

Analysing the tower of babel religion essay



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The “ Tower of Babel” story bridges the gap between when all the people of the world are “ one” to when Abram is called by the Lord to migrate.

Specifically, dealing with how a change in language separated the universally united people. It serves as a crucial “ hinge” in the canonical sequence because all human language must have come about after this story took place.

The story begins with parenthetical verse, describing how the whole world spoke the same language. Migrating men came about Shinar, an ancient Sumer in northern Mesopotamia, and settled there. They wanted to build a city and a tower to the “ top of the sky,” so that they [people] do not become scattered throughout the Earth. Then the Lord comes down, saying that if the people do this, nothing will stop them from doing anything they want to in the future. In order to stop this development, the Lord scatters the people throughout the Earth, and confuses their languages so different peoples will not be able to understand each other. Then the narrator notes that the city from which this took place was called Babel, and by reversal leads us back to the story’s message: the people were united and their language was one; now it is not.

From a mythological standpoint, the story attempts to explain how the major change came about from all peoples speaking the same language and living in the same general area, to speaking many different languages and moving across the earth. There simply cannot be such a major change between the Table of the Nations and Abram’s Call and Migration without a transition story to explain how the rapid spreading of people with different languages came about.

It appears that this story comes from the J sources, and there are several reasons that exemplify this clearly. Most obviously, the story uses the divine name LORD. In addition, God has several anthropomorphic characteristics. He “ comes down” to see the city and tower that the men have built, and appears somewhat jealous or afraid of the people’s growing skills. He later says, “ Let us go down” in order to confuse the people’s language. Although it could be said that for God to scatter the people throughout all the Earth, it must have been an action from “ above,” it is safe to say that God is anthropomorphic.

In terms of canonical sequence of Genesis, this falls in the category of after blessing, sin rising up again out of human pride. The people feel successful in becoming independent of Yahweh and want to make a name for themselves, and want to avoid being scattered throughout the earth, so they do the opposite and come together in the city of Shinar. Specifically, it is sin because in the covenant with Noah, God commanded that the people go forth and multiply, filling all the Earth.

The focal point of the story is “ The Tower.” In the story, the people say “ Come, let us mold bricks and harden them with fire.” The story background is Babylonian. Shinar is the ancient name for Babylon, and the method of brickmaking described is characteristic of Mesopotamia due to the use of bricks and not stone. The tower, usually considered a sign of the sin of pride and rebellion against God, is compared to a Babylonian temple, otherwise known as a ziggurat. However, most ancient cities were built with watchtowers, which lessens the tower to just a “ standard” feature of the city, with the only defining feature being that its top is “ in the sky,” or very

tall. There is little historical aid to this confusion because of the common practice of reusing mud bricks, and there is no historical parallel in Near Eastern mythology.

It is generally accepted that the story can be broken down into two separate parts. Verses 1-4 describe human plans, including settling, making bricks, building a city, and making a name. Verses 5-9 describe divine action, including God confusing the language, going down, ending the building of the city, and scattering the people throughout the Earth. Some break it down further to say that verse 9 is separate, since it is an explanatory statement with an etymology of the name Babel that concludes the story.

The “ pun” in the story is found in verse 9 - “ That is why it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the speech of all the world. It was from that place that he scattered them all over the Earth.” The word “ balal” is Hebrew for “ confusion,” Also, “ bavel” was a Hebrew word for “ babel.” God confuses the common language of the people, ending the possibility for them to communicate Verse 9 can be translated as “ For that reason its name was called bavel for there Yahweh made a babble (balal) of the language of the whole Earth.” The pun is that God confuses the language, so that they do nothing more than “ babble,” which is the root for the name of the city in which this occurred, Babylon.

In Canonical sequence, the Tower of Babel story bridges a large gap between the connected people from after the Great Flood, to the call of Abram.

Specifically, it represents sin rising up again from human pride, after the covenant with Noah and blessing. It explains the transition from the Table of

Nations, in which all people lived in the same area in the Near East, speaking the same language, to the covenant with Abram and he and Sarai setting out to go to the land of Canaan, and the further distribution throughout the world of other people.

The religious message of the story is that the growth of sin even turns a people against itself. The divine truth communicated via the myth is that every human is flawed. Looking at the big picture, this is true as the bible shows that no matter how many times God punishes the people for sinning, they simply cannot stop because of God's choice to give true will. In the story, the independence of the people leads them to hubris, and into believing that they can disobey God's command, and do so by building a city and a tower so they may name themselves and remain together. Of course, God punishes them for disobeying and does so by babbling their language and forcibly spreading them throughout the Earth.

Another interesting point is that since Babylon comes from the word "Babilani," meaning "gate of the gods," the city came to symbolize for the Israelites the worst kind of idolatry-degrading the divine in pagan polytheism. Babylon represents humanity's unified rebellion against God, therefore changing it from the "gate of heaven" into "confusion of speech."

In conclusion, the "Tower of Babel" is a mythical story explaining how such a variety of languages could exist among the earth's people, and showing the fact that all humans are flawed. It also contains a pun that pokes fun at the Babylonians, which is only uncovered once you dig deeper into Mesopotamian life at the time.