

Issues/themes in the Babel story (Genesis 11.1-9)

1. Why is the story traditionally called “The Tower of Babel” when that is only part of the project described? What is the effect on readers of that title?
2. What is the relationship between the claim in Genesis 11.1 that “the whole land had one language,” and earlier in Genesis 10.5, 20 and 31, where we are told that each people had their own language?
3. What is the relationship between 10.10, which claims that Nimrod built Babel in Shinar, and this story?
4. How could the people of “all the land” settle in a single plain in Shinar?
5. Why do they begin by “bricking bricks” and “burning them to burning”?
6. How do the words of this story parallel the bricks within the story as “building blocks”?
7. What does “its top in the heavens/skies” connote? Simply a tall building (“skyscraper”) or an attempt to “storm heaven” or rise up to God’s realm?
8. What exactly, according to verse 4, is the builders’ purpose? What, if anything, is “wrong” or “sinful” about their plan?
9. Are we to imagine the tower as a Mesopotamian ziggurat? And if so, how does that shape how we interpret the story?
10. What, in v. 7, is YHWH’s concern about the project or its potential aftermath?
11. How does this story connect with the Garden of Eden story, in terms of a human initiative which YHWH’s response interrupts?
12. How does YHWH’s proposal to “confuse their language” (v. 7) relate to v. 8 telling us that YHWH “scattered them abroad...”?
13. What exactly is the pun in v. 10 on “Babel” and “confusion”?
14. How are we to understand the builders’ desire to “make a name for ourselves” in relation to 12.2, where YHWH says to Abram, “I will...make your name great”?