

Origin Stories, Babel Then and Now, Genesis 11:1-9, 3/24/24

By a raise of hands, how many of you are fluent in more than one language? More than two? Three? I'm so impressed with you. We have a young man at our church who decided to learn French, became fluent, and then thought- I'd like to learn Russian and so he's currently in the military in their language program learning Russian, how cool is that? Other than knowing how to read just some of the Bible languages...I know un poco Spanish...and I was watching YouTube and this dog that knew all kinds of commands in English, Spanish and German...

man I need to step up my language game, this dog might be smarter than me. Well, I guess if I really wanted to learn another language there's an app for that, one of which is **Babbel**. How did Babbel get their name? Well according to its founder- by reading our text today, Genesis 11 about the famous tower of Babel where God mixed up the languages of the people so they couldn't understand each other...they should have just used the Babbel app!


But this story isn't really so much about the origin of languages, although it may well be where they came from, more importantly it serves as a warning, a cautionary tale, about how not to build a society and how not to build your life and mine. So let's jump into the story.

11 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ² And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

Remember where we are in our Origin Stories series, the sin and rebellion of man becomes so corrupt, so concentrated- God rebalances the scales with a massive flood- and chooses Noah and his family as the ambassadors of his mission to bless the world and make his glory known. When Noah and his family exited the Ark, they began to migrate from where the Ark settled at Mt. Ararat in modern day Turkey and heading southeast they followed the rivers the Tigris and Euphrates eastward where the Bible calls the "plain of Shinar" let me show you a **map [Picture]**, modern day Iraq, what was called Mesopotamia (between two rivers). This migration happened over the course of about 150 years when we follow the Bible's timeline.



³ And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens,

Bible historians estimate about 30-50k people had migrated here, and the Bible's description of what happened is true to archaeology. This region of Mesopotamia is known as the cradle of civilization because this is where some of the first technological advances in agriculture and urbanization started, just like the Bible says-they built a city. And they also got started on an ambitious project- building the world's first skyscraper- what we call the Tower of Babel. Again I want you to know how incredibly precise and historically accurate the biblical record is. Archaeologists have discovered about 30 of these towers, also known as ziggurats, here's a photo taken in the 1920s of the ruins of the Ziggurat of Ur, but it likely would have looked more like this  these are across the Mesopotamian region that use a construction technique of baked bricks that was unique to this region and this time using the tar from the tar pits that are in that region to this very day, just like the Bible says. Inscriptions on several of these ziggurats, decoded by archaeologists reference their top reaching the heavens, just like the Bible says.¹ Which reminds us that the "more they dig out of the ground, the more the Bible proves to be true."

⁴ Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." ⁵ And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. Now, does God need to leave heaven to know what's going on? Of course not, he's omniscient and omnipresent, but the biblical author wants us to see some ironic humor in this, here's mankind building what they think is a tower into the heavens, but God has to descend all the way down to earth just to see what they are building. But while God isn't so impressed, he is concerned. Let's see why.

⁶ And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.

⁷ Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." ⁸ So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

Can you imagine what this must have been like? They are working on the tower and one guy says, "Hey, hand me a brick." And the other guy just looks at him. And he says again, "Stop messing around, hand me a brick." And of course the guy just looks at him perplexed. The same look I had when I was in villages in Kenya this summer and people would start talking to me in Swahili. But finally the guy starts talking back to him, saying, "I don't know what you are saying."

¹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation*, Genesis. P,50

But all that guy hears is “Asante Sana, Hakuna Mata, bro!” I’d imagine there was not only confusion but conflicts, fist fights were breaking out all over the place. And so what do they do? They stop working, and they cluster up in groups of people who understand each other, and they begin finding their own places to live which is exactly what the Bible says happened.

What was it that got God so concerned? I mean, it would seem sensible for people to consolidate their society by living in cities together, after all there are benefits of security and the division of labor that it would bring. What’s wrong with urbanization? And is God against skyscrapers? And if so, what’s his cut off? What’s the big deal? If we dig deeper at the context, we will see that the big deal is what gets at the root of what makes a society corrupt at Babel then and what will destroy a modern society now. And it boils down to one word, “Autonomy”. This city, this society wanted autonomy from God and it’s observed in two ways.

Autonomy in Defiance of God’s Rule

If we go back to the beginning, **Genesis 1:28** God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, to make God’s name and glory and blessing known throughout the entire world. After Noah and the flood, **Genesis 9:1**- Same thing- blessed, be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth...a repetition of the mandate. These people knew God’s command, but they didn’t want to obey. They built the city as it says in verse 4 expressly in defiance of God- ***lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.*** This is just plain disobedience to the clear rule of God. They were more concerned for their own security, prosperity, they were about their own agenda, not God’s. This was the individual sin of autonomy multiplied and amplified by 50k people. “There’s strength in numbers, if we stick together God can’t make us spread out.” Notice the result of God confusing their languages, they finally did what he told them to do, this is what it took to get them to fill the earth as he commanded. And there is a little lesson here- God always pushes his people to look outward, to multiply, toward sending and blessing others. Sinful man always looks inward toward building for his security, his own prosperity and his own glory. But there was another sign of Autonomy.

Autonomy in Defiance of God’s Reign

Notice the purpose of the tower in v.4 ***Let us make a name for ourselves.*** In biblical thinking to name some thing is to have authority over it. In Genesis 1, God systematically names the elements of creation as he makes them and bestows Adam with his name. Watkin- ***“To seek to make a name for oneself is to assert one’s self-made autonomous independence, to claim once more to be ‘The master of my fate and the captain of my soul’ and to ignore the One who gives you life, breath, and everything.”*** This city wanted to assert their own autonomous social identity and meaning apart from God. Their mantra- ***“We don’t need God, we will make our own name!”*** The tower, which seems at first glance a great technological achievement for ancient man, Watkins says, is actually more ***“like a beachhead for launching an assault on God’s throne-room: a proud assertion of autonomous technological capability on the part of a culture that has turned its back on God.”***²

² Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory*, p.208

What started as an individual sin of autonomy in the Garden with Adam and Eve, now becomes the collective project of humanism- they formed a centralized power, with all their energy, harnessing their collective intellect, labor force and technological advancement- there's nothing man cannot achieve! Who needs God? And this is precisely what concerned God. As Lord Acton famously said, "Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely." God says, this is merely the beginning [Verse 6 slide], man's heart being as sinful as it is with this collective power, there's no telling what evil, suppression, injustice they might do. What started in Babel then is the project of humanism that is the dominant cultural air we breathe now. Doesn't our modern culture think like this? "We will make our own fate, with our own education and technological advancement we can achieve our own greatness, we can solve all our own problems...we don't need God." I was listening to a tech futurist on a podcast just recently using this very language about AI. But I remember Mark Zuckerberg using the same idealist language- about the advent of social media- that it's going to bring the world together. How's that coming along? This is what happens when we forget the origin story of human depravity. All this has its roots in the people of Babel. Might I suggest that we have a healthy skepticism of any technological, social, political, or economic advancement, movement or party that echoes the spirit of Babel- attempting to unite under any banner of human achievement, dismissing human depravity, that seeks autonomy from God?

[verse 7-8 slide] Now God could have just vaporized them, but he doesn't, what he essentially does is ensure that they cannot all come together under the banner of one evil empire, a unified totalitarian humanism that would be devastating to human flourishing. Instead he divides them into people groups, with different languages to scatter throughout the world. In essence this is God's mercy on humanity and his gracious preservation of life so that human flourishing on earth can happen. We often think that not being able to all understand each other and work together across nations, cultures and language divides is only a bad thing, but consider that this also might be God's way of reducing mankind's collective evil and corruption. Do you know that Revelation tells us that in direct defiance of God, the first act of the Antichrist will be to unite the world under one economy and government? That's why the Bible calls the capital city of the Antichrist Babylon, which comes from this same word- Babel. He will attempt to harness this collective unity to maximize man's sinfulness and turn it into mass rebellion against God and His people.

But these are not equal, opposite powers, God will in the future destroy the efforts of Babylon just like he ended the rebellion in Babel in the past. ⁹ *Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth. And from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth.*

So in the end, God does not tear down the tower. He leaves it there rotting as a laughingstock- calling it Babel which means confusion...a city that thought it could replace God, and instead becomes a monument to man's folly. What began as project of humanism becomes a cautionary tale of what happens when a society seeks autonomy apart from God and attempts to make a name for themselves for their own glory.

[Title Slide] So you might say, “Well that’s an interesting story Nate, I learned about ziggurats and about maybe where some of these languages came from, but I don’t have any plans to build a tower...especially after that story, so what difference does this make in my life?”

One of the greatest Christian works outside of the Bible ever written was **St. Augustine’s City of God** written in 413AD, a brilliant, powerful, and relevant contrast between the City of Rome within whose empire he lived and the heavenly City of God. One city built with the blueprint of Babel following (as seen in the center of this painting) its operating system of security-seeking, self-glorifying, name-building, power-hungry, autonomous humanism that looked to the power of technology and its own collective brilliance...the other city built from the blueprint of the Gospel- looking to God alone as the source of true life, identity and meaning and the solution to man’s deepest problems of sin and brokenness, with the gospel of Jesus as the operating system of humility, righteousness, justice, love, goodness and mercy. And Augustine’s challenge for these Christians at that time was you might live in the City of Rome but your true citizenship is in the City of God- living under God’s rule and reign and bringing the Gospel to bear in the culture of the day. To be like the great men and women of faith who were seeking as **Hebrews 11:10** *the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.*

So my question for you today is: **Which City are you Seeking- The City of Babel or the City of God? Are you living under rule of self or the rule of God?** The city that sings the defiant mantra “I did it my way”, like Frank Sinatra, or the city whose mantra is “All to Jesus I surrender”?

God made his commands clear, but the people of Babel disobeyed, we will do it our way- our way is better, easier, more efficient, less costly. Are we doing the same thing with the clear commands of God- God says don’t hoard, be generous and sacrificial with your money and possessions. We say, no I’m going to keep it for myself, be own security and comfort. God says- love your enemies and forgive those who wrong you. We say, no they don’t deserve it, they owe me, I want to see them suffer. God says, sex is designed for a man and a woman in marriage. We say, no we are more interested in our own pleasure and gratification. Where are you singing “I did it my way” in your life? Will you start singing “All to Jesus I surrender?”

Are you living for your own name or for Jesus’ name? The tower wasn’t the problem- it was the motive for the tower. Achievement and education and technology and social media and influence are not bad things. But what is your motivation? What is your ambition? Why do you want more followers? Why do you want to accomplish something on the field of sports? Why do you want the promotion? Why do you want the bigger house or see your portfolio hit a certain \$ amount? Is it about your ego, your power, your control...your name? Or to use your gifts and abilities to bring glory to God and bless others...for Jesus’ name?

Which City are you Seeking- The City of Babel or the City of God? Today, that ancient City of Rome, like Babel is a heap of rubble, a cautionary tale for all to see. And one day, powerful politicians and world powers and tech billionaires will also pass and fade away. And so will your company, and your social media influence and your house and sports accomplishments... But guess what won’t? City of God. In fact the City of God cannot be stopped Jesus said, it will

continue through the message of gospel of Jesus Christ and his finished work on the cross to save us from sin and death. His church continues to demonstrate and declare the gospel under the mandate of Jesus our king- scattering throughout the nations, languages and people groups. And to unite us under one banner- not national pride, not language, not ethnicity or race or form of government- but unity in Jesus Christ. And one day when Jesus returns, He will bring the city of God, the Kingdom of Heaven and he will unite all people on earth under his perfect rule and reign and eradicate the curse of death and all evil and sin with it, and we will be with him forever and ever.

What city are you seeking? Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, then all these things will be added.

Works Consulted

- Christopher Watkin: *Biblical Critical Theory*
- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: *Covenant and Conversation: Book of Beginnings*
- Christopher Wright: *The Old Testament in Seven Sentences*
- Victor Hamilton: *NICOT Book of Genesis*
- John Piper- <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-pride-of-babel-and-the-praise-of-christ>
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- JD Greear <https://summitchurch.com/GetFile.ashx?Guid=500dedcf-def9-41eb-817f-fd77fed28fc2>
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