

Reading Genesis & Exodus as Christian Scripture for the Church Today
Diocese of Chichester Online Book Group for The Year of the Old Testament 2023:
Genesis 11:1-9 – The Tower of Babel

Tom led the session on Genesis 10-11:9, but since I had some notes on Babel, here they are:

What would be the basis, manner and goal of good or bad unity?

The Tower of Babel & Pentecost: Unity false and true

Sermon video from around 17:45 here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5eWL7CnpWuU&t=1642s>

Cf 10:10 Nimrod connected to Babylon

V2 – moving eastwards may set off alarm bells because Adam and Eve were exiled East of Eden
 Here's a little reminder that we're no longer in the paradise garden, we're in a fallen world, and perhaps we're not headed God's way.

The people settle down and they come up with this project to bake bricks thoroughly (v3).

It seems they have all the best technology and great skill and dedication.

In many ways it could be all very impressive.

But maybe the Genesis writer thinks that good stone like what they have in Israel would have been better than these foreign Babylonian bricks.

Their real ambition becomes clear in v4:

“Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches up to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves, and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

Nothing necessarily wrong with cities in the Bible

Jerusalem the city of God

A new heavenly Jerusalem

The Bible: garden to garden city

Human beings were meant to rule and subdue the world and increase and fill it.

They are meant to cities and civilisation.

The City of God and the City of Man

A tower at the centre of the city

Defensive? Cf. God as fortress / strong tower / refuge / defence / security

Was the tower a temple? Cf. Athens, Rome

The word culture, comes from the world cult, which is associated with worship and reverence, religion and temples and so on.

Religion, to the ancient mind, was the centre and basis of any civilisation – it acted as the glue.

Unity comes from God or the gods and our relationship with them.

Our ultimate commitment binds us together.

And this tower (which may have been a temple) was intended to reach up to the heavens (v4).

It could seem something wonderful and heroic.

But there's no mention of God in it, is there?

Look again at vv3 and 4.

It's all about us and ourselves and what we are going to do for ourselves, is it not?

Here's a humanistic project without the God of the Bible, as far as we can see.

And wanting to reach up to heaven seems such a noble purpose.

But do they want to storm heaven, to usurp God, to take his place?

Like Adam and Eve in the Garden, they want to be like God without God – to be their own gods – to secure heaven for themselves, we might say, and keep God out of it all.

They want to make a name for themselves (v4).

It's all about them and their fame.

Whereas in the Bible we know the great concern is for the honour and glory of God's name.

In chapter 12v2, God tells Abram that he, God, will make Abram's name great. (similarly David in 2 Sam 7:9; 8:13)

So there are two ways you can seek a great name:

You can try to make your name great by your own unaided efforts.

Or you can look to God to bless you and make your name great.

If we wanted to put this in theological terms, we might say the people of Babel seek works righteousness: it's all about them, their efforts, their achievements, their invincible mighty performance, what they are going to do for themselves as they unite to make their great plans using all the best technology.

Or there is Abram who is to humbly look to God to receive grace by faith.

Here are two choices:

(1) us and our works

(2) God and his grace, which we receive by faith.

The people want to keep from being scattered (v4).

But their hope of unity and security fails.

There is no permanence, no safety without God.

The only human hope and future, really, ultimately, in the end, is to be found in the true and living God of the Bible – not in ourselves or in our substitutes for God.

In a way, these people are trying to defy their exile from Eden.

They don't want to be like Cain back in chapter 4, condemned to be a restless wanderer.

They are trying to find a new home and new fixed place.

But God's purpose is for them to spread out and fill the earth.

v5, God comes down.

(The essence of Biblical religion: not that you must reach up to heaven by your own marvellous efforts, but that God in his grace comes down and brings us to heaven.)

Here, however, God comes down in judgement.

I think we're meant to have a wry smile at v5.

They want to build this massive tower up to the heavens (v4), but God has to come down to see it, as it were.

(More anthropomorphic language – a truth expressed in human terms)

God is so high and lifted up that human beings would look like grasshoppers to him.

Our attempts to out-do God are of course pathetic and ridiculous in his sight.

Human ambition is met by a divine inspection.

Of course human beings, however united, determined and modern are never going to take heaven by force and displace God.

They say, "let us make bricks" and God says, "let us mix up their languages".

And of course the judgement of God prevails.

"Man proposes; God disposes." (Thomas à Kempis, "The Imitation of Christ")

And so, vv6 and 7, God mixes up their languages.

He makes a Babel, a babble of their speech.

And they get scattered.

Here's another exile like that from Eden, like that of Cain.

Their punishment fits their crime.

Godless unity of course ends in confusion and division.

Again, as in Eden, there is mercy in the judgement because God's confusion of their languages limits their evil.

V6: If human beings spoke only one language, nothing they plan would be impossible for them, God says, and it seems likely that human beings would conceive some pretty evil stuff.

God's judgement restrains them.

And God's judgement also fulfils his purposes.

Human beings are scattered, and so they fill the whole earth.

Pentecost as a (partial) undoing of the curse of Babel

The Word of God comes to them all in their own languages.

Here is a new basis for human unity: in Christ, by the Spirit.

Not now the tower of Babel, but the church of Jesus Christ unites a diverse humanity.

God has his own building project: to build his church.

One meaning of Babel could be "gate of God".

We could compare Jacob's ladder at Bethel in Genesis 28, which he calls the "the house of God... the gate of heaven." (Genesis 28:17)

Jesus is the true Jacob's ladder.

Jesus tells his disciples that rather like Jacob's ladder they will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending upon him (John 1:51).

Jesus is the true and better Jacob's ladder, the real gate of God and of heaven:

the meeting place of heaven and earth, the true way to heaven and to knowing God.

The true version of what the Babel builders were looking for is to be found only in Jesus.

True unity is to be found only in the Lord Jesus.

Jesus is the only basis for true community and civilisation.

Lasting hope, security and peace are in Jesus.

The only real eternal future and lasting home are in Jesus.

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When we aspire to heights too lofty, we topple into the depths

V2 – travelling east of Eden was the judgement on Adam and Eve’s sin (3:24; 4:16)

V3 – Israel’s stone thought superior to Babylonian brick?

V4 – the main temple in Babylon was called the Esagil, the house with the raised head (Wenham, p239)

V4 – a defying of the command to fill the earth? 1:28; 9:1 but they end up being scattered vv8-9

V6 echoes 3:22

V6 cf. Job 42:2 – only God’s purposes cannot be thwarted

V7 – us – angels? Cf Dt 32:8-9

V8 cf. expulsion from home after fall 3:24 and in the case of Cain 4:16

Cf. Is 14:13-15

Cf. Daniel 4:8, 19, Babylon the tree which reached to heaven

Rev 18:4, 20

Zeph 3:9

The nations arise as a result of God’s curse on sin

But one nation is going to arise from the blessing of God which will be a blessing to the nations

A new technology

A sense of their own power?

Now they can do it, they want to, they must

A hubristic vision

Pride, power

Mastery, control

A city and a tower (horizontal and vertical dimensions)

The tower as a meeting place of heaven and earth

In the face of Death, it seems we are all making sandcastles on the beach

They long for something that will outlast them – a legacy

Unity / stability / permanence

Collaboration / co-operation, but not for good

Babel – Babble – Babylon

Cf Is 40:22

How foolish to think that we could rival or replace God

The babel builders think God is not needed!

Redundant

Self-sufficiency

Glorying in our own skill, and strength, and cleverness, and ability

Humanity is put in its place

Our sin is limited, restrained – judgement / curse also an act of God's grace to prevent further evil

Fulfils God's plan for the filling of the earth

Division, confusion

The word Babel even sounds like the word for "folly". (Wenham, p235)

This is a foolish project.

The human plans – "let us make bricks" - (vv3-4) are thwarted by God's plans (vv6-7) – "let us mix up".

The divine inspection visit (v5) is the decisive centre of the narrative.

The great ziggurats of Mesopotamia were well known

Babylon and its temple tower

See the chiasm on Wenham p235.

<https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/sermons/9984/genesis-11-biblical-reading-and-reflections/>

Tim Keller – sermon on The Problem of The City - <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/the-problem-of-the-city-6288/>

Image: *The Tower of Babel* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1563) from Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tower_of_Babel