

An Introduction

This will be a rather in-depth Bible study into the incredible language and use of language in Genesis 11:1-9: the Tower of Babel. This is one of the most incredible pieces of literature in the Bible, but it is often overlooked. I hope dearly to provide a whole new way of appreciating just how amazing this narrative is. If you're not already aware of what exactly the final verse means, you are in for an exciting ride!

It's easy for Christians today to read the account of the Tower of Babel and assume that it is an ancient primeval legend, along the lines of the other accounts of Genesis 1-11, such as the Serpent in the Garden and Noah's Flood. This largely stems from the traditional view that Genesis was authored by Moses, though as scholarship has developed in recent centuries, that view has largely fallen out of favour. In reality, while The Tower of Babel was certainly deliberately placed at the end of Genesis 1-11 to close out the primeval history, the story was more likely written in a much later period; possibly even post-exile, by Jews captive in Babylon.

As a note, the date the story was authored, the reason for its authorship, and whether or not it is an historically accurate account of a real event, have no bearing on its status as a piece of God-ordained Scripture, and regardless of how this study will conclude, it is still theologically rich, and personally one of my favourite Bible stories—specifically because of the things I will explain anon.

Some Historical Context

To begin, 'Babel' in the story is literally just Babylon. Generally speaking, most scholars agree that the Tower of Babel was likely a ziggurat, an ancient temple of worship used by many ancient Near Eastern cultures, including Babylon. The assumption is that the Israelites saw their neighbours building such structures; inspiring this narrative. The two main contenders in scholarly thought are the grand building projects of Nebuchadnezzar I (1123 – 1101 BC) and Nebuchadnezzar II (605 – 562 BC). Anyone familiar with Ancient Near-Eastern history will know that Nebuchadnezzar II was the king that exiled the Jews during the Babylonian captivity.

Literary Structure: Both a Parallelism and a Chiasm

But with the historical context out of the way, the thing that fascinates me the most about the Tower of Babel is the *way* in which it was written. As you will soon see, the story is an incredible work of literary art. It is a feature of Scripture that often gets lost when translated into other languages; the Hebrew in this passage is incredible—there is rhyming, alliterations, and even, as we will soon see, plays on words. If you haven't already, now would be a good time to read the passage, Genesis 11:1-9, for yourself.

First of all, the entire story is written in such a way as to show God's actions mirroring the actions of the people of Babel. The story can be split in half, at verse 5—that which comes before is the actions of the people, and that which comes after is the actions of God. Most of this is preserved in English, so we can see exactly how the author has repeated the same kind of language.

v. 1	"one language"	v. 6	"one language"
v. 2	"there"	v. 7	"there"
v. 3	"each other"	v. 7	"each other"
v. 4	"build ... a city"	v. 8	"building the city"
v. 4	"name"	v. 9	"its name"
v. 4	"lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth"	v. 9	"the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth"

But not only is the second half a repetition of the first half, but also a reversal. The words used in the second half mirror the words used in the first half in reverse order. This is known as a chiasm, and is very common throughout the Bible. In particular, The Tower of Babel is considered one of the finest examples of a chiasm in the Hebrew Bible.

A	"the whole earth had one language" (v. 1)
B	"there" (v. 2)
C	"they said to one another" (v. 3)
D	"Come, let us make bricks" (v. 3)
E	"let us build ourselves" (v. 4)
F	"a city and a tower" (v. 4)
G	"the LORD came down" (v. 5)
F ¹	"the city and the tower" (v. 5)
E ¹	"which the children of man had built" (v. 5)
D ¹	"Come, let us go down and there confuse" (v. 7)
C ¹	"one another's speech" (v. 7)
B ¹	"from there" (v. 8)
A ¹	"the language of all the earth" (v. 9)

To have both a parallelism and a chiasm at the same time, to this extent, covering the entire narrative, is not common, and shows a certain level of artistry on the part of the narrator.

Literary Alliterations

The things that don't translate well to English, however, are the specific words being used in the story. This is the thing that blows my mind the most. As a reminder, this is a story about language and the use of language, and the way in which God made language confusing for the people in the story. Keep that in mind as we explore how language is used.

First of all, 'Babel' in the language spoken in Babylon, would be pronounced like *balibu*. The word means 'Gate of God.' So 'Babylon' was the Gate of God, or the Gate of the Gods, for the Babylonians, which seems appropriate, given that the Tower of Babel was apparently going to be high enough to reach the heavens. Now, the name of the city is not given to the audience—not until the last verse. In English, we have a subtitle, "The Tower of Babel," which, in a sense, is a spoiler for the end of the story. If the story was being told back in the day, the audience would have basically been trying to guess which city the narrator was talking about. So, to leave clues, the author constantly uses words that sound similar, or use similar sounds.

For example, "let us make bricks", would be pronounced *nilbenah lebenim*. The opposite verb, based on our chiasm diagram, would be "let us confuse", which is pronounced *nabelah*. It's deliberately ironic that the Hebrew word for 'confuse' would be easily confused for another word used earlier. There are other examples, too: "come, let us build ourselves..." is *habah nibneh lanu*; "brick for stone" is *lahem hallebenah le'aben*. The story ends up sounding *almost* like a tongue twister when read aloud in Hebrew.

Like I said, these words give some indication as to the end of the story. One could describe verses 1-8 as a set-up for verse 9, which could literally be considered a punchline.

The Punchline

Like I said at the start, if you're not aware of what verse 9 is, exactly, this is an opportunity to think about the Tower of Babel in a whole new way. The city of Babylon was *balibu* in Akkadian, the language spoken by the Babylonians. The Hebrew word for "confused" is *balel*. The narrator constantly uses words that sound similar

to both of these, and some words that even rhyme with *balel*, all so that when it comes to the end of the story, the narrator concludes with "And that's why the city is called *balel*, deliberately saying something that is *almost* but *not quite* the actual name of the city, having navigated what was otherwise a labyrinth of tricky language. Despite the story being known in English as "The Tower of Babel," the name of the city is never actually said in the story.

If you're anything like me, you will be sufficiently amazed at the fact that there seems to be a literal joke in the Bible—hopefully you find it amusing, as would seem to be its purpose. Within a story about God making communication through language difficult, there is a play on words wherein the narrator is confused about the name of a city because in his/her language, the word for confused (*balel*) is very similar to the word the foreigners in that city use as the name of their city (*balibu*).

So What's the Point?

As hilarious as this joke is, and as creative and artistic as the writing itself is, you may be left wondering 'what's the point of it?' at the end. After all, it is still Biblical Scripture, and the Word of God.

The first thing I'll mention is that this joke is being made at the expense of the Babylonians—not just verse 9, but also verse 5. In verse 5, we see that the tower the Babylonians are so proud of, the so-called 'gate of god' is so small and far from the heavens that God has to come down from heaven just to see it. Obviously this is a facetious anthropomorphism of God, and not a misrepresentation of theology—the point is that the great temple of the Babylonians is being mocked. Remember, these are the ruthless barbarians who captured and exiled the Jews, and if this story was inspired by the building works of Nebuchadnezzar II, it may have been written while the Jews were still *in exile*, making this essentially a prison joke about the guards.

But more importantly, there is a lesson to be learned. As with most of the primeval history found in Genesis, the cautionary tales are about humanity choosing their own plans over God's plans. There is little opportunity nowadays for humans to refuse to fill the earth or build a tower to heaven, but that is not the point. The point is the arrogance and hubris of humanity to think that they can be like the gods or reach the heavens through their own means.

Babylon was an incredibly powerful and wealthy superpower—they had control over a *massive* portion of Africa and Eurasia, and they were incredibly proud of their achievements. This story is one where the proud are knocked down a few pegs and reminded of who is truly in control.

The takeaway from the story is to remember that no matter how great we think we are; how great our achievements are; how great our reputation is, that we are less than ants in comparison to God, and he can confuse our plans and scatter our ambitions with ease. We can never reach the heavens on our own and we have to rely on him in order to do so. No amount of tower-building, be it wealth, power, security, reputation, or status, is a 'gate to God.'