

## Asphalt Aspirations And Pentecost's Promise

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Please turn to Genesis 11. Here, sandwiched between the “Table of Nations” (we know that to be) of Genesis 10 and the genealogy of Shem that makes up the last part of chapter 11 in Genesis, is the story of Babel. It is only nine verses and as far as I know, this story is not mentioned directly anywhere else in God’s Word. Yet, for all that, the story of the mixed up Babel-folk relays an important message to us, especially, as we will see, at this time of the year.

Today, let us take a look at the story of Babel and the confusion of languages. Genesis 11:1-9; I am going to be reading from a particularly fine translation by Everett Fox.

**Genesis 11:1-9** (TSB) Now all the earth was of one language and one set-of-words. And it was when they migrated to the east that they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said, each man to his neighbor Come now? Let us bake bricks and let us burn them well-burnt! So for them brick-stone was like building stone, and raw-bitumen was for them like red-mortar.

And they said: Come-now! Let us build ourselves a city and a tower its top in the heavens, and let us make ourselves a name, lest we be scattered over the face of all the earth! But YHVH came down to look over the city and the tower that the humans were building. YHVH said: Here, (they are) one people with one language for them all, and this is merely the first of their doings—now there will be no barrier for them in all that they scheme to do!

Come-now! Let us go down and there let us baffle their language, so that no man will understand the language of his neighbor. So YHVH scattered them from there over the face of all the earth, and they had to stop building the city. Therefore its name was called

Babel/Babble, for there YHVH baffled the language of all the earth folk, and from there, YHVH scattered them over the face of all the earth.

Worth noting first of all is the universality of the story. The Hebrew word for “earth” appears no less than six times in the narrative, and is generally translated with the force of “all the earth” or “the face of all the earth.” This is a story of events on this earth, “under the sun,” a story relevant to everyone living there. It is a Jack-and-the-Bean-Stalk story of mankind’s failed attempt to connect heaven and earth, above the sun with under the sun, through his own intelligence, through his own ingenuity.

Another striking aspect of the narrative is its implicit as well as its explicit symmetry. The first half of the narrative, quite clearly, is from man’s perspective: Mankind says, “Come-now, let us build. . .” The second half of the narrative is from God’s perspective, as He rejoins, “Come-now, let Us go down and let Us baffle.” The plot turns, therefore, on a of “man proposes, God disposes” type of theme.

A more implicit symmetry pivots around the fact that God did precisely what the Babel-folk sought to avoid; He scatters them. He destroys their unity and, what is more than that, He does so by extinguishing their primary, their basic unifying characteristic, which was their common language.

Robert Alter, a translator and commentator, remarks, “The thrust of the story is against . . . the overweening confidence of humanity in the feats of technology.” So, with that in mind, let us look for a few minutes at the technology the Babel-folk proposed to use to create their city and their tower.

There are different time lines. But, for our purposes we are going to say that about a hundred years after the Flood, about 2250 BC, what must have been three, maybe as many as five thousand people migrated east, down the Turkish highland from where the Ark had come to rest, into the plain of Mesopotamia. Noah and his sons, Japheth, Shem, and Ham were apparently not among them. You see, some people, obeying God, moved north into Europe, some had moved west and some had moved south. But, these folks,

which I will call the Babel-folk, traveled eastward. And in so doing, they moved in the same direction Adam and Eve and their family took after they left the Garden of Eden—eastward.

When they got to the general area of southern Mesopotamia, probably around Kish (Kish is a city named after Cush; that was the father of Nimrod), possibly to where Babylon was built later on, they simply settled down. Now, we do not know precisely where they were but that seems to be the consensus.

God, as recorded in Genesis 9:1, told the people to spread out over the entire earth. But, under Nimrod's leadership, the people came to believe that it was in their best interest to settle, not to keep moving but to settle down. And to "make ... a name" for themselves. Everett Fox glosses that to mean, "to make sure that we and our works endure." God's objective at the time was scattering but their goal was permanence. There was a disconnect. A very basic disconnect in objectives.

Ironically, the very geography of their new homeland was to thwart the attainment of their goal of permanence and its resultant stability. You see, in the Babylonian plain there were few stones with which to build, stones like the Canaanites later used to build in Palestine. Nimrod and his father Cush and Ashur (Ashur was a son of Shem; he was conceived in the Ark, probably born just days or weeks after the Ark rested), these were the leaders of these folk and they chose an area which would not support the creation of monumental structures, a city and tower that would endure.

Such structures require limestone, as the Egyptians found in Upper Egypt, stones which they would use later to construct temples and pyramids which stand to this very day. Or, they needed to be built with stones like marble, granite, or with gypsum, for mortar, which those individuals moving west of the Ark's landing discovered in places like Greece and Italy. There is some evidence that points to Noah's settling down in Italy. He moved west of the Ark landing, not east.

Much later in antiquity, the Romans, and again, they were in the west; they came to formulate a cement which almost had the tensile strength of Portland cement. Now, Portland cement was a formulation of cement that we

developed probably in about the late 1850's I would say and it is the basic formula for cement that we use today.

The Romans had their own version of a strong cement. They built roads with it which are in use today, they built aqueducts with it which still carry water to this day. The Coliseum, still standing in Rome, is made of cement. And as far as we know, the dome of the Pantheon, which is a temple in Rome, was the largest span of concrete, unsupported by any post in the center, in the world. Amazingly, this non-reinforced concrete dome stands to this very day and you can walk under it.

The Romans, and the Egyptians before them, built monuments which astound us to this day. If you stop to think about it, the great pyramid remained the tallest structure in the world until the erection of the Eiffel Tower in our own era, in 1889.

The Babel-folk parked themselves where there was no limestone, no granite, no marble, no gypsum. What did they have? They had bricks and they had bitumen. Bricks in the place of stone and tar for mortar.

First, let us consider brick. The Hebrew word for “brick” first appears in this story in the Scriptures. Noah’s sons certainly carried the knowledge of brick making through the Flood. It is really pretty simple technology. You pour a compound made up of straw and you put some mud, you put some clay in it and water in it and you put it into a form and let it set in the sun. You let it bake in the sun; you let it harden. Better still, if you really want hard brick, you put them in stone kilns, as the Babel-folk certainly did. I think that knowledge came to them through the Flood and I think that is where the term “bricks well burnt” means. They were bricks that had been cooked in the kiln.

But, even kiln-baked bricks lack the tensile strength of stone or of concrete. They are brittle, chip away easily, break; they are fairly compressible, eventually collapsing from their own weight as they are piled atop one another.

During an architectural tour of Manhattan a few years ago, I saw the tallest unreinforced brick building in the city. It had no rebar in it. It was just straight up and down and it had no iron in it at all. It was I believe eight

stories; it was not stepped at all. But, because of the inherent weakness of brick, the builders of the building had to make the first floor's supporting walls, the weight bearing walls, no less than six feet thick. And of course they could be thinner as you moved up the building and there was less weight involved. But because of the weakness of brick, they had to be that thick on the first floor. And the people of Babel wanted to ensure the perpetuity of their efforts by building with brick! Brick would simply not admit to that kind of permanence.

So, the question becomes: What was the attraction of southern Mesopotamia? What led Nimrod to want to settle there? Well certainly, the accessibility of water was a factor. The plain was well-watered, it may have been swampy, it may have been marshy because the Flood waters had not receded fully yet. But, let us face it, brethren, in those days, water was pretty much everywhere. So, that probably was not the main factor.

The appeal may have been the ready availability of tar in the area. There were tar pits around there. That is the slime mentioned in verse 3—it is tar or asphalt; it is slime. The first occurrence of the Hebrew word for asphalt is in this particular passage (it is used only three times in the Old Testament) and its presence in the area may have given Nimrod an idea: "I'm going to use this gooey stuff to convince these people to settle down here." What was it about tar that would have been so appealing to the people?

Well, in its various forms, bitumen is made up of a number of hydrocarbons. That is, it is oil based and is not water soluble. In the ancient world, even in the pre-Flood world, bitumen was commonly used as a waterproofing agent. Noah used it inside and outside the ark, you remember, as mentioned in Genesis 6:4. We will not turn there but God told him to pitch the ark; to put tar on the inside and outside. Its use for this purpose is also recorded in another passage we will not turn to, Exodus 2:3, where Moses' mother pitched or tarred the basket in which Moses was to lay to waterproof it. Herodotus, a Greek historian, tells us that the walls of the city of Babylon (now Babylon was built a long time after this), but that it was covered with bitumen. A tunnel under the Euphrates River in Babylon has been discovered and it too was water-sealed with bitumen.

Nimrod undoubtedly leveraged this characteristic of tar as he sought to sell the people on the idea to settle in this area. By tarring the city and the tower, it would become water-impervious, just like the ark. It would be their ark. People would be safe from the waters of another flood.

Now as a plus, bitumen could also be used as a mortar, it could be used as a glue to hold things together. This is not its strong suit, but it could be used for that and it was used for that commonly in the ancient world. It works best for this purpose when it is slow-cooked, a process which cracks off the lighter hydrocarbons, producing a stickier, a harder, and a more durable substance, a more durable mortar. The cracking technology was commonly used in the Middle East, and I believe it came to them through Noah's sons, that is, through the Flood. Cracking was certainly a technology they had before the Flood.

Along this line, it is interesting to note the meaning of the Greek word for bitumen, *asphaltos*. Obviously, we get our word "asphalt" from it. It comes from the verb *sfallo*, which means to overcome or to make fall. The Greeks apparently used *sfallo* in a wrestling context, where they would talk about a wrestler tripping up his opponent, making him fall. The initial "a" on *asphaltos* is a negative particle. So, the word means, "not able to make fall," "not able to overcome," "not able to pull down," "not able to pull apart."

Metaphorically, it carries the idea of invulnerability. The Babel-folk felt their brick and pitch city with its brick and pitch tower reaching into the sky would make them insuperable. God would not be able to destroy them again. Permanence! Security! That is what the people really wanted, and Nimrod sold them on its feasibility with inferior materials of brick and tar.

But, there is really not much that is unconquerable about tar, if you stop to think about it, even when it is cracked. In fact, asphalt is quite compressible, at least compared to the lime-based mortars used to bind the limestone blocks of the later pyramids which the Egyptians built. Or when you compare it with the cement-based mortars with which we are more familiar today, like the mortar that was used in that building in Manhattan. Bitumen-based mortars will simply not bear up under the weight of bricks ascending high into the sky.

So just how high was high? Always an interesting question; I guess I have to ask it. There is evidence that God ended the building project about 19 years after it began. We will not be able to go into that right now but the project probably lasted just under 20 years. How high did the tower grow in that space of time?

An apocryphal writing, *The Book of Jubilees*, says the tower was of such a height that it would have been three times higher than Burj Khalifa, in Dubai. It is a very tall building. It would have been 1.6 miles high. Obviously not. The compressibility of tar simply would not permit that. The tower would collapse upon itself unless it were shielded and supported by some technology which is simply not evident in any credible archeological findings. By that I mean, peer-reviewed archeological reports, not something that has been written up by some guy on the Internet.

The *Third Apocalypse of Baruch*, another apocryphal book, says the tower was 695 feet tall, about 70 stories higher than the Great Pyramid's 481 feet. This too is a little bit outlandish, a little bit of an overreach I think. It is possible if the tower tapered as it rose into the sky, such that it defined a cone, like a ziggurat, or, more possibly, a stepped pyramid like you see in the Americas, sometimes also in the Middle East. For taller buildings in those particular days, tapering was absolutely vital; it makes each story lighter than the story just below it and it vastly reduces the overall weight of the whole structure on its foundation because it is tapered. It reduces it by about, depending on how it is built, by about two-thirds. So, it is a substantial weight reduction if you taper it. For their tall buildings, they had to taper; they could not go up like a skyscraper. They did not have iron technology like we do.

Another more recent author, one from our era writing in the 1990s, comes to the erroneous conclusion that the tower could rise, in theory, 1.3 miles high, but if you tapered it, it could reach to such a height that the builders could not even breathe. Well, that is a bit absurd, but it is no more silly than the kabbalistic writings.

The kabbalistic writers aver that the tower was really a space ship designed to go to the moon and that it had shields and weapons which would allow it

to control the planet. All this from a structure built with bricks and asphalt which could in no way of course withstand the rigors of escape velocity. Not without some type of technology which is simply not evident to our investigators today. That would be kind of akin to gluing the SR-71 together with bubble gum—and hoping that it would fly.

The technology was errant, as is so often the case with mankind's technology; it would not admit to the attainment of the builders' goals. The Babel-folk wanted to make themselves unconquerable. They wanted to endure. They wanted their works to endure. And to accomplish that, they set out building with tar and with brick. There is only one thing that they really had going for themselves and that is unity. So, we are going to turn the discussion away from building materials and look at the builders' objective; the peoples' objective.

As recorded in Genesis 9:1, God told the people to spread out; He said to scatter worldwide. Disobediently, the Babel-folk stopped spreading and started settling. More than that, what they did is that they began to urbanize, they began to build a city. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, in its article on the Tower of Babel, comments that the concept of city makes a wonderful “image of human community—an image of the universal dream of unity with other people.” Notice: Not unity with God, but unity with other people.

Along that line, notice the echoes of the “town hall” meeting in verse 3: “They said, each man to his neighbor. Come-now, let us bake bricks ... .” You see, there was concurrence here; you get the feeling of widespread concurrency. Perhaps it was not unanimity, there are always dissenters, but, the zeitgeist of the day, brethren, the driving attitude and the preponderant spirit of the people as a whole was enduring security. That is what they wanted.

Nimrod brilliantly sold them on the idea of building their own ark, as it were, in the form of a pitched city and a pitched tower. One does not get the idea that these people were acting in blind fear of a dictator, as Nimrod was—or certainly became. Fear was there, of course, but it was not so much the fear of a leader as it was the fear of becoming scattered, the fear of the loss of



community. Nimrod simply exploited that fear. That is what any good dictator does, if you stop to think about it: he exploits peoples' fears and their ambitions.

If a city is anything, it is community: People sacrificing a degree of privacy and independence to gain economic benefits and to gain protection. In a city, people live the same general lifestyle, face the same threats, and indeed respond in a measure of unity to common challenges. The model of city life is social cooperation almost to the point of economic symbiosis. Hermits are not appreciated in a city and are indeed feared.

Specialization of labor is intense in a city, where the bicycle repairman and the piano tuner may live in the same apartment, their kids may attend the same schools. But the two fellows could not even begin to exchange their vocations. Compare that, for instance, to a level of specialization that is seen in a rural setting, where the farmer works the land, he repairs machinery, he builds barns, he takes care of animals almost like a veterinarian. He is really kind of a jack-of-all-trades type person and, in many ways, he is quite independent. And you do not see that jack-of-all-trades kind of person in a city as you do in a rural setting.

The first verse of chapter 11 tells us why the Babel-folk got along so well together. They had one language, that is one thing but it says two things. They also had a shared vocabulary; two different things there. Hence, they could communicate easily, because the grammar, the syntax, the word order, the morphology, all of that was shared as well as the vocabulary.

The word "language" appears for the first time in Genesis 11:1 in this story and it appears five times in that one story. The other noun in verse 1 is another Hebrew word and it is the word for "speech". And most modern translators understand it to mean vocabulary or word stock in Babel story's context.

So the people enjoyed the luxury of a common grammar, as well as a common vocabulary. The idea was that they did not even have to contend with different dialects. They could communicate absolutely freely with each other. God notes, in verse 6, that these were *one* people—hold on to that, brethren, they were one people—they had *one* language, a combination that

would permit them to accomplish about anything they set their minds to do. God did not go after their technology; He went after their single language, the source of their unity.

The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* summarizes it this way: “Babel symbolized the dream of human civilization. It is an attempt to meet human needs by the peaceful means of invention, language, utopian planning, social cooperation, creativity, culture and technology.”

Brethren, the plans of the people were mind-expanding and they were thrilling. The work was so big. It filled their minds, and it filled their horizon. And yet, it was so small, it was so miniscule, that God could not hardly see it from heaven and He had to come *down* to the earth, it says in verse 5, to “to look over the city and the tower that the humans were building.” It was really that small and He evidently was not at all impressed.

He noted that these people could accomplish so much so fast that He retarded the flow of history by dividing the people at the bedrock level of their language. In doing so, of course, He forced the people to disperse—and that is really what He wanted to do in the first place. He wanted them to disperse. The word "Babel" in Akkadian means “the gate of God.” Perhaps it was a folk-belief—an urban legend of the day—that the people were going to build an entrance to a divine realm. More pertinently, Nimrod certainly knew, he understood that he was building an alternative to God’s government.

But, there is a somewhat sardonic pun here; for in Hebrew the Akkadian word sounds like "balal", which means “to confuse or to confound.” Interestingly, God accomplished His goals at the cost of the peoples’ desire for permanence, for both the city and the tower are rubble today. An ancient Greek source, cited by Josephus, suggests that God set up a wind storm, with lightning involved, and burned the tower; the fire started by lightning striking the tar. Tar has a high flashpoint, but it will ignite if there is enough heat. The fire would have been superheated by the wind and could have collapsed the tower about as fast as we saw the Twin Towers fall. Now, I am not saying it happened that way. I do not know; I was not there.

But! What I do know is that the Tower never became one of the wonders of the ancient world, something to which droves and droves of European and American tourists would travel to like they do with the Great Pyramids. The Tower of Babel never became anything like that.

There is only a mound topped by a 47-foot tower. That mound is about 15 miles outside the ruins of Babylon. And that tower may be, perhaps, the remnants of the Tower. But, there are contrarian views about that; they really do not know. The archaeologists really do not know. There are many points of view that the Tower was actually built in northern Mesopotamia, not in southern Mesopotamia miles away from what later became Babylon. It would still be between the two rivers; it would still be in Mesopotamia, but not in southern Mesopotamia. Now brethren, the fact that the location of the tower is obscure today bears testimony to the vanity of the Babel-folks' wish for an enduring city, a permanent tower. It never happened.

If it were not already in use, I would have chosen the title “A Tale of Two Cities” for my title. But that was already chosen so I had to settle for “Asphalt Aspirations and Pentecost's Promise.”

Please turn to Acts 2 and we will take a look at the narrative of another building project, much later in history and in another city. Here, God begins building His church, something so enduring that “the powers of death will never prevail against it,” as Christ Himself mentions in Matthew 16:18. I am going to read Acts 2; the first 12 verses from the *World English Bible*:

**Acts 2:1-12 (WEB)** Now when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all with one accord in one place. Suddenly there came from the sky a sound like the rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. Tongues like fire appeared and were distributed to them, and one sat on each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other languages, as the Spirit gave them the ability to speak.

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under the sky. When this sound was heard, the multitude came together, and were bewildered, because everyone

heard them speaking in his own language. They were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, “Behold, aren’t all these who speak Galileans? How do we hear, everyone in our own native language?”

Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, the parts of Libya around Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians: we hear them speaking in our languages the mighty works of God!” They were all amazed, and were perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”

As verse 1 says, these people were “in accord, all in one place.” Not in Mesopotamia or its surrounds, but, as verse 5 makes clear, in Jerusalem. Here, on a small scale, God has reversed the dispersion of the people, bringing them together from north, south, east, and west. His purpose at this time was not scattering, it was not dispersion, it was unity.

But, there is more to the comparison. In the Babel story, remember, YHWH, who later became Christ, came down to a *united* people and ultimately confused their language, resulting in the cessation of construction. They had to stop building. In the Pentecost account, it was precisely the same Being who came down, and He again came down to a united people. However, He did not thwart, but He *facilitated* the building, in this case the construction of His church. YHWH came down, but this time under the name of the Holy Spirit. Remember, in II Corinthians 3:17 we understand that Christ is that Spirit.

YHWH came down and He again brought confusion, but not by confusing language. Quite the opposite. For this time He reversed what He did at Babel, undoing the confusion of the languages, at least for a while, at least on a small scale. Everybody around could understand each other just like they did at Babel. It is interesting that confusion ensued in Babel as well as in Jerusalem. Acts 2:12, the *Easy-to-Read Version* is rather interesting; it says, “The people were all amazed and confused.” So unusual was this situation that people became nonplussed, they were bewildered and confused, just as they had become at Babel.

Brethren, there are many other comparisons but as we approach Pentecost, it may be a good idea to consider *God's* building project. He is forging a people *unified* in Him. He is not using inferior building materials. And, His structure, unlike that of the Babel-folk, which may be nowhere to be found “on the face of all the earth,” will endure! You can count on that.

In the final analysis, the Babel-folk were fearful communitarians who sang the praise of their own beggarly accomplishments. Conversely, the Pentecost-people gladly and hopefully focused on the “mighty works of God.”