

## The Tower of Babel

by Dr. John C. Whitcomb

God's judgment of the Tower of Babel was one of the greatest catastrophes in the history of the world. In one moment, a massive, highly complex building project, involving the entire human race, came to an end. Thousands of workers, linguistically unified and Satanically inspired, suddenly found themselves incapable of communicating with each other. Overwhelmed by fear and frustration, each worker took his family and moved away from the others. Mankind has never recovered.

But what really happened, and why? For centuries, Bible students have wondered about the following three statements:

- "Come, let us build for ourselves...a tower whose top will reach into heaven" (11:4).
- God's amazing response to this: "Behold, they are all one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them" (11:6).
- "In [Peleg's] days the earth was divided" (10:25), and the relationship of these words to those in the previous chapter.

### THE TOWER

Let us now consider these three statements in order. First, were these Mesopotamians who descended from Noah's family actually attempting to build "a tower whose top [would] reach into heaven" (11:4)? The clear answer is "No!" The NASB puts the words *will reach* in italics, which means that they are not in the original Hebrew text, but were added in an effort to make sense out of the wording. (The KJV italicizes *may reach*.)

But what happens when the Hebrew wording is translated literally? We then have "a tower whose top [is] into heaven." (cf. NKJV). And this is exactly what ancient Mesopotamian ziggurat temple-towers were for! The top compartment represented heaven. The inner walls, in all probability, were decorated with blue glazed tile, with the sun, the moon, and the five known planets (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn) lined up along the plane of the zodiac. In the center of the room would be their "god" seated upon a throne! Nebuchadnezzar later rebuilt such a tower in Babylon, which the Sumerians had called E-TEMEN-AN-KI ("the building of the foundation-platform of heaven and earth"). (See J.D. Douglas, ed., *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Part I*, Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Pub., 1980, p. 155.) The pyramids of Egypt and, much later, the great Mayan temples of Central America, reflected the design and function of the original Tower of Babel.

This was not an innocent, scientifically naïve, primitive effort to reach the highest heavens! It was, instead, a brilliant but blasphemous effort to dismiss forever the God who had commanded Noah and his three sons after the Flood to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen. 9:1). Instead of honoring His name (ie. His character and attributes), they said, "Let us build for ourselves a city...and let us make for ourselves a name; lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth" (v. 4).

The entire enterprise, devoid of reverence, respect, and obedience to the known will of Noah's God, simply reeked with human pride and arrogance. The entire human race, bonded by a common language, became Satan's stupendous instrument to dismiss God from His universe.

Satan almost succeeded in dominating mankind again, as he had done at the fall of Adam and Eve, and as he had done before the Flood (with the exception of one family [Gen. 6:5; Heb. 11:7]).

### **THE RESPONSE OF GOD**

The second statement which we must understand is the shocking response of God to the Babel project: "Nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them" (v. 6). The triune, sovereign God of the universe, anthropomorphically viewed as coming down from the third heaven, through immeasurable distances of "outer space," views this tower emerging from the tiny speck called earth with a sadness that only He can know, and pronounces judgment: "Let us...confuse their language...So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth" (vs. 7-8).

But how did their linguistic unity provide the possibility and potential for infinite iniquity? Perhaps we can find the answer by looking at the vast English-speaking world today. Almost instantly, demonic perversions and poisons can penetrate and permeate the minds of millions through the internet. Avalanches of morally hideous films, videos, books, and magazines sweep across the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia, and South Africa daily, pouring into schools and homes like the locust plague of Joel 2:1-9, 25.

Now, what would happen to this Satanic sewage if the 322 million people who speak English suddenly discovered that their linguistic unity was shattered? The blow to Satan and sinful men would be staggering. The intervention at Babel was God's holy and loving purpose in dividing and separating people from each other.

### **THE EARTH WAS DIVIDED**

This brings us to the third significant statement: a descendant of Shem named Peleg was a living witness of this great judgment of God, for "in his days the earth was divided" (10:25). Some have speculated that his division of the earth was the breakup and separation of continents after the Flood. However, these gigantic earth movements occurred at the very end of the Flood, and actually caused the Flood to end (see Ps. 104:6-9; and discussion in J.C. Whitcomb, *The World That Perished*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988, pp. 37-42); but Peleg lived long after the Flood (see Whitcomb and Morris, *The Genesis Flood*, Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub. Co., 1961, pp. 476-83).

The entire context of Genesis 10 makes it clear that the division, which occurred in the days of Peleg was linguistic, not geological. Note this threefold emphasis: "the coastlands of the nations were separated into their lands, every one according to his language... (vs.5); according to their languages... (vs.20); according to their languages... (vs.31)." Thus, the linguistic division of mankind described in Genesis 10 anticipates the more detailed explanation in Genesis 11, just as the brief statement of mankind's creation in Genesis 1:26-28 anticipates the greater details of Genesis 2. Genesis 10 leaves the reader pondering these major questions: how and why did Noah's monolinguistic family become "separated" from each other (10:10, 31), speaking different languages (10:5, 20, 31)? Genesis 11 provides God's amazing answers.

Peleg, which means "division," was the name which this particular descendant of Noah and Shem acquired by virtue of his presence at the scene of God's judgment of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 10:25). Surely, loving parents would not have named their son "Peleg" at the time of his birth, anymore than Nabal ("fool"), the husband of Abigail, would have received such a name at his birth (cf. 1 Sam. 25:25)!

But the question remains: Why was mankind divided? I believe an answer may be found in this astounding statement by our Lord: "Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division [= Peleg!]; for from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two, and two against three. They will be divided, father against son, and son against father; mother against daughter, and daughter against mother; mother-in-law against mother-in-law" (Luke 12:51-53; cf. Matt. 10:34-36). God sent division as part of His gracious plan for His people.

I understand a little of what that division means. When I began my studies at Princeton University in the summer of 1942, I was deeply motivated as an only child to please my parents. They had worked hard to get me there, and I strove for excellent grades. But a radical change took place seven months later. One night, in my dormitory room at Pyne Hall, a gracious and godly Bible teacher led me to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. I knew immediately that my life and my destiny had changed forever. I wanted to study the Bible and tell others about my Savior.

But what would my parents think of this radical change in career goals? Should I suppress this LIGHT and maintain family unity? Or should I reflect HIS LIGHT into the lives of my parents and risk years of DIVISION? By God's mercy, I made the latter choice, and thirty years of spiritual division followed. However, in God's wisdom and love, the light that HE brought into our darkened home finally resulted, I believe, in the salvation of my father only a few months before he died in 1976. Without that LIGHT and the resulting DIVISION, there could have been NO SALVATION.

Has not this been a major part of God's gracious plan throughout the ages? He had to DIVIDE Adam and Eve from Satan in order that the LIGHT of the proto-Gospel could shine into their hearts (Gen. 3:15). He had to DIVIDE Noah and his family from a godless world in order that the message of RIGHTEOUSNESS might be preserved (2 Peter 2:5; Heb. 11:7). When the desperate desire for outward, organizational unity begins to overshadow the priority of TRUTH, then theological and spiritual disaster begins to loom large on the horizon. The God-revealed plan for SEPARATION from error and evil is thus an absolutely vital part of His saving love [cf. George Zeller, *The Beauty of Separation*, The Middletown Bible Church, 349 East St., Middletown, CT 06457].

Thus, it was our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of history (Heb. 1:3; Col. 1:17), who DIVIDED ("peleg-ed") mankind into many hundreds of linguistically isolated people-groups (and now over 6,000!). (See "Voices of the World," National Geographic map, August, 1999.) "He made from one [Adam] every nation of mankind...having determined ... the boundaries of their habitation" (Acts 17:26; cf. Deut. 32:8). This has become an enormous obstacle to Satan's plan to permeate and spiritually destroy every human being on earth with "the deep things" of demonic blasphemy and perversion (Rev. 2:24). (For a study of the amazing genetic/physical effects of isolation and inbreeding which resulted from the Babel dispersion, see Don Batten et al, "How did different 'races' arise? In *Answers to the Four Big Questions* [Answers in Genesis, PO Box 6330, Florence, KY 41022], pp. 25-40).

## PROS AND CONS

Let us consider briefly the positive and the negative aspects of the Babel judgment with respect to God's love for the world (John 3:16). Positively, as we have seen, Babel has been God's enormous roadblock to Satan, just as the shorelines are God's post-Flood boundaries to the turbulent seas: "Thus far you shall come, but no farther; and here shall your proud waves stop" (Job 38:11). Billions of people today are thus relatively free from the total demonism that

characterized mankind just before the Flood (Gen. 6:5) and at Babel, even though pockets of special Satanic power have appeared from time to time in places such as Sodom (Gen. 19) and Pergamum (cf. Rev. 2:13).

Negatively, however, linguistic pluralism has proven to be for the Church, weakened by centuries of theological and spiritual corruption, a great hindrance to the spread of the Gospel and the written Word of God, apart from occasional special divine enablement. The widespread use of Greek and Latin in the Roman Empire when the Church was created on the Day of Pentecost was God's provision for the Gospel message to teach millions of people in a relatively short period of time (Col. 1:23). But our Lord never intended the Gospel to be confined to Greek and Latin! He commanded us: "Make disciples of ALL the nations..." (Matt. 28:19).

## **BABEL IN REVERSE**

Just ten days after His ascension, a great linguistic miracle occurred: "There were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And...they were each one hearing [the apostles] speak in their own language" (Acts 2:5-6). Not just Greek and Latin, but a *dozen other languages are listed* (vs. 9-11)! Here was Babel in reverse: in the days of Peleg the earth was DIVIDED; but in the days of the apostles thousands of people from many lands were UNITED for many months, "continuing with one mind...and continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42-46). This was a preliminary answer to our Lord's prayer to His Father: "Keep them in Thy name...that they may be one, even as We are" (John 17:11). The ultimate answer to this marvelous prayer will surely occur one moment after the rapture, when we will all communicate perfectly with each other!

On the Day of Pentecost our Lord inaugurated His great program for removing the Babel language barriers that He Himself had erected. His Church, which is His Body and His Bride, was to break through every one of these thousands of cultural and linguistic walls, attracting people everywhere to the one true God by means of genuine love (John 13:35) and the pure Gospel (Rom. 10:9-15). Human isolation was to give way to SPIRITUAL UNITY and spiritual darkness to DIVINE LIGHT. "The Lord is...not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

The Church, however, has only partly succeeded in fulfilling the Great Commission. Several thousand languages, after 1,970 years, still have no part of the written Word of God. How tragic! How many of us will "suffer loss" at the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:15) because of disobedience to our Lord's commands? Nevertheless, in the fullness of time, God will follow through with His stupendous reverse-Babel program. Redeemed Israel, especially through the ministry of the 144,000 during the last half of the 70th Week of Daniel, will preach "this Gospel of the Kingdom...in the whole world for a witness TO ALL THE NATIONS, and then the end shall come" (Matt. 24:15).

At the end of this age, all of God's glorified people will sing a new song: "Thou...didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9). Indeed, there will be "a great multitude...from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues...and they will cry out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb'" (Rev. 7:9-10). The curse of Babel, the division (peleg) of peoples, the separation of nations, and the confusion of tongues will end forever; and the wisdom and love of our great God, even in His judgments, will be understood in a new way by those who have put their trust in Him.