

## Tower of Babel: Jewish and Christian Interpretations

The Tower of Babel exists in different forms such as the physical manifestation of a Babylonian Ziggurat and in the figurative sense the existence of language diversity evident throughout the world. In this paper, we will focus more on the Christian and Jewish literary interpretations of the Tower of Babel. There are contrasts and similarities in each religious group's explanation of the Bible's sentiment on diversity, the meaning of good unity, and the criticisms of human ambition. These points are major in deciding the Old Testament's stance on humanity's features and how these qualities are viewed and what are the definitions of these aforementioned features. By taking into account different aspects from the perspectives of two sects that have influenced many followers of the Bible, we learn about possible underlying beliefs that hinder society's progress towards becoming a utopia. It is also probable to find beliefs and truths that drive society's advancements in all fields of science. Regardless if the figurative event is based on a similar historical one, there is a justification for the written destruction of this grand Tower.

The emergence of different languages was directly caused by the "Promethean hubris on the part of a humankind unwilling to accept subordination to their Creator."<sup>1</sup> The Jewish interpretation continues the assumption that mankind is flawed despite their descendancy from Noah who, as good as he was narrated to be, was also flawed in some of his decision-making. It appears that diversity of languages or cultures appears to be a form of punishment in this interpretation in the Bible's mentioning of the varied tongues. Meanwhile, we must remember that the Jewish community, at least in ancient times, adhere to a set of laws and traditions that

1. Berlin, Adele, Marc Zvi. Brettler, and Michael Fishbane. 2004. "The tower of Babel" In *Genesis The Jewish Study Bible: Featuring the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation*. 29. New York: Oxford University Press.
2. Brueggemann, Walter, Walter C. Kaiser, Leander E. Keck, and Terence E. Fretheim. 1994. "The City of Babel" Vol. 1 of *The New Interpreters Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflection for Each Book of the Bible, including the Apocryphal-deuterocanonical Books*. 414. Nashville: Abingdon Press

embrace the Abrahamic covenant. On the more conservative side of their view those who did not practice their laws were not accepted in their community much less their religion. It would seem that their close-knit community gave their people reason to fear being apart from what is their home.

Contrary to the Jewish thought, diversity is a positive factor in God's decision to spread the people in the Tower of Babel. One could speculate God could have separated people, destroy the tower, without having to "confound" speech of all people. God spreads the people of Babel just as the descendants of Japheth were "branched out...—each with its language"<sup>3</sup> This scene emphasizes God's goal of filling the Earth with humans and diversity serves as a necessary tool to achieve it. For Christians, speaking different languages "enriches people's understanding of the world around them."<sup>2</sup> The Christians in the past included these outsiders and others who could not claim descendency from Abraham. For these ostracized peoples, they must have viewed their unique cultures to be a unifying commonality between themselves. This is reflected in Acts 2 when each people "heard the gospel in their native tongue."<sup>4</sup> Despite the language barriers, the Gospel reaches everyone present. It follows that the different languages supports the Gospel's power to be heard but can also mean God gave the Babel's former residents the ability to communicate with other communities whom already use a different language.

From one end of diversity's importance in spreading people across the earth, there is the other end: unity. In many contexts, unity and cooperation amongst humans and any other living being is a positive concept. Usually, demonstrations of teamwork between people would inspire and bring about a sense of community. Berlin et al. state that "Human disunity and exile are not God's final wish..."<sup>3</sup> This implies that God will not simply divide people up for the sake of

3. Berlin et al., JSB, 29

4. Brueggemann et al., NIB, 414

diversity but will reinstate what unity is in a proper manner than what was used in the Tower of Babel's construction. Modern Christian interpreters do not contradict this view and actually expand on this by pointing out "the discourse and motivation are remarkably democratic, reinforcing the view that the problem here is generally human, not that of any particular institution..."<sup>5</sup> Christian minister Mark Woods concludes "...it's what people are capable of if they work together that matters."<sup>6</sup> and what they created together was an impressive medium of self-preservation. The collaboration between the builders of the Tower is a magnificent thing but the purpose of the Tower's existence was against God's command to Noah to fill the earth with people. Having people cooped up in one location while in fear of being spread was directly opposing God's order. Furthermore, there is an implication that these Tower residents are fearful and doubtful of the future of which God had promised them to be prosperous. To be doubtful of God's will has been shown to be dangerous as displayed later in the Genesis 18:12-15 where Sarai is seen laughing at the notion that she will bear a child for Abraham at her elderly age and God then questions why she laughs at His claim that she will bear children. Altogether, unity is not a quality to be ashamed of nor avoided. Considering the purpose of the unity is fundamental because it is a powerful tactic that enables great works to be either detrimental or beneficial.

Along the lines of great works, there comes the questioning of whether human ambition threatens God. The Jewish perspective states it is not that God was afraid of what humans can do because "the Lord must descend from His heavenly dwelling"<sup>7</sup> to even see the humans' tallest building highlighting his supremacy over his creations' best efforts and the immeasurable gap between humans and Himself. This indicates God is not fearful of man nor his inventions for He is incomparable even to humanity's best work at the time. Christians dispute the construction of

5. Brueggemann et al., NIB, 411

6. Woods, Mark. "The Tower of Babel: How the Genesis Story Speaks to the Church Today." Christian News on Christian Today. September 21, 2015. Accessed March 01, 2019. <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/the-tower-of-babel-how-the-genesis-story-speaks-to-the-church-today/65363.htm>

7. Berlin et al., JSB, 29

the Tower of Babel is an example of one of the “finest creative efforts [that] can subvert God’s creational intentions.”<sup>8</sup> and that “...sin...accompanies human progress of whatever sort.”<sup>8</sup>

Regardless, God is able to wreak havoc to the Tower demonstrating His power exceeds all. This still leaves the question as to why the tower was destroyed if not out of fear of humans.

Ambition may hinder God’s will, but it is certainly no threat to God. It can be deduced that ambition can also hinder humanity’s progress in all aspects of society. The Jewish Bible does note that Genesis 11:4 is similar to the boast of the king of Babylon who boldly declares that he “...will match the Most High (Isa. 14.13-14).”<sup>9</sup> The commentary also states “...technology poses grave dangers when it is not accompanied by reverence for God.”<sup>9</sup> Additionally, in Dr. King’s lecture on the Tower of Babel, he states it is desirable to attempt ascension to godhood in Babylonian culture but such endeavors in the context of the Jewish world is strongly avoided because their God would not like it. Accounting for the fact humans can make haughty judgements of themselves, it stands to reason that humans can obsessively pursue goals that will indiscriminately bring about disorder and harm. We see evidence with the Tower of Babel when people cease to spread the Gospel. The main issue is the judgement of whether human ambition poses a threat not to God but to their growth.

In the Jewish Study Bible and the New Interpreter’s Bible, there were some uniform and some alternative explanations and translations for how the God sees diversity, unity, and human ambition. Considering the Tower of Babel’s context where the world was barren of people after the Flood that wiped out masses of humans, God saw diversity as a necessity to execute his intention of filling the Earth else people could repeat another form of the Tower that contradicts His will. This is corroborated in the clarification: “God’s response focuses, not on their present project, but on other possibilities of united human endeavor.”<sup>8</sup> By providing the ability to speak a

8. Brueggemann et al., NIB, 413

9. Berlin et al., JSB, 29

different language, the Gospel can spread further and promotes its potency to be understood by all. Further along that note is the question of whether unity is good, and the answer is shared by both Jewish audiences and Christian audiences. We define unity for Bible followers means their shared faith for God. It is not a contradiction of God's use of diversity in dispersing the people. This is evident in Genesis 12:7 where Abraham is promised a land of his own to consolidate his people on instead of being exiled and dispersed out of their land like the builders of Babel were. Lastly, the spiritual morality of human ambition is elucidated when reading both Christian and Jewish interpretations. Though the Jewish do not see mankind as a possible match for God in terms of power, both the Christians and Jews realize from the Tower of Babel that ambitions without regards for God can be an obstruction to their worship and God's plans for humanity. In more recent history, we can define Hitler's campaign as an example encompassing contradictions to God's will. Hitler desired to have only the Aryans dominate the world contradicting diversity. He succeeded in conquering several countries and unified them in a sense but also spread a xenophobic ideology that provoked many atrocities committed during World War II. Lastly, his ambition fittingly costed his accomplishments in the Battle of Stalingrad. The creation and destruction of the Tower of Babel serves as a story for all mankind and not a specific civilization.<sup>10</sup> It is important to remember the reasons behind the destruction of Babel, but it is also of equal importance to remember that the Tower's creation is a model for the potential of unified and ambitious people.

10. Brueggemann et al., NIB, 413