

The Towering-Tower: Genesis 11:1-9

Translation from the Hebrew BHS/BDB by J. Elliott Lein

And it came about
that the earth-entire had a single tongue;
all words shared.

A

And it came about,
as they were migrating from the East,
that they discovered a plain in the land of *Shinar*,
and they made habitation there.

And they spoke, each one to their neighbor:
“Be ye persuaded!
All of ye: be ye brickmakers making bricks;
All of ye: be ye stokers of the fires for burning.”

B

And it came about,
their bricks became like stones,
and oil-tar was melted for stacking-high.

And again they spoke:
“Be ye persuaded!
All of ye: be ye building a city
and a towering-tower with its head among the divine heavens
and all of ye: be ye building a name
to prevent scattering out upon the face of the earth-entire.”

C

And They descended, *YHWH*,
for perceiving the city and the towering-tower
which was built by the children of all humanity.

D

And spoke *YHWH*, “Behold!”
“The People are one, and for all of them a single tongue.
And here: they have just begun making.
And now: nothing will be impossible for them,
of all that which they plan to be making.”

C'

“Be ye persuaded!
Let Us be descending.
And let Us muddle, then and there, their languages
that they may not hear and obey
the human tongue of each their neighbor.”

B'

And scattered them, *YHWH*,
then and there upon the face of the earth-entire,
and they ceased toward the building of the city.
Therefore they proclaimed its name, *Babylonia*,
because then and there *babbeled* *YHWH*
the tongue of the earth-entire,
and then and there They made them scatter, *YHWH*,
upon the face of the earth-entire.

A'

Reading/Translation Notes

- **earth-entire:** Lit. “all the earth,” implying a single entity.
- **tongue:** Lit. “lip,” meaning “language.”
- **Shinar/Babylonia:** Babylon is in the Shinar region.
- **plain:** traditionally “valley,” but the Hebrew can also mean “plain” which makes more sense in context.
- **Be ye persuaded:** Lit. the imperative “[You] give [to us]!” This is a clear demand for the acquiescence of the addressee.
- **brickmaking:** “An explanation of Mesopotamian building techniques for the Hebrew audience. The text plays on sound (*levena...le-aven; hemer...la-homer*).”—E. Fox.
- **oil-tar:** Raw bitumen, a natural substance used for making cement-mortar for brick-building in Mesopotamia.
- **towering-tower:** Lit. “tower,” from g-d-l root forming words relating to largeness or growth, including “great.”
- **divine heavens:** Lit. “heavens/sky.” Used in its connection to the divine here, though Y_{HWH} must *descend* to even *see* it!
- **building a name:** “That is, make sure that we and our works will endure.” The narrator subverts their intention.
- **then and there:** Hebrew adverb *sham* can mean either/both.
- **muddle/babbed:** R. Alter: “*balal*, to ‘mix’ or ‘confuse,’ is a polemic pun on Akkadian ‘Babel.’” E. Fox’s “muddle” feels more *physical* (“tongue”) than Alter’s *intellectual* “baffle.”
- **Capitalized Pronouns:** Y_{HWH}’s self-address is in plural form; signaling a Royal We, a trinity-like identity, or divine court.

Commentary:

- Context: Genesis is completed/canonized during the period surrounding the Hebrew Exile in Babylon (see Is. 14:13-14).
- Note careful *chiastic* literary structure: two mirror pairs of three parts each (A, B, C) reflected at a focal transition (D).
- What follows this story is the beginning of Avraham’s narrative, as God takes a man out of Ur to give him a name.

Translation Commentary from Robert Alter

“Its top in the heavens” is a hyperbole found in Mesopotamian inscriptions for celebrating high towers, and to make or leave a “name” for oneself by erecting a lasting monument is a recurrent notion in ancient Hebrew culture. The polemic thrust of the story is against urbanism and the overweening confidence of humanity in the feats of technology.

“Come, let us.” As many commentators have noted, the story exhibits an intricate antithetical symmetry that embodies the idea of “man proposes, God disposes.” The builders say, “Come, let us bake bricks,” God says, “Come, let us go down”; they are concerned “lest we be scattered,” and God responds by scattering them. The story is an extreme example of the stylistic predisposition of biblical narrative to exploit interechoing words and to work with a deliberately restricted vocabulary. The word “language” occurs five times in this brief text as does the phrase “all the earth” (and the “land” of Shinar is the same Hebrew word as that for earth). *The prose turns language itself into a game of mirrors.*

“bake bricks and burn them hard.” A literal rendering of the Hebrew would be something like “brick bricks and burn for a burning.” This fusion of words reflects the striking tendency of the story as a whole to make words flow into each other. “Bitumen,” *heimar*, becomes *homer*, “mortar.” The reiterated “there,” *sham*, is the first syllable of *shamayim*, “heavens,” as well as an odd echo of *shem*, “name.” Meaning in language...is made possible through differences between terms in the linguistic system. Here difference is subverted in the very style of the story, with the blurring of lexical boundaries culminating in God’s confounding of tongues. The Hebrew *balal*, to “mix” or “confuse,” represented in this translation by “baffle” and “babble,” is a polemic pun on the Akkadian “Babel,” which might actually mean “gate of the god.” As for the phonetic kinship of babble and *balal*, *Websters* (1966) notes that a word like “babble” occurs in a wide spectrum of languages from Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit to Norwegian, and prudently concludes, “of echoic origin; probably not of continuous derivation but recoined from common experience.”

—From *The Five Books of Moses* by Robert Alter

Excerpt from J. P. Fokkelman

Babel lies in ruins! The tremendous metropolis has become a desolate ruin and therewith its name has become transparent for Israel, after the event. This is the conclusion which the Israelite observer has left us... Thus he muses from what is now a safe distance on how the fortune of the most feared and most powerful city can change, and he does so with a sneering pun, not without malicious pleasure, not without relief.

Was this narrator a Palestine farmer, who sees himself surrounded by too many rather than too few stones; a peasant who on the one hand finds his material ready at hand for his modest building achievements and who on the other hand hopes, when full of years, he will be spared the punishment which an unwished-for invader has in store for him: scattering stones all over his farmland? Or was he one of the semi-nomads, a class which, not excelling in architectonic ambitions, observes in anxiety mingled with wonder how the people in the river area, each a tiny wheel in a gigantic organisation, must slave away to build houses, towers and temples from clay and pitch?

...so much is certain, that our narrator belonged to a simple small community and that either the country village or the clan was his social horizon. This life must have signified great freedom for him when compared with the complicated and in his opinion oppressing hierarchy of “classes,” functions and tasks in Mesopotamian society, with the impressive and pretentious administration and organisation of the city-states founded by the Sumerians in the Country between the Rivers...

—From *Narrative Art in Genesis* by J. P. Fokkelman