The Towering-Tower

Prelude (Genesis 9:18-10:32)
The Drunkenness and Descendents of Noah

> Noah's sons who went out of the Ark were
> > Shem, Ham, and Yefet.
> > Now Ham is the father of *Canaan*.
> These three were Noah's sons,
> > and from these were scattered abroad
> > all the earth-folk.

There follows a brief narrative about Noah becoming the first vinter and the first drunk, and his son Ham in some manner mistreating him, upon which Ham's son Canaan is cursed to be a servant to his brothers. Then there is a new set of begettings finishing out chapters 9 and 10. The following are key points:

- These names are recognized by scholars to be the first attempt to create an ethnography—charting tribal locations and migrations—which as always has an agenda.

- Two sons of Ham are *Canaan* and *Mitzrayim* [Egypt]. These are the two primary adversaries of Israel in the early period. The Philistines, a later enemy, are also traced from this line, as are Babylon and Assyria.

- The mighty-hunter Nimrod is mentioned, likely referencing a great set of myths and stories we no longer have.

- "Peleg/Splitting, for in his days the earth-folk were split up."

- **The people are divided:** "...divided by their lands, each one after its own *tongue*: according to their clans, by their nations... These are the Sons of --- after their clans, after their *tongues*, by their lands, by their nations... *From these the nations were divided on earth after the Deluge.*"

The Towering-Tower: Genesis 11:1–9

Translation from the Hebrew by J. Elliott Lein

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

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

C 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."

D And They descended, Yʜᴡʜ,
    for perceiving the city and the towering–tower
    which was built by the children of all humanity.

And spoke Yʜᴡʜ, "Behold!"   **C´**
"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."

"Be ye persuaded!   **B´**
    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."

And scattered them, Yʜᴡʜ,   **A´**
    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* Yʜᴡʜ
    the tongue of the earth–entire,
    and then and there They made them scatter, Yʜᴡʜ,
    upon the face of the earth–entire.
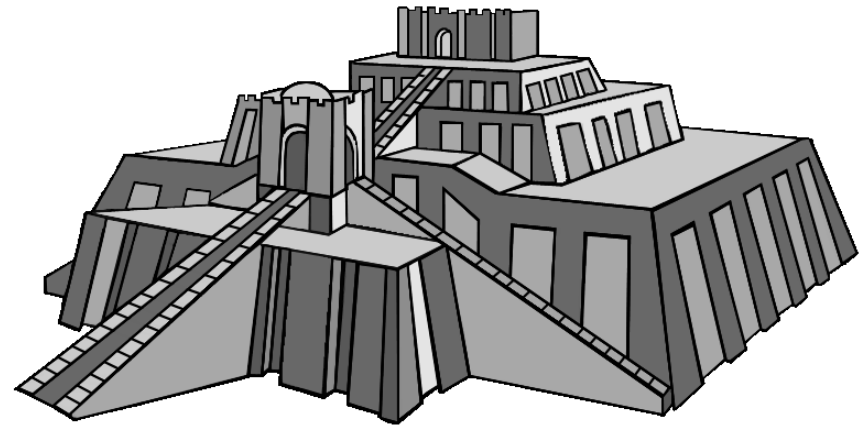
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Postlude (Genesis 11:10–32)
From Shem to Avram

Now these are the begettings of Terah:
  Terah begot *Avram*, Nahor, and Haran;
  and Haran begot *Lot*.
Haran died in the living-presence of Terah his father in the
  land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans.
Avram and Nahor took themselves wives;
  the name of Avram's wife was *Sarai*,
  the name of Nahor's wife was Mika—
  daughter of Haran, father of Mika and father of Yisca.

Now Sarai was barren, she had no child.

Terah took Avram his son and Lot son of Haran, his son's son,
  and Sarai his daughter-in-law, wife of Avram his son,
they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans, to go to the
  land of Canaan.
But when they had come as far as Harran, they settled there.
And the days of Terah were five years and two hundred years,
  then Terah died, in Harran.

Ziggurat of Ur, made of bricks.

Reading/Translation Notes
For the translation by J. Elliott Lein

- **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 Yнwн 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/babbeled:** 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:** Yнwн's self-address is in plural form; signaling a Royal We, a trinity-like identity, or divine court.

Commentary:

- **Context:** The writings in Genesis are completed/canonized during the period surrounding the Hebrew Exile in Babylon:

> And the [Babylonian] king said in his heart:
> "I will climb to the sky;
>> Higher than the stars of God
>> I will set my throne....
> I will match the Most High"
>> *Isaiah 14:13-14*

- Note the 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, as the biblical writer realized long before the influential Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, 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 New World Dictionary of the American Language* (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."

Commentary 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. "Babel" is the product of "*balal*", so Babel means "muddle". This is the conclusion which the Israelite observer has left us and for which he has drawn on etymological sources. 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 un-

wished-for invader has in store for him: scattering stones all over his farmland (reference II Kings 3:25, Is. 5:2)? 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? (A third possibility is that of a new fangled citizen with his ambivalence about the growth of court and machinery in—for example Salomonic, rising—Jerusalem.)

"From whatever consciousness" this story may have been written, 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.

Although all this has little bearing on the text and although it remains a speculative view of the text, we cannot dismiss it because this sense of freedom can still be perceived in the story of fallen Babel. The narrator seems to be released from a certain pressure, a pressure which his age experienced at the sight of the variety of that social polity, its pretensions, inspiring shudders and aversion—and also possibly its expansionism…[He] talks not only about the world of the people and the earthly polity, his pun is also essentially connected with his view of the relationship between God and men and his view of history…

Resources used

- *The Five Books of Moses* translation/notes by Everett Fox
- *The Five Books of Moses* translation/notes by Robert Alter
- *Narrative Art in Genesis* by J. P. Fokkelman
- *The Jewish Study Bible* translation/notes
- *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* with *Brown/Driver/Briggs Lexicon*