A LEXICAL GRAMMATICAL ANALYSIS OF GENESIS 10:10 AND 11:9

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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. 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

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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.’ 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).’ 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. But, the question remains. Why have two names for the same city?

The entry in BDB is brief at best. 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. In all other instances, Bäbel is best translated as ‘Babylon’ as it references ‘the ancient capital of Babylonia […] situated on the Euphrates.’ Therefore, in this instance, Bäbel translated as ‘Babel’ refers to 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.’ Gesenius compares Bäbel to the Syriac proper pronoun Bäbel, ‘confusion of speech, stammering, and as to the casting away of the second letter.’ 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. 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.’ 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. 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’ 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.

In summary, following an observation of historical and current treatments of Bäbel in Genesis 10:10 and 11:9, the previously stated widespread 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
lexicography in biblical Studies. Fewster primarily focuses on defining what ‘meaning’ is. For this study, ‘meaning’ is formed through synchronic and monosemous approaches.


3. TWOT, 89.


6. BDB, Bäbel.

7. BDB, Bäbel.


9. Gesenius, Gesenius’ Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon, Bäbel. Gesenius points the reader to ‘for haphutaph, 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.’


12. Swanson, Dictionary of Biblical Languages, Bäbel.

13. GING, Eugrysis.

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).