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Context for Confusion: Understanding Babel in the Book of Beginnings

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The “Tower of Babel” narrative of Genesis 11:1-9 stands out as one of the more cryptic, debated, and also most far reaching episodes of the Old Testament. The challenge of these nine brief verses is common to Hebrew narrative, in that the genre largely avoids waxing eloquent on the “moral of the story,” and deals with “just the facts.” In addition to the ambiguous nature of the genre, the Babel episode is particularly abbreviated and bears heavily on the contentious themes of race, language, religion and divine judgment (on human cooperation and achievement no less). Attempts to unravel the meaning and import of the Babel passage have gone far afield of the text itself in order to bridge the gap in understanding left in this terse text’s wake. In particular, scholars have focused on archaeological, cultic, and mythical data to supplement and shed light on the divine author’s meaning and purpose here.

Even when interpreters focus on the text itself, however, results seem widely varied with little consensus, even among interpreters from similar theological traditions. Joel S. Baden notes concerning approaches to the Babel narrative that, “Scholars have gone to great lengths in arguing for the unity of this pericope by demonstrating that it contains wordplay, alliteration, chiastic structure, and other literary features.” Yet, few commentators have taken more than cursory time to consider the unity of Genesis itself and how the Babel segment’s placement within the book affects its intended meaning. The Babel narrative stands at a crucial transition within Genesis and largely functions as a conclusion to the Bible’s opening salvo. As such, this short passage relies heavily on the preceding material of the initial chapters of Genesis to fill the gaps which are not explicitly stated but implied by the literary context of the narrative. Therefore, this study will argue that, despite the importance of the historical, architectural, and cultic context of the Babel episode, the canonical context of the passage remains far more important in determining the passage’s final meaning.

INTERPRETIVE RANGE AND METHODOLOGY

Before it is possible to address the positive claim of this study, it will be necessary to define and describe some of the alternate approaches and, in the process, demonstrate the weaknesses inherent in these methods. First, though, it is paramount to admit that this project will assume the unity and veracity of the Genesis account based on the authority of the “divine author” in directing the text’s development and transcription throughout history. As such, approaches based on the documentary hypothesis and other source critical methods will not receive treatment here. The central argument of this study hinges on the assumption that Genesis is a skillfully crafted piece of ancient literature whose parts are woven together intentionally and seamlessly to create on grand work that clearly communicated to its original readers, by the purposes of both the divine word of God and the human author.


However, even among theological communities who readily accept this view of Genesis, the scholarly treatments of Genesis 11:1-9 demonstrate the wide array of interpretations possible to such a passage. Reading them, one might imagine that scholars follow the rabbinic tradition that, “Each word in the Torah has seventy possible interpretations.” The need for a clear method of attaining the central meaning of this passage will be demonstrated by first examining several noteworthy, albeit differing, attempts to shed light on the meaning of the Babel account. One approach worth mentioning does indeed depend upon Midrash tradition (the ancient collections of rabbinic commentaries on the Hebrew Scriptures). Sheila Tuller Keiter, in her *Jewish Bible Quarterly* article, describes one such Midrash as follows: “the project of building the Tower of Babel became of such paramount importance that bricks became more valuable than human beings. If a man fell to his death during the construction, no one paid notice. But if a brick dropped, the people wept.” Based on this interpretation and the lexical connection she draws between the Babel account and the first chapter of Exodus, Keiter claims that the final sin of the city’s builders was their devaluation of human beings. While such an act would be a grievous sin, there is no evidence from God’s response (Gen 11:6-7) that human dignity was the problem he intended to address. In fact, as the below explanation will show, the sin of Babel seems to be not a devaluing of human dignity, but an overvaluing. The Babelites appear to grasp at territory previously reserved for God alone. The rabbinic tradition, in this case, seems to distract from the intention of the text and is, therefore, an unsuitable guide for interpretation of this passage.

Another approach focuses on similar building narratives from ancient Mesopotamia. In his attempt to explain the sin of Babel’s builders, Andrew Giorgetti compares the account of Genesis 11:1-9 to the similar accounts of the surrounding cultures, noting comparable “motifs of name-making, universal hegemony and colossal building projects.” Allowing for the polemical nature of the early Genesis installments, Giorgetti’s comparison brings to light an important purpose in the Babel account. Bruce Waltke picks up on this same theme when he comments on the detail that the builders “have begun to do this” that, “Describing this building project as just having begun also has polemical significance. This counters the Babylonian creation myth that presents Babylon as founded at the time of the original creation.” Many of the statements in the early chapters of Genesis seem to directly confront the claims of Mesopotamian religion as recorded in the *Enuma Elish* and elsewhere. As part of the same subsection of Genesis, Waltke and Giorgetti’s contention that the Babel account contains such a polemic is entirely plausible.

On the other hand, Giorgetti takes the comparison beyond the scope of the biblical text by claiming that the primary sin of the builders involved breaking “virgin ground” for a city without God’s explicit approval. This conclusion is not warranted by God’s judgment statement within the passage, nor by any narrative clues therein. Furthermore, throughout the primeval history

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7 Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New International Version (Biblica, Inc., 2011).
section of Genesis there are many descriptions of individuals or peoples building cities without earning a verdict of judgment (though most of these are found in the cursed spiritual line of Cain, not the faithful remnant of Seth). If no explicit permission was given for these cities, why would the Babel tower city merit judgment which earlier city-builders did not? Giorgetti’s interpretation of the sin of Babel seems to be based more on the contemporary literature than on the text of Genesis itself. Again, focus on external materials seems to have distracted from the purpose of the biblical writer.

Another scholar, Allan S. Maller, hones in on the detailed recounting of the building materials, combined with the unity of language and purpose amongst the people who traveled to Shinar, to claim that their failure was over-conformity at the expense of God’s natural, diversified design in creation.10 Maller’s approach admirably focuses on the biblical text itself, both the narrative in question and a contextual link within the Pentateuch (namely, the Law’s requirement to build altars with natural, uncut stone). The fact that the Babel narrative includes such a specific description of materials used in the tower’s construction is likely significant given how quickly the narrative moves and the lack of description regarding other key details. However, Maller’s overemphasis on a single detail within the account at the expense of the larger narrative and his neglect of the more immediate context within the primeval history portion of Genesis leads him to a conclusion that appears largely contrived, apparently based more on modern sensibilities than those of the original audience. For instance, the larger context of Genesis 1-12 says little concerning the theme of diversity within creation or the danger of conformity.11 If this was a key concept in the author’s design, further use of this theme should be more apparent throughout the early narratives of Genesis. By taking the Babel narrative as an isolated story, Maller has missed the interpretive cues provided by the larger context. Unfortunately, his approach is exceedingly common in exegetical efforts of all stripes.

This sampling of attempts to supplement the biblical text with a variety of external sources demonstrates the weakness of approaches which lean too heavily on culture at the expense of literary considerations within the text itself, highly common in commentaries on the early chapters of Genesis. Cultural clues found in extant materials can be valuable tools for clarifying the meaning of the text, but that meaning should have connections within the larger context of the work in question. If the meaning of a passage seems isolated from the major themes of the larger work, interpreters should question or rework their inductions from the extant material. Furthermore, the conclusions described vary so widely and relegate the text to the sphere of historical and linguistic experts, that the meaning and value of this passage is effectively unreachable for the average reader of the text, even most ministry professionals trained in biblical interpretation. If the clarity and perspicuity of Scripture can be given any benefit of the doubt, then interpretations should be more readily attainable to the majority of trained interpreters. Given the important placement of the Babel account, at the transition between the primeval and patriarchal sections of Genesis, making it the climax of humanity’s downward spiral before positive divine intervention, the meaning must be more obvious within the text. Therefore, a more reliable method is required.


11 God does, however, clearly value diversity and creativity as evinced by the variety found in creation and the acceptance of all peoples demonstrated throughout the Bible, but especially in Gal 3:28-29, “In Christ, there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek.” The primary themes of Genesis, though, simply do not focus on this message.
CONTEXT OF BABEL NARRATIVE

While many commentators obscure the Babel account’s significance by undue attention to supplementary materials, this does not negate the value of those materials as they make up an important facet of the passage’s original context. As such, the archaeological, cultural, and literary background of the passage requires a balanced treatment to gain the perspective of the original audience before approaching the relevant textual contexts. What follows is a summary of the pertinent information from those fields.

Historical and Cultural Context

While the identity of the Babel tower remains uncertain, certain aspects of the tower give helpful clues as to its features and function. Many commentators doubt the connection between the Babel tower and the Mesopotamian ziggurat based on the seemingly human-centered focus of the builders proclamation “Let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves” (Gen 11:4). These interpreters claim that ziggurats had an exclusively religious function and the attitude of the city’s builders is anti-God and, therefore, excludes a religiously aimed tower. While the ziggurat is certainly religious and the builder’s goals are indeed self-centered, there is no reason to assume that such a human focus precludes a religious mindset. In fact, the primary function of religious undertakings throughout history has been the security and prosperity of man’s hopes and desires. In the ancient world, to aim for such goals without the gods, however human-centered those goals may be, would have been virtually unheard of. This objection to seeing the ziggurat in Gen 11, then, is more probably based on a modern conception of man-centered undertakings—secular and religiously sanitized. Stated alternatively, this argument notes that religious function does not require exclusively religious function (that is, for the gods only).

What, then, is the positive case for the ziggurat and why does it matter for the present study? In ancient Mesopotamia, the location of the “plains of Shinar” associated with Akkad, Babylon and Assyria (Gen 10:10-11), the first cities would have been built around temples. Unlike modern cities, ancient cities did not include, at least broadly speaking, residential dwellings, but functioned essentially as expanded temple complexes, sometimes including other public administrative buildings. This Mesopotamian view of the city in the Babel episode is further supported by the detailed description of building materials found in 11:3, due to the fact that kiln “burnt brick and bitumen (tar and mortar)” were largely unfamiliar to the Israelites. E. A. Speiser notes additionally that, “The ceremonial and year long preparation of sacral bricks and the solemn laying of the first brick were standard practices bound up with the religious

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12 Suggestions include the cities of Babylon, about which excavations are unhelpful since “the shifting water table of the Euphrates has obliterated the strata” there, and Eridu, the first known city and capital of the Ubaid dynasty (5000-3500 BC). The latter conclusion is fascinating due to the unprecedented uniformity of pottery samples found throughout the vast region, suggesting a uniformity of thought and language, John H. Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel Account and Its Implications,” Bulletin for Biblical Research 5 (1995): accessed June 27, 2017, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost, 171-174.


14 Bruce K. Waltke, Genesis, 179 and John H. Walton, “Mesopotamian Background of Babel,” 164-165.
architecture of Mesopotamia.” These materials would have been extremely expensive, due to their time consuming production, but would have made impressive building projects more tenable; such materials would have been reserved for important public buildings, such as palaces and temples. Taken together, a picture begins to emerge of a sacred, publicly supported tower building project rising out of a temple complex city in Mesopotamia.

The ziggurat, therefore, or some early “failed prototype” as Walton calls the effort, is an entirely plausible conclusion. Ziggurat evidence (as early as 3200 BC) based on baked brick technology (3100 BC), combined with Mesopotamian urbanizing (2800 BC) all place the Babel timeline well before the life of Abraham, following the biblical account. The question, then, becomes: “What significance does the ziggurat concept add to interpretation?” Walton provides a helpful analysis of the Ziggurat’s function:

The ziggurat was a structure that was built to support the stairway (simmiltu), which was believed to be used by the gods to travel from one realm to the other. It was solely for the convenience of the gods and was maintained in order to provide the deity with the amenities that would refresh him along the way (food, a place to lie and rest, etc.). The stairway led at the top to the gate of the gods, the entrance to the divine abode.

In other words, the tower was “designed to make it convenient for the god to come down to his temple, receive worship from the people, and bless them.” What follows is a deeper understanding into the religious mindset of the people of Babel. While their self-sufficient attitude is apparent from the text, this does not mean that they do not rely on the gods, but that they see the gods in human terms as weak, needing human worship, and somewhat easily manipulated. Walton describes Babel as the birthplace of paganism, the anthropomorphism of God and the attempt to make God do man’s bidding. Again, however, Walton stops short of a further analysis of the surrounding biblical context, making his final interpretation effectively limited. Though the ziggurat conception is informative, any interpretation based solely on this approach remains on shaky ground, given the lack of explicit indication from the text and the disputed nature of the claim.

One additional branch of supplemental material is helpful to the present discussion; namely, the correlating depictions of the Babel account in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. Much as the story of Noah shares similarities with the flood epics of Egypt and Gilgamesh, the Babel narrative mirrors the stories of Enki, the primary god of Eridu, and the Enuma Elish. Speiser notes that the Enuma Elish, which recounts the building of Babylon and its “structure

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17 John H. Walton, “Mesopotamian Background of Babel,” 171, and could have been much earlier still: “the biblical account the tower of Babel is presented as a failed prototype. The result of God's action against the builders was to delay the development of urbanization in Mesopotamia. Consequently, it would be logical to infer that the event recorded in Genesis 11 occurred perhaps centuries prior to the actual development of urbanization as attested by archaeological records.”
18 John H. Walton, “Mesopotamian Background of Babel,” 162.
19 The temple itself would have stood beside the tower at its base, John H. Walton, Genesis in The NIV Application Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 374 and Bruce K. Waltke, Genesis, 179.
20 John H. Walton, Genesis, 381-85 (emphasis added).
with upraised head,” shares a lexical link to the tower of Babel with its “head in the sky” (Literal translation, Gen 11:4). As mentioned above, Waltke claims that the Babel account is, in part, a polemic against the Enuma Elish narrative; that epic sees Babylon as an original feature of creation while Genesis sees it as the bottom of a downward spiral into human sinfulness (sinfulness here is particular helpful when understood as separation from God). Walton also connects the biblical account with that of the Sumerian epic "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta." This narrative depicts all of man with one tongue and one purpose having their language changed by Enki, “the leader of the gods” who “brought contention into…the speech of man that had been one.” While many scholars find reason to believe this account is one of the sources for the Babel author, the inimitable “J,” it is also possible that both accounts remember the same historical event, each through its own religious lens. Walton’s note that these correlating accounts “may well represent the memory of an actual event from the late fourth millennium BC,” is not so important to interpretation of the passage as it is to the apologetic defense of the Bible’s historicity. However, this connection to the Sumerian account offers one further example of the polemical nature of the primeval history segment of Genesis and gives an important clue to the author’s intention and his unity of purpose throughout the book’s first twelve chapters.

In summary, the contextual materials found in the archeological, cultural, and literary background to the Babel episode provide important information as to the purpose of the tower, the religious attitudes of the builders, and even the unity of the Genesis account. Archeological evidence from other ziggurat sites opens the possibility that the Babel tower represented an early attempt by the world’s collective inhabitants to claim the blessing and favor of the gods. This demonstrates a distinct shift in mankind’s attitude towards God from benevolent, transcendent deity to a weak god whom man could bend to his will. The God of the Bible is here treated much as the gods of the Romans and Greeks, to be placated and tricked into promoting the agenda of keen human opportunists. If this connection holds, then the final stage of the downward spiral from the fall of Genesis 3 has been realized in man’s corrupted view of God’s nature and character. Additionally, the literary comparisons between the Babel account and similar accounts in the surrounding cultures further support the conception of the opening portion of Genesis as an effort to set the record straight against the religious accounts of that era. The continuation of the polemical theme illustrates the further unity of Genesis 1-11, suggesting the importance of the other major themes for those chapters for interpretation of the Babel episode.

Canonical Context

Having gained the perspective of the original audience through archeological, religious, and mythic inquiry, it is now time to address the primary argument of this paper: the importance of the immediate and surrounding context of the Genesis text itself in extricating the meaning of the Babel narrative. T. Desmond Alexander frames the place of the Babel account helpfully: “In spite of its brevity, [the Babel account] brings the opening chapters of Genesis to a notable climax.” Genesis is widely considered to divide into two separate sections: chapters 1-11 contain the so called primeval histories and chapters 12-50 make up the patriarchal histories.

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21 E.A. Speiser, Genesis, 75.
22 Bruce K. Waltke, Genesis, 180.
23 John H. Walton, “Mesopotamian Background of Babel,” 175.
24 T. Desmond Alexander, From the Pentateuch to the Promised Land (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 128.
This places the Babel episode at the very end of the primeval section, followed only by the bridging genealogy from Shem to Abraham. The brief nature of this passage seems confusing until one compares the account with the preceding accounts that touch on the same themes and contrasts it with those that follow in the patriarchal section. Though the present effort will leave room for further inquiry, the primary themes of Genesis will be helpfully clarified below.

The Primeval Context

Several passages bear important resemblance to the Babel account, but the first passage of importance is that of the first sin. Here the narrator focuses on the enticement of the serpent’s offer to Eve: “God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God” (Gen 3:5). This prideful desire for a greater status and to achieve unknown greatness taints every action that follows and so many in the coming chapters corrupt themselves in their attempts to “be like God,” however corrupt their picture of God becomes in the process. Additionally, God’s judgment on the actions of Adam and Eve sets intentional barriers between man and his ability to achieve the desires of his heart. These events set the stage for the development of two distinct responses to the judgments and will of God: the spiritual lines of Cain and Seth.

Seeing the tower building Sinar dwellers in their appropriate context requires looking at them in light of their ancestral forbearers. Bruce Waltke makes several significant connections that enlighten the present study:

The postdiluvian tower builders are the spiritual heirs of the line of Cain, not of Seth…both migrate eastward (4:16; 11:2); both build a city to establish a secure place and a meaningful existence without God (4:17; 11:4); both are proud manufacturers (4:19-24; 11:3-4); both are judged by being forced to migrate (4:12-13; 11:8); both continue to propagate under the Lord’s blessing (4:17-24; ch.10).25

Cain and his descendents not only add violence to their improper worship (or lack of worship), they also fail to trust God for protection and provision; hence, “My punishment is more than I can bear…I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me” (Gen 4:14). He then proceeds to build a city, his progeny descending further into violence and self-centered pride (4:23-24). Every effort seeks to undo the curse and dampen its blow yet only succeeds to exponentially increase the curse’s effects.

As the human family descends into corruption, the flood narrative comes into view beginning with a brief and contentious passage that sheds further light on the theme at hand. In this introductory explanation to the flood, the reader is told of the “Nephilim,” the offspring of the “sons of God” and “daughters of men” (Gen 6:1-8). While the precise meaning of this passage is unclear, one possible explanation sees these unions as a continued attempt to reach beyond the curse and the mortal parameters for man set by God by breeding more “divine” descendents (also one of the possible causes for God’s judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, as suggested by their attempt at intercourse with the angels). If this theory of divine progeny is assumed, then the plan works, if only to a degree, for such rendezvous produce the “men of

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renown” (6:4, literally, “men of name,” anshey ha-shem). Regardless of how one explains the Nephilim motif, the connection between this passage and the Babel narrative is strongly supported by the wordplay of the Babel account, which repeats the “name” (shem) motif throughout the passage and is one of the primary reasons the builders give for attempting their project.

The Nephilim introduction then flows naturally into the flood narrative itself, which follows a similar chiastic structure to the Babel account; this both links them together and reinforces their corresponding themes. As the spiral continues downward, man is judged wholesale (though also individually as, “every inclination of the thoughts of [man’s] heart was only evil all the time” Gen 6:5). Noah and his family are preserved to restart the human race, but the same results develop again. One might ask, given the placement of the Babel account after the flood in the descent of man, how the Babelites could be worse than the pre-diluvian man. The answer potentially lies in their collaborative effort to accomplish their corrupt purposes; defying and denying the one true God has apparently become a unified purpose for them. Returning to Noah, the seeds of corruption show up early when Noah’s own son treats him with derision in his drunken state. Sailhamer sees Noah’s proceeding poem as programmatic for what follows in the genealogies and the Babel narrative, as poems are extremely important in the early chapters of Genesis for setting the interpretive tone of the narratives that follow them. The curse on Canaan and his descendents is then described more concretely in the genealogy of chapter ten.

In the genealogy of Canaan, another important passage for the Babel narrative comes into view. Shortly preceding the Babel episode is the genealogical account of Nimrod, who is either present in the Babel narrative or is a descendant of the Babel tradition (as Waltke suggests, making the Babel account chronologically prior to Nimrod, even though this placement is reversed in the text for literary purposes). Nimrod seems to typify the persona of the Babelites, in either case. He is described as a mighty warrior and hunter “before the Lord” (10:9).

Alexander states that this is not to be taken positively, as “it could mean ‘opposite the Lord,’ or ‘facing up to the Lord.’” He is also a great builder of cities, though the cities attributed to him are among the vilest offenders in the following biblical history, including both Babylon and Nineveh (interestingly, many of his cities had ziggurats). Additionally, other cities are mentioned among the descendants of Cain which are also important symbols of corruption and evil throughout he Bible, including both Babylon and Nineveh (Isaiah 23; Luke 10:14). These references within the genealogy would have been clear indicators to the audience of Genesis of the failure of the line of Canaan, continuing the spiritual line of Cain (though not his physical line). Nimrod’s position in the line of Canaan, therefore, gives

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26 John H. Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009), 318
30 There is some confusion concerning from which of Noah’s sons comes the builders of Babel. Waltke notes that the name ‘Peleg’ from the line of Shem means ‘division’ and “probably prophesies the dispersal of the nations at Babel.” It also states there that “in [Peleg’s] time the earth was divided. However, it is more likely that the sons of Ham (and Canaan) are in view as the description of Nimrod and his building of Babylon figures prominently in the genealogy, setting the stage for the Babel account to play out Noah’s promissory poem. Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis*, 173.
what are perhaps the strongest negative literary implications against him. The corruption of mankind continues despite the pervasive nature of God’s judgment in the flood. This demonstrates that the root of man’s rebellion lies not within any special physical descendancy but that of Adam, whose rebellion lies in the heart of all people at all times. At this point, then, the stage is thoroughly set for the climactic failure at Babel. The chart below summarizes the thematic connections between the early episodes of Genesis and the judgment at Babel:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gen 3: The Fall and Curse</th>
<th>-Origin of rebellion and the corruption of man’s view of and trust in God.</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| Gen 4: Cain | -Introduction of two spiritual lines, one faithful and repentant, the other self-reliant and obstinate.  
-Introduction of name (shem) theme.  
-Introduction of city building theme.  
-Divine Judgment on Cain and descendants. |
| Gen 6:1-8: Nephilim | -“Men of Name,” continues name chasing apart from God.  
-further corruption of line of Cain. |
-Divine Judgment.  
-Remnant of line of Seth (Noah).  
-Judgment does not end the corruption of mankind.  
-Noah’s curse on the line of Cain. |
-Name theme continues in Nimrod.  
-Mention of archetypal cities of corruption in line of Canaan: Sodom and Gomorrah, Babylon and Nineveh, and Sidon (of Tyre and Sidon). |

The Patriarchal Context

One final look at context behooves those who wish to understand the Babel pericope in light of its placement within Genesis—that is, the context that follows the passage in the patriarchal narratives. The stories that follow Babel are intended as contrasts to Babel and, programmatically, to all of the post-fall episodes in the primeval section. They begin with Abraham, whom God calls out of one of Nimrod’s cities (“Ir” in 10:11, which is likely “Ur”), to be a “wandering Aramean” (Deut 26:5) and who he promises many things, including much of what the builders of Babel so dramatically sought—a great name for themselves (Gen 12:1-3). However, while Babel failed to reach its intended heights, despite the unreserved striving and ability of its designers, Abraham achieves a name for himself by divine gift, despite his apparent lack of all the necessities required to accomplish what God promised him (no son and no land).

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34 John H. Sailhamer, Meaning of the Pentateuch, 35.
The Babel account demonstrates the great need for what God initiates in Abraham and his family in much the same way that the Old Testament demonstrates the need for all that God initiates and accomplishes in Jesus Christ.\(^\text{35}\)

The second episode that is pertinent to the Babel account from the patriarchal histories is less obvious to the casual reader. Two generations after Abraham, Jacob has received the blessing through deception and flees to his uncle Laban. While he rests in transit, he dreams of a staircase leading up to heaven, on which angels come and go from the presence of the Lord who stands at its zenith (Gen 28:12-13). The poignancy of this passage is highlighted by the understanding gained from the ziggurat background of the text. The access to God and his blessing that the inhabitants of Babel so longed for was achieved in spite of Jacob’s moral failures and by God alone on his behalf. God reiterates the blessings he had promised to Jacob’s forefathers and, in response, Jacob exclaims that he has seen “the gate of heaven” and the “house of God.” Both of these expressions harken back to both the ziggurat imagery and the meaning of the word “Babel,” which would have indicated “gate of heaven” or “gate of the gods” (though the Babel account plays on the original word with the Hebrew word meaning “confusion”).\(^\text{36}\)

What the people of Babel failed to achieve with all their unity, technology, and determination, one crafty Hebrew stumbled upon by the grace of God.

THE CONTEXTUALLY INFORMED INTERPRETATION OF THE BABEL EPISODE

Though much more could be written about the importance of Babylon (from Babel), throughout the rest of the Old Testament and the Bible itself, this treatment will suffice to say in Alexander’s words that, “Although the Genesis report…is brief…this city casts a long shadow over the whole of the Bible…for Babel-Babylon is the archetypal God-less city.”\(^\text{37}\) This important biblical theme, as set in contrast to Jerusalem, the city of God, all the way through to Revelation, begins here in Genesis where the account of Babel’s origin provides the fitting climax to man’s downward spiral away from God and into sin.

Babel’s Sin

What, then, is the sin of Babel’s dreamers? In so many ways, given the brief nature of the text, determining the primary sin at Babel is difficult, for much of the builders’ project appears understandable and commendable. Alexander portrays the human side effectively: “On the one side we can see the human longings for community, achievement, civilization, culture, technology, safety, security, permanence and fame.”\(^\text{38}\) None of these goals is inherently wrong, and many of these are excellent desires that God promises to his people throughout Scripture. The Babelites’ shortcoming, then, lies not in their desires but in their method for achieving those desires.

The above perusal of the immediate and surrounding context has demonstrated the links between the Babel account and nearly every episode which precedes it, as well as a few that follow. The line of Cain, both biological or spiritual, appears again and again. Essentially, this line embodies the rebellion of Adam and Eve, for their original fall to the temptation to “be like

\(^{35}\) Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis*, 170.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 179.


\(^{38}\) Ibid., 128.
God” is their primary lasting influence on the history of humanity. In Scripture, some escape this heritage and others revel in it, so joining the line of Cain as portrayed in the earliest pages of Genesis. Again and again the rebellious attitude of the fall, rooted in a distrust of God, rears its head to corrupt the intentions of mankind.

While many early human efforts appear to seek higher, godlike abilities or to throw off the yoke of the curse through city building or violence, the people of Babel take an approach that is both new and strikingly similar. Their call to one another is, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (Gen 11:4). The proto-ziggurat tower they built stood as a testament to their degraded view of God. They saw him, not only with weaknesses and needs, but as one who could be manipulated to give his favor and blessing. The entire design of God has been turned upside down as man, made in the image of God, has now made God in the image of man.39

Additionally, the offense of Babel becomes clear in light of the precedent that Babel’s builders follow. They have forged a new path, perhaps, in their pagan view of God, but they are walking well-trodden, hard-packed earth as they follow the footsteps of Cain, Lamech, the parents of the Nephilim, Canaan, and Nimrod in asserting their own will to overcome God’s curse, regardless of who stands in their way. They seek a name for themselves, while God provides a name for Abraham. They seek to build their way to access God’s blessing, while God provides his blessing freely to Jacob in the wilderness. The city itself is not the problem, but “it is the human pride and security that people attach to these cities (Gen 4:12-14, 17) that displeases the Lord.”40

Divine Judgment

The builders of Babel believe they are undertaking an impressive accomplishment, but God sees matters differently. As Waltke eloquently describes, “Its builders think their temple tower reaches to the heavens; it is so low that the Lord has to descend from heaven just to see it.”41 Indeed, when God does descend, he does not bring the expected blessing. God’s confusing expression, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them,” refers not to the truly unlimited potential for human achievement, but the unlimited capacity for human sin. Walton notes that God merely delays the pagan attempts of man in this process; he does not ultimately stop them. Man goes on to continue this way of thinking throughout history, and God laments this very attitude in his own people throughout their covenant relationship. God temporarily stunts their ability to accomplish their desires by separating mankind from one another.42 Interestingly, one byproduct of this separation is the necessary isolation required for God to reintroduce himself to a particular group of people, and through them, to ultimately reveal himself to the world.

As the plot transitions from man’s actions to God’s, Sheila Tuller Keiter notes the irony in God’s judgment as relayed by the author of Genesis: “The anonymity of the tower builders stands in stark contrast to the genealogies that immediately precede and follow the Tower of Babel story. The progenitors of each generation are listed by name, as individuals. The builders

40 Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis*, 179.
41 Ibid., *Genesis*, 178.
42 John H. Walton, “Mesopotamian Background to Babel,” 170.
of the tower are the exception, relegated to namelessness.” The context of the passage not only sheds light on the sin of the Babelites, but also illuminates God’s response in judgment. Waltke also senses the irony in the narrative; he states that, “The plot moves from humanity’s construction of a city and a tower to God’s deconstruction of them.” The sin of earth’s initial inhabitants has once again reached its full measure. God takes the necessary action of thwarting the plans of man and so lays the groundwork for his own. He is preparing the soil, as the author of Genesis transitions through genealogy, to plant the great name he refused to Babel in an insignificant man of his choosing.

CONCLUSION

The Babel episode of Genesis 11:1-9 continually spawns new analysis and attempts at fresh methodology to uncover its cryptic agenda. Rarely, however, do such interpreters submit themselves to the marvelous unity of the Genesis text and accept the enlightening results of placing Babel within the context of the book on beginnings. Though numerous supplementary materials give helpful insight into the text, none of these takes precedence over the text itself, read within the larger context in which it was composed. The story of the building of Babel, pithy as it seems, makes most sense when taken, as intended, following the preceding narratives of mankind’s descending spiral into sin. The builders of Babel are the apple at the base of the tree, not far from where Eve dropped it upon realizing the dire consequences of her actions. They are the cursed ones, raising up their wills and designs to put the effects of God’s judgment safely behind them. Upon final scoring, however, they are definitively not the recipients of the blessing and name they so earnestly chase, despite the seemingly limitless human resources at their disposal. One must only read a few chapters farther to find out who is. Consequently, the themes which illuminate the ever-elusive Babel episode set the stage for the major themes of the entirety of God’s word. The distrust and rebellion which define the actions and efforts of mankind throughout history and, all in all, amount to nothing despite their human grandeur, are overtaken by the gracious gift of God in his own person, Jesus Christ, who is “the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9-11).

43 Sheila Tuller Keiter, “Outsmarting God,” 204.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


