

The Tower of Babel

And the Building of a Name

¹ Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.

² And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

³ And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar.

⁴ Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth."

⁵ And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built.

⁶ And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.

⁷ Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech."

⁸ So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

⁹ Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

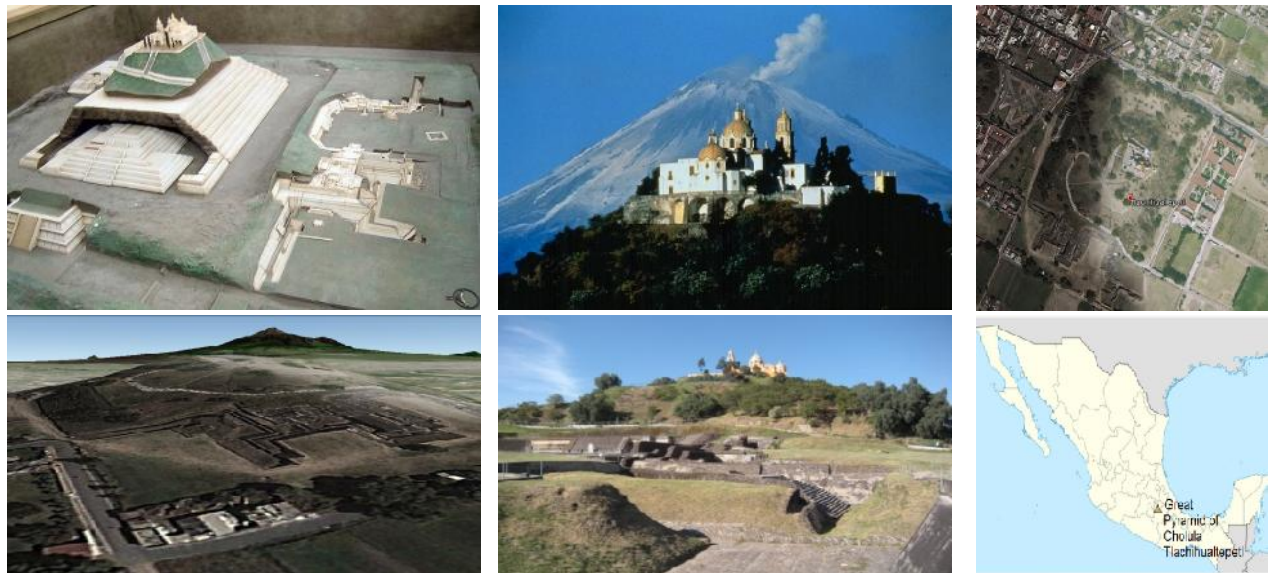
Genesis 11:1-9

Towers, Giants, and Confusion

Nestled in the plains a mere 20 miles below the towering heights of the 14,636 ft. **La Malinche** volcano (also known as **Matlalcuéyetl**, Matlalcueitl or Malintzin) to the NE and the

even taller 17,160 ft. **Iztaccíhuatl** and currently active 17,802 ft **Popocatépetl** volcanoes to the west (and north west) stands **the largest monument in the entire world**. Built many centuries ago and topping out at 210 ft., it has a volume of 4.45 million cubic meters. To put that in perspective, the Great Pyramid at Giza only has 2.5 million cubic meters. This monument is not really a monument at all, but a sacred structure known as the **Cholula Pyramid**.

Cholula Pyramid, South of Mexico City



Thus writes James George Frazier in his book Folk-Lore in the Old Testament:

A legend concerning the foundation of this huge monument is recorded by the Dominican friar Pedro de los Rios. It runs as follows. Before the great flood, which took place four

thousand years after the creation of the world, this country was inhabited by giants. All who did not perish in the inundation were turned into fishes, except seven who took refuge in caves. When the waters had retired, one of the seven, by name Xelhua, surnamed the Architect, came to Cholula, where, in memory of the mountain of Tlaloc, on which he and his six brothers had found safety, he built an artificial hill in the shape of a pyramid. He caused the bricks to be made ... It was his purpose to raise the mighty edifice to the clouds, but the gods, offended at his presumption, hurled the fire of heaven down on the pyramid, many of the workmen perished, and the building remained unfinished.¹

A similar Flood tradition of the Toltecs at another monument² states that after the deluge, “Men [giants?] built a *zacuali* of great height, and by this is meant a very high tower, in which to take refuge when the world should be a second time destroyed. After this their tongue became confused, and, not understanding each other, they went to different parts of

¹ James George Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament: Studies in Comparative Religion, Legend, and Law*, vol. 1 (London: MacMillan and CO., 1919), 380. You can read this and the following quotes from Frazer starting here:

<https://archive.org/stream/folkloreinoldte00frazgoog#page/n398/mode/2up/search/chapter+v>

² Peter Tompkins (*Mysteries of the Mexican Pyramids* [New York: Harper Collins, 1987], 57) suggests that the following story is about the same Cholula pyramid, but Frazer does not think so.

the world.”³ Frazer says, “In th[ese] legend[s] the coincidences with the Biblical narratives of the flood, ... the tower of Babel, and the confusion of tongues seem too numerous to be accidental.”⁴

All the way around the world in Tibet/Burma, the Mikir tribe have the following story:

They say that in days of old the descendants of Ram were mighty men, and growing dissatisfied with the mastery of the earth they aspired to conquer heaven. So they began to build a tower which should reach up to the skies. Higher and higher rose the building, till at last the gods and demons feared lest these giants should become the masters of heaven, as they already were of earth. So they confounded their speech, and scattered them to the four corners of the world. Hence arise all the tongues of mankind.⁵

Again, and very far away, the Admiralty Islanders of Papua New Guinea tell this story. “Muikiu [the tribal leader] said, ‘Let us build a house as high as heaven.’ So they built it, and when it nearly reached the sky, there came to them from

³ Frazer, p. 382. See also **Hubert Howe Bancroft** et al., *The Native Races of the Pacific States of North America*, vol. 5: Primitive History (New York: D Appleton and Co., 1874-76), 17-18, n. 40.

⁴ Frazer, *ibid.*

⁵ Frazer, 383.

Kali a man named Po Awi who forbade them to go on with the building ... he [Muikiu] took water and sprinkled it on the bodies of his people. Then was their language confounded; they understood not each other and dispersed into different lands.”⁶ David Livingstone, the famous missionary, reported that the Africans whom he met living near Lake Ngami in Batswana in 1849, “Have a tradition which may refer to the building of the Tower of Babel, but it ends in the bold builders getting their crowns cracked by the fall of the scaffolding.”⁷ Such is the nature of almost all the stories in these early chapters of Genesis. Found all over the world, scattered across oceans and mountains ranges and languages, people still have dim memories of our earliest history.⁸

A Giant

As you could probably guess, today we are looking at the **Tower of Babel** in **Genesis 11:1-9**. The story is foreshadowed

⁶ Ibid., 383-84.

⁷ David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, ch. 26.

⁸ Here is one more from India. The Hindus remember the Asuras, evil beings variously translated as demons or giants, who seek to imitate the great fire altar of heaven and “ascend to the sky.” This altar is said to rise from the earth to Heaven. These enemies of the heavenly gods, tried to imitate it, but their undertaking came to nothing, as the gods overthrew it by taking away the foundation of bricks. See *Satapatha Brahmana* 2.1, 2, 13-16. For the translation of Asuras as demons or giants see William Joseph Wilkins, *Hindu Mythology, Vedic and Purānic* (London: Thacker & Co., 1882), 364.

in Genesis 10 with the insertion of **Nimrod** into the Table of Nations. Nimrod does not properly belong to the Table, but he is placed here in order to give us a hint at what is coming.

It tells us that Nimrod had a vast kingdom, extending pretty much the entire span of the Fertile Crescent (from Babylon to the Mediterranean). It says that **the beginning of his kingdom was Babel (Gen 10:10)**. This seems to imply that Nimrod was the designer and builder of the Tower of Babel. It should be pointed out again that Nimrod means “**rebel,**” and certainly what we will find happening in the Tower of Babel story is rebellion against heaven in the extreme.

Curiously, like the Toltecs of Mexico, the Mikir of Tibet, some Hindu tribes of India (see note 8), and others, the Bible probably tells us that Nimrod was a **giant**. It says that he became a mighty one on the earth, using the language of **Genesis 6:4** and the nephilim. The LXX translates *gibborim* as *gigas*, and thus it reads, “**He began to be a giant upon the earth.**” The earliest Hellenistic Jewish historian **Eupolemus** (150 B.C.) as recorded by the first great Christian historian **Eusebius** (263-339 A.D.) agrees saying, “**The Assyrian city of Babylon was first founded by those who escaped the Flood. They were giants, and they built the tower well known in**

history. When the tower was destroyed by God's power, these giants were scattered over the whole earth."⁹

It is very curious to me that so many vastly diverse peoples from opposite sides of the globe would all have giants associated with the same story. Today I simply point this out to show why I believe these people and the Bible all have a common source. You just don't make things up like this unless they are true. You can make things up that aren't true, sure, but when so many stories have the same unusual and unnecessary details attached to them, it strains credibility to say that they all accidentally use them.

A Tower

Of course, **Genesis 11:1-9** is explicitly focused on something else. It tells the story of how the whole earth with one language and the same words (**vs. 1**) ends up being scattered around the whole earth with different languages and many tongues that sound like babble to one another. This comes about because of the hubris of the builders. This comes about as a direct curse from heaven.

Vs. 4 says that the people say, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens." But there are a few interesting details in the previous verses that

⁹ [Pseudo-Eupolemos 1:1-2](#). Quoted in Eusebius' *Preparation for the Gospel*, 9.17.2.

are worth pointing out, for they do some things to help us understand what follows. These details help us understand exactly what the purpose of this tower was going to be.

East

First, it says that the people migrated “**from the east.**” This makes it sound like they came from the east and are moving west. Some translations make it sound the opposite saying that they **moved eastward** (NAS, NET). There is a preposition attached to the word, but it is ambiguous as to whether it means “from” or “in” here. The direction they are going *may* be important, but more important is the term “**east.**” We have seen it several times already in Genesis. **God planted a garden in Eden in the east** (**Gen 2:8**). If you remember, Eden and its Garden are **sanctuaries**. Eden is a **mountain** where God and the **divine council** would meet with man, which is why God and Satan and two other cherubim (at least) are here in this place.

Remember also that the LORD stations **two cherubim at the east gate** of the garden of Eden (**3:24**). Here I want you to picture the tabernacle or temple. There are three sections to each. You enter each section via an eastern door. You approach from the east and move west into the courtyard, the holy place, and the most holy place respectively. That’s the

picture of the cherubim guarding the eastern gate. To enter the sanctuary of Eden, you move through the eastern gate.

Finally, we find “east” in **Genesis 4:16** which tells us that **Cain** went out from the presence of the LORD, presumably by this very eastern gate (i.e. the door of **Gen 4:7**) where he and his brother offered sacrifices to God, and “settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.” There are two things to point out here. First, he is now moving in an easterly direction rather than west. That is, he is **moving away from God’s sanctuary** in a direction that will allow him to found a kind of anti-temple in a city he will build in the next verse. Second, **Nod** means “wandering.” And so Cain “settles” in the land of “Wandering.” This becomes the background for understanding the evil line of Cain in the next verses. To summarize this idea of “east,” whenever we have seen it thus far, it is being used in a religious or cultic sense. Sanctuaries, mountains, temples, and anti-sanctuaries (cities) are in mind.

Let’s now return to **Genesis 11:2**. Whichever way the people were moving is not really relevant to the discussion, since either direction can be read in this light. The key point is that their migration is tied to the direction “east.” This gives us a hint as to what the Tower of Babel is going to be.

“Plainly” Defiant

Second, notice that they find a **plain**. Plains are low areas. Given that there has just been a flood, you might expect them to move to higher land, but they deliberately go to the lowest place they can find. Given the rebellion of this story, I interpret this as pure defiance. “God said he will never again flood us out, so we are safe to go to the lowest land we can find and dare him to do it again and break his word.” Curiously, as I point out, the Cholula Pyramid is also located in a plain.

Settling in Shinar

The last thing in **vs. 2** to notice is that they “**settle**” (same word used for Cain) in the land of Shinar. Shinar is Nimrod’s land, and given that Babel becomes Babylon in the Bible, we know that it is located east of Israel in today’s modern day Iraq. But this isn’t the most interesting thing to me. More interesting is the meaning of “**Shinar**.” It means “**Tooth of the city**” or “**casting out; scattering all manner of ways**.”¹⁰ To put that another way, **they settle in the land of scattering just like Cain settled in the land of wandering**. Very ironic indeed.

¹⁰ Stelman Smith and Judson Cornwall, *The Exhaustive Dictionary of Bible Names* (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos, 1998), 223.

Burning Bricks and Other Word Plays

Vs. 3 adds a couple more important details. First, the people say to one another, “**Come let us make bricks.**” Here, they think of bricks as good things. Bricks will become important at the beginning of the Moses story, not good things, but cursed things for Israel, whom Pharaoh forces to make bricks without straw.¹¹

Second, they want to “**burn**” these bricks. This has little to do with putting some clay into a hot oven to make it hard. In other words, this is not here just to be a description of how they made their bricks as if anyone even cared. The word for “burning” here is *seraph*. It is the same word that later becomes *seraphim* or a kind of heavenly being. A seraphim is literally a “Burning One” which is similar to a “Shining One” (Lucifer or the Nachash of Gen **3:1**). This particular verb appears 41 times in the Pentateuch, and every single time it is used it comes in a **religious or cultic context**. It is a **priestly** work to burn/*seraph* things. So this also gives us a hint as to the function of this city and tower.¹²

¹¹ **3 Baruch 3:5** makes this very connection.

¹² **Going Deeper:** This is difficult to explain in a sermon, so I’ll leave it as a footnote. There are several word plays in the Hebrew of **Gen 11:3** that any original reader or hearer would have relished. You have “**make bricks**” which is “nilBuna lubenim” () or perhaps more literally “brick bricks.” You have “**burn them thoroughly**,” which is “wuniSrupa liSrepa” () or perhaps more literally “burn a Burning.” You have “**brick for stone**,” which is hallubena lu’aben () and finally “**tar for mortar**” (in English the wordplay sticks)

A Religious Tower

Thus, vv. 2-3 provide very important religious clues as to what these people are up to. They are up to going about the work of religion, and their religious aspirations are up to no good. Now we can start to understand what it means when it says, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens.” Like Cain, they want to build a city—a word, which curiously, is identical to a heavenly Watcher [‘ir]). But they want to do more. They want to build a tower. But what kind of a tower is it? What is its purpose? Is it commercial real-estate built in the middle of a downtown metropolis? Did it look like the World Trade Center towers?





The word is *migdal*. **Migdal** is a Mesopotamian loan-word. It means a “tower or fortress.” You find it in Egypt where it sometimes describes the fortresses that the Pharaoh’s were building for themselves. Some believe that *migdal* could also be translated as a pyramid.¹³ Do you remember what Cholula

which is wuhaHemar ... laHomer (...). There are lots of word plays going on throughout this story.

¹³ “The next Bible mention of a tower by name, if I mistake not, is that of the Great Pyramid itself, under the name of ‘Migdol,’ which means, according to the Hebrew lexicographers, ‘a tower,’ involving the idea of ‘greatness.’ According to this the Great Pyramid was the Great Tower, or the tower, par distinction, and appears to have given name to the entire Gizeh hill.” J. W. Redfield, “The Altar and Pillar to Jehovah,” *The International Standard Volume 2*, (March 1884), 18 [14-33]. “This, R. Isaac says, is only when they lie like a migdal (pyramid).” Zevi Hirsch Chajes; Jacob Shachter, *The Student’s Guide Through the Talmud* (New York: P. Feldheim, 1960), 146. Walton (n. 13) hints at this as well. As does the Anchor Bible

is? A pyramid! The ancient Greek historian **Pliny the Elder** said, “Upon the Libyan side, are the towers known as the Pyramids” (*The Geography of Egypt*, Ch. 11).¹⁴

More technically, this *migdal* (*mgdl*) at Babel would have been known to the builders as a **ziggurat**. The Bible does not use this word because Israelites did not build ziggurats, as they seem to have been forbidden in the law (see **Ex 20:24-26**). Ziggurats are ancient temples made to look like mountains. Do you remember what I’ve reminded you that Eden was? A **mountain**. They are found all over the world.

| Babel? | Middle East | Egypt | N. America | Korea | S. America |
|---|--|--|--|---|--|
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Artistic Tower of Babel | Ur-Nammu (2,100 B.C.), Iraq | Pyramid of Djoser 2630-2611 B.C | Monks Mound Collinsville, Illinois | Ji'an pyramid | Temple of Kukulcan Chichen Itza, Yucatan |

“Ziggurat” can be defined very simply as “a **staged tower** for which the stages were consciously constructed.”¹⁵ Not coincidentally, the Akkadian word *ziqqurat* means “**to be high**.”¹⁶ What do they want to do? Build a tower that **reaches**

Dictionary entry on “Babel (Place)” saying that a migdal is “a kind of pyramid structure.” see Frank Anthony Spina, “Babel (Place),” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 561.

¹⁴ For Pliny see: http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/texts/pliny_geography.htm.

¹⁵ **John Walton**, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel Account and Its Implications,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995): 157.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

the heavens. The root of *migdal* (*gd*) means “to be large.”¹⁷ What do they want to do? Make a name for themselves. So, what did the ziggurat signify? The only truly objective way to know is to study the names given to them. The oldest ziggurats of Syria and Iraq still have the names recorded on tablets.¹⁸

| Ziggurat Name | Ziggurat Location |
|--|-------------------|
| Temple of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth | Babylon |
| Temple of the Wielder of the 7 Decrees of Heaven and Earth | Borsippa |
| Temple of the Mountain Breeze | Nippur |
| Temple of the Stairway to Pure Heaven | Sippar |
| Temple of the Exalted Mountain | Ehursagkamma |
| Temple of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth | Dilbat |
| Temple which Links Heaven and Earth | Larsa |
| Temple of the Ziggurat, Exalted Dwelling Place | Kish |
| Temple of Exalted Splendor | Enlil |
| Temple of the god Nanna | Kutha |
| Temple of the god Dadia | Akkad |

In these names we can clearly identify the idea of a mountain, a mirror, a link-stairway between heaven and earth, and the home of the god(s).¹⁹ This gets at the heart of what Nimrod and the people at Babel were after. In fact, the stories of the

¹⁷ Ibid., 155.

¹⁸ The Table is a partial list of ziggurats mentioned in Walton, 159-60.

¹⁹ Unlike the Great Pyramids of Egypt and China, ziggurats have well defined sections (terraces) and stairways rising up to the heavens (as at least one of the names describe). In fact, the Hebrew word *sullam* and the Akkadian word *simmiltu* (which are related) both mean “stairway,”¹⁹ and both are identified with ziggurats or cosmic mountains in biblical and extra-biblical literature. When viewed from below, the partially rebuilt ziggurat at Ur-Nammu looks just like a stairway to heaven (Led Zeppelin didn’t invent the idea). We will look more at this “stairway” idea when we come to Jacob’s dream of the “ladder” to heaven.

world get it right to some degree. This was an attempt to reach up into heaven to commune with the gods *on human terms*. Indeed, this is what all human religions are. It is **man's attempt to use God or the gods, and in exchange we will give them worship**. Most religions do this implicitly. The occult does this explicitly. There is no doubt in my mind that the Tower of Babel was profoundly occultic. It is actually an ironic way to usurp true worship and elevate yourself above the god you worship, because if you can get them to do what you want, then who is really the one in charge? Thus, when I give you this definition for a ziggurat from the Dictionary of Bible Images, you should not be surprised. It is “**an astronomical observatory for use in divination and occult mastery of the universe.**”²⁰

The Tower of Babel was not like the high-rises of today, tall, skinny, usually basically completely vertical structures whose purpose is to get as high as humanly possible in a literal sense (though, those may very well metaphorically signify man's hubris). **The Tower of Babel was literally a human recreation of Mt. Eden.** The tower of Babel was an attempt to assault the mountain of heaven, to breach the gate of Eden, without having to actually go to Eden. But Jesus is the only

²⁰Ryken, Leland; Wilhoit, James C.; Longman III, Tremper, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press) 2000, c1998.

way to get to the Tree of Life. You must go through him. We can't manufacture a way in. So this was a completely religious structure. To have the “**top in the heavens**” was to create a spiritual link that would connect heaven and earth. Reaching to the heavens is therefore religious rather than physical language.

The city comes back into play here too, for what this does is force them to stay in one place, to consolidate their power, to rule from a central location where they can have better control over others (even as men do today), and perhaps even to refuse to obey the command to “**fill the earth.**” So they say, “**Let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth**” (**Gen 11:4**). They clearly do not want to be dispersed. They want to stay in one place. They do not want to obey God. They want things on their terms.

Naming a Name

What do they want most of all? This question gets at the heart of the problem. They want, “**To make a name for ourselves.**” **Making a name** is central to the entire post-flood storyline of the Bible. These people were trying to usurp God and his Name through a perverted religious system that is the root of all religious perversion in the world today. They

would replace God's Name with their own. "Look at man, the pinnacle of all things in the universe. We were even able to go up into heaven to make the heavens obey us."

This comes out in the text via the Hebrew word *shem*. To "make a name" is to "make a *shem*." If you will remember, one of Noah's sons is **Shem**. If you will also remember, it is to Shem that God continues the promise given to Eve of a seed that would come. This is why after Babel we find that Abram comes from the line of Shem. In the very first Abram story (**Gen 12:8**) we read, "And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the Name of the LORD." He called upon the *shem* of the LORD. For this, God promises that through Abram all the nations of the world would be blessed. And through Abram, a Seed would come.

Thus, the deepest conflict in the entire Babel story is over **who will have the name**. Will it be mankind? Or will it be God? Will they take their own name and exalt it above all names? Or will the Name of God be exalted above all names? It is for this reason that **Gen 11:5** says, "And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built." Literally, it is the "sons of man" (*beney ha-adam*). Notice that it is *not* the "sons of God" (*beney ha-elohim*). This is not about heaven breaching its proper domain and

coming down, but about man breaching his proper domain to rise up, sort of like we do when we consult mediums and necromancers and try to contact the dead.

What did the LORD find? “And the LORD said, ‘Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them’” (Gen 11:6). AS Wenham notes, the structure and sentiments closely resemble Gen 3:22, “Since man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil, now lest he reach out ... and live forever.” The idea, as there, is again the making of judgments over right and wrong apart from God’s commands. But here is added the idea of plotting and scheming (“propose to do”). This is nefarious human scheming like you find in Ps 31:13, “I hear the whispering of many-- terror on every side!-- as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life.” Or again Ps 37:12, “The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him.” It is a plotting against the laws and morals of the creator. It is moral recklessness and usurpation. And unless God does something, it is man and not

God who will be impossible to stop,²¹ for to be like this is to be divine. Only one can be God.

So it says next, “Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.” Now, in my view, the “let us” here refers to the divine council, as it has in Genesis 1 and 3. For “us” to come down is a lot like when the LORD and two angels visited Abram in Genesis 18-19 in much the same fashion, in order to see what was going on in Sodom and to execute judgment upon it. In fact, in this way, the stories are identical.

But notice, as was true in Genesis 1 when God alone made man, and in Genesis 3 when the LORD alone clothed man and judged him, and even in Genesis 18-19 when God alone sends fire upon Sodom and Gomorrah, here it says, “So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth” (Gen 11:8-9).

It is God alone who rules heaven and earth, even if the heavenly beings also have thrones (Dan 7:9). It is God alone

²¹ “Be impossible for them” (*batsar*) is found in this form only one other time, and it is said of God by Job, “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2). This is the essence of being divine.

who is the Judge, even if the heavenly beings also have books (**Dan 7:10**). The God of the Bible has no peer to his nature, no rival to his throne, no equal to his character. Yet, as we saw last week, part of the judgment in this dispersion was to give the nations to the heavenly beings and the heavenly beings to the nations. This is not mentioned here, but it is mentioned in other places in the Bible. It is not mentioned here, because the focus is on this battle between men and God. Who will be God? The LORD, he alone is God.

The focus in Genesis 11 is also on the languages and confusion that results from the tower story. While this is the common theme of many similar legends, the Bible is making one more point in a play on the name. It involves the word Babel. Notice, “**Therefore its name was called Babel.**” They wanted to make a name for themselves, and the only name they end of making is babble, gibberish, gobbledygook.

There is a Greek comedy called “**Birds**” written by **Aristophanes** (446 -386 B.C.). A pastor told me to read it this week in light of what I am preaching. I recommend it, for it is funny and brilliant. The theme is very much like that of Babel. In this story, the men make a deal with birds to build a new city where they will begin to worship birds instead of the gods. They call the city Nephelococcygia (ne-fê-lê-kak-'si-

jee-yê). This is literally the act of seeking and finding shapes in clouds. But it may be better translated as “[Cloud Cookoo Land](#).” That’s exactly it. The whole scheme is cookoo. Babel is cookoo, and heaven laughs and scoffs at man’s arrogance. Some legacy, isn’t it?

But this is what God thinks of our attempts at self-divinization. And this is what he does with them in the end. The story of Babel is a strong polemic against the arrogance of mankind, especially when it comes to his religious affections, or rather, his religious passions and lusts. Man desires to worship God his way. He desires to have his own morality become immortal. He desires to reach up to heaven, rather than wait for God to come down to earth (ala the king of Babylon in [Isaiah 14:12-13](#)).²² The most powerful city on earth is reduced to a mockery, to baby-talk.

“[The kings of the earth rise up, and the rulers take council together, against the LORD and against his Anointed.](#)” Psalm 2. And yet, as we remember from last week, in that same Psalm, the LORD offers to his King, his

²² While I ordinarily reference this passage to Lucifer, I read a book this week challenging the Lucifer interpretation which dates to at least Justin Martyr. While I am not convinced by the author’s take, it does remind me that first and foremost, Isaiah has in mind the king of Babylon—a belief I’ve always maintained though have not in recent years spoken much about. But this Babylonian king has obvious and important later significance to this earlier Babel story for obvious reasons.

Son, an inheritance of all the nations. And he scatters them—the language of the tower of Babel—with a rod of iron. That leads me to one final thought I want to leave you with today.

Being that **today is Easter**, the day Jesus rose from the dead, and that in 40 days (a number related to Genesis 1-11) we have **Pentecost**, and being that I believe Luke had the Tower of Babel story in mind as he wrote about Pentecost, I wanted to show you how even though God dealt out great punishment at the Tower of Babel, he only did so knowing full well that he would not leave all of us in that state forever. In fact, we should read the Pentecost story as the reversal of the Tower of Babel. And Pentecost is only possible, of course, because Christ rose from the dead.

We know the story, but have you considered how so much of it relates directly to Babel, as the beginning of its reversal in Christ? Consider the following facts:

Babel: At Babel we are told that one world settled into one place, the **plain of Shinar**. (**11:1-2**)

Pentecost: On that remarkable morning we are told “*they were all in one place.*” (**Acts 2:1**)

(**Babel**): (The following is a parenthetical parallel from the Sibylline Oracle on the Tower of Babel): At Babel, there were winds.²³

Pentecost: A mighty wind filled the house (2:2)

Babel: Is the story of confused **tongues**, where God makes one tongue become many. (11:1, 9)

Pentecost: **Tongues** of fire came to rest on each of them. (2:2)

Babel: Took place in **Babylon** [Babel is anti-Jerusalem].

Pentecost: “They were staying in Jerusalem” (Acts 2:5)

Babel: “From these **the nations** spread out over the earth after the flood.” (10:32)

²³ **The tower of Babel (Sib.Or 3.97-109)**

⁹⁷ But when the threats of the great God are fulfilled with which he once threatened men when they built the tower in the land of Assyria ... They were all of one language^{100*} and they wanted to go up to starry heaven.

But immediately the immortal one imposed a great compulsion [Josephus, saying he cites the Oracle, has “gods”]

on the winds. Then the winds cast down the great tower from on high, and stirred up strife for mortals among themselves.

Therefore humans gave the city the name Babylon.

^{105*} But when the tower fell, and the tongues of men were diversified by various sounds, the whole earth of humans was filled with fragmenting kingdoms.

Then was the tenth generation of articulate men, from the time when the Flood came upon the men of old.

Pentecost: “God-fearing Jews from **every nation** under heaven”
(2:5)

Babel: When God came down, he **confused** their **language** and their name became Babel, Confusion/bewilderment.
(11:9)

Pentecost: When they heard the **sound**, they were **bewildered** (6), **utterly amazed** (7), **amazed** (12) and **perplexed** (12). In other words, Luke tells us four times in this short passage that they were **confused** at what was happening.

Acts 2:6 (sugxeo) = confound/bewilder (NT)

Gen 11:7 (sugxeo) = confound (LXX); בָּלַל (BLL) = MIX, MINGLE, CONFUSE (Hebrew)

Gen 11:9 (sugxeo) = confusion; בָּבֶל (bbl, Babel) = confusion

Babel: They are building their own **kingdom**.

Pentecost: They are building God’s **kingdom**.

Babel: Their kingdom was trying to open a **gateway to heaven** (this is what **Babel** meant to them) via their own methods and accent to God.

Pentecost: The kingdom was established by God himself and the gateway to heaven (Babel) was opened via the Holy Spirit and God's decent to us.

Babel: The one language is turned into many and they do not understand one another (1:9)

Pentecost: The one language of Peter is heard and understood by everyone, even though they spoke different languages. "How is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?" (2:8)

Babel: Want to stay together and are **scattered**.

Pentecost: They are gathered together in order to be **scattered**.²⁴

Babel: They want to **make a name for themselves**, while God is busy making a **name** for himself.

Pentecost: God have made a Name for himself. Peter says, "And it shall be, that everyone who calls on the **name** of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21).

²⁴ But even those in the church are not willing to scatter any more than those at Babel were. Thus, we are told that God once again intervenes in Acts 8:1 "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria." Much has been made of this fact by scholars. The church was no better than Babel, though certainly their motives for staying together were different than their forefathers at Babel. But, even here, it takes God's mighty hand to force the people to scatter back around the world in order to fulfill the task of preaching the gospel to all nations.)

As Peter says a few verses later, when they ask him what they must do, he says, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). Jesus is the name of the LORD, for he is the seed promised to Eve, Shem, and Abram, which is why it says, when Abram saw the LORD with his eyes in a vision, “He built an altar to the LORD and called upon the Name of the LORD” (Gen 12:8). God has proved this to the world by raising Jesus from the dead, Peter tells them.

But even Abraham knew him, and Abram’s altar in Ch. 12 is God’s acceptable version of the Tower of Babel in Ch. 11, for the name Abram seeks is the name above every name, the name exalted in the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ, the God-man. Abram seeks to worship God in His way on His terms rather than his (Abram’s) own. Let this be true of us in this day of gathering and harvest. For Babel has past and Babylon the Great has fallen. And now has begun the glorious and eternal reign of our Savior Jesus Christ who is alive both now and forevermore.

APPENDIX: The Gigantomachy and the Tower of Babel

Since I put a few of the world's stories at the beginning of this sermon, I wanted to put together an appendix to clarify my own thinking on whether or not Greek mythology has anything to say about the Tower of Babel episode. James George Frazer (cited earlier in the sermon) writes, “Not a few peoples have attempted to explain the diversities of human speech without reference to a Tower of Babel or similar structures.”²⁵ He then writes:

Thus the Greeks had a tradition that for many ages men lived at peace, without cities and without laws, speaking one language, and ruled by Zeus alone. At last Hermes introduced diversities of speech and divided mankind into separate nations. So discord first arose among mortals, and Zeus, offended at their quarrels, resigned the sovereignty and committed it to the hands of the Argive [Argolis, a region in southern Greece] hero Phoroneus, the first king of men.²⁶

There are three figures in this story: Zeus, Hermes, and Phoroneus. There are two other stories that I will also add to

²⁵ Frazer, 384.

²⁶ Ibid. This story comes from Hyginus (64 BC – 17 AD), *fables* 143.

this one with Hermes that bear upon my thinking on the Tower of Babel. These are the War of the Titans and the War of the Giants.

Zeus (Jupiter) is the king of the gods. Zeus came to power with the Olympians during what is called the **Titanomachy** (The Titan War). Before this, the Greeks said that a different pantheon of gods ruled called **Titans** (“titan” means “giant,” but these Titans seem to be gods rather than demigods, even though they are children of Ouranos/Uranus/Heaven and Gaia/Earth). These gods included **Kronos** (Time) who ruled during the Golden Age (which I would suggest is equivalent to the time before the Flood, which is why they lived for a long “time”). Kronos came to power by castrating his father (Heaven), thereby making heaven incapable of reproducing. It is a metaphorical rebellion against Heaven, which sounds like something that could have taken place at the Garden of Eden story or before, though the Greeks have a separate Garden story that takes place much later.

At any rate, Kronos tried to devour all of his children when they were born, but Rhea, Zeus’ mother, managed to hide him away as a baby. Because of this Zeus would grow to take revenge on his father Kronos. He did this when he led a ten year assault against the Titans, driving them into the pit

of Tartaros, where Kronos and his brothers were then chained. 1 Peter uses the exact same language of *tartaroō* and chaining to refer to the days before the flood, when the fallen angels (Watchers as 1 Enoch calls them) were chained in Tartarus (**2 Peter 2:4**) for their (heavenly) rebellion in taking wives from mankind (earth).

So now Zeus is elevated to the high god of a new pantheon. One of his sons is named **Hermes** (Mercury). Hermes is the messenger of the gods. He thus functions as an angel which also means “messenger.” He carries messages from gods to men. From his name we also derive “hermeneutic.” Hermeneutics deals with the meaning of words. As we have seen, Hermes is said to be the god who gave mankind different tongues/words. This is remembered in the Bible and in the Tower of Babel story.

After confusing the languages, **Phoroneus** is given rule over mankind by Zeus, who thereby effectually abandons man. Two things can be pointed out here. First, Phoroneus, being the first human king, is very similar to Nimrod, being the first great ruler of the earth—and Nimrod is the leader of the Babel rebellion. Second, Yahweh giving up sovereign rule over the nations, thereby placing gods over them, is a similar theme found in the Tower of Babel/Table of Nations texts in

Genesis 10-11 and other later biblical reflections of these stories. (We should also remember Plato here who tells us that at some point in the past the gods were divided up into their allotments over the nations, thereby using the exact same language as Deuteronomy 32:8. Plato's allotment may or may not take place at the same time the Phoroneus receives his rule, though there is nothing logically incompatible with both taking place simultaneously). Phoroneus (Fire Bringer) then introduces the use of fire and the forge. It does not take long to think of the words, "Come, let us bake bricks, and burn them thoroughly" at the Tower of Babel.

Hermes and Zeus are also both involved in what is seemingly a separate story in Greek mythology: the **Gigantomachy** (War of the Giants). In this war, the **Gigantes** (the word used to describe the nephilim in the LXX of Gen 6:4) assault Mt. Olympus by attempting to pile Mt. Ossa upon Mt. Pelion. Though not exactly the same kind of idea as building a tower/pyramid/ziggurat that we find at Babel, it certainly carries with it building something so high that you can get to heaven. It also carries the thoughts of rebellion and usurping God (the gods). I do not know of any other stories like it, nor of any tower stories in Greek mythology.

In the Gigantomachy, Hermes is found fighting against the giants. He even manages to kill one of them named Hippolytos. In fact, Hermes is regularly found fighting against giants throughout his career. In the War of the Giants, the gods end up fleeing Olympus, all except Zeus, who eventually wins the battle, but not before Heracles (Hercules), the demi-god and also his son, gives him the victory. Thus, we find a demi-god *gigantes* fighting against other *gigantes* to secure the victory for Zeus.

Though we have here two or possibly three separate Greek stories, and though they do not have all of the elements of the Tower of Babel story, we do find several elements (1. a god dividing humans into various tongues; 2. a man being the first king around the time that the tongues are introduced; 3. the high god abandoning mortals; 4. the first mentioning of fire;²⁷ 5. the building of a structure to reach up to heaven; 6. giants being behind it) that converge with the same heroes through these stories. This leads me to suspect the Greeks could have very faded memories of the biblical events of Genesis 10-11.

²⁷ It should be remembered, however, that Tubal-Cain prior to the flood was the “forger” of bronze and iron.