

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
CHARLOTTE, NC

OH, THE HUMANITY!  
A TRANSLATION, JUSTIFICATION, AND BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF  
GENESIS 11:1-9

SUBMITTED TO DR. RICHARD BELCHER  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
03OT5150 – HEBREW EXEGESIS

BY  
GRANT TAYLOR  
MAY 10, 2020

## **Proposal and Methodology**

The Tower of Babel narrative found in Genesis 11:1-9 is both a literary masterpiece and a genuinely funny framing of an anthropological reality. There are some components of the story's brilliance that are lost in translation, but by working through the story in the original Hebrew, some of the notable features will be brought forward so that the reader can see exactly what the author of the narrative is doing. A justification of the translation will be offered so that further analysis of the passage can take place. This analysis will look not only at how the narrative operates to explain a historical reality, but also how the dichotomy of God and man functions within the redemptive historical account of God and his people. The purpose is to see this story not as a fable or an old hand-me-down account of an event that took place so long ago that it could not possibly mean anything for anyone today, but that the very message it gave to its initial audience is one that the reader today could apply to their life and use to reflect on their place before their God.

The folly of the schemes of man, the power of the words of God, and the ways those are both on display anytime a person opens their mouth, are all evidenced in the Tower of Babel narrative. It not only accounts for the dispersion of the human race, but also the beginning of a people chosen by God.

The full narrative has been translated for the purpose of this paper. A justification for the translation will only be offered for the first eight verses, although it would be impossible to fully understand the narrative without the ninth verse to draw it all together. Therefore, it has been included in the translation. The first portion of this paper, the justification of the translation provided, will be somewhat technical, as it seeks to understand some of the variations that exist in translations of the text. Where there are disagreements in vocabulary or meaning, there are notes

to explain the choice. Narrative in Hebrew tends to translate well into English, although there are some peculiarities in this text, as with any, that need additional language to smooth over. The notation on the translation corresponds with the justification provided.

The remainder of the paper will consist of the literary context of the passage, an analysis of the passage, and its place in the redemptive-historical timeline. Because the passage selected is a narrative, the paper will focus more on the nature of the story and the purpose of its inclusion in Scripture. The final section, which focuses on the Tower of Babel and how it relates to redemption, will zoom out and see Scripture as a whole, highlighting obvious links to other parts of the Bible. This section is included because the Babel narrative richly colors the landscape for redemption to occur. The Tower of Babel cannot properly be understood without seeing its place as the transitional narrative from the primeval period to the patriarchal period. That is to say, it was not simply a historic event with global consequences, but also an event that speaks so deeply to the human desire to rebel against God that its inclusion in the Bible was necessary to fully understand the scope and severity of mankind's sin, as well as the gracious lovingkindness of God to redeem such a rebellious people.

## Genesis 11:1-9: A Translation

<sup>1</sup> Now the whole earth had one language consisting<sup>a</sup> of common words.<sup>b</sup>

וַיְהִי כָל־הָאָרֶץ שָׂפָה אֶתֶת  
וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים:

<sup>2</sup> Now they journeyed<sup>c</sup> in the east<sup>d</sup> and they found a plain in the land of Shinar and they dwelled there.

וַיְהִי בְנוֹסְעֵם מִקֵּדָם  
וַיִּמְצְאוּ בְקֶעֶה בְּאֶרֶץ שִׁנְעָר וַיָּשְׁבוּ שָׁם:

<sup>3</sup> They said, each<sup>e</sup> to his neighbor, "Come,<sup>f</sup> let us bake bricks,<sup>g</sup> and we will burn them in the fire."<sup>h</sup> And they used bricks as stones<sup>i</sup> and the tar was mortar for them.

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ  
הָבָה נִלְבְּנָה לִבְנִים וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשִׂרְפָּה  
וְנִתְּלִי לָהֶם הַלִּבְנָה לְאַבֵּן וְנִתְּסָמָר הָיָה לָהֶם לְחֹמֶר:

<sup>4</sup> And they said, "Come, let us build for ourselves a city and a tower; and its height will reach<sup>j</sup> into heaven<sup>k</sup> and we will make for ourselves a name, so that we will not be scattered<sup>l</sup> all over the face of the earth."

וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֶבְהִי  
נִבְנֶה־לָּנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה־לָּנוּ שֵׁם  
פֶּן־נִפְּוֶץ עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ:

<sup>5</sup> Then YHWH came down<sup>m</sup> to see the city and the tower that the sons of man<sup>n</sup> had built.<sup>o</sup>

וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה לִרְאוֹת אֶת־הָעִיר וְאֶת־הַמִּגְדָּל  
אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם:

<sup>6</sup> YHWH said, "Look!<sup>p</sup> The people have one language among them,<sup>q</sup> and this is what they have begun to do.<sup>r</sup> Now nothing at all which they plot<sup>s</sup> to do will be withheld from them."

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה  
הֵן עַם אֶחָד וְשָׂפָה אַחַת לְכָלֶם וְזֹה הַחֲלֹם לַעֲשׂוֹת  
וְעַתָּה לֹא־יִבָּצֵר מֵהֶם כָּל אֲשֶׁר יִזְמֹוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת:

<sup>7</sup> "Come, let Us go down and let Us confuse<sup>t</sup> their language there so that<sup>u</sup> they do not understand, each the language of his neighbor."<sup>v</sup>

הָבָה נֵרְדָּה וְנִבְלֶה שָׁם שְׂפָתָם  
אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שְׂפַת רֵעֵהוּ:

<sup>8</sup> YHWH scattered them from there, over all the face of the earth,<sup>w</sup> and they ceased from building the city.<sup>x</sup>

וַיִּפְּץ יְהוָה אֹתָם מִשָּׁם עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ  
וַיַּחְדְּלוּ לִבְנֹת הָעִיר:

<sup>9</sup> So they call the name Babel, for there YHWH confused the language of all the world and from there YHWH scattered them from all the earth.

עַל־כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ בָּבֶל  
כִּי־שָׁם בָּלַל יְהוָה שְׂפַת כָּל־הָאָרֶץ  
וּמִשָּׁם הִפְּצָם יְהוָה עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ:

### Justification of the Translation Provided

a. Hebrew, as well as other Semitic languages, frequently uses apposition in its noun phrases. English adds verbs to make these clauses make sense.<sup>1</sup> In this case, the Hebrew would literally translate into *All the earth was one lip one set of words*. Supplying the verb *consisting* between language (lip) and words makes sense of the string of nouns.

b. The use of דְּבָרִים fluctuates between English translations because its meaning is a bit awkward. It is the plural version of *one*, identifying that there is a *oneness* to a plurality of words (דְּבָרִים דְּבָרִים). In many cases, the best way to capture this word is with *a few* (Gen 27:44, 29:20; Dan 11:20). However, *one language of a few words* would confuse the *oneness* of the words and instead come across as the language being limited in vocabulary rather than humanity sharing in one language of common phrases and words. A better comparison is Ezek 37:17, where many *ones* come together to make a collective *one*. This is made possible because both explicitly communicate that there is *one* (אֶחָד/אֶחָד) made up of ones, although interestingly enough, in this narrative the components are plural and the whole is singular, whereas the Ezekiel verse has the components being singular and the whole being plural. Regardless, the parts make *one* whole, not *a few* as seen in the other uses of דְּבָרִים. Therefore, one language of common or shared words communicates the idea better. That the one language *consisting of* or *made up of* common words is an addition to the text to smooth over the idea, as mentioned above.

c. The הָ prefix attached to הַנִּסְעִים is spatial, meaning they were setting off to travel, captured well by the word *journeyed*.<sup>2</sup> The verse does not ever supply a subject for who did this wandering, only providing the הָ suffix.<sup>3</sup> It will become evident that it is *the men* introduced in v. 3, but the narrative never identifies who these men are. As will be seen in the narrative, this stylistic choice of simply referring to the group as “them” serves to make the story a bit punchier, as they seek to make a name for themselves, but God disrupts their work in such a way that the audience never actually knows who they are.

d. The challenge with מִמֶּנֶּם lies with the מִ preposition. When used locationally, it can either describe where the event is coming from or the direction it is headed to.<sup>4</sup> In this case, the two possibilities are opposites. These men are either coming from the east or are in the east. The possibility of either is evident in English translations, suggesting the people moved from the east, eastward, or were in the east. The same formulation is used in Gen 2:8 and 12:8, where

---

<sup>1</sup> Bruce K. Waltke and Michael P. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 226-228.

<sup>2</sup> See נָסַע, *HALOT*. When used in Qal stem, it can also mean “to pull,” with the idea being the pulling out of tent pegs as one sets out of camp.

<sup>3</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 351.

<sup>4</sup> Walte and O'Connor, *Syntax*, 212.

*in the east* works as the best option.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is used here as well. Because it is not certain which the author intended, it is best not to draw any larger application from this clause.

e. In this case, the distributive form of שִׁיר is preferred.<sup>6</sup> It cannot be the subject because the verb is plural. Therefore, it is not *a man* who is speaking, but instead it borrows the subject from the previous verse. These men speak, *each to his neighbor*.<sup>7</sup>

f. When made into a cohortative with the addition of the ה on הִבֵּה, יֵהב can shift from *to give* to the interjection *come*!<sup>8</sup> This same formula takes place in 11:4 with the same men, and then is echoed by YHWH in 11:7.

g. The additive ה on הִבֵּה makes the verb into a cohortative, where the men are encouraging one another to assist in the work of making bricks, thus the *let us*.<sup>9</sup> The formulation, הִבֵּה לְבָנִים, is a paronomasia that essentially says *let us brick bricks*. This is because the verb for making bricks is simply *brick* formed into a verb. This only occurs two other times, both in the Exodus narrative (Exod 5:7, 14). In both of these other occurrences, the verb is paired with *to make*. In this narrative, the sound repetition of ל, ב, and נ are so prevalent that it makes the inclusion of Babel at the end almost like the punchline to a joke.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the slight change from *make* to *bake* is preferable because of the repeating sounds in *bake* and *brick* and their similarity to *Babel*. The *fire* used to make them allows for *bake* to be an option consistent with the text.

h. The repetition of a verb and noun with the same root takes place again with וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשָׂרָפָה. Many English translations opt to use *burn thoroughly*. The ל gives reason to take it in another direction. If it is used as the manner in which the brick are burned, then it would make sense that they are burned *by fire*. While *thoroughly* would likely infer this idea, the explicit

---

<sup>5</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 238.

<sup>6</sup> For distributive form, see שִׁיר, *Dictionary of Classic Hebrew*.

<sup>7</sup> Barry Bandstra challenges the distributive use of שִׁיר in this verse. He suggests instead that the verb and noun do not agree in person because when each man speaks with his neighbor, it leads to many people speaking. Thus, his translation reflects שִׁיר is a singular man by saying *And a man said to his neighbor*. See Barry L. Bandstra, *Genesis 1-11: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 558-559.

<sup>8</sup> See יֵהב, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*.

<sup>9</sup> Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 79. It becomes even more evident that this is a volitional form because it follows the imperative. See Waltke and O'Connor, *Syntax*, 577.

<sup>10</sup> Babel, closely related to the verb “confused,” while also containing the same sounds repeated throughout the story, marking a conclusion to the narrative that is humorous. See Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1996), 486.

connection between *to burn* and *fire* as a verb form and noun form of the same word makes it preferable to use the two related words, *burn* and *fire*.<sup>11</sup>

i. The prepositional ל on לְאֶכֶן is a function of purpose. Therefore, the bricks were used in place of stones, or *as stones*. This is not simply a method of explaining the details of construction. There is a sense of superiority in such a claim. The less sophisticated Babylonians simply used stones, but the ingenuity of these men gave them far better building materials.<sup>12</sup> Thus, every component of this endeavor was by the work of the hands of men, glorifying their strength.

j. The ו attached to וְרָאשׁוֹ connects it to the previous clause but does not supply a new verb. This disjunctive is used instead to specify the contemporary circumstance, or to explain what kind of tower they are building. Thus, the verb *will reach* must be added to connect *its height* with *the heavens*.

k. Translating בְּשֵׁמִים means imputing a motive on the builders. They already claim that the purpose of this project is to make a name for themselves. If their motive really is that simple, then the height of their tower reaching *into the sky* would be understandable. However, as the story progresses, it becomes obvious that their aim is an offense to God, and thus, must be more than just a feat of ingenuity. Instead, they are attempting to make a tower that reaches *into the heavens*, creating a connection from man to God. This difference highlights that their goal has a worship element to it. Perhaps it was specifically a ziggurat.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps they are trying to establish ongoing communication with God through human means.<sup>14</sup> Either way, it is almost certainly a temple of some sort, meaning worship is at the very heart of the project, which makes it evident why it is seen as an affront to God.<sup>15</sup>

l. A remnant of an archaic imperative, כֵּן frequently translates into *lest* or *so that not*. The original imperative probably meant something like *turn back!* but has since been used to negate the idea that it is paired with, in this case, *so that we will not be scattered*.<sup>16</sup> This particle is frequently functioning to mark a negative final clause.<sup>17</sup> The irony of this statement is that the very thing they wanted to avoid will happen to them because of this project. Specifically, they will be scattered and their names forgotten.

---

<sup>11</sup> Whether to highlight the parallelism between the words or out of a sense of extreme literalism, Bandstra translates this phrase as *Let us brick bricks and let us burn (them) for a burning*. Bandstra, *Genesis 1-11*, 560.

<sup>12</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-17*, 239.

<sup>13</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 82.

<sup>14</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-17*, 239.

<sup>15</sup> E. B. Banning, "Towers," in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman and Gary A. Herion (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 623.

<sup>16</sup> See כֵּן, *HALOT*.

<sup>17</sup> Arnold and Choi, *Syntax*, 189.

m. The verb **בָּנִי** that begins v. 5 notes a shift in the narrative. It has been concerned with mankind up until now. But the scene changes from the earth to the heavens.<sup>18</sup> It is notable that YHWH had to *come down* to see the work that they were doing. This is not a suggestion that YHWH was unable to understand what was taking place while in the heavens, but instead is a satirical jab at the project itself. Despite their goal to establish a connection to heaven, the tower was so far from heaven that God needed to come down.

n. Now with God in perspective, the word used to describe the builders changes. The builders have previously been called **אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ**, *each to his neighbor* or *each man to his neighbor*. But here, they are now called **בְּנֵי הָאָדָם**, or *the sons of man*. Not only does the word itself change, but it is also made plural. One possible reason for this is simply stylistic. This title connects the **ב** sound in **בְּנֵי** with the verb **בָּנוּ**, so *that the sons of man were building* has repeating sounds that are finally captured in v. 9 when this place is called “Babel.” Another reason is the wordplay between *man* and *ground*.<sup>19</sup> Despite the perceived glory of this task, mankind is still nothing more than the dust of the earth, and the only reason mankind can aspire to anything is because of the very breath the God breathed into man. When God is absent from the story, this perspective is lost. Now that God has appeared, the audience is reminded of the true state of mankind.

o. The verb **בָּנוּ** is in a Qal perfect form, *they were building* or *they had built*. The difference in tense may be insignificant. This is apparent among English translations. The NIV chooses *were building*, whereas ESV and NASB prefer *had built*. This choice between these two options is perhaps a theological one. If God interrupted the project while it is still in its building phase, does that mean he fears it being completed, that it might actually accomplish its aim? Could it establish a connection to heaven? To say that God disrupted them after it had been built would prevent this question. However, there is not enough evidence in the text to support this claim. Instead, there is a distinction between the construction of the tower here, and the construction of the city in v. 8. The completion of the city is interrupted; the tower might or might not have been finished.

p. The interjection **הִנֵּה** halts the story in its tracks. YHWH is now speaking. The similarity to Gen 3:22 cannot be missed.<sup>20</sup> *Behold* is frequently used, however *Look!* gives it a more modern meaning that still draws attention to YHWH’s words.

q. This clause is clunky, literally translating into *one people and one language to all of them*. The parallelism of the word *one* is intentional but does not work well in English. Therefore, *people* should be made definite to maintain the meaning of *one people*, making it *the people*. *One language to all of them* could likewise be supplemented with *had one language among them*.

---

<sup>18</sup> Hamilton, *Genesis 1-11*, 354.

<sup>19</sup> See **אָדָם**, *HALOT*.

<sup>20</sup> “Behold, the man has become like one of us...” Gen 3:22



r. The following clause is somehow even clunkier. This is due to the double infinitive construct in *וַיִּזְהוּ הַחֵלֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת*. If used the way an infinitive is expected to function, it would mean *this to begin (them) to do*. The first infinitive construct functions differently here, while the second functions in the typical way. *וַיִּזְהוּ* must be used nominally in a predicate clause.<sup>21</sup> With this additional *to be* verb, the clause can be translated as *this is the beginning of them to do*, or if smoothed out even further, *this is what they have begun to do*. Therefore it is demonstrative + noun + infinitive rather than demonstrative + infinitive + infinitive.

s. There is a wide semantic range for *וַיִּזְמֹן*, all of which would work here. *They plan, they purpose, they devise, or they scheme* all capture the same idea. The choice for *they plot* is more of a decision to follow the pattern used elsewhere in Scripture. Where this verb is used to consider God's actions, *plan* or *purpose* are used (cf. Jer 4:28, Zech 8:14). When it comes to mankind, man's wicked actions are translated as *plot* (Ps 31:13, 37:12), and man's righteous actions are translated as *purpose* (Ps 17:3, Prov 31:16). This action would fall in line with the wicked plans of man, and therefore, matched with other passages using *וַיִּזְמֹן* in a similar way.

t. YHWH's mocking words are obvious enough in English, but the literary ties in Hebrew are even more obvious. The words of the men, *הָבֵה נִלְבְּנָה... הָבֵהוּ נִבְנֶה-לָּנוּ* (*Come! Let us bake bricks... come! Let us build to ourselves*) and the words of YHWH, *הָבֵה וְנִבְלָה* (*Come! ... Let us confuse*) are all made up with the same syllables. Men are saying *n-l-b-n... n-v-n-l-n* while YHWH says *v-n-v-l*. Even in the sounds themselves, YHWH's *mixing up* makes something new. It cannot be lost that *let us confuse*, *וְנִבְלָה*, and *bricks*, *לִבְנָה*, mirror each other (*n-v-l, l-v-n*). Thus, YHWH is pulling apart what man has built with bricks by confusing their language.<sup>22</sup> He is so mighty that he can simply rearrange what already exists and make something completely new.

u. A phrase beginning with *וְאֵין לָאֲשָׁר* is often introducing a negative final clause.<sup>23</sup> Thus here it is not *which not they understand* but rather *so that they do not understand*.

v. Once again, the distributive form of *וַיִּשְׁאָר* functions in place of *man*. Whereas *each* once found strength in speaking to their neighbor, now *each* is unable to communicate with their neighbor because of what YHWH has done.

w. The final use of *כָּל-הָאָרֶץ*, the phrase also used in 11:1 and 11:4, wraps up the story by giving the scope of YHWH's action. It is in direct contradiction of the goal of man in 11:4. They did not want to be scattered over the face of all the earth, and yet that is exactly what YHWH did to them. The folly of duping God or finding a sense of security in the works of man is made evident. The humor of this story cannot be lost. The characters in this story got exactly what they feared, and the audience watches the whole thing unfold before their eyes.

---

<sup>21</sup> Waltke and O'Connor, *Syntax*, 600-601.

<sup>22</sup> Hamilton, *Genesis 1-15*, 355-356.

<sup>23</sup> Arnold and Choi, *Syntax*, 188.

x. The shift from the tower to the city is notable. It is such a major shift that it has caused some to believe that there are actually two narratives that have been redacted into one.<sup>24</sup> Others have surmised that it must not be the building of the tower that was an offense to God, but rather the building of the city.<sup>25</sup> Neither of these options are necessary. The tower and the city are clearly linked together in the one purpose man seeks, to find security before God because of what they have done. As the narrative closes, the city comes into focus, because its name is ribbon that ties together the entire joke: the city is called Babel.<sup>26</sup>

### **Literary Context: Rebellion-Judgment Events in Genesis 1-11**

The story of the Tower of Babel is both unique to Scripture and a feat of literary beauty.<sup>27</sup> Its purpose is to, at least in part, explain the reality of the dispersion of the human race over the face of the earth. Paul's sermon on Mars Hill offers a fair summation of the effect. *"From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands."* (Acts 17:26). But what would be lost without the narrative is the cause of this dispersion.

The narrative finds itself between two genealogies. It is important to recognize that this is a literary choice and not done to strictly hold a chronological timeline. Gen 10:20 makes it clear that different languages existed. The Tower of Babel narrative must have taken place prior to this. It is not possible to nail down the chronology of this narrative, however. There are no names of individuals in the story to help identify when it would have taken place (which

---

<sup>24</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 94.

<sup>25</sup> Hamilton, *Genesis 1-15*, 356.

<sup>26</sup> The humor of this city name is apparent in at least three different languages. In English, it sounds like childish noises. But this is not why the Hebrew speaker would have found it humorous. The name Babel sounds like Hebrew's word for confusion, but in Akkadian, the Babylonian language, it meant *gate of god* (Bab-ilu). Even the name of this city is a testimony to YHWH's superiority over the foreign gods and those who worship them. See Frank A. Spina, "Babel," in *ABD*, ed. David N. Freedman and Gary A. Herion (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 561.

<sup>27</sup> There is no record of a parallel story among Israel's neighboring nations. There is a Sumerian parallel to the motif of confused language, but that is as far as the similarity goes. See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 539.

is ironic because the very reason these men set out to build was to make a name for themselves). The only things given to specifically identify what is taking place in this story is that it takes place in Shinar, and that it eventually becomes known as Babel.

What is far more important than exact time or place is why it is included in the first place. The Tower of Babel narrative marks the third and final rebellion against God in the pre-patriarchal period. Abraham, or Abram at the time, is introduced in Gen 12, and thus kicks off the patriarchal era, the time in which God in his infinite wisdom chose to make his name known to the world through a family.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis are quite mysterious. They are not given to provide a detailed history of all past events, but to present humanity with information necessary to know God and to know man's place before him. So while there are numerous questions raised by what these first eleven chapters *do not* say, all that humanity needs to know about this period is contained in what they *do* say. For the purposes of understanding the Tower of Babel narrative, the rebellion-judgment sections are what is most relevant.<sup>28</sup> The first rebellion-judgment event is found in the Fall of man (Gen 3) and is the lens in which the rest of Scripture must be understood. Man's rebellion against God was not a one-time event, but a perpetual reality that runs deep into every part of creation, a sickness that does not only hinder its victim from doing good but leaves them dead in its wake. Likewise, the judgment doled out by God is not simply a proverbial slap on the wrist, but a response to the curse of sin that affects every living creature. Man's rebellion had completely separated him from God. It is this rebellion of

---

<sup>28</sup> These three events highlight the *antithesis*, or the two seeds that emerge from the Garden of Eden, which are followed throughout redemptive history. These two seeds are at odds with one another, diametrically opposed all through human experience. For more on the Reformed idea of *antithesis*, see Daniel Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock: A Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 82-83.

the first Adam that leaves humanity wanting for a Second Adam. It is in humanity's darkest moment that God gives a promise of a coming light. But it is not yet time for this light to come.

The second major rebellion-judgment even is found with the story of the Nephilim and the flood. Who these Nephilim were and what exactly their rebellion was is beyond the scope of this paper. What is relevant is that the Lord saw that *the wickedness of man was great on the earth* (Gen 6:5). A catastrophic judgment found in the flood would mark the second time God proclaimed a truth that all of humanity following would remember: sin has consequence, and that consequence is death.

With the exception to the genealogy following, the first eleven chapters are capped with the final rebellion-judgment event: The Tower of Babel.<sup>29</sup>

### **Analysis of Genesis 11:1-9: Let Us Make a Name for Ourselves**

The narrative itself is fairly straight-forward. An unnamed people desires to make a name for themselves. They devise a plan to do so: a mighty city and tower. After some conversation and some time to gather materials, the work begins. But while the work is taking place, YHWH descends from heaven and confuses their language. No longer unified in speech, no longer able to understand each other, the work must stop. The very thing this people wanted to avoid, *being scattered over the face of the earth*, was now a reality.

---

<sup>29</sup> "With the Tower of Babel, we come to the last of the great tales of universal judgment that punctuate the primeval history." Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 244. Matthews suggests that this narrative reflects both the attempt of humanity to achieve power independently from God in the garden, as well as sharing major allusions with the Noahic flood event. He adds that this story shares links with Cain's narrative through migration and building of cities, but these links seem more ancillary than informative about God's judgment. More importantly, God's dealing with Cain is not universal in scope, but is a localized rebellion. That is to say, it deals with one man as an individual, rather than with humanity as a whole. Thus, Cain's rebellion should not be seen as an independent rebellion-judgment event, but rather a fleshed out reality of the Garden rebellion. See Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, 467.

It is likely that this plan was more sinister than it might have seemed, however. After all, sin's roots are deep. The goal of this project, and the name they were seeking to establish for themselves, was for the purpose of security and peace with the gods.<sup>30</sup> The unnamed men teamed up, finding a plain in Shinar, where they would hatch their scheme to make a city and tower so great that even the gods would be impressed. No one would ever forget their names. A universal center for worship, a place to appease the gods and find relief from guilt, a city whose builder is man and whose god is pride.

YHWH is aware of their project. The story centers on v. 5, where the speaker is no longer *man* but *God*.<sup>31</sup> The men spoke of their dreams, but God proclaimed their destiny. The narrator mockingly says that YHWH *came down* or *descended* to the project, even though the tower was to reach the heavens. It is possible that this declaration meant that it was to be a feat of ingenuity, climbing higher into the skies than any tower before it. But what it certainly meant was that man wanted to step into the domain of the divine and reach into the dwelling place of the gods.<sup>32</sup> The narrator makes pains to tell that the tower failed in this task. YHWH had to leave the heavens just to see what it was that the men were up to. There is no doubt that

---

<sup>30</sup> There is some debate about what this structure might have been, but there is little question about its purpose. Some, like Sarna, argue it must have been a ziggurat. Others, like Speiser, suggest that the ziggurat view is anachronistic, while still maintaining that the structure was a place for offering sacrifices to the gods. See Sarna, *Genesis*, 82, and E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 75-76. For a case that there was not a worship element to the construction, but simply that the tower was to be so large that it glorified man, see Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), 149.

<sup>31</sup> Many scholars have found this narrative to have a chiasmic structure. It is apparent both in the English and in the Hebrew how many phrases and words are reused throughout the text, so there is not consensus on how this chiasm should be structured. Regardless, virtually all scholars find that the beginning of v. 5, וַיֵּרָד יְהוָה לִרְאוֹת, is the piece that the whole narrative is centered on. For a detailed analysis of these different approaches, see Joel S. Baden, "The Tower of Babel: A Case Study in the Competing Methods of Historical and Modern Literary Criticism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 2 (2009): 209-224.

<sup>32</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 242.

God was already aware of their actions; the anthropomorphism was simply to shame the glory of the men.

YHWH, aware of what man is capable of, proclaims that the unity of mankind in one language should come to an end. The phrase YHWH says, “*Now nothing at all which they plot to do will be withheld from them,*” presents possible challenges that must be examined. It immediately carries shades of God’s statement in Gen 3:22, “*Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out with his hand, and take fruit also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.*” A first reaction might be to suggest that God fears that man will become like him. This is clearly not the case, as the narrative at every point makes evident the difference between man and God. The Creator-creature distinction means that God will always be God, transcendent, infinite, and powerful; man will always be man, finite and weak. Instead, this proclamation of God is that mankind will constantly scheme to transgress God. It is not enough for man to worship YHWH; man will seek to worship himself.

YHWH mixes up their language, forcing man to break off into smaller groups of people who they can understand, eventually leading to the mass exodus of these people groups. The narrator frames the story with the inclusio of the *whole earth*. Once the whole earth shared one language in common, but now the whole earth is covered with people who have been scattered by the hand of God. And this is because of one singular event in human history, originating in a place called Babel. The idea comes together with this punchline: the belief that man can work his way into the presence of God is foolishness. It is gibberish. It is utter *confusion*.

## **Undoing of Man in the Person of Christ: Redemptive Fulfillment of the Tower of Babel**

When it comes to peace with God found in salvation, mankind falls into two errors: relying on favor from God based on man's accomplishments and relying on intervention or assistance from other men or creatures.<sup>33</sup> Both errors are put on full display in the Tower of Babel narrative, only to be repeated time and time again throughout human history. Belief that man can build a tower so great that God would be appeased and man's name could live on in posterity demonstrates enormous hubris; and yet, somehow this rebellion against God is not too foreign. This is not an event isolated in a prehistoric context. It is an event that has occurred every day since. Rebellion is not unique. It is invasive. It is everywhere.

Man's rebellion against God is not the fascinating part of the Babel narrative. No, it is not what man did, because man's nature is so corrupted by sin that the dethroning and defamation of God's glory for man's might is almost expected. What is fascinating is how God responds. He does not smite the men for their arrogance. He does not pour out his wrath as he did in the days of Noah. Instead he confuses their language, an action so simple to God that it only takes one verb to explain. And yet its effect is monumental. This singular action changes the course of human history forever.

God causes tremendous change with a simple action. But this change does not simply prevent the men from achieving their dastardly dreams. It accomplishes something far greater, something that sets aside a lineage earmarked to bring about a Redeemer. Mankind breaks off into factions, becoming tribes and nations of people scattered over the face of the earth. In God's wisdom and in God's time, he chooses one of these families to be his own. Abram, son of Terah,

---

<sup>33</sup> William Cunningham lays out this two-fold failure beautifully when speaking of sacraments and their usefulness in the Christian life. See William Cunningham, *Historical Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1979), 2.121.

would be the head of this family. Despite his own failure, despite the failure of his offspring, despite the wickedness of men and nations surrounding them, despite that *the wickedness of man was great on the earth*, God would preserve his promise to Adam through his chosen family. Scripture guides its readers through this divine drama, constantly drawing the readers to the reminder that it is God who saves his people. It is God who keeps his family together.

This line would eventually find its fulfillment in the person of Christ. God chooses to *come down* once again, this time to dwell among his people (Jn 1:14). He would live in obedience. He would suffer. He would die at the hands of Pontius Pilate. He would resurrect from the dead. And he would ascend once again into the heavens. He would do what the Tower of Babel could not: bring mankind into the presence of God, at peace with him once and for all. And he did all of this in human flesh, from the flesh of a family God had chosen. From the flesh of Abraham preserved throughout history.

And then a peculiar event occurs. Now that the fullness of times had been realized, now that salvation had been won, an undoing of Babel must occur. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended, and a *crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language* (Acts 2:6). God's mixing up of language was once to limit the schemes of man. Now the people were proclaiming, "*we hear them in our own tongues, speaking of the mighty deeds of God.*" (Acts 2:11). His mixing up of language was now to proclaim the work of God. God's people were no longer separated from the rest of the world. Now they were sent out into the world. It was once an act of re-creation. Now it was an act of reconciliation.



The work of God on that day in Babel was not one strictly of judgment. It was an act of mercy.<sup>34</sup> God, knowing man's perpetual desire to sin, set apart a family to protect. Through his beloved people, he preserved a line that would eventually bring Christ into the world. Once this was accomplished, once the spirit of Babel had been defeated, there was no longer a need for this preserved family. God would open this promise up to the *whole earth*, spreading this message with Babel's antithesis: each man proclaiming to his neighbor the same message, that Christ had been raised from the dead, victorious over sin, and now mankind can know God. YHWH has proven that he is superior to the gods of this world, whether the gods of Babel or the gods of modernity.<sup>35</sup> Those who were once not a people of God were now the people of God, a chosen race and holy nation (1 Pet 2:9-10).

But first, a tower must be built. And after God descends and these people have their languages confused, and after they settle down with those whose language they understand and after tribes and nations are established, then all of this can occur. As this narrative gently draws to a close, off in the distance a lowly man named Abram tends to his flock. And soon he will hear a call from the heavens that will change his life forever: I will make you a great nation.

---

<sup>34</sup> "...humanity in building the Tower of Babel conceives a plan to continue to live together in one location and to start a world empire, God frustrates the plan, disperses it in peoples and languages, and in that way too, counters the development and explosion of wickedness." Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 3.218.

<sup>35</sup> Strange makes this point succinctly as he focuses on Babel's inclusion in the Genesis account. He contends that there is no sign of polytheism prior to Babel, but after the nations are formed, a polemic exists. The rest of the Old Testament is filled with YHWH proving his strength and might as he protects Israel from foreign nations. The undoing of Babel at Pentecost is a loud proclamation that God had defeated all other gods. See Strange, *Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock*, 127-128.

## Bibliography

- Arnold, Bill T., and John H. Choi. *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Baden, Joel S. "The Tower of Babel: A Case Study in the Competing Methods of Historical and Modern Literary Criticism." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 2 (2009), 209-224.
- Bandstra, Barry L. *Genesis 1-11: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008.
- Banning, E. B. "Towers." In *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, edited by David N. Freedman and Gary A. Herion, 6.622-624. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Translated by John Bolt. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006.
- Clines, David J. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993.
- Cunningham, William. *Historical Theology*. London: Banner of Truth, 1979.
- Gunkel, Hermann. *Genesis*. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997.
- Hamilton, Victor P. *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990.
- Köhler, Ludwig, and Walter Baumgartner. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. New York: E. J. Brill, 1994.
- Mathews, Kenneth A. *Genesis 1-11:26*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1996.
- Sarna, Nahum M. *Genesis*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989.
- Speiser, E. A. *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1964.
- Spina, Frank A. "Babel." In *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, edited by David N. Freedman and Gary A. Herion, 561-563. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Strange, Daniel. *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock: A Theology of Religions*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015.
- Von Rad, Gerhard. *Genesis: A Commentary*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973.

Waltke, Bruce K., and Michael P. O'Connor. *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*.  
Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990.

Wenham, Gordon J. *Genesis 1-15*. Waco: Word Books, 1987.

Westermann, Claus. *Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary*. Translated by John J. Scullion.  
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994.