The Tower of Babel: A Case Study in Combining Traditional and Academic Bible Methodologies

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The growing popularity of what Rabbi Shalom Carmy calls the "literary-theological" approach to Tanakh study has been transforming the way we approach our most sacred texts. This methodology demands a finely tuned text reading, along with a focus on the religious significance of the passage. The premises of this methodology include the following:

1. The words of our Sages and later classical commentators are central to the way we understand the revealed word of God; and
2. It is vital to study biblical passages in their literary and historical context.[1]

This article on the Tower of Babel offers a "textbook lesson" in combining traditional rabbinic commentary with contemporary academic Bible scholarship. These two approaches begin with different sets of assumptions, but each gives us access to greater meaning in the Torah. Taken together, we emerge with a fuller picture than with either one by itself.

Text Analysis

We will first explore the basic text issues, and we then will turn to layers of interpretation—both traditional and literary-historical.

Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard.”—Brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar.—And they said, “Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world.” The Lord came down to look at the city and tower that man had built, and the Lord said, “If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach. Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another’s speech.” Thus the Lord scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel, because there the Lord confounded the speech of the whole earth; and from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth. (Gen. 11:1–9)

Our narrative begins with a united humanity living together. Yehudah Kiel notes that Shinar is likely the Torah’s way of saying Sumer. Kiel also argues that the story need not refer literally to *all* humanity; it may refer simply to the people living in that region.[2]

The protagonists in this text migrate eastward until they reach a *bikah*, translated by Ibn Ezra and Yehudah Kiel as a plain. The Babylonians depended on brick-making for their building projects, since they did not have an adequate stone supply. While historically accurate, we may ask why the Torah places such emphasis on this seemingly trivial detail.

Verse 4 contains the crux of the builders’ intent: “Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world.” “A tower with its top in the sky” appears lexically similar to our term “skyscraper.” Similar terminology appears in Deuteronomy in reference to the high walls surrounding Canaanite cities (Deut. 1:28; 9:1). The builders of the Tower wanted to be remembered for having built this monumental structure (Ibn Ezra, Radak). On the surface, there does not appear to be anything unusually sinful about their intent. They were interested in holding their growing community together with the help of the Tower, and being remembered by later generations.

However, God thwarts them. God’s “descent” does not reflect some primitive notion of God’s being “up” and needing to come down to earth to figure out what is happening. To the contrary, God knows that the people are building the Tower. Rashi therefore explains that God is teaching the notion that judges must investigate cases thoroughly.

It is not evident why God should feel threatened, or what the builders of the Tower were doing wrong that God needed to intervene. It also is remarkable that the Torah states that Babylonia was named after linguistic confusion, given that the Babylonians themselves referred to their city as Babel. We turn now to rabbinic commentary to explore these questions.

Rabbinic Interpretation

One classical explanation of the Tower of Babel is found in the Talmud:

R. Jeremiah b. Eleazar said: They split up into three parties. One said, 'Let us ascend and dwell there;' the second, 'Let us ascend and serve idols;' and the third said, 'Let us ascend and wage war [with God].'...It has been taught. R. Nathan said: They were all bent on idolatry. (*Sanhedrin* 109a)

These Sages explain that the Tower reflects idolatry and rebellion against God. Rashi adopts their analysis, as well. The advantage of this interpretation is that God's strong reaction makes sense. God felt threatened and therefore intervened to thwart their plans. This interpretation also gains credibility insofar as this narrative is the only one spanning from Noah to Abraham and his family. It is reasonable to surmise that this story must be significant beyond its teaching of how people speak many languages.

However, one may ask whether this reading fits the text. Where is there mention of a rebellion against God or idolatry in this passage? Ibn Ezra summarily dismisses this interpretation:

The builders of the tower were not so foolish as to think that they could go to the heavens…The text reveals their intent—to build a large city for their settlement, and the Tower would be a sign of their glory and also their location for shepherds who ventured away. They would also preserve their name all the days of the Tower…The builders hoped that they would never scatter, but this was not God's plan, and they did not realize that. (Ibn Ezra on Gen. 11:3)

However, commentators seeking the plain sense of the text (*pashtanim*) also struggle to determine the meaning of this narrative. Ibn Ezra argues that the people did not do anything sinful. God opposed the project since

He had blessed them to multiply and fill the earth (Gen. 1:28; 9:1). God scattered them to fulfill His blessing to humanity. In a similar vein, Ralbag maintains that the people did not sin, but God desires human diversity rather than conformity and therefore scattered them.

Several later commentators assume that the builders of the Tower must have done something sinful, as God appears threatened. They modify the views of Ibn Ezra or Ralbag and insist that the people deliberately wanted to thwart God's blessing to fill the earth (Radak, Joseph Bekhor Shor) or to create a conformist, totalitarian regime (Yitzhak Arama, Samson Rafael Hirsch, Netziv).

Abarbanel submits a surprising thesis. Brick-making symbolizes human creativity, and he argues that technology ultimately causes problems. Of course, God does not outright forbid technology, but it is not the ideal course for humanity. Unlike the other interpretations we have seen, Abarbanel addresses the textual element of brick-making.

Although the talmudic interpretation of idolatry appears to read a lot into the text, the interpretations of the later *pashtanim* also do not appear evident in the text. Other than Abarbanel's anti-technology reading, the other interpretations do not explain the Torah's emphasis on brick-making. Moreover, none of the above interpretations explains why the Babylonians would refer to their own city as "confusion." The cryptic nine verses of this narrative pose difficulties in arriving at a compelling reading.

Ancient Near Eastern Context

Over the past century, scholarship has progressed significantly with the archaeological discovery of many artifacts and written documents from the ancient Near East. Much of this section summarizes the groundbreaking work of Moshe David (Umberto) Cassuto, and the subsequent discussions of Nahum Sarna and Elhanan Samet.[3] They argue that the Tower of Babel narrative is a polemic against the worldview of the nations, in particular Babylonia. In every ancient Babylonian city, there were temples, always accompanied with a tower called a ziqqurat. This term derives from the Akkadian *zaqaru*, "to rise up high," or "step pyramid." In Babylonia, the great ziqqurat was the Temple of Marduk—the patron deity of Babylonia. The Temple was called *E-sag-ila* ("the house with a raised

head”), and its tower was called *etemen-an-ki* (“the house of the foundation of the heavens and earth”). It appears that this temple originally was built in Hammurabi’s time (18th–17th centuries b.c.e.), approximately the same time as Abraham. The Babylonians took such great pride in their temple that they composed myths that attributed its building to the gods:

Marduk, the king of the gods divided all the Anunnaki (=various gods) above and below...The Anunnaki opened their mouths and said to Marduk, their lord: “Now, o lord, you who have caused our deliverance, what shall be our homage to you? Let us build a shrine”;...When Marduk heard this, brightly glowed his features, like the day: “Construct Babylon, whose building you have requested, let its brickwork be fashioned...” the Anunnaki applied the implement; for one whole year they molded bricks. When the second year arrived, they raised high the head of Esagila equalling Apsu (=corresponded to the depths of the ocean. Apsu was one of the original two gods in world, according to this myth.)...(Akkadian Creation Epic, Tablet VI, lines 39–62)[4]

The ruins of the Temple of Marduk were found between 1889 and 1917 by German archaeologists. It was gigantic, about 300 feet high, rising from a square base of equal size. There is little question that the Torah is discussing this temple. Archaeologists have unearthed the biblical Tower of Babel and other documents that describe what the Babylonians thought of their prized temple.

A ziqqurat was built as a surrogate mountain, designed as a meeting place between the gods and people. Priests could ascend to the top on elaborate staircases in order to encounter the gods. Phrases such as “its top in the sky” and “to make a name for oneself” appear regularly on Akkadian building inscriptions.[5] *E-sag-ila,* the house with a raised head, now appears strikingly similar to the Torah’s quoting the Tower’s builders as wanting “a tower with its top in the sky” (Gen. 11:4).

Additionally, the Babylonian Creation Epic cited above marvels at the brick-making required for the Tower. In this myth, it took *the gods* one year to make enough bricks to build the Temple of Marduk! The Torah mocks this claim, noting that the Tower and its bricks were built by people. This detail in the Babylonian epic helps explain why the Torah focuses on the brick-making aspect of the project.

God’s “descent” in the Torah narrative also speaks against the idea of a ziqqurat. The physical height of a mountain or structure does not bring anyone closer to God. God descended to thwart the Tower before it was

completed.

In this reading of the Torah narrative, Babylonian society was guilty of the ultimate arrogance. They were excessively proud of the Temple of Marduk, and claimed that their gods built it. They also built the Tower to make for themselves a name, usurping a supposedly religious structure for self-aggrandizement.

We now can understand the Torah's explanation for the city name, *Bavel*, confusion. The Babylonians called their city Babel, from the Akkadian *bab-ilim*, "the gate of the god." They considered their city to be the religious center of the world. The Hebrew etymology, then, is a "midrash" of the Torah to mock the Babylonians. You think you are the gate of the god, but in fact you are completely confused!

To summarize, the sin of the Tower of Babel was supreme arrogance of a polytheistic, idolatrous society. This interpretation also is the view of the talmudic Sages (*Sanhedrin* 109a) quoted earlier. Living in Babylonia, the Sages well understood what the Torah was teaching. With our knowledge of the ancient setting, their interpretation is closely wedded to the text of the Torah, and is the most convincing of all the suggestions cited above.

The Significance of the Narrative

Following this interpretation, Yehezkel Kaufmann observed that until this point in the Book of Genesis, all people are assumed to be monotheists. The Tower of Babel represents the moment when idolatry entered human culture. As a result, Abraham was chosen to leave Babylonia and to teach humanity about its original vision of monotheism.[6]

As in the Tower of Babel, the Garden of Eden narrative also revolves around people overstepping their human boundaries and God appearing to feel threatened by human actions:

> And the Lord God said, "Now that the man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever!" (Gen. 3:22)

Both narratives also have God using the unusual plural "we" form when referring to Himself. Lyle Eslinger explains that this unusual form is used specifically when establishing boundaries between the divine and human realms.[7] Ramban (on 11:2) notes further that Eden and Babel were similar

sins, and therefore the protagonists were exiled each time.

The Talmud poignantly casts God and human arrogance as diametrically opposed, to the point where God's presence in this world is threatened by arrogance:

If one walks with a stiff bearing [i.e., with arrogance] even for four cubits, it is as if he pushed against the heels of the Divine Presence, since it is written, The whole earth is full of His glory (Isa. 6:3). (*Berakhot* 43b)

Monotheism is not simply a matter of the number of deities one serves. Rather, it promotes humility. God's Presence is invited in through that humility, as exemplified by Moses who was the humblest of all people (Num. 12:3) and the greatest prophet (Num. 12:6–8). The Tower of Babel narrative teaches that idolatry is rooted in the ultimate human arrogance.

Yehudah Elitzur further observes that the term *sulam* (ladder) appears only in Jacob's dream with the angels ascending and descending. More significantly, the term *sha'ar ha-Shamayim*, the gateway to heaven, appears only here:

Shaken, he said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven (*sha'ar ha-Shamayim*)." (Gen. 28:17)

Elitzur argues that this narrative is the Torah's response to the Tower of Babel. The Babylonians called themselves *bab-ilim*, the gate of the god, similar to *sha'ar ha-Shamayim*. God descended to the Tower of Babel, mocking its builders for thinking that they had connected heaven and earth with their ziqqurat. In reality, they were arrogant and confused. In contrast, Jacob's ladder effectively connects the heavens and earth, as angels freely ascend and descend.[8]

Finally, Zephaniah prophesied that in the ideal future, arrogance shall be replaced by all humanity again being pure of speech, i.e., being God-fearing.

For then I will make the peoples pure of speech, so that they all invoke the Lord by name and serve Him with one accord. From beyond the rivers of Cush, My suppliants shall bring offerings to Me in Fair Puzai…For then I will remove the proud and exultant within you, and you will be haughty no more on My sacred mount. But I will leave within you a poor, humble folk, and they shall find refuge in the name of the Lord. (Zeph. 3:9–12)

This prophecy is the antidote to the Tower of Babel, which represents the arrogance and idolatry that led to people speaking many languages. In those medieval communities where the triennial cycle was used for Torah readings, this passage in Zephaniah fittingly was selected as the Haftarah for the reading of the Tower of Babel.[9]

To summarize, the Tower of Babel is of central importance to the early Genesis narratives. The Babylonians arrogantly presumed to establish the place where the heavens meet earth and that they could bring the gods down to earth by building high temples. They were self-aggrandizing by building a temple to make a name for themselves, and in their mythology they ascribed this monumental building project to the gods.

This is the moment in the Torah where idolatry is introduced. God shifts from focusing on all humanity to Abraham and his descendants, who were entrusted to teach the world about ethical monotheism. Humility brings God's presence closer. Arrogance is linked to idolatry and threatens God's presence.

Conclusion

In this article, we briefly explored facets of how to analyze the Tower of Babel narrative. We began with the basic text, pinpointing the major issues that need to be addressed. We then surveyed talmudic and later rabbinic commentary. Although insightful and illuminating, none of these sources fully addressed the various details of the text. A consideration of the ancient Near Eastern setting, coupled with the talmudic reading in Tractate *Sanhedrin*, provided a more satisfactory reading of the details of the narrative in a vacuum and in its surrounding context. This reading highlights a vital detail in the spiritual history of the world as presented by the Torah.

To round out the analysis, we considered other biblical reference that shed additional light on the theme that the Tower of Babel narrative

teaches. The Garden of Eden narrative and the Tower of Babel both explore how people sometimes exceed their boundaries and this threatens their relationship with God, leading to exile. Jacob's humility and God's revelation are linked as the ideal connection between the heavens and the earth. Zephaniah prophetically anticipates a future era when the damage of the Tower of Babel is undone and the world unites again in humility and in serving God.

By the conclusion of the analysis, we can see how the rabbinic interpretations and ancient Near Eastern scholarship complement each other, enabling us to unlock a brief but powerful narrative that lies at the heart of the Torah's values.

Notes

[1] See Shalom Carmy, "A Room with a View, but a Room of Our Own," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), pp. 1–38.
[2] Yehudah Kiel, *Da'at Mikra: Bereshit* vol. 1 (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1997), pp. 279–280.
[3] Moshe David (Umberto) Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987), pp. 154–169; Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), pp. 63–80; Elhanan Samet, *Iyyunim be-Parashot ha-Shavua* (first series) vol. 1 (Hebrew) ed. Ayal Fishler (Ma'aleh Adumim: Ma'aliyot Press, 2002), pp. 21–30. Modified English version at http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.60/02noach.htm.
[4] Translation from James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 68–69.
[5] Ada Feyerick, *Genesis: World of Myths and Patriarchs* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 53.
[6] For further discussion of the subject of the Chosen People, see Hayyim Angel, "'The Chosen People': An Ethical Challenge," *Conversations* 8 (Fall 2010), pp. 52–60; reprinted in Angel, *Creating Space between Peshat and Derash: A Collection of Studies on Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2011), pp. 25-34. For a different approach, see Zvi Grumet, "The Revolution of Terah and Avraham," in this issue.
[7] Lyle Eslinger, "The Enigmatic Plurals Like 'One of Us' (Genesis I 26, III 22, and XI 7) in Hyperchronic Perspective," *VT* 56 (2006), pp. 171–184.
[8] Yehudah Elitzur, "The Tower of Babel and Jacob's Ladder" (Hebrew), in *Yisrael ve-ha-Mikra: Mehkarim Geografiyim Historiyim ve-Hagotiyim*, Yoel Elitzur and Amos Frisch (eds.), (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1999), pp. 46–48.
[9] See listing of the triennial Haftarot at the end of Yosef Ofer, "The Sections of the Prophets and Writings" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 58 (1989), pp. 155–189.