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RAYMOND B. MARCIN

The City of Babel: Yesterday and Today

WE ALL KNOW THE STORY. It is as old as the Bible itself. And it is as new as the Bible itself:

These are the families of Noe, according to their peoples and nations. By these were the nations divided on the earth after the flood.

And the earth was of one tongue, and of the same speech.

And when they removed from the east, they found a plain in the land of Sennaar, and dwelt in it.

And each one said to his neighbor: Come, let us make brick, and bake them with fire. And they had brick instead of stones, and slime instead of mortar.

And they said: Come, let us make a city and a tower, the top whereof may reach to heaven: and let us make our name famous before we be scattered abroad into all lands.

And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of Adam were building.

And he said: Behold, it is one people, and all have one tongue: and they have begun to do this, neither will they leave

off from their designs, till they accomplish them in deed.

Come ye, therefore, let us go down, and there confound their tongue, that they may not understand one another's speech.

And so the Lord scattered them from that place into all lands, and they left off to build the city.

And therefore the name thereof was called Babel, because there the language of the whole earth was confounded: and from thence the Lord scattered them abroad upon the face of all countries.¹

Notice, it was the City that humanity had partially built that came to be known as "Babel." The Tower merely derived its name from the City.

That is not to say that the Tower was unimportant. On the contrary, the Tower was the symbol of the sin that humanity was committing in building its City. Towers, in those ancient days, were watchtowers, protections, and not simply instances of the vertical use of space. Throughout the Old Testament, God is often alluded to as a "Tower," in that sense of "protection": "The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the just runneth into it, and shall be exalted."² Humanity, in the Babel experience, put its trust in its own Tower, its own protection, and not in God. It had its City to defend and its accumulated property, its commerce, and its buildings to protect. And it had its new institutions, its new social order, its promise of progress, to safeguard. That humanity sought to protect all these things with its own Tower and not with reliance upon God was its failing. And that, no doubt, is the reason why the Tower in the story of Babel has traditionally been stressed. It was an example and stands as a symbol of human sinful arrogance, the human version of the sin of Lucifer.

But it was the City that came to be called "Babel." And the City, not just the Tower, displeased God. We can easily understand God's objection to the Tower, but we might well wonder what God's objec-

tion to the City was. Many of us, perhaps, have thought that it was probably God's objection to this *particular* City, that is, that this City which humanity was constructing must have been something like Sodom. But the language of Scripture bears none of that out. In fact, nowhere at any point in the scriptural account of the incident are the people or their City referred to as "wicked" or "evil" or anything of that nature. If you doubt this, reread the story. Certainly what they were doing in constructing the City and the Tower was laced with sinful pride. That is clear in the scriptural account of the story. But we can not really tell, from the words used by the inspired Scripture writer, whether the people themselves were any better or worse than we are today, or that their City was to be put to any better or worse uses than we put our cities to today. Maybe we get the cursory impression that the Babel people were somehow especially wicked because of the positioning of the story in Genesis. It is sandwiched between the Flood account of a world in which all save Noah³ and his family had turned to evil⁴ and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.⁵ But when we look at those incidents we can easily tell that when God indicts people as especially wicked the inspired Scripture writer makes that fact clear in quite definite terms:

And God seeing that the wickedness of men was great on the earth, and that all the thought of their heart was bent upon evil at all times, it repented him that he had made man on the earth. . . . And the men of Sodom were very wicked, and sinners before the face of the Lord, beyond measure.⁶

But the inspired Scripture writer did not say anything like that about the Babel builders. Yes, they sinned, but they were not singled out as exceedingly wicked. And it is that simple fact that makes the Babel story so intriguing. *For all the inspired Scripture writer tells us, the people of Babel were no different from us.*

What, then, was God's objection to the City? Why did *its* building, and not just that of the Tower, cause God to confound human

language? The scriptural account of the reason seems to make God out to be fearful, threatened, even jealous:

And he said: Behold, it is one people, and they all have one tongue: and they have begun to do this, neither will they leave off from their designs, till they accomplish them in deed.⁷

Was God actually fearful or jealous or threatened by human accomplishment? We can not believe that. The City can not conceivably have posed a threat to the Omnipotent God, and God, our Creator, may have ample reason to be disappointed with us, his creatures, but surely he can have no reason to be jealous of our puny tinkering.

Again, what was God's real objection to the City of Babel? Was it simply an objection to the idea of a city? The careful Scripture reader will know that Babel was not the first recorded city. It was the second.⁸ The first was built by Cain:

And Cain went out from the face of the Lord, and dwelt as a fugitive on the earth, at the east side of Eden. And Cain knew his wife, and she conceived, and brought forth Henoah: and he built a city, and called the name thereof by the name of his son Henoah.⁹

One of the first things that Cain did after his separation from the Lord was to build a city. One may wonder why a primeval man like Cain would want to build a city. For protection? Perhaps, but against what? Cain was already protected by the mark God had set upon him.¹⁰ There must have been another or a further reason. We can not tell for certain why Cain built a city, but the scriptural account does give us a hint. Cain did not name it "Cain's City." He named it "Henoah," after his son. It could be that Henoah (usually rendered "Enoch" in other translations) was something special in his day—a great man—the kind that cities get named after. But we can not tell

that from Scripture. No, it seems more likely that Cain's focus was on what Henoah represented to him: his child, his posterity, that part of him that lived on into the indefinite future.

When we compare Cain's City of Henoah (or Enoah) with humanity's City of Babel, however, we see differences. Cain was specially cursed by God. The Babel builders, when they began their enterprise at least, were not. They were descendants of Noah. They, in fact, had a special renewed relationship with God that Cain lacked. God had covenanted that he would not destroy them all by flood, and had given them a sign in the rainbow.¹¹ Cain came *to* the east; the Babel builders came *from* the east. But there is one feature that is the same in the two stories of cities: the felt need for a *name*. Cain felt the need or the wish to honor his posterity and named his city after his son, Henoah.

The Babel builders too felt the need for a name: "Let us make our name famous, before we be scattered abroad into all lands."¹² They saw a name as unifying them, keeping them together as a people. "Babel" was not, of course, the name the builders had chosen. It was the name by which the City came to be known after, and because of, the fiasco. We are not told what name they came up with, nor whether they ever succeeded in agreeing on a name. But it is clear that it was to be a name that would suggest the unity and importance of all human beings. The name would be their link with one another, and would establish them as a people. It would give them identity. And, since it was a City they were building, it would be an identity that belonged to their posterity as well. More modern generations would have less trouble coming up with a name that would express the unity and importance of all human beings. Many might think of the name "Humanism." Some might prefer to place adjectives in front of the name, like "progressive" or "religious" or even "Christian." However qualified or embellished, the name "Humanism" does seem to convey the requisite sense of identity and unity and importance.

But we may be getting ahead of ourselves. Let us look at the language that the inspired Scripture writer used in telling us about God's objection to the City. God was objecting, not simply to unity among human beings, but to the kind of human unity that would enable the human Babel builders to "accomplish their designs."¹³ What "designs"? A clue may be found in two earlier passages in the Book of Genesis, one just prior to the Flood, and the other just after it. Just prior to the Flood, the inspired Scripture writer tells us:

God [saw] that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that all the thought of their heart was bent upon evil at all times.¹⁴

And just after the Flood, in response to Noah's sacrifice, we are told:

And the Lord smelled a sweet savour, and said: I will no more curse the earth for the sake of man: for the imagination and thought of man's heart are prone to evil from his youth.¹⁵

Strong words indeed. And in light of these strong words, one might conclude that God's "fear" in the account of the City of Babel was of humanity's evil imagination and thought, "prone to evil from his youth." And it was not so much a "fear" as a foresight. God foresaw, in the Babel situation, the potential for the evil that he had seen rampant upon the earth in the pre-Flood era and that he had concluded was in "man's heart . . . from his youth," the evil that lay at the base of the young Cain's sin: envy, self-importance—a self-importance leading paradoxically to self-hatred and, if unchecked, to violence—a warping of the flesh away from God's purpose.¹⁶ God's "fear" or foresight was of something beyond human arrogance in the face of Divine Omnipotence. It was a fatherly concern for the consequences of that arrogance: a warped, distorted humanity whose "imagination and thought" is limited, an imagination limited by humanity's own

“image” of itself—a humanity whose noblest efforts must fail, must deteriorate because humanity’s “image” of humanity is “evil from its youth.” Seen in that light, God’s confounding of human language seems more like a lesson than a curse, more like a restraining hand than a punishment. God’s “fear” was never for his own authority. It was for *us*—for the debacle that we bring upon ourselves by exalting our own image in our own flawed thoughts and imaginations.

Again, we are not told that the Babel builders were especially depraved, corrupt, or violent. Indeed, we *are* told enough to allow us to conclude that they were united, working together, and determined to form a stable society. In short, they were doing much the same things that we are doing, on a grander scale, today. And in that fact lies the lesson for us in the story of the *City of Babel*. God reproved them for doing what we are doing today, and he reproved them in a way that destroyed their unity and the stability of their society. The lesson in the story of the *City of Babel* is subtle, so subtle that we read into the story a violence and depravity that is not there, so that we can explain God’s apparent harshness. Reinhold Niebuhr saw the lesson:

[M]an builds towers of the spirit from which he may survey larger horizons than those of class, race, and nation. This is a necessary human enterprise. Without it man could not come to his full estate. But it is also inevitable that these towers should be Towers of Babel, that they should pretend to reach higher than their real height; and should claim a finality which they cannot possess . . . [S]in corrupts the highest as well as the lowest achievements of human life. Human pride is greatest when it is based upon solid achievements; but the achievements are never great enough to justify its pretensions.¹⁷

The sin of the Babel builders was, of course, pride. But in their efforts to build the *City*, it was a different kind of pride; we might be tempted to call it a “justifiable” pride. To condemn the arrogance of the *Tower* is easy and obvious. It is more difficult to find fault with

the City, and that makes the fault the more dangerous. The builders of the City of Babel were accomplishing much of what is seemingly good for human beings to accomplish. They were creating a unified, stable society. They were doing what we are doing today. We come together. We unify. We build our cities and our institutions. We call for stability and unity among all human beings. But pause. At the same time we war. At the same time we starve. At the same time we oppress. We do all the things that cause us to unify in order to stop doing. And we somehow fail to notice our failure and fail to admit our inability. Our cities get bigger and our problems get bigger. The institutions we devise to alleviate human need spawn human want. The more impassioned our denunciations of war and self-destruction, the more urgent our preparations for war and self-destruction. It is not that we are completely blind to these realities. We see them. But we see them in our own “imaginings.” We see an evil in *some* of us, to be fought against by some *others* of us. What we resist seeing, of course, is that the evil is in *all* of us.¹⁸

It is probably doubly difficult for us today to see the evil in all of humanity—in every human being without exception. Today we know of the importance of a healthy “self-image.” This other image, the image of humanity’s “self” as being “evil continually” and “evil from its youth” seems to us today to be psychologically unhealthy. And so it is. It *is* psychologically unhealthy. And so it must be opposed. But it is at this point, the point at which we recognize the need to oppose an unhealthy self-image, that Christians diverge from “humanist” humankind. The Christian chooses one way of opposing that unhealthy self-image, the humanist another. In the language of psychology, the humanist chooses the way of denial or the way of projection. Time and again the humanist says: “Humanity’s heart is simply not ‘prone to evil from its youth,’” or “The evil is in the heart of nonhumanist humankind, not in my own.” Denial of a truth and projection of a trait to another, which is really another form of denial, merely perpetuate a problem.

The paradox of faith in Jesus, building upon the lesson of the City of Babel, is this: The divinely revealed truth that humanity's heart is "prone to evil from its youth," true though it is, can be opposed. Another way is open to humanity when it faces its decision to oppose that "unhealthy self-image." Earlier, we noticed that the word "imagination" is used in unmistakable reference to the proneness to evil in humanity's heart. It may be of some relevance that, in the English language, the root of that word "imagination," the word "image," appears three times in Genesis before the Babel account, and in a most definitive passage:

And [God] said: Let us make man to our *image* and likeness . . .
 And God created man to his own *image*: to the *image* of God
 he created him: male and female he created them.¹⁹

Combining this very positive assessment of man with the other negative assessments of man's "imagination," the lesson seems to be that the unhealthy self-image (man's imagination, prone to evil from its youth) is humanity's own image of itself, an image clouded and determined by the sin of Adam. But in God's eye, by God's very own act, humanity's true image is far nobler than the Babel builders or the staunchest humanist of today could ever appreciate. The true image of humanity is there for the viewing, but the viewpoint has to be God's, not humanity's own.

It is paradoxical and, perhaps, a measure of the gravity of Adam's sin, that humanity requires humility in order to be able to share in the viewpoint of God—not a self-importance leading paradoxically to self-hatred, but a self-denial leading, also paradoxically, to a freedom and a love and a unity and a solidarity that surpass understanding.²⁰

One may view the *Tower* of Babel as an example of humanity's incessant attempts to *become God*, and one may view the *City* of Babel as an example of humanity's incessant attempts to *prove itself to God*

(religious humanism), *or to itself*, the “itself” that it makes into a god (secular humanism, or perhaps “new age” religious humanism). The lesson in the story of Babel is that all those examples are wrong, but by far the most dangerous, because of its subtlety and its pervasiveness, are the religious and quasi-religious examples that flow from the *City* of Babel. It is when we are about our noblest and, in the human sense, highest human accomplishments that we, paradoxically, are farthest from God. Reinhold Niebuhr expressed it well:

The Christian view of the future is complicated by the realization of the fact that the very freedom which brings the future into view has been the occasion for the corruption of the present in the heart of man. Mere development of what he now is cannot save man, for development will heighten all the contradictions in which he stands . . . His hope . . . lies in a forgiveness which will overcome not his finiteness but his sin, and a divine omnipotence which will complete his life without destroying its essential nature.²¹

It is not the City that matters in the end. It is the Kingdom.

Notes

1. Gen. 10:32-11:9 Douay Rheims. The Douay Rheims English language version uses the Latinized spelling of “Noe” for the patriarch whom God commissioned to build the ark instead of the now more commonly used Hebraic spelling of “Noah.”
2. Prov. 18:10 Douay Rheims. Cf. Ps. 61:3, 144:2; 2 Sam. 22:3; Isa. 2:15.
3. Rendered “Noe” in the Douay Rheims version. See note 1 *supra*.
4. Gen. 6.
5. Gen. 13.
6. Gen. 6:5, 6 and 13:13 Douay Rheims.
7. Gen. 11:6 Douay Rheims.
8. It is, of course, true that other cities are mentioned at a point in the Bible half a chapter before the Babel account. These are the cities of Nimrod (or “Nemrod” in the Douay Rheims translation). But the inspired Scripture writer tells us quite clearly that of these mentioned cities, the first was Babel: “Now Chus begot Nemrod: he began to be mighty on the earth. And he was a stout hunter before the Lord. . . . And

the beginning of his kingdom was Babylon [the word which the Douay Rheims version translates as “Babylon” here is the Hebrew word “Babel,” exactly the same word as is used in Genesis 11:9], and Arach, and Achad, and Calanne in the land of Sennar” (Gen. 10:8-10 Douay Rheims). Nimrod, then, was the leader of the Babel builders. Sociologist and Scripture scholar Jacques Ellul has Nimrod characterized as something of a warlord, a mighty “plunderer” against, or separated from, God (Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1970], 10-13). This characterization is easily reconcilable with what likely happened in the aftermath of the confusion of tongues: a divided people, ideologically as well as linguistically at odds, governable only by someone like a despotic warlord.

9. Gen. 4:16, 17 Douay Rheims.
10. Gen. 4:15.
11. Gen. 9:11-13.
12. Gen. 11:4 Douay Rheims.
13. Gen. 11:6 Douay Rheims.
14. Gen. 6:5 Douay Rheims.
15. Gen. 8:21 Douay Rheims.
16. Gen. 4:7 and 6:11, 12.
17. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), 29-30.
18. Ps. 14:3 and 53:3, Eccles. 7:20, and Rom. 3:10-12.
19. Gen. 1:26-27 Douay Rheims.
20. Eph. 3:19.
21. Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 305-6.