

# THE 'TOWER OF BABEL' AS A CLUE TO THE REDACTIONAL STRUCTURING OF THE PRIMEVAL HISTORY [GEN. 1-11:9]

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The 'Tower of Babel' is a well known episode in Genesis which concludes the Hebrews' assessment of mankind's history previous to the election of Abraham as the first patriarch of God's chosen people. Immediately afterwards (Gn 11:1off) the narrative concerned with that ancestor and with his descendents is introduced by means of a genealogy which links Abraham through Eber, the eponymous forebear of all the Hebrews, with Shem, father of all Semites. In this paper, offered in tribute and affection to a teacher and friend, Cyrus H. Gordon, we will avoid the issues concerned with the unity, derivation, dating, and structure of this narrative;<sup>1</sup> rather, we will discuss the

<sup>1</sup> *a. Unity:* See the discussion in H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (Göttingen 1969), 92-101; J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh 1930), 223-231. *b. Derivation.* The opinions that this tale either depended on direct Mesopotamian prototype (cf. S. N. Kramer, "The Babel of Tongues: A Sumerian Version," *JAOS* 88 [1969], 109-111), or that it was written by someone who had knowledge of Mesopotamian practices (e.g., N. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* [New York 1966], 70-77) are commonly met with in Biblical scholarship. While in no way wishing to imply that the ancient Hebrew lived in a hermetically sealed environment, I find it as doubtful that the bits of information about Mesopotamia which are found in this tale reflect a real appreciation and understanding of its modes of living, as that the journeys of Gahmuret and Feirefiz, recorded by Von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, accurately recreate life in the Middle and Far East. The audience of such stories simply did not expect to be given a detailed appreciation of foreign regions, but merely to be entertained and edified through references to them. *c. Dating.* Most date this text by attributing the episode to J. However, I must agree with J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen 1975), 44: "Dating this story is not essential in order to understand it; the text forbids dating, as it were, out of inner necessity." *d. Structure.* Cf. Fokkelman, *op. cit.*, 11-45; B. Jacob, *Das erste Buch der Tora: Genesis* (Berlin 1934), 297-304; I. M. Kikawada, "The Shape of Genesis 11:1-9," *Rhetorical Criticism: Essays in Honor of James Muilenberg* (Pittsburgh 1974), 19-32;

relationship of this episode to the one immediately preceding it, 'the Table of Nations'; we shall assess its position in the complex of tales which make up the so-called Primeval History (Gn 1-11:9); lastly, we will gauge the import of these two queries for our understanding of the *modus operandi* of the Genesis Redactor/Compiler.

The 'Table of Nations', occupying chapter 10, had given the order with which Noah's descendents branched out upon Earth after the Flood "according to their origins and by their nations (v. 32)". The presentation was elaborated in a very intricate manner, providing, at one and the same time, political, historical, genealogical, geographical as well as tribal information.<sup>2</sup> In one case, this listing sought dexterously to explain the presence of *three* separate geographical entities which shared the same name.<sup>3</sup> Concluding the treatment of each one of Noah's sons, a statement is added clarifying that the blocks of descendents were given "according to their clans (משפחתם), languages (לשונתם); by their lands (ארצתם), and their nations (גוייהם)". This summary is commonly regarded by scholars as an insertion of P into a fabric woven by J. The only attempt within the Hebrew traditions at explaining the

cf., also, *idem.*, "Literary Convention of the Primeval History," *Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute* 1(1975), 3-21.

<sup>2</sup> *a. Political.* For example, note how the Canaanite border in v. 19 is described. Despite the obscure *לשע* of this line, as has been noted by commentators, the border thus described matches that of Israel's most ambitious aspirations; cf., B. Jacob., *op. cit.*, 289, who cites Am 6:14; I Kg 8:25; II Kg 14:25; II Ch 7:8; Gn 15:18; Dt 11:24. For Israel, it should be noted, the political boundaries were rarely sketched without theological considerations in mind. *b. Historical.* Although we might label such endeavors as 'pseudo-historical', note how a date for Eber, eponymous ancestors of the Hebrews, is established by recalling that when his son Peleg was born "a chasm opened in the earth." For this interpretation of a difficult verse that is usually translated: "For in his days the earth was divided," see my "A Genealogical 'Convention' in Biblical Chronography?," *ZAW* 90 (1978), 176 n.4. *c. Genealogical.* The genealogical pattern followed in this table is that of three horizontal lines which, beginning with Noah, ran 3, 7, 7 deep for, respectively, Yaphet, Ham, and Shem. The total number of descendents amounts to 70, a number symbolic of a "total community" (cf., Gen 46, and the comments of B. Jacob, *op. cit.*, 296). This number, it should be emphasized, could be obtained only if one recognizes the major role played by the compiler in harmonizing and streamlining the material which he obtained from his J and P sources. *d. Geographical.* It has been pointed out, e.g., S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London 1926), 113-114, how the children of Noah occupy, with some overlapping, the Northwest, Middle, and Southeastern segment of the Near East known to the Hebrews. *e. Tribal.* Note the pattern in the listing of (mostly) Arabian tribes as descendents of Cush (v. 7) and Joktan (vs. 26-30).

<sup>3</sup> Note how neatly the compiler solved the problem of homonymous Cush. The *Ethiopian* Cush is listed in v. 6 as belonging to Ham's line; The *North-Arabian* Cush, whence came Moses's wife Zipporah, is divided into its Arabian parts (v.7), while the *Kassite* Cush is reckoned as father of Nimrod, ancestor of Mesopotamian city-states (vs. 8-12).

cause of this division into 70 nations, however, is not made until the *succeeding* 'Tower of Babel' episode. It has generally escaped exegetical attention how singular is the nature of a literary relationship in which the consequences of the division of mankind ('Table of Nations') *precede* the occasion in which an explanation is offered for that division ('Tower of Babel'). It may be that scholarship has been satisfied to resolve this difficulty by providing those verses in chapter 10 which distinguished mankind according to languages (vs. 5; 20; 31) with an origin (P) which differed from those within Gn 10-11:1-9 (J). Occasionally, one meets with an opinion that accuses a redactor of retaining contradictory materials simply because they were available to him.<sup>4</sup>

Yet it might well be worth our while to seek a solution which does not depend so heavily on documentary separation, but one which would retain a healthy respect for the literary sensitivity of redactors. Such an approach might, to be sure, seem to ignore the source divisions so meticulously charted by generations of Biblical scholars. At the outset, therefore, I should state that while it is entirely proper for scholarship to concern itself with the origins and significance of each one of the many units that are identified in the OT; while it is certainly beneficial that it should trace the background of each one of these units by searching for valid parallels from ancient Near Eastern lore; while it is very useful to consider the literary context of even the smallest of Hebrew formulae; it is equally important a task to outline the frameworks of overarching, architectonic structure within Biblical narratives and to seek therein evidence for the theological presuppositions and the hermeneutical perspectives of those redactors who, by gathering the hoary traditions,<sup>5</sup> by sifting from among them those which suited didactic purposes, and by shaping as well as by arranging and welding them in a manner which promoted their ideals, created a compilation of Genesis which approximates our very own.<sup>6</sup> We begin our discussion with a short statement on the periodization of history as seen by the Hebrew redactors.

Hebrew chronographers charting the pre-monarchical period used basically two schemes by which to locate events in linear time: 1) a chronology which counted from the moment in the past when the cosmos was created, and reckoned the years by establishing the age of ancestors as they bore

<sup>4</sup> Cf. C. A. Simpson, "Genesis," *IB* 1, 562.

<sup>5</sup> Legends concerning Paradise, the Flood, primordial days and the patriarchs are known to occur in the prophetic and belles-lettres literatures in forms that differ enough from the accounts preserved in Genesis to betray independent origins.

<sup>6</sup> Of late, scholars have become increasingly sensitive to this approach. For the latest contribution to the discussion on Genesis 1-11, cf. B. W. Anderson, "From Analysis to Synthesis: The Interpretation of Genesis 1-11," *JBL* 97 (1978), 23-29.

descendents important to Hebraic history. Somewhat complex, this scheme permitted infinite difficulties to creep into the transmission of traditions, even when written down (compare, as one instance, the same chronologies as preserved in the LXX and the MT). 2) Another approach, much less likely to be distorted in the course of time by scribal vagaries, was to depend on genealogical structuring: horizontal to demonstrate kinship between tribes, clans, and families; vertical to establish the precise generational slot occupied by specific ancestors. Now for the periods preceding Solomon, that is from Creation to David's reign, the generational span was divided into 4 blocks of time paired into two distinctive types:

- a. Creation to Noah [via Seth] . . . . . 10 generations
- b. Flood to Abram [via Eber] . . . . . 10 generations
- c. Abraham to Exodus [to Moses's sons] . . . . . 7 generations<sup>7</sup>
- d. Abraham to David [reconstructed] . . . . . 14 generations

Within each one of these blocks a powerful theme repeated itself but which, in successive retelling, nevertheless became increasingly particularizing. We shall explore this theme more thoroughly as we concentrate on the block-periods *a* and *b*.

I. *From Creation to Noah*. This series of episodes occupies Gn 1–6:8. It opens with God expressing satisfaction with his labors, but ends with His decision to wipe out his human creation. This block of tales could be divided up into the following segments.

i. *Creation(s)* (Gn 1–2:14). We have gathered into one episode narratives that are commonly ascribed to two separate documents. The first, culled from the work attributed to P, may have been developed primarily to confer divine sanction upon an institution, the Sabbath, whose background and original purpose had become lost in primordial antiquity (Gn 1–2:4a).<sup>8</sup> We might

<sup>7</sup> It may be highly coincidental that Moses's generation, the 26th since Creation, is equivalent to the gematria of the tetra-grammaton (Y=10; H=5; W=6; H=5).

<sup>8</sup> On the difficulties in establishing the antiquity and original purpose of the Sabbath, cf. G. Robinson, *The Origin and Development of the Old Testament Sabbath*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation at University of Hamburg (Hamburg 1975), and the bibliography gathered by B. E. Shafer in *IDB Supp.* Vol., 761–762. Often met with as explanation for the P creation narrative is that it served as a polemic against the Mesopotamian concepts of creation as found in the *Enuma Elish*. That the last is not a composition which addressed itself primarily to creation, but to the exultation of Marduk and his city Babylon, is one reason to reject such a conjecture. But more seriously perhaps, is the unlikelihood that a Hebrew priest would have access to, or information about, a highly secret account, recounted in the late afternoon, in the holy temple of Marduk, during the

note, in passing, that at least one other tradition, preserved in Dt 5:12-15, knew of an alternate solution to the same problem. The second creation narrative, beginning with Gn 2:4b, is attributed to J. It is a creation tailor-made to describe the beginnings of man and to underscore the intimate relationship that he had with his Creator. That these traditions were seen as supplementary rather than contradictory is a conjecture that could be bolstered by the finds at Kouyounjik. There, a number of totally different creation narratives were gathered by the Assyrian scribes of Aššurbanipal who, no doubt, conceived of truth as not necessarily conveyed by a single tradition.

ii. *Warning and Covenant with Man* (Gn 2:15-24). This episode continues the narrative conceived by J. Man is allowed free movement in Paradise, but is warned of the consequence of eating from the Tree of Total Knowledge (lit. 'good and evil'). The implication is that, by having access to the Tree of life, man will be repeatedly rejuvenated (hence immortal), but will not be divine in that he will not have total wisdom. In exchange for this requirement, God's covenant with man is conceived as allowing him to have total dominion over the animal world (Gn 2:19-20) and to give him a worthy companion (Gn 2:21-25).

iii. *The Fall* (Genesis 3). The reasons for man's loss of daily interaction with God are given in this episode, also attributed to J. Once he had broken the covenant by partaking from the Tree of Total Knowledge, man had now become like a god, immortal and totally knowing (Gn 3:22). Ejected from the garden of Eden where his access to the Tree of Life permitted him unending life, man was, however, granted immortality not for an individual, i.e., Adam and Eve, but for the whole seed through the gift of birthgiving.<sup>9</sup> It is of interest in that respect to note that woman, who is to bear the brunt of the painful process of rejuvenation, is never cursed (verb: אָרַר) by God as are the snake and (because of Adam) the Earth. Alas, by the time man is old enough to properly enjoy the gifts of Total Knowledge, his days upon earth will end.

iv. *Cain and Abel* (Gn 4:1-16). Although the context whence came this tale and the precise meaning of some of its obscure passages remain the subjects of scholarly debate, for the redactor it afforded a singular opportunity to stress

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Akitu festival. We might perhaps better appreciate the difficulties that any ancient Hebrew would have had in reacting against the literature of his neighbors, when we acknowledge that J. B. Pritchard's *ANET* was not available to him for easy consultation.

<sup>9</sup> I am unaware of this proposal elsewhere in scholarly literature. Among its merits is that it does explain God's injunction of Gn 2:17: "As to the Tree of Total Knowledge, you (Adam) should not eat from it; for the moment you eat partake of it, you shall die (מוֹת חַיָּוִת)". E. A. Speiser's lame explanation for his translation, "you shall be doomed to death," is not convincing; cf. his *Genesis* (AB; Garden City, N.Y. 1964), 16.

the aggressive, all-too-human aspect of man as he commits fratricide. From this point on in the narrative, the gap between God and man will become unbridgeable. (Also attributed to J.)

v. A. *Pre-Diluvian Cultural Ancestors* (Gn 4:17-26). The line of Cain, which progresses no further than the 7th generation, is used by the compiler to explain how mankind, no longer in proximity to the divine, established institutions basic to civilization: city dwelling (Cain); nomadism and animal husbandry (Jabal); the arts (Jubal); and craftsmanship (Tubal-Cain). (Attributed to J, also.)

v. B. *Pre-Diluvian Eponymous Ancestors* (Genesis 5). The line of Seth is the one which ultimately will populate the Earth. This genealogy, commonly attributed to P (except for v. 29), links Adam to Noah within 10 generations.

vi. *The Nephilim* (Gn 6:1-8). Mankind's *hubris*, perhaps spurred by desperation over the loss of privileges accorded to divine beings, leads it to attempt regaining Paradise. This angers God who decides to wipe out his creation. While the origin of this remarkable fragment, attributed to J, who might have used older materials, is obscure—(is it to explain the superhuman aspects of the Nephilim, a race which the Hebrews, against all odds and aided by God, will face and defeat when they enter Canaan [Nu 13:33]?)—the compiler used it to set the stage for a new creation. The obscurity of crucial vocabulary (e.g., in v. 3) makes hopeless our task of understanding its 'original' purpose. The coda (vs. 5-8), also attributed to J, may well have belonged to the Flood narrative, but the compiler used it not only to quote God's decision to send a universal Flood, but to indicate that henceforth God's hopes for mankind were to be centered on Noah.

II. *From the Flood to Abram* (Gn 6:8-11:9). We shall note how God's hopes for this newer world fade as mankind once again chooses to blur the distinction between the human and the divine.

a. *The Flood and its Aftermath* (Gn 6:9-9:22). The narrative was compiled from materials attributed to J and P. That the Flood sets the stage for a New Creation and World Order is acknowledged by many scholars who note strong similarity, in vocabulary as well as in formulations, with Gn 1-2:4a. Among these we list the following:

רוח 8:1 cf. 1:2

תהום 8:2 cf. 1:2

*Separation between waters and dry land* 8:13, 14 cf. 1:9

*Be fertile and increase for animals* 8:17 cf. 1:22

*Be fertile and increase for humans* 9:1 cf. 1:28

*Mastery over animals and plants* 9:1-3 cf. 1:28-30

*The root שבת* 8:22 cf. 2:2

Additionally, it should be noted that the New Order began on: "the six hundred and first year, in the first month, on the first of the month . . .".

b. *Warning (Curse of Reckoning) and Covenant with Man* (Gn 9:3-9:17). In these verses, attributed to P, an injunction (v.2) is followed by two restrictions: one forbids the eating of animal blood (v.4), the second the shedding of human blood (v.6). Sandwiched between is God's reckoning from both kingdoms. The whole is completed by a reiteration of a past blessing. This passage clearly shows the skill in which either P or a redactor stitched together elements which very likely stood separately, by resorting to paronomasia on the root אדם. That the warnings may have belonged to narratives which went on to detail the results of violating such directives is plausible, but can no longer be established.

The Covenant with man (Gn 9:8-17) is also attributed to P. This covenant is remarkable in that it does not reveal the terms of agreement between man and deity, but only records the manner by which man may know that that covenant remains in effect.

c. *The Curse of Canaan* (Gn 9:18-27). This very complex narrative shows Noah in a different light than has heretofore appeared. That this does not necessarily signify that a 'different' Noah is at stake here can be recognized by comparing the Hebrews' total assessment of his character with that promoted by the Canaanites about El; patriarchal, loving, and wise, he is occasionally totally inebriated.<sup>10</sup> For our purpose, it is essential to note that this episode narrates the manner in which a fallout occurred between brothers. Ham and his son Canaan are now at odds with his brothers Shem and Yaphet.

d. *Nations of the Earth* (Genesis 10). This listing, considered as a fusion of P and J materials, is discussed above.

e. *The Tower of Babel* (Gn 11:1-9). This episode ends the sequence of narratives which began with the Flood. We note that man's motives and goals are still those which were furthered by *hubris*. We also note how God had to interfere directly with human activities which, once more, were spurred by a desire to blur the lines that separate God from man.

<sup>10</sup> Text first published by C. Virolleaud, *Ugaritica V* (1968), No. 1, (pp. 543-551). Commonly called "the Banquet of El," this text has been repeatedly studied; cf., M. Pope, "A Divine Banquet of Ugarit," in *The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays: Studies in Honor of William Franklin Stinespring* (Durham, N.C. 1972), 170-203. The connection between this text and the drunkenness of Noah deserves further elaboration.

With an alternate translation of the notice for the birth of Peleg (Gn 10:25)<sup>11</sup> removing from consideration the slight possibility that it may contain a dating for the dispersion of the human population, we have no directives from the Hebrews about their own temporal place for the Tower of Babel within primeval history. All that we could say is that they conceived this moment to have occurred prior to Abraham's emigration to Canaan, and that the last occurred 75 years into the 10th generation after the Flood. We are therefore encouraged to think that the compiler of these episodes considered the period from the Flood to Abram to span ten generations, thus duplicating the one between the Creation and the birth of Noah. If this point is conceded, then we might be able to note that the episodes culled from Hebraic traditions of early history were conceived in two matching sequences.

Table I

<i>From Creation to Noah</i> (10 generations)	<i>From the Flood to Abram</i> (10 generations)
i. <i>Creation(s)</i> (Gn 1-2:14)	a. <i>The Flood and its Aftermath</i> (Gn 6:9-9:2)
ii. <i>Warning and Covenant with Man</i> (Gn 2:15-24)	b. <i>Warning and Covenant with Man</i> (Gn 9:3-17)
iii. <i>The Fall</i> (Genesis 3)	[No equivalent] <sup>12</sup>
iv. <i>Cain and Abel</i> (Gn 4:1-16)	c. <i>Curse of Canaan</i> (Gn 9:18-27)
v. <i>Mankind's Ancestries</i> (Gn 4:17-5:32)	d. <i>Nations of the Earth</i> (Genesis 10)
vi. <i>The Nephilim</i> (Gn 6:1-8)	e. <i>Tower of Babel</i> (Gn 11:1-9)

Each one of these sequences describes the manner in which man was removed progressively from the realm of God, in which he initiated fraternal (and hence human) strife, divided into tribal and national groupings, attempted to restore his divine nature or gain access to the divine realm, but was foiled in this by God. In each case, it is the consequence of this *hubris* which launched God into a decision to particularize his relationship with man. In the first case, God destroys mankind, allows it to survive through his choice of Noah, but almost immediately recognizes (Gn 8:21) that His mea-

<sup>11</sup> Cf. above, n. 2, section b.

<sup>12</sup> It should not be surprising that the Fall has no equivalent episode in the narrative that stretches from Gn 6:9-11:9, since it depicts the unique occasion in which man was taken away from the realm of God and thus lost his opportunity to be immortal.



sure was a shade too drastic. It may very well be, as is often asserted, that the Hebrews' use of the Flood as a punishing instrument was borrowed from Mesopotamian lore or, better, was shared with other folk of Amorite background. But the next sequence and its working out was purely Hebraic in its theological perspective. Distressed by man's repeated attempt to unbalance the cosmological order, and no longer allowing Himself the option of totally annihilating mankind, God finally settles on one individual, uproots him from his own kin, and promises him prosperity and continuity in a new land, provided that his descendents do not follow other Gods. This individual, descendent of Eber, is of course Abram the Hebrew. With the first tangible reward for Abram's faith, the birth of Isaac, the story of God's relationship with Israel will be one of repeated disappointments, but also one of ardent reconciliations.

We can now return to the promise made in this paper's title and specify how the Tower of Babel may be considered as a clue to the redactional structuring of episodes found in Gn 1-11:9. A series of events which occurred after creation had culminated in an act of human arrogance so overwhelming (Gn 6:1-4) that God chose to destroy man. But He relented and allowed him one more chance. A new series of events (Gn 6:9-11:9) began which *duplicated*, in its consequence rather than in the contents of each individual episode, the previous sequence. Among the individual tales was the Tower of Babel which told of man's recurring act of excessive pride as he desired to storm the heavens, an act which directly caused his dispersal throughout Earth. In placing that tale *after* The Table of Nations, the compiler not only succeeded in recapturing a pattern (Gn 1-6:18) with a clear goal and message, but was able to show how the birth of the Hebrew nation occurred at a junction in history crucial to the future relationship between God and man. It is at this point, the Redactor implies, that God, despairing over recalcitrant man but no longer wishing to destroy him, focused His hopes in a covenant with Abra(ha)m, ancestor of the Chosen People.