

**November 27, 2016 - Gen. 11:1-32 - Tower of Babel, Abram's genealogy**

**Torah Readings: Gen. 11:1-32 - Tower of Babel, Abram's ancestors and family**

**Psalm 8**

**Haftarah - Zephaniah 3:9-17 + 20**

**Jeremiah 30:20 – 31:3 + 9**

See also

**Isaiah 2:12-18** - The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day.

:15- "And upon every high tower, and upon every fenced wall ..."

**Isaiah 26:1-5** - "For he bringeth down them that dwell on high; the lofty city, he layeth it low"

**Isaiah 30:25** - "And there shall be upon every high mountain, and upon every high hill, rivers and streams of waters in the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall."

### **Genesis 11:1-9 - The Tower of Babel**

**Genesis 11:1** - "And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech."

Targum Pseudo Jonathan for: B'resheet (Genesis) 11:1-32 XI. "And all the earth was (of) one language, and one speech, and one counsel. In the holy language they spoke, that by which the world had been created at the beginning.

Why are we told one language AND one speech? Not only did everyone speak Hebrew, but when they spoke they actually communicated. There was no misunderstanding.

Genesis 11:2 - "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."

"journeyed from the east" = Rabbi Elazar b. Shimeon says: "They journeyed away from the First (*kedem* means both "east" and "first") of the world. They said 'Neither Him not his Divinity!'"

"Shinar" is Sumeria, the region of Southern Iraq.

[For the location of the Tower of Babel, see previous notes: Who was Nimrod, from Nov. 20, 2016 at [http://www.communityoncolumbia.org/pdf/Readings\\_Notes/Revised\\_Who\\_was\\_Nimrod.pdf](http://www.communityoncolumbia.org/pdf/Readings_Notes/Revised_Who_was_Nimrod.pdf)]

**Genesis 11:3-4** - "And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, 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.”

**“Let us build us a city...”**

Cain built the first city. City in Hebrew is “iyr.” The first definition of “iyr” is “excitement, anguish, or terror” and thus “a place of waking, guarded.” It came into being as protection from terror, but soon became a place that incited pride, selfishness and violence through the anonymity of the crowd.

Without God, Cain was sentenced to perpetual insecurity. Since he wouldn’t rely on God’s protective mark to keep him safe, he sought safety and security in a settlement/village/city of his own clan and followers.

Without the certainty of God’s presence and protection, humans follow Cain’s “way” of self-exertion (aven in Hebrew) and begin to gather for security from danger, but their very closeness breeds increased anxiety. And close proximity demands strictly enforced taboos and social controls to keep them bound together. This results in fear and hostility toward outside groups, and a common idolatry - worshipping an objectification of themselves - to replace worship of God.

(In contrast, believers gather for communion with God and each other, imitating the angelic hosts gathered around God’s throne. Oneness springs from connection to the head - Christ. We also have a contrasting city, the New Jerusalem - “We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks” - Isaiah 26:1)

**“lest we be scattered abroad...”**

Humans when gathered together behave sort of like ravenous locusts.

**Isaiah 40:22** - “It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers (locusts); that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in.”

**Joel 1:4** - “What the gnawing locust has left, the swarming locust has eaten; And what the swarming locust has left, the creeping locust has eaten; And what the creeping locust has left, the stripping locust has eaten.”

Gnawing, swarming, creeping and stripping. That’s us. Locusts start out as harmless grasshoppers. As they multiply after a rainy season, they crowd together. Their rubbing together sets off a remarkable hormonal response that literally transforms them into the constantly consuming horde known as a plague of locusts.

**Rabbinical views**

The seeds of the rebellion against God in building the Tower were present as early as the Fall from Eden, according to the Zohar:

“Before He breathed sense into the earth that was to be man, God put his seal upon His creation’s forehead. The three letters *aleph*, *mem*, and *tov*, of which the seal was composed, encompass all speech, for they are the first, middle, and last letters of the alphabet. But in the mystical tradition of which this legend is a part, words themselves are creative and even identified with God himself. Thus, the three letters in encompassing all language encompass all things: they are the beginning, end, and continuity. They also spell the word *emet*, which means “truth.” When the sense that God had breathed into him led man, as it inevitably did, into a lie — violation of the order protected by the primordial prohibition against making distinctions — God erased from his forehead the letter aleph, which, signifying the beginning of all things, was associated most closely and unambiguously with Himself. This left on man’s forehead the word *met*, meaning “death.” — From Gershom Scholem, “On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism” 1969, quoted in “Ecology, Meaning and Religion,” by Roy A. Rappaport.

Talmud (Sandhedrin 109a) - In the School of Rabbi Shila it was taught that they built the tower with the intention of piercing the heavens with axes to drain all the water held therein, making it impossible for G-d to bring another flood, should they vex Him again.

An interesting teaching in the Midrash is that they were afraid that the heavens would collapse regularly every 1,656 years like it did during the flood, which took place in the year 1656 from Creation, and they therefore decided to build a scaffolding to support it.

Rabbi Yirmiya bar Elazar taught that there were actually three groups; each with its own plans for the tower: One group planned to climb the tower, safely out of harm's way, should another flood come. A second camp wanted to use it as a shrine for idol worship. Yet a third group actually wanted to use it as a platform from which to battle G-d.

The Targum Yerushalmi explains that the tower was to be crowned by the form of a man holding a sword in his hand—an act of defiance against the G-d whom they hoped to overcome.

Later ziggurats in the cities of Sumeria, and Babylon were topped by temples where the gods resided, and also served as platforms for observing the movements of the celestial spheres and their positioning in the sky, for astrological readings and divining the future. The ziggurats also were described as “stairways to heaven” for the gods to pause, ascend or descend between the heavens, earth and the underworld.

**Genesis 11:6-9** - “And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.”

God confused them into now speaking 70 different languages, corresponding to the list

of Noah's descendants (or 72 languages, if you take the Septuagint rendering of Genesis 10).

According to the Midrash, one-third of the Tower collapsed, one-third sunk into the ground, and one-third remained as a reminder of the great folly of mankind's undertaking.

Only the descendants of Shem (the Semites) retained the original language, Hebrew.

(For more info, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tower\\_of\\_Babel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tower_of_Babel))

There are many similar stories of the origin of languages around the world, and many contain elements of the Tower of Babel incident. For instance, Plato held that in the golden age, men and beasts all spoke the same language, but that Zeus confounded their speech because men were proud and demanded eternal youth and immortality.

(See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mythical\\_origins\\_of\\_language](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mythical_origins_of_language))

### **Languages retain hints of a common origin**

Up to 7,000 languages are still spoken across the globe, belonging to roughly 150 language families. MIT linguist Shigeru Miyagawa contends human language shows signs that it likely developed quite rapidly into a sophisticated system, with no hint of going through a “proto-language” stage.

Recently, linguists have found two-thirds of all languages use similar sounds in common words, (which hints at a common source). See <http://buff.ly/2fjxhGy>

Another interesting finding: People with synesthesia – a condition where a stimulus, such as sound, can evoke unusual perceptions of color, taste, or odor – are especially adept at matching unknown, foreign words with their meanings. (Perhaps everyone had synesthesia before the Tower of Babel fell). See <http://bit.ly/1N2TrX6>

God's confusion of languages went deeper, I think. It included a permanent inability to ever cross the interpersonal barrier, to ever know what another person is thinking for sure (even between two people who share the same language), or even to access our own thought processes without distortion.

The confusion was reversed at Pentecost, in which disciples speaking unlearned languages all proclaimed the mighty works of God. The Holy Spirit restores the possibility of true communion and unity in the Body of Christ.

It also demands first a common “hearing”:

Deuteronomy 6:4 - “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD.”

The Hebrew word “Shema” means to “hear under,” hear with understanding, to listen

attentively, and thus to be willing to obey. (However, it does not call for “blind obedience,” but always demands understanding on the part of the hearer).

### **A strange “tower” of brainless cells**

Cellular slime molds (*Dictyostelium discoideum*) display a unique series of developmental events that occurs when they are deprived of food.

Normally small, solitary blobs of goo on the forest floor, in times of drought or stress, they begin to coalesce into a giant mat that moves along the ground.

The cells begin to associate, forming streams of migrating cells which merge in an aggregate consisting of up to 100,000 cells. The multicellular aggregate secretes material that forms a sheath around the entire structure, which forms a tower of cells. In the absence of light the “tower” topples and migrates as a single organism, called a pseudoplasmodium, slug, or grex. The slug resembles a blob of petroleum jelly, leaving a trail of slime as it migrates.

Following migration (or immediately upon aggregating if there is plenty of light), the slug contracts and the anterior tip begins to rise to form a fruiting body or “tower.” As the fruiting body forms, the cells differentiate into a base, stalk, and apical mass containing encapsulated spores, that can scatter and continue the life of the cells somewhere else.

It’s an amazing display of altruistic self-sacrifice and cooperation that gives only some of the cells a chance for survival.

—<http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~bioslabs/studies/invertebrates/dicty.html>

This activity was only discovered in 1934. But it has puzzled scientists because evolutionary self-sacrifice is usually only seen among relatives or kin, as in an ant colony or bee hive. But the slime mold cells are not all related.

Humans display some of this kind of social cooperation, choosing to treat their neighbors like “honorary relatives” in social groups, according to evolutionary biologist Mark Pagel in his book, *Wired for Culture*.

### **Cooperation vs. Tribalism**

But there is another propensity working against this cooperation - tribalism.

Groups of people, especially when they are in close proximity, engage in a process of dividing into smaller groups, distinguishing themselves from others by emphasizing their distinctiveness in habits, culture and social norms, but especially in language.

In populous Papua New Guinea, an area about the size of Texas, there are 800 languages spoken, about 15 percent of the world’s languages. You can walk a few miles and encounter another tribe with a different language, Pagel explains. The process is

ongoing. On anthropologist found a tribe that had purposely reversed the gender groupings of all its nouns. Another changed the word for “no” to a different word.

A milder form of this is the use of technical jargon in our professions or crafts that distinguish “us” from “them.”

The story of the confusion of languages at Babel explains this tension between cooperation and an ongoing opposite pressure toward division that can only be overcome by the Holy Spirit and the communion within the Body/Bride of Christ.

### **Confusion of languages reversed at Pentecost**

The Haftarah reading is **Zephaniah 3:8-9**, which promises God will “pour upon them mine indignation, even all my fierce anger: for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy. For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent.”

This “fire of my jealousy” is pictured in the tongues of fire at Pentecost, burning up the chaff at the threshing floor.

(Previously in Zephaniah, God says, “I have cut off the nations: their towers are desolate.” (Zephaniah 3:3)

Pentecost, with the disciples miraculously speaking in languages unlearned and proclaiming “the mighty works of God,” marked a fulfillment of Zephaniah 3:8-9. Jewish tradition says that Pentecost also marked the day when the Tower fell. God now provides believers a true unity in the Spirit, even though we may speak in numerous different languages. There is “neither Jew nor Greek” in God’s new kingdom.

Interestingly, in the Babylonian story of the tower as well as in the story as told in the Sibylline Oracles, a mighty wind (Compare Acts 2:2) was sent by the gods to destroy the Tower.

**Genesis 11:10-32** - Generations of Shem and Terah, Abram moves from Ur to Haran

God begins dealing with Abraham’s family.