

THE FIRST BOOK OF MOSES CALLED GENESIS.

GENESIS, CHAPTER 11: 1– 32

Verses taken from “The Tanakh. The Jewish Bible.” The New Jewish Publication Society Translation According to The Traditional Hebrew Text.

11:1...Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words.

Given that the Torah traces all humans to a single couple, it traces all languages to a single language. This may well be so but, linguists will probably never be able to prove or disprove it.

11:2...And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there.

11:3...They said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard.”—Brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar.

This verse is another example of the Torah’s antiquity. Here the Torah displays an accurate and detailed knowledge of Mesopotamian construction techniques. This is further evidence for its origins in the period described.

11:4...And they said, “Come, let us build us a city,

We tend to remember only the Tower of Babel but, every time the Torah mentions the tower, it also mentions the city that was built with it.

11:4 (cont.)...and a tower with its top in the sky,

To this day, people identify—or more precisely, confuse—“big” with “important.”

11:4 (cont.)...to make a name for ourselves;

Nothing has changed regarding human nature. To this day countries vie with one another to build the tallest building in the world for no other reason than to become the country that built the tallest building in the world—“To make a name

for ourselves.” But having the tallest building in the world says nothing about a country other than it has the tallest building in the world.

The Torah does not necessarily oppose making a name for oneself. In the very next chapter, God tells Abraham that He will make Abraham’s name great. (Genesis 12:2) The sin of the builders of Babel—and of most people wanting to make a name for themselves—is wanting to do so solely to make a name for themselves, to bring glory to themselves. As God is completely absent, they recognize nothing higher than themselves to bring glory to.

If a person’s primary goal is to be famous, fame becomes a false god. And like all false gods, it can be dangerous—because one of the characteristics of a false god is something that becomes higher than morality. Therefore, a person might do anything to become famous. And I mean anything!

Few things distort a person’s thinking, values, and even personality as much as fame. The greater the fame, the greater the inclination to think one is better than others.

One important rule of life to remember about fame: “The famous are rarely significant, and the significant are rarely famous.”

The other important rule of life is: “The more important God becomes, the less important fame becomes.” A genuine and humble faith in God puts things in perspective like nothing else. Take your religious faith seriously.

Very few of us can or will be famous. But all of us can be significant.

11:4 (cont.)... else we shall be scattered all over the world.

The builders’ fear of being scattered—wittingly or unwittingly—defied God’s plan for the world. God’s first commandment to Adam and Eve, and then again to Noah’s family, was to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. However, man did not perceive this to be a blessing and so devised means to thwart its fulfillment. The tower builders want to stay in one place.

We cannot grow up unless we leave what is most comfortable and venture out into the world. And God and the Torah, as we shall repeatedly see, want us humans to grow up. Growing up begins with leaving our mother and father and bonding with a spouse, (Genesis 2:24) It also may include leaving the place in which one

has grown up. The next chapter begins with God telling Abram to leave his home and go to a new land.

11:5...The Lord came down to look at the city and the tower that man had built.

It is difficult to miss the irony in this verse. The builder's intention is to erect a tower whose top will be "in the heaven's," that is, among the gods. But even though they build the tower, it is so far from the heavens that God must come down to see it.

11:6...and the Lord said, "If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act,

Speaking one language, the builders want a united world. God declares this is not a good idea.

God comes down not to inspect the scenario, but to thwart it. His method is perhaps surprising, He will confuse their language. Why not simply topple the tower? Because that would only solve the problem temporarily. Towers are replaceable...The solution must go deeper than that. It is not the tower that must be done away with but, what makes possible the building of that tower—an international language that provides communication among one linguistic group. If this ability to communicate is removed, it is unlikely that the individuals will continue with their work.

Needless to say, knowing more than one's language is a virtue. But the Torah is making a rather audacious point: the world would not be better if people abandoned all languages but one.

It is very tempting to seek a united world—one language and one governing authority, with no divisive national identities. But God declares such a world dangerous. For one thing, it inevitably concentrates power in the hands of the few who run that united world—and power corrupts. For another, diverse national identities and cultures are a good thing.

The united world the Torah seeks is a world of nations united in acknowledging the one God and living by His moral code. Beyond that, diversity in national identity, language, and even religion is welcome. Regarding the latter, the Torah and later Judaism are unique among religions that believe in the One True God in

not seeking a world in which all people are members of their religion. Rather, the Torah wants all people to be ethical people who acknowledge the One God of the Torah and live by His moral demands. As one theologian put it, “God is God of all humanity but between Babel and the end of days no single faith is the faith of all humanity.”

Virtually every call for “unity” is disingenuous. People who call for ideological unity do so on the presumption that it will be based on their values. When a Christian calls for Christian unity, he is calling for a unity based on his understanding of Christianity. Protestants who call for Christian unity are hardly willing to accept the Catholic pope or Sacraments, and Catholics who call for Christian unity are hardly willing to give up the papacy or the Sacraments. Likewise orthodox Jews who call for Jewish unity assume it means all Jews embracing “Halacha,” (Jewish Law) and few non-Orthodox Jews who call for Jewish unity are willing to embrace most, let alone all, of “Halacha.”

The founders of the United States, the freest country ever to exist, understood the limitations of unity. (Perhaps because their values were so deeply rooted in the Bible.) That is why they gave the states of the United States so much power. According to the U.S. Constitution, (Tenth Amendment) unless a power is specifically given to the federal government, all powers belong to the states: “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” So, too, the Constitution gave the United States Senate much more power than it gave the nation’s population, states with very small populations have as many senators (two) as states with enormous populations.

11:6 (cont.)...then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach.

God warns against technological advancement for its own sake—or worse, for the sake of human ego. Technology without God can be dangerous. When people who are not guided by the Bible have access to advanced technology, we get such things as cloned human beings. And only God knows where Artificial Intelligence unconstrained by God-centered values will lead us. Already, at this time, some people (men in particular) are beginning to relate more to human-like robots than to human beings.

11:7...Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech."

Once again, we are confronted with the rare divine usage of "us." (As in Genesis 1:26: "Let us make man in our image") Who is included in the "us" to whom God is speaking? Here I believe it is God mocking the tower makers, who had said in verse 4, "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky..." In effect, they said, "Let us go up," and God responded, "Let us go down." However, even with this possibility, one must remember as a follower of Jesus Christ, the presence of the Trinity. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

11:8...Thus the Lord scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth;

The results of human behavior are often the opposite of what was intended. The builders wanted to concentrate humanity in one place—"Let us build a city...else we shall be scattered all over the world." The result was that they were dispersed—"the Lord scattered them from there 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.

To this day, and based on this biblical episode, the word in English for speaking incoherently is "babble." Some years ago, Dore Gold, the former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, titled his memoir about the U. N.,--an institution where truth and moral coherence are rare (How could it be otherwise, given how many of the member states of the United Nations are corrupt and/or dictatorships?) ---"Tower of Babble."

11:8...and they stopped building the city.

The tower is not mentioned here because the tower is the embodiment of the city; and it is the building of the city that is the primary sin. It has often been mentioned that the proper name of the story should be "The City of Babel," not "The Tower of Babel." The thrust of the story is against urbanism and the overwhelming confidence of humanity in the feats of technology.

The Torah presents the story of Babel as a warning against human self-confidence or excessive pride and also as a warning against the often-immoral nature of cities.

The Torah warns us about cities for moral and religious reasons.

City dwellers are far more capable of anonymity than people who live in small towns and in rural area. And when people are anonymous, they feel less moral obligation to their neighbors—who are also likely to be anonymous. When both the individual and his neighbors are anonymous, people inevitably feel much less connected to one another. And they often act worse—just look at the differences between anonymous comments on the internet and comments whose authors are identified.

A study by the University of Indiana Center on Philanthropy concluded, “American rural donors donated a statistically significant higher percentage of their income to charity than urban donors did.”

It is not surprising that so many of Israel’s great prophets were shepherds, the most rural of folk. Moses too was a shepherd. And nearly all of the terrible ideas of the modern period were thought up in cities. Marx in London, Hitler in Vienna, Lenin in a host of European cities, etc.

Of course, there are fine people who live in cities, and there are bad people who live in rural areas. Moreover, even more than whether one is a city or rural resident, affiliation with a church can be the greatest predictor of how much a person will be involved in his/her neighbors’ lives. But given their role as incubators of bad ideas and the anonymity they afford, cities are a moral problem.

Cities have enriched civilizations culturally, artistically, scientifically, and medically. But morally—the Torah’s preoccupation—has often been another matter.

11:9...That is why it was called Babel, because there the Lord confounded the speech of the whole earth; and from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

The Hebrew name “Bavel” is a play on words; it sounds like “Balal,” the Hebrew word for “confound” or “mix up.” In addition, “Bavel” is the Hebrew name for Babylon; thus, according to the Torah, Babylon means “mixed up.”

11:10...This is the line of Shem. Shem was 100 years old when he begot Arpachshad, two years after the flood.

11:11...After the birth of Arpachshad, Shem lived 500 years and begot sons and daughters.

11:12...When Arpachshad had lived 35 years, he begot Shelah.

11:13...After the birth of Shelah, Arpachshad lived 403 years and begot sons and daughters.

11:14...When Shelah had lived 30 years, he begot Eber.

11:15...After the birth of Eber, Shelah lived 403 years and begot sons and daughters.

11:16...When Eber had lived 34 years, he begot Peleg.

11:17...After the birth of Peleg, Eber lived 430 years and begot sons and daughters.

11:18...When Peleg had lived 30 years, he begot Reu.

11:19...After the birth of Reu, Peleg lived 209 years and begot sons and daughters.

11:20...When Reu had lived 32 years, he begot Serug.

11:21...After the birth of Serug, Reu lived 207 years and begot sons and daughters.

11:22...When Serug had lived 30 years, he begot Nahor.

11:23...After the birth of Nahor, Serug lived 200 years and begot sons and daughters.

11:24...When Nahor had lived 29 years, he begot Terah.

11:25...After the birth of Terah, Nahor lived 119 years and begot sons and daughters.

11:26...When Terah had lived 70 years, he begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

There are ten generations from Adam to Noah and there are another ten generations from Shem to Abraham.

This is the first mention of Abraham, the patriarch of the Jewish people, whose original name is Abram. The Torah has now moved from universal history to the history of one specific people: the Chosen People, known later as Jews. But, in keeping with the Torah's—and God's—overriding concern for all nations, the purpose of this Chosen people is to be a blessing to all nations. Its mission will be to bring the other nations to God and His moral Law.

11:27...Now this is the line of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begot Lot.

11:28...Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah, in his native land, Ur of the Chaldeans.

11:29...Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Abram's wife being Sarai and that of Nahor's wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah.

11:30...Now Sarai was barren, she had no child.

The theme of women who give birth after long years of infertility is a recurring one in Genesis, and it is likely meant to underscore that the people of Israel came into existence through divine intervention. The first detail we learn about Sarai is she is barren, and she remained so for many years.

We know it was Sarai and not Abram who was infertile because Abram, at Sarai's urging, has a child with Sarai's maid, Hagar. (Genesis 16:1-4)

A generation later, Isaac and Rebecca did not have a child for twenty years, and in the following generation, Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife, was so upset with her barrenness, (Jacob already has four children with her sister Leah) she wanted to die. (Genesis 30:1) The lesson is clear: Had nature taken its course, the Jewish people would not have come into existence. But God intervened and the barren matriarchs—Sarai, Rebecca, and Rachel—all gave birth to children.

11:31...Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there.

11:32...The days of Terah came to 205 years; and Terah died in Haran.