

THE CITY OF BABEL AND ITS TOWER

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The conventional interpretation of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9) is that humanity arrogantly challenged God's space by building a *tower; with its head reaching up to the heavens*. Genesis Rabbah (38:6) explains that they planned to do battle with God in His heavenly abode. This idea is also found in the anachronistic version of the narrative found in the Qur'an, where the Pharaoh mockingly and arrogantly asks his associate Haman to build a lofty tower. Pharaoh said: "O Haman! Fire up (a kiln to bake bricks) of clay, and build me a lofty tower, that I may mount up to the God of Moses: but as far as I am concerned, I think (Moses) is a liar!" (Qur'an 28:38). However, a careful reading of the Torah text shows that what they built was not just a tower, but an entire city made out of manufactured uniform bricks (Gen. 11:3-4); and the reason they built the city and the tower was not to challenge God or invade the heavens, but to *make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the whole earth* (Gen. 11:4).

In the aftermath of a catastrophically destructive flood, many generations of humans were fearful and anxiety-ridden. They felt very weak and vulnerable; and they only wanted to huddle together in one place. Humanity did not want curiosity to lead people to explore other locations and thus promote change and development. This went against God's blessing to *fill up the earth* in Genesis 9:7. Similarly, they did not want to expand their knowledge and vocabulary because that promotes nonconformity and diversity. Humans were proud that every single human being spoke the same language, and that their one language had only *a few words* (11:1, literal translation from the Hebrew).

When the post-flood humans said *to one another; come let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly* (11:3), they were doing much more than discussing building methods. Bricks are one of the first building materials created by human beings. Sun-dried bricks made of mud and straw are called "adobe." They were used in the famous ziggurat temples of Mesopotamia.

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But over time, rain and flood water will dissolve sun-dried mud and straw bricks, and cause them to crumble and break apart. Ancient brick makers learned to "burn" bricks by baking them in a very hot oven called a kiln. This would make the bricks very hard and durable. Manufacturing hundreds of thousands of bricks for very large building projects led to the first mass production factories. When the post-flood humans said *to one another; come let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly* (11:3) they wanted to build their city with uniform manufactured bricks instead of natural unhewn stones. The use of uniform bricks made it easier to construct giant building projects with much higher structures, and even a skyscraper-sized tower; for they thought that if another flood occurred, perhaps they could survive on the roofs of their tall buildings, or on top of their temple tower. Beyond this practical reason to use uniform, manufactured bricks, there was a powerful symbolic reason to use them as well. They did not want each stone to be a different shape and color from all the other stones in order to symbolize their wish to unify themselves by teamwork expressed as highly organized conformist factory behavior, as well as an all-encompassing common purpose. This lack of regard for the individual is expressed in the midrash that states that when a person died, he was not mourned; but when a brick fell and broke, everyone would weep (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, 24).

The biblical opposition to the use of baked bricks in a ritual/spiritual context may also be connected with our interpretation of the sin of the city builders. Immediately after the giving of the Ten Commandments the Torah says, *An altar of earth you shall make for me* (Ex. 20:21) and *If you make me an altar of stone, do not build it of hewn stone, for if you use a tool on it, you pollute it* (Ex. 20:25). Thus, natural unshaped building materials, symbolizing individuality, are preferred by the Torah to manufactured materials, symbolizing conformity.

The fear of dispersal and the desperate need to make a name for themselves demonstrates that the generations following the flood lacked both a self-confident individual identity and an established positive group identity. Their polytheistic account of the flood, found in the ancient Epic of Gilgamesh, relates that the gods decided to destroy humanity because humans made too much noise, and kept the gods from sleeping. These early humans believed that violence was natural, normal and thus inevitable. Widespread human and

animal violence would not be punished by the gods, because, in polytheistic myths the gods themselves spent a lot of time fighting and killing each other. The only resort was to build a city and tower.

Finally, they believed that one language would guarantee cooperation. This way they would not have to learn to respect social or personal differences, because there would be no differences between individuals or groups of people. There would be only one group of people, with one and the same language for all humanity. This seemed like an ideal way for humans to create harmony and avoid strife and violence.

Their plan for the city might have been modeled on beehives or termite mounds: lots of close contact, with a high degree of conformity and common purpose. When God saw what they were scheming, and what effects that master plan would have on the future of humanity, He confounded their language and dispersed them all over the surface of the earth. This geographical expansion was meant to promote linguistic, cultural and religious diversity, which in turn greatly enriched humanity's cultural, artistic and spiritual productivity. Indeed, there are thousands of known spoken languages today. Although globalization will lead to the disappearance of many languages and cultures, it is hard to argue that we should or ever will go back to the days when humanity had only *one language with a few words* (Gen. 11:1).



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