The Deceptive Simplicity of Babel:
Questioning the Literary Text and Social Reality of Genesis 11:1–9

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And all the biblical scholars at SBL (or at least all the scholars that mattered, *kol-ha-SBL*), had one hermeneutical methodology and used the same set of interpretive categories. And as they traveled *miqqedem*, like me from the east, or on another reading of *miqqedem*, eastward, that is, *miyyam*, while many traveled *minnegev*, and a few *miṣṣaphon*, they came to Chicago and settled there (temporarily).[1]

And they said, Come, let us interpret Genesis 11:1–9 and let us construct a reading of the Babel story that stands out above all others, lest the significance of this text be scattered among diverse interpreters with contradictory interests and approaches—and among those of naive religious persuasions. (And they relied on literary analysis and ANE backgrounds, without entirely abandoning source criticism, and they dipped into ideological and reader-response theories instead of reading the text "objectively.")

And God came down to see the interpretation that the *běnê*-Wellhausen, and the *běnê*-Gunkel, and the *běnê*-Muilenburg, and the *běnê*-Derrida had built.

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[1] This paper still bears the marks of an oral presentation, even beyond the ironic opening. Although this form of the paper is longer than the abbreviated version presented at the SBL, I am not yet means satisfied with the argument or framing of the issues. I would therefore be grateful for any feedback readers might give as I work towards revising the paper for publication.

Or should I say *běnê ûbanôt*?

And if this were a Monty Python skit, a British copper would step into the camera frame about now and say, *Alright, that's enough; break it up. Off with you all!*

So, I think I should stop there.

But you get the point.

How is it possible, given the long history of diverse (and contradictory) interpretations, to construct (or excavate) *the* singular meaning of this lapidary text? More to the point, how can *I* claim to understand definitively the point of the Babel story in Genesis 11, in the presence of interpreters like Ted Hiebert, who just a few years ago published a major essay on the subject in *JBL*,[2] which challenged pretty much all previous readings of the text, and is presently preparing a commentary on *Genesis* for the Abingdon OT series; or André LaCocque who took Hiebert to task in a later issue of *JBL*,[3] and has now published an entire book on Babel[4]; or John Walton who not only wrote on Babel in a 1995 essay[5] (and in other places), but who has published a commentary on *Genesis*,[6] and just presented his latest thinking on the text in this very Consultation?[7]

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[2] Theodore Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126/1 (2007): 29–58.

[3] André LaCocque, "Whatever Happened in the Valley of Shinar? A Response to Theodore Hiebert," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128/1 (2009): 29–41.

[4] André LaCocque, *The Captivity of Innocence: Babel and the Yahwist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010). This is a multi-layered approach to the Babel story, with chap. 2 "Construction" consisting in LaCocque's central literary analysis of the text.

[5] John H. Walton, "The Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel Account and Its Implications," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995): 155–175.

[6] John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001). See pp. 371–377 for his analysis of Babel.

[7] John H. Walton, "The Tower of Babel and the Covenant: Rhetorical Strategy in Genesis Based on Theological and Comparative Analysis."

Why would anyone listen to Middleton—especially since I have only addressed the text briefly in my monograph on *imago Dei* (*The Liberating Image*[8]), and I've even changed my mind about some of what I wrote there?

I called the Babel narrative a *lapidary* text, using the word in its adjectival sense. But *lapidary* is also a noun, referring to one who works with precious and semi-precious stones. So the adjective describes a well-crafted, precisely-chiseled gem. And that is certainly appropriate for our text. Its superb and compact literary qualities have been mined (no pun *originally* intended) by many biblical interpreters. And our text even contrasts kiln-fired brick, as a monumental building material, with stone (though not of the precious or semi-precious kind).

But the Babel story is like a well-polished gem also in being many faceted, so that it matters which aspects and nuances of the text one calls attention to, and what angle one views them from. Perhaps most importantly, the facets often reflect back to us what we bring to the text. So George Tyrrell's comment about the nineteenth-century quest of the historical Jesus is relevant here. Interpreters gazing into one of these facets (like the well that Tyrrell referred to) might wonder if they aren't seeing the reflection of their own faces looking back at them.[9]

And to some extent this is inevitable, since this lapidary text leaves so much unsaid. Lacunae riddle this text, and that is indeed part of its beauty and appeal. It is a deceptively simple text—simple on the surface, but highly complex when we take a closer look. And we must, if we are to interpret it at all, fill in the lacunae—but with what? What is the appropriate mortar or bitumen or background or methodology that we are to use to make sense of the Babel story?

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[8] J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The* Imago Dei *in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005). The section on Babel (221–228) is found in chap. 5: "Genesis 1–11 as Ideology Critique." For an analysis of Babel congruent with my own, see Wes Howard-Brook, *"Come Out My People!": God's Call Out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 47–51.

[9] Sometimes incorrectly attributed to Albert Schweitzer, Tyrrell was making a comment about the picture of Jesus proposed by Adolf von Harnack: "The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well." George Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads* (London, UK: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), 44.

What holds this story together? And what are appropriate assumptions to bring to the interpretive task of understanding Babel?

Given the immensity of the task I've set for myself in this paper—somewhat akin to building a tower up to heaven—and given the short time frame in which to accomplish this, I've decided to proceed by voicing my *questions* about the text (while making, to be sure, a few assertions). Questioning is central to my approach both to this text itself, and to the reality represented by this text.

As I pose my questions, I will interact with aspects of the history of interpretation I have found helpful, and I'll wonder out loud about the relevance of various details in the text and aspects of the text's literary and historical/cultural context, including what an Israelite reader might be expected to think of this text.[10] I'll also reflect on my own assumptions and ruminate about what inclines me to read the text one way rather than another.

And I invite you to join the conversation.

I have a dozen questions. They are quite wide-ranging and are not formulated just for experts (indeed, I first articulated this series of questions to help students think through the text in a course I was teaching). Not all my questions are of decisive importance for understanding the thrust of the Babel story. But these are the questions that have engaged me from the time I first began paying careful attention to this particular bit of Scripture. They are arranged roughly by narrative order, but they end with more general questions about how the story *works* as a literary piece.

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[10] My interactions with secondary literature will quite limited; but I will provide some citations to the work of Hiebert, LaCoque, and Walton. Hiebert's essay, in particular, is a very clearly argued piece and itself interacts with much of previous interpretation, though in the end I must dissent from certain aspects of his reading.

Question #1: *What does "all the earth" mean?*

What does "all the earth" (*kol-ha'areṣ*) in verse 1 (and verse 9a) mean if they lived or settled in one location (verse 2), especially if the city they built is called Babel (verse 9), which is one particular (well-known) historical city, and certainly nor the first city in the world—except by Babylonian reckoning, according to some of their myths (such as *Enuma Elish*[11])? Babel is only one of the Mesopotamian cities mentioned in Genesis 10:10, certainly not the first city in the world in *Israel's* understanding of the cosmos. And what does "all the *'ereṣ*" mean (verse 1) if they settled in "the *'ereṣ* of Shinar" (verse 2), which is only one of the geographical regions people settled (according to 10:10)? And what does it mean that these people called "all the earth" (verse 1) were scattered from Shinar over the face of "all the earth" (in verses 8 and 9b)?

Any way we read it, there seems to be an internal contradiction between universality and particularity in this text. How can people be considered "all the earth" and yet constitute a particular cultural group (Mesopotamians), living in one particular region?

This, of course, raises the contentious question of the relationship of the Babel episode to the Table of the Nations in chapter 10. So let's not just dip our toes into this stream; let's plunge right in!

What does "all the earth" mean if human spreading over the earth is *already* mentioned in Genesis 9:19 (indeed, using the expression *kol-ha'areṣ*, along with the verb *to spread* [*nāphaṣ*])? But the spreading of particular cultural groups is also mentioned in 10:5 (the coastland peoples in the line of Japheth spread [*pārad*] into their own lands [*'araṣim*]), in 10:18 (the Canaanites spread [using *pûṣ*, the same verb from the Babel story]), in 10:20 (the line of Ham is mentioned

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[11] *Enuma Elish*, Tablet 6. On the idea of the first city founded by the gods in Mesopotamian myth and legend, see Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "Eridu, Dunnu, and Babel: A Study in Comparative Mythology," in *I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern Literary and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis*, ed. Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura; Sources for Biblical and Theological Study: Old Testament Series (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 143–168.

according to their *'arṣôt*), in 10:25 (the *'ereṣ* was divided [*pālag*] in the days of Eber's son

Peleg), in 10:31 (the line of Shem is mentioned according to their *'arṣôt*), with a final summary

statement in 10:32 that from the sons of Noah the nations *pûṣ* on the *'ereṣ* after the flood. The

clear picture of Genesis 10 is of a diversified human race spread over the earth.

So could "all the earth" in 11:1 be in quotes, so to speak, ironically taking the totalizing

perspective of Babylonian civilization itself, such as when tablet 6 of *Enuma Elish* describes the

creation of the black headed people (Mesopotamians) as if they were indeed "all the earth"?[12]

So, "all the earth" settled in one place!

Question #2: *What does it mean that these people had one language?*

What can it mean that "all the earth" were (that is, shared) one lip or language (*śāpāh*)

and the one (set of) words (*děbarîm 'ăḥadîm*), if the division of the world into diverse languages

(using *lāshôn*) is mentioned already in 10:5 (the descendents of Japheth), in 10:20 (the

descendents of Ham, from which the Babylonians are said to come), and in 10:31 (the

descendents of Shem)?

Does Genesis 11 assume an originally unified, ideal language for humanity,

chronologically *prior* to the diversification mentioned in chapter 10, perhaps like the single ideal

language mentioned in the Sumerian work *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*—at least on

Kramer's reading?[13]

Or does Genesis 11 describe one particular people's *resistance* to the linguistic

diversification that was taking place in the rest of the world—a negative case study, perhaps, in

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[12] *Enuma Elish*, 6.5–8 speaks of Marduk's intention of creating humanity, while 6.33–35 describes Ea's creation of humanity. Yet 6.113 identifies those created specifically with the "black headed people." I discuss this sort of totalizing (false universality) in *The Liberating Image*, 205–206, 251–242. For further analysis of totalization in the contemporary world and how Scripture may be read as antitolalizing, see J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1995), chaps. 4 and 5.

[13] Samuel Noel Kramer, "'The Babel of Tongues': A Sumerian Version," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88 (1968): 108–111.

the diversification recounted in chapter 10?[14] Or does it even describe an attempt to *revert* to one

language *after* diversification, reading the sequence of chapters 10 and 11 not as

dischronologization, but as precisely as temporal sequence? Or, to be more precise, where the

settling of some people on the plain of Shinar (with Babel specifically mentioned) is first

described in 10:10–12) as an aspect of the diversification of the human race, followed by an

expansion of this account in 11:1–9? And is the singular language understood as positive,

negative, or neutral? How one answers these questions depends, at least in part, on how one

values linguistic (and cultural) diversity.

Question #3: *What is the significance of the building materials (in the speech of the*

builders and in the narrator's comment)?

Specifically, do the wordplays in verse 3 about building materials convey significant

points? First, we have the verb and its cognate accusative, "let us brick bricks" (*nilbĕnāh*

lĕbanîm), followed by another verb with its cognate accusative (to describe the thorough burning

of kiln-fired bricks)—"let us burn for burning" (*niśrĕphāh liśrēphāh*). Are these examples of

paronomasia to be taken as ironic examples of the limited vocabulary of "all the earth"? After

all, they had "few words" (going by the meaning of *'ăchadîm* in Genesis 27:44; 29:20; and

Daniel 11:20).[15] Did they have to keep reusing the same lexemes? Or was their topic and focus

of conversation limited (taking *dābār* as not as word, but in its other meaning, as subject

matter)?[16]

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[14] Commentators often suggest that the Babel story is simply an alternative account of the spreading of humanity recounted in chapter 10 (for example, Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," 31–32). One variant of this is to think of Babel as an example of how the diversification happened in the case of one particular cultural group from chapter 10.

[15] These three uses of *'ăchadîm* are all paired with *days* and are best translated *few*; the only other use of *'ăchadîm* in the Hebrew Bible (Ezekiel 37:17) occurs with the preposition *lĕ* and means "as one."

[16] LaCocque takes *dĕbarîm 'ăḥadîm* as meaning "a few subjects/utterances" (*The Captivity of Innocence*, 26), citing George Orwell's "newspeak" to highlight the monoglossic/monological uniformity of the builders (*The Captivity of Innocence*, 42–43).

Following upon this, why does the text contrast building with brick and bitumen with building with stone and mortar? Is this simply an observation for historical verisimilitude? We know that the absence of naturally occurring stone in Mesopotamia (in contrast to Israel) is a historically accurate note, as is the fact that the Mesopotamians built with brick.

But why make the point with wordplays? They had "brick for-stone" (*hallebēnāh le'aben*); "and bitumen" (*wĕhaḥēmār*) was for them "as mortar" (*laḥomer*). Does the almost identity in sound of *brick* (*lebēnāh*) and *stone* with the preposition (*le'aben*) and of *bitumen* (*ḥēmār*) and *mortar* (*ḥomer*) convey an ironic point? That is, they almost got it right—but not quite. Sort of like when in Isaiah's song of the vineyard (Isaiah 5:7), God looked for *mišpāṭ* (justice) but found *mišpāḥ* (possibly oppression or bloodshed[17]), and looked for *ṣĕdakāh* (righteousness) but found *ṣĕ'akāh* (outcry). The imitation in sound evokes the *almost, but not quite* quality of the reality, a failure to attain to the norm. Could the paronomasia in Genesis 11 constitute an ironic comment on inferior Mesopotamian building materials in contrast to good Israelite stone? Perhaps this is a clue to the wider role of irony in the entire account.

Question #4: ***What was the tower that accompanied the building of the city?***

What exactly *were* they building? Do the building materials themselves provide any hint of what was being built? The text says a city and (or with) a tower (*migdāl*). Walton suggests that the reference to building with kiln-fired brick and bitumen (an expensive, time-consuming process) means that the text is describing public architecture, typically a religious and political complex (since they typically went together in Mesopotamia). While sun-baked brick was used for ordinary dwellings and for the inside of structures, the outside of monumental architecture was often overlaid with kiln-fired brick. So perhaps they were building a city comprised of

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[17] This is a hapax legomenon, so its meaning has to be derived from context.

public buildings, with a temple complex at the center. That makes sense of what we know of ancient Mesopotamia.[18]

But are interpreters correct to see the *migdal* as a Mesopotamian ziggurat? Remains of such structures have indeed been found dating from the Sumerian through the Neo-Babylonian periods. Whereas earlier interpreters thought the tower might be the Ezida ziggurat in Borsippa, later interpreters identified it with the three-hundred-foot Etemenanki ziggurat which stood beside the Marduk temple (called Esagila) in Babylon.

My problem with this interpretation has been that most interpreters who thought the tower was a ziggurat identified it as a cultic center by which the builders sought to storm heaven or attain to God's realm, thus identifying its building with an act of religious hubris. But there is no explicit reference to anything cultic or religious about the tower in the Babel story. And Hiebert is right; the builders are not critiqued for hubris[19] (or, I would add, for idolatry).

Perhaps, then, the tower functioned as a military fortification? Not only is the term *migdal* typically used in the Hebrew Bible to describe Canaanite and Babylonian fortifications (Judges 8:9, 17; 9:46–52; Psalm 48:13–14 [ET 12–13]; Isaiah 2:15; Ezekiel 26:9; 2 Chronicles 14:6 [ET 7]), but fortified cities in the Bible are said to have walls up to the heavens (Deuteronomy 1:28; 9:1), and the oracles against Babylon in Jeremiah 51 and Isaiah 14 critique not cultic hubris but oppressive military power (by means of which Babylon tries to reach heaven [51:53; 14:12–26]). So I myself came to read the *migdāl* of Genesis 11 as a symbol of military power in *The Liberating Image* (in my brief excursus on the Babel story).

But Walton has now convinced me that a ziggurat makes sense, by his correction of the typical misunderstanding of ziggurats in the literature on Genesis 11. As Walton points out,

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[18] Walton, "The Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel Account and Its Implications," 163–164.

[19] Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," 41.

ziggurats were not used by people to ascend to heaven, but by the gods to descend to earth.[20]

Genesis 11 thus does not portray an act of human hubris which infringes on the realm of deity,

but—as I read it—the attempt to provide religious legitimation for human civilization. That the

gods descend from heaven to Babylon to take up residence in their cult statues kept in temples

dedicated to them (typically located beside ziggurats) fits what we know of how the royal and

cultic elites of Mesopotamia claimed divine blessing on their urban cultural projects.

If the tower is a ziggurat (rightly understood), how might that help us read the amazing

lack of reference to any religious critique in the Babel story (no deity but YHWH is mentioned,

and idolatry is not even touched on)? Could it be that the Israelite storyteller was stripping away

the putative religious legitimation for Mesopotamian urban culture (after all, it is the gods who

build Babylon for Marduk's fame, according to Enuma Elish), by suggesting that it is simply a

(flawed) human building project? Is this an exercise in ancient ideological deconstruction?

Question #5: *What is the significance of the phrasing of the builders' exhortation,*
"Let us"?

Is the *form* of their exhortation, using cohortatives—"let us brick" (*nilbĕnāh*) and "let us

burn" (*niśrĕpāh*) in verse 3, and "let us build" (*nibnēh*) and "let us make" (*naʿăśeh*) in verse 4—

is all this meant to be imitative, echoing God's cohortative to the heavenly court in Genesis 1:26,

"let us make" (*naʿăśeh*)? Indeed, this would be appropriate, since Genesis 1:26 goes on to say,

naʿăśeh ʾādām bĕṣalmēnû kidmûtēnû ("let us make humanity in our image, according to our

likeness"); so the builders would simply be reflecting or imaging God's mode of speech and also

the fact that the deity is a maker. Since God constructed the world as a cosmic building

(according to the Hebrew and Mesopotamian world picture), their desire to construct a city could

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[20] John H. Walton, Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 25, and 119–123 ("Excursus: Ziggurats").

be construed as a example of the image of God; the builders are fulfilling a legitimate human task. Indeed, the statement in verse 6 that nothing they propose will be impossible for them to accomplish famously uses Job's language from 42:2 that no purpose of *God's* can be thwarted. So there is arguably an *imago Dei* motif here.

Except that becoming *like God* at the end of the Garden narrative of Genesis 3 is not understood as unambiguously positive, and indeed may be taken by canonical readers as an ironic comment on the *manner* in which humanity fulfilled their creation as *ṣelem 'ĕlohîm*. Not all attempts to be like God are appropriate. Not all cultural construction is good; thus we have juxtaposed in Genesis 4 positive historical developments like nomadic livestock herding, metalurgy, and music (among the sons of Lamech) with negative developments like Cain's murder and Lamech's revenge killing and bigamy.

And city building is mentioned there too. Given the proclivity of Mesopotamian myth and legend to attribute the origin of cities and cultural progress to the gods (or to semi-divine figures), perhaps the perspective of Genesis (in chapters 4, 10, and 11) is intentional. It is *humans* who build cities and invent forms of culture (good and bad). This is arguably a pointed alternative to the ideological mystification of Babylonian civilization, which attributes cultural development to the gods. Could the Babel story in Genesis 11 likewise function as demystification?[21]

Not only do the builders' words echo those of God in Genesis 1, but God's own words to the heavenly court in 11:7 imitate those of the builders, even down to the addition of the opening *hāvāh* ("Come!") Indeed, YHWH copies the builders' use of *hāvāh* followed by two verbs (they do this twice—in verse 3 and then again in verse 4). So God says, *hāvāh nērĕdāh wĕnabĕlāh*

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[21] For an analysis of how the Primeval History as a whole dissents from the Mesopotamian idea of the gods as the originators of civilization, see Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 213–219.

("come, let us go down and let us confuse"). Is God's imitation of the form of the builders' own statements meant to be ironic (parodying their speech), and does this irony serve the text's demystification of Babel?

Question #6: *What is the significance of the resistance to scattering?*

This resistance is given as the ultimate reason both for building the city (with a tower) and for making a name for themselves (11:4). Could this resistance to scattering be related to God's command to multiply and fill the earth in Genesis 1:28 (rearticulated after the flood in 9:1 and in slightly different language in 9:7)? After all, diversification and spreading are not only portrayed positively in the Table of the Nations (chapter 10), but this is prefigured in the division and outward spreading of the headwaters from Eden into four rivers (Genesis 2).

As a canonical reader I had already made the connection between Genesis 11:4 and 1:28 long before I investigated scholarly works on the subject that artificially separated this Yahwistic tale from related Priestly texts in the Primeval History. Then I found that Josephus in the *Antiquities* had viewed the resistance to scattering in 11:4 as disobedience of God's command to fill (or colonize) the earth in Genesis 9:1.[22] And many recent writers have made the explicit connection to 1:28.

But the question still remains as to the significance of this. What exactly is wrong with settling in one place if, as I think likely (*pace* Hiebert), the text is suggesting a negative evaluation at this point. And what would God's solution of scattering accomplish?

Or, to be less contentious (at least for a little while), what do the *builders* think is wrong with dispersion over the face of the earth? What could they accomplish by resisting this scattering?

This takes us to the next question.

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[22] Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 1.4.1.

Question #7: *What is the significance of the parallel between the sentence with <u>pen</u> (lest) in 11:4 and the similar sentence in Exodus 1:10?*

In 11:4 the builders say: "Come, let us build for ourselves a city with a tower . . . and let us make for ourselves a name *lest* [*pen*] we are scattered over the face of all the earth." Many commentators have pointed out the parallel between this sentence and the words of Pharaoh in Exodus 1:10 concerning Israel: "Come, let us deal shrewdly with them *lest* [*pen*] they multiply and, if a war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land."

Not only are both texts formally similar, but in both the speakers propose an action to prevent an eventuality that is perceived as a threat. And in both cases that eventuality involves dispersion outward. Indeed, in Exodus 1:12 we are told that what Pharaoh tried to prevent did in fact happen. The Israelites "multiplied and *spread*," the text says, using *pāraṣ*.

Is it significant that what Pharaoh is afraid of is the loss of an Israelite workforce, and that this workforce is used to *build* storage cities (1:11), which bear the *names* (perhaps) of prominent pharaohs? Indeed Exodus 1:14 even mentions brick and mortar as building materials, two terms also found in Genesis 11:3 (one used, one not used by the builders of Babel).

Are we to understand a connection between the building projects of Egypt and Babylon, and between their similar ways of gaining fame and notoriety?

Finally, there may be a parallel in the Exodus story to God's intervention at Babel. Whereas in Genesis 11:7 YHWH says, "let us go down" to confuse their language, in Exodus 3:7–8 YHWH tells Moses: "I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings and *I have come down* to deliver them from the Egyptians." Is there a parallel between YHWH's descent in both stories? YHWH's descent in Exodus is for both judgment and liberation; is that relevant to the Babel story?

This combination of resonances between Babel and the bondage in Egypt suggests—to this reader at any rate—a construal of the sin of Babel in Genesis 11 as not primarily cultic, but as social or political, having to do with oppression and exploitation, whether of its own populace or of other nations.

Could it be that an ancient Israelite reader is meant to reflect on the parallel between the experience of enslavement in Egypt for the benefit of the Egyptian empire and how cities were built in Mesopotamia, namely on the backs of those enslaved by military conquest and on the backs peasants who were taught they owed obligation to the gods (via submission to the empire)?

Could Israel's own experience of oppression under both Egypt and Babylon be relevant to the significance of this text? Or do we actually expect socially located readers to ignore their location when they read a sacred text?

Of course, we don't know when the Babel text was written, so it might be prior to the Babylonian conquest of Judah and consequent exile. Could it then be (whenever it was written) a warning about the allure of Babylonian civilization, the highest, most sophisticated form of urban culture in the ancient Near East, whose architecture, military prowess, literature, wisdom traditions, and cuneiform writing were viewed as an ideal among many cultures in the region?[23] Just as many Third World peoples are wannabe Americans, oblivious to the mixed blessing such cultural assimilation might bring, could this text function as a warning for wannabe Babylonians among the people of God?

This leads to the next question.

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[23] I have addressed the allure of Babylonian civilization in *The Liberating Image*, 195–204.

Question #8: ***What is the relationship between the desire to make a name for themselves (11:4) and God's promise to magnify Abram's name in Genesis 12:2?***

Is there a tension between achieving renown for oneself and receiving a good reputation from God, as has been thought by many commentators? Or, as Hiebert claims, is making a name always a noble enterprise in the Bible, whether for God or humanity?[24] Doesn't it matter in biblical religion whether one's reputation is a gift or an achievement—on analogy with creation in the divine image in Genesis 1 *versus* becoming like God in a manner that leads to exile from the Garden in Genesis 3? Or coming to know good and evil through a developmental process of trust in God *versus* grasping for that knowledge in a manner that sears the conscience?

Most fundamentally, does it not matter *how* one's reputation or "name" is achieved? Many examples of someone gaining or having a reputation in the Hebrew Bible are correlated with brutal military conquest, and many of these examples of achieving a name or reputation (such as Abishai, Uzziah, the leaders of Mannasseh, the men in the Korahite rebellion, and even David) are contextually linked with pride or a disobedient life.[25]

The two statements about the making of David's name in 2 Samuel may shed light on the distinction between Genesis 11:4 and 12:2. In 2 Samuel 8:13 David is said to have "made a name" (the text does not say *lô*, for himself); the question is whether this is a positive example of name making, a fulfillment of God's promise in 2 Samuel 7:9 to make David's name great (*vĕʿāsitî lĕkā shēm gadôl*). The fact that David's reputation is clearly based on military conquests, through subduing the nations around him, may be a clue. This is very different from the way Abraham's name will be made great; whereas subdued peoples come to fear the name David, nations will bless themselves by the name of Abraham.

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[24] Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," 40.

[25] Contrary to Hiebert's claims, a contextual reading of biblical passages about people making a name or reputation suggests that many (if not most) are negative.

Indeed, we should not be too quick to see David making a name through military might as the straightforward fulfillment of God's promise to make his name great. Throughout the episode in chapter 7, David attempts to reframe God's simply-stated promise of support and favor in such a way as to guarantee divine support, as if David can't quite trust the bare promise freely given (much like Jacob's response to God's promises at Bethel). This fits a pattern of action without attention to boundaries that is discernable in David's life, beginning with the Goliath episode and continuing throughout his rise to power in 1 and 2 Samuel, which leads to his explicit overreaching in the episode of Bathsheba and Uriah, by which time it is clear that the "name" that David has made is by no means entirely positive.[26]

So, could the reputation of Babel have been achieved oppressively, on the back of imperial conquest, and on the *backs* of the slaves and peasant classes who were used to support this monumental urban culture? Are we to ignore everything we know about the realities of the Babylonian empire when we read this text? Who can afford to do this? Certainly not those who feel the brunt of this (or similar) empires.

Question #9: *What is the significance of YHWH coming down to see the city and the tower (verse 5), which had its top in the heavens (verse 4a)?*

Should we take this as part of the ironic perspective of the narrator, mocking not the attempt of the builders to storm heaven's gate—that misreads the function of ziggurats—but the claim that ziggurats symbolize divine legitimation of Babylonian civilization? After all, a ziggurat is supposed to provide access for the gods to descend to the city. So does YHWH

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[26] For a critical reading of David, see J. Richard Middleton, "A Psalm against David? A Canonical Reading of Psalm 51 as a Critique of David's Inadequate Repentance in 2 Samuel 12," chap. 2 in *Explorations in Interdisciplinary Reading: Theological, Exegetical, and Reception-Historical Perspectives*, ed. by Robbie F. Castleman, Darian R. Lockett, and Stephen O. Presley (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 26–45; and Middleton, "The Battle Belongs to the Word: The Role of Theological Discourse in David's Victory over Saul and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17," chap. 6 in *The Hermeneutics of Charity: Interpretation, Selfhood, and Postmodern Faith*, ed. by James K. A. Smith and Henry Isaac Venema (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 109–131.

having to come down even to *see* the tower suggest that the tower simply cannot accomplish

what it was claimed to—after all, it does not even come close to the heavens? And if this is

ironic, could it also be ironic that (according to 11:2) the place from which they try to build up to

heaven is a valley (*biqʿāh*)? This is already self-defeating; and is the building of the tower an

attempt to compensate for starting out in a topographical depression?[27] And does 11:5 where

YHWH says "Come, let us go down" further support the irony, especially if YHWH is parodying

the speech of the builders (as I've suggested)?

Of course, there is nothing that requires an ironic interpretation of YHWH's descent and

many commentators explicitly deny such a reading. Hiebert even suggests that YHWH coming

down is simply "conventional" language of the Yahwist about God coming from his place in

heaven to enter into human affairs, much as tower with its top in the heavens is a stereotypical

expression for a ziggurat.[28] But as the heirs of James Muilenburg should know, the fact that

something is stereotypical does not preclude a particular author putting her own twist on it,

which may well be what is going on here.[29]

I say may, because no interpretation is strictly required, and commentators can be found

on every side of every interpretive question regarding this lapidary text.

This is especially true in the case of my next question.

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[27] LaCoque comments on the "paradoxical" character of this building up from a valley in *The Captivity of Innocence*, 44. He also notes that Babylon was understood as the "gate of the apsu" (the primordial underground waters), which might account for its placement in a valley (45, n. 61). LaCoque also discusses possible negative associations of valleys in some biblical texts (LaCoque, "Whatever Happened in the Valley of Shinar?" 32).

[28] Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," 42 on YHWH's descent; see 37–38 on the stereotypical language of a ziggurat reaching up to heaven.

[29] I am referring, of course, to Muilenburg's famous presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature in which he challenged biblical interpreters to move beyond comparative studies of similarities between texts (typical of Form Criticism) to discern the innovative literary artistry or "actuality" of a given text (with this address, he is widely regarded as inaugurating the modern discipline of Rhetorical Criticism in Old Testament studies). See James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 88/1 (19690): 1–18. LaCoque makes a similar point in *The Captivity of Innocence*, 30 in relation to the stereotypical designation of ziggurats. That is, even if having a top reaching heaven is a typical description of a ziggurat, the author of Genesis 11 may still have been making the point that this "lofty" goal isn't actually achieved.

Question #10: *What is the problem with being one people speaking one language (verse 6), such that YHWH wants to confuse or mix their speech (verse 7)?*

This has been one of the interpretive cruxes of the Babel story, since many interpreters have typically viewed the single language as an ideal and the ensuing linguistic confusion (paradoxically) as punishment. Of course, the punishment could not be *for* the single language (if this is viewed as ideal), so it must be for some putative sin (such as hubris, ambition, or the attempt to exist autonomously, independent of God). But such speculations are not easily supported by the text.

The only clue to what God might be troubled by is verse 6, where YHWH says: "Behold, they are one people with a single language, and this is the beginning what they might [or will] do [*la'asot*]; and now no plan of theirs will be impossible for them to do" (repeating *la'asot*). Is this simply a factual statement, as Hiebert suggests, that the builders have actually built a city (this is what they have begun to do) and that they will be able to make their reputation and stay in one place?[30] Or is God worried about this, viewing it as in some sense anti-normative? What does building this city, as one people, with a single language, make possible for them that might be problematic?[31]

But what is God worried about? Does it make sense to think that the God who shared power with humans to be his image on earth (Genesis 1), or who is portrayed as bringing the flood (Genesis 6 and 7), is worried that humans will breach the earth-heaven barrier (an incursion into the divine realm), as has sometimes been thought? Or, in line with my previous suggestion of Babylonian imperial power (backed by religious legitimation), could God be

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[30] Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," 44–46.

[31] The paradox of Hiebert's position is that while he suggests that God does not want the cultural homogeneity that the builders intend, the narrator does not judge their intent as evil in any sense.

concerned with the impact of this aggregation of power on the peoples of the world—so that the threat is not to God but to humanity?

And is the problem with one language that this enables a unified culture to impose its will more efficiently on others? Indeed, as Christoph Uehlinger has suggested, followed (indeed, nuanced) by David Smith, could the single language be a reference to the Assyrian royal practice of imposing Akkadian on subjugated peoples?[32] As when Ashurbanipal II claims that he "made the totality of all peoples speak one speech."[33] Or when Sargon II asserts: "Populations of the four world quarters with strange tongues and incomprehensible speech . . . I caused to accept a single voice."[34] Indeed, Assyrian royal inscriptions often combine motifs of a single language with building, making a name, and world empire.[35] And we know the history of the imposition of language on conquered peoples.[36]

More broadly, why should we take the multiplication of languages as punishment at all? Or at least why take this multiplication *solely* as punishment? Yes, there is initial confusion when people no longer understand or listen (*shāmaʿ*) to each other.

But is there a redemptive element to the multiplicity or mixing of languages? A negative or positive valuation of the linguistic diversity that follows YHWH's descent is, like all interpretations, partially a function of where an interpreter stands. The forthright challenge of at

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[32] Christoph Uehlinger, *Weltreich und "eine Rede": Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbauerzählung (Gen 11, 1–9)* (Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990); David Smith, "What Hope After Babel? Diversity and Community in Gen 11:1–9; Exod 1:1–14; Zeph 3:1–13; and Acts 2:1–3," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 18 (1996): 169–91.

[33] Cited in Uehlinger, *Weltreich und "eine Rede,"* 464; translation from Smith, "What Hope After Babel?"173.

[34] Cited in Stephanie Dalley, "Occasions and Opportunities I," in *The Legacy of Mesopotamia*, ed. Stephanie Dalley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 27.

[35] We do not have to accept Uehlinger's theory of an earlier Assyrian rescension of the story, followed by a editing in later times (to refer to Babylon). The text could be telescoping the entire history of Mesopotamian civilization (Sumerian, Old Babylonian, Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian) into a single story (note the anachronism of Ur of the Chaldeans, used in reference to the Abram in 11:27 (an ancient Sumerian city and the ethnic group which ruled the Neo-Babylonian empire).

[36] Does this relate to the English-only agenda of some members of the Tea Party in America today?

least one interpreter, David Smith, to the negative appraisal of this diversity is grounded in the fact that Smith teaches foreign language learning to undergraduates, and multiple languages are, on his view, part of the complex created order God ordained. Thus Smith views languages, which are vehicles of cultures, as important for the fecundity of God's world.[37]

So while I cannot fully buy Hiebert's idea that the Babel story is simply an etiological account of cultural and linguistic diversification, with no negative judgment whatsoever, it certainly has an element of truth. Just as God's coming down to liberate Israel from bondage was primarily positive (for Israel), but involved judgment (on Egypt), it makes sense that God's confusion or mixing of languages at Babel is liberative, involving the break-up of the empire; but for that very reason can also be viewed as judgment. In fact, it would fit the pattern not of sin and punishment in the Primeval History (which is a highly simplistic schema), but the pattern of sin followed by a judgment that is also restorative. This is the case with the disobedience in the Garden, Cain's murder of his brother, and the violence before the flood; why would it be different in the case of Babel? But it *is* different in one significant way, which I will soon get to.

Question #11: *What is the role of irony in the Babel story?*

I've already touched on the possibility of irony in the wordplays about the building materials; also in the narrator's comment about God going down to see the tower, in connection with their building in a valley; and that God's imitation of the builders' speech might be ironic. Those are all, admittedly, debatable.

But the likelihood of these being ironic may be strengthened by the widespread recognition that that YHWH's statement of intent in verse 7 reverses the order of the three consonants *lamed-beth-nun* found in verse 3, "let us brick bricks" (*nilbĕnāh lĕbanîm*) and "brick

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[37] A sampling of David Smith's work includes *Teaching Modern Languages: A Fresh Approach to the National Curriculum* (St Albans: ACT, 1994); *The Spirit of the Foreign Language Classroom* (Nottingham: The Stapleford Centre, 2001); *Learning from the Stranger: Christian Faith and Cultural Diversity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

for-stone" (*hallebēnāh lě'aben*). That YHWH's statement, "let us confuse" (*nabĕlāh*) itself confuses the *lamed-beth-nun* (L-B-N) order, replacing it with *nun-beth-lamed* (N-B-L), is a superb example of the ironic unity of form and content. The irony is enhanced when we realize that *nabĕlāh* ("let us confuse") is very close to *nĕbālāh* ("folly") and is followed in verse 8 by the statement that the builders *stopped* building (*libnot*) the city, where *libnot* itself has the original *lamed-beth-nun* order. But this consonantal order—just like the building project—has now come to a halt.

This ironic wordplay is followed by the irony of 9a, where the city is called *bābel* because there YHWH mixed or confused or babbled (*bālal*) the speech of all the earth.[38] This fictitious etymology certainly seems to be an ironic comment on the city's name, perhaps critiquing the well-known Babylonian etymology for the name of the city (namely, *gate of the gods*).[39] Instead, of the glorious height of civilization, Babel's reputation (at least, in the biblical narrative) is confusion or chaos.

But could there be a further irony in the phrase *kol-ha'areṣ*, which I suggested even for verse 1? Is "all the earth" both at the start and the end of the story in quotes? As verse 9a puts it, YHWH mixed the language of "all the earth," and then 9b tells us that from there (Babel, Shinar) YHWH scattered them over the face of "all the earth." It is all well and good to assert that the first "all the earth" refers to the people and the second to the geography. But how does one disperse "all the earth" over the face of "all the earth"? Wouldn't a perceptive reader ask this question, especially if they read this story *after* Genesis 10, which already mentions Babel and Shinar as only one among many cities and locations on the earth?

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[38] Hiebert makes much of the need to translate *bālal* somewhat neutrally as *mix*, rather than as *confuse*; likewise he prefers to render *pûṣ* as *spread abroad* or *disperse*, rather than as *scatter* ("The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," 48–49). I am not sure this makes a great deal of difference one way or the other.

[39] On the ancient interpretation of the name of the city, see Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 357.

This raises the question of the function of irony in the narrative. While there is no definitive proof that the story is permeated with irony, a reader's social location, vis-à-vis dominant, imperial cultural formations (whether ancient Babylon or the contemporary global West), might incline them to an ironic reading. It has certainly inclined me to see irony in the text.

But what is the value of an ironic reading? Irony teases the reader to look aslant at things, not taking them at face value. Irony thus helps create a sense of critical distance from that which is being described, prodding the reader to look beneath the surface and question what is going on in the text. An ironic engagement with the text of Genesis 11:1–9 might then generate a sense of critical distance also from the *reality* to which the text refers, namely Babylonian culture and civilization. Indeed, if the ancient Israelite reader were to access their own knowledge and experience of Babylon, this would reinforce an ironic reading. Irony and experience would then be mutually reinforcing.

This leads to my last question, about a noticeable absence in the text.

Question #12: *Why is there no sin, especially no violence, mentioned in the Babel story?*

I have previously mentioned the puzzling lack of any explicit religious or cultic reference in the story. This was particularly puzzling given the fact (which surely Israel would know) that the Babylonians claimed their city was founded by the gods at creation. That absence prodded me to wonder about the function of the text to demystify Babylon.

But more puzzling even than the absence of explicit mention of religion is the lack of reference to wrongdoing in the text. Hiebert is right; the text does not specify a sin. But is he right when he goes on to claim that that this means there was no sin? Would this lacuna mean

that Israelite readers are to assume that Babylonian civilization was a positive phenomenon in the ancient world?

The absence of any mention of sin is puzzling, in that it does not fit the pattern of the Primeval History, which typically portrays wrongdoing followed by judgment (and mitigation or grace). After an idyllic beginning the Primeval History has recounted (in Genesis 3) the disobedience in the Garden, followed by expulsion, which is both judgment and grace (so that the now corrupt human race will not eat from the Tree of Life and become permanently corrupt). Then there is Cain's murder, followed by his exile, mitigated by God's gracious mark of protection (Genesis 4). The flood itself follows the corruption of the earth by human violence, and functions both as judgment on humanity and cleansing of the world, including a new beginning for Noah's family (Genesis 6–9).

Why then at the culmination of the Primeval History is no explicit sin mentioned in the Babel story?

Ending the Primeval History with a story that does not mention sin might well give the impression that humanity has finally found a solution to the problem of violence. Violence has, after all, haunted the narratives of Genesis prior to this point. If the fundamental problem of the corrupt human heart both before and after the flood (noted in Genesis 6:5 and 8:21) is expressed in rampant violence before the flood (6:11–13), could the fact that no violence is mentioned in the Babel story be because in this glorious civilization known as Babel/Babylon we have finally found an ordered social reality that brings peace, the *pax Babylonia*? Isn't that what Babylon would like the world to believe?

And here I wonder if the deceptive simplicity of the literary tale of Babel reduplicates in some sense the deceptive simplicity of Babylonian civilization for Israelite readers. Are the appeal and allure of ancient Babylonian urban culture captured in this simple tale by

intentionally *leaving out* the darker underside of the project of the builders, in order to force the reader (whether ancient Israelites or us today) to struggle to dig deeper to uncover the point of the story? And does this literary struggle not only *parallel* the existential struggle to discern the true character of Babylon, but also *aid* in that very struggle?

In the end, I am not interested in achieving *the* singular correct interpretation of this text, especially a text that is so contested. Rather, I wonder if our hermeneutical grappling with the meaning of the Babel story, listening to alternative interpretations, mining the details of the text in its various contexts (literary, historical, contemporary) could lead us to critical reflection on our own cultural embeddedness and our (often complicit) stances towards the dominant cultures with which we have to do. And might this critical (even ironic) reflection on Babel result in ethical discernment into how we might live in the face of a globalized Western culture that indeed functions as if it were "all the earth."

No outcome is, of course, guaranteed; but perhaps I am permitted to hope that grappling with this text might generate critical discernment on the part of readers, leading to patterns of action alternative to the violence and corruption of our contemporary context.