

Babel Part 1: The Reason For The Tower

Man seeking the power to produce truth as opposed to participate with God's truth. Political leaders becoming spiritual leaders. Trying to find utopia through a worldly solution is not aiming high enough, any solution that leaves out God will always fall short of man's purpose. But any solution with God at its center has the gravity to succeed.

"Now the whole earth had one language and one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there. Then they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth."

-Genesis 11:1-4

As we finish Genesis 10 and 11 we are coming to the end of the mythical portion of the book of Genesis. As stated in previous papers, this doesn't mean that the book of Genesis is ahistorical, only that the history recorded for us in these first few chapters is deeply symbolic, and universally representative of human history as a whole. It is in these first few chapters that we see the goal of all human society shown in the Garden of Eden and the fall from that society that has resulted in all the current problems we face. Since Eden was perfect as a result of God's perfect rule of that society, any society built by man, apart from God, is doomed to fail. And so in the subsequent chapters, we see human society fall apart, beginning at the family level and then permeating the cultures of man, which results in the flood, and then the building of the tower of Babel. Since the issues that caused these two events are universal, every human society that has ever existed exists somewhere between the flood and the building of the tower.

What I mean by that, is that the world that preceded the flood represented unstable, chaotic anarchy. This is shown in the unnatural hybrids known as the "Nephilim", the various "mighty men", and also in the way that God describes mankind in this culture in Genesis 6:5 "...that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually..." This instability results in the flood which represents the destruction of a "world" through chaos. But then after the flood, man tries to build a tower into the heavens. This

represents a world totalizing system, ruled by a single “mighty man”, Nimrod in this case, that attempts to create artificial, permanent stability that reaches to the heavens.

Once you understand this pattern, you can make sense of all human history. Every culture that is standing right now exists between the time of the flood and the time of Babel, in a symbolic sense. As cultures expand and develop, they tend to grow too fast, and improperly assimilate too many fractious ideas. This results in chaos and a type of “flood” that threatens to wipe out the culture. Out of fear, this culture usually tries to create stability by turning to a charismatic, powerful individual who promises to solve all their problems. But because all men are fallen, and they don’t have perfect knowledge, they tend to reduce all societal problems into one category and create a tyrannical system aimed at solving that problem. This power exists for a while, until there is an internal revolution, accomplished in this story by God confusing the languages, or an external invasion that results in a “flood” period, and the cycle starts over. If you study any empire in human history, you will see this cycle play out, and it is no different than what we are seeing in our current culture.

In order to understand this cycle better, and to avoid contributing to it, or at the very least, surviving it, we are going to break this story into two parts. In this paper we will talk about the mindset that led to the building of the tower. By doing this we can hopefully recognize the warning signs in our own time and fight against them. And then in the next paper, we will talk about the kind of culture that was created in this story. This will also hopefully serve as a warning for us today, but also, it is important to study this so that we might seek our own stability within Christ and His church. We will talk more extensively about this in these two papers, but the church is symbolically shown to be the antithesis of Babel, as well as being the modern day ark that preserves us from the “flood”. So, as we recognize these patterns in our own time, this shouldn’t cause us to despair, but instead to seek God and to find provision and hope within His church. We should also remember that this cycle will eventually end when Christ returns and sets up His perfect kingdom in which righteousness and peace will reign forever.

“For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace There will be no end, Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, To order it and establish it with judgment and justice From that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.”

-Isaiah 9:6-7

The Allure of Babel and The Fulfillment of the Church

“So he carried me away in the Spirit into the wilderness. And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. And on her forehead a name was written:

MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus....”

-Revelation 17:3-6

The interesting thing about the story of Babel, is how often this “city” comes up throughout the Bible. This should again show us the symbolic significance of this story and how universal its lessons are for us. In this particular passage, the apostle John is shown the last empire of this world that appears in the form of a gigantic hybrid monster that is being ridden by a harlot. In this one image, we can see the culture of the flood, and the culture of Babel displayed. The beast, with all of its various heads, and mutated features, is a picture of the world of the Nephilim. A fractious empire that is divided amongst itself by its multiple “heads”. But, there is a unifying factor in this picture, and that is the singular harlot that rides upon the beast.

We are told that she represents a city, more than likely the capital city of this empire, but she is also called “Babylon” as a direct reference to the tower of Babel. And so by understanding this image, we can understand a little more about the account in Genesis. “Babylon” is depicted as a harlot dressed in fine apparel. What we see here is the powerful appeal of “Babel”. Meaning that men don’t try to build Babel through pure malice or wickedness, instead there is a powerful allure to this system that we need to understand in order to avoid this desire in our own hearts.

However, she is also depicted as being drunk on the blood of the saints. This shows us that while Babylon promises men peace and prosperity, the result is always unhinged, totalitarian oppression. But what is the appeal of “Babel”? While there are many, I will focus on just two that can be seen in Genesis 11:4: certainty, and prosperity.

“And they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”

-Genesis 11:4

The Faithful Bride

“Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

-Revelation 21:2

Before we talk more extensively about the allure of Babel, I think that it would be good for us to contrast the allure of Babel with the Church. Throughout the Bible, the Church is intentionally shown as a rival to Babel. There are more parallels than what I am about to share, but this is why Babel is shown as a harlot, and the church as a faithful bride in the book of Revelation, why Babel has at its center a tower that reaches to heaven, and the church has at its center Christ who has bridged heaven and earth through His incarnation and resurrection, and it is also why Babel is destroyed through a supernatural confusion of languages in Genesis 11, but the church is established through a supernatural manifestation of languages in Acts 2. What the Biblical authors are trying to show us with these parallels is that all that Babel promises to man, and ultimately fails to give through earthly power, the church actually manifests through divine power. So as we talk about the specific allures of Babel, we will also talk about their true fulfillment in the church.

Certainty

“And they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens...”

-Genesis 11:4

Ever since the fall, man has been trying to find a way to reunite heaven and earth. This fact gives us a simple way of looking at all systems of human religion and government. These systems function like the tower of Babel, they are man made constructs that are designed to bring man into the realm of the divine. This is why the tower of Babel is a construct that exists, in one way or another, in all human myths. As Mircea Eliade points out in his book *“A History of Religious Ideas Volume 1”*:

We have, first of all, the archaic tradition according to which certain privileged beings (ancestors, heroes, legendary kings, shamans) mounted to the sky by the help of a tree, a lance, a rope, or a chain of arrows... Other myths report the failure of later attempts to climb to heaven by means of various scaffoldings... Indeed, the ziggurat was considered

to have its base at the navel of the earth and its summit in the sky. By climbing the ziggurat, the king or the priest arrived ritually (that is, symbolically) in heaven.

- Mircea Eliade - "A History of Religious Ideas Volume 1"

It is this "ascent" into heaven that moves men to build their own "tower of Babel". We want a solution for our guilt and so we build these towers in order to access a form of salvation for our souls. We also live in a very uncertain world, and so we want to look to people who are speaking with divine insight. This alleviates our anxiety and gives us a false sense of intellectual certainty. So let's look at these two forms of certainty that the "tower" is supposed to provide for us.

Salvation For The Soul

And he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household."

-Acts 16:30-31

Every human religion is an acknowledgement that we are not as we ought to be, not just externally in our bodies, but more importantly that we are corrupt in our souls. That we are constantly failing both our own moral standards, as well as our communities and we experience this failure through our guilt and shame. Because of this, man has always been in a state of existential worry about the condition of our soul that causes us to desperately seek a system that will give us internal peace.

For most historical religions, this problem has always been seen as a theological one, meaning that we understand that our problem is one between us and the divine, and therefore unless we achieve peace with the gods, we will never have peace in our souls. So, all ancient religions produced religious texts that contain moral laws and ceremonial rites that help people cleanse their souls and find forgiveness before the gods. In these cultures, the ancient priests who ascended and descended these towers to heaven, were acting as mediators between men and the gods that allowed for people to achieve salvation. This gave the religious elites absolute power over the people, but it also gave the people a promise of certainty within their consciences.

"Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt."

-Romans 4:4

It is this level of certainty that the Bible does not promise the Christian. The allure of the religious tower of Babel, is the promise that if we perform the right religious actions, we can place God in our debt and "force" Him to bring us to heaven through our faithfulness. In this system, we don't need to exercise faith towards God and His grace,

we only have to have faith in our works that are functioning within the religious system. The gospel that the church has been entrusted with functions in a very different way.

“For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

-Romans 4:2-3

The righteousness that the Christian has is one that he must trust God with, not one that he can ever work to merit. What this means is that the Christian must fully acknowledge before God that we are not owed heaven, instead, because we have failed to meet His perfect moral standard, we are actually deserving of hell.

“And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.”

-Ephesians 2:1-3

This is a message that man does not want to hear. The message of Babel appeals first to our egos because it teaches us that we can become good enough by our own efforts. And it appeals second to our anxiety in that we don't have to trust God who we can't see, we only have to trust our works that we can see. This is also something that religious leaders don't want to hear. This puts even the most pious religious figure in the same boat as the most depraved sinner.

And it also removes any overt power structure within the church of Christ, because the church merely proclaims the gospel, we don't guard the rituals that will make someone right with God. The priests that performed the pagan rituals exercised ultimate authority over their followers, because if they ever cut someone off from the rituals, they cut them off from salvation. But if salvation is accessed directly through God in the person of Jesus Christ, while the church can align itself with God's judgment on the state of someone's soul, we don't have the power to judge someone's soul, nor can we withhold from them the means of salvation.

“Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

-John 14:6

Perfect Knowledge

The image of the tower reaching to heaven also represents divine knowledge. Beyond being fallen, we are also extremely limited in what we can know. After surviving the chaos of the flood, you could see people existing in a state of anxiety, especially concerning the natural world. Even though God promised not to destroy the world with another flood, He never promised to prevent floods from destroying individual cities, or to prevent drought, or fire, or disease, or any other disasters that can come upon men. This existential angst would move men to seek out a leader that promised to lead them with perfect, divine knowledge. I believe that the Christian theologian and mathematician Blaise Pascal expressed this anxiety really well in his book "Pensees":

"We sail within a vast sphere, ever drifting in uncertainty, driven from end to end. When we think to attach ourselves to any point and to fasten to it, it wavers and leaves us; and if we follow it, it eludes our grasp, slips past us, and vanishes forever. Nothing stays for us. This is our natural condition and yet most contrary to our inclination; we burn with desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation whereon to build a tower reaching to the Infinite. But our whole groundwork cracks, and the earth opens to abysses. Let us, therefore, not look for certainty and stability. Our reason is always deceived by fickle shadows; nothing can fix the finite between the two Infinities, which both enclose and fly from it."

-Blaise Pascal - "Pensées"

We all exist in this profound uncertainty that Pascal is describing. There are so many things in this world that we do not know, and so many things that we lack the ability to understand. The more you try to understand one facet of reality, the more you understand how little you know about reality as a whole. And so men crave a system that gives them absolute truth. One where they can ask for direct divine judgment so that they don't have to worry about making the wrong decision, or any type of worldly disaster. It is this universal thirst for certainty that has caused men to give up their liberty and to rally behind various false prophets and cultic systems.

In the beginning, people begin to follow these systems because they do have something important to say. No one would follow a religion or a political movement if it didn't provide them with some good insights about the world. However, over time, in order to give people absolute certainty, they have to convince people that they don't just have the ability to discover truth like everybody else, instead they claim an exclusive right to speak infallible truth. This serves as a way to elevate their own power above all others and have a monopoly on absolute truth. But, since these systems are still run by fallible men, they are bound to make mistakes, and so they must set up a system of truth that is made up of contradictory facts that their followers must adhere to, and they must

silence opposing views that criticize them. And men will still follow them, because in trusting this system, they have absolute assurance about their beliefs.

Also, since men can't actually save the world, no matter how high their system aims, if they aren't aiming at God, they aren't aiming high enough. Because of this, any solution offered is going to be necessarily reductionistic and false. Think of the leaders of the last few centuries and this point becomes more clear. For Marx and his followers the issue was economics, for Freud the problem was sexual repression, for Nietzsche the problem was power, and for Hitler the problem was race. All these men created movements oriented around their singular vision of what would make the world perfect, and every single one produced revolutions that failed to meet their expectations. This principle helps us understand the shape of the tower of Babel. The singular tower in Babel is representative of how all these men seek to collapse all facets of life into a singularity. That all solutions run through their ideas and all structures of society, family, religion, education, politics, entertainment, etc. All filter through their singular structure and their singular focus of truth.

When Jesus proclaims that He is "The way, the truth and the life" in John 14:6, He is claiming that He alone is the cause and the end of all things in creation. He is telling His followers, that through Him alone are all problems of this earth solved and only by putting Him first, and aiming to serve Him supremely, are we finally aiming high enough and we finally can find the solutions that we are looking for. Think again of the image of the rainbow. The rainbow is created when white light is refracted and then shines forth the full spectrum of color. Christ is the singular white light that contains all other things within His being. So while the solutions for this world are incredibly varied, they are all contained in Him and shine forth from Him. When we understand this, it should provide us with humility. Because while all things are solved in Him, He doesn't give His church the totality of His knowledge. We have to walk in humility, seeking Him supremely and submitting ourselves to what He reveals.

Surely I am more stupid than any man, And do not have the understanding of a man. I neither learned wisdom Nor have knowledge of the Holy One. Who has ascended into heaven, or descended? Who has gathered the wind in His fists? Who has bound the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name, and what is His Son's name, If you know?

-Proverbs 30:2-4

It would be nice if pursuing God gave us absolute certainty, but that isn't how God has designed this world. God desires for us to trust in Him in all situations, being as faithful

as we can be with the information He has provided us. But we also must accept that He has not offered us perfect knowledge.

*“Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and depart from evil.”
-Proverbs 3:7*

The church is meant to be a representation of this humility. The church does not speak for God, instead the church is tasked with being faithful to the word of God that He has revealed to us in Scripture. Because of this, the church is liable to err, or to give bad counsel. The only real certainty that God has given to the church regards our relationship with Him. Of that the church has access to the simplicity of the gospel that gives men assurance of salvation through faith in Christ. But beyond that, the church is meant to exemplify humility and faith towards God. Not seeking to pretend knowledge that we don't have, but to always proclaim with boldness the knowledge that we do have. While a relationship with God has within it, the solution to all of our individual struggles, these solutions are not always as clear and straightforward as we would like. But this is meant to highlight the greater glory of the gospel and its power in our lives.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.”

-Romans 1:16-17

Prosperity

“...let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”

-Genesis 11:4

This next point flows naturally from the first. When men feel uncertain, they tend to look for strong leaders who can assure them of prosperity and safety. This is what we see in Genesis 10 when it tells us of the founder of Babel, Nimrod:

“Cush begot Nimrod; he began to be a mighty one on the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; therefore it is said, “Like Nimrod the mighty hunter before the LORD.”

-Genesis 10:8

It would make sense that in the world after the flood in which resources were scarce, a “mighty hunter” would be an attractive leader for most people to follow. In his strength

and skills the promise of prosperity and security would be implicit, many would see him as a savior and a protector. This helps us understand the structure of the tower. Rashi, a famous medieval Jewish theologian, made a commentary on Genesis and he says this about Nimrod:

“They came with one scheme and said, “He (God) had no right to select for Himself the upper regions. Let us ascend to the sky and wage war with Him.” Another explanation: [they spoke] against the Sole One of the world. Another explanation of דְּבָרִים אֶתְדִים (other editions read: דְּבָרִים חָדִים, sharp words): They said, “Once every 1,656 years, the sky totters, as it did in the time of the Flood. Come and let us make supports for it.” - [from Gen. Rabbah 28:6, Tan. Buber Noach 24]

Rashi - Commentary On Genesis

In other words, the structure of the tower was meant as a direct affront to God and His sovereignty. It was man declaring that they would “invade” God’s kingdom, and even construct a “pillar” that could prevent the heavens from flooding them. This is how far man will go for security. Since nature is uncertain and God’s ways are beyond our control, we tend to pursue powerful leaders who promise to give us prosperity that no force can take from us, even God.

This same type of leader always shows up at the beginning of “Babel”. Whether it’s Caesar, Napoleon, general Mao, or Hitler, when cultures go through a time of scarcity, people become desperate for a strong leader who promises prosperity, and they will give that person total power in order to have an assurance of safety. And the reason why all these men ended up creating tyrannical orders or power, is because to go against God is to go against reality itself. But when men channel the spirit of Satan and rebel against the God who gave them life, they realize sooner or later that no matter how much power you obtain, reality will eventually reassert itself and God’s will eventually wins out.

“...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Philippians 2:10-11

In order to understand this better, let’s take the extreme example of Adolf Hitler. After their defeat in World War 1, the country of Germany was humiliated on the world stage, and decimated financially. Much of their infrastructure was in ruins, and their economy was in terrible shape. At the same time, you had many German Marxists trying to

destroy the culture and the remaining structures of Germany in order to create their own “Utopia”.

It was because of this that many began supporting the Nazi party, and their charismatic leader Hitler. He was a patriot, a veteran, and a professed Christian who spoke of German excellence and rightly called out the incompetence of the government officials who were running the German economy into the ground. Because of this, he received massive support, even from among many German pastors. But he used all the crises mentioned above to demand that he be named “Führer” (German for leader) in order to fix everything. The day after Hitler had wormed his way into the position of “Führer” a German pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave an impassioned speech to try to convince his fellow Germans, and his fellow pastors, to see why their current course was doomed to failure. This is part of what he said:

“The political, ideological, and religious ideas of the younger generation are symbolized in the image of the “Führer,” and its transformation mirrors their emotional and political history. Where does this particular fire, this brilliance, and this pathos contained in the concept of leader as used by the youth of today come from? Those in their forties can assure us that in their youth such talk of a leader was completely unknown. Does the call for a leader arise from knowledge that the power of things over people has become so great and so destructive and so chaotic that only a great figure would be able to restore order and unity? Or does talk always necessarily turn to a leader when, given the awareness of the political necessity of surrendering the ideal of the individual and the engagement of human beings as a mass, as collective, everything one was forced to surrender is transferred onto the ideal of the leader and is rediscovered in him, magnified immeasurably? What other explanation is there for the peculiar tension between a cult of personality and collectivism? Or is the call for a leader a logical reflection both of our current political situation as well as of a certain youthful way of looking at life in general?... Only those who give careful consideration to these questions can understand something of the nature of “the ideology of the ‘Führer’” and something of the behavior of the younger generation.”

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - “The Younger Generation’s Altered View of the Concept of Führer”

What he is pointing out is that the younger generation had grown up in such turmoil that they didn’t see the need to preserve some of the democratic protections on German power. They truly believed that these “protections” only served to stymie growth and prevent the amazing prosperity promised to them by Hitler and the other Nazi’s. They even began to believe the mad claims of Hitler about the Jews and Aryan supremacy. They believed this to the point where they actually thought that they could conquer the

world and artificially evolve the human race through eugenics. We may have the benefit of hindsight to see why the Germans were wrong, but like Babel itself, this is a universal principle that we are not immune to. Many today are looking at the chaos of our current political moment and are seeking a “strong man” to lead us into a prosperous future. This desire, although not wrong in itself, when taken too far is the exact desire that elevated men like Nimrod and Hitler to power.

“And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth...”

-Matthew 5:1-5

This was the same spirit that animated the Jews who began to follow Christ. We know that even His apostles saw Him as a “strong man” who would help liberate them from Rome and set up a powerful kingdom in Jerusalem. And when they followed Him onto the mountain, they thought that they were repeating the ascent up the “tower”. That Jesus was bringing them up to “heaven” where He would proclaim His divine power that would win their war and produce infinite prosperity for them and their children. But instead, Jesus begins His sermon by teaching about the blessedness, not of power or riches, but poverty of spirit.

This is the prosperity that the church proclaims and the heaven that Christ leads us to. Not the physical blessings of wealth and power, but instead the spiritual blessings of righteousness and peace with God. These blessings are not attained through man’s power, but through the power of the cross for mankind.

“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

-John 16:33

The true safety and prosperity of the Christian is not in this world, but in the world to come. It’s not that we shouldn’t seek out physical blessings or greater prosperity for ourselves or our cultures, it is simply that we understand that this world remains fallen. This means that all men, no matter how wealthy or powerful, are subject to death, and all systems, no matter how wise or holy, eventually corrode and fall apart. We are always seeking better ways to manifest the goodness of God on this earth, but we do this not because we are guaranteed prosperity in the here and now, but only because we want to reveal the beauty and the goodness of the One who has saved us. And at all

times, we are seeking true and everlasting treasure in submission to Him. We seek to believe that no matter what may come our way, whether prosperity or adversity, all comes from the sovereign hands of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.

“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,”

-Titus 2:11-13