

Kelly Wagaman

(Coach Todd Johnson)

The Tower of Babel

Genesis 11:1-9

I. Context Analysis Genesis 11:1-9

A. Redemptive Context

God created man in His own image on the earth to be image bearers of His name and to establish His kingdom. God's mandate was to, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28). Man rebelled against God and His Kingdom when Adam and Eve tried to set up a rival kingdom where they could know everything and make the laws. God cursed their mission of multiplication and dominion, and banished them from paradise.

God sent a great flood to destroy the earth and start over with one man, Noah, and his family. When the earth dried, the mandate to fill the earth and subdue it was given again to Noah. A few generations later, man tried to set up his kingdom again at the Tower of Babel but was scattered over the earth by God.

After Babel, God called Abraham, made his name great, and made him the father of many nations. Israel became a great nation, but not without their troubles. They thumbed their nose at God as their King until their evil ways finally sentenced them into captivity.

Finally, Christ came and announced the coming of the Kingdom of God. He left earth but gave His Spirit to all who yield to His Kingship. At Pentecost the curse of Babel was broken when all who were redeemed heard each other in one language. At the climax and end of history, Jesus will return to earth to reign as King and His empire will consist of all tribes, tongues, and nations.

B. Historical Context

The story of the Tower of Babel takes place in Mesopotamia in Babylon sometime before 2000BC. The book of Genesis was written by Moses most likely during the time

Israel spent in the desert from 1446-1406BC. The audience of Genesis was primarily the descendants of Abraham, the nation of Israel.

Two men in the genealogies, Nimrod and Peleg, foreshadow the tower and its devastating consequences. Nimrod is noted as a godless man who built cities in Babylon and Shinar that mirrored Babel and its Ziggurat. Peleg, whose name means “division”, signifies the dispersion after the Tower of Babel and the separation of the earth. Peleg is also in the elect lineage of Abraham and the line of salvation, unlike his brother Joktan and his descendants who are linked with the Tower incident and a curse.

Important in Mesopotamian culture were genealogies, geography and mapmaking, construction techniques, the migration of people, land sales and purchases, and legal matters and methods. Ancient Near East building practice in Mesopotamia used bricks instead of the readily available stone the Israelites used. Defensive walls were the stamp of a city, which were not built to be lived in, but rather for public and religious purposes. Ziggurat structures were grand, solid brick, staircase structures. The people believed the stairway provided a way for the gods to come down to them. There was usually a little shrine at the top.

At this point in history all people spoke one language. After men were scattered from Babylon, the city continued to be the headquarters of evil and is finally condemned to eternal judgment by God in the last days.

C. Literary Context

Gen 6-9	Gen 10	Gen 11:1-9	Gen 11:10-32	Gen 12
Noah and the flood	The Table of Nations	The Tower of Babel	Shem to Abram	The call of Abram

The Tower of Babel is a narrative sandwiched between two accounts of lineage, or names. Since the story of Babel is one about “making a name” it is significant that it falls

between Noah's line, the Table of Nations, and Shem's line. "Name" is a key word in the story of the Tower of Babel.

The Tower incident is right after Noah and the story of the Flood . Since Noah is the new Adam, it seems fitting there would be another "Fall". The Tower of Babel mirrors the story of the garden in many ways. Just as Adam and Eve rebelled against God's kingdom and boundaries, so did the people in Babel attempt to make their own kingdom and develop new boundaries, which of course tried to reach into the heavens.

It is also ironic that the lineage and call of Abram follows this passage. Abram was content to be a wanderer until God called him to go settle in Canaan where He would make a nation out of him and make his name great.

Israel first had the book of Genesis after Moses wrote it in the desert. This was a time when they were about to go conquer the Canaanites in the promised land. The Israelites would've heard the story of Babel and their towers that "reached to the heavens" and immediately thought of the cities they were about to conquer. Hearing how God took care of the people at Babel would have given them courage to siege the Canaanite cities.

II. Content Analysis

A. Genre

Genesis and The Tower of Babel is Old Testament Narrative.

Scenes

- I. Scene 1: vs 1
- II. Scene 2: vs 2
- III. Scene 3: vs 3
- IV. Scene 4: vs 4
- V. Scene 5: vs 5
- VI. Scene 6: vs 6-7
- VII. Scene 7: vs 8-9

B. Textual Outline

Characters: The main characters are the descendents of Noah (survivors of the flood) and the Lord.

Problem: The world was united under one common language and began migrating east, settling at Babylon. (vs 1-2)

Rising Action: The people decided to make bricks in order to build a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens to make a name for themselves so they wouldn't be scattered over the earth. (vs 3-4)

Turning Point: The Lord came down to see what they were building. (vs 5)

Falling Action: God saw that their language unified their rebellion and decided to thwart their plans by confusing their language and scattering them over the earth. (vs 6-7)

Resolution: The people stopped building the tower in the city because the Lord confused their language and scattered them over the whole earth. (vs 8-9)

C. Author's Big Idea

When evil men started building a tower to make a name for themselves, the Lord thwarted their plans by confusing their language and scattering them over the earth.

D. Explanation of Author's Big Idea

Problem:

The story starts out with the world was united under one common language (vs 1). People were created in the image of God with the gift of language to be used for dominion of the earth through naming God's creation. Instead at Babel we see the people using it to rival God's Kingdom. The result of their rebellion was destruction, rather than dominion. From this dividing of language came different nations that were constantly at war with each other and still are today.

We are also told in vs 2 that people began migrating east, settling at Babylon. This may seem innocent at first, but we must remember that God's original mandate was to "fill the earth". By settling in one place they were defying God's covenant to multiply His image on the earth. In Genesis, going Eastward is portrayed as moving away from God.

In contrast to this defiant "settling", we have the story of Abraham in chapter 12. Abraham was content to be a wanderer with God. But when God called him to settle in the Promise Land, he went.

Rising Action:

In vs 3-4, the people decided to make bricks in order to build a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens to make a name for themselves so they wouldn't be scattered over the earth (vs 3-4). They wanted their tower to "reach to the heavens" so they would be famous (vs 4). It's significant to note that the tower they were building was not just any tower, but a ziggurat. Ziggurat structures were grand, solid brick, staircase structures. The people believed the stairway provided a way for the gods to come down to them. There was usually a little shrine at the top.

They even wanted to construct their own building materials, rather than use the natural stone around them. Everything about their plight was man-centered and man-made. God does not frown on the building of cities themselves, but on human pride and material security.

The people of Babylon wanted to make a name for themselves, but God gave them a name, “confusion.” In chapter 12, Abraham’s name was made great by God and was blessed to be the father of many nations. Abraham did not want a great name, rather God chose to make his name great. God praises those who magnify *His* name and not their own achievements. Later in redemptive history, God gave Jesus “the name that is above every name.”

Turning Point:

The literary structure of this passage hinges on vs 5. Moses writes that “the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building” (vs5). It’s pure irony that the Lord couldn’t see this “great tower” from heaven but actually had to descend to see it because it was so puny! God wasn’t descending in wrath, nor was He worried He might get overthrown. Rather I imagine He was smirking and probably laughing at their pathetic attempts to transgress heaven.

Falling Action:

God saw that their language unified them in this rebellion (vs 6a). He knew that if He let them continue, that nothing would stop them in their pride and desire for independence (vs. 6b). Corporate apostasy could be mortally devastating. So God scattered them over the whole earth and they stopped building the city (vs. 8).

The people’s ambition was to transgress the boundaries of heaven and earth in order to overthrow God’s rule and transgress His dwelling. They were blatantly exalting

themselves above God and extending their boundaries vertically. It is ironic that God expanded their boundaries horizontally when He scattered them.

Resolution:

The people stopped building the tower in the city because the Lord confused their language and scattered them over the whole earth (vs 8-9). Their “great project” was left incomplete.

In vs 9, the city is named “Babel.” The founder of Babel and its tower meant the name to mean “gate or residence of the gods.” When Moses recorded this story, he used a word play of “Babel” that means “babel of voices.” It’s easy to see how Moses makes fun of their high opinion of themselves and the fate of their defiance.

Overall Structure:

Waltke structures the text in a Chiastic, or hourglass, structure. The first four verses (vs 1-4) depict humanity’s construction of their fame. The story reverses itself at vs 5 when God begins His deconstruction of their achievements.

The symmetry of the passage is undeniable. The story starts with everyone speaking one language and ends with them speaking many. In the beginning, people are settling in Babylon whereas in the ends they are scattering from that same place. They begin united in understanding and end scattered in misunderstanding. The people say, “*Come*, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly” (vs 3) and God says, “*Come*, let us go down and confuse their language” (vs 7). The people initiate the rebellion, but God has the final word.

III. Correlation/Application

A. Discontinuities

Personal Differences

- I live in a world where there are many languages and dialects.
- I have never made bricks or built a tower.
- Skyscrapers are a normal part of our cities now.

Cultural Changes

- The word “name” doesn’t have as great of a meaning today as it did then.
- We use iron and steel to construct buildings.
- My culture does not generally practice polytheism.
- I live in a country where people speak multiple languages.
- I live in the western hemisphere, not Mesopotamia.
- Cities are rampant now, they were just getting started then.

Redemptive History Progression

- Not much has happened in redemptive history yet, this is at the very beginning of God’s story.
- The world was just flooded and the people were under the universal Noahic covenant.
- Abraham had not yet been called to be the father of the nation of Israel.
- Moses is writing to Israel before they settle in Canaan to become a nation.

B. Continuities

God

- He is all-powerful.
- He is all-knowing.
- His plans always prevail.
- His kingdom is still His first priority.
- He still multiplies His image in man to rule over the earth.
- God still comes down to us.

People

- We still want to make ourselves great.
- We still invent new ways to build things.
- We are still scattered over the earth.
- We speak hundreds of different languages.
- Man is still trying to reach up to God.

Redemption

- The mandate to have dominion and multiply still stands today.
- God still frustrates the plans of the wicked and prideful.
- Christ reunites the people of the world in their language at Pentecost.
- People of all tribes, tongues, and nations will be saved.

C. Theological Big Idea

The Lord frustrates the plans of those who exalt themselves in pride and ignore His covenant to multiply His image and kingdom.

D. Personal Impact

It's ironic that I've been studying a passage about men taking pride in their own achievements and seeking a name for themselves. Talk about my life long ambition. From an early age I can remember constantly worrying about what people thought of me and trying to manipulate my image so that I would be popular. In elementary school academics brought me fame. In Middle School I made a name for myself in athletics. High School was all about partying and dating the popular guys. I slowly but surely climbed the popularity ladder only to fall hard at the end of my high school career.

Today I tend to "spiritualize" my pride in achievements. "For the glory of God!" I say. But in my heart I worship the work of my hands. During the course of this class God brought a deep conviction in my soul about how I treat support raising. We've been well over 100% of our goal for over two years. When I talked to people whose accounts were not as healthy, I would tell them how God provides for us "to encourage them". But in my heart I took great pride in our abundance. I let it go to my head. I attributed our good status with my hard work. I have even berated Ben for his "laziness" and credited myself with our success.

I started building my own tower, but God in His grace didn't let me finish. Over the past two months, He slowly allowed our support to deteriorate. This is what it took to get my attention to realize my sin. Then last week I read this passage:

"When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful not to forget the Lord your God...Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied...then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God who brought you out of...slavery." Deut 8:10-14

My heart wept when I read this and I knew what I had done. I forgot Him. I became proud. I rejoiced in my own achievements rather than in Him and His great blessing. I confessed my sin to God and to Ben. And for the first time in a long time I determined in my heart to repent from this wicked pride. I felt a heavy burden lift from me in that moment.

In the following days I noticed a change in my attitude. Not because I was trying harder to be humble and trust God, but because I felt Him changing my heart. We had a big check come in out of the blue from unsuspecting people and when I saw it, my heart praised God for His kindness to us. Ironically it was not from people I knew or had cultivated in the least. My great prayer now is that He will keep my heart humble, whether on staff or not, when I see His great provision and care for us. May He keep me returning to my self-exalting tower of pride.

IV. Bibliography

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