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The sin of Shinar (Genesis 11:4)
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SUMMARY

Research related to the so-called Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11:1-9 continues to debate the exact nature of the sin described in verse 4, which caused the Lord to punish the people with confusion and dispersion. This article offers an atypical answer to this question. The attempt to "make a name" is reasonably defined by the narrative in its immediate and OT context, not as attacking God or avoiding migration, but pride that led to an abuse of power. The building of a ziggurat or tower indicated a desire to have communion with God or the gods. The arrival in Shinar shows the people were already migrating and multiplying. Their fear of being scattered was the fear of defeat and deportation. The story in Genesis 11 builds on 10:8-10 and the history of Nimrod. These Shinarites were guilty of using violence as had been the case with people God judged since Genesis 4. The sin was that of building a fierce reputation ("a name") to keep from being scattered by others with similar plans for cruel conquest.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Für die Forschung über die so genannte Turm-von-Babel-Geschichte in Genesis 11, 1-9 geht die Debatte über die eigentliche Natur der Sünde weiter, die in Kapitel 11, 4 beschrieben wird. Diese hat Yahweh veranlasst, die Menschen durch Verwirrung und Zerstreuung zu bestrafen.

Der vorliegende Artikel bietet einen ungewöhnlichen Beitrag zu dieser Diskussion. Der Versuch der Menschen, sich selbst einen Namen zu machen (11, 4) wird durch die Erzählung in ihrem unmittelbaren Kontext und auch den weiteren alttestamentlichen Zusammenhang logisch erläutert. Dabei ging es nicht um einen Angriff auf Gott oder um Zentralisierung, sondern um Stolz, der zu Machtmissbrauch führte. Der Bau einer *„Ziggurat"* oder eines Turmes weist auf den Wunsch hin, mit Gott oder den Göttern Gemeinschaft zu haben. Die Ankunft der Leute in Schinear zeigt, dass sie bereits migrierten und sich vermehrten. Ihre Furcht vor Zerstreuung war eigentlich auf ihre Angst vor Niederlage und Deportation zurückzuführen.

Die Geschichte in Genesis 11 baut sich auf die Erzählung in Kapitel 10,8-10 und der Nimrod-Geschichte auf. Die Leute von Schinear wurden der Gewaltanwendung schuldig, wie bereits die Menschen, die seit den Ereignissen in Genesis 4 unter Gottes Gericht gefallen waren. Ihre Sünde bestand darin, daß sie sich den Ruf der Gewalttätigkeit zugelegt hatten („einen Namen"), um nicht von jenen zerstreut zu werden, die ähnliche Pläne einer grausamen Übernahme hegten

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RÉSUMÉ

Dans le cadre de la recherche sur le récit de la tour de Babel (Gn 11.1-9), on continue à débattre de la nature exacte du péché mentionné au verset 4 et qui a conduit Yahvé à châtier les gens en semant la confusion et en les dispersant sur la terre. L'auteur propose ici une réponse originale à cette question. La tentative de se faire un nom peut se comprendre en fonction du récit, de son contexte immédiat et de l'ensemble de l'Ancien Testament : il ne s'agit pas d'une opposition à Dieu ni d'un refus de la migration, mais de l'orgueil qui a conduit à un abus de pouvoir. La construction d'une ziggourat manifestait un désir d'obtenir la communion avec Dieu ou avec les dieux. L'arrivée à Shinéar montre que les gens étaient déjà en train de migrer et de se multiplier. La crainte de la dispersion s'explique comme une crainte de défaite et de déportation. L'histoire de Genèse 11 prolonge celle de Nimrod (10.8-10). Les habitants de Shinéar se rendaient coupables de violence, tout comme les gens qui ont subi le jugement de Dieu depuis le chapitre 4. Leur péché consistait à se bâtir une réputation féroce (« un nom ») pour éviter d'être dispersés par d'autres ayant de semblables projets de conquête.

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Introduction

This article was sparked by P. J. Harland's observation that, "The account of the building of the tower of Babel in Gen. xi presents an enigma. In contrast to the other stories of the primeval history the sin which the people commit is not made explicit."[1] Harland discusses the two different traditional views: 1) the Christian interpretation that the sin was that of human pride trying to take power from God and 2) the Jewish explanation that the sin was failure to comply with God's mandate after the Flood (Genesis 9:1) to disperse and fill the earth. What follows will challenge the popular understanding of the sin committed by the builders of the Tower of Babel as religious rebellion, i.e. disregard for the command given in Genesis 9:1 to populate the earth and/or pride and self-sufficiency that led the Shinarites to "storm the heavens" and to rival God by erecting a tower so tall as to threaten God.

According to Chrysostom the people who migrated from the East to found Babylon were motivated by ambition and pride. He saw this text as a warning to those who seek fame through building mansions for themselves. Augustine interpreted this pride in terms of defiance of God's power; Dionysius said they were giants, whose power worried God, who were seeking salvation by human means.[2] None of these suggestions seems to find a connection between the sin of Shinar and God's command to fill the earth, as is now so popular. Augustine seems to be the fountainhead of the idea that the transgression was essentially religious in terms of direct aggression against God's rule. The assumption that these people defied God may be logical but it is neither the only possible one nor the most probable. The text shows them behaving ungodly but not necessarily anti-godly.

We agree with Skinner, "the idea of storming heaven and making war on the gods, which is suggested by some late forms of the legend (cf. Homer, Odyssee 11.313ff) is no doubt foreign to the passage"[3] and with von Rad, "That men wanted to storm heaven, God's dwelling place (cf. however, Isa. 14.13), is not said."[4] Man's self-exaltation is checked by God, as Skinner notes (229) but the issue is what kind of prideful purpose was involved. Isaiah 14:13 is about an Assyrian king's ambition to be deified and sit among the divine council on the sacred mountain top (which is another setting than the ziggurat). We suggest that pride in Genesis 11 was exhibited through power: violence and

oppression against humanity. The problem was first and foremost horizontal (which is inevitably vertical). Of course warfare and enslavement of others had become the focus of the people who had already abandoned any religious instructions they may have had about the sinfulness of such behaviour.

The idea that Genesis 11:1 places the story at a time when one and only one language was in existence globally will also be questioned.[5] The purpose of this article is primarily to show that the current and common view still leaves important questions unanswered or not answered satisfactorily. A secondary goal is to make a modest proposal for an alternative understanding: the sin of Genesis 11:4 that led to God's dispersion of these people was not religious but ruthless: a preoccupation with military might and violence. The view that the sin was something other than or more than religious is not original, but I hope to add more fuel to the fire of the debate and to reawaken it and demonstrate some weaknesses of the traditional view as well as strengths of this proposal.[6] The argument of this article is that a prideful desire for world conquest is the evil that God judges, not pride that tried to reject or resist God per se; so the tower was for military not religious purposes (although ironically if it was a temple to rival or replace God, or engage in idolatry as some claim [cf. Genesis Rabbah], then that is a sense would be an irreligious purpose by definition, i.e. men making themselves divine, a religious yet a false religious activity).[7] Whoever these people were, they could be held accountable for violent behaviour.[8]

One language and travel from the East (11:1-2)

Chapter 11 begins with the statement, not that the entire global world had one language only, but that an entire specific region ("the land") somehow came to have "one tongue and a common vocabulary".[9] Even the mention of tribes moving out across כָל־הָאָרֶץ should be viewed as only the expansion of various people groups as delimited by chapter 10 to a large region of the earth, yet not the entire earth. This would suggest that already a number of languages were in use. The author could only speak of his known world and not the global earth of many societies with very ancient roots we know today. Hamilton's argument, based on Gordon, that the unique wording of 11:1 means a *lingua franca* is the best explanation.[10]

What is most important here is the mention of people travelling "from" the East. Some translations say "to" the East but the preposition used, min, is normally "from". If this is correct, the story is placed at a point in time far enough past the early movements of Noah's sons such that people have travelled eastward and then back again. This is highly significant because it suggests or establishes a lapse of time that would most likely be long enough for various dialects if not languages to have developed. Since Shinar is by scholarly consensus an area in Mesopotamia, moving there from the East would mean that people groups were already at least as far East as what in ancient times became Persia. But even if מִקֶּדֶם means "eastward", we still have the problem that multiple languages are already mentioned in chapter 10. If 11:1-4 is about a time when only one language was in use (at least in this region or the world) then chronologically the story has to be placed between 9:28 and 10:1. Some would say it coincides with 10:25, which speaks of the time when the land/earth was divided. The problem is that various languages are already in existence in 10:5-24. So any division into multiple tongues could not be what is mentioned in verse 25.

A plan to build a Great City with a greedy purpose (11:3-4)

This event took place at some point after brick-making technology was perfected. This would seem to suggest a time when more than one language was in use on the earth, although not necessarily in a particular province. Regardless, we now get to the heart of the matter. Verses 3-4 conclude the opening pericope regarding the Shinarites and act as a fulcrum for moving to the second and final pericope about God and his response. Here the focus is on the motives of these people. The tower is a minor element in the story. They plan to build a city with a tower, which was normal for that period of history. If we focus on the tower per se, we miss that fact that the intention was to build a city and even more a reputation so intimidating that they would be safe from attack (which could lead to defeat and dispersion).[11]

The expression "a tower and its head in the heavens" does not necessarily mean they planned to make the tower so high it would reach the clouds (although clouds might form this low), much less the stars or God. It may only be a way of saying "tall". The term "heavens" (שָׁמַיִם) is used in

the OT for "H/heaven" or "heavens/sky" depending on context. Pre-scientific theologians thought in terms of something like nine miles high.[12] First of all the ancients had no such technical ability and neither does anyone today. (The ancients equated Heaven with heights like mountain tops, not a place beyond distant galaxies as we do today.) Second, scholarly consensus is that this tower was what we know as a ziggurat,[13] and these pyramids were not erected to dizzying heights. Furthermore, the purpose of a ziggurat was not only to reach the gods but to provide a gateway for a god to come down to the people.[14] So the ziggurat interpretation precludes any idea that building this tower was a superhuman construction of a super skyscraper and some kind of attempt to "storm Heaven" and rival or resist God.

Yet if this tower was not a ziggurat, what was it? The only other ancient tower we would associate with the building of a city would be a watch or siege tower, and the latter has been suggested by early Jewish exegetes[15] who did not conclude that this passage indicates some kind of treachery against God via a tremendously tall tower, which modern readers somehow think is obvious. I suggest that we have been conditioned to think this way, so we see in the passage what we expect, which is much more than it actually says. Although the KJV and even the NIV both use phrases that speak of this tower reaching heaven (KJV) or the heavens (NIV), this verb in fact is not part of the Hebrew text.[16] This interpretation is erroneous in that it goes against both the purpose and the nature of a ziggurat. A house for the gods was placed on top of these pyramids to promote contact with them or one of them, and such contact was intended for communion with the deity, not for confrontation. A tower with a heavenward top is therefore to be understood as describing the purpose of the tower as religious.

If the tower was not a ziggurat then it had a military purpose (offensive or defensive) and had nothing to do with God or the gods. So either way (for worship or war) the traditional interpretation of a ridiculously high tower opposing God fails. The explanation of this tower as a watch or siege tower is hard to prove; but we can note firstly that the term (מִגְדָּל) is often used of a watch tower in the OT (although its use in Genesis 11 seems to favour the ziggurat) and secondly that the concern with a city and a tower to defend against deportation is consistent with a military motive for the tower.

The major issue here is the people's desire to "make a name for themselves", that is to build a fierce reputation. This second aspect of the building programme is what is directly connected to their purpose: "so that we will not be captured and carried away to other lands".[17] The plan was firstly to build a city with a central pyramid for the gods (to ensure divine help) and secondly to build a reputation strong enough to deter would-be attackers, so that the Shinarites could hopefully avoid being conquered and enslaved. Perhaps this involved legislation or the imposition of a *lingua franca*. Perhaps they had forced the people in the area they had subdued (Shinar) to adopt their language in place of their native tongue. Such measures were and are typical when a new kingdom is established. The reader must wonder who the Shinarites feared might invade and enslave them. This reality suggests a time in history when a number of "nations" existed as enemies, which implies the existence of at least several dialects if not languages.[18] The traditional view is not concerned with this observation because it usually understands the fear of dispersion as a fear that God would scatter the Shinarites in light of his plan and command to Noah and his sons as stated in Genesis 9:1: have children and fill the earth (הארץ)! (Although again it could be argued that "earth" is not necessarily the globe as we understand it but as Noah would have understood it, i.e. the land area of which he was aware.) Nothing in the text from 9:1 – 11:4 clarifies that these settlers were worried about God making them perpetual travellers and/or parents. In fact the text taken at face value says that they have travelled from the East to get to Shinar. And this logically implies that their ancestors first had to travel eastward before they could travel back westward. They have to be a sizable community in order to build a city so they had no compulsions about bearing children. Nothing suggests they were opposing God's ideal of filling the earth except the assumption that they were aware of Genesis 9:1 and were resolved to disobey. Even if they were not from the east but had travelled eastward and were cognisant of the command to fill the lands with people, the very fact they have just arrived in Shinar at journey's end is evidence of following that order. Certainly people had to settle somewhere at some time, and the fact that these people finally get to a desirable place is no reason to say that they settled down out of an evil motive to disobey God.

Furthermore these apparently Mesopotamian (or pre-Persian?) people would not necessarily know about God's words in Genesis 9:1. That is only the case if we assume they are so close in time to Noah's sons that the command was still fresh and being taught. But if they are living at a time when enemy nations could plunder them, they likely have no knowledge of the Lord or his commands. And if they do, there still is nothing that makes a solid connection between their actions in 11:4 and the divine command in Genesis 9:1. The only possible connection textually is that while 9:1 promotes "global" migration, 11:4 indicates a desire to avoid being scattered.[19] The question then becomes, of what were they afraid? The tone of 11:4 is not that of a resolution to defy God. The Shinarites are not talking to God or responding to anything about him in verses 1-3. They are having a discussion about why they need to build a city. City building had not been divinely forbidden so building a city is no proof of a plan to bypass 9:1. All the text of Genesis 11 says so far is that some people were moving about the Middle East and increasing their population to the point that when they discovered a suitable place they settled down and set about building a city with a tower, most likely a ziggurat for contact, not conflict, with gods or God.

Another issue that is often overlooked is that many slaves would have been needed to build this city, especially the kind of tower the traditional view envisions. This indicates that the people who moved to Shinar from the east must have enslaved people along the way or conquered an already existing civilization in Shinar upon arrival, possibly – as was common – by destroying an existing city and rebuilding it. The pride and power of 11:4, then, is not a matter of rejecting the Lord but of ruthless military aggression. Religion or dependence on their gods or chief war deity would have been part of this, as the building of a ziggurat shows. Spiritual sin comes into play here only in that they worshipped false gods; but the text in verses 4-6 highlights that the problem that entreated the Lord's wrath was the Shinarites' attitudes and actions of building a reputation ("name"), of which the building of a city was just one example -not the building per se but why and how they built it. Their main purpose was to guard against being scattered (4b) and God's verbal response (6a) involved a concern about them being "one people with the same language". The Lord was angered by how the Shinarites had been and were planning to use their unified power. All

this points to a problem related to gratuitous and aggressive military might. This view fits with what had been the principle sin of mankind throughout the early chapters of Genesis. Sibling rivalry led to murder in the first family (4:1-8). The Flood was sent to judge a world or region "filled with violence" (6:13). Ham's descendants were destined to become slaves of the descendants of his brothers (9:25-27). Nimrod, the founder of the earliest settlements that became Babylon and Akkad (among other cities) in Shinar (10:10), was a "mighty warrior in the land [בָּאָרֶץ]" (10:8), and "a mighty hunter before the LORD" (10:9). Even some traditional interpreters of Genesis 11 have taken this phrase in verse 9 to mean "hunter of men",[20] presumably in light of 10:8 which describes Nimrod as a warrior. Regardless, he was a warrior and is credited with activities leading to the establishment of cities known for their conquests and cruelty as well as architectural accomplishments.

Interestingly only the narrator mentions or names God as the LORD (YHWH). It is not clear if these people worshipped the LORD as God or a god. If so, it does not fit with what we know about the earliest Sumerians or Babylonians. (Most scholars connect these civilizations to this story, except literalists who place the story very soon after the initial migration of Noah's sons, before a new language could develop and even before ziggurats first appeared, making the relationship to 9:1 reasonable, and making the tower an unbelievably high structure in order to defy God and demonstrate their self sufficiency.) Nimrod is associated with the LORD in 9:9, but the meaning is unclear. The author recognizes the LORD's knowledge of Nimrod but whether or not Nimrod knew of the LORD is uncertain.[21] He was a descendant of Ham (10:6-8)[22] whose descendants were cursed to be slaves (9:25), so he is not part of the line of people leading to those chosen and blessed by God (Shem), which would indicate he was likely at odds with the LORD. What is clear is that he is associated with settlements in Shinar and with warfare.

Those who hold to the ziggurat view of the tower and still say the sin was religious in nature have the burden of proof to show how a structure intended to appease the gods is evidence of sinful pride. The problem seems clearly not to be the tower but the motive of building a city so that the inhabitants could be secure from external threat. They are not trying to avoid migration but subjugation. Whether or not only one or several languages

existed at this time, whether or not "a region of the earth" or "the entire earth" is in view in verse 1, and whether or not the tower is a religious or military one, unity and the power and prospects it brings was both the goal of these people (verse 4) and what concerned the LORD (6). And whatever the sin of Shinar was must and will be established on grounds independent of these decisions. How we understand Genesis 11:1-4 is crucial, because it explains why God is so angered in verses 5-8. Also what is emphasized in verse 6 may be the clue to understanding verse 4.

The mentioning of "one lip" (שָׂפָה אֶחָת) in 11:1 in contrast to multiple tongues (לִלְשֹׁנֹתָם) in 10:31, and the mentioning of Babel in 11:9 and Shinar in 11:2 in contrast to Babylon and Shinar in 10:10, have raised controversy over the chronological relationship between these chapters and over the possible literary placement of the "one language" and "one people" in chapter 11 after the territories, nations, clans and tongues in chapter 10. There is no chronological problem or question if the proposal made in this article is correct. Chapter 11 focuses on one example in which a particular people (perhaps led by Nimrod in the earliest settlement of Babylon) subjugated a region and enforced linguistic and political unity with wicked and wanton desire for power, prestige and prosperity. This explains how "it came to be" (וַיְהִי) in 11:1 that this land had one language at some point in the multiplying and migrations of chapter 10. Otherwise, the traditional view that 11:1 speaks of a time before new languages developed is hard pressed to explain why the Tower Story follows the spread of nations and languages and to position it between chapters 9 and 10. If only one language existed in the world in 11:1, the story cannot fit with Nimrod and the founding of Babylon in 10:8-10 or with Peleg (פֶּלֶג) and the dividing of the earth in 10:25, since multiple tongues are in use. That chapter 10 speaks of "tongues" and 11 of "one lip" and "shared words" (dialects?) is best taken as synonymous ways to speak of language; but perhaps it indicates that the author of the Tower Story had something unusual in mind. Again, the word for "divided" (פֶּלֶג) in 10:25 is not the same as that for the dispersion (פּוּץ) in 11:4, 9. To what 10:25 is referring is a mystery, but if we did equate it with the builders of the city in Shinar (as some holding the tradition view of 11:1 do), the understanding of 11:1 as limited to the time of the original human language is (ironically) weakened. That violence was at the heart of the Shina-

rites' quest for a name and defensive posture better explains the Lord's anger and anxiety as expressed in the next half of the story (verses 5-9).

The Lord's opinion of these plans (11:5-7)

The most significant feature of verse 5 is the reference to God coming down. This is consistent with what we know about the function of the ziggurat as a means of contact between people and their principle deity. It was not for them to go up to meet Him but for Him to have a place to dwell in yet above their city and possibly to descend the steps to meet with them or for priests to ascend to Him. Yet the entire atmosphere and attitude was one of communion. From the narrator's point of view the Lord is the one and only true God, so only He could respond to what people do, whether they know His name or not. This verse indicates His concern with the city and tower but nothing negative is yet revealed. That comes in the next verse.

In verse 6 the concern shifts from the city and tower to the real problem: these people's unity, both political and philological, along with their methods and motives. God's response and solution in verse 7 is also aimed at their linguistic unity. So this is the key. Something about their power and potential in concert with their psychology alarmed the Lord enough that he needed to stop them (6-7). Interestingly this return to a statement about the "one language" found in 11:1 makes use only of the first element (11:1a, "one lip") and not of the second (11:1b, "unified words").

What is ambiguous yet vital for understanding this text is the statement "and this to begin to do". The versions translate this as "and this they have begun to do" (NIV, KJV, LXX) or "this is only the beginning of what they will do" (e.g. NRSV). But the question the translations do not answer (seeking to be more literal than interpretive in such cases, even the dynamic equivalent ones like NIV) is what "this" is. What is it exactly that these people have begun to do that upsets the Lord? The city and tower are almost finished. This is based on 11:5, which says God came down to see the city and tower these people "had built" (בָּנוּ), likewise LXX (ᾠκοδόμησαν), although some versions have "were building" (e.g. NIV). Yet there is an apparent contradiction in verse 8, which says that the Lord's intervention led to a halt in the construction of the city (which is why some translations

seek to harmonize the text with "were building" although the verb used does not say that). A solution is to translate the verb in verse 5 as "had built [so far]". They may have built the tower first as a priority. Verse 8 says that they stopped building the city but it does not mention the tower – although the tower could have been included as the central feature of the city, as understood by ancient readers. It may be also that verse 8 indicates continued building beyond the first phase of a city with a tower. This could be an indication that the people were excessively consumed with greedily and mercilessly advancing their kingdom at all costs (although not the megalomaniacs some suggest), which would explain God's great grief over their actions and his swift punishment.

Still what they had begun to do that bothered the Lord as sinful was not the construction project per se. The problem must be related to the nature of the unity created, which was driven by evil motives and enabled by having a city, especially but not necessarily if the tower was a military one. The city was a tool, morally neutral like an axe, but capable of being used with evil intent. If these people are not stopped they will apparently continue to abuse their privilege of having a unified population. But the odd thing here is that unity is normally something positive in the Bible and the eyes of the Lord. Linguistic unity is something we would typically see as a blessing, because we experience our linguistic barriers as troublesome for the communication of the Bible's Good News. Here, however, linguistic and societal unity is sinful. So the Lord confuses their communication (verse 7). Jacques Ellul wrote regarding this phenomenon of miscommunication, even when people speak the same language,

> A humanity capable of communicating has in its possession the most terrible weapon of its own death: it is capable of creating a unique truth, believed by all, independent of God. By the confusion of tongues, by noncommunication, God keeps man from forming a truth valid for all men. Henceforth, man's truth will only be partial and contested.[23]

The expression "let's go down" (7a) is a pun meant to ridicule the people who had said "Let's go build" (4a). God mimics their words: If you try to go up, I will just come down. This use of "let us" when God is speaking brings to mind statements like we see in Genesis 1:26, "Let us make man in our image." The "us" has been interpreted

as God and the angels or as the Trinity. But the similar use in Genesis 11 indicates that such an expression is just a figure of speech like the editorial we. In 11:7 the Lord says "Let us" not due to a plan to work with the angels but merely as a play on words to make fun of the people's frail plans – however majestic it was in their own eyes.[24] Regardless, the point of verse 7 is that the Lord's solution to the problem or sin of Shinar is to create misunderstanding and to confuse their communication. It must be observed that nothing is said specifically about the creation of new languages. That is one possible logical deduction to make, but not the only one. The rest of the passage only says that something happened to bring urban sprawl to a halt and that the people were scattered (8, 9b). As a result the place was ridiculed as "Babel" (a pun between Babylon, babel, and Hebrew balal "to mix up") because of their inability to communicate (9a). The author or editor is writing after the rise of Babylon or maybe even Neo-Babylon in order to poke fun at this idolatrous empire. The LXX translates babel as Babylon. Verse 9 speaks of confusion and scattering throughout the כָּל־הָאָרֶץ, which again may be taken in context to mean "all the land" (a particular region of the earth, not the entire globe).

The Lord's punishment of these people (11:8-9)

The punishment fits the crime. Gratuitous conquest was solved by confusion and the incapacity to unify in order to occupy and oppress. It cannot be missed that the confusion of language is related to כָּל־הָאָרֶץ. Since the story is about what happened in a limited location, Shinar, the linguistic confusion cannot be extended to "the whole earth" but only to the "whole region". The verb used does not indicate that at that time God divided these people into different languages, only that they were rendered unable to understand each other enough to continue cooperating and constructing.[25] Only by a presupposition and a jump in logic can these words be extended to mean that numerous languages were supernaturally created. Something happened that led to miscommunication and chaos and eventually to these people being deported or dispersed. The narrator presents the Lord as directly punishing them but the Old Testament mindset was such that even if they were conquered and taken captive, the Lord would be seen as orchestrating the events of history. So the wording would be the same even

if an enemy nation was the direct cause of their scattering. The word "scattered" does not intrinsically mean "to the four winds"; that is merely a default meaning in modern English due to the traditional teaching. Being scattered in a number of Old Testament texts speaks of how Israel will be conquered and captured by other nations (Deuteronomy 4:27; 28:64; Jeremiah 9:15; Ezekiel 11:16 et al.). "Over the face of the earth/land" may alternatively picture being dragged away over the ground by a foreign power rather than splitting up and travelling in many directions.

Conclusion and application

"Babel" does not mean "confused", it just sounds like the word that has that meaning. The Israelites could not miss this opportunity to take a pot shot at the pompous Babylonians. Parts of the story are intended as humorous and heuristic and overall to promote holiness by encouraging the readers not to follow the bad example of these Shinarites. Genesis 11:1-9 picks up on 10:8-10 and the tales of Nimrod.[26] However, it could be surmised that 11:9 was added by a redactor so that the original story was not intentionally related to the origins of Babylon. The same word (בָּבֶל) is employed for Babylon in 10:10 and Babel in 11:9. Either way the story as we now have it contains a final commentary on why the city was named Babylon or Babel, i.e. because it was confused (בָּלַל). Yet the etymology of Babel (Akkadian Bab-ilu) is from the Sumerian, meaning "gate of the god", presumably due to a sacred gate at the end of the procession street in Babylon.[27] (Yet the house at the top of a ziggurat was also considered a gate for the gods' entrance into the human realm.) The Babylonian and later the Assyrian empires were known for their cruel treatment of those conquered and captured. The mention of one language in the land likely hearkens back to a period when a particular *lingua franca* like Sumerian or Babylonian was in force (11:1). The region of Shinar was discovered, perhaps invaded, and inhabited (11:2) and eventually a brick city (Babel, typical of Mesopotamia) was built with a ziggurat as a central feature, meaning the gods were called upon for assistance (11:3-4a). But the people's motives were not pure. They built a fortress and sought the chief deity's help in order to establish a fierce reputation so that no other nation would defeat and disperse them (11:4b). So the Lord was concerned about what they were doing (11:5); he was worried about the

potential problems if their unified power (militaristic and linguistic) went unchecked (11:6). He so orchestrated events that they became confused; through miscommunication and chaos their unity was weakened (11:7). As a result they were defeated and their empire building ceased; they were deported and dragged away to another region as captives (11:8). Epilogue: This is why the city was named Babyl[on]: because the area under its control became confused, mired down in miscommunication, and the LORD used another nation as his instrument to bring judgment and to scatter this once proud and powerful but too proud and powerful people who violently misused their privileged position.

What then is the value of this text for the modern reader? It is an example of one of the dominant themes of the Old Testament: God's repeated judgment of those who act violently and abuse power. The issue is not the tower but the power of Babel. The narrative in Genesis 11:1-9 gives every indication that the problem was not votive (religious) or volitional (refusal to migrate) but violence (a reputation built on power, real and perceived).

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Notes

1   P.J. Harland, "Vertical or Horizontal: The Sin of Babel", *Vetus Testamentumi* 48 (1998) 515. Luther also thought that "This chapter [11] does not indicate clearly wherein the sins of the builders of the Tower of Babel consisted." Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther's Works, vol. 2: Lectures on Genesis Chapters 6-14* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1960) 2:210.

2   See Andrew Louth (ed.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Genesis 1-11* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001) 166-170, citing *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1947) 14:495-499; 48:170; 67:66-67; 78:138-139; 82:222-229; 91:147-148; *Pseudo Dionysius, The Complete Works*, transl. C. Luibheid et al. (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1987) 282; and *Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1953-) 128:79.

3   John Skinner, *Genesis*, 2nd ed. (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930) 226.

4   Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, rev. edition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961) 149.

5   For related literature see Jubilees 10:18 and Sibylline Oracles 3:100, in J.H. Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha II* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985) and *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha I* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983); *Josephus Antiquities 1:118*, transl. H.St.J. Thackeray (London: SPCK, 1930) 57. For rabbinic views, *Commentaries on the Pentateuch*, ed. C. Pearl (New York: Harper and Row, 1970) 39; C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974) 734; G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco: Word Books, 1987) 245; V.P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 356; and others, in addition to the famous painting by Pieter Brueghel (which has probably influenced popular belief more than the Bible or any book, except Bible books for children, or lecture and is likely equalled by fundamentalist sermons). See Theodore Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126:1 (2007) 29, citing James Kugel, "The Tower of Babel" in *Traditions of the Bible: A guide to the Bible as it was at the start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) 228-242 (for a review of early interpreters); Theodore Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel: Babble or Blueprint? Calvin, Cultural Diversity, and the Interpretation of Genesis 11:1-9", in Wallace M. Alston, Jr. and Michael Welker (eds.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity, vol. 2* (forthcoming), for a review of interpretations until the present. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 719-721, warns against an interpretation that focuses on a particular place or tower; yet also traditionally says their sin was forcing their way into God's presence.

6   Besides Harland's approach (see note 1), Hiebert has proposed that this story is about the tension between cultural solidarity and diversity (cultural injustice). See Hiebert, " Tower of Babel and Origin of Cultures", 29-58. He argues that Genesis 11:1-9 has no focus on pride and punishment but exclusively explains why the world has a diversity of cultures.
It has even been suggested that Jesus had the Tower of Babel in mind when he taught his disciples about counting the cost of discipleship. He told his disciples the parables of the tower builder and the king going to war (Luke 14:25-33), which interestingly combines a story of building of a tower with one about warfare. See Peter G. Jarvis, "Expounding the Parables: V. The Tower-builders and the King Going to War (Luke 14:25-33)", *Expository Times* 77 (Jan 1966) 196-198.
Jacques Ellul gave a brilliant treatment of the meaning of such a city in the ancient world. He spoke of the inevitability of the city, due to the motives for its creation, needing to conquer the "country" and of its necessary spiritual power for good or evil. Nimrod accomplished his "hunting" of men through city building. In the same context of the building of Babylon in Shinar in Genesis 10 is also

the reference to Nineveh in Assyria (also "built" by "Nimrod"). According to Nahum 3:1, Nineveh was a city of falsehood, violence and plunder. This is the legacy of city building in human history. Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1997, repr. ed.) 8-22.

7 Some non-traditional views on the nature of the sin regard the tower not as a ziggurat but a siege or watch tower. See e.g. C. Uehlinger, *Weltreich und "eine Rede": Eine neue Deutung der sogennanten Turmbauerzahlung (Gen 11, 1-9)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990) 231-236, 503-513, 534-536, who argues against the temple idea and sin of religious pride, indicating the sin was an attempt at world domination. Uehlinger compares the language of world domination found in Assyrian rhetoric, specifically inscriptions dealing with the failure of Sargon II in conquering the known world. Pride is said not to be the issue for Genesis 11, but pride can be or most certainly is involved whether people are trying to rival God or run over fellow humans. See Harland, "Vertical or Horizontal," 518 citing Uehlinger. Empire building as an interpretation was also promoted in J. Severino Croatto, "A Reading of the Story of the Tower of Babel from a Perspective of Non-Identity" in Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (eds.), *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998) 203-223. Others explain the sin as social injustice, e.g. Steve Reimer, "The Tower of Babel: An Archaeologically Informed Reinterpretation", *Direction 25:2* (1996) 64-72. Ernest B. Cohen, "The Tower of Babel Revisited", *Reconstructionist* (21 Jan 1972) 25-29, compares the Tower Story to loss of jobs for NASA scientists in spite of their grand schemes and abilities to reach the skies and asks for social solutions for those unemployed.

8 Ephrem the Syrian (born ca. AD 306) suggested that after confusion set in, a war erupted in which Nimrod was victorious. He then scattered the population of the city and set himself up as king of Babylon. See Louth, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 166, 187.

9 Orally, T. Muraoka (Hebrew and Semitics professor emeritus of Leiden University) suggested the meaning "one dialect" for the phrase וּדְבָרִים אֲחָדִים. The entire statement וּדְבָרִים אֲחָדִים שָׂפָה אֶחָת is enigmatic as illustrated by the various ways it is translated and interpreted. Perhaps the connective waw is not conjunctive syntactically ("and also") but explicative ("especially") or pleonastic (stylistic). Possibly the two clauses are appositional ("that is"). This could be a hendiadys. It sounds redundant to say "one language and one speech" as if two different things are meant, unless Muraoka is right about the latter being a dialect. If the point in history was when only one language was being used,

it would suffice to just say "everyone spoke one (or 'the same') language". Why add the comment about "words"? To say "one language and a shared vocabulary" is redundant, unless meant appositionally or explicit as a restatement ("that is, a shared vocabulary"). But then Hebrew does possess some redundant features. Regardless of what exactly is meant, the added phrase and the context (see comments on 11:2 above) seem to place the event historically at a point when linguistic and dialectical changes had already occurred.

10 Hamilton, *Genesis*, 350-351, notes 7-8, citing numerous articles and chapters by C.H. Gordon, especially "Ebla as Background for the Old Testament", *Congress Volume: Jerusalem, 1986*, *VTSup* 40 (Leiden: Brill, 1988) 295. He also cites an argument that this language was Sumerian and the scattering is linked to the Ur III period in D.S. DeWitt, "The Historical Background of Genesis 11:1-9: Babel or Ur?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22 (1979) 15-26.

11 Gordon Wenham suggests a hendiadys here ("city tower"?), which takes the city out of the picture (unless it is "towered city"). But a city tower presupposes a city so even if the focus is on the tower per se, we still have to ask its purpose. If the reader does not know about ziggurats, it is reasonable to conclude this is a watch or siege tower. As a religious structure, however, it could still fit a warfare situation as far as the story goes. A ziggurat would have been used for inviting the gods' blessings on their battles. The purpose of a ziggurat could in no way have enraged the gods. *The Lord* would have been upset by idolatry but these are not Hebrews and the text does not describe the problem in this way. The sin would have to be something that was universally viewed as sinful, like gratuitous violence. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 239.

12 Luther spoke of medieval folklore that placed the Tower at nine miles high. Pelikan, *Luther's Works*, 2:211.

13 Therefore Dale DeWitt could confidently assert: "It is common knowledge now that the tower is the ziggurat of the lower Tigris-Euphrates basin." See DeWitt, "The Historical Background", 15. In the *Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 20 it says regarding Genesis 11:4: "Ancient cities were dominated by a temple complex, including a tower…. Ziggurats were dedicated to particular deities. Their design made it convenient for a god to 'come down' to his temple, receive worship from his people and bless them." On sacred space in the ancient world, see V. Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House, JSOT* Sup 115 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992). DeWitt plausibly argues that the date of the Tower event is best related to the fall of the Third Dynasty of Ur, the end of the Sumerian civilization, ca. 1960

BC. He connects the division of languages in Genesis 11:7 with the time of Peleg when the earth was divided (10:25; cf. 11:18; DeWitt 10:18 [sic?]). His defence of the tower of Genesis 11 as a temple uniting Heaven and earth is based mainly on the wording of 11:4 (mentioning the heavens) for which he finds parallels in ancient Mesopotamian texts which speak of ziggurats or temples as links between Heaven and earth (DeWitt, "The Historical Background", 21). However, these texts use the term "house" not "tower", although structurally these temples were often seven-stepped pyramids of ca. 30 feet [10 metres] high. Extant towers range from 60 to 200 feet per side. See John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2007) 119.

14 As André Parrot concluded, a ziggurat was "a bond of union, whose purpose was to assure communication between earth and heaven"; therefore, a "giant step-ladder by means of which a man may ascend as near as possible to the sky". Such a definition on the surface seems to align well with the words of Genesis 11:4a. See André Parrot, *The Tower of Babel, Studies in Biblical Archaeology 2* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955) 64.

15 See *inter alia* John H. Walton, "The Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel and its Implications", *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995) 155-175; Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 121.

16 Luther was influenced by such wording, as many still are. He concluded it was a place of worship. See Pelikan, *Luther's Works*, 2:213. He may have been influenced by the Vulgate, as were the KJV translators. The Vulgate in verse 4 reads *et dixerunt venite faciamus nobis civitatem et turrem cuius culmen pertingat ad caelum et celebremus nomen nostrum antequam dividamur in universas terras*. ("And they said: Come, let us make a city and a tower, the top whereof may reach to heaven: and let us make our name famous before we be scattered abroad into all lands"; *The Holy Bible Translated from the Latin Vulgate, Douay-Rheims* [New York: Edward Dunigan,1844]; emphasis added).

17 Cf. KJV punctuation: "Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth"; and NRSV: "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

18 An alternative approach is not to worry about such inconsistencies (e.g. only one language and one set vocabulary but various nations) and to admit that the story is a fable meant to teach a valid lesson, not validate historical details. But the presupposition of this study is to understand that a historical event is behind the story, and its intention is to interact with a traditional interpretation that is held by those who accept this text as historical and divinely authoritative.

19 The verb used for "scatter" in 11:4b (פוץ) is similar to but not the same as that found in 9:19, where Noah's sons are mentioned as those whose descendants were scattered (נפץ) over the "earth".

20 People's pride and pursuit of power inevitably lead to battles between cities for more prestige. This usually ends in the defeated population being dispersed or deported (scattered and enslaved). God allows this to continue as the natural consequence of and punishment for gratuitous violence against neighbours. Interestingly a Puritan commentator speaking of Nimrod said: "By hunter here is not meant an hunter of beasts, but an hunter of men." See William Whately, *Prototypes or, the Primarie Precedent Presidents of the Booke of Genesis* (London: Edvvard Langham, MDCXL) 87. Luther said about verse 4 that: "The descendants of Ham had invaded the region of Shem… Because they were inclined towards despotism, they had a desire not only to drive out the descendants of Shem but also to establish [as Satan does] a new government and a new church." See Pelikan, *Luther's Works*, 2: 219. Cf. Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, 10-13, who makes a case for "hunter before the Lord" meaning "plunderer" or "conqueror". I would add that the parallel with "mighty warrior" supports this as a military statement, not one about hunting game. Ellul speaks of this reflecting the establishment of the first military empires by one whom God knows about but who does not know God as did Moses (Ellul, *City*, 11-12). Being "before the Lord" is a negative assessment in this case. The city is a centre from which war is waged (Ellul, *City*, 13). Josephus wrote: "They were incited to this insolent contempt of God by Nebrodes [LXX name for Nimrod], grandson of Ham the son of Noah, an audacious man of doughty vigour. He persuaded them to attribute their prosperity not to God but to their own valour, and little by little transformed the state of affairs into a tyranny, holding that the only way to detach men from the fear of God was by making them continuously dependent upon his own power." Josephus, *Antiquities IV*, transl. Thackeray, 55.

21 The Sumerians worshiped Anu (meaning "sky" or "heaven/s") as the chief deity. Ellul refers to the distance between the Lord and Nimrod, who was "before the Lord" (Genesis 10:9; see Ellul, *Meaning of the City*, 11-12). The Lord was not sanctioning Nimrod's prowess; rather Nimrod was separated from the Lord while a part of his omniscience.

22 In Gen 10:8 he is called a son of Cush (a son of Ham in verse 6) but in Micah 5:6 he is Assyrian.

23 Ellul, *Meaning of the City*, 19.

24 Likewise such a statement in Genesis 1:26 is probably just a literary convention and nothing theologi-

cal should be taken from it.

25 A widely accepted chiasm of Genesis 11:1-9 makes a parallel between "had one language" (b; 11:1b) and "the LORD confused the language" (b'; 11:9b). This would suggest that the one language was confused not divided. See e.g. J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975) 13-22. In this chiasm the centre point or climax, for which there is no corresponding line, is "The LORD came down" (g; 11:5a).

26 Wenham's view is that that 11:1-9 explains the diversity and dispersion of chapter 10, but he does not tie it specifically to Nimrod. See Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 242-244. My proposal is also that 11 explains 10 but not in terms of how the diversity of tribes and tongues arose. However, the view that violence is the sin of verse 4 does not depend on how the language of verse 1 is understood. Whether of not 11:1-9 fits chronologically before chapter 10 or early in it, the attempt to make a name is reasonably defined by the narrative in its immediate and Old Testament context, not as attacking God or avoiding migration, but pride that led to an abuse of power. The story shows they had no problem with migration and reproduction. And nothing indicates that God was angry about the tower per se but rather about the motives behind the city. The tower was evidence that they sought God but the Ten Commandments had established God's resolution that a right relationship with him was related to a right relationship with humanity. Jesus summed up the Old Testament and its two greatest commands as love God and your neighbour as yourself (Luke 10:27). Cf. 1 John 4:20, "If anyone says, 'I love God', yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen."

27 S.v. בבל in Koehler and Baumgartner (eds.), *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Accordance Bible Version). David C. Mitchell, "'God Will Redeem My Soul from Sheol': The Psalms of the Sons of Korah", *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30 (2006) 373 n. 30, notes the derisory nature of the translation of Babel ("Gate of God" in Aramaic).