

The Babble at Babel

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. (Genesis 11:1–9)

One of our intrepid members sent me a list of all the languages he knew were spoken by our members. I added a few others. English, Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, Tswana, Venda, French, Portuguese, Italian, Tsonga, Shangaan, Sepedi, siSwati, Ndebele, Shona, Chichewa, Polish, Bulgarian, German, Hebrew, Spanish, Arabic, Hindi, Afrikaans, Greek, Dutch, Tagalog, Agutaya, Mandarin. That's 29 languages, which is pretty remarkable. Around 7100 exist in the world today.

Though scientific theories change like the wind, it is interesting that current linguistic theory believes that all languages came from one original language, which they have called Proto-World or Proto-Human. This is exactly what the Bible says took place.

It's also interesting to read how many nations and ethnicities have an account of the Tower of Babel. The tradition is found in India, in ancient Mesopotamia, the ancient Aztecs, the ancient Toltecs. In Burma, the story is told of a pagoda built to reach into heaven, and the gods came down and confused their languages. Greece has the legend that Hermes separated the people into nations by confusing their languages. These all describe a Tower that was built shortly after a Great Flood, and the languages were mixed up. In fact, when David Livingstone spoke with Africans in 1849 near Lake Ngami in Botswana, they told him of a tradition they had about a tower built after a great flood, that they sought to build a tower to reach the sky until the tower was demolished, and in their words, the stones "cracked their heads".

So where did all this come from and why? Genesis 11 gives us the true account. One word sums it up: rebellion. Genesis 11 shows us whether the descendants of Noah were of a completely different kind than the people who rebelled before the Flood. We find out that a united humanity sought to disobey again. The cycles of human history show the same thing: God's grace gives man space to repent, man turns again to defiance and rebellion, and God graciously restrains man's sin.

Here is another illustration of the fact that God mercifully restrains man's sin. In 2 Thessalonians, it is likely the Holy Spirit who is being referred to when Paul says "He who now restrains" (2 Thessalonians 2:7). The request we make in the Lord's Prayer, 'lead us not into temptation' is a request for God to restrain sin. Who can possibly imagine how nightmarishly evil the world would be if God did not restrain sin?

Genesis 11 is the event that kicked off God's plan to use multiple nations that we studied the last time we were in Genesis together. God put in place the barriers of language and ethnicity, slowing the progress of idolatry, preparing the way for Messiah to come through the chosen nation. The Tower of Babel is the last major account of the foundational Genesis 1-11 before Genesis takes up the story of Israel for the rest of the book: the lives of Abram, Isaac, Jacob, and his twelve sons.

Our account today unfolds along the lines of a rebellious plan, followed by a restraining proposal and the resulting proliferation.

I. The Rebellious Plan

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."

The whole world spoke one language – we don't know what it was, some claim it was Hebrew, because the names of the people prior to this time only have meaning in Hebrew, but we don't know for certain.

Even though the world was being divided into recognisable clans, tribes, families, according to their descent from Shem, Ham, and Japheth, one can imagine the temptation to not scatter, and have to face the harsh new post-Flood world in small isolated tribes. You're vulnerable in small groups, and it's also a lot harder to strike out and tame the wild world in small groups.

So the mass of humanity, it seems, essentially congregated as a group of many thousands, one estimate has it as high as 920 000, and moved slowly, looking for the ideal settlement.

What were they looking for? They needed an area large enough and flat enough to build a city – a true mega-city that could house all of humanity, where everyone's abilities and resources could be pooled. The plan here is to build something that would require massive combined manpower.

The plain of Shinar is in southern Mesopotamia, modern day Iraq. They find a large enough area, flat-enough for an extensive city. And extensive it was. Alfred Edersheim claims that the city which they built, which became Nimrod's Babylon, was between 100 and 200 square miles, massive by ancient standards.

When they arrive on this large plain, it is mostly the dry desert sand near the Tigris and Euphrates. That doesn't give you much rock to quarry to build with, so verse 3 describes the technological innovation they came up with to solve that problem. They learned how to fire and bake sand into clay bricks. Even though the flat plain didn't provide much building material, so determined were they to stay together and build a megacity that they overcame the natural obstacle and found a way to still build their city.

So why was this rebellious? For a few reasons.

First, they were disobeying the command God had given men to spread out and subdue the earth. He gave this command to Adam and Eve, and repeated it to Noah. "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. (Genesis 9:1)

By remaining in one place, and concentrating all their resources in one or even a few connected cities, mankind was saying, "no" to God's command. We will not spread out and fill the earth. The end of verse 4 says it explicitly: "lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." (Genesis 11:4)

Second, they were proudly seeking their own glory. “Let us make a name for ourselves”. This is a people who don't want to be identified as God's people, called by His name. In defiance of God's name, they seek their own name, their own reputation. This is the beginning of an evil humanism, man valuing himself apart from God, man making himself the measure of all things.

Third, they were creating a counterfeit religion. There is more than meets the eye in the words “⁴ And they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top *is* in the heavens;” (Genesis 11:4) There are strong religious overtones here.

Remember that Satan is ever the master of counterfeit, the one who fakes and imitates the true with his own version. In Scripture, mountains were often the place of meeting with God. Mount Sinai is where God gives His covenant to Israel and where Moses meets God. Jerusalem becomes the Mount of God, Mount Zion. Jesus is transfigured before His disciples on a mountain. Calvary itself is Mount Moriah.

It seems that the concept of a mountain as a lofty place to meet God is soon co-opted by Satan. It's said that the fallen sons of God came down to earth at Mount Hermon. Pagans throughout the Bible seek to meet their gods on the high places. Pagan temples were often built on mountains. And it seems that the Tower of Babel was like a man-made mountain with strong religious and occultic purposes. In fact, throughout the world, those scattered after the Tower of Babel built miniatures of what they remembered at Babel: Ziggurats, Pyramids, Mounds, Obelisks and Stone Circles are found on every continent in the world, always places of worship, often aligned with the stars, particular constellations on particular days. When the builders say “let us a build a tower whose top *is* in the heavens” the goal is not some kind of geographical exercise, to simply be vertically high and impressive. The goal here is to commune with the gods, the fallen angels and spirits who would give man in rebellion to God special knowledge, special powers, special abilities.

We have good reason to think the mastermind behind this was the man mentioned in chapter 10, Nimrod. ⁸ Cush begot Nimrod; he began to be a mighty one on the earth. ⁹ He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; therefore it is said, “Like Nimrod the mighty hunter before the LORD.” ¹⁰ And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. ¹¹ From that land he went to Assyria and built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah, ¹² and Resen between Nineveh and Calah (that *is* the principal city). (Genesis 10:8–12)

Many legends are connected with Nimrod. Josephus, the first century Jewish commentator, says of him:

“He also gradually changed the government into tyranny, seeing no other way of turning men from the fear of God, but to bring them into a constant dependence on his power. He also said he would be revenged on God, if He should have a mind to drown the world again; for that he would build a tower too high for the waters to reach. And that he would avenge himself on God for destroying their forefathers. Now the multitude were very ready to follow the determination of Nimrod, and to esteem it a piece of cowardice to submit to God; and they built a tower, neither sparing any pains, nor being in any degree negligent about the work: and, by reason of the multitude of hands employed in it, it grew very high, sooner than any one could expect;

This is why it is here, at Babel, soon to be Babylon, that we have the birth of false religion. Cain was the originator of worshipping the right God in the wrong way, but here is the origin of worshipping false gods.

I think Paul has this particular moment in mind in Romans 1¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, ¹⁹ because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them. ²⁰ For since the

creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, ²¹ because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. (Romans 1:18–23)

All through the rest of Scripture, Babylon is the symbol of false religion, of religion distorted, perverted, counterfeited. Babylon is copying what God gave in some other form. That's why false religion has a counterfeit saviour, counterfeit heaven, counterfeit angels, even counterfeit virgin birth. The false gods of Babylon become the gods of pagan Greece, Rome, India and Egypt. Babylon as a religion never completely disappears; we meet it at the very end in Revelation. ⁵ And on her forehead a name *was* written: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH (Revelation 17:5).

Babylonian religion works by trying to submerge the true faith under an avalanche of false religion, and then claiming to unite all faiths under one banner. If the true faith looks like just one more contender, just another claimant to the title, people may suspect it is just making arrogant claims to be the only one true faith. And with that claim will come persecution, hostility, attack by the adherents of Babylonian religion.

When these people are scattered, they really have two religions they remember: the monotheism taught to them by Noah and his sons, or the counterfeit religion of Babylon, which introduces many gods, many ways, many rituals, many saviours, many scriptures.

So, in light of this rebellious refusal to scatter, the rebellious pursuit of hallowing their own names, and the rebellious pursuit of false religion, we now see the Lord's proposal.

II. The Restraining Proposal

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."

Now the language here of coming down to see the city and the tower does not imply God needed to change locations to see it. It uses a kind of anthropomorphic language that ascribes a human action to God to illustrate what He did. A human would have to visit the site to understand it, so this is suggesting God saw and inspected and took in the full scope and significance of the project.

In verse 6, the Lord comments on the problem of united depravity. When one man's rebellion is shared, cheered and encouraged by another, the depravity multiplies and intensifies. And when there is no difficulty in communicating, the flow of wicked thought, the exchange of evil plans and ideas runs at full speed. They have unity, but it is a wicked unity. It is fellowship, fellowship around darkness, unbelief, rebellion.

A culture develops when there is enough stability to focus on pursuits other than just subsistence living. When you are fighting against the elements, just fighting to get food for the day, you don't have time to develop philosophy, and art, and advanced technologies. But once, through cooperation and a taming of your environment, you begin to get ahead of nature, you can increasingly turn your attention to other pursuits. And if the heart is in rebellion, those pursuits will become more and more depraved, perverted, dark, and evil.

The Lord points out that the building of the city and the tower of Babel is just the beginning of man's cooperative evil. A united, unimpeded, uninhibited human culture building a megacity under the satanic religion of Babel is going to exponentially grow in evil. If something isn't done, the evil will once again reach the levels it did before the Flood.

It is amazing to see the amount of times God restrains evil in the Bible.

This is why many Bible interpreters notice that biblical history seems to come in the epochs, these periods of time where God gives mankind a particular stewardship, and particular responsibility, and it always ends in failure on man's part, and God's restraint on the evil.

The first one is the economy or dispensation of innocence, where man's one responsibility was to keep the garden and not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Man fails. To restrain man's evil, and keep him from eating from the tree of life, man is expelled from the garden.

That begins the second economy, which is the economy of conscience, where man is to live in light of conscience and walk with God, wait for the promised seed of the woman who will defeat the serpent. Man fails and fills the earth with violence, receives the lies and evil of the fallen sons of God. To restrain man's evil, God send a Flood.

That begins the third economy, the economy of human government, where God tells Noah to spread out on the earth, rebuild the world with law and order, where murder will be punished with capital punishment through proper human government. Man fails again, and comes together, builds the Tower of Babel, and does not set up human government. So God restrains their evil with the scattering of the nations.

And so begins the fourth dispensation, the dispensation of promise. God chooses Abram, and makes him the promise through the covenant that he will have land, descendants and blessing. Abram is to trust God, dwell in the land. But the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's sons keep failing – they keep going down to Egypt, trusting in their own deceptive schemes. God restrains their evil by having the nation go down to Egypt and end up in slavery.

So begins the fifth dispensation, the dispensation of law, where God gives Israel the Mosaic covenant and tells them to keep it and be loyal. Israel fails and falls into idolatry. God restrains their evil by sending them into exile before returning them.

And even in the sixth dispensation, the dispensation of the church, the command to the world is to believe the gospel, and the command to the church is preach the gospel and live it. Failure leads to God restraining evil with the Great Tribulation, which leads to the final and seventh dispensation, the dispensation of the kingdom. And even there, Revelation 20 tells us that at the end of 1000 years of peace and prosperity, there will be a rebellion, a failure, and God will restrain that evil with a fiery judgement.

So, in this case, the restraint of evil is done by confusing the communication of the collaborators. Why not just throw down the Tower? Well, that won't really deal with the problem. They'd just begin again, probably with more resolve, and find other evil projects to pursue. If the city of Babel suddenly devolves into hundreds of dialects, chaos will ensue. People will cease building and simply try to find others who speak as they do.

Notice the plural pronoun "Let Us". This is God speaking in council, but it also opens the door for God to be speaking as the Triune God. How was this done? It appears miraculous. But that shouldn't surprise us because human language is miraculous. No linguist has ever bridged the chasm between the grunts and squeaks of animals and the sophistication of human language. It is a sign of being made in God's image of having had His Spirit breathed into us. So the God who gave language can now equally divide it up into multiple languages very easily.

Now I think there had to be a minority of people who did not go along with Nimrod. Certainly Noah, who was still alive, if there are no gaps in the genealogy, and Shem, would not have cooperated. But perhaps the majority did.

We can try to picture the chaos when this struck. The noise that must have resulted from the calling out, the shouting, the seeking to find others who spoke as you did. We imagine that perhaps in the common grace of God, families and children were given to speaking the same language. But profound chaos and fear must have spread through the city.

Humanity will be broken up into small tribes, tribes that will immediately see the other tribes as competitors, not colleagues. And seeing the others as competitors would suddenly make this city feel more like a battlefield than a building site. People would be driven to seek a place to dwell, and when other, stronger tribes came, it would push them further out, and when others came, push further. And so man's selfishness and mutual suspicion would keep driving him further and further on the earth until each tribe had found a spot uninhabited by any other.

So it leads to the third moment in this narrative.

III. The Resulting Proliferation

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. (Genesis 11:1–9)

You remember when we studied the topic of nations, we saw four reasons why God moved to the idea of separate nations.

First, to fulfil the blessing and command given in Genesis 1:28: fill the earth, subdue it. Second, to produce variety and diversity. Third, the design of nations is to slow the spread of sin, and promote the seeking of God. Fourth, to select one nation to be the witness to all other nations.

As people scattered, seeking suitable land, and seeking distance from the other tribes of man, not only would they develop distinctive customs and habits, they would soon begin taking on distinctive physical characteristics. It is only in this period that man's longevity dramatically drops, so human genome is still much healthier compared to our today. That would include remarkable adaptability to environments, vastly greater than today's. As tribes moved into hot climates, cold climates, snowy regions, sunless regions, desert regions, changes in skin colour, hair, eye colour would begin setting in. Though the genes for particular height and hair texture and facial features would have been latent in everyone, from Noah on down, now particular genes begin finding common expression in tribes in particular climates. And when these tribes are not intermarrying with others, but remaining within their own gene pool, the dominant genes soon find common expression in the physical features of the group, recessive genes become rarer. Within a short time, you could will have what evolutionists have called "races". But skin colour and hair and eye colour are not other races. There is one race – the human race. But there are many nations, and as these languages separated tribes, and the tribes lived in different climates, some of the physical differences appeared.

With tribes now foraging for food, battling the elements, figuring out how to again smelt iron, create ceramics, build, what has happened is a slowing down of sinful rebellion. Mankind in their separate tribes must consider the general revelation of creation and conscience, and decide between the monotheism they remember from Noah and his sons, or the Polytheism from Nimrod.

In the meantime, God is selecting one nation to be a blessing to all the nations. And Genesis 12 takes up that story – the call of Abraham, and the beginning of the messianic nation that will return the nations to the one true God.

And fifty days after Jesus rose from the dead, the sign of the Holy Spirit was that 120 Jewish believers began speaking fluently in the languages of many nations. The gift of tongues in the early church was both a rebuke to those hard-hearted Israelites who still thought God only love done nation, and also a call to all nations to come to Israel's Messiah, Jesus. The Day of Pentecost is a reversal of Babel. All nations coming together, not in rebellion, but in submission, and instead of confusion, there is interpretation, understanding. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying: “You are worthy to take the scroll, And to open its seals; For You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, (Revelation 5:9).

The fact that we are here today, with our 29 languages worshipping the true God, is testament to how that plan worked. He restrained the sin of our ancestors; He sent His Word and His Son through the nation Israel; He sent His gospel to every nation, and here we are: many nations, many tribes; many languages: but as Ephesians puts it: one body and one Spirit, one hope, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who *is* above all, and through all, and in you all.