

BABEL OR BABYLON? A LEXICAL GRAMMATICAL ANALYSIS OF GENESIS 10:10 AND 11:9

ANDREW W. DYCK

INTRODUCTION

The ancient Hebrew (AH) word *Bäbel* is translated two ways in the Tanakh: ‘Babel’, and ‘Babylon,’ the capital of Babylonia. Of the 224 instances of *Bäbel*, only two are translated as Babel and they are both found in the book of Genesis, *The beginning of his kingdom was **Babel** and Erech and Accad and Calneh, in the land of Shinar* (Genesis 10:10) and *Therefore its name was called **Babel**, because there the LORD confused the language of the whole earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth* (Genesis 11:9). When observing popular English translations of the Torah, it is obvious that there is widespread agreement that *Bäbel* in those two instances should be translated as Babel. In an exploration into possible rationales for this translation, this study sets out to conduct a lexical grammatical analysis of *Bäbel* in Genesis 10:10 and 11:9 to determine if the typical translation Babel is indeed correct, or if it should rather be translated Babylon as seen in the other 222 instances in the Tanakh. Furthermore, this paper seeks out to discover if *Bäbel* references ‘Babylon’ like the 222 other instances, or if it in fact tells of a second spatial location that is distinct from Babylon and Babylonia. To accomplish this task, this article first explores historical and current treatments of *Bäbel* in lexicography. Second, this paper provides a lexical analysis that pays attention to the syntactic environment of *Bäbel* in Genesis 10:10 and 11:9 – my designated corpus. In the lexical analysis, some other instances of *Bäbel* in the Tanakh that are outside of the book of Genesis are also observed.¹ As previously stated, the AH word *Bäbel* is rendered as either ‘Babel’, or ‘Babylon’ in the Tanakh. However, it is unclear if ‘Babel’ and ‘Babylon’ are the same city, the capital of Babylonia, or are in fact separate physical locations.

TREATMENT OF *Bäbel* IN BIBLICAL DICTIONARIES AND TRANSLATIONS

TWOT, like many Hebrew-English lexicons, considers *Bäbel* to be translatable as either ‘Babylon’ or ‘Babel’. It is considered to reference the same

Andrew W. Dyck is a Ph.D. student at McMaster Divinity College. He specializes in linguistic research of ancient Hebraic Psalmic poetry, but is interested in several other areas of Tanakh research

city: ‘Babylon is the Greek spelling of the name which in Hebrew is uniformly ‘Babel’ [... and] refers to an ancient city on the eastern bank of the Euphrates about twenty miles south of Bagdad, near the modern village of Hilla in Iraq.’² Historically, ‘[t]he first definite occurrence of *bab-illi(m)* is in the texts of the Third Dynasty of Ur (2300-2200 BC[E], approximately Abraham’s day), although the Scriptures state that Babylon along with Erech and Akkad was one of the earliest cities in the South (Genesis 10:10).’³ In this instance, *TWOT* further emphasizes that ‘Babel’ and ‘Babylon’ are in fact referencing the same city although the reference in Genesis 10:10 most likely pre-dates extra biblical sources.⁴ But, the question remains. Why have two names for the same city?

The entry in *BDB* is brief at best.⁵ According to *BDB*, Genesis 10:10, and 11:9 are the two instances where *Bäbel* functions in connection with the verb *Bälal*, ‘confuse’ or ‘confound’. In those places the word is understood to refer to the country of Babylonia.⁶ In all other instances, *Bäbel* is best translated as ‘Babylon’ as it references ‘the ancient capital of Babylonia [...] situated on the Euphrates.’⁷ Therefore, in this instance, *Bäbel* translated as ‘Babel’ references the country, but when translated as ‘Babylon’ it references the capital of Babylonia. Thus, there is reason behind the distinct translation of *Bäbel* in Genesis 10:10 and 11:9.

Gesenius treats *Bäbel* in a similar fashion as *BDB*. He states that *Bäbel* is derived from the root verb *Bäbel* ‘confusion.’⁸ Gesenius compares *Bäbel* to the Syriac proper pronoun *Bäbel*, ‘confusion of speech, stammering, and as to the casting away of the second letter.’⁹ As a proper pronoun, Gesenius argues that *Bäbel* should be translated as ‘Babel’ or ‘Babylon’. Similar to *TWOT*, Gesenius explains that the term *Bäbel* references the same city. But, our initial question remains unanswered, why have two names for the same city?

HALOT treats *Bäbel* in a much simpler way. He simply states that *Bäbel* can function to reference either the people of, or the city of Babylon.¹⁰ Typically, it references the territory and empire of Babylon in the Tanakh. Holladay does not consider the uses of *Bäbel* in Genesis 10:10 or 11:9. Furthermore, Holladay does not include any comparative lexical information for understanding the present noun and does not argue for any connection between *Bäbel* and the verb *Bälal*. Thus, in this instance it can be understood

that *Bäbel* in all instances should be translated as 'Babylon', the capital of Babylonia.

Clines, the most up-to-date Hebrew-English lexicon, provides a single translation for *Bäbel*: 'Babylon.'¹¹ Clines sees no reason to translate *Bäbel* differently. He does not even consider 'Babel' to be a viable option as he does not include it in his extended or concise lexicons. Therefore, *Bäbel* references a single city, the capital of Babylonia.

Like all the above entries other than that of Clines, Swanson also has a brief treatment of *Bäbel* as he states that the word can reference either the tower of Babel in Genesis 11:9, or the land of Babylonia.¹² He, however, does not include any comparative lexical information for understanding the present noun and does not argue for any connection between *Bäbel* and the verb *Bäbel*. However, this once again leaves us wondering if Swanson does in fact understand the use of *Bäbel* in Genesis 11:9 to reference a distinct city separate from Babylon.

The problem becomes even more convoluted when the Old Greek (OG) translation of the *BHS* is brought into the discussion. In Genesis 10:10, the OG considers *Bäbel* to reference the capital city of Babylonia, Babylon, with 290 other instances of *Babulon*, the proper pronoun, in the Tanakh. In Genesis 11:9, the OG considers *Synchysis*, 'confusion' or 'tumult'¹³ to be the best translation of the word *Bäbel*. This is the only instance of *Synchysis* as a proper pronoun in the OG Tanakh. There are three other instances where *Synchysis* is rather used as a noun. In these other three instances (1 Samuel 5:6, 11; 14:20) *sýnchysis* is not used in parallel to *Bäbel*, but rather *mühû/mat* (1 Samuel 5:11), 'confusion,' 'panic,' or 'a deadly panic.'

Popular English translations cite *Bäbel* as 'Babel' in both Genesis 10:10 and 11:9: The only popular English version that translated *Bäbel* as 'Babylon' is the *NIV* in Genesis 10:10.¹⁴

In summary, following an observation of historical and current treatments of *Bäbel* in Genesis 10:10 and 11:9, the previously stated wide spread agreement of Babel as the proper translation is true in these instances - except for the *NIV* in Genesis 10:10. Most of the older lexicons consider Babel to be a viable translation of *Bäbel*. Yet, a more current lexicon such as the one by Clines considers Babylon to be the only proper translation. Yet, throughout this exercise in observation, we were presented with the question, is *Bäbel* in

Genesis 10:10 and 11:9 reference to a distinct city separate from Babylon, the capital of Babylonia, or, more simply, a second name for the same city?

A SYNTHESIS OF *Bäbel* IN GENESIS 10:10 AND 11:9

The following section presents a lexicographical synthesis of *Bäbel* in Genesis 10:10 and 11:9. An individual synthesis is presented for each verse. Then, at the end of the section, both sub-sections are brought together to determine a proper synthesis of *Bäbel* in AH as it should be translated and understood in English.

In Genesis 10:10, *Bäbel* exists within a list of three other spatial locations - most probably cities - *Erech and Accad and Calneh*. Each functions as objects of 'his kingdom' and are located within Shinar. In this instance, *Bäbel* functions similarly to many other occurrences of the *Bäbel* in the Tanakh where it is referenced as a spatial location and is translated 'Babylon': [...] and brought him to Babylon (2 Kings 25:7); [...] he brought them all to Babylon (2 Chronicles 36:18); *By the rivers of Babylon* (Psalm 137:1). Having the first appearance of 'Babylon' as a city, possibly the capital city of Babylonia, earlier than 2 Kings 17:30, *And the men of Babylon made Succoth-benoth* (NASB), may impact the historiography of this location in biblical texts. However, in Genesis 10:10, there is no lexicographical evidence that *Bäbel* should be translated as 'Babel.' It seems that, as previously stated, the NIV is correct in translating this instance as 'Babylon,' thus, referring to the capital city of Babylonia.¹⁵

In Genesis 11:9 *Bäbel* functions as the object of the clause *Therefore its name was called [...]* (NASB). Several scholars and previously cited dictionaries state, in this instance, *Bäbel* is modified or related to the governing verb of the following clause, *Bälal*, which in the greater co-text of 9b is [...] because there the LORD confused [Bälal] the language of the whole earth (NASB). While there does seem to be some relation between the verb *Bälal* and the proper pronoun *Bäbel*, there is no evidence in the Hebrew that suggests 'Babel' should be the proper translation. The furthest I would go in arguing a relation between these two words is to state that the proper pronoun *Bäbel* might have the semantic value of 'confusion.' Yet, this possible semantic value should not influence its translation as 'Babel.'

In observation of a proper synthesis of *Bäbel* in these two instances, there is no linguistic evidence that might suggest a different translation of *Bäbel* in Genesis 10:10 and 11:9 from the other 222 occurrences of *Bäbel* in the Tanakh. Therefore, I conclude that *Bäbel* in Genesis 10:10 and 11:9 references the same city as the other 222 occurrences of the same word throughout the Tanakh. Thus, the best translation of *Bäbel* in these two instances is 'Babylon' and references the capital city of Babylonia.

CONCLUSION: BABEL OR BABYLON?

This paper set out to provide a lexicographical analysis of *Bäbel* in Genesis 10:10 and 11:9 with the purpose to determine if this proper pronoun should be translated as 'Babel' or 'Babylon.' We first reviewed historical and current ways *Bäbel* has been treated. It was found that most lexicons, word books, and biblical dictionaries consider *Bäbel* to be properly translated as either 'Babel' or 'Babylon' when functioning as a proper pronoun that references a spatial location, a city. The only exception was Clines Hebrew-English lexicon, which stated that only 'Babylon' is an appropriate English treatment of the word with no semantic value that is parallel to 'confusion.' Outside of Clines' translation, it was unclear if the other lexicons and dictionaries suggested that *Bäbel* could reference two distinct cities, one the capital of Babylonia, and the other the location of a very tall tower. We then provided a lexicographical analysis of *Bäbel* in Genesis 10:10 and 11:9, also noting instances in Second Kings, Second Chronicles, and Psalm 137. It was found that in both instances in Genesis, 'Babylon' is the best and most effective translation. In these two instances, there is no linguistic evidence that would suggest a reference to two distinct cities, or a city with two different names. Furthermore, *Bäbel* most probably has no reference or semantic value that is similar or related to *Bälal*.

NOTES

1. My analysis will be done free of lexical fallacies as argued by Porter and Fewster in Porter, Stanley E. "Linguistic Issues in New Testament Lexicography," *Studies in the Greek New Testament: Theory and Practice* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), pp. 49-74; Fewster, *Creation Language*, 20-39. Porter provides a brief review of tendencies of modern linguists where they tend to return to older approaches - such as undue weight given to etymological analysis. Porter "Linguistic Issues," 64-66. Fewster also provides an interesting summary of traditional approaches to

lexicography in biblical Studies. Fewster primarily focuses on defining what ‘meaning’ is. For this study, ‘meaning’ is formed through synchronic and monosemous approaches.

2. Harris, R. Laird, et al. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), pg. 89.

3. *TWOT*, 89.

4. Other dictionaries simply state that the first reference and possible origins of Babylon was in the third millennia B.C.E. P.-A. Beaulie, *Dictionary of the Old Testament Historical Books*, pp. 106-113. For further reading on the historiography of Babylon, see Arnold, *Who were the Babylonians?*; Beaulie, “King Nabonidus and the Neo-Babylonian Empire,” pp. 969-79; Brinkman, *A Political History of Post-Kassite Babylonia*; Burstein, ed., *The Babyloniaca of Berossus*; Charpin, *Hammu-rabi de Babylone*; Finkel, “Adadapla-iddina, Esagil-kīn-apli, and the Series SA.GIG,” 143-59; Frame, *Rulers of Babylonia*; George, *Babylonian Topographical Texts*; Oates, *Babylon*; Sasson, “King Hammurabi of Babylon,” pp. 901-15; Sommerfeld, “The Kassites of Ancient Mesopotamia,” pp. 917-30; Verbrugge and Wickersham, *Berossos and Maneth*; Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon*.

5. Brown, Francis, et al. (BDB), *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*. Translated by Edward Robinson. (New York/London: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), *Bäbel*.

6. *BDB*, *Bäbel*.

7. *BDB*, *Bäbel*.

8. Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon*, *Bäbel*.

9. Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon*, *Bäbel*. Gesenius points the reader to ‘for *haphtaph*, Lehrgeb. 134, 869; others [who reject the *Scripture* account as to the origin of the name, and follow their own fancies] make it i.q. *Belus* gate, i.e. hall of Belus.’

10. Holladay, William Lee. *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, based

upon the lexical work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), *Bäbel*; Köhler, Ludwig, et al. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. 5 vols., (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1994), *Bäbel*.

11. Clines, David J. A. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), *Bäbel*.

12. Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages*, *Bäbel*.

13. *GING*, *Eugrusis*.

14. The first centers of his kingdom were **Babylon**, Erech, Akkad, and Calneg, in {Or Erech and Akkad - all of them in} Shinar. {That is, Babylonia} [*NIV*]

15. The OG also treats *Bäbel* similarly to my conclusion—a translation as ‘Babylon’ and not ‘Babel.’ The OG uses ‘*Babylōn*’: *Kai egeneto archē tēs basileias autou Babylōn, kai Orech, kai Archad, kai Chalannē, en tē gē Senaar, The primary regions of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Akkad, and Calneh in the land of Shinar. (NASB)* This is parallel to the translation of 2 Kings 25:6, 2 Chronicles 36:18, and Psalm 137:1 (136:1).