

GENESIS 11

THE TOWER OF BABEL

Overview

Genesis 11 is a variation on the earlier Genesis theme of human efforts bridging the gap between heaven and earth by defiant transgressions rather than through strict obedience to God’s law.¹ Nowhere is this theme more explicit than in the attempt to build the Tower of Babel, a “tower whose top assaults the sky—a perfect and natural metaphor for the human assault on the divinely ordained cosmos.”²

The tower and construction techniques related in Genesis 11 match descriptions of Mesopotamian temples, called ziggurats. Records are scarce for the earliest ziggurats, but the inscription of Nebuchadnezzar II on a later ziggurat built at Babylon attests the use of “bitumen and baked brick throughout” the structures as described in the biblical account (11:3).³ More intriguingly, this inscription gives an elaborate description of how workers were gathered from throughout the empire to execute the project, recalling the biblical imagery of “confounded” (Hebrew *bālal* = “to mix or mingle”) languages and peoples.⁴

While the account of Babel is valuable, we should not forget its important role as the final flourish of the extended prologue that chapters 1–11 provide for the later chapters of Genesis and the rest of the

1 Ronald S. Hendel, “Of Demigods and the Deluge: Toward an Interpretation of Genesis 6:1–4,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (1987): 23.

2 Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *The Eden Narrative: A Literary and Religio-historical Study of Genesis 2–3* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 127.

3 Andrew George, “A Stele of Nebuchadnezzar II (Tower of Babel stele),” in *Cuneiform Royal Inscriptions and Related Texts in the Schøyen Collection*, ed. Andrew George (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2011), 160.

4 George, “Stele of Nebuchadnezzar II,” 160. On the idea that such mixing of peoples was being condemned in the Tower of Babel story, see Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God’s Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 400.

Old Testament. After the destruction of Babel, “God will abandon efforts to educate all of humankind all at once; instead, He will choose to advance His plan for human beings by working first with only one nation. After Babel, the Bible will turn directly to its main subject, the formation of the nation of Israel.”⁵

Happily, however, even though God turned His attention to Israel, He will not abandon the other nations. Through Abraham, Israel was commissioned to be the instrument through which God will bless all the nations of the earth (see Genesis 22:18). God will continue to carry out His objective to make the whole earth “a temple-city filled with people who have a holy or priestly status.”⁶

In the nine verses that make up the account of the Tower of Babel, we have “a short but brilliant example of Hebrew story telling.”⁷ To begin with, we marvel at how “in 121 words or two minutes,”⁸ the author has created a literary masterpiece. Ingenious word and sound parallels between verses, “ironic linkages between sections and ideas,”⁹ and a beautiful economy of style are readily apparent to readers of Hebrew. In its original tongue “the prose turns language itself into a game of mirrors.”¹⁰

Going further, scholars have noted the obvious chiasmic features of the story.¹¹ For example, Ellen van Wolde’s brilliant tower diagram of the Tower of Babel story visually demonstrates how the words and phrases elegantly structure the account, showing precisely how the city of Babel is incrementally built up by men (verses 1–4] and then is taken down step-by-step by God (verses 5, 7, 8, 9).¹² Not only the verses but also the key phrases or terms within each verse are reversed in the second half that follows verse 6.¹³

Source

Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God’s Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 379–409.

5 Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York, NY: Free Press 2003), 217.

6 T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 30.

7 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 234.

8 Cited in Ellen van Wolde, *Words Become Worlds: Semantic Studies of Genesis 1–11* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1994), 84.

9 Everett Fox, trans., *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1995), 46.

10 Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2004), 59.

11 See, for example, Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 235–236.

12 van Wolde, *Words Become Worlds*, 89. Compare Proverbs 11:11: “A city is built up [literally raised up] by the blessing of the upright but it is torn down by the speech of the wicked” (translation in Phillip Michael Sherman, *Babel’s Tower Translated: Genesis 11 and Ancient Jewish Interpretation* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013), 76.

13 For an adaptation of Ellen van Wolde’s diagram, see Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God’s Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 387.

Related verses

Genesis 11

Genesis 11:1. The People Are of One Language and One Speech

11:1. “the whole earth.” Does this phrase necessarily imply that the same language was being spoken by every person on the globe? Hugh Nibley pointed out that the Hebrew word *eretz* can mean either “earth” or “land,” and it is impossible to know which is which except from context.¹⁴ It is possible that the Book of Mormon took a more limited view of the events than did Genesis since it simply says the language of “the people” was confounded (Ether 1:33).

11:1. “one language, and of one speech.” The Joseph Smith Translation gives this phrase as “of *the same* language, and of *the same* speech.”¹⁵ Ronald Hendel interpreted this as “one language and the same words.”¹⁶ Though the two parts of the phrase, “one language” and “one speech,” could be taken as synonyms, they actually convey different things. The difference is explained in the comments on “one language” and “one speech” below.

11:1. “one language.” Literally “one lip” (Hebrew *safah ’echat*). It seems we are meant to understand that the “one language” of Genesis 11:1 is Sumerian, Akkadian, or even Aramaic rather than a supposed universal protolanguage. The sense is that “in addition to the local languages of each nation (Genesis 10:5, 20, 31), there existed ‘one language’ which made communication possible throughout the world.”¹⁷

From this perspective, as Victor Hamilton argued, it “is unlikely that Genesis 11:1–9 can contribute much, if anything, to the [history of the] origin of languages. . . . [T]he diversification of languages is a slow process, not something catastrophic as Genesis 11 might indicate.”¹⁸ For this reason, it seems more reasonable to read the story as an account of how a Babylonian language used for cooperative projects disappeared from common use than to embrace the “highly imaginative explanation of language diffusion” that is often depicted (and parodied) in cartoons and popular media.¹⁹

¹⁴ Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites*, ed. John W. Welch, Darrell L. Matthews, Stephen R. Callister, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* 5 (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1988), 172. See also Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God’s Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 428.

¹⁵ Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 120, 634.

¹⁶ Ronald S. Hendel, quoted in Harold W. Attridge et al., eds., *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, rev. ed. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2006), 19, Genesis 11:1.

¹⁷ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 350.

¹⁸ Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 358.

¹⁹ For a scientific view of the diversification of languages, see Bradshaw and Larsen, *Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*,

11:1. “one speech.” Literally “one [set of] words” (Hebrew *devarim achadim*, using a rare plural form of “one”).²⁰ André LaCocque translated the phrase as “with a few subjects/utterances” and understood it as a “severe limitation of interest” among the builders.²¹ In other words, the narrator criticized the project because the common purpose of building the tower eventually became all-consuming, crowding out more important matters.²²

Source

Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God’s Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 411–412.

Related verses

Genesis 11:1

Genesis 11:2. The People Journey to Shinar

11:2. “And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east.” In the Joseph Smith Translation, we read, “And it came to pass *that many journeyed from the east*, and as they journeyed from the east.”²³

11:2. “as they journeyed.” André LaCocque, following J. P. Fokkelman, observed that “the people arrive ‘there’ ‘more or less accidentally’ as indicated by the verb *nasa* ‘(to journey)’ ‘typical of nomadic mobility.’”²⁴

11:2. “they.” The narrative here is unusual in that it “begins with a subject that is neither introduced nor described in more detail than ‘they.’ The reference is undoubtedly to ‘the people.’ But it is striking that they are not presented with a personal name or a collective name but with an undifferentiated ‘third person plural.’”²⁵ In short, the people who will seek to make themselves a name (see 11:4) are—appropriately at this point—nameless.

398–403 (see also 438nn11–20).

20 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 238.

21 André LaCocque, *The Captivity of Innocence: Babel and the Yahwist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 43.

22 Meir Zlotowitz, *Bereishis/Genesis: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1986), 1:333–334.

23 Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 120, 634.

24 André LaCocque, *The Captivity of Innocence: Babel and the Yahwist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 28.

25 Ellen van Wolde, *Words Become Worlds: Semantic Studies of Genesis 1–11* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1994), 96.

11:2. “from the east.” Hebrew *miqqedem*, or in other words, “eastward”—meaning toward Mesopotamia from an orientation point to the west.²⁶ Throughout the first half of Genesis, “eastward movement is repeatedly associated with increasing distance from God.”²⁷ For example, Abraham’s subsequent “return from the east is [a] return to the Promised Land and . . . the city of ‘Salem,’” being “directed toward blessing.”²⁸ Thus, “humanity is going eastward, prolonging the initial migration since the exit from Eden. . . . Their settlement in the east is already in and of itself a token of their rebellion against God.”²⁹

11:2. “they found a plain.” The Hebrew verb “implies that they came upon what they were seeking.”³⁰

11:2. “plain.” “Ironically, the action occurs in a valley. (Settling in a valley contrasts with erecting a huge tower that will compensate for the absence of mountains in Mesopotamia.) . . . In ancient Israel, valleys are seen with a certain suspicion. God’s [preferred] locales . . . for His [appearances] are mountains: Sinai, Horeb, Nebo, and Zion. Nothing good is expected to happen in a valley [note, for example, the valley of death in Psalm 23:4].”³¹

11:2. “land of Shinar.” In other words, “southern Mesopotamia or Babylonia, the ancient land of Sumer.”³² In addition to its universal lesson for humanity, the story of Babel/Babylon also specifically “serves to mock the pretensions of the contemporary imperial power of Mesopotamia.”³³

26 Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, vol. 2, *From Noah to Abraham*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem, Israel: Magnes Press, 1997), 240; LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence*, 27.

27 Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *In God’s Image and Likeness 1: Creation, Fall, and the Story of Adam and Eve*, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 161.

28 John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 59; Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical, and Theological Commentary* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2001), 117. See also Genesis 14:17–20.

29 LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence*, 44.

30 Meir Zlotowitz, *Bereishis/Genesis: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1986), 1:335.

31 LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence*, 27. Cassuto concluded that the Hebrew *biq’a* is often rendered in English as “valley” (Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, vol. 2, *From Noah to Abraham*, trans. Israel Abrahams [Jerusalem, Israel: Magnes Press, 1997], 240). See also 1 Kings 20:28, where the word for “valley” is ‘*amaqim*. The plains of Moab in Numbers 22 are an example of valleys being treated with contempt; Sheol evidently is underground and is foreshadowed by the Hinnom valley in Jerusalem. In Deuteronomy 34:1, Nebo is set in opposition to the plains of Moab.

32 Ronald S. Hendel, quoted in Harold W. Attridge et al., eds., *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, rev. ed. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2006), 19n11:2.

33 Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *The Eden Narrative: A Literary and Religio-historical Study of Genesis 2–3* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 127.

11:2. “Shinar.” See Genesis 10:10; 14:1, 9; Joshua 7:21; Isaiah 11:11; Zechariah 5:11. “Significant is the text of Daniel 1:2, where ‘Shinar’ is used in a clearly disparaging way; the context comments about ‘the treasury house of [Nebuchadnezzar’s] gods’ and again associates Babylon with an idolatrous shrine.”³⁴

Source

Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God’s Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 412–413.

Related verses

Genesis 11:2

Genesis 11:3. The People Conceive the Building Project

11:3. “they said one to another.” “As the story more than hinted from the start, the project for building the city depends on human speech.”³⁵

11:3. “Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly.” The creation of brick was a long process in the ancient Near East.³⁶ In the Babylonian epic *Enuma Elish*, bricks were molded for a whole year before the process of construction began.³⁷

The repetition of simple words highlights both the singlemindedness and the simplemindedness of the people. In an effort to reproduce the Hebrew more literally, André LaCocque gave this as “Come! Let us brick bricks [Hebrew *nilbena leveniyim*] that we’ll flame in the flame.”³⁸ Wenham noted that “the Hebrew words for ‘make bricks,’ ‘for stone,’ and ‘build for ourselves’ contain the consonants *n, b, l*, which spell ‘mix up’ (v. 7) or ‘Babel’ (v. 9) and evoke the word ‘folly’ (Hebrew *nebalah*).”³⁹

34 LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence*, 28.

35 Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York, NY: Free Press 2003), 225.

36 Phillip Michael Sherman, *Babel’s Tower Translated: Genesis 11 and Ancient Jewish Interpretation* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013), 27.

37 See Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God’s Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 382.

38 André LaCocque, *The Captivity of Innocence: Babel and the Yahwist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 25. Similarly, Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, vol. 2, *From Noah to Abraham*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem, Israel: Magnes Press, 1997), 241, gave this as “burn them to a burning” (Hebrew *venisrfah lisrefah*).

39 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 239.

Jewish tradition paints a wicked inversion of values that accompanied the work of building the tower: “If someone fell to their death, they paid no attention, but if a single brick fell they sat down and wept, saying: ‘Woe unto us! How long will it take now for us to get a replacement?’”⁴⁰

11:3. “Go to.” Leon Kass commented, “Speech is here used by human beings to exhort to action and to enunciate a project of *making*, for the first time in Genesis. ‘Come’ (or ‘go to’; Hebrew *havah*) means ‘prepare yourself,’ ‘get ready to join in our mutual plan.’ Each man thus roused his neighbor to the joint venture: ‘Let us *make*.’ Hortatory speech is the herald of craft. And craft enables man to play creator: God, too, had said, ‘Let us make’ (1:26).”⁴¹ Going further, Kass noted, “The verb used [in the story of Creation] is *asah*, ‘to do or make,’ while the verb used here by the men of Babel is *banah*, ‘to build or make,’ the same verb used in the second creation story when the Lord God builds woman from the rib of man. The Babel builders will use the verb *asah* in the sequel, ‘Let us make for ourselves a name.’”⁴²

11:3. “they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar.” The point of this little digression is to explain Babylonian construction techniques in contrast to Israelite practice: the Babylonians were handicapped by the rarity of stone. Umberto Cassuto saw mockery in this verse, which he paraphrased as “the poor creatures did not even have hard stone for building such as we have in the land of Israel, and which we bind together with mortar!”⁴³ It is also easy to hear echoes of the contrast between Mesopotamian structures built upon the river flood plains and Israelite structures built on rocky elevations within Jesus’s parable of the foolish man and the wise man (see Matthew 7:24–27; Luke 6:47–49).

Reproducing the sound-play of the Hebrew words, Everett Fox gave this translation: “So for them brick-stone [*levena*] was like building-stone [*le-aven*], and raw-bitumen [*hemer*] was for them like red-mortar [*la-homer*].”⁴⁴ “The accent is on the artificiality of the enterprise: counterfeited materials to build the sham mountain that the ziggurat imitated. This purely *human* production parallels the Hebrew slavery in Egypt, according to Exodus 1:14 (where incidentally the words ‘bricks’ and ‘mortar’ are found). So even the term ‘brick’ in Genesis 11 is loaded with bad memories in Israel.”⁴⁵ According to Exodus 20:25 and Joshua 8:31, the use of iron (as opposed to uncut stone) tools to build an altar would “pollute” the altar.⁴⁶

40 Marc-Alain Ouaknin and Éric Smilévitch, eds. and trans., *Chapitres de Rabbi Éliézer (Pirqué de Rabbi Éliézer): Midrach sur Genèse, Exode, Nombres, Esther* (Lagrasse, France: Éditions Verdier, 1992), 146.

41 Kass, *Beginning of Wisdom*, 225.

42 Kass, *Beginning of Wisdom*, 225.

43 Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham*, 241.

44 Everett Fox, trans., *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1995), 48.

45 LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 29.

46 See LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence*, 29.

11:3. “slime.” “Asphalt, used for making cement.”⁴⁷

Source

Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Jeffery M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God’s Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 313–314.

Related verses

Genesis 11:3

Genesis 11:4. The People Propose to Make a Name for Themselves

11:4. “whose top may reach unto heaven.” The Joseph Smith Translation softens this expression: “whose top *will be high, nigh* unto heaven.”⁴⁸ “To be stressed is the ludicrous paradox of building such a column in a valley or a depression.”⁴⁹

11:4. “let us make us a name.” To make a name for oneself means to achieve fame and renown. The phrase “men of renown” in Genesis 6:4 and Moses 8:21 literally means “people of name.”⁵⁰ These verses link to Nimrod (Genesis 10:8) by their common reference to “mighty man/men” (Hebrew *gibbor/gibborim*). “The desire for a name anticipates God’s promise of a great name to Abraham (Genesis 12:2), who serves as a counterpoint to the men of Babel.”⁵¹ Of course, “Abraham does not make a name for *himself*.”⁵² John T. Strong argued that the effort of the people of Babel to make a name for themselves amounted to “defacing the image of God . . . scratching off the name of God and replacing it with their own name.”⁵³

Because the Babel story is set in the explicit context of the construction of a temple city, we should not neglect the possibility that the desire of the builders to make a name for themselves has its roots in temple ritual.

⁴⁷ Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 48.

⁴⁸ Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 120, 634.

⁴⁹ André LaCocque, *The Captivity of Innocence: Babel and the Yahwist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 30.

⁵⁰ See Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God’s Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 230.

⁵¹ Ronald S. Hendel, quoted in Harold W. Attridge et al., eds., *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, rev. ed. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2006), 19n11:4.

⁵² LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence*, 31.

⁵³ John T. Strong, “Shattering the Image of God: A response to Theodore Hiebert’s Interpretation of the Story of the Tower of Babel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127 (2008), 625–634, cited in LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence*, 45.

The importance of naming as it relates to Mesopotamian rites of investiture and Israelite temple ritual is well known.⁵⁴ The idea also has parallels to the Mesopotamian story known as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.⁵⁵

Nebuchadnezzar, who restored the ziggurat at Babylon, recorded in a commemorative inscription, “The fortifications of Esagila and Babylon I strengthened, and made an everlasting name for my reign.”⁵⁶

11:4. “lest we be scattered.” The following reading is implied in this verse: “lest we be scattered *again*.” “This revealing motivation is to be read against the background of Genesis 11:2. There the crowd is changing its collective identity from nomadism to sedentary life. . . . The Babel story starts with dispersion and ends with dispersion.”⁵⁷ “What man did his utmost to prevent, he is condemned to suffer by the decree of heaven.”⁵⁸

11:4. “scattered.” The Hebrew verb used here for “scattered” (*puts*) “always conveys a negative sense. . . . [It] denotes the loss of identity. . . . [It] has to do with the dissolution of Babylon itself by means of the same weapon (the scattering over the whole earth) used by Babylon at the time of the destruction of Judah and especially of Jerusalem.”⁵⁹ The ruin implied is absolute; the Hebrew term is used elsewhere to mean “shatter” and “pulverize.”⁶⁰

Everything in the story up to this point has been driven by the speech of the builders. However, when “the work . . . is interrupted and the workers dispersed, not one word is uttered—not in surprise, protest, anger, or sorrow. It is a silence that speaks volumes: after the sacred silence of the ritual comes the sullen silence of emptiness.”⁶¹ This silence can be compared to the speechless actions of Adam and Eve in making aprons after their transgression.⁶²

54 See Bradshaw and Larsen, *Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 390.

55 Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 178n24.

56 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 83.

57 LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence*, 52.

58 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 240.

59 J. Severion Croatto, “A Reading of the Story of the Tower of Babel from the Perspective of Non-Identity: Genesis 11:1–9 in the Context of Its production,” in *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 220–221.

60 See LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence*, 33. For examples of the Hebrew term translated as “shatter” and “pulverize,” see Isaiah 27:9; Jeremiah 13:14; 48:12; 51:20–23; Psalm 2:9; 137:9.

61 LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence*, 41.

62 See Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *In God’s Image and Likeness 1: Creation, Fall, and the Story of Adam and Eve*, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 258.

Source

Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God's Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 414–416.

Related verses

Genesis 11:4

Genesis 11:5. God Sees the Hearts of the People

11:5. “to see.” The aspirations of the builders that the top of the tower “may reach unto heaven” (11:4) are contradicted by the statement in Genesis 11:5 that the Lord had to come down to it. Gordon Wenham observed, “With heavy irony we now see the tower through God’s eyes. This tower which man thought reached to heaven, God can hardly see!”⁶³

Though the irony is compelling, it must be admitted that the use of the term “see” is figurative in this case. Nahum Sarna noted, “This figurative usage implies no limitation on God’s omnipotence, for the divine ‘descent’ presupposes prior knowledge of human affairs from on high.”⁶⁴ André LaCocque likewise observed that God’s sight is not a mere physical phenomenon but rather the means by which the secrets of the human heart will be revealed (compare Genesis 7:1; Exodus 2:25).⁶⁵

11:5. “the children of men.” This might be better translated as “the children of Adam.” Sarna saw here a satirical note in the use of “a phrase heavily charged with the consciousness of man’s earthly origin, his mortality and frailty.”⁶⁶

Source

Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God's Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 416–417.

Related verses

Genesis 11:5

63 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 240.

64 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 83.

65 André LaCocque, *The Captivity of Innocence: Babel and the Yahwist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 34.

66 Sarna, *Genesis*, 83. See also Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2003), 231–232.

Genesis 11:6. God Recognizes Where the Project Will Lead

11:6. “Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do.”

The Joseph Smith Translation reads, “Behold, the people *are the same*, and they *all* have *the same language*; and this *tower* they begin to *build*.”⁶⁷

11:6. “Behold.” The Hebrew word *hen* is used similarly in Genesis 3:22; 4:14; 15:3; Exodus 4:1; 5:5; 8:22 to introduce “a rhetorical reflection occasioned by regret or sorrow.”⁶⁸

11:6. “this they begin to do.” As in the reference in Genesis 10:8 to the doings of Nimrod (“he began to be a mighty one in the earth”), the Hebrew verb *chalal* (“to begin”) in this verse “has become decidedly negative.”⁶⁹ André LaCocque saw ambivalence in the meaning of the verb as used here: “This is what they have started [or ‘they have profaned’] to make.”⁷⁰

11:6. “now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.” LaCocque correctly saw here an echo of God’s assessment of the consequences of Adam and Eve’s transgression in Moses 4:28. The expression is found again only in Job 42:2, where it refers to God’s omnipotence.⁷¹

The verb for “restrained” (“to be inaccessible”) in Genesis 11:6 should be taken in the common sense that alludes to defensive fortifications: “Now nothing that they propose to do can be defended against.’ That is, with such a fortified city as a base for empire, no other power will be able to withstand their imperial aggression.”⁷²

11:6. “now.” LaCocque argued that the Hebrew term for “now” in this verse “indicates a turning point: ‘and now/but now/from now on/henceforth.’ . . . That is why I see v. 6 as the pivot between the two parts of the story, rather than v. 5 as several critics prefer. For in Genesis 11:6, the interjection announces the drawing of a line between the human endeavor and the divine decision to keep human history in check. . . . Building Babel is evil, and it augurs a very bad future with more and worse evils. It must be nipped in the bud.”⁷³

11:6. “which they have imagined to do.” LaCocque argued that “the verb is to be read with the sense of plotting or scheming.”⁷⁴

67 Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 634.

68 André LaCocque, *The Captivity of Innocence: Babel and the Yahwist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 34.

69 LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence*, 35.

70 LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence*, 34; see also page 58.

71 LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence*, 35, 139.

72 LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence*, 56.

73 LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence*, 35, 58.

74 LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence*, 26.

Source

Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God's Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 417–418.

Related verses

Genesis 11:6

Genesis 11:7. God Confounds the Language of the People

11:7. “Let us go down.” The Joseph Smith Translation gives this as, “*Except I, the Lord, confound their language.*”⁷⁵ The divine pronouncements in Genesis and Abraham of “Let us go down,” “We will go down,” or “I will go down” always signal significant events.⁷⁶ Sometimes the references occur at important junctures of Creation; at other times they portend judgment or promise heavenly protection.⁷⁷

11:7. “Go to.” The repetition of these words from verses 3–4 can be seen as mocking the speech of the builders. “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.”⁷⁸

11:7. “Let us go down.” This is one of a few key places in the early chapters of Genesis where the plural expression “let us” is used.⁷⁹

11:7. “confound.” While the use of the Hebrew verb *bālal* (“to confound, to mix, to mingle”) is not always negative, “in texts that can really be allied with Genesis 11:7, the sense is definitely negative: Hosea 7:8 says Ephraim is confusedly mixed with nations. Isaiah 64:6 presents a confession in the first-person plural in which the term means ‘to be rotten’ or, at least, ‘to be withered.’”⁸⁰

75 Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 120, 634.

76 See these pronouncements at Genesis 11:7; Abraham 4:1, 26–27; and Abraham 3:24; and Genesis 18:21, 46:4.

77 See Abraham 3:24; 4:1, 26–27; Genesis 11:7, 18:21; 46:4.

78 Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2004), 58–59.

79 See Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *In God's Image and Likeness 1: Creation, Fall, and the Story of Adam and Eve*, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 111.

80 André LaCocque, *The Captivity of Innocence: Babel and the Yahwist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 37. Compare Hosea 9:1. An example of *bālal* used in the positive sense is in the mixing of ingredients for the daily sacrifice (Exodus 29:40; Leviticus 14:10; Numbers 6:15) and in anointing with oil (Psalm 92:10).

The book of Ether relates that the brother of Jared pleaded with the Lord to not confound the language spoken by his family and friends (Ether 1:34–37). Later, when the Lord commanded him to record his sacred experiences upon “the mount Shelem” (Ether 3:1), the brother of Jared was told that “the language which ye shall write I have confounded” (Ether 3:24). As a consequence, his words “cannot be read” without the use of “two stones” that were specially prepared as translation aids (Ether 3:22–24, 28). That the language of the Jaredite group was apparently confounded for anyone but themselves has led some to teach that they originally spoke the Adamic language.⁸¹ However, in light of scriptural and scientific problems with this view, alternative interpretations have been offered by Latter-day Saint authors such as Hugh W. Nibley and Brant Gardner.⁸²

11:7. “that they may not understand one another’s speech.” Or, rather, “that they will not listen.’ God will make them break all relationships.”⁸³ This insight is crucial. God has no need to “confound” the people—they are already thoroughly mixed up, and that is the problem. What He needs is a way to end their work, and this can be accomplished when their “one language and one speech” (11:1) is no longer directed single-mindedly toward their one project and their will to cooperate evaporates.

In his discussion of this verse, Walter Brueggemann cited another example in Genesis 42:21 of the people of Babel’s deliberate refusal to listen:

They did not listen because they feared, resented, and hated. Failed speech is linked to the disappearance of trust. Not listening is related to death in a relationship. To fail to listen means to declare the other party null and void. A society which suffers failed speech, as in our text, not only cannot build towers, it cannot believe promises, cannot trust God, cannot be human. The consignment of humanity to ‘not listening’ subsequently becomes an indictment against Israel (see Jeremiah 5:21; 7:13; 11:10; 13:10, 11; 22:5; 29:19). . . . Our Genesis text ends with a scattering. There is not listening.⁸⁴

81 See Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God’s Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 434. Wisely, the *Joseph Smith Papers* editors avoided mentioning the idea of an Adamic language and instead referred merely to the Jaredites’ keeping “their original language” (Matthew C. Godfrey, Mark Ashhurst-McGee, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833*, vol. 2 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Matthew J. Grow [Salt Lake City, UT: Church Historian’s Press, 2013], 214).

82 See Bradshaw and Larsen, *Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 428.

83 LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence*, 37, following Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays, Patrick D. Miller Jr., and Paul J. Achtemeier (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 103.

84 Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 103–104. See Bradshaw and Larsen, *Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 438.

Source

Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *In God's Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 418–419.

Related verses

Genesis 11:7

Genesis 11:8. God Scatters the People

11:8. “So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.” The Jewish Masoretic text mentions only the city, not the tower. André LaCocque noted that some critics “exaggeratedly stress” the absence of the tower, arguing that it “is simply due to a *hendiadys* [that is, the expression of a single idea with two joined phrases] with the city. It is evident that the interruption of the construction of one is also the interruption of the other. The end of the narrative comes with a play on words with Babel/Babylon (not on the tower), because only the city receives a name here.”⁸⁵ The Samaritan version of the text (with the Septuagint) says that “they stopped to build the city and *the tower*.”⁸⁶ The Joseph Smith Translation gives the following reading of this verse: “So *I*, the Lord, *will scatter* them abroad from thence upon *all* the face of the *land*, and into [OT2: ‘unto’] *every quarter* of the earth: and *they were confounded* and left off to build the city; and *they hearkened not unto the Lord*.”⁸⁷

Source

Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God's Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 419.

Related verses

Genesis 11:8

⁸⁵ André LaCocque, *The Captivity of Innocence: Babel and the Yahwist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 39. Compare Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, vol. 1, *From Adam to Noah*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem, Israel: Magnes Press, 1998), 248.

⁸⁶ Benyamim Tsedaka, ed. and trans., and Sharon Sullivan, ed., *The Israelite Samaritan Version of the Torah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 25, Genesis 11:8.

⁸⁷ Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 120, 634.

Genesis 11:9. God Calls Its Name “Babel”

11:9. “Therefore is the name of it called Babel.” “The desire of the men of Babel to ‘make a name’ for themselves . . . comes to naught with anonymous infamy, but the ruined city gets a name.”⁸⁸

11:9. “Therefore.” Hebrew *‘al-ken* (“that is why”). This formula is typical of stories that conclude with a lesson about how something came to be.⁸⁹

11:9. “called Babel.” Rather, “*He* called. . . . God is the subject of the verb.”⁹⁰

11:9. “Babel.” In other words, Babylon. The Akkadian word *bāb-ili* means “gate of the god (Marduk).” “Babylon was one of the most famous cities of antiquity, but it is mocked here as a ruined site of ancient hubris [that is, excessive pride], transgression, and confusion.”⁹¹ A possible allusion to this imagery may be found in Jeremiah 51:53: “Though Babylon should mount up to heaven, and though she should fortify the height of her strength, yet from me shall spoilers come unto her, saith the Lord.”

Michael Fishbane noted that “the very bricks (*li-be-na*) out of which the tower of human pretension is constructed are themselves symbolically deconstructed and reversed when God babbles (*nu-bi-la*) the language of ‘all the earth’ (11:1) and scatters the builders ‘over all the earth.’”⁹² In an effort to capture the sound play of the Hebrew passage in English, Robert Alter gave the following translation: “Come, let us go down and *baffle* their language. . . . Therefore it is called *Babel*, for there the Lord made the language of all the earth *babble*.”⁹³

11:9. “the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth.” The Joseph Smith Translation reads, “The Lord *was displeased with their works and did there confound the language of all the earth.*”⁹⁴

88 Ronald S. Hendel, quoted in Harold W. Attridge et al., eds., *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, rev. ed. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2006), 19n11:4. See Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God’s Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 414.

89 See André LaCocque, *The Captivity of Innocence: Babel and the Yahwist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 39.

90 LaCocque, *Captivity of Innocence*, 39.

91 Hendel, in Attridge et al., *HarperCollins Study Bible*, 19n11:9.

92 Michael A. Fishbane, *Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts* (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 38.

93 Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2004), 59, Genesis 11:7, 9; emphasis added.

94 Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 120, 634.

Source

Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God's Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 420.

Related verses

Genesis 11:9

Genesis 11:10–26. The Generations of the Shemites

11:10. “These are the generations of Shem.” The Tower of Babel story is positioned after the record of the genealogical line that extends from Shem and Eber through Joktan (10:22, 24, 26–29) and before the record of the line from Shem and Eber through Peleg to Abram (11:10–26). “One [line] ends in Babylon, the other in the Promised Land. It is hard not to see this positioning of the account of Babylon as deliberate on the part of the author of Genesis, especially in light of the continuous interplay between the name Shem (*shem*) and the quest for making ‘a name’ (*shem*) both in the account of the building of Babylon (11:4) and in the account of God’s election of Abraham.”⁹⁵

In contrast to the connection of the story of Abraham to Shem, the story of the Tower of Babel and Sodom is linked with the story of the sons of Ham (via Nimrod and Canaan respectively). “In both instances God came down to see what was going on (Genesis 10:10–19; 11:7; 18:21). This comparison is made more directly in Isaiah 13:19.”⁹⁶

11:10. “two years after the flood.” “This is the last mention of the Flood in Genesis. The narrative is now entering a new phase.”⁹⁷

11:18. “Reu.” “There may be a connection with the name Reuel (= Jethro), son of Esau (36:4, 10, 13) and also Moses’s father-in-law (Exodus 2:18).”⁹⁸

11:22. “Nahor.” “Joshua 24:2 describes both the elder Nahor and his son Terah as polytheists. The Bible also alludes to the religion of the younger Nahor (11:26). . . . [In Genesis 31:53], we read how Jacob

95 John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 103–104. See also Genesis 12:2.

96 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 245–246.

97 Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 250.

98 Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 251.

and Laban concluded their agreement by swearing by the deities representative of their ancestors; by the God of Abraham and by the god(s) (*'elohe*) of Nahor. Although we do not know the specific identity of these deities, we may observe the association of both Nahors with Ur and Haran, both of which held a tradition in the ancient Near East as cult centers of the lunar deity Sin.”⁹⁹

11:24. “Terah.” Each of Terah’s three sons will play some role in the story of Abraham.

11:24. “Abram.” “It could mean ‘exalted father’ or ‘the father is exalted,’ which would then make it a variant of Abiram, Abarama, found in Akkadian texts of the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries BCE.”¹⁰⁰ God gave Abram the new name of Abraham in Genesis 17:5.

11:24. “Nahor.” Nahor is named after his grandfather.

Source

Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God’s Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 421–423.

Related verses

Genesis 11:10–26

Genesis 11:27–32. Terah and His Children: Abram, Nahor, and Haran

11:27. “Lot.” The name Lot is related to a Hebrew root that signifies “wrap closely, tightly, enwrap, envelop,” and has the meanings of “covering; veil; covered; concealed; myrrh.”¹⁰¹ The name is arguably related to the character of Lot, who in contrast to Abraham, “is quite an ambivalent figure.”¹⁰² In his explanation of Genesis 18–19, Brian Doyle showed that Abraham, when encountering heavenly visitors who were on their way to Sodom, “recognizes immediately and gains access to the divine,” whereas “Lot gets off to a poor start but the ‘veil’ cloaking his understanding is gradually lifted as he is brought into the

⁹⁹ Richard S. Hess, *Studies in the Personal Names of Genesis 1–11* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 153.

¹⁰⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 86.

¹⁰¹ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 53; Judson Cornwall and Stelman Smith, *The Exhaustive Dictionary of Bible Names* (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos, 1998), 160.

¹⁰² Yehuda Thomas Radday, “Humour in Names,” in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Yehuda Thomas Radday and Athalaya Brenner (Sheffield, England: Almond, 1990) 295–313.

presence of the divine.”¹⁰³ The key Hebrew term in the story (*pethach* = “door”) “is a point of access, a place of encounter with the divine, associated with the Tent of Meeting and the Temple.”¹⁰⁴ The righteous are admitted through this door, whereas the wicked are excluded.

11:28. “Haran died.” This detail explains why Abram took Lot with him in Genesis 12:4–5.

11:28. “Ur of the Chaldees.” Ronald S. Hendel described this place-name term as follows: “As scholars have long recognized, the use of the ethnic term ‘Chaldeans’ to denote southern Mesopotamia can only refer to the period after the eighth century, when the Chaldeans gained political and economic power in the region. ‘Chaldeans’ is used as a synonym for ‘Babylon’ in biblical writings during the Neo-Babylonian period (late seventh-early sixth century, e.g., in Jeremiah, Second Isaiah, and the latter chapters of 2 Kings) and thereafter.”¹⁰⁵

As an alternative to concluding that this is an anachronism in our text, some scholars have associated this place name with one of the sites named Ur (also known as Edessa) in upper Mesopotamia, about twenty miles northwest of Haran or Ura in Hittite territory.¹⁰⁶ “These were possibly founded by citizens of the famous city in the south and named after it. An Upper Mesopotamian Ur would have been much closer to Haran, which is central to the patriarchal narratives.”¹⁰⁷

11:29. “Sarai.” Sarai means “princess” in Hebrew but “‘queen’ if based on Akkadian *šarratu*, a term used for the female consort of the moon-god Sin, the principal god of Ur.”¹⁰⁸ God gave Sarai the new name of Sarah in Genesis 17:15.

“Though the parentage of Nahor’s wife is given, that of Sarai is not. This omission is so extraordinary that it must be intentional. The Narrator withholds information so as not to ruin the suspense in Genesis 20 when Abraham, in order to extricate himself from an embarrassing predicament, reveals that Sarai is his half-sister.”¹⁰⁹

103 Brian Doyle, “‘Knock, Knock, Knockin’ on Sodom’s Door’: The Function of *Pethach-Deleth* in Genesis 18–19,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28, no. 4 (2004): 446.

104 Doyle, “‘Knock, Knock, Knockin’ on Sodom’s Door,’” 447.

105 Ronald S. Hendel, “Historical Context,” in *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, ed. Craig A. Evans, Joel N. Lohr, and David L. Petersen (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 61.

106 Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 364. See also Stephen O. Smoot, “‘In the Land of the Chaldeans’: The Search for Abraham’s Homeland Revisited,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2017): 7–37.

107 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 87.

108 Sarna, *Genesis*, 87.

109 Sarna, *Genesis*, 87.

11:29. “Milcah.” “The name, as vocalized, is a variant form of Malcah, ‘queen.’ Akkadian *malkatu* is a title of the goddess Ishtar, who is known as ‘Queen of Heaven,’ daughter of the moon-god Sin. Nahor married his niece, the orphaned daughter of his departed brother Haran. The granddaughter of this marriage was Rebekah, who became the wife of Abraham’s son Isaac, as told in Genesis 24:24, 27. This is another example of the narrative technique of introducing information into the text with an eye to later developments.”¹¹⁰

11:30. “barren, she had no child.” Such doubling of expression is common in Hebrew poetry. “The notice . . . is an anticipatory announcement of the central problem of the Abraham narrative, which will come to the foreground in gradual stages after God’s promise that Abram will be a father of a great nation in Genesis 12:2.”¹¹¹ The theme recurs in the stories of Rebekah, Rachel, and the mothers of Samson and Samuel.¹¹²

11:30. “barren.” “Hebrew *‘akarah* simply means ‘childless’ but not necessarily infertile.”¹¹³

11:31. “they came unto Haran, and dwelt there.” “The reason for Terah’s detour to Haran is not given, but it may have had to do with Haran as a focus of the international donkey caravan trade and with the fact that both it and Ur were centers of the moon-god cult. Of course, the problem disappears if a northern Ur is intended. We are not told why the family migrated from Ur in the first place. If Ur was the southern city, the migration could have been prompted by the gradual decline of the city and the increasingly harsh economic conditions, along with overpopulation, known to have been its lot in the course of the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2100–1600 BCE).”¹¹⁴

11:31. “Haran.” In Hebrew, Haran the city was pronounced with a harder *h* sound (*charan*) whereas the name of Abraham’s deceased brother Haran was pronounced with a softer *h* sound, probably more similar to the English *h*.

Ronald S. Hendel wrote:

In the case of the biblical memory of the patriarchal homeland, we may be able to trace a chain of memory and cultural tradition that long predates the biblical text. Haran (Akkadian *Charranu*) was a strategically located site in the Upper Euphrates region of Mesopotamia and was a station along important trade

¹¹⁰ Sarna, *Genesis*, 87.

¹¹¹ Ronald S. Hendel, quoted in Harold W. Attridge et al., eds., *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, rev. ed. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2006), 20n11:30.

¹¹² See Sarna, *Genesis*, 87.

¹¹³ Sarna, *Genesis*, 87.

¹¹⁴ Sarna, *Genesis*, 88.

routes. During the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 1800–1500 BCE), it was a central meeting place of a major confederation of tribes whose grazing land extended from the Haran region all the way to western Syria. This confederation was called the Yaminites (*banu-yamina*), meaning “Southerners” (literally, “sons of the right [hand]”). As Daniel Fleming observed, Haran was in the heart of the Yaminite territory and, as a prominent site with a famous temple, it was well-suited to be a tribal center. . . .

These geographical details make a genetic connection between the Israelite memory of the tribal homeland and the ancient Amorite tribes a distinct possibility.¹¹⁵

11:32. “Terah died in Haran.” “A calculation based on the data of verse 26 and Genesis 12:4 shows him to have been 145 years of age when Abram left Haran for Canaan; thus Terah lived on in Haran for another sixty years after Abraham’s departure.”¹¹⁶

Umberto Cassuto commented, “Throughout his life, [Terah] did not find the strength to continue his journey and reach the goal that he originally had in mind under his son’s influence. Although he made an effort to get away from the center of the moon-cult in Ur of the Chaldees, yet when he came to another city dedicated to this worship—to Haran—he did not succeed in freeing himself from the spell of idolatry, and stayed there. Where he halted he also died.”¹¹⁷ And the legacy of Babylon within the line of Abraham died with him.

Source

Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David J. Larsen, *In God’s Image and Likeness 2: Enoch, Noah, and the Tower of Babel*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 424–426.

Related verses

Genesis 11:27–32

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¹¹⁵ Ronald S. Hendel, “Cultural Memory,” in *Reading Genesis: Ten Methods*, ed. Ronald S. Hendel, 28–46 (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 40–41. See also Hendel, “Historical Context,” 66–69.

¹¹⁶ Sarna, *Genesis*, 88.

¹¹⁷ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, vol. 2, *From Noah to Abraham*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem, Israel: Magnes Press, 1997), 283.

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