainp/brainil/lang.jpg>

languages, as the Spirit gave them ability for speech. (5) There were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. (6) When this sound occurred, the multitude came together and was confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language. (7) And they were astounded and amazed, saying, "Look, aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? (8) How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? (9) Parthians, Medes, Elamites; those who live in Mesopotamia, in Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, (10) Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, (11) Cretans and Arabs--we hear them speaking in our own languages the magnificent acts of God."

Allow me to draw some conclusions from these two incidents, one in near-pre-historic Babylon and one in Jerusalem.

Man says: Concentrate your forces and develop a fortress mentality.

God says: Reach out, spread out and serve the world.

Man's way reflects death. Dead plants draw in upon themselves and harden.

God's way reflects a living system. A living plant grows, thrives, and spreads out.

Man's way leads to self-glorification at the risk of long-term survival.

God's way leads to humble work but long-term health and safety.

Man's way leads to artificial unification in one location that cannot be sustained.

God's way leads to the unification of all men under one idea no matter where they are.

Man's way leads to confusion of languages; misunderstanding.

God's way leads to increased understanding.

Man's way leads to chaos and ruin.

God's way leads to a Kingdom against which the gates of Hades cannot prevail.

I believe this principle is reflected even in the play on words from which we derive the place name Babel and its etymological descendent "babble." You see "Bab+llu" in Akkadian means "Gateway of the Gods". This was mankind's intent. However, "Babel" in Hebrew is derived from the root "balal" meaning to mix and thus means "confusion". God's joke prevailed over time and it is THIS sense that has carried through time even in our modern English word "babble." Isn't it funny that Mankind's greatest achievement did not have the staying power of one of Hashem's jokes?

Brothers and sisters, friends and potential family,

- [Colossians 2:8 HCSB](#) Be careful that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit based on human tradition, based on the elemental forces of the world, and not based on Christ.
- [Romans 12:2 HCSB](#) Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.