

Where It All Began

An Inductive Study of Genesis

A Commentary on Genesis Chapters 10 & 11 – The Tower of Babel

יְהִי שֵׁם יְהוָה מְבֹרָךְ

Y'hi Shem (Adonai) m'borak.

Let the Name (of the Lord) be blessed.

Job 1:21

10:31 These *were* the sons of Shem, according to their families, according to their languages, in their lands, according to their nations. ³² These *were* the families of the sons of Noah, according to their generations, in their nations; and from these the nations were divided on the earth after the flood.

11:1 Now the whole earth had one language and one speech. ² And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there. ³ Then they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake *them* thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. ⁴ And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top *is* in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth."⁵ But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. ⁶ And the LORD said, "Indeed the people *are* one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. ⁷ Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."⁸ So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. ⁹ Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

A very quick reading of this passage reveals an inconsistency. Chapter 10 gives the genealogy of the sons of Noah, and concludes with the words "These *were* the sons of Shem, according to their families, according to their languages, in their lands, according to their nations." Like Genesis 1, we have here what appears to be an orderly, easily understandable, and almost "scientific" presentation of the re-creation or re-population of the earth following the flood, including the natural progression of division into families, nations, locations, and *languages*.

Yet the very next sentence seems to defy this, stating that the whole earth had but one language until a certain event happened. This is *not* the way that we think that separate languages came to be.

Genesis 11:1 in Hebrew starts out with the words, *Vayahi*, which is generally used to start a new narrative, especially a story. It is almost the equivalent of our "once upon a time." Literally, it means "And there was." It is as if the Redactor

or Author of Genesis wanted to change the subject, interrupt his "history", and tell a story. "Did you hear the one about....."

So what *is* the point of this strange story? One somewhat biased school of thought has always tried to fit everything in the Bible as if part of one continuous, literal and historical narrative. This school, which has affected some Christians, Jews, and Moslems alike, would also try to explain the differences between the two creation narratives the same way, despite the fact that the first account takes place over six days, and second in one day, and in the first "man", both male and female, is created at the end or apex of creation, and in the second, man (Adam) is created before everything else, and woman (Eve) after everything else.

This way of thinking would suggest that chapter 11 is a "pre-quel" to chapter 10, to explain how the descendants of Noah came to speak different languages. However, the flow of chapter 10 does not really allow for such an event without

Where It All Began

An Inductive Study of Genesis

applying some convoluted logic. In other words, logically we can construct a universe in which the sun does go around the earth, but not without replacing Newton's theory of gravity with something a bit more complex and mysterious.

In exposing the message that I feel *is* contained in this story, I would like to focus on three little words contained in it.

Many or perhaps most Biblical scholars believe that our present text of Genesis came into its final form around 500 B.C. in Babylon, where the present and future leadership of Judah and Jerusalem were in exile. Babylon was the capital of a large and aggressive empire. Is it a mere co-incidence that the tower in our story is called Babel? In the story, the narrator passes it off as derived from a verb meaning to "babble" or speak incoherently.

The second word I would like to mention is the word "east." Time and again in Genesis, the land of the east is mentioned. When Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden, God places a guardian "at the east" of the Garden, preventing access to the Tree of Life, presumably from people "from the east." We will see later that those seeking or following God *will* pass from east to west, as does Abraham, and as do the Israelites passing through the Jordan into the Promised Land, and as Matthew has the Magi come. Babylon is in the east.

We should dispel our notions acquired in childhood about the authors of Genesis being a bunch of simple nomads living in a state of primitive nature (or something like that). Babylon in 500 B.C. was the apex of civilization this side of China. Mathematics and science were far advanced, and much of what we take for granted in our present ways of measuring things came from Babylon, such as 360 degrees in a circle, sixty minutes in an hour, and 24 hours in a day. The concept of zero, which originally came from India, was first appreciated in its full potentiality in Babylon. It wasn't until 1100 in Europe (following the Crusades) that the zero began to replace the incredibly cumbersome Roman Numeral System. There is little doubt that the notions of Pythagoras, who taught that

the entire universe could be explained and understood by using numbers and rhythmic patterns, originated in Babylon. In the story of the Flood (which has a parallel story in Babylon), Genesis uses a pattern of numbers which unfold beautifully, using the ancient Babylonian system of twelve equal months of thirty days (360 days) with five extra days at the end of each cycle.

Of course, the notion of understanding everything by numbers and by cause and effect alone has the consequence of denying freedom and accountability. And if nothing else, the Bible is certainly about freedom and accountability. In other words, if we can explain every action and event by a simple result of the entirety of all the events preceding, then the meaning of agency disappears, and we must abolish our courts of law. Everything is fate.

But back to the tower. The building of this tower seems to be nonetheless somewhat problematic. After all, is it a bad thing to want to build tall houses of worship, to want to be close to God? Is it wrong to want to be unified? Is this not what Jesus prayed for us in John's Gospel? Is this not the dream of the United Nations?

Let's look a little closer at the motive for building the tower, which will bring us to my third word. The builders want to make for themselves a "name" lest they be "scattered." Chapter 10 seems to imply that the natural order of Creation, as in the early chapters of Genesis, is in diversity and complexity. Indeed, at the conclusion of 10, mankind is rather "scattered" and in the absence of evidence to the contrary, apparently quite happily so.

Okay, so what's in a name? The reader will recall in the second account of creation in Genesis that God comments that it is "not good"¹ for the man to be alone. God will provide an "ezer neged" for Adam: Literally one who is a Helper-Opposite. God then makes all the various creatures, and brings them to Adam to "name" them, but not one of them is found to be a helper-opposite. Naming things, of course,

¹ This is the only place in the entire Bible where anything is said to be "not good."

Where It All Began

An Inductive Study of Genesis

implies “conceptual” thinking. That is, when we say “door,” we think of particular doors. The concept “door” is not a door itself, but pulls together in thought what is common to many things into one package: the door to my study, the door to the church, the barn door on the farm where I worked, and so on. This is one thing that separates Adam from the creatures he names: they have no name for him. He is just another thing moving about in their environment. Eve (whose name means “life”), however, can. The Hebrew preposition “neged” can refer to someone opposed to us such as an enemy, someone confronting us. However, it also refers to something very present, such as in the 23rd Psalm, “neged zorrarai” “in the presence of my enemies.” Life, then, for Adam, lies in the presence of opposites. All the naming that Adam does only indicates diversity, and a relativity of all creation. At this point in the story, the only actual names given are that of God and Adam, and every other creature is only known generically, such as cattle or woman. After the awakening of Adam and his wife when they eat of the fruit, and the resultant expulsion from the Garden, Adam finally gives his wife a name, Eve, “for she was the mother of all living.” To receive a proper name seems somehow in some way to be to confer something much more eternal and powerful. Indeed, Medieval scholastics referred to a concept as a “universal.”

The ancient Hebrews had two “names” for God. One, Elohim, is clearly more generic. It is strangely usually used in its plural form, “gods,” and can and does refer to the divine beings of the non-Hebrews as well. There was another, more special name, expressed by the Hebrew letters **yvhv**. It probably was spoken at one time, but a long time ago a tradition arose of *not* saying this word, and hence many Christians have tried to guess at what it was and have spelled it Yahweh, Jehovah, and so forth. Most translators, however, honour this ancient tradition, and simply put the word LORD in all-caps whenever the word occurs, Lord being the translation of the word the Hebrews did say when they saw the “four letters.” The reason for the tradition is said to be that when we name

something, we not only confer eternity and concept on it, but we also box it in and limit it. To say the “real” name of God thus limits God. A common expression among many Jews which has also been taken up by many evangelical Christians is “Baruch ha Shem,” “Blessed be the Name.”²

Back to the Tower again. The builders want to make a “name” for themselves. From what we have learned about the naming of things in Genesis prior to this, we might say that they wanted to gain the eternity and unity of God Himself. From the preceding chapter, this is not the direction in which God has pointed creation. When we place the story in the context of the Empire of Babylon, it begins to make sense. Perhaps it makes even more sense today when we recall the famous slogan of Nazi Germany, “Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer” (One People, One Empire, One Leader). Or the degrading leveling of the “rulership of the proletariat” as played out in the Soviet Union.

God, Genesis explains, has created diversity. Each created thing has a special relationship to every other created thing. They are not merged, but “neged” one to another. The tension of creation lies in the interplay between the paradoxical compulsive and independent aspects of the interaction between created beings. We are opposite, but not distant. We are helpers who are both here and not the same. We have names that indicate something beyond ourselves, but we are not the Name. Baruch ha Shem. Blessed be the Name.

Ed Alexander
Hamilton, Ontario
December 17, 2006

² This phrase, despite what some of them think, does not actually occur in the Bible.