

THE TOWER OF BABEL - GENESIS 11:1-5



In this classic story from the Old Testament of the Bible, the people of the Earth were building a colossal staged temple-tower or multi-storeyed ziggurat - that would reach heaven. But did they really believe they could reach their Gods? Most likely the tower would be used as a place of worship.

Actually, the purpose of the tower was to provide a common religious center as a rallying point, lest the people be scattered. The builders of the tower were in open defiance of God's command (Genesis 9:1) (53).

In the ninth chapter of Genesis, God commands Noah and his sons to "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (9:1 NAS). On the fifth day of the creation of the Earth, God gave this command to the birds and fishes (Gen. 1:20-23). On the sixth day, God reiterated this command to the pinnacles of creation, man and woman (Gen. 1:26-28). Humanity was to subjugate the untamed Earth by dispersing themselves.

The builders in Shinar banded together for a common ecumenical purpose. Genesis 11:6 suggests that this assembly would have given rise to projects of a purely secular nature. The people did not consider that their misguided enthusiasm may have been just a bit shortsighted. Considering the benevolent, omniscient knowledge of God it appears that the long-term consequences of the Tower of Babel might have resulted in a plight similar to the apostate state of humanity (Gen. 6:1-5) prior to the sanctifying flood of the entire Earth (Gen. 6:6-24).

Genesis 9:18-19 and the entire tenth chapter of Genesis contain the Table of the Nations. All of the people alive at the time of Babel were descended solely from the three sons of Noah. Consequently, Shem, Ham and Japheth are the fathers of modern civilization. Hayes remarks that Genesis 10 is specifically written to demonstrate that all humanity descended from these three men (146). As Noah was a virtuous man in the eyes of God

(Gen. 6:8-9), it is reasonable to presume that the commandments of God were passed on to his sons.

Genesis chapter 10, verses 5, 20 and 32 also suggest that the land of the Earth was physically divided at this time in response to Babel. Genesis specifies: ". . . the name of the one was Peleg, for in his days the earth was divided . . ." (10:25). Willmington comments that "Peleg" means "division" (53). The coastal outlines of the Earth's continents suggest the likely prior unification of the various land masses. The terra firma can be viewed as a once-unified puzzle now separated into its various fragments.

It is important to note that although chapter 10 precedes the account of Babel in chapter 11, the events described in both chapters are not rendered in a chronologically consecutive fashion. Accordingly, it must be understood that the tenth chapter of Genesis details events prior, during and after those described in chapter 11. Chapter 12 of Genesis portrays the beginning of God's redemptive plan commencing with the call of Abram.

Despite the bleak future of Babel, God had promised Himself never to destroy the Earth with a flood again due to the disobedience of mankind (Gen. 8:20-22). God also made a covenant with Noah, his descendents and "every living creature," that He would never again destroy the Earth with a flood. Genesis 9:8-17 affirms that the rainbow serves as a personal reminder to God of His covenant.

Accordingly, God separated the people to different lands and languages to frustrate their self-destructive plans. Determined to stay faithful to His covenant, this was God's only merciful alternative in response to the tower. If the people were punished, it was a light affliction administered. The reproof was quite mild compared to the prior worldwide flood (Gen. 7:21-23). Similarly, the rebuke of God at Babel hardly parallels the subsequent fiery obliteration of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24-30).

Although at a casual glance this rebellion appears benign, it has been demonstrated that this autonomous or self-governing spirit would likely prove to be self-destructive. Willmington points out that the first person plural pronouns "us" and "we" occur no less than 5 times in this King James Version rendering of one sentence:

And they said, Go to, let us build us a city, and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth (Gen. 11:4) (50).

Nowhere in the entire passage referring to the Tower of Babel is there found the slightest indication that the builders considered God's will in their plans. The Bible goes to great lengths to confirm God's disdain for society's self-ruling ecumenical pursuits. The Psalmist writes of God's intervention into the affairs of humanity:

The LORD nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples (Psalm 33:10 NAS).

Archaeologists have long desired to locate the Tower of Babel. They have been unfruitful in their efforts. There may be Scriptural evidence for why the ruins have not been found. The land of Shinar is shown in Zechariah 5:11 as a site for the city of Babylon. The ancient city of Babylon was located some 80 kilometers south of modern-day Baghdad, Iraq (Douglas 111). The Bible confirms that Babel and Babylon were both located in Shinar. Of the history of the Tower of Babel, Hayes states:

This episode (Gen. 11:1-9) was included . . . as the capstone of . . . primeval history. . . . The original story was . . . to explain the existence of multiple language groups with its play on the words Babel (Babylon) and babal ("confuse") (146).

Babylon is an apostate city frequently mentioned in the Old Testament. From 2nd Kings 17:24 through Zechariah 6:10 there are at least 257 direct references to Babylon (Strong's 94-95). Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary defines ancient Babylon as: ". . . a city devoted to materialism and the pursuit of sensual pleasure" (122). In the 18th chapter of the Book of Revelation, Babylon epitomizes mankind's final organized rebellion against the sovereignty of God and is utterly destroyed. This parallels the destruction of ancient Babylon, overthrown pursuant to the prophecy of the 13th chapter of Isaiah.

Babel's founder was Nimrod the Hunter (Gen. 10:8-12), who also was a "king of Shinar" (Webster's 798). Nimrod was a ruthless conqueror of the ancient day with ambitious political aspirations (Willmington 53). Willmington states: "Nimrod's name means 'let us revolt'" (53). Genesis 10:9-12 shows that Babel was the first of many cities that Nimrod established.

The Assyrian capital of Nineveh is enumerated (Gen. 10:11) as one of the many cities built by Nimrod. The prophecy of the Book of Jonah records God's solemn warning to the city to repent of its evil ways. God sent the reluctant prophet Jonah to deliver the admonition. Nineveh immediately repented. However, the prophecy of the Book of Nahum declares that God's judgment would fall on the subsequently backsliding and unrepentant Nineveh and that they would be pillaged by the Babylonians, Scythians and the Medes.

In Genesis 11:5-7 an exceptionally rare and uncommon event occurred. God personally visited the Tower of Babel to see what was going on. Later, God paid a visit to the twin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ascertain the degree of depravity of their inhabitants. These cities were completely disintegrated by a fiery earthquake metaphorically referred to as a "furnace" (Gen. 19:24-29).

The Tower of Babel is extremely significant to the epic of the Bible. The story is much more than God indiscriminately interrupting an insignificant building project. The Tower of Babel marks the origins of the nations of the Earth.