



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

A Story of Heaven and Earth

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Set between the pre-history of humanity as a whole and the particular covenant with Abraham, the story of the Tower of Babel is one of the turning points of the biblical narrative, central to its vision of what can go wrong in civilisations and societies.

The story itself – told in a mere nine verses – is a compact masterpiece of literary and philosophical virtuosity. The first thing to note is that its

historical background is exceptionally precise. The tower or ziggurat was the great symbol of the ancient Mesopotamian city states of the lower Tigris–Euphrates valley, the cradle of civilisation. It was here that human beings first settled, established agriculture, and built cities.

As the Torah makes clear with unusual attention to what seems like a peripheral fact, one of the great discoveries of Mesopotamia (along with the wheel, the arch and the calendar) was the ability to manufacture building materials, especially bricks made by pouring clay into moulds, drying it in the sun, and eventually firing it in kilns. This made possible the construction of buildings on a larger scale and reaching greater heights than hitherto. From this came the ziggurat, a stepped building of many stories, which came to have a profound religious significance.

Essentially these towers – of which the remains of at least thirty have been discovered – were man-made “holy mountains,” the mountain being the place where heaven and earth most visibly met. Inscriptions on several of these buildings, decoded by archeologists, refer, as does the Torah, to the idea that their top “reaches heaven.” The largest – the great ziggurat of Babylon to which the Torah refers – was a structure of seven stories, 300 feet high, on a base of roughly the same dimensions (further details can be found in Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*).

Not only is the story of Babel historically precise. It is also shot through with literary devices: inversions, word plays, ironies and puns. One of the most masterly is that the two key words, l-v-n, “brick,” and n-v-l, “confuse,” are precise inversions of one another. As so often in the

Torah, literary technique is closely related to the moral or spiritual message the Torah wishes to convey. In this case it is the phenomenon of inversion itself. The results of human behaviour are often the opposite of what was intended. The builders wanted to concentrate humanity in one place (“Let us build a city . . . and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth”). The result was that they were dispersed (“from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth”). They wanted to “make a name” for themselves, and they did, but the name they made – Babel – became an eternal symbol of confusion.

Their pride lay in their newfound technological ability to construct buildings of unprecedented grandeur. They did not realise (the message signalled in the opening verses of the Torah) that the greatest creative power is language (“And God

said . . . and there was”). It was not a technical problem that caused them to abandon the project but the loss of the ability to communicate. What is holy for the Torah is not power but the use to which we put it, and this is intrinsically linked to language – the medium in which we frame our ideals, construct imaginative possibilities, and call others to join us in realising them. The word is prior to the work.

What, though, was the builder’s sin? The narrative signals this, again, by a series of verbal cues. The first is the phrase with which the episode both begins and ends, *kol ha-aretz*, “the whole earth.” It begins, “And the whole earth was of one language,” and ends, “from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.” (The phrase *kol ha-aretz* appears five times in the nine verses: all three-, five- and especially seven-

fold repetitions in a biblical passage signal the presence of a key theme). A framing device of this kind is highly significant.

The second is the phoneme (a basic unit of sound) sh-m, either as sham, “there,” or *shem*, “name.” This appears seven times in the passage. It is clearly linked to the word *shamayim*, “heaven” – the place the builders attempted to reach in building the tower. The thematic elements of the narrative are thus clear. This is a story about heaven and earth – but in what way? To understand the point at issue we must return to the opening chapter of Bereishit and its description of creation.

Two words in that account are decisive. The first is tov, “good,” which appears seven times. God says, “Let there be,” there is, and God sees “that it is

good.” Creation in [Bereishit 1](#) is not primarily about the power of God but about the goodness of God and the universe He made. In historical context, this is an extraordinary statement. For the most part, the ancients saw the world as a dangerous and threatening place, full of dangers, disasters, famines and floods. There was no overarching meaning to any of this. It was the result of clashing powers, personified as conflicts between the Gods. Religion was either an attempt to assert human power over the elements through magic and myth, or a mystical escape from the world into a private nirvana of the soul. Against this, Judaism made the astonishing assertion that the world is good. It is intelligible. It is the result not of blind collisions and random mutations but of a single creative will. This alone is enough to set

Judaism apart as the most hopeful of the world's faiths.

There is however another key word, the root b-d-l, "to separate, distinguish, divide." This appears five times in [Bereishit 1](#). The goodness of the universe is itself a matter of order, boundaries and distinctions. God separates the different domains (day 1, light and dark; day 2, upper and lower waters; day 3, land and sea) and fills each with its appropriate objects or life-forms (day 4, sun and moon; day 5, birds and fish; day 6, land animals and mankind). So important was this idea to Judaism that we have a special ceremony, *havdallah*, to mark the end of Shabbat and the beginning of each cycle of "the six days of creation." Like God, we begin creation by *havdallah*: making, noting and consecrating distinctions.

This too is fundamental to the Judaic world view. Goodness is order; evil is disorder, an act or person or entity in the wrong place. The word *chet*, sin, comes from a verb meaning “to miss the target.” The word *averah*, like its English equivalent “transgression,” means to stray across a border, to enter forbidden territory. Many of the *chukim* or “statutes” of Judaism are about inculcating respect for the inherent orderliness of the universe – and thus not mixing milk (life) and meat (death), wool (an animal product) and linen (a vegetable product) or sowing a field with “mixed kinds” of seed.

Creation itself is seen as the slow emergence of order from chaos. This, as the physicist Gerald Schroeder points out (in *Genesis and the Big Bang*) is implicit in the Hebrew words *erev* and *boker*, “And it was evening (*erev*) and it was

morning (*boker*).” *Erev* in Hebrew means an undifferentiated mixture of elements. *Boker* comes from a root meaning “to reflect, contemplate, seek clarity.” Much recent work in physics, biology and cosmology has converged on the discovery that the birth of stars, planets and life itself is a matter of the slow emergence of ever more complex systems of order swimming, as it were, against the tide of entropy.

An ordered universe is a peaceable universe in which every form of being, inanimate, animate and human, has its proper place. Violence, injustice and conflict are forms of disorder – a failure to respect the integrity of each life-form or (in the case of humanity, where “every life is like a universe”) each person. That was the state of the universe before the Flood, when “all flesh had corrupted its way on earth.”

This was not an abstract idea. The world of myth, against which Judaism is a sustained protest, was one in which boundaries were not observed. There were human beings who were like Gods and Gods who were like human beings. There were strange mythological hybrids – like the sphinx, half human, half animal. Religious ecstasy was often accompanied by a ceremonial breaking of boundaries in various ways. To the Judaic mind this is paganism, and it is never morally neutral. God creates order; man creates chaos; and the result is inevitably destructive.

The most fundamental boundary is stated in the Torah's first sentence – that between “heaven” and “earth.” Never before or since (except among religions or cultures influenced by Judaism) has God been conceived in so radically transcendent a way. God is not to be identified with anything on


earth. “The heavens are the heavens of the Lord,” says the Psalmist, “but the earth He has given to man.” This ontological divide is fundamental. God is God; humanity is humanity. There can be no blurring of the boundaries.

That was the sin of the builders of the tower. Their aspiration (to “reach heaven”) was laughable, and indeed the Torah makes a joke of it. They think that their construction – three hundred feet high – has reached heaven, whereas God has to “come down” to look at it (in general, the one thing that makes God laugh in the Torah is the pretensions of human beings when they think of themselves as like the Gods). However it was worse than laughable. The Netziv (R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, 1817–1893), writing in Czarist Russia and prophetically foreseeing the worst excesses of communism, sees Babel as the world’s first

totalitarianism, in which to preserve the masses as a single entity, all freedom of expression is suppressed (that, for him, is the meaning of “the whole world had one language and a unified speech”). Intoxicated by their technological prowess, the builders of Babel believe they had become like Gods and could now construct their own cosmopolis, their man-made miniature universe. Not content with earth, they wanted to build an abode in heaven. It is a mistake many civilisations have made, and the result is catastrophe.

In modern times, the re-enactment of Babel is most clearly associated with the name of Nietzsche (1844-1890). For the last ten years of his life, he was clinically insane, but shortly before his final breakdown he had a nightmare vision which has become justly famous:

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, “I seek God! I seek God!” . . . “Whither is God? he cried. “I shall tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers . . . God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves? What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this



blood off us? . . . Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we not ourselves become Gods simply to seem worthy of it?”

As George Steiner pointed out (in his *In Bluebeard's Castle*) there was less than three-quarters of a century between Nietzsche and the Holocaust, between his vision of the murder of God and the deliberate, systematic attempt to murder the “people of God” (Hitler called conscience “a Jewish invention”).

When human beings try to become more than human, they quickly become less than human. As Lord Acton pointed out, even the great city-state

of Athens which produced Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, self-destructed when “the possession of unlimited power, which corrodes the conscience, hardens the heart, and confounds the understanding of monarchs, exercised its demoralising influence.” What went wrong in Athens, he writes, was the belief that “there is no law superior to that of the State – the lawgiver is above the law.”

Only when God is God can man be man. That means keeping heaven and earth distinct, organising the latter only under the conscious sovereignty of the former. Without this there is little to prevent human beings from sacrificing the many for the sake of the few, or the few for the sake of the many. Only a respect for the integrity of creation stops human beings destroying themselves. Humility in the presence of Divine

order is our last, best safeguard against mankind arrogating to itself power without restraint, might without right. Babel was the first civilisation, but sadly not the last, to begin with a dream of utopia and end in a nightmare of hell. A world of *tov*, good, is a world of *havdallah*, boundaries and limits. Those who cross those boundaries and transgress these limits make a name for themselves, but the name they make is Babel, meaning chaos, confusion and the loss of that order which is a precondition of both nature (the world God creates) and culture (the world we create).