

THE TOWER OF BABEL:
A LITERARY EXAMINATION OF GENESIS 11:1-9

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A thesis submitted to the
School of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Religious Studies Department
Memorial University of Newfoundland

September, 2008

St. John's

Newfoundland

Abstract

The Tower of Babel narrative describes how the entire world has settled in one place and has established a city and built a great tower. The people share unity of place, language, and purpose but their desire to stay united is countered by Yahweh's desire for diversity in his creation. My literary examination of this tale delves into the language and structure of the narrative which exposes its complexity and artistry. By analyzing these literary features, it is hoped that the meaning of the narrative is revealed which, in turn, add nuances to Genesis 1-11 as a whole.

Read on its own, the tower narrative describes a clash between human and divine wills: the will to remain together against the will for diversity. Yet, when the pericope is read in its larger context as the ending of Genesis 1-11 the narrative's deeper meaning is revealed. The tower narrative is linked to the Garden of Eden narrative on a variety of levels. Thematically, the maturation theme as told in the garden narrative is, on a universal scale, related once again in the tower narrative. When seen in this light, the narrative then relates the positive development of humanity from a single, united group to the diverse cultures of the world completing humanity's journey begun at creation.

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Kim Ian Parker for his guidance and tireless patience. His help was invaluable to say the least. I would also like to thank the Religious Studies Department for their help, both economic and otherwise. And a special thank you to my parents for their loving support.

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Introduction

The story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9 has sparked numerous debates among biblical scholars. The story begins by describing a world that has one language, and a people who have settled in the valley of Shinar (Babel). The people, unified by their language, decide to build a city and a tower in order to “make a name for themselves” and to avoid being scattered over the face of the earth (11:4). Yahweh, however, observes this united group and decides to confuse the people’s language and scatter them over the face of the earth (11:8). The city is thereafter named “Babel” (בבל) for it is there that Yahweh “confused” (בלל) the language (11:9).

Although the story can be read as a simple aetiology on the origins of different languages, one question that immediately arises is, what exactly did the people of Babel do that was so bad? After all, is not universal sisterhood/brotherhood a laudable goal for humanity? Most interpreters, therefore, have tried to understand the nature of the crime that so irked the deity.

In this thesis, I will argue that there is no “sin” committed at all. Rather than a story of profound pride, I see the narrative as one of societal development which corresponds to the maturation theme found in the Garden of Eden narrative. The tower narrative relates the story of how society developed from a single, united group to multiple groups spanning the various nations, just as the garden narrative relates how a man and woman matured into adults capable of procreation.

My thesis will consist of four chapters: in the first chapter I will discuss a number of scholarly approaches to Genesis 11:1-9 each with its own distinctive interpretation of

the narrative; in the second chapter I will discuss a methodology which promises to shed new light on the material; in chapter three I will discuss a new structural arrangement of the material which will foreground the key verse of the pericope and so offer a prospect of a new analysis; in the fourth chapter I will argue that the careful language of the narrative echoes that of the garden narrative and indicates that the narrative deals with human development on a universal level.

Chapter One Recent Scholarship

Most scholars believe that a sin was committed at Babel and that the nature of the sin is pride; pride is revealed in their speech as well as their actions. Hermann Gunkel, Umberto Cassuto, Gerhard von Rad, Terence Fretheim, and J.P. Fokkelman are some of the scholars who argue that the tower narrative relates a tale of hubris. Whether the people of Babel desire a name for themselves or to build a high tower, the result is the same: Yahweh punishes them for their Herculean pride. Others, like Nahum Sarna, also sees pride in the tale though due to the people's unwillingness to fill the earth. It is the deliberate thwarting of his will that causes Yahweh to act and scatter the people across the earth.

Thus, it is evident that most scholars see the meaning of the text as lying in one word or phrase. The entire pericope, however, and its place within Genesis, must be considered in order to ascertain a deeper meaning. As I shall endeavour to show, a close contextual reading of Genesis 1-11 emphasizes humanity's unity through their speech and actions. I will argue that it is humanity's desire for unity to which Yahweh reacts.

Chapter Two - Methodology

In this thesis I will employ a literary methodology. Literary criticism is a relatively new methodology in biblical studies. Although there were some literary studies in the 1960s and 1970s it did not receive significant attention until the 1980s. Literary critics emphasize the unity of the text analyzing it as it stands. They pay close attention to its "literary" features; issues dealing with authorship, historical background or sources are considered secondary. Essentially, this method advocates analyzing biblical narrative as one would another piece of literature.

The minutest of details are deemed important and worthy of analysis in literary criticism. The author's use of language down to word choice is believed to have significance to the point where a single word change could alter the meaning of a sentence, verse, or entire narrative. Such a close scrutiny of language as used in literary criticism is indeed relatively new to biblical studies, and it has become obvious that biblical authors took great care in their use of language, style and structure. These authors were not just writing stories but creating literary art. In the past when a narrative was deemed too incoherent for a unified meaning, it was often blamed on the fractured nature of the text. In literary studies of biblical narrative, however, the emphasis is placed more on the reader's shortcoming rather than the text's if an adequate meaning is not attained. The onus, therefore, is on the reader to do the work necessary to fully appreciate the meaning of the text.

The analysis of language is especially important in the tower narrative. The narrator relies heavily upon repetition. With the use of this literary construct the narrator is able to highlight certain words and phrases which are integral to the overall meaning of

the narrative. It is also with the use of repetition that the narrator connects this narrative with the Garden of Eden story. Read on its own, the tower narrative deals with a conflict of interest between humanity who wishes to remain together in Babel and Yahweh who strives for diversity and for the earth to be filled. However, when the narrative is read in the larger context as the conclusion to the Primeval History, the tale reflects the development of humanity on a universal scale, just as the garden narrative deals with human maturation on a personal scale.

The plot also provides structure for the narrative. The chiasmic structure of the tower narrative functions in a way that contrasts the two sections. The first section dealing with humanity is countered in the second section by Yahweh who counteracts what humanity had achieved. Chiasmic structures also serve to emphasize the central verse which here relates Yahweh descending to observe humanity. Once Yahweh descends the reader becomes aware that change is imminent. Once all of these aspects have been analyzed, then the reader can evaluate the narrative for significance and draw conclusions as to its overall meaning.

Chapter Three - Structural Arrangement

In chapter three I will describe in detail the structure of Genesis 11:1-9. Thus far I have concluded that the narrative is characterized by a chiasmic structure as follows:

The first 4 sections (A, B, C, D) deal with humanity where the sense of unity is manifest. All of humanity is portrayed as having one language and together they have migrated to the east and have settled in Shinar. Here they have decided to build a city and a tower. At this point Yahweh descends, and the final 4 sections (A', B', C', D') deal with the deity's

reaction to the people. In a systematic reversal of the opening verses Yahweh undoes what humanity has done.

The narrator uses repetition to emphasize the connection between the various sections that the chiasmic structure provides. Therefore, in A and A' we have the repetition of the word 'language' and the phrase 'all the earth' which appears in A once and A' twice. Similarly, in B and B' the word 'there' is repeated. In both C and C' we see the word 'his friend' as well as the phrase 'come let us.' Lastly, in D and D' the verbs 'said' and 'make' occur in each section once in D and twice in D'.

Unlike linear narratives, chiasmic structures are designed to draw the reader's attention to the central verse where often crucial or, at the very least, noteworthy details are revealed. Thus, section E, where Yahweh descends, lies at the heart of the narrative. Yahweh's reaction is surprising to the reader for nothing in the first four sections prepared him or her for the drastic nature of the reaction. It is then up to the reader to decipher the various aspects of the narrative in order to ascertain why Yahweh reacts in the way that he does. The so-called 'clues' of the narrative which reveal the people of Babel's motivations for remaining united as well as Yahweh's reaction is the subject of chapter four.

Chapter Four Universal Development

In the fourth chapter I will try to demonstrate that there are five clues in Genesis 11:1-9 that point back to an earlier point in the Primeval History which in turn provide meaning to the narrative at hand. It is, therefore, the Tower of Babel's place in the larger narrative of the Primeval History which gives it its ultimate significance. Once the

connection between the Babel story and the Garden of Eden narrative is established, the significance of the story becomes clear.

The tower narrative can be read on its own as a tale relating the efforts of humanity to remain together which directly opposes Yahweh's desire for diversity in his creation but also a tale relating the universal development of humanity. The association of the tower narrative with the garden narrative reveal certain nuances which give the tale added significance. The theme of maturation begun in the garden narrative comes to a conclusion in the tower narrative and is a fitting conclusion to the history of humanity from creation up until the time of Abram. Humanity has gone from a child-like state in Eden to acquiring the ability to build great cities like Babel and nations as related in the Table of Nations. By (re)creating the history of humanity, the biblical author has placed not only Abram in context but also the author's own world.

Chapter One – Recent Scholarship

According to most critical research on the Tower of Babel narrative (Genesis 11:1-9), the sin of human pride lies at the heart of the narrative. Typically, scholars point to 11:4 as the major indicator of pride. Here, the inhabitants of Babel say “come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens and let us make for ourselves a name” (הבה נבנה-לנו עיר ומגדל וראשו בשמים ונעשה-לנו שם). Two aspects of this verse have been used as evidence of pride, namely, the people’s desire to build a tower with its top in the heavens or their desire for a name. Almost all scholars discussed below maintain that pride is the major problem of the narrative. I hope to show that their interpretations do not adequately address an important theme of the biblical story.

In 1901, Hermann Gunkel argued that the Tower of Babel is an amalgam of two separate stories, one about the city and the other about the tower. Gunkel cites several inconsistencies which he believes to be proof of his theory. These inconsistencies include the problems of: Yahweh descending twice (11:5 and 11:7); the builders stating two reasons for building the tower (for fame and to prevent being scattered); and the discontinuities between 11:8 and 11:9 (i.e., in 11:8 Yahweh scatters the people and they stopped building the city; in 11:9 Yahweh confuses the language and scatters the people). Gunkel declares, “all these observations can be most easily interpreted by assuming two recensions.”¹

For Gunkel, the purpose of both stories was to explain the reason for the diversity of languages and for the geographic dispersal of people throughout the earth as well as

¹ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997), 94.

the origin of the name 'Babel.' Since there is no concrete historical evidence which can answer the questions as to the origin of the diversity of human language as well as the distribution of humanity throughout the earth, Gunkel argues that stories became the best way to answer inquisitive questions. Stories are, as he calls them, "a naïve answer of the ancient period to certain questions it found important."² Gunkel believes that pride is the reason for Yahweh's actions in both stories. This is a theme to which many scholars will return as discussed below.

In the city recension (11:1, 11:3a, 11:4aα, γ, 11:6aα, β, 11:7, 11:8b, 11:9a), Gunkel argues that humanity's desire for a name is what Yahweh considers to be sinful: only his name is to be eternal. Since Yahweh sees the source of humanity's power as centred around their oneness, he confuses their language to put an end to their arrogant behaviour. Thus the name "Babel" will be evidence of their shame rather than proof of their glory. In the tower narrative (11:2, 11:4aβ, b, 11:3b, 11:5, 11:6aγ, b, 11:8a, 11:9b), it is the tower itself that is evidence of human pride. Yahweh looks to the future and sees the tower as a means by which humanity will be able to storm heaven. His way of establishing limits on humanity is by scattering them over the earth. The immensity of the tower is evidence of human pride, just as the ruins of the unfinished tower illustrates God's judgment on the sin of humanity.³

John Skinner agrees with Gunkel in that the text is an amalgam of two stories.⁴ He sees both primarily as etymological tales depicting human pride. In his 1910 commentary

² Ibid., 99.

³ Ibid., 100.

⁴ Skinner uses the same verse division as Gunkel except that he places 11:6aβ in the tower recension.

on Genesis, he wrote, "its central idea is the effort of the restless, scheming, soaring human mind to transcend its divinely appointed limitations."⁵ The basic storyline originated as a Babylonian tale, but many of the details changed during the process of oral transmission. The polytheistic elements were removed and the etymological aspects involving the name Babel, as well as the origin of geographical dispersion and diversity of languages were incorporated.⁶ He writes, "the stories travelled from land to land, till they reached Israel, where, divested of their cruder polytheistic elements, they became the vehicle of an impressive lesson on the folly of human pride, and the supremacy of Yahwe in the affairs of men."⁷

Most scholars, however, disagree with Gunkel's and Skinner's theory of a double recension of the narrative. One of the earliest "literary critics," Umberto Cassuto, especially criticized Gunkel's notion of separate "city" and "tower" narratives in his 1944 commentary.⁸ He proclaims that Genesis 11:1-9 "cannot be understood without both themes."⁹ For Cassuto, there is nothing sinful about the actions of the people without the tower narrative, and a tower narrative in isolation from a city one would have no purpose. Both structures are necessary to reveal the "sin-of-pride" theme that Cassuto believes to be the point of the narrative. Cassuto further notes that the two narratives are linked idiomatically. The city and the tower narratives are joined with the word "and" (ו) as are the tower and its top (though it is usually translated into English by the preposition "with"). "The tower is included in the concept of the city, and every time the city is

⁵ John Skinner, *Genesis*, 2d ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 229.

⁶ Skinner cites one polytheistic element remaining, when Yahweh says "Let us."

⁷ Skinner, *Genesis*, 228.

⁸ I will deal with an explanation of other biblical literary critics in chapter 2 of the thesis.

⁹ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis Part II* (Jerusalem: Central Press, 1974), 237.

mentioned the tower is also implied."¹⁰ For Cassuto, this explains why the word "tower" is not mentioned in 11:8 as the tower's inclusion is already presumed.

Cassuto also gives an explanation for the inconsistencies Gunkel cites as confirmation of the two recensions. What Gunkel deems to be Yahweh descending a second time in 11:7 is, by Cassuto's account, a record of what Yahweh thought before he descended. Thus, his speech in 11:6-7 occurs before he descends in 11:5. He reconciles the inconsistency that Gunkel perceived by arguing that the people state two reasons for building the tower (for fame and to prevent being scattered). Cassuto maintains that the people's desire for a name was peripheral; it was more a consequence of the building rather than a reason for it. For Cassuto, the sentence can be better understood by placing that phrase in parenthesis as follows: "let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens (and thereby we shall make a name for ourselves), so that we may not be scattered abroad."¹¹ Cassuto explains the so-called unrelated phrases in 11:8-9 with climactic emphasis: the scattering of the people (11:8a) is emphasized by the fact that they stopped building the city (11:8b), just as the confusion of the languages (11:9a) emphasizes that humanity is dispersed (11:9b).

Cassuto's argument that Gunkel's separation of the unity of the pericope does a grave injustice to the unity of the text is similar to a point that I wish to make in chapters three and four and, in this sense, I am in full agreement with him. Where I have problems with Cassuto's argument is his tendency to reduce the narrative to a story about human pride.

¹⁰ Ibid., 237.

¹¹ Ibid., 243.

Cassuto argues that the purpose of the story is to teach two moral lessons, the first and possibly the more significant of the two being that “boastful pride in material power is considered sinful in God’s eyes.”¹² Everything in the story, especially what the builders say, exhibits pride. Ironically, the tower itself, perhaps the most visible sign of their pride for many scholars, is not the main subject for Cassuto. In fact, he would rather the narrative be called “the Generation of Division” rather than the “Tower of Babel.” As his alternative nomenclature suggests, the tower is reduced to its proper place as a detail within the narrative rather than occupying the title role, and allows a more important aspect within the story (the division of humanity) to be brought to the fore. This division has to do with the second moral lesson Cassuto believes to be behind the story: that God’s plan will not be interrupted. He cites the fact that, at the end of the story, the tower is not mentioned along with the city when the author tells us that construction has been halted.¹³

Cassuto argues that the narrative is essentially a protest against polytheistic cultures, especially Babylonian culture, and is therefore Israelite in origin. Since the narrative satirizes Babylonian culture, it could not have begun as a Babylonian tale as Skinner proclaims. Cassuto writes that the text describes the tower or ziqqurat¹⁴ named *Etemenanki*. He believes that since the ruins have been found in Babylon, “all agree that this was the tower referred to by Scripture.”¹⁵ He notes that the Babylonians were proud and even boastful of their structural achievements and that with this tale the biblical

¹² Ibid., 225.

¹³ Cassuto does not reconcile the fact that he cites the tower as a mere detail in one argument and later uses its so-called conspicuous absence in 11:8 as proof of another argument.

¹⁴ The term is variously spelled ‘zikkurat’ by Skinner and ‘ziggurat’ by later scholars including von Rad, Fretheim and Blenkinsopp.

¹⁵ Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 229. Opinions have changed since his time and most modern scholars do not believe a specific tower was intended.

author was mocking the other culture because what the Babylonians once glorified lay in ruins by the author's time. Cassuto writes, "during that period the children of Israel remembered the vainglorious bragging of the Babylonians with derision, and it is probable that at this period the Israelites composed satiric poems on the building of the city and its tower."¹⁶

It is this attitude which pervades Cassuto's reading of the text. He is unable to see beyond the word 'Babel' (which seems to be synonymous with pride to him) to appreciate what the biblical text might otherwise be saying. He details the extensive use of repetition but believes that the purpose is to emphasize the naming of 'Babel' which he perceives as the climax of the text.¹⁷ He notes the repetition of the letters *Beth* (ב), *Lamedh* (ל), and *Nun* (נ) in "let us make bricks" (נִלְבְּנָה לְבָנִים), "they had bricks" (וַתְּהִי לָהֶם הַלְבָנָה), "let us build ourselves" (וַנִּבְנֶה-לָנוּ), "the sons (of men) had built" (בָּנוּ בְנֵי הָאָדָם), "let us confuse" (וְנִבְלֶה), "they stopped building" (וַיַּחֲדְלוּ), and "Babel" (בָּבֶל). I would argue that such repetition points to the subject that is being repeated, namely the people. Each sentence deals with the people as a group (us, they, the sons) or, in the case of the phrase 'let us confuse,' which mimics the words of the people and reflects the consequence of their unity. The pattern of this repetition emphasizes the 'oneness' of the people and by maintaining that the sole purpose of the pattern is to lead to the word 'Babel' is, I believe, to miss the point of the artistry of the text.

Cassuto also points out instances of alliteration but does not discuss the possible purpose or results of these narrative constructs. Alliteration of the letter *Sin/Shin* (שׁ/שׂ)

¹⁶ Ibid., 229.

¹⁷ Fokkelman will later see the repetition of the s-m (שׁ-מ) sound similarly as a method of emphasizing the word 'heavens' (שָׁמַיִם).

occurs throughout the text especially in 11:2, 11:4 and 11:7. If we were to look at the context of these three verses, there does appear to be a connection. In 11:2 the people settle in Shinar; this is the beginning of their troubles. Yahweh wants separation but the people have chosen to unite in one place. In 11:4 they build the tower which is the physical representation of their unity. Finally, in 11:7 Yahweh confuses their language to disrupt the unity which he so adamantly opposes. In essence, these three verses are an abridged version of the narrative complete with an introduction, complication and resolution. I see these linguistic details as emphasizing the problem of the people's unity. Though Cassuto points out these narrative elements, he does not see what they might be referring to as he is committed to the theme of pride and the primacy of the word 'Babel.' As Westermann writes of scholars who argue the importance of 'Babel': "both extremes a Babylonian story or an anti-Babylonian story – fall into the same methodological error: they make Babylon the theme or centre of the narrative, which it is not."¹⁸

Another kind of interpretation is offered by Gerhard von Rad in 1961. Von Rad maintains that, in the original version of the story, the purpose of the tower was to facilitate an assault on heaven. As the Yahwist removed this aspect of the story, the sin of the builders became ambiguous. As such, Yahweh's actions must then be preventive rather than punitive. Without the sin being clear, one must look at the whole of Genesis 1-11 to fully understand the meaning of the narrative. In fact, for von Rad, the Tower of Babel has a place of prominence as the conclusion of the Primeval History. When seen in this light, von Rad argues:

¹⁸ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion S.J. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 541.

the multitude of nations [present in chapter 10] indicates not only the manifold quality of God's creative power but also a judgment, for the disorder in the international world, which our narrative regards as the sad conclusion, was not willed by God but is punishment for the sinful rebellion against God.¹⁹

Unlike all the progressively worsening sins committed by individuals in the past, this sin of rebellion is not countered by Yahweh's forgiveness. For von Rad, the Primeval History ends with the relationship between the people and God seemingly irreparably damaged; the reader's attention is now drawn to the opening of the Patriarchal History to one man and it is he and his story whom the reader now follows.

Von Rad is quite terse in his commentary on the Tower of Babel and, as such, the reasoning behind his argument is at times difficult to follow. He writes that the tower symbolizes the people's desire for fame: it is the tower in and of itself -- not its height -- that is at issue for von Rad. Neither can an assault on heaven be inferred as it would go beyond the confines of the text. Von Rad writes, one must:

observe a subtlety of the narrative in the fact that it does not give anything unprecedented as the motive for this building, but rather something that lies within the realm of the human possibility, namely, a combination of their energies on the one hand, and on the other the winning of fame, i.e., a naïve desire to be great.²⁰

This desire for fame constitutes a rebellion against God. Von Rad never indicates in what way the text reveals the people's desire for fame nor does he clarify why this desire would be offensive to Yahweh. Yet, von Rad clearly sees Yahweh's actions as punitive and, therefore, the actions of the people must be sinful. I would argue that von Rad relies too heavily on what he deems as the pattern of sin and forgiveness in Genesis 1-11 to

¹⁹ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972), 152.

²⁰ Ibid., 149.

explain this episode rather than a close reading of the text where the tower itself is a minor aspect, and where textual evidence of the people's desire for fame is absent.

Nahum Sarna also believes that there was a sin, namely of resisting Yahweh's commandment to 'fill' the earth. In his 1966 commentary on Genesis he writes:

man had fulfilled the part of the divine blessing – 'be fertile and increase' – but he had balked, apparently, at 'filling the earth.' The building project was thus a deliberate attempt to thwart the expressed will of God, something that would interfere with the unfolding of the divine scheme of history.²¹

He believes that confusing the languages was only a means to an end, the end being the spread of humanity over the earth.

Sarna denies the idea that the builders' sin could have been an attempt to storm heaven. As evidence against this notion he states that nowhere in Scripture is it ever mentioned that such a possibility physically existed. Sarna does not see this story as a universal one, but a story strictly concerning the Babylonians as told from an ancient Israelite perspective. He asserts that storming heaven would have been absurd to the Babylonians. Furthermore, he notes that the phrase "its top in the heavens" (וְרֵאשׁוֹ בַּשָּׁמַיִם) is found elsewhere in the Torah, namely Deut. 1:28 and 9:1, and both verses refer to great height. It is also, in fact, a common Babylonian phrase and thus its use in this episode, just as the details of the bricks, shows the writer's "intimate knowledge" of Babylonian culture.²²

Sarna draws the same conclusion for the builders' desire to make a name for themselves. This, as we have seen, is one of the reasons why some scholars, such as

²¹ Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 67.

²² *Ibid.*, 73.

Gunkel and Cassuto, believe that this story exhibits human pride. Sarna, however, believes it is yet another turn of phrase. On this note, he points out the fact that God's promise to make a name for Abram means that wanting a name cannot be sinful. Sarna goes on to show that Babylonian kings would often have their names inscribed in bricks on the foundation of towers so that they would be remembered as the king who erected this tower. One of the examples he cites is, "Nebuchadrezzar, who restored the very ziqqurat of which the Bible speaks, records in a commemorative inscription, 'the fortifications of Esagila and Babylon I strengthened, and make an everlasting name for my reign'."²³

Sarna believes the significance of the story is to be understood from the actions of the people of Babel, not their words. They have failed to fill the earth and it is this failure that prompts Yahweh's action to scatter the people. As we have seen, many scholars have argued that the people of Babel are guilty of pride (either by wanting a name or by building a high tower), guilty of an assault on heaven or guilty of neglecting to fill the earth (a commandment). Pride and intending to storm heaven are undeniably sinful. But for the idea that neglecting to fill the earth is to be regarded as a sin (as Sarna does), we must look at the intentions of the people. If they knew of the commandment, then the deliberate disobedience of it is sinful. However, if they were unaware of the edict, then how could they be guilty of sin?

Thus, the point of the matter lies in the intention, or knowledge, of the people. It is not recorded, for example, that the woman was told of the commandment against eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil yet she seems to know about it in her

²³ Ibid., 74.

conversation with the serpent, presumably told to her by the man. Furthermore, she was punished for her choice (indeed more harshly than the man who was given the commandment directly). Thus, first-hand knowledge is not necessary to be expected to follow God's commandments. Thus, were the people told to fill the earth (as were Adam, Eve, Noah and his family) through the generations, subsequent to Noah and his sons? The text simply does not provide an answer in regards to whether the people were aware of the commandment.

One should notice, however, Yahweh's reaction to the actions of the people of Babel. Does he react to their actions as if they were sinful? In fact, Yahweh's speech is ambiguous. There is no comment on the people's actions (sinful or otherwise), just a comment on their being 'one' and their future potential as unlimited. Being 'one' is not in itself morally wrong. As the text does not emphasize the intentions of the people, then I believe that an assumption is required. Most scholars assume an evil intent and thus deem their actions as sinful. Though I agree with Sarna's argument that the unity of humanity is a problem in Yahweh's eyes, I see their actions as, at best, unclear.

In his 1969 work, Terance Fretheim also details a pattern of sin, punishment and what he calls "mercy" or "blessing" throughout Genesis 1-11. He argues the Tower of Babel as a "recapitulation of some of the basic themes of the previous narratives of the Yahwist."²⁴ Just as Adam and Eve attempted to alter their 'creaturely' status by eating the fruit of knowledge to join the ranks of Yahweh, so the inhabitants of Babel try to alter their status by building the infamous tower. Fretheim essentially sees human

²⁴ Terance E. Fretheim, *Creation, Fall and Flood: Studies in Genesis 1-11* (Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), 123-124.

independence as the primary sin. He believes that the Yahwist is trying to show that “man cannot build a civilization whereby he can maintain his unity and make his name great if God is left out of the picture.”²⁵ Humanity must accept its created status, not try to build a tower that will reach the heavens, and not try to immortalize their name.

I do not believe that there is an attempt on the part of humanity to alter their place in the created order in Genesis 3 or the Tower of Babel. Also, a desire for a name points to a desire to be remembered more than it does a desire to be equated with Yahweh. Similarly, the narrative does not explicitly state why building the tower to reach the heavens expresses such desire to compete with Yahweh. The most significant point which shows that this interpretation is not justified by the text is Yahweh’s speech in reaction to the builders’ action. He comments on their unity and ever growing ingenuity. This does not point to an attempted advancement towards divinity, but merely an opposition to the divine will of spreading out.

J.P. Fokkelman’s 1975 analysis of Genesis 11:1-9 is arguably the most in depth in terms of structure. As a result of his exhaustive interpretation, he also believes that the builders of Babel were guilty of hubris and believes that not only the structure of the narrative points to this but also the context. He writes, “implicitly they want to penetrate the strictly divine and become divine themselves. What drives them is hubris.”²⁶ He maintains that the repetition of the words ‘name’ (שם) and ‘there’ (שם) emphasizes the ‘s-m’ sound which brings the word ‘heavens’ (שמים) to the fore. This shows that humanity is not satisfied with the earth and has its eye on the heavens.

²⁵ Ibid., 126.

²⁶ J. P Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis*, 2d ed. (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 17.

The word 'tower' (מגדל), he asserts, also points to this same conclusion in that it would bring the word 'great' (גדל) to mind and shows that humanity yearns for greatness. Fokkelman writes, "the very function of this word is to reveal the action and intentions of the people as *hubris*."²⁷ The parallel and concentric structures that he outlines signify that the punishment humanity receives is proportionate to its crime. In other words, because humanity fears being scattered, that *are* scattered, Yahweh does precisely what the people fear, namely, he scatters them. Yahweh saw unity of place and language as the source of their power. This is why humanity wanted to remain united and why Yahweh meted the punishment he did.

It is very difficult to argue with Fokkelman. His arguments draw you in and his findings seem to fit the text. However, upon closer examination, there is a flaw between steps and it becomes clear that one argument does not lead to the next. He emphasizes the repetition of the words 'name' (שם) and 'there' (שם), but the sole purpose of the pattern is to draw attention to the word 'heavens' (שמים). In turn, 'heavens' is so pregnant with meaning that humanity's intentions are found in this single word; indeed, humanity's hubris is hiding in this word. Though, when all is said and done, this argument, i.e., that 'the heavens' refer to pride or that the intent to storm the divine realm, is not new. As I have pointed out above, the text simply does not justify such an interpretation.²⁸

In the 1970s Claus Westermann writes that the narrative contains three motifs that were independent of each other in the pre-written stage. The three motifs are: the tower

²⁷ Ibid., 20.

²⁸ See sections on Kugel (below) and Gunkel (above). Even Sarna writes that nowhere in Scripture is such a notion as storming heaven mentioned, let alone conceived of as physically possible. Also, there are two instances when 'top of the heavens' is used, Deut. 1:28 and 9:1 in both cases they simply refer to great height. Thus the idiom referring to pride is unlikely. Sarna, *Understanding*, 73.

reaching the heavens; the dispersal of humanity; and the confusion of languages. According to Westermann, the narrative shows evidence of the individual nature of these motifs, especially in 11:7-8. In 11:7, Yahweh decides to confuse the language of the people, but the action executed in 11:8 is the dispersal of humanity. This shows that the two unrelated motifs were incorporated into a single narrative. Further evidence of the separate motifs concerns the tower. In 11:4-5, the tower is the dominant feature, but it then fades into the background never, in fact, to be mentioned again. He writes, "it is very striking that God's decision and its execution has no relation at all to the tower."²⁹ Though once independent, these three motifs have coalesced and, by the written stage, they had dissolved into the unity of the tower narrative. Westermann writes:

one must certainly agree with H. Gunkel and others that 11:1-9 was not shaped in a single mold and that it shows clear signs of gradual growth. However, the obvious unity of the narrative in its present form permits the conclusion that the three motifs came together and developed in the pre-literary stage.³⁰

The original purposes of the dispersal and confusion motifs were etiological. The tower motif, on the other hand, originally pointed to the theme that:

humans were no longer satisfied with the limited state of their existence, but wanted to force their way into the realm of the gods or God. This was worked over and adapted in a later stage but in such a way as to preserve the basic motif, that of people overstepping their limits.³¹

Therefore, according to Westermann, the narrative we have today deals with humanity, as Fretheim put it, trying to alter their created status. There is no discussion of pride or, in fact, sin of any kind in Westermann's commentary; rather the Tower of Babel portrays humanity striving to move beyond what it is, perhaps to the level of divinity.

²⁹ Westermann, *Genesis*, 536.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 537.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 552.

Significantly, Westermann does not believe that the redactor, J, viewed this negatively. Westermann writes, “[J] has set out the significance of this drive in such a way that it is not as such reprehensible or directly against God, but appears as something of an ambitious aspiration that belongs to human beings.”³² Though the people’s desire to go beyond their ‘created limits’ is not hostile or sinful, it is nonetheless dangerous and the redactor is attempting to show the error of such an ambition. Rather, humanity must remain within the level of creation in which it was placed. Yahweh’s action, therefore, is preventive. For Westermann, Yahweh’s desire to divert humanity from this danger is apparent in verse 11:6 in which Yahweh sees the “danger that has its seeds in these beginnings.”³³ It is therefore this negative interpretative of Yahweh’s words where I disagree with Westermann opting rather for a positive reading of what Yahweh deems the future of humanity to comprise.

In the 1980s, Louis Mauldin, writing, also sketches a pattern of sin, punishment and grace throughout Genesis 1-11 very similar to that of von Rad. He believes that the sin at Babel was that they wanted “to become as God by subjectively making a name, and thus defining their own essence.”³⁴ If humanity tries to define itself independently of God, the Creator responds by scattering them over the face of the earth. Mauldin continues, “surely such isolation, confusion, and lack of community are the most severe of punishments.”³⁵ The Babylonians’ sin and punishment is followed by forgiveness. Though Mauldin’s thematic argument is similar to von Rad’s insofar as they both outline

³² Ibid., 555.

³³ Ibid., 555.

³⁴ Louis Mauldin, “Singularity and a Pattern of Sin, Punishment, and Forgiveness,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 10 (1983): 48.

³⁵ Ibid., 49.

a pattern of sin and punishment, Mauldin believes that there is a sign of grace in the tower episode. Maudlin sees the scattering itself is redemptive for it “prevented man from continuing the vain attempt to become as God.”³⁶ God’s forgiveness is further evident by the genealogy that follows the incident at Babel in which Abram is introduced.

There are two points on which I disagree with Mauldin. First, there is no textual evidence that making a name for oneself automatically makes one independent of God. That name could be anything, including for example ‘God’s beloved’, a name which obviously does not distinguish one from the deity. I do believe that they see themselves as independent of Yahweh but that is due to the fact that they are the first ones in Genesis who do not talk to or about God. Their desire for a name does not reflect their independence of God; it is their silence that does.

Secondly, this desire does not constitute a sin. If making a name for oneself is in no way a declaration of their independence of God, the desire itself cannot be sinful. Nowhere in the Primeval History does Yahweh demand that humanity rely on him. In the narrative thus far, he has never demanded anyone’s worship or attention, and therefore a group wanting a name would not cause his wrath.³⁷ He has, of course, made commandments, the first dealing with the injunction to “be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth” (repeated to several individuals), and the second to refrain from eating of a particular tree, but neither commandment was properly obeyed. There were, however, no instances when he demanded recognition.

³⁶ Ibid., 49.

³⁷ The two instances of sacrifice, first by the brothers Cain and Abel and secondly by Noah were not divinely decreed but rather the result of human perceptions of divine expectations.

Thus, if there is no sin, there can be no punishment. Maudlin bases his reading on “let us make for ourselves a name” (וַנַּעֲשֶׂה-לָנוּ שֵׁם) with the emphasis on “name” (שֵׁם). The thrust of the narrative, as I shall demonstrate in chapter 3, indicates more that the words ‘us,’ ‘ourselves,’ and ‘one’ are the ones to be emphasized. It is not ‘name’ (as a reflection of independence) that Yahweh remarks on upon descending to earth, but the fact that the people are “one” (אֶחָד). God’s motivation for scattering the people lies behind this fact of ‘oneness.’ It is not punishment so much as it is forced submission to his will. Maudlin, in his attempt to implement his pattern of sin, punishment and forgiveness, neglects to see whether or not the pattern truly fits the text.

James Kugel’s 1998 interpretation goes one step further than the tower exhibiting excessive pride. He maintains that the purpose of the tower is to facilitate an assault on heaven and Yahweh himself. Although the biblical version of the text never mentions the wish of the builders to ascend to heaven, he cites several ancient texts where it is explicitly stated that humanity intends to storm the divine realm. Kugel cites numerous ancient texts written or compiled ranging from the first century B.C.E. to the 5th century C.E. He argues that these texts are biblical interpretations and, as such, they are able to provide insight into how biblical texts were viewed at the time. Kugel writes that his purpose is “to show how the Bible was interpreted in ancient times and what conclusions individual interpreters drew about the meaning of individual texts.”³⁸ To shed light on Genesis 11:1-9, he cites *Jubilees*, *Sibylline Oracles*, *3 Baruch*, *Sanhedrin* (Babylonian

³⁸ James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible As It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 37.

Talmud). Philo's *Questions and Answers*, *Targum Neophyti*, Ephraem's *Nisibene Hymns* and *Day of Atonement 'Abodah*.³⁹

Jubilees, a retelling of Genesis, is thought to have been written around 150 B.C.E. though some, including Kugel, maintain that it was written closer to 200 B.C.E. The author's intention was to clarify the commandments which were hidden within the stories of Genesis. The *Sibylline Oracles* is a collection of poetic writings all ascribed to a sibyl compiled from the 2nd century B.C.E. to the Middle Ages. *3 Baruch* was written between the late 1st century and 2nd century C.E. The Babylonian Talmud is a body of writings compiled in the 5th or 6th century C.E. Philo was a Greek-speaking Jew who lived approximately the same time as Jesus; he believed in an allegorical reading of the Bible. *Targum* is the name of the Aramaic translation of the Bible. It includes exegetical expansions and is thought to have been written around the early 2nd century C.E. Kugel writes of Ephraem (309-373 C.E.) who wrote the *Nisibene Hymns*, "his writings contain numerous parallels to, and developments of, earlier Jewish motifs."⁴⁰ Lastly, the *Day of Atonement 'Abodah* is the latest of all these texts, dated later than the 5th century C.E. Kugel argues that since all of the texts have a similar interpretation of the biblical narrative, then the overall analysis that they provide must be an accurate one.

Jubilees 10:19 and *Sibylline Oracles* 3:99-100 both discuss simply going up to heaven without any specific objective mentioned; *3 Baruch* 3:7-8 relates how the builders of the tower want to pierce the heavens in order to determine what material it is composed of; and *b. Sanhedrin* 109a mentions striking the heavens to cause water to flow. As we

³⁹ Ibid., 228-9.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 915.

can see, a clear connection between these texts and our narrative seems to be lacking as the biblical version never reveals the wish of the builders to ascend to heaven. More importantly, humanity in these four texts do not have hostile intentions towards heaven or Yahweh which is of course what Kugel argues is the proper interpretation of the narrative.

The last four texts, *Questions and Answers*, *Targum Neophyti*, *Nisibene Hymns* and *Abodah*, all detail a tower constructed in order to facilitate an assault on heaven. These texts make clear the intentions of the people, which not only disambiguates Yahweh's actions but also justifies the punishment. Thus, the question becomes: is there a connection between Genesis and these texts (or the traditions behind them) and if so, can we therefore assume comparable contexts? In other words, do these texts truly clarify the biblical narrative as Kugel claims? The Torah is considered to have been in written form by Ezra's time in the 5th century B.C.E. but the traditions would have been in existence for centuries beforehand.⁴¹ Of these four texts which clearly state the hostile intentions of humanity towards the deity, Philo's *Questions and Answers* is the closest in age being written four centuries after the final redaction of the Torah; *Abodah*, the oldest of these texts, was written about a 1,000 years after the Torah was in its final form. Therefore, do these texts truly reveal the inner meaning of the biblical narrative, or did the assault-on-heaven interpretation develop centuries later to be first recorded by Philo? I agree with Cassuto who writes, "the later Haggadah enlarged the content of the story and depicted an

⁴¹ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1992), 10. For the dating of the Torah, see both Skinner's and Gunkel's introductory sections in their commentaries on Genesis.

attempt by human beings to rise in actual revolt against the Lord and storm heaven, but this does not represent the real meaning of the text.”⁴²

Moreover, if storming the heavens is what is at issue, why is the narrative not more explicit? If such an inference is to be drawn by the idea of building a tower up to heaven, then why did the other texts state the builders’ intention directly? Also, if a war against Yahweh was the intention, is the punishment sufficient? Would Yahweh merely have scattered the people if they were planning to attack him? After all, Yahweh destroyed the world and all living things not lucky enough to be granted access to the ark due to systemic human violence. Would Yahweh here simply react to people intent on attacking him with dispersion? Lastly, would an account dealing with such hostility on the part of humanity be completely lacking in all tell tale terms (evil, corrupt, violent)? It would seem that such a maximized reading of the tower narrative is inappropriate. As a result, it would seem that relying on the text as it stands is the best course of action. Without the context added by the other sources, I would suggest that the biblical version does not warrant such an interpretation.

In the same year, Severino Croatto comes to the same conclusion as Fretheim, i.e. that humanity was punished for its attempt to become like God. Croatto, as Fretheim, sees the Tower of Babel as comparable to Genesis 3 and, in both cases, Yahweh’s actions were not only punitive but also preventive. In Adam and Eve’s case, the couple was exiled from Eden in order to prevent them from adding immortality to the omniscience they acquired by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree. Croatto argues that in the Tower of Babel narrative humanity is capable of becoming like God, as evidenced by Yahweh’s

⁴² Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 225.

words in 11:6. Croatto maintains that Yahweh feared what humanity was capable of and, though the narrative does not outline what these capabilities may be, the biblical author certainly had an exact idea of what is meant by Yahweh's words. Croatto describes it as "the infinity of power" and compares it to how Job describes Yahweh.⁴³

Leaving aside Croatto's rather naïve understanding of authorial intention here (see chapter 2 below), he tends to anthropomorphize the deity far too much. Though Yahweh is often portrayed as anthropomorphic (walking in the garden, talking with various people, feeling sorrow) one would be hard-pressed to find evidence that Yahweh is fearful. To ascribe fear to Yahweh is going beyond the confines of the text. If Yahweh had reason to fear what humanity might become, he might not have planted the tree of knowledge. It is extremely difficult to believe that the ancient Israelites entertained the notion that Yahweh, the creator of the cosmos no less, was prone to attack or even accessible to humans without his knowledge or permission. Yahweh's statement that 'now nothing will be impossible for them' does not suggest attaining divine status, but that all that humanity is capable of is already in sight. If more were implied, then scattering the population would not have been sufficient in deterring this newly attained power. In Genesis 3, Yahweh cuts off any possibility that humanity could have access to the tree of life and further alter their created status. Here, however, he merely scatters the people. This of course leaves room for unity to prevail again and for 'infinite power' to be once more at hand. Suffice it to say, Yahweh's words simply do not suggest the fear that

⁴³ J. Severino Croatto, "A Reading of the Story of the Tower of Babel from the Perspective of Non-Identity: Genesis 11:1-9 in the Context of Its Production," in *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, eds. Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 213.

Croatto reads in them. If there were an anthropomorphic emotion emanating from the words, it would be Yahweh's annoyance at humanity's ubiquitous opposition to following his will of separation.

Aron Pinker is among the small minority of scholars who believe that the people of Babel have not committed a sin. In 1999, he maintains that the key to understanding the narrative lies in God's speech. Pinker sees the story of the Tower of Babel in a positive light and essentially says that it is often human nature to automatically see things from a negative point of view. He asks that if the traditional explanations for the dispersal (pride or resistance to filling the earth) were actually committed, sins that are considered grave, then why was the punishment so mild? Even though the builders' did fear this outcome, it is still not a harsh reprimand. His view is that 11:6 is to be taken as evidence of God's pleasure over the accomplishments of humanity. He writes, "greatly pleased, God then stops the building of the city, and disperses them to use their skills to build more cities, to fill His world with people and civilization."⁴⁴ I will also argue for a positive interpretation in the final chapter.

Johnson Lim, like Sarna, believes that the sin of the people lies in their deliberate rebellion against the divine mandate to fill the earth. In his 2002 work, Lim sees their unity as power and their nature, as revealed throughout Genesis 1-11, as inherently sinful. He believes that "God's statement in 11:6 may allude to Gen. 6:5 concerning the depravity of the human heart."⁴⁵ As such, Yahweh's action was preventive, to stop

⁴⁴ Aron Pinker, "The Tower of Babel: God's Towering Pride," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 27 (1999): 97.

⁴⁵ Johnson Lim, *Grace in the Midst of Judgment: Grappling with Genesis 1-11* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 182.

humanity from doing something disastrous. Lim, like von Rad, Fretheim, and Mauldin, maintains that there is a pattern of sin and grace/forgiveness depicted in the Primeval History.⁴⁶ Confusing the language of the people and scattering them across the earth is, in Lim's view, an act of grace as Yahweh could just as easily have destroyed them. Lim specifies their sin as:

an attempt to secure their own future in isolation from the world, that inward concern for self preservation places the rest of creation at risk. This is also contrary to and a direct challenge to God's commandment to fill and populate the earth.⁴⁷

Whereas other scholars have chosen one particular deed as sinful (tower, name, or defiance), Lim believes them to be guilty of all of the above; their tower exhibits rivalry, their desire for a name reveals hubris, and their unity exposes their contempt of the commandment to fill the earth.

Lim points out the way in which the author has emphasized the unity of the people through repetition, and maintains that the purpose of this repetition is to show their disobedience.⁴⁸ The tower and the people's desire for a name add to the sin of disobedience. The tower expresses a direct challenge to the deity and the desire for a name is evidence of hubris as it is an "attempt to usurp God's place."⁴⁹ Lim points out that though they wanted a name, their desire would remain unfulfilled which is seen in

⁴⁶ All the scholars noted believe the sin depicted in the Tower of Babel episode is matched by grace/forgiveness except for von Rad who believes one must wait for the beginning of the Patriarchal History and the introduction of Abram for evidence of the next instance of divine grace.

⁴⁷ Lim, *Grace*, 183.

⁴⁸ As I will discuss in chapter three, the word 'one' is repeated four times, the phrase 'all the earth' appears five times, a repetition which emphasizes the unity of the people.

⁴⁹ Lim, *Grace*, 185.

contrast to the narrative that immediately follows where Yahweh promises to make a name for Abram.⁵⁰

Lim also discusses the verbal linkages between this episode and the creation narrative. The terms 'man' (אדם), 'heavens' (שמים) and 'one' (אחת / אחד) appear in both as well as the thematic connection where the commandment to fill the earth appears in the creation narrative and its fulfillment occurs in the present pericope. The verbal link to Eve is arguably stronger with seven words in common including 'find', 'east', 'see', 'head', 'build', 'make', and 'name'. However, Lim neglects to draw any conclusions for these similarities between biblical narratives, merely noting the commonalities.⁵¹

Though I share Lim's belief that the reason behind Yahweh's action against the people of Babel is to disrupt their unity, I do not see their actions as sinful, as a deliberate attempt to impede Yahweh's will of separation as discussed above. He states that their unity amounts to self-preservation and it puts the rest of creation at risk. For self-preservation to be a negative attribute, the self-preservation must be at the expense of others. But the people of Babel constitute the entire population of the world. The biblical narrative's language emphasizes the universality of the people, therefore there is no one else to harm by such preservation. As stated when discussing Sarna above, the intentions of the people do not seem to harbour any "flagrant rebellion"⁵² as Lim calls it. Rather, they seem unaware of any divine mandate and as such cannot be guilty of any deliberate act of rebellion.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 185.

⁵¹ Other verbal links between the Tower and creation narratives will be brought up by Kikawada who presents a compelling argument. In chapter three I will similarly point out verbal links between the Tower and garden narratives.

⁵² Ibid., 184.

From this brief analysis of critical research on Genesis 11:1-9, there remains many unanswered questions. Gunkel and Skinner, in seeing the text as an amalgam of two distinct stories, fail to see the unity of the text which I believe is integral to its meaning. Cassuto, though he gains many insights into the narrative through a close reading, concludes that the narrative refers to Babylonians because of the details of the construction techniques along with the name 'Babel' related in 11:9. As such, he reads a context of pride which does not adequately address the theme of the pericope. Von Rad, Sarna and Lim all see the sin of the builders as resistance to divine will. Since the text never reveals whether or not the people of Babel knew of the commandment to fill the earth, this knowledge must be assumed if they are to be deemed guilty of disobedience. Since the actions of the people seem to lack any rebellious nature, and the fact that Yahweh's reaction which correspondingly seems to lack any sign of rebuke, I maintain that the people of Babel had no knowledge of any commandment.

Fretheim and Croatto both go beyond the confines of the text with their interpretations. Fretheim, who maintains that humanity is trying to alter its created status and Croatto who believes that Yahweh's actions are driven by fear of humanity's ultimate achievements neither have any textual evidence to support their theories. Maudlin, who details a pattern of sin and punishment throughout Genesis 1-11, places the Tower of Babel as its denouement. As each sin depicted in Genesis 1-11 worsens progressively, then the sin as well as the punishment in the Tower of Babel must be the height of human sin. Yet Maudlin fails to show how the so-called sin could be more severe than that committed by the generation of the flood, or how the people being scattered could be worse than the flood. Kugel and Fokkelman both rely too heavily on the word 'heavens.'

For them, it is this word alone that clarifies the meaning of the text. For Kugel, 'heavens' shows humanity's forthcoming assault and, for Fokkelman, 'heavens' exhibits pride.

Thus, it is evident that most scholars see the meaning of the text as lying in one word or phrase. The builders wanting a 'name' thus points to pride; building the tower to the 'top of the heavens' refers to an assault on the divine realm or again to pride. But meaning cannot be so narrow. There are no other indications in the narrative that they were sinful, whether the sin lies in pride or resistance to filling the earth. There is certainly no textual evidence for an assault on heaven. The entire pericope, as well as its place within Genesis, must be considered in order to ascertain the meaning. As I shall endeavour to show, a close contextual reading of Genesis 1-11 will emphasize humanity's unity through both their speech and actions. This kind of "literary" reading, one which takes into account the larger context of the narrative, will be the subjects of chapters 3 and 4. For the present, however, I must first explain what is meant by a "literary" reading. This will be the subject of chapter 2.

Chapter 2 - Methodology

In order to avoid fragmenting the text as has been so often the case in studies of Genesis 1-11, I will interpret the text as a unified whole by employing a literary methodology. Literary criticism is a fairly recent methodology in biblical studies. Although there were some literary studies in the 1960s (James Muilenberg, E. M. Good), and in the 1970s (J. P. Fokkelman, David Gunn, David Clines), it did not receive significant attention until the 1980s. During this decade, many scholars, including Lyle Eslinger, David Jobling, Robert Alter and Shimon Bar-Efrat, applied this method to the Bible and developed some fascinating insights into the text. Literary criticism has now gained some distinction in biblical studies and many scholars have shown that it is not only a worthy method of interpretation, but that it has much to offer the field of biblical studies. Regarding the future of the methodology, Gunn wrote:

There are many of us who look forward to the introductory textbook which radically reverses the present priority and consistently (and logically) places literary questions – which might include, in the case of narrative texts, attention to structure, plot, informational gaps, redundancy, allusion, metaphor, modes of speech, point of view, irony – ahead of questions of history and development.⁵³

Though literary criticism has not gained primacy over historical criticism at this point, there certainly has been an influx of books in the past decade on the subject which seems to be an indication of the enormous interest in literary studies of the Bible.

Literary critics are concerned mainly with the unity of the text as it stands, and pay close attention to its “literary” features; questions concerning authorship, historical

⁵³ David M. Gunn, “New Directions in the Study of Biblical Hebrew Narrative,” in *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism*, ed. Paul R. House, (Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 413.

background or sources are deemed less important to the overall meaning of the narrative. With this method, one analyzes biblical narrative as one would another piece of literature.⁵⁴ As Robert Alter writes, we must “attend more finely to the complex, tersely expressive details of the biblical text.”⁵⁵ Thus one closely examines the text for patterns including structure, alliteration and repetition.⁵⁶

Paul House writes that literary criticism arose out of the necessity for a new way to examine biblical narratives. For House, the historical-critical method can only go so far in analyzing the literary problems in the text, and that further historical analysis would only reveal more of the same. While this argument is probably overstated, House does make a good point that a historical analysis often misses subtle nuances of meaning; he writes, “an overemphasis on historical detail cost readers a proper understanding of plot, theme, and character.”⁵⁷ By searching for what the Bible can illuminate about the history of the period through historical analysis, its narrative meaning could be overlooked. Similarly, source criticism can “divide and atomize texts... [but such analysis]

⁵⁴ Many literary scholars, such as Alter, Barton, Clines, Gunn, and Fewell have made strong advances in understanding the narrative art of the Bible. See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1981); Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Georgia: Almond Press, 1989); John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1984); David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative Art in the Hebrew Bible* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993); David J.A. Clines, “Story and Poem: The Old Testament as Literature and as Scripture,” in *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism*, ed. Paul R. House (Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 25-38.

⁵⁵ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1981), 20.

⁵⁶ James Muilenburg, an early literary critic, wrote, “a responsible and proper articulation of the words in their linguistic patterns and in their precise formulations will reveal to us the texture and fabric and the writer’s thought, not only what it is that he thinks, but as he thinks it.” James Muilenburg, “Form Criticism and Beyond,” in *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism*, ed. Paul R. House (Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 56.

⁵⁷ Paul R. House, “The Rise and Current Status of Literary Criticism of the Old Testament,” in *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism*, ed. Paul R. House (Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 3.

obscure[s] the unity of large and small texts alike."⁵⁸ Literary criticism, on the other hand, examines the text in its final form. "What a literary approach offers," writes Kim Ian Parker:

is a way in which the integrity of the narrative can be preserved and understanding can be attained without recourse to textual dissection. Contradictions and inconsistencies are viewed as part of a deliberate narrative strategy rather than as "inelegance" on the part of the authors.⁵⁹

Therefore, not only is the structure of a pericope integral to meaning, but each sentence and indeed even the author's word choice plays a role in the final form of the biblical narrative adding to or even creating context. As Shimon Bar Efrat writes, "if a sentence were to be modified slightly, for example, by using a synonym, by changing a grammatical form or by altering the order of the words, the style (and with it the precise meaning) would be affected."⁶⁰ Thus, when analyzing a text using this methodology, every detail is considered significant and contributes to the meaning of the narrative as a unit.

Parker writes that the shift from historical criticism to literary criticism is "to shift the emphasis from the past (what the text might have meant to the original audience or author/editor) to the present (what the text means to the reader today)."⁶¹ It is very difficult, if not impossible, to know what the author's intentions were. This is compounded by the fact that millennia have passed since the author's death creating not only a temporal chasm but a cultural one as well. Literary criticism, therefore, focuses on

⁵⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁹ Kim Ian Parker, *Wisdom and Law in the Reign of Solomon* (Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 21.

⁶⁰ Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Georgia: Almond Press, 1989), 198.

⁶¹ Parker, *Wisdom*, 15.

the text as it stands today, rather than delving into the ancient past. When readers find texts, especially the Bible, difficult to understand it may not necessarily be due to the incoherence or fragmentary nature of the text but the lack of the imagination of the reader.⁶² Therefore, "the incoherence detected in the narrative by historical-critical scholarship is not the failure of the text to explain the historical realities adequately, but, rather, the failure of the interpreter to explain the subtleties and nuances of the text."⁶³

How, then, do we discover the meaning of the text? Parker maintains, "there is no definitive correspondence between what the writer intends and what the finished product turns out to be. Meaning is best determined by the word themselves, rather than by authorial intention."⁶⁴ It is, then, the reader who sheds light on the meaning of the text. In order to ascertain this meaning, the reader must pay close attention to the details of the text. The reader must make his or her interpretation fit these details rather than making the text fit any preconceived notion. Readerly bias is expected but the reader must control this and remain open-minded until the text has been read and all the details revealed before a conclusive analysis can be reached. As Parker writes, "a "valid" interpretation is the result of the interpreter's ability to construct a hypothesis that accounts for the greatest amount of detail in the narrative unit."⁶⁵

Many literary critics, including J. P. Fokkelman, Yairah Amit, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan and Edgar McKnight discuss the role of the reader in interpretation. In Fokkelman's view, the text only comes alive when it is in the hands of a reader.

⁶² Many historical critics, beginning with Gunkel, view the Bible as fragmentary.

⁶³ Parker, *Wisdom*, 20.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

Fokkelman maintains that the biblical authors knew that their texts would outlive them and they, therefore, made the texts capable of standing on their own. Fokkelman writes, "as products of a deliberate and meticulous designing intelligence they have been crafted to speak for themselves, provided there is a competent reader listening closely. They are, after some training on our part, extremely able to reveal and explain themselves."⁶⁶ Authors, therefore, fortified their texts with clues requiring nothing more than an attentive reader to decipher them and reveal its meaning.

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan also gives a detailed discussion of the text and reader. Her view of the text, similar to Fokkelman, is that it:

develops in the reader a specific competence needed to come to grips with it, often inducing him to change his previous conceptions and modify his outlook. The reader is thus both an image of a certain competence brought to the text and a structuring of such a competence within the text.⁶⁷

Rimmon-Kenan notes how the text reveals its story in a linear fashion therefore controlling what information the reader knows at each point in the progression of the story. The tendency for the reader to cling to the details that are revealed at the beginning of the text she calls the 'primacy effect.' She writes, "texts can encourage the reader's tendency to comply with the primacy effect by constantly reinforcing the initial impressions, but on the whole they induce the reader to modify or replace the original conjectures."⁶⁸ Since the reader cannot understand the text until the entire text has been read, readers can therefore hold on to certain misconceptions throughout the text only to

⁶⁶ J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Ineke Smit (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 21.

⁶⁷ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (New York: Methuen, 1983), 118.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

be given vital information at the end which reverses the text's meaning completely. This is a way for a text, or perhaps the narrator, to develop suspense and dramatic irony. The 'recency effect,' on the other hand, "encourages the reader to assimilate all previous information to the item presented last."⁶⁹ This way, the reader constantly alters his or her notions of the meaning of the text, and changing the meaning to fit the latest detail it reveals. Rimmon-Kenan's view of the text and reader shows the intricate relationship between the two, showing a reciprocity that is integral in not only to the reading process but, more importantly, in determining the meaning of the text. She concludes by writing:

From this perspective, reading can be seen as a continuous process of forming hypotheses, reinforcing them, developing them, modifying them, and sometimes replacing them by others or dropping them altogether. It should be noted, however, that even rejected hypotheses may continue exercising some influence on the reader's comprehension.⁷⁰

Thus, we can see that reading is far from a passive activity. The reader is responsible for recognizing the details provided by the text, interpreting them correctly, and when necessary, altering their notions when the text shows them to be premature.

Fokkelman believes that the issues being focused on in the past two centuries, including questions regarding authorial intention and sources, were being "asked by Bible scholars who had no idea of the unique mode of being of the literary text, and who never got around to training themselves in the conventions and rules of the texts themselves."⁷¹ For literary critics who analyze the text as literary art, these conventions and rules teach the reader how to discover meaning in the text. Without this knowledge, only the surface of the text will be visible.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 120.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 121.

⁷¹ Fokkelman, *Reading*, 26.

To delve below the surface, we must examine the literary devices used by the biblical authors, devices which are still used to this day. These devices include character, narrator, language, and plot. I will examine each aspect in turn and show their relevance to the Tower of Babel narrative. I will discuss the distinction between flat and round characters and the way in which characterization is revealed, i.e. either directly (when the narrator relates the necessary information about a character) or indirectly (by way of action or speech). Furthermore, I will examine the narrator in terms of reliability or unreliability as well as his neutrality. I will study language through the repetition of words and sounds. Lastly, I will also look at the way in which plot patterns present themselves (chiastic or concentric structures) which will foreground certain aspects of the narrative that the narrator wants to emphasize.

Character

The notion of examining characters within biblical narrative was perhaps the most difficult aspect for literary critics to advance. As David Gunn and Danna Fewell point out, there had been an uneasiness regarding biblical characters whose behaviour could be scrutinized. The view “that biblical literature is unsophisticated and thus unconcerned with the intricacies of human thought and behavior” has only within the last few decades begun to be seen as inadequate.⁷² Thus, the behaviour, intentions, and motivations of characters are now being examined and new meanings of biblical narratives are being revealed.

⁷² David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993), 48.

Once the view of characters as mere types whose sole purpose is to help progress the plot is abandoned, one can then analyze the behaviour of certain characters to reveal their intentions. Even the intentions of God can be examined. As the Bible has always had the authority of sacred writings, the idea of examining the behaviour of Yahweh, as one would examine a character in literature was, until recent times, largely ignored. As Fewell and Gunn remark, Yahweh was deemed a type, as were the other characters, and he was defined as strictly good and just. They write:

Thoughts, feelings, and actions that appear to conflict with such expectations (jealousy, anger, violence, favouritism, change of mind, lack of knowledge, or failure to anticipate developments) are then either ignored or rationalized as good, just, etc., or these values are redefined to fit the behavior of the divinity.⁷³

Thus, for example, we can only speculate as to why Yahweh planted a tree of knowledge of good and evil only to forbid the only inhabitants of Eden to eat of it. Was it a test to gauge the obedience of the man and woman, or of human nature in general? As Gunn and Fewell write, "why [did] the woman in the garden [pick] the fruit and why [did] the man [stand] passively by while she did it?"⁷⁴ Was her intent to merely gain knowledge, or did she aspire for something greater, divinity perhaps?

In order to more easily examine characters, they are generally categorized as "flat" or "round." E.M. Forster is one of the earliest literary scholars who defines these two categories. He writes that flat characters "are constructed round a single idea or quality.... The really flat character can be expressed in one sentence."⁷⁵ These characters do not develop and are generally in a peripheral role. Though the plot does not revolve

⁷³ Ibid., 49.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 50.

⁷⁵ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel and Related Writings*, 2d ed. (London: Edward Arnold Ltd, 1974), 47.

around these characters, their role can range from minor to vital. Gunn and Fewell write that, "God, for example, is a flat character in many biblical stories. Defined often by a single or few traits (for example, steadfast, merciful, and concerned for justice), God may none the less participate decisively in the story."⁷⁶

In the tower narrative, the people are, collectively, a single, flat character. Not one person stands out in the text; rather they are seen as a single whole. Their speech, a topic which will be discussed in chapter four, indicates that they are 'one,' as does the repetition of the word always referring to the people. As Forster defines the 'really' flat character as being summed up in one sentence, the people's mantra, or defining sentence, would be, 'we are one community and we want to remain as such.' Perhaps the idea of strength in numbers is at play here. They fear being scattered but we can only speculate as to why. Like all flat characters, they are not given the emotional range of round characters. Even though the builders of the tower are flat characters, they are still the main, if not only, concern of the reader as will be discussed below.

Round characters are the main actors of the story. These characters have many traits and are capable of change. Forster relates round characters to real people; they are convincing as characters with realistic motivations and emotions. Bar-Efrat believes that a character in a short narrative can be defined by one action, for example Cain can be defined as a murderer because "if the author had wanted us to see [him] in a different light we would have been told about other (or additional) things [he] did."⁷⁷ Gunn and

⁷⁶ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 75.

⁷⁷ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 80

Fewell, however, see Cain as a round character exhibiting complex characteristics. They wrote:

he has a family. He builds the first city. He is the father of society and culture. Cain actually becomes the epitome of a person who is rejected by God, who makes the terrible mistake of taking out his frustration on a fellow human being, and who, despite his alienation, makes a new start with considerable success.⁷⁸

Gunn and Fewell maintain that it is often tradition that links characters with one single trait, like Cain to murder and Job to patience, rather than a close reading of the text.

It is clear that in Genesis 1-11 the character of Yahweh is round. Amit furthers the characterization of God by describing him as either intervening or observing. God goes back and forth between the two being an intervener in Genesis 1-11, Exodus and Numbers but much more of an observer in Genesis 37-50 and 2 Samuel 9-20.⁷⁹ She states that when God plays an active role in the text, the human characters are generally flat and "when God is portrayed as distant, there seems to be greater scope, or living space, for human motives and their complexities."⁸⁰ This theory certainly holds true for the Tower of Babel where the people are indeed flat, lacking expressed motivations for their actions; their characters even lack personal distinctiveness as they are portrayed as a unified group.

As mentioned above, however, it is the people who are the main focus of the text. Amit details four criteria which help delineate the leading figure of a story. These are: "one, the focus of interest; two, quantitative; three, structural; and four, thematic."⁸¹ As

⁷⁸ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 77-78.

⁷⁹ Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, trans. Yael Lotan (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 83.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 84.

⁸¹ Ibid., 88.

stated, it is the situation of the people with which the reader is concerned. It is their story, their plight that engages the reader. We wonder why they fear separation and what caused Yahweh to confuse and separate them. Quantitatively, the people feature in each of the nine verses. The first four deal with the people as they settle and build a community, the last four with Yahweh's reaction to what they have built and the consequences thereof. The fifth verse can be analyzed in terms of the structural criterion: this is the pivotal verse and structurally the focus of the text. Here, where Yahweh descends, the reader first gets an indication that the actions of the people go against God's desire for diversity. Lastly, thematically speaking, it is clear that the people are the focus of the text.

Bar-Efrat explains that there are two ways in which a character's moral nature is portrayed: direct characterization and indirect characterization.⁸² Direct characterization occurs when the narrator or another character communicates their judgment of the character in question. However, reliability is a factor here. The reliability of the narrator, which will be discussed below, is for the most part unquestioned. When Yahweh evaluates a character, the evaluation, like that of the narrator, is completely accurate.⁸³ However, when one character evaluates another, the accuracy of the characterization must be corroborated, usually by the character's own actions. At times, when one character evaluates another, what they say may reveal more about the speaker than about those of which they speak. Lastly, statements made regarding a character's own personality are also not always reliable. Bar-Efrat uses the example of Cain who, when asked by God

⁸² Other traits dealing with personality can also be depicted, but characterization is generally a question of morality.

⁸³ See Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 154.

about the whereabouts of his brother Abel, is “clearly evasive.”⁸⁴ Direct characterization is, however, uncommon and the reader is often expected to draw his/her own conclusions about certain characters based on indirect characterization.

Indirect characterization, the more common means of relaying the nature of characters, is related either by speech or action. A character’s speech can show them as good or wise and can reveal emotions such as grief and anger.⁸⁵ What characters say is, however, not always straightforward and interpretation is required in these instances. For example, it was previously mentioned that, according to Bar-Efrat, Cain’s response to Yahweh when asked of the whereabouts of his brother was ‘clearly evasive.’ Yet, is it so clearly defined? His response, I believe, can be taken in a variety of ways. Rather than being evasive, Cain could be responding in anger. Perhaps it is not that he does not want to divulge the information, but that he is angered by Yahweh’s inquiry and gives a contemptuous response showing that he does not care where his brother is. Or, perhaps he was truly asking a moral question as to one brother’s ethical obligations to another.

One of main modes of speech for characterization is what Bar-Efrat refers to as ‘directive speech’ where one character requests or impels action from another. Bar-Efrat writes, “the importance of this kind of speech lies in the fact that it reveals the speakers’ intentions and aspirations and through them their characteristics.”⁸⁶ The speech in the Tower of Babel is an example of directive speech. In this case it is not a command but a request. There is no response to the request but the narrator informs us that what was

⁸⁴ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 62.

⁸⁵ Examples of various speeches that reveal characterization are discussed in Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 65-70.

⁸⁶ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 73.

requested (first to make bricks followed by the request to begin building the city and tower) was complete in that the people did then have bricks and the city and tower were built as Yahweh saw them when he descended. In this case, however, the form of speech reveals nothing about the characteristics of the people. We know that they wanted to build a city and a tower, but their motivations remain obscure.

Action, the second means of indirect characterization, is as equally revealing as speech. In order to truly analyze the actions of a character, one must understand his or her motives. As Bar-Efrat points out, we rarely see the everyday activities of biblical characters, rather, we meet them “primarily in special and unusual circumstances, in times of crisis and stress, when they have to undergo severe tests.”⁸⁷ Therefore, can a character be defined by one action, especially when that one action takes place under unusual circumstances? Bar-Efrat maintains that the length of the narrative determines the answer. In longer narratives, readers are able to see characters in a variety of actions and are better able to judge their personality as a pattern usually emerges. In shorter narratives, however, a character must be judged by one single action because that was all that the author deemed necessary to reveal. Rimmon-Kenan takes a different stance. She maintains that one-time actions are “not less characteristic of the character. On the contrary, its dramatic impact often suggests that the traits it reveals are qualitatively more crucial than the numerous habits which represent the character’s routine.”⁸⁸ Therefore a one-time action not only can characterize a character but this action is more revealing than habitual actions. Thus, if the narrator had provided more information about the

⁸⁷ Ibid., 78.

⁸⁸ Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 61

people of Babel, they would still be characterized by their building the tower which is a symbol of their unity. The problem remains that the act of building the city and tower alone is morally neutral and their motive, which could verify or refute the possible sinful nature of the act, is unclear.

Motives can often be quite apparent, for examples the actions of David and his son Amnon. In Amnon's case, the motive for the rape of his sister Tamar was lust, and this one action does indeed determine the true nature of his character. In the incident involving Bathsheba, David is also motivated by lust but as he is a round character, he is not defined solely by this action. Also, there is a difference of degree between the two as David was not guilty of rape but of taking another man's wife and when admonished by the prophet Nathan, he recognized and regretted his sin.⁸⁹ As Bar-Efrat writes of David, "despite the fact that there is more information in the Bible about David than any other figure or perhaps just because of this, it is extremely difficult to fathom the depths of his personality."⁹⁰ Therefore there can be too much information about a character where his actions at times conflict with his seemingly established personality; and there can be too little information given to establish motive or characterization as with the people of Babel.

The importance, therefore, of analyzing character in the tower narrative is the nuances it adds to its meaning. Character motivation, whether or not the people are sinful or deliberately thwarting the will of God is a major point of interest with interpreters. Most scholars, including Fokkelman, Clines, and Sarna, view their actions as overtly

⁸⁹ David's murder of Uriah can be considered yet another sin motivated by trying to cover up his affair with Bathsheba.

⁹⁰ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 78.

sinful, a view which is clearly contingent upon a negative characterization of humanity in the Primeval History as a whole. If, however, humanity's motivations are not coloured by this premise then their actions can speak for themselves. The possibility of being scattered is real in their minds and the cause of much fear. If this is indeed the primary motivation for the city and tower, then these structures represent security, as does remaining together. The nuance, then, that the examination of character brings to the narrative is that the people of Babel simply wish security, a basic desire common to most people.

Narrator

The narrator is another major aspect to be analyzed when using literary criticism. Gunn and Fewell maintain that the Jewish people of the ancient world saw a distinction between the author and the narrator and cite the book of Esther as well as the works of the historian Josephus as examples where the author clearly speaks in the voice of a narrator. As a result, Gunn and Fewell "urge the reader of biblical narrative, therefore, to observe that the narrator is not the author but a fictional construct."⁹¹ The narrator is, then, seen more as a character within the narrative than someone outside it. He is an integral part of the narrative as we, the reader, essentially see through his eyes; he shows us what he wants to show us and omits what he deems superfluous.

The reliability of the narrator is an issue with which literary critics must deal. As noted in the section dealing with direct characterization, a narrator's judgment of a character is rare but it does happen. Therefore we must look at whether or not the reader can trust these characterizations. Gunn and Fewell cite Meir Sternberg as one who

⁹¹ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 52.

maintains that the narrator is completely reliable and “does not make mistakes, give false or unintentionally misleading information, or deliberately deceive us.”⁹² Gunn and Fewell believe this statement needs modifications in order to be totally accurate. First, the narrative unit must be defined for if Genesis – 2 Kings was believed to be one unit and therefore have one narrator, then the contradictions within the narrative would show that the narrator cannot be reliable. Therefore, narratives are broken down into smaller units where it is clear that the narrative voice does not change. Secondly, the possibility that the narrator is using irony to confuse the reader is rejected. When these two stipulations are included in the description of a reliable narrator, then Gunn and Fewell accept the premise.

Lyle Eslinger also discusses the role of the narrator, including his reliability. Biblical authors normally use the construct of an external narrator to tell the tale. According to Eslinger, because the narrator is outside the story, his reliability is absolute. Eslinger maintains that “the ‘truths’ revealed by means of the literary convention of an external narrator who has unconditioned access to the truth are enshrined as real, enduring, and guaranteed by God himself.”⁹³ In the case of the tower narrative, it is clear that the narrator is indeed external and outside narrative space and time. The city and tower are built in the span of one verse showing he has no temporal constraints. Also, he is aware of the thoughts and speeches of the deity. He gives no hints except for the subtle repetition of the word ‘one’ that what the people are doing is contrary to the wishes of

⁹² Ibid., 53.

⁹³ Lyle Eslinger, *Into the Hands of the Living God* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1989), 14.

Yahweh. As a result, when he reveals the actions of God against the people the reader is taken aback.

It is important that the narrator is outside the story in this particular case. It shows his independence of the people of Babel, that he is not part of the unwanted 'oneness' perceived by the deity. He is not among the group in Babel, but neither is he sided with God. As Eslinger points out, the external narrator is often neutral. This is against the notion that the narrator takes on the evaluation of God maintained by Alter and Sternberg. Eslinger writes in a footnote:

instead of ideological commitment supporting the deity that he describes acting in his story world, the external unconditioned narrator is neutral, his interests being to reveal the hidden workings of divine-human interaction and to understand. Understanding: that is central. The simple fact that so many of these insights expose what God would keep hidden does, however, evoke, at least initially, a certain sense of shock and repugnance from the reader who shares this view for the first time.⁹⁴

Eslinger elaborates on this concept in chapter three of his book *Into the Hands of the Living God* where he goes into great detail about the true intentions of God as they are revealed by the narrator. In Judges 1-2,⁹⁵ Eslinger contrasts God's monologue in Judges 2:20 with his announcement in 2:1-3. Due to the narrator's repetition in this chapter as well as the explanations of earlier events causing narrated time to pause, verses 1-3 and verse 20 are essentially simultaneous according to Eslinger. According to the covenant, God was going to drive the original people out of the land so that Israel may settle there, yet this was not accomplished. In 2:1-3 he tells the people that he will never break the

⁹⁴ Ibid, 18.

⁹⁵ The opening of this book deals with the failure of the Israelite campaign against their enemies. The problem stems from the fact that Yahweh had declared his military support for his people, yet they were defeated. Yahweh's subsequent announcement of their disobedience of the covenant seems to solve the problem, yet the narrator's understanding of the events given in 2:23 sheds new light on the issue.

covenant, yet to himself he says that the people have broken their commitment and that he will not remove the people from the land. Israel, believing that the failure to take the land is due to their own sin, subsequently attempts to make amends.⁹⁶ The narrator, however, points out that the people have done nothing wrong. By stating that the actions of the people were evil in the eyes of Yahweh, he disassociates himself from the evaluation. The people are not to blame for their lack of commitment as it is stated that only those who have witnessed God's works are to be held to the covenant. After Joshua, the last adult who experienced the exodus, died, the people would have had no knowledge of God or the covenant. Eslinger writes, "if Yahweh wished to continue his affiliation with this nation he will have to re-educate them in much the same manner that he educated their forefathers in the exodus from Egypt."⁹⁷

However, as the narrator makes clear, Yahweh is likewise not to blame for not selecting a leader after Joshua's death which would have maintained the covenant because there was no one appropriate for the job. As a result, we see that the narrator is giving the details of the event that would have otherwise remained unknown to the reader had the tale been told by an author without the convention of a narrator who is privy to such details. The narrator places no blame on either party; instead, he offers "understanding and insight, not evaluation or exhortation."⁹⁸ Thus we see that the narrator is presenting events in a neutral fashion, not taking on the evaluation of God to simply depict the people as wrongdoers.

⁹⁶ Most commentators view this narrative as a series of sins and punishments much like the opening chapters of Genesis.

⁹⁷ Eslinger, *Into the Hands*, 71.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

Eislinger's analysis seems to lend itself well to the tower narrative. Just as Israel was not aware of the true reason why Yahweh did not remove the local inhabitants, the people of Babel were not aware why they were scattered. Nowhere in the text does the reader get a sense that the people are trying to deliberately thwart the will of God. This is because, in my view, they are completely unaware of any divine will or even presence. They cannot be held accountable for ignoring or disobeying a commandment if they were not given the commandment in first place. This seems evident by Yahweh's reaction to the people and their accomplishments. He does not react to them as if he has been disobeyed; rather his reaction is one of non-judgemental observation. Thus, it seems that the people of Babel were unaware that their actions could be perceived as being against the will of God. In Judges, the narrator is careful to show that no one is to blame for the breakdown of the covenant. He counters Yahweh's evaluation of the people's actions as evil by distancing himself from the words of God to remain neutral. In the tower narrative, there is no such evaluation because the people had no knowledge of any commandment and thus their actions cannot be considered wrong or sinful. Regarding Judges, Eislinger writes that if Yahweh wanted to continue his relationship with Israel that he would have to 're-educate' them. I believe the same issue arises in Babel: if Yahweh wanted the people to obey his commandment to fill the earth as earlier generations had been commanded to do, then he would have to reveal as much to the people of Babel. Therefore, the narrator as external and therefore neutral reveals much about the narrative.

Fokkelman, in his discussion of narrator, also examines levels of knowledge. The narrator and God share the same level of knowledge but who occupies the lower levels differ from story to story. Often the reader is next followed by the characters who occupy

the lowest level of knowledge. But there are times when the narrator reveals everything to the reader when he “prefer[s] certainty for his readers over creating and exploiting suspense”⁹⁹ and times when he gives no information and the reader is on the same level as those in the story who are completely unaware of what is going on.¹⁰⁰ The Tower of Babel would fall into the latter category where the characters as well as the reader are lacking fundamental knowledge. Neither could anticipate Yahweh’s reaction to the people thus both are left wondering as to what exactly happened.

Fokkelman continues his discussion on the narrator by stating that he rarely provides the so-called ‘moral of the story.’ Rather, the narrator wants the reader to think about the moral implications of his text. By making the reader think, he draws him or her further into the story he weaves which again emphasizes the active rather than passive manner of reading and interpreting. “In this way,” Fokkelman writes, “we educate ourselves further, while the story, through the moral, legal and religious challenges arising from its unique events, confront us with the question of what we are prepared to accept, and what not.”¹⁰¹ Thus, depending on our own biases and attitudes, what we get from the Tower of Babel, the Bible, or with literature in general, greatly varies from the pessimistic outlook of “watch out, God can strike at any time,” to a more positive view of “God is looking out for our best interest.” As Fokkelman writes, “long live diversity there may be more than one truth.”¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Fokkelman, *Reading*, 136.

¹⁰⁰ Fokkelman also gives examples of when the reader is given knowledge of a plan putting the schemer on the same level as the reader and the unfortunate character being schemed on the lowest level, for example when Jacob steals Isaac’s blessing.

¹⁰¹ Fokkelman, *Reading*, 149.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 58.

Gunn and Fewell discuss the naming of characters by the narrator as having significance. They maintain that it “may indicate a person’s work or social role or status.”¹⁰³ One of the examples they cite is when the narrator refers to Ruth as ‘the Moabite’ which they believe points to her foreignness. This narrative trait may apply to Genesis 11:1-9. In the tower narrative, the narrator always refers to the people as ‘they’ giving the narrative an impression of universality and emphasizing the unity of the people. They have no specific identity other than being one single group. Yahweh also refers to the people using the generic ‘they.’ The only exception occurs in 11:5, the pivotal verse according to the concentric structure that will be discussed in the following chapter, where the narrator calls them ‘the sons of men’ (בני האדם). This epithet, which is the sole instance where the phrase is used in the Torah, emphasizes the people’s independence of God. This is not the story of one man but of humanity. They are in a sense removed from the reality thus far depicted, the sons of the mortal world devoid of the divine presence.

The neutrality of the narrator, then, is an important feature in the tower narrative. He does not side with either the people or with God allowing the reader to judge for him or herself the significance of the tale. Had the narrator begun by reiterating that Yahweh was striving for diversity, then the reader would know straight off that Yahweh would disapprove of the unity of the people. Instead, the narrator begins with the people encouraging the reader to see from their point of view only later showing Yahweh’s assessment of the situation. By structuring the narrative in this manner, the narrator not only builds suspense because the reader is unaware of the potential complication, but also

¹⁰³ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 58.

allows the reader to first relate to the people and, lastly, to see the situation from the point of view of the deity, what Rimmon-Kenan calls the 'recency effect.' This results in a well-told story presented in a careful and compact way.

Language and Plot

The third aspect literary critics examine is language. Literary critics maintain that writers never use language arbitrarily, that their word choice is often significant. As Alter writes:

Writers put together words in a certain pleasing order partly because the order pleases but also, very often, because the order helps them refine meanings, make meanings more memorable, more satisfyingly complex, so that what is well wrought in language can more powerfully engage the world of events, values, human and divine ends.¹⁰⁴

Repetition is one of the principal ways in which biblical authors use language to convey meaning. It can be used to give structure to a narrative, in the construction of a character, or for emphasis.¹⁰⁵ Repetition of the same word or phrase is often significant to the narrative, but minor variations can also be significant. This can be seen in an aspect of the tower narrative mentioned above. Throughout the narrative, the people of Babel are referred to as 'they' or 'the people'; they are nameless and universal. But, in the central verse, they are called 'the sons of men.' This variation of the way in which the people are referred to draws further attention to the central, or pivotal verse, and gives the reader a characterization of the people of Babel, namely of being united.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 15.

¹⁰⁵ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 148.

Bar-Efrat writes that since biblical authors are so terse every word is meaningful. “Consequently,” Bar-Efrat maintains, “it is appropriate to pay attention to even the minutest detail of biblical narrative and to their linguistic features.”¹⁰⁶ He goes into great technical detail of stylistic devices including categories of sound and rhythm, word meaning, and repetition of words. Words that are repeated many times in a small number of verses are called “key words.” A key word “reveals the meaning and the implicit message of the narrative, without adversely affecting its pure artistic form in any way.”¹⁰⁷ Bar-Efrat cites the example of “brother” in the Cain and Abel narrative which occurs six times in four verses. Therefore, in the Babel narrative, the word “one,” which occurs four times in two of the nine verses, is a key word. As Eugene Combs notes, with the appearance of the word “one” we are reminded of Genesis 2:18 when God told the man it is not good to be alone (לֹא-טוֹב הִיּוֹת הָאָדָם לְבֶדוֹ).¹⁰⁸ Though the words “one” and “alone” differ, the meaning is the same and we are told that the condition of being alone, or one, is not good. As a result, when the people of Babel are repeatedly associated with the word “one,” we, as the reader, are aware that the people will not be allowed to continue as they are. Just as Yahweh intervened to assure Adam would no longer be alone, God intervenes at Babel to alter the state of the “oneness” of the people.

Fokkelman’s work is a good example of the use of sophisticated literary techniques to discern the meaning of the narrative. He writes that the author is specific in what and how he writes; therefore the interpreter must not “neglect studying the ingenuity

¹⁰⁶ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative, Art*, 199.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁰⁸ A. Eugene Combs and Kenneth H. Post, *The Foundations of Political Order in Genesis and the Chāndogya Upanisad*, vol. I. (Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 389.

of form. Through such work, he will gain insight into the structure which governs the words, a structure which will be seen as the motor of the narration and the narrator's view."¹⁰⁹ It is Fokkelman's study of the language of the Tower of Babel that guides his interpretation. In his close reading of Genesis 11, he sees two structures (one parallel and the other concentric) which, according to Fokkelman, emphasize the crime and punishment aspect of the narrative. The repetition of words and sounds has a significant bearing on the context. As mentioned in chapter one, Fokkelman points out the repetition of the words 'name' (שם) and 'there' (שם) which emphasize the 's-m' sound. The sole point of this repetition is to highlight the word 'heavens' (שמים). In Fokkelman's view, this shows that humanity is not satisfied with the earth and has its eye on the heavens. Furthermore, the word 'tower' (מגדל), he asserts, points to this same conclusion in that it would bring the word 'great' (גדל) to mind and shows that humanity yearns for greatness.

In my view, it is the repetition of the key word 'one' as well as the repetition of the pronouns referring to the people (us, ourselves, they, them) as a single group which more accurately points to the meaning of the narrative. These words are so prevalent that one cannot fail to notice the narrator's intent to emphasize this unity. It is unity that the people have and desire to maintain; it is what Yahweh remarks upon when he descends, and what he objects to and consequently alters. Though this point may seem minor, I consider it to be vital to the understanding of the narrative. Alter wrote:

the authors of the biblical narrative astutely discovered how the slightest strategic variations in the pattern of repetitions could serve the purposes of commentary, analysis, foreshadowing, thematic assertion, with a wonderful combination of subtle understatement and dramatic force.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 12.

¹¹⁰ Alter, *The Art*, 91.

The Tower of Babel is a perfect example of this sort of fundamental repetition as both characters, the people and Yahweh, as well as the narrator comment on the 'oneness' of the people. It is variously viewed as the desirable state of being, undesirable state of being and as a neutral state of being respectively.¹¹¹ It is with the subtle use of language that meaning is conveyed, that provides clues to the reader as to the significance of the narrative.

The importance of language, therefore, cannot be overstated. The biblical author is not only interested in telling a story, but in creating a piece of literary art. It is his method of manipulating language that allows for subtle nuances of meaning which transforms the story into art. The language of the Tower of Babel will be more thoroughly examined in the following chapter.

Plot, according to Bar-Efrat, can be defined as a "meaningful chain of interconnected events."¹¹² Establishing the beginning and ending is the first step of examining the plot which is generally described as having an exposition, climax and resolution. These boundaries are often, but not always, clearly defined. Gunn and Fewell cite several examples of biblical narratives where the exposition is missing as seen in the book of Jonah or narratives that have more than one conflict and resolution most often occurring in longer biblical tales.

Both Bar-Efrat and Amit refer to the tower narrative when discussing the aspect of plot. Bar-Efrat divides the narrative into two acts, one contrasting the other. The first half (11:1-4) deals with the realm of humanity while the second half (11:5-9) deals with the

¹¹¹ The neutrality of the narrator is discussed above.

¹¹² Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 93.

divine. "This structure supports the content of the narrative," writes Bar-Efrat, "dealing as it does with action and counteraction while at the same time bringing into prominence the immense difference between the two sides, man and God."¹¹³

Amit uses the Tower of Babel as an example of the pediment structure of plot which includes the complication, change and unraveling (which is bordered by the beginning and ending creating a five-stage structure). In this configuration, the change is featured at the top of the pediment and therefore emphasis lies within it. The complication is the plan to build the city and the tower. The change, then, according to Amit is when Yahweh descends and decides to prevent the building project.¹¹⁴ The unraveling is Yahweh's action against the people. Though this is not, nor is it meant to be, a detailed examination of the narrative, it does delineate the various stages of plot.

When discussing the exposition, Bar-Efrat writes "it should be emphasized that in general no information is included in the exposition which does not have a definite function in the development of the action."¹¹⁵ Bar-Efrat follows this by stating that information about characters is often repeated in the body of the narrative. As the tower narrative is quite brief, there are only a couple of pieces of information which contribute to the development of the plot, and only one of these is repeated. This is, of course, the fact that the people have one language, stated in the opening verse and repeated in 11:6. It is the first characteristic of the people described by the narrator, and it is the first thing Yahweh notices when he descends to examine what the people have done. Bar-Efrat

¹¹³ Ibid., 110.

¹¹⁴ I would argue that the city and tower are not at issue with Yahweh, rather it is the oneness of the people he finds problematic. It is the people he takes action against by scattering them; the city and tower remain untouched.

¹¹⁵ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 114.

concludes, "the information in the exposition frequently serves to emphasize matters of importance or hint at implied meanings."¹¹⁶ Thus, according to his theory, the oneness of the people is shown once again to be important not only by its repetition as a key word but also by its inclusion in the exposition. Fokkelman reiterates this concept when he writes, "the biblical narrator only uses details if they are functional to his plot."¹¹⁷

Amit states, in the final stage of the plot "the consequences of the change are revealed."¹¹⁸ In Genesis 11:1-9, the situation of the people has completely reversed from beginning to end. They are no longer one but have been scattered over the world. Their language is no longer the same but has been "confused" which compounds their division because if they were to overcome their geographical separation and once again unite, their language barrier would still isolate them. The Primeval History, then, ends with the forced acceptance of the divine commandment to fill the earth.

The plot, therefore, serves as a way for the biblical author to structure his narrative in a way that artistically emphasizes the various important features of the narrative. In the tower narrative, the scenes are divided equally between the people and Yahweh allowing for a contrast between both sides. The central verse acts as a pivot and bridges the two scenes. It is in this turning point where Yahweh descends that the reader realizes that something more is going on than a deceptively simple tale about the establishment of a city. Here we learn that the actions of the people demand Yahweh's immediate attention followed by a perspective switch. Once the reader is aware of Yahweh's point of view the

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 117.

¹¹⁷ Fokkelman, *Reading*, 78.

¹¹⁸ Amit, *Reading*, 47.

meaning of the narrative, namely diversity over unity becomes clear. The chiasmic structure of the tower narrative will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

Conclusion

Thus, it is clear that literary critics, by closely examining the text which is accepted, perceive patterns that may not be apparent by using other methodologies. With these patterns identified, meaning emerges. By analyzing the characters, the reader gets a sense of their motivations. The narrator provides neutrality to the events which gives the reader a chance to judge the characters for themselves. The language as well as the plot add to or give structure to the text, emphasizing significant details and ultimately establishing meaning. An example of a literary methodology to discern an over-arching literary pattern is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 3 - Structural Arrangement

Now that we have seen how literary critics approach a text, we can apply these techniques to the tower narrative. The importance of the analysis of character, narrator, language and plot has been established. Here I will examine an aspect of both plot and language, the structural arrangement. All of these literary devices, especially plot and language, emphasize not only the unity of the text (which was under attack by scholars such as Gunkel), but also its artistry. In this chapter I will examine in detail the structure of Genesis 11:1-9. This narrative is a perfect example of a structural arrangement that shows the unity and artistry of biblical writing. As Fokkelman writes, "the Hebrew storytellers must have received excellent literary training, as time and again they demonstrate a strong preconception of form, and consummate mastery of it at all these levels [from sounds, words and sentences to paragraphs, scenes, stories, acts, and cycles to books]."¹¹⁹ The use of repetition, the importance of which was discussed in the previous chapter, is an essential linguistic feature of the Hebrew Bible. The overarching pattern in Genesis 11:1-9 is a chiastic one (A B C D E D' C' B' A'). As I will demonstrate, this pattern, as well as parallel patterns (A B C - A' B' C'), "is a structural application and exploitation of repetition."¹²⁰

Fokkelman cautions, however, that it is important not to force a pattern onto a text. He notes that this is often done by inexperienced exegetes who see patterns where none exist, as well as by scholars who force patterns onto a text in order to prove an

¹¹⁹ Fokkelman, *Reading*, 162

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

already existing interpretation. To avoid such pitfalls, Fokkelman recommends interpreters be self-critical. To that end, he details two ways in which to verify the authenticity of a structural arrangement: “(1) demonstrable relations are present that (2) yield a better understanding of the text and point to new meanings.”¹²¹ Thus, for example, A and A' must correspond to each other. This correspondence can be categorized either by similarity, contrast or a combination of both. As we will see in the structure below, all of the pairings show a distinct contrast from the fundamental division of the narrative. The first four units deal with humanity and the final four units deal with the divinity. Lastly, Fokkelman writes that there are two types of demonstrability: hard and soft. Hard demonstrability is strict repetition while soft demonstrability is a “connection based on semantic similarity, i.e. correspondence of meaning.”¹²² As will be discussed below, all of the pairings in the tower narrative include hard repetition often with multiple repetitions of keywords which all contribute to the overall meaning of the text. As each pairing is examined, it will become clear that the structure I have outlined below is indeed valid according to Fokkelman’s criteria.

Another important feature of this narrative is its chiasmic structure. Chiasmus is defined as “a passage in which the second part is inverted and balanced against the first. Chiasmus is thus a type of antithesis.”¹²³ It is the inversion and the balance that is emphasized when defining and identifying chiasmus. The inversion is structural and therefore more easily identified whereas the balance element is strictly literary and

¹²¹ Ibid., 118.

¹²² Ibid., 118.

¹²³ John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis*. (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981), 9.

consequently has a subjective aspect to it. According to John Welch, subjective judgment is required to match individual words within pairings. It is up to the interpreter to determine what the author has emphasized using his structure. An interpreter, however, cannot simply enforce a chiasmic structure onto a narrative, it is only there for him/her to discover, not to impose. As Welch writes, "key words, echoes, and balancing should be distinct and should serve defined purposes within the structure."¹²⁴ Simply put, meaning can be found within form. It is the existence of a chiasmus that provides clues to the reader that the antithetical elements are essential to the significance of a narrative.

The function of chiasmus is threefold: it is artistic, practical and, perhaps most importantly, it provides emphasis or meaning. Chiasmus also serves a practical purpose. Repetition that is inherent in such a structure not only emphasizes the importance of certain themes, but there is also a mnemonic aspect which was important during the times when the literature was transmitted orally. However, its primary characteristic is that "it systematically serves to concentrate the reader's or hearer's interest on the central expression."¹²⁵ Modern readers expect literature to be linear which is perhaps why it took so long for scholars to notice the existence of chiasmus which, in turn, led to the proper understanding of many biblical texts. Now, readers know to look to the centre for meaning. Welch writes that the growing awareness of chiasmus is one of "the most salient developments in the study of ancient literature over the past few decades."¹²⁶ Let us now turn back to the tower narrative and what its structure reveals.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 13

¹²⁵ Ibid., 7.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 9.

The narrative is characterized by a chiasmic structure (typically employed in Hebrew poetry and narrative) as follows:

A	all the earth was one language	one language
B	they dwelled there	settled
C	let us make bricks	unity
D	build ourselves a city and a tower	future unity
E	Yahweh's descent	"one"
D'	the people are one	future unity
C'	let us go down and confuse	disunity
B'	Yahweh scattered them	scattered
A'	Yahweh confused the language	multiple languages

The first 4 sections (A, B, C, D) deal with the human realm, and the sense of unity is unmistakable. All humanity has one language, and together they have migrated from the east to arrive in one place, Shinar, where they decide to build a city and a tower. After the people reveal their intention to build a city and a tower, Yahweh descends (E). The final 4 sections (A', B', C', D') deal with the systematic reversal of the opening verses: Yahweh, step by step, erases what humanity has done.

Section A describes how the world is one language (literally, "one lip" (שפה אחת) and "one word" (ודברים אחדים)). Section B shows that, perhaps because of their "one" language, they have settled in one place, the land of Shinar in the east. Section C shows their unity as they begin a massive building project. The outcome of this unity is clearly shown in the following section (D) with the construction of the city and a tower that reaches the heavens. This is by no means a minor feat and should be recognized as a major triumph. Only with an entire community working tirelessly together could such a massive building project be accomplished. It is not merely the physical effort that is impressive here, but also the united efforts to complete such a monumental task. This tower is what a united humanity conceives of and is able to achieve.

Part One

A	A'
And <i>all the earth</i> had one <i>language</i> and one words.	Therefore its name is called Babel because there Yahweh confused the <i>language</i> of <i>all the earth</i> and from there Yahweh scattered them upon the face of <i>all the earth</i> .

In section A, all the world was “one lip” (שפה אחת) and “one word” (ודברים אחדים); section A' reverses that situation when Yahweh “confuses” (בלל) the language of the people.

Section A', relates how all the earth has been scattered following the confusion of language; this is the new circumstance in which humanity lives, and is directly opposed to the circumstance described in A, i.e., that the earth has one language. The people, once united, are now characterized as “scattered” (פוזר) and “confused” (בלל). The systematic reversal is complete, the situation neutralized. This is what Fokkelman calls hard repetition. “All the earth” (כל-הארץ) appearing once in A and twice in A', as well as dual appearance of the word ‘language.’

In A, ‘all the earth’ refers to the people as does the first occurrence of the phrase in A' though first they are united and in the end they are scattered. However, the second occurrence of the phrase refers to the land rather than the people. According to Fokkelman, references to time and space also help structure a narrative and here there are numerous spatial terms which reinforce the chiasmus delineated above. Thus we can see how the spatial terms reveal another level of the narrative. In this way, the Tower of

Babel can be viewed as a journey, in fact a redirected journey. Even Yahweh is depicted as a source of movement and it is of course the deity who redirects the people's journey.

Ellen van Wolde maintains that the phrase 'all the earth,' as it opens and closes the narrative, points to the fact that the tower narrative centres on the earth rather than the people. The people have done nothing wrong, but Yahweh scatters them for the good of the earth. She writes:

the human desire is positive, that is, even in our modern evaluation we are inclined to consider it as good that the human beings are striving to be social and communicative, that they want to be one and united; there is nothing wrong with that, from the human point of view. Nevertheless it turns out to have negative consequences for the earth and God acknowledges here the earth as a subject in its own right.¹²⁷

Though I agree that the people have committed no crime and were indeed scattered to bring an end to their unity and to fill the earth, I believe van Wolde goes a step too far in arguing that the earth is the main focus of the narrative. The people are clearly the core of the story in terms of the repetition of the pronouns referring to them: they are the actors in the first half of the narrative and the recipients of the action in the second half. In fact, two of the five times when the narrator uses the phrase 'all the earth,' I believe he is indeed referring to the people (11:1 and 11:9a). I also agree with van Wolde that there is a reciprocal relationship between the people and the earth, but it is the people, rather than the earth, whom the writers of Genesis 1-11 hold as the central figures.

¹²⁷ Ellen van Wolde, "Facing the Earth: Primeval History in a New Perspective," in *The World of Genesis: Persons, Places, Perspectives*, eds. Philip R. Davies and David J. A. Clines, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 46.

Part Two

B	B'
And in <i>their</i> journey from the east, <i>they</i> found a plain in the land of Shinar and <i>they</i> dwelled <i>there</i> .	And Yahweh scattered <i>them</i> from <i>there</i> upon the face of all the earth and <i>they</i> stopped building the city.

Unit B describes “all the earth” (כל-הארץ) settling in the land of Shinar; B' reverses that action by describing how Yahweh “scattered” (פירץ) them. Confusing their language, accomplished in section C', was insufficient to quash the unity of the people; more drastic measures are required. B and B' are not only thematically connected by the contrast of the actions depicted (settling and scattering) but also through the hard repetition of the word “there” (שם). First they settled “there” and finally are scattered “from there” (משם).

Note also the spatial terms. In B, the unity of place is emphatically established. Indeed, in this one verse there are five references to one place (east, plain, land, Shinar, there) and three verbs describing how the people first embarked on a *journey* to *find* a place and finally to *dwelt* there. In B', in contrast to all the spatial terms in B, the people are scattered ‘from there’ to across the earth destroying their unity of place.

Kikawada points out that there are only two words in B' (‘them’ (אתם) and ‘and they stopped’ (ויהדלו)) that do not appear earlier in the narrative. All of the remaining words thus form an antithesis to the earlier point in which the word or phrase appeared. ‘Scattered’ and ‘upon the face of the earth’ alludes to D where the people expressed fear of this possibility. ‘Yahweh’ is the character behind the action in this section. ‘There’ (שם) according to Kikawada, “is a key word used in v 2 and elsewhere which now

underlines the heightened theme of the land.”¹²⁸ And, finally, the phrase ‘building the city’ (לבנת העיר) refers back to D where the people first expressed their desire to build a city which now has come to an end (‘and they stopped’ (ויהדלו)). Thus we can see the extreme compactness, the careful and artistic use of language, of the narrative, especially as seen in this verse.

Part Three

C	C'
And a man said to <i>his friend</i> , “ <i>come let us</i> <i>mold bricks and burn them thoroughly.</i> ”	<i>Come, let us</i> go down and confuse there their language so that <i>they</i> will not hear the language of
And <i>they</i> had bricks for stone and bitumen <i>they</i> had for mortar.	<i>his friend.</i> ”

The unity that is emphasized in section C is then countered in section C' by the confusion of the language. In C, the narrator notes the speech of a man “to his friend” (אל-רעהו) and the result of the speech (i.e., the materials necessary for their building). Language is the symbol of their unity, and the means by which they achieve their goals. The people state, “come let us make bricks” (הבה נלבנה) in proposing the building project, the physical representation of their unity. In C', Yahweh mimics their words by also saying, “come, let us go down” (הבה נרדה). This draws a distinct parallel between the two verses using hard repetition where the actions depicted in the initial verse are

¹²⁸ Isaac Kikawada, “The Shape of Genesis 11:1-9,” in *Rhetorical Criticism: Essays in Honor Of James Muilenburg*, eds. Jared J. Jackson and Martin Kessler (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1974), 25.

counteracted and contrasted in the corresponding verse.¹²⁹ Furthermore, God also repeats the word 'friend' (רֵעֵהוּ). In C, the idea of unity, or more specifically community, is evoked. Humanity is working together for a common goal and kinship is implied. When Yahweh uses that same word, such an implication is completely missing. Yahweh does not want unity or community. It is quite the opposite, in fact, as he plainly wants division. Not only will the people be unable to understand one another's speech, but as a result will not address each other as 'friend.' Without community, there can be no friendship. Lastly, in both C and C' the verbs describe a proposed course of action first by the humans then by God, this is the planning stage.

Some scholars, including Fokkelman, believe that Yahweh's choice of words here is ironic. Fokkelman writes, "what a blow, what disillusion for man and his plans, which are, as it were, ridiculed from within by God singing *with* the people and working *against* them. In fact, the humour is subtle, corroding irony."¹³⁰ As discussed in the first chapter, Fokkelman, among many others, believes that this narrative details the hubris of humanity and is essentially a tale of crime and punishment. For Fokkelman, humanity's attempt to reach heaven by way of their tower is ironic, or at least so incomprehensible so as to be laughable. God uses humanity's own words in a mocking tone to show that their effort pales in comparison with his own capabilities. However, when discussing D', Fokkelman cites the reason for Yahweh's action is that he *fears* what humanity is capable of, in other words, Yahweh sees their unity as a threat. Fokkelman writes, "how much he fears the

¹²⁹ Many commentators are perplexed by the use of the plural "us" here (and cf. Genesis 1:26 and 3:22). A literary explanation, however, indicates that it is used to make the parallels stronger and more self-evident.

¹³⁰ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 14.

creativity of language and its possibilities for man is evident in the reason for his intervention.”¹³¹ It is extremely unlikely that Yahweh would fear humanity in D' and then mock them in C'. Furthermore, although Yahweh is often portrayed as anthropomorphic in Genesis, fear is never one of his characteristics.

Part Four

D	D'
And they <i>said</i> , “come let <i>us build ourselves</i> a city and a tower with its top in the heavens and let <i>us make ourselves</i> a name lest we are scattered upon the face of all the Earth.”	And Yahweh <i>said</i> , “behold, the people are one and they have one language <i>for all of them</i> and this is the beginning to <i>make</i> and now nothing will be impossible <i>for them all</i> that they propose to <i>make</i> .”

If in D humanity was capable of achieving impressive technological accomplishments, D' describes Yahweh's vision of what a united humanity is capable of, namely, anything that they put their mind to. The text is characteristically laconic here and no details are given as to what Yahweh might mean by “nothing will be impossible” (לא-יבצר) for humanity. Perhaps, it is not *what* they can do but simply the fact that they *can* do it that is at issue here. Again we see hard repetition. Both sections begin with the verb ‘said’ (אמר), include ‘make’ (עשה) in D once and in D' twice and two pronouns each. In D, the people say ‘for ourselves’ (לנו) twice and Yahweh says ‘for all of them’ (לכלם) and ‘for them all’ (כל מהם). The contrast is clear: both sections represent completely

¹³¹ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 28.

opposing viewpoints on the desired future of the people. The people want to remain together in the city they are building, and Yahweh, as we find out in the following section, wants to separate them so that they may fill the earth. The reason behind his reaction is never quite explained but the most promising clue is found in section E, the central and pivotal section of the chiasmus. As in the previous section, several action words occur in D and D'. In D, the people quickly build themselves a community. In D' all the actions words refer to hypothetical actions that the people are capable of doing.

In D' we also have the appearance of the word 'behold' (הִנֵּה). Berlin and Fokkelman both discuss the variant uses of this word in the Bible. When it is used by the narrator its basic function is to indicate point of view, to show that the narrator is perceiving events through a particular character's eyes. Similarly, 'behold' can also denote a shift in point of view from one character to another, what Berlin refers to as showing a different camera angle.¹³² When, however, it is used in direct discourse, its purpose is to focus attention on what the speaker is saying. In this way, according to Berlin, 'behold' is better translated as 'look!' The latter is the case in section D'. Though Yahweh is not speaking to anyone, it is still direct discourse rather than narration. Like the examples cited by Berlin, Yahweh's words are intended to draw the hearer's attention (in this case the reader as Yahweh's speech is essentially an interior monologue and no characters can hear him) to the significance of his words, namely, as stated above, that what Yahweh perceives as he descends is the unity of the people in terms of their language and place.

¹³² Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 2d ed. (Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 62.

While D' is direct discourse, the other function of the term detailing a shift in point of view is still fitting. In this verse, there is indeed a shift from the realm of humanity to that of God. Following Berlin's analogy, it can be described as the camera being pulled back to see that the people are not alone and are being observed by the deity, essentially switching from a close-up to a panoramic view.

While it is evident that sections A-D are systematically reversed in sections A'-D', we are still left with the question of why Yahweh intervened in the first place? In other words, why exactly did Yahweh "come down," and what exactly did he find so troubling, if anything at all? I believe that the structure of the text is artfully arranged so as to provide a clue for Yahweh's intervention. This clue occurs in section E. Section E is not included in the parallels considered above. It describes the descent of Yahweh to see what the sons of men have built. This is important in chiasmic structures.

Part Five

E

And Yahweh came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built.

As we have seen, it is the central verse which holds the key in a chiasmic structure. Welch writes, "an emphatic focus on the center can be employed by a skilful composer to elevate the importance of a central concept or to dramatize a radical shift of events at the turning-point."¹³³ This pivotal verse stands out in many ways. With the exception of the opening verse, it is much shorter than the remaining verses. Of the many repeated words

¹³³ Welch, *Chiasmus*, 10.

and phrases, ‘language,’ ‘all the earth,’ as well as the pronouns referring to the people, do not occur here. It is in 11:5 that the human and divine realms are linked: it is essentially a bridge between both worlds as well as between both sections of the narrative and it is precisely this that is the “radical shift of events.” In Kikawada’s words, “the unique fifth verse marks the crossover point of the narrative, summarizing what has gone before and forecasting what is yet to come.”¹³⁴ Kikawada points out that all of the elements in this ‘crossover point’ can be linked to either the first half of the narrative in the human section or in the second half relating Yahweh’s actions. The phrase ‘Yahweh descends’ (וירד יהוה) is linked to C’ where Yahweh is again referred to as descending. The verb ‘to see’ (לראות), according to Kikawada, “finds its destination in another sensory verb ישמעו.”¹³⁵ The phrase ‘the city and tower’ (את-העיר ואת-המגדל) as well as the verb ‘built’ (בנו) both refers back to the first half in D where each of these words appears. Lastly, as Kikawada writes, “the unique האדם reflects the significance of the human actors in Ep. 1.”¹³⁶

Yahweh descends to earth to look in on his creation and to see the city and tower. He does not descend to see what ‘the people’ or ‘they’ have built but rather what ‘the sons of men’ have built. How, therefore, can we make sense of the use of this one and only appellation? Its singular usage again draws attention to this pivotal verse, but the name itself must also be significant, not only its appearance. We have already seen the importance of repetition, but as Alter writes, when changes occur, they “can point to an intensification, climatic development, acceleration, of the actions and attitudes initially represented, or, on the other hand, to some unexpected, perhaps unsettling, new revelation

¹³⁴ Kikawada, “The Shape,” 30.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 24.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 24.

of character or plot.”¹³⁷ I believe that the phrase emphasizes the people’s unity, anonymity and independence of God all of which causes the deity to act, and of which, until now, the reader had no indication.

Fokkelman maintains that the narrative tells of the people’s hubris which is revealed by the height of the tower.¹³⁸ The alliteration of the phrase “the sons of men built” (בני בני האדם) emphasizes that the people are builders by nature, which for Fokkelman is another piece of evidence as to humanity’s high intentions. However, the neutrality of the narrator who uses the phrase makes such a connection unlikely. In each example where humanity, or an individual, has sinned and were described as wicked or evil, it is Yahweh who judges them so. When, for example, Yahweh decided that humanity was corrupt beyond all hope and determined to flood the earth, humanity was said to be corrupt in the eyes of God.¹³⁹ Thus, it is Yahweh who makes such values judgments and the narrator always maintains neutrality. Therefore it seems doubtful that the narrator would prove to be the mouthpiece of the deity here and nowhere else.

The importance of the phrase does not point to what they are building or that they are builders but that they are singular in their purpose, one group working together for a common purpose. Many factors have shown that unity is what is at issue here. The repetition of the key words ‘one’ may be the most obvious indication that Yahweh finds their unity problematic. Furthermore, what is Yahweh altering? It is of course the people’s unity of place and language. If Yahweh were indeed incensed by or even fearful of the existence of the city and tower as Fokkelman maintains, would scattering the

¹³⁷ Alter, *The Art*, 97.

¹³⁸ See chapter one for details.

¹³⁹ 6:5, "וירא יהוה כי רבה רעת האדם"

people truly address the problem? The fact that they are builders plays no part in Yahweh's assessment of the people. I agree with Alter when he writes of Fokkelman that he "gives us some brilliant analysis of formal patterns in the Hebrew prose and of how they function thematically; but he also shows a certain tendency to interpretive overkill in his explications, at times discovering patterns where they may not be."¹⁴⁰

Not only does the phrase 'sons of men' emphasize their unity and anonymity but also their perceived independence from God. The pivotal verse being a link between the human and divine realms also demonstrates this. In the first four verses, only the people exist with no thought of, or intervention by, God. Yahweh is simply not mentioned. Here, however, though they may think they are in control of their lives, both Yahweh and 'the sons of men' inhabit the same verse and indeed the same world. The reader learns, just as the people do, that how humanity conducts their lives depends on the approval of God and, whether or not one feels the presence of God, he is there ready to enforce his cosmic plan. As will be argued in the fourth and final chapter, there is a link between the first and last human-related scenes in the Primeval History, namely the Garden of Eden narrative and the tower narrative. In that earlier narrative the woman also decided to make up her own mind with regards to the forbidden tree rather than simply accepting the tree as off limits without question. This perceived independence of God, the desire to choose for oneself, which tree to eat or whether or not to live united, is among the reasons which cause Yahweh to act but, as will be argued in the next chapter, not to punish.

Yahweh's act of scattering the people to fill the earth also has another purpose: that of establishing proper relationship between peoples. As I have emphasized, it is the

¹⁴⁰ Alter, *The Art*, 16.

peoples' unity which Yahweh finds problematic when it is diversity and properly maintained boundaries that Yahweh deems necessary. Creation is a classic example. Several scholars, including Alter, Fokkelman, and Sternberg, maintain that Genesis 2 is not a second creation story but rather a more detailed account of the creation of humanity.¹⁴¹ Other scholars further state that the same is true for the tower narrative. Sarna writes, "the Babel narrative is thus in the first place etiological and complementary to the preceding chapter; it provides the necessary historical background."¹⁴² The tower narrative does not contradict the proliferation of humanity as it is relating in the Table of Nations but instead depicts how these events came about. As such, after Babel when the people have formed many different nations in Genesis 10, it is repeated three times that each group has its own land, language, family, and nation (10:5, 10:20, 10:31). They are no longer one, but are rather separate each according to their own kind (למנהגה) as is emphasized as proper and good during creation.¹⁴³ When viewed in this way, the phrase 'the sons of men' is again revealed to be an important key to the narrative. The people of Babel are one group, essentially one family. As Genesis 10 details the various groups, it is the sons of Noah, (10:1, 10:32), the sons of Japeth (10:2), the sons of Gomer (10:3), the sons of Javan (10:4), the sons of Ham (10:6, 10:20), the sons of Cush (10:7), the sons of Shem (10:22, 10:31), the sons of Aram (10:23), the sons of Joktan (10:29) who emerge. The people are now many families spread throughout the earth, separate and distinct. This would make the opening and closing of the Primeval History dealing, at least in part, with

¹⁴¹ See Alter, *The Art*, 141; Fokkelman, *Reading*, 124; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 414.

¹⁴² Sarna, *Understanding*, 67. Anderson also argues this point, see Bernhard W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 174.

¹⁴³ 1:21, 1:24, 1:25.

proper relationships between all things, first in the creation of the earth, then with the formation of the various nations.

Combs maintains that ‘the sons of men’ or ‘of Adam’ draws a distinct contrast with the beginning of Genesis 10 where the people are called ‘the generation of the sons of Noah.’¹⁴⁴ According to Combs, ‘generations’ (תולדות) refers to people who have been separated into families and who are “historical beings.”¹⁴⁵ ‘The sons of Adam’ are, on the other hand, one single group and therefore cannot be referred to as the generations of Adam. Combs writes, “if the men of Genesis X have accepted their historicity, the men of Genesis XI have rejected theirs. They seek their eternity.”¹⁴⁶ Therefore Combs sees the phrase as an indication of the people’s intentions which are, in his mind, misguided. He views their unity as a bad thing. Indeed, it is certainly possible that the term ‘generations’ does refer to proper plurality and correspondingly its absence refers to improper relationships.¹⁴⁷

We must now return to the heart of the matter. In section E, Yahweh descends to see the city and tower built by the sons of men. Once there, Yahweh’s first remark about the people is they are “one” (אחד). He not only sees that the people are ‘one’ but also hears this fact in their ‘one’ language. It is then that immediate action is taken to correct the situation. As stated, I believe the problem lies in the people’s unity. To get a better grasp of this issue, it will be necessary to have a closer look at the tower narrative as seen in the larger context as the conclusion to the Primeval History. When seen in this way, it

¹⁴⁴ Combs views Genesis 10 and 11 as linear, the nations first being separate in 10 then coming together in 11 rather than the tower narrative being a flashback to establish how the nations were divided as I have stated.

¹⁴⁵ Combs, *Foundations*, 410.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 410.

¹⁴⁷ ‘Generations’ appears in 2:4, 5:1, 6:9, 10:1 and 11:10 and in each case unity is not a problem.

becomes clear that the tower narrative is alluding back to the Garden of Eden narrative where the man and woman undergo a process of maturation. I will argue that the people of Babel develop in a similar fashion, though on a universal scale as Adam and Eve mature on a personal level. It is this reading of the tower narrative as a story of development that will be the focus of the following and final chapter.

Chapter 4 – Universal Development

As I argued in the previous chapter, a chiastic structure of Genesis 11:1-9 aids in revealing the meaning of the narrative. This structure highlights the central verse where Yahweh descends to observe humanity. Nevertheless, we are left with two important questions, “why did Yahweh come down”? and “what caused him to scatter the people”? Many authors state that the people clearly did something wrong, but exactly *what* remains ambiguous.¹⁴⁸ If, however, we do not assume that the scattering is a punishment on account of some sin, then much of the confusion of the narrative is eliminated: in other words one cannot identify their sin because they have not committed one. As we have seen, understanding the narrative through the lens of “sin-punishment” does not sufficiently deal with all the nuances of the text. Many scholars, including Cassuto, Clines, Fokkelman, and Skinner, maintain that the people are guilty of hubris. Others, including Fretheim, Lim, Mauldin, and Westermann, argue that the people attempted to alter their created status by building the tower to reach the heavens. Neither of these interpretations is directly supported by the text in that the people’s actions are in no way *overtly* sinful, and Yahweh’s reaction cannot be described as a condemnation. Perhaps even more importantly, the idea of sin does not adequately deal with the clear focus of the narrative, the unity of the people. If “sin” does not adequately account for the meaning of

¹⁴⁸ See Bernhard W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); Isaac Kikawada, “The Shape of Genesis 11:1-9,” in *Rhetorical Criticism: Essays in Honor Of James Muilenburg*, eds. Jared J. Jackson and Martin Kessler (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1974); James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible As It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974); Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972).

the narrative or the account for the reason Yahweh “descended,” what might the narrative concern? Perhaps a way to approach this question is to notice how the tower narrative closely parallels the Garden of Eden narrative in Genesis 2-3. By comparing these narratives we will begin to see the glimmerings of a solution to our problem.

Similarities between the tower narrative and the Garden of Eden narrative, the opening and closing human-related scenes of the Primeval History, have long been recognized.¹⁴⁹ David Clines, while linking the two narratives in a literary manner, argues that the sin of the people of Babel parallels the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden and therefore Genesis 1-11 “exhibit[s] the common literary technique of *inclusio*, with the final episode in the story of human sin repeating and balancing the first.”¹⁵⁰ I agree that the two narratives are indeed linked, but the theme of sin is perhaps missing the point. As I will try to demonstrate, the two narratives are linked thematically, structurally, and grammatically.

Isaac Kikawada is another who links the tower narrative with creation, although his *inclusio* is with Genesis 1 more than with the garden narrative. He maintains that the text is suffused with irony which becomes clear when it is placed into its larger context of the Primeval History. He writes that the original Hebrew audience would have been amused by the actions of the people of Babel depicted in the narrative, especially of their

¹⁴⁹ See Bernhard W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); Terance E. Fretheim, *Creation, Fall and Flood: Studies in Genesis 1-11* (Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969); See David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1978); A. Eugene Combs and Kenneth H. Post, *The Foundations of Political Order in Genesis and the Chāndogya Upanisad*, vol. I. (Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006); Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion S.J. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984).

¹⁵⁰ David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1978), 69.

attempt to build a tower that could reach the heavens as well as their fear of being scattered (given that the nomadic Hebrews would have been accustomed to such a lifestyle). Though I disagree with his interpretation of irony and punishment, Kikawada's structural and rhetorical analysis reveals many parallels both within the narrative (as discussed in the previous chapter) as well as to Genesis 1-11 as a whole. He cites the phrase "upon the face of all the earth" (עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ), and the words "humanity" (אָדָם), and "heavens" (שָׁמַיִם) as some of the verbal links between the first and last chapters of the Primeval History. He also suggests that the "two peculiar rhetorical features concerning Divine speech are found in both: one is the direct Divine discourse, and the other is the plural verb referring to the singular divine subject, "let us make man" in 1:26, and "Halah, let us go down, let us confuse" in 11:6."¹⁵¹ According to Kikawada, the point of the *inclusio* is to show that the scattering of the people fulfills the blessing of Genesis 1:28 for humanity to fill the earth. His interpretation is therefore much different than the majority of commentators who view the scattering as merely a punishment. Kikawada sees Yahweh's actions as "a gracious act," and is along the same line as I will argue.¹⁵² Verbal features link the tower narrative to the garden narrative including "one" (אֶחָד), "name" (שֵׁם), "us," and "cast" (קָדַם) which will be discussed below. But the similarity between 3:22 and 11:6, specifically in Yahweh's words, is noteworthy.

¹⁵¹ Kikawada, "The Shape," 31.

¹⁵² Ibid., 32.

3:22	11:6
And Yahweh God said (ויאמר יהוה אלהים)	And Yahweh said (ויאמר יהוה)
Behold (הן)	Behold (הן)
the man	the people
is like one of us	are one
knowing good and evil	this is beginning of what they will do
and now (ועתה)	and now (ועתה)
he can become immortal	nothing will be impossible for them

Both of these direct discourses of Yahweh describe his reaction to the development of humanity, first on an individual level and secondly on a collective one. After the man and woman eat the fruit, the first thing they “know” (ידע) is that they are naked, suggesting that they have not attained any special “insight” (שכל). By 3:22, however, Yahweh recognizes that they have not just reached adulthood, but also reached a level of maturity or development which entails knowledge comparable to his own. There is no reason to believe that this outcome was in any way unexpected for Yahweh. Since Yahweh placed the tree of knowledge in the garden, it appears that his intention was for the humans to eat of it, in other words, to mature when they were ready.¹⁵³ This knowledge, according to Lyn Bechtel, entails general knowledge including moral, experiential and sexual knowledge. Bechtel writes, “it is never knowledge that reaches beyond the limits of human possibility. Eating the fruit of this tree will symbolically

¹⁵³ This argument was alluded to many years ago by the philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant’s argument is helpful here in elucidating this key component of the story. For Kant, Eden represents life guided by instinct. Once reason enters into the human mind, symbolized by the eating of the fruit, there is no going back to the simplicity of a life led by the senses. Kant writes, “nature had now driven him from the safe and harmless state of childhood – a garden, as it were, which looked after his needs without any trouble on his part (3:23) – into the wide world, where so many cares, troubles, and unforeseen ills awaited him” (Immanuel Kant, “Conjectural Beginnings of Human History,” in *On History*, trans. Lewis White Beck, Robert E. Anchor and Emil L. Fackenheim (Indiana: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1963), 59). Such a transition is nothing less than freedom for Kant. Without this conscious choice, we would still be immature human beings. Humanity was not meant for a simple existence in a garden paradise but one characterized by procreation, at times by hardship, and, most importantly, knowledge. Knowledge is not the result of sin but of choice; the choice of knowledge which entails adversity over and above a life of ease and intellectual oblivion (see page 56).

begin the process of adolescent maturation, which can be characterized by the beginning of sexual maturation and the development of awareness of oppositional forces.”¹⁵⁴ This tree is forbidden to children but essential to prepare for life outside the garden. The notion that the knowledge gained in the garden was the natural course for human maturation is important. It was not sinfully begotten with the intent to reach beyond their created status, but a part of natural maturation.

The two narratives are indeed closely related but, as I will try to demonstrate, not in the manner previously suggested by either Clines or Kikawada. Other interpretations which regard both stories as dealing with sin and punishment, also regard the punishment for both as expulsion, first from Eden, and then from Babel. However, with the sin and punishment aspects removed, we get a very different reading from both narratives. The Garden of Eden becomes a story of individual human maturation and the Tower of Babel becomes a story concerning collective human maturation. The maturation theme is first told on a personal level with Adam and Eve as they mature into adults then on a universal level as humanity matures from a single, united culture to the diversified cultures of the world.¹⁵⁵

The tower narrative, taken on its own and read closely, can be understood as dealing with the theme of the clash between human and divine aspirations, specifically humanity’s wish for unity and Yahweh’s wish for diversity. As Alter writes, “it is the inescapable tension between human freedom and divine historical plan that is brought

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 12.

¹⁵⁵ The theme of maturation in the Eden narrative is the subject of L. Bechtel’s illuminating essay (Lyn M. Bechtel, “Genesis 2.4B-3.24: A Myth About Human Maturation,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 67 (1995)). I want to suggest that the maturation theme is also evident in the tower narrative. We are alerted to this allusion by a variety of literary clues in both narratives.

forth so luminously through the pervasive repetitions of the Bible's narrative art."¹⁵⁶ However, when the narrative is seen in the larger context as the ending to the Primeval History (Genesis 1-11), we get a fuller picture of the text. In fact our literary methodology requires it: as Eslinger writes, we can "analyse a single scene by itself as long as the reader bears in mind that the scene and its interpretation should ultimately be reintegrated with the story."¹⁵⁷

These texts also both record a moment when Yahweh is "thinking out loud," addressing no one in particular. Interpreters often suggest that Yahweh's thoughts in these two places indicate his disapproval or even fear,¹⁵⁸ but it is possible that his thoughts indicate something completely different. Just as Yahweh's words in 3:22 reflect the man and woman's readiness to leave their childhood home of Eden behind due to their maturing knowledge, now the people of Babel, who have developed the ability to build cities and high towers, are ready to populate the earth as the divine mandate stipulates. If the first city established by Cain is characterized by violence, the city of

¹⁵⁶ Alter, *The Art*, 113.

¹⁵⁷ Lyle Eslinger, *Kingship in Crisis: A Close Reading of 1 Samuel 1-12* (Decatur: The Almond Press, 1985), 45.

¹⁵⁸ Some of the scholars who interpret Yahweh's words in 3:22 as part of the punishment (i.e. those who view Genesis 2-3 as relating the fall of humanity) are: U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis Part I* (Jerusalem: Central Press, 1974); Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972); David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1978); Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997); Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion S.J. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984); Similarly, some of those who read 11:6 negatively, in terms of Yahweh either being fearful of what humanity may achieve or simply disapproving of it, are: J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis*, 2d ed. (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991); Leon Kass, "The Humanist Dream: Babel Then and Now," *Gregorianum* 81 (2000); von Rad, *Genesis*; Gunkel, *Genesis*.

Babel is characterized by cooperation.¹⁵⁹ Perhaps this is an indication that humanity has learned to live in peace, at least for the time being. It is, then, these values that Yahweh wished to spread throughout the earth; Yahweh does not want one large, unified community, but many smaller communities capable of working together for a united purpose and of building a society. The people of Babel are armed with newfound knowledge just as the man and woman of Eden are prepared for life guided by reason. Both of these divine speeches are followed by expulsion.

It is the tower narrative's placement in the Primeval History as its concluding account which gives it its ultimate significance. There are five more clues which the narrator includes in both narratives in order that the reader may perceive the deeper meaning of the tale.¹⁶⁰ These clues which are references to an earlier narrative in the Primeval History not only add nuance but also reveal meaning in an undeniably artistic and complex way.

The five clues concern (1) unity; (2) east; (3) the use of the plural; (4) dispersal; and (5) the use of direct speech. Unity is emphasized throughout the tower narrative and has been discussed in detail in previous chapters. But unity is also an issue in the garden narrative where the man and the woman are "one" flesh. A second clue concerns the geographical location. The narrator relates that the people journeyed "from the east"

¹⁵⁹ The cases of Enoch and Babel, however, cannot be viewed as one-dimensional. Cooperation must also have been present for the completion of the first city. Also, it was in the city of Enoch where music and metalwork began. The negative aspects of such unity as related to Babel will be discussed below.

¹⁶⁰ The narrator, indeed, is loath to spell out the meaning preferring rather that the reader participate in the unfolding of his narrative creation. As Sternberg writes, the narrator "disorders where he could follow the natural order, conceals where he might reveal, twists a coherent action into incoherence, challenging the reader to straighten out the incongruity by his own efforts" (Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 284).

(מקדם). This small detail reveals much about the character of the people, namely that they may come from the east, or have an “easterly” character to them. East is where the Garden of Eden is located and where the man and the woman became “one.” A third clue is the usage of the plural pronoun ‘us’ which recalls Genesis 3 where Yahweh also refers to himself in the plural, i.e., “behold the man has become like one of us” (הן האדם היה כאחד ממנו). A fourth clue deals with the Yahweh’s reaction to the people, namely, the fact that he “scatters” (פזן) them. This is a thematic link to the garden narrative where Adam and Eve are similarly “sent forth” (שלח). Though the words are not the same the idea of dispersal is evident in both narratives. A fifth and final clue is the use of direct discourse. In both the garden narrative and the tower narrative direct discourse is used to emphasize the importance of the scene. With these five clues or signs, therefore, the narrator is relating Babel to Eden thematically, structurally, and grammatically. The narrative depicts the development of humanity on a universal scale just as the narrative of the Garden of Eden relates the development of two humans on a personal scale from childhood to adulthood. Hence, Babel is only a starting point, a safe haven in which society can develop, and cannot be a permanent home.

Unity

The unity of the people is without a doubt a major impetus in Yahweh’s decision to scatter the people. The people’s will for unity clashes with the divine will for diversity. While we are not explicitly told what Yahweh’s specific problem with the people is, the issue of their unity is clear enough. The unity of the people is the first thing he notices when he descends to earth, and Yahweh’s thoughts, related in direct speech, gives them

extra force. The unity of the people is stressed throughout the narrative by the repetition of the word 'one' as well as other words and pronouns referring to the people as a universal, single group. The exposition of biblical narrative, as discussed in the second chapter, does not include information that is not pertinent to the plot. It is not simply unity that is related in the first line of the tower narrative, but unity of language. It is the use of one language that defines the group as a single entity. The unity of language and place is compounded by their unity of purpose. All of the people of Babel are joined in their purpose, namely to build a city and a tower and, most importantly, to remain together.

At first glance we may look at their endeavour as worthwhile, even commendable. As Kass writes, "it expresses powerful human impulses, at first toward safety and permanence, eventually toward full independence and self-sufficiency. And it is accomplished entirely by rational and peaceful means."¹⁶¹ However, a closer reading shows this first impression as mistaken. Kass agrees with the majority of scholars who maintain that it is the pride of the people as apparent in their building or desire for a name that causes Yahweh to react. Kass sees their unity as a major concern for Yahweh yet he takes the problem of unity beyond the confines of the narrative. He maintains that the people's unity will lead to a belief in their own superiority and will ultimately erase any distinction between themselves and God. In fact, if we look at the Creation narration Yahweh decides to create humanity in his image and likeness (נעשה אדם בצלמנו כדמותנו). The fulfillment of this creative act comes at the end of the garden narrative when Yahweh remarks that "the man has become like one of us" (האדם היה כאחד ממנו). Therefore it seems clear that it was his intention for humanity to gain the knowledge once the man and the

¹⁶¹ Leon Kass, "The Humanist Dream: Babel Then and Now," *Gregorianum* 81 (2000): 635.

woman were ready to take that step. It is not a negative comment on the condition of humanity, but rather the recognition that the maturation process is complete and Yahweh's goal for humanity has been attained. Therefore Kass's fear of humanity's over-identification with the deity is unfounded. Yahweh himself created humanity in his own image. Recognition of this relationship is not evidence of hubris or of a mistaken notion of their superiority. The simple fact remains, however, that the people of Babel do not broach this topic whatsoever. Evidence of their self-identification with Yahweh is wholly lacking.

Kass continues his argument in questioning "where will the builders of Babel find any knowledge of justice, or indeed, of any moral or political principle or standard?"¹⁶² For Kass, this is the heart of the matter but, I believe, it misses the point of the narrative. Kass states that the unity as seen in Genesis 11 will ultimately result in a sense of superiority which will first lead to a mistaken perception of their equality with God and finally to a loss of morality (if morality is attained in the first place). It is not unity that Kass finds most troubling, but their lack of piety. He sees the narrative as being a morality tale about the dangers of secular life when the narrative can be better described as one that promotes the importance of a diverse humanity. It goes without saying that the narrator believes in the importance of God, but such a statement is hardly worth mentioning. It is, rather, a different matter what the narrator is addressing, namely, how humanity is supposed to live, and how society and culture is supposed to develop. As

¹⁶² Ibid., 649.

Sicker wrote, the Hebrew Scriptures portrays humanity's story, not God's.¹⁶³ The narrator is not preaching to his audience about the proper attitude towards God but relating the conditions under which humanity is best able to prosper, in other words, man's proper attitude towards his fellow man. Without diversity, a counterbalance, society cannot reach its full potential.

The repetition of the word 'one' not only emphasizes the unity of the people but reminds us of Genesis 2:18 where Yahweh tells the man that it is not good to be alone (לֹא-טוֹב הִיּוֹת הָאָדָם לְבָדוֹ). Adam requires another being as a counterbalance which is what the woman provides and the reason for her creation. A problem arises, however, with Adam's perception of her. She was intended to be a counterbalance (עֶזֶר-כְּנֻגָד), yet Adam sees her only in terms of himself as he states, "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" (עֶצֶם מֵעֲצָמִי וּבָשָׂר מִבָּשָׂרִי). Where Yahweh intended diversity, Adam sees only unity. Parker argues that such a desire to merge is also apparent in other parts of creation, most notably between light and darkness. Yahweh attempted to overcome this merging by establishing the greater and lesser lights to rule over light and darkness. The tendency of humanity to merge was to be solved in a much different fashion, namely the establishment of the "other."¹⁶⁴ The people of Babel have the same problem as the man: they strive for unity when diversity is necessary for a balanced and fully developed society. As Combs writes, "the multiple invocation of the use of 'one' should recall to us the earlier use of one in

¹⁶³ Martin Sicker, *Reading Genesis Politically: An Introduction to Mosaic Political Philosophy* (Westport: Praeger, 2002), ix.

¹⁶⁴ Kim Ian Parker, "Adam: The Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberal?" *Journal for the Study of The Old Testament*, Vol. 29, 2005, 447.

Genesis where it was first a problem in YHWH's eyes (2:18)."¹⁶⁵ Therefore, when Yahweh warns that it was not good to be alone, or one, and subsequently acts on the man's behalf to alter the situation, the reader is alerted to the possibility that the oneness of the people of Babel will have a similar affect on the deity. Thus, we see that the tower narrative is, in many ways, a retelling of the garden narrative on a universal scale. Genesis 2 introduces the theme that a woman is created after the man for an "other," a creation necessary to maintain a balance. Yahweh once again sees a need for balance in the tower narrative which causes him to scatter the people abroad. There was no "other" until the woman, and the earth was not filled with a variety of nations until after the people of Babel were scattered. The importance of the "other" will be further discussed below.

East

Unity, the foremost reason Yahweh descends, is not the only clue to the meaning of the narrative. The location of Babel, in the east, also relates information to the reader. As Bechtel writes, Eden is "'toward the east', symbolic of the beginning of the day or the beginning of life (infancy and childhood)."¹⁶⁶ Both Eden and east are mentioned for the first time in 2:8 and it is at this point that man is placed in Eden. It would seem clear, then, in line with Bechtel's maturation theme, that both Eden and the east refer to beginnings or youth. Eden is where Yahweh placed the man to grow and develop. In 3:24 after Adam and Eve have been sent out of the garden, the cherubim are placed in the east

¹⁶⁵ Combs, *Foundations*, 389.

¹⁶⁶ Lyn M. Bechtel, "Genesis 2.4B-3.24: A Myth About Human Maturation," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 67 (1995): 10.

to protect the tree of life which, according to Bechtel, symbolizes childhood knowledge just as the tree of knowledge represents adult knowledge illustrating another link between east and youth. However, since the tree of life is in the centre of the garden it would seem that the narrator is trying to make a point about the term 'east' as well as attach a quality to it rather than the cherubim's location. I would argue that this reference to the east, thus, seems to deal more with Eden as opposed to the tree. First it is a reminder of the connection between east and Eden and its connotation of beginnings, and secondly that re-entry into the childhood home or child-like state is impossible.

Therefore, when we see men migrating eastward, as in the account of the Tower of Babel, we are mindful of the implications. As discussed in the previous chapter, the narrator does not include details unless they serve a function. Thus by the narrator including this detail the reader is given the sense that this may be a story of further development. The similarities between the two narratives make it very probable that they are thematically related. When seen in this way, the tower narrative is about the development of humanity from a single, emergent group to a fully developed humanity with diverse societies, cultures and languages. In Eden, the rite of passage is eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge; here it is developing the technology to build the tower. Once that knowledge is achieved, Yahweh realizes that they are now able to leave Babel with the knowledge they have acquired and to fulfill the divine command of filling the earth. This would mean that what Yahweh says in 11:6 (D') is indeed positive, as discussed earlier. It is not a condemnation that their actions are sinful or that he is worried or fearful of their capabilities (as Fokkelman maintains) but an acknowledgment of their maturity as a society, of their readiness to leave the nest as did Adam and Eve.

Combs' interpretation of the 'east' is quite different. He cites the fact that the man's purpose in the garden is to keep it and that he is forbidden to eat of a specific tree. Therefore, it is in the east that the "man first experiences deprivation."¹⁶⁷ The man and woman's actions in Eden are thereafter driven by this sense of deprivation. They endeavour to overcome it by seeking to be like God. The knowledge they gain from eating of the forbidden tree is outweighed by further deprivation (a cursed ground, the need to toil, childbirth pain, and the introduction of death). Cain similarly sees himself as deprived once informed of his punishment that the ground will not yield food and he in turn moves east. Cain then builds a city to overcome his fear. Combs further states that east "is used to designate those who do not believe they can be forgiven or who do not believe that God is beneficent."¹⁶⁸ Lastly, east is used to designate those who believe that they are not free but rather controlled by the same force that causes the sun to rise. The people of Babel build a city for the same reason as Cain, namely out of fear. Once, however, 'east' is associated with Babel, it then takes on a new connotation, that of oneness. Combs argues that by the tower narrative, humanity has developed in a way that promotes oneness to the point of complete homogeny, what he calls an 'eastern view.'

According to Combs, east has many negative connotations, though I believe it is difficult to associate east with an absolute negativity. Why are cherubim negative? Does the association of east to Eden refer to Adam or to the garden? Is Cain's travelling to the east a reflection on Cain or the nature of the first city? Likewise, does Babel's eastern location refer to the people or to the city? Do the man and woman truly feel deprived?

¹⁶⁷ Combs, *Foundations*, 13.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

Can humanity still be described as deprived since toiling, the pain of childbirth, and death have continued to be a part of, if not epitomize, the human experience?

Rather than interpreting east as signifying a feeling of deprivation and of being controlled by fate in the midst of an unforgiving and unkind God, east can more consistently be understood as representing beginnings. In every instance the term is used it refers to the place rather than the people. This is evident from the first home of the man and woman, to the first city, and finally to Babel where humanity takes the first step from a single emergent group to many nations occupying and filling the earth. It is in Babel, in the east, where the people first develop impressive construction techniques which facilitate their filling the earth. Populating the earth without first developing skills necessary to accommodate large groups, i.e., cities, would have been akin to the man and woman trying to mature without the security of Eden.

Use of the Plural Pronoun

A third clue is Yahweh's use of the pronoun 'us' which again brings us back to the garden. In Eden, Yahweh recognizes that after the couple have eaten the fruit that the man is now "like one of us" knowing good and evil. This signifies the completion of the human's maturation into adulthood. In the tower narrative, 'us' is an allusion back to this development. When Yahweh says "come let us go down" in 11:7 (C") it is in recognition of the readiness of humanity to delve into life outside Babel.¹⁶⁹ Of course, like Eden, the people require a push.

¹⁶⁹ Yahweh's use of the pronoun 'us' also echoes the words of the people of the corresponding section (C) as described in the previous chapter about the chiasmic structure of the narrative.

As discussed earlier, Kikawada views the “plural verb form referring to the singular Divine subject” as a verbal *inclusio* connecting the tower narrative with the creation narrative.¹⁷⁰ It is the sheer infrequency of the term as used by Yahweh which gives the reader pause and causes him or her to wonder of the possible nuances of the term. In fact, if we look at the two earlier uses, one in the creation narrative and the other in the garden narrative, then the premise that Babel ends the Primeval History as the garden narrative began, namely with an account of the development humanity, is strengthened. In 1:26 Yahweh states “let us make a man in our image and after our likeness” (נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדֹמוֹתֵנוּ). Then in 3:22 Yahweh recognizes that “the man has become like one of us” (הָאָדָם הָיָה כְּאֶחָד מִמֶּנּוּ). Thus, it would appear that the man was not like God until after he ate of the forbidden fruit. The creation of man was not complete until this point, until maturity. Since Yahweh intended to make humanity in his image and states that man is “like one of us” at the end of the garden narrative, Yahweh, therefore, perceives himself in terms of knowledge. Humanity was never meant to remain in the garden but to mature and gain the knowledge that Yahweh had intended for humanity since the beginning of creation.

It is this connotation that the term ‘us’ brings into the tower narrative, the idea of completion. As the creation process of humanity was complete upon gaining knowledge, humanity on a universal scale becomes complete once it has acquired the knowledge at Babel depicted as technical abilities. Yahweh’s “let us go down” in section C is not only an echo of the people’s words in section C but also the narrator’s way of crafting this nuance. The tower narrative is not a simple tale dealing with pride and punishment but a

¹⁷⁰ Kikawada, “The Shape,” 31.

remarkably complex as well as artistic tale bringing in various elements of earlier narratives. As the ending to the Primeval History, it is designed to be appreciated on a variety of levels with numerous nuances. With the inclusion of Yahweh's plural pronoun, we get the nuance of the completion of a process begun at creation but only fulfilled at Babel, namely filling the earth. As Kikawada states, "this motif of scattering in our story would then fulfil the blessing given in Genesis 1."¹⁷¹

Dispersion

This brings us to the next clue to the meaning of the narrative, that of scattering. The term "scatter" (פּוֹצֵץ) is used in the previous two chapters, in 9:19 and 10:18. These usages are in no way negative or punitive but merely describe the spreading abroad of the descendants of Noah after the flood (9:19: "these are the three sons of Noah and from these the whole earth was scattered" (שְׁלֹשָׁה אֱלֹהִים בְּנֵי-נֹחַ וּמֵאֵלֶּה נִפְצָה כָּל-הָאָרֶץ) and 10:18: "afterward scattered the families of the Canaanites" (וְאַחֵר נִפְצְוּ מִשְׁפְּחוֹת הַכְּנַעֲנִי)). If, as I have argued, the events of chapter 10 occur after the Tower of Babel narrative, then the verb "scatter" should be read as it is in these two instances without the punitive aspect. Even the language of 9:19 is reminiscent of the tower narrative with the phrases 'sons of Noah' and 'all the earth' bringing to mind 'the sons of men' in section E and the repeated occurrences of 'all the earth.'

The relationship between the Table of Nations and the tower narrative chiastically resembles that between Genesis 1 and 2. Genesis 1 gives a general account of creation followed by Genesis 2 where the more detailed creation of humanity is given prominence.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 32.

Conversely, the Table of Nations describes the details of humanity scattering across the earth relating names and places. At this point, the narrator uses the convention of a flashback in order to reveal the impetus behind this scattering. As Genesis 2 gives a more personal account of Genesis 1, the tower narrative provides an explanation for the spreading abroad of Noah's sons. The biblical narrator is not constrained by linearity. Rather, narrators use flashbacks, or analepses, to "stress a particular situation or idea."¹⁷² In this case, the narrator, who neglected to relate why the sons of Noah began to spread across the earth, reveals, in the tower narrative, that humanity had strived for unity and it is, in fact, Yahweh who instigated the scattering that is described in chapter 10.

Thus we have the tower narrative filling in gaps, artfully illustrating how the world has come to be what it is in the previous chapter. Therefore, the scattering that occurs in the tower narrative is not only to be seen in the same light as in the Table of Nations, but is indeed the same act of scattering told on two different levels with two different purposes, first to describe the proliferation of the human race and secondly to explain how it came about. Who is this generic humanity that Yahweh has scattered in the tower narrative? They are the sons of Noah, and where they have been scattered has already been detailed. Though the diversity is forced, it is no more a punishment than previous interpreters has viewed the 'spreading' about of the sons of Noah. The dispersal of the people was carried out not as a punishment but as a necessary act in order to ensure that the people fill the earth. As Anderson writes, "ethnic diversity is understood to be the fruit of the divine blessing given at the creation (1:28) and renewed in the new creation

¹⁷² Amit, *Reading*, 111.

after the flood (9:1,7).¹⁷³ It seems clear through the refrain of ‘multiply and fill the earth’ that Yahweh not only intends for diversity in his creation but will enforce its realization.

The connection to the garden narrative lies in the fact that the dispersion is caused by Yahweh. Both the human couple and humanity on a universal scale needed guidance upon achieving maturity. Adam needed to be ‘sent forth’ from the garden as Bechtel writes, “to fulfill his potential of cultivating the ground in the world. He is sent forth and driven out (*grš*, emphasizing physical removal), not because God is jealous of his knowing good and bad, but because he is mature enough to leave the childhood world.”¹⁷⁴ The tree of life is guarded to ensure they will not return to childhood. In Babel, Yahweh’s intention is likewise to show humanity that it is prepared for the outside world. They no longer need to be huddled in one united mass, but must venture out to achieve their potential of filling the earth with the knowledge they have acquired at Babel. This is why they are scattered rather than simply expelled *en masse*. If punishment were the issue, then expulsion would have been sufficient but Yahweh scatters them, prompting the diversity he desires.

Use of Direct Speech

A final clue that reveals the meaning of the tower narrative is the use of speech. Four of the nine verses of the narrative are direct speech, structured symmetrically and divided equally between the people and God. Alter discusses in detail the importance of

¹⁷³ Bernhard W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 176.

¹⁷⁴ Bechtel, “Genesis,” 26.

language in the Hebrew Bible and maintains that the narrator will choose direct speech and dialogue over narration whenever possible. He writes:

what is important to [the narrator] is human will confronted with alternatives which it may choose on its own or submit to divine determination. Articulated language provides the indispensable model for defining this rhythm of political or historical alternatives, question and response, creaturely uncertainty over against the Creator's intermittently revealed design, because in the biblical view words underlie reality. With words God called the world into being; the capacity for using language from the start set men apart from the other creatures.¹⁷⁵

Speech is particularly important because it reveals the inner thoughts of the characters as thought process and decision-making are both related, if at all, in this manner. When speech is used, we must consider the impact of speech, in other words, would the scene be altered if narration were used instead? The impact here is that the reader is brought into the story by the use of speech. The reader hears first hand what the characters' intentions are and are thus encouraged to see from the point of view of the people, to identify with them. Without the speech of the people, the reader may not relate to the characters at all. The same is true with the divine speech which echoes and contrasts that of the people. Yahweh is given the last word and the reader then views the situation from his point of view.

When it comes to Babel, there is nothing overtly negative about the attitude or actions of the people but their words point to one very important fact that, in their unity, the people have failed to uphold the diversity exemplified in creation. Rather, they express through their language that they are unified. As discussed earlier, unity is emphasized in the narrative in general and in the speech of the inhabitants of Babel in particular. As the people are anonymous, emphasizing the universality of the text, the

¹⁷⁵ Alter, *The Art*, 69.

words 'us', 'we', 'they' are repeated numerous times. They say, 'let *us* mold', 'let *us* build *ourselves*', 'let *us* make for *ourselves*', and 'lest *we* are scattered' (emphasis added). In just two verses, they refer to themselves six times. Their speech does not relate disobedience or sin but a desire to remain united. It is not insignificant, therefore, that Yahweh directs his attention to that method of unification as he not only alters their unity of place, but of their language as well. Had pride been the issue and not unity, then altering their language as a punishment makes no sense. Such an action can only be explained by the desire to encourage and bring about diversity.

The importance of direct speech in relation to time is further illustrated by several scholars including Bar-Efrat, Amit, and Rimmon-Kenan. When a narrative is presented in the scenic method (when the "events themselves"¹⁷⁶ are described as opposed to the summary method where the narrator summarizes the events) and direct speech is used, narration time and narrated time are virtually identical. With the summary method, narrated time is accelerated and with the scenic method, time slows down which consequently draws attention to the words of the speaker.¹⁷⁷ As Bar Efrat writes, "if we note the variations in narrated time in relation to narration time, we will discover the narrator's focal points and the relative importance of its various subjects."¹⁷⁸ When we examine the tower narrative, A and A' are description or explanation, B, B' and E are summary, and C and C' and D as well as D' are direct speech or scene. The narrator can pause narrated time for a variety of reasons including to pass judgment, to give an explanation, description or comment or to elucidate the motivations of a character. Bar-

¹⁷⁶ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 34.

¹⁷⁷ Summary and scene are also referred to as showing and telling and diegesis and mimesis.

¹⁷⁸ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 151.

Efrat writes, "explanations of events are a powerful tool in the hands of a narrator, enabling clear and unequivocal messages to be conveyed to the readers."¹⁷⁹ This is to ensure that the reader correctly understands the significance of the narrative. The narrator interjects twice in this narrative, in the exposition and conclusion. In A the narrator emphasizes the unity of the people as evident by their one language, as discussed earlier, and in A' relates the consequences of this unity which are, of course, that they have been scattered. The phrase 'all the earth' (כל-הארץ) is used three times in A and A', a stylistic convention which Bar-Efrat refers to as an envelope and is primarily used for emphasis.¹⁸⁰ It is yet another way the narrator focuses the reader's attention on the unity and universality of the people. The ending is reminiscent of the ending of the garden narrative (3:23-24) where the narrator also interjects to relate how returning to Eden is impossible just as the people cannot return to Babel.

In scene (C and C' and D and D'), time passes more slowly than the actions portrayed in summary. This use of time therefore stresses the inherent importance of language in biblical writing. The words of the characters within the narrative are given primacy over their actions. Therefore, as Bar-Efrat maintains, the narrator has

a clear tendency to regard the preparations preceding events and the reactions following them as being more important than the events themselves, denoting a special interest in matters pertaining to the human mind, its motives, decisions, and attitudes. In other words, the human aspects, whether psychological, spiritual, or moral, are granted greater emphasis than factual components.¹⁸¹

This point is made clear when the people state their desire to build a city and a tower in D and when Yahweh descends in E the construction is complete. It is not the buildings that

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 26.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 216.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 152.

are of consequence but the people's mindset to stay together which is emphasized in their speech. The effect of the repetition of 'us' and 'ourselves' could not have been achieved in narration, or indirect discourse. As Fokkelman writes, "the Bible does not contain one single instance of *small talk*; almost every word by a character is existentially revealing or rooted."¹⁸² Many characterizations are revealed about the people in only two lines of speech including their fear of being scattered (which leads to their wish to remain united), their desire to be remembered, as well as their technical skills in construction.

Significantly, Yahweh addresses both the people's fear as well as their desire for a name in his two lines of speech. In scattering them to bring about the diversity he desires, perhaps he is showing them that they are more than capable of building nations and there is no reason to fear separation. Recall that this is precisely what happens in Genesis 10, which looks ahead to what happens after the dispersal. Yahweh also recognizes their technical skill in 11:6. Though far from straightforward, Yahweh's words in 11:6 show that the people have developed a great deal as a society. In the people's own words, they can make bricks and build towers, but Yahweh sees their full potential. In essence, like the garden narrative, their eyes have been opened; the essence of life has not changed, but they have become capable of much more. Finally, the fact that they have been remembered goes without saying. Without Yahweh's intervention, there would be no story to tell.

Thus we can see that the tower narrative, when placed in its larger context of the ending to the Primeval History, is linked to the garden narrative. The tower narrative is in no way meant to be read as an independent tale devoid of contextual background. The

¹⁸² Fokkelman, *Reading*, 68.

case is, in fact, just the opposite as its relevance lies in its placement. The narrator obviously took great care in creating these narrative links so that the reader may bear in mind all of the themes presented along the way to this closing tale. As Gunn and Fewell write, "the search for narrative significance is the scrutiny of words."¹⁸³ Without the close examination of the language that the narrator chooses, then many nuances of the text would be lost. How, then, does the idea that the Tower of Babel narrative relates, in a positive way, the account of human development from a single, unified group to the diverse cultures of the earth affect the overall construct of the Primeval History? Let us now look at the possible implications.

The Implications of the Development Theme on the tower narrative and Genesis 1-11

In reading the tower narrative as a story of development, we wonder what would happen if Yahweh had not intervened and had rather allowed humanity to remain united. Apart from the fact that Yahweh opposes the unity that is described in Babel, many scholars also see such unity as problematic because they believe it is potentially or inherently dangerous. Kant writes:

Holy Writ is quite right in regarding the fusion of peoples into one society – and their complete liberation from external dangers at a time when their culture had hardly begun – as an impediment to all further cultural progress, and a plunge into incurable corruption.¹⁸⁴

Though diversity breeds antagonism it also results in progress and new ideas. Without the interaction that comes with diversity and the subsequent influx of new ideas, such a society would fail to reach its full potential and would rather result in stagnation. There is,

¹⁸³ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 147.

¹⁸⁴ Kant, "Conjectural," 67.

however, a graver implication, that of corruption. Though Kant does not elaborate on falling into 'incurable corruption,' he is surely referring to moral depravity. This is in all likelihood along the same lines that Kass was thinking when he argued that the unity of the people would ultimately lead to a loss of morality due to the mistaken belief of their equality with God.¹⁸⁵

Combs sees the matter of unity in much the same way. He writes, "it leads to excesses because there is no need to search for justice because nothing that happens, even the most horrendous violence, ever actually changes or alters the "one substance"."¹⁸⁶ As long as the group is unaffected, the individuals do not matter, and can even be considered expendable. In such a system, the rights of the individual can disappear which can only have disastrous results.

Parker's interpretation is, arguably, closer to what the narrator is trying to convey and envisions a less dramatic outcome than Kass or Combs. He maintains that a successful society requires both a united people but also an 'other' to act as a balance much in the same way as the woman was to counterbalance the man in Genesis 2. Parker writes:

the desire for universal brother/sisterhood, therefore, has to be seen in conjunction with a situation in which individuals or groups are separate from one another, and in which competitiveness, distrust, and mutual hostility might come about. Here one can recognize, but not overcome and assimilate, the 'Other'.¹⁸⁷

For Parker, it is individuality that is the issue, not morality. In order for an individual not to be subsumed by the group, proper distinction between him/her and the

¹⁸⁵ See Kass, "The Humanist Dream."

¹⁸⁶ Combs, *Foundations*, 411

¹⁸⁷ Parker, "Adam," 447.

group as a whole must be maintained. The same is true for societies on a larger scale. It is, fundamentally, an issue of boundaries. The importance of boundaries was established at the very beginning of Genesis during creation. As Ajzenstat writes, “we have already met a God who intended a creation of clear boundaries and differences, a God who all through this passage repeatedly works by separating.”¹⁸⁸ Yahweh separated the light from the darkness, the waters above and below the firmament, and finally day from night. The greater and lesser lights were given the charge of ruling over day and night respectively because they continued to merge at dawn and dusk. Thus, Yahweh recognized the natural tendencies of certain things to mix, to unite, and therefore put procedures in place to guard against them. The refrain ‘according to their/its kind’ (לְמִינֶה) acts in a similar fashion. Yahweh created an abundance of diverse creatures yet they are all meant to stay among their own kind. This is perhaps why God gave dominion over the animals to the man and woman, so that they could enforce the boundaries. When humanity itself fails to uphold the balance of unity and separation, of diversity and uniformity, he acts to correct the situation.

Perhaps the most notable implication of the development interpretation is the change of tone stemming from the absence of sin. This is not only true for the tower narrative but the whole of Genesis 1-11. When both the maturation theme of the Garden of Eden narrative and the development theme of the tower narrative are in conjunction with each other, then Genesis 1-11 changes to a more positive note. Rather than the

¹⁸⁸ Samuel Ajzenstat, “Liberal Democracy and the Biblical Account of Creation: Some Structural Analogies,” in *Liberal Democracy and the Bible*, ed. Kim Ian Parker (Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 24.

narrator relating the repeated sins of humanity, Genesis 1-11 becomes a narrative recounting the history of humanity from creation to the varied cultures of the world.

It is with Bechtel's analysis of Genesis 2-3, which is devoid of the notion of sin, which not only re-evaluates the narrative but also allows the garden narrative to be seen in an entirely different light than the problematic "fall" interpretation.¹⁸⁹ Bechtel argues that the eating of the fruit symbolizes the humans' maturation into adolescence. She writes, "it is not that the world changes once of the fruit is eaten, but that the humans see the world as it really is through the eyes of mature adults, rather than through the eyes of immature children."¹⁹⁰ The adolescents are now self-aware, cognisant of the reality of the world around them as their eyes are now open. Not only was the process a natural one, but it was intended by God as it was he who created the snake and the woman, the means by which maturation was brought about. The humans have not reached adulthood at this point as evidenced by their inability to take responsibility for their actions as both blame another for what they have done. What is traditionally seen as a dispensation of punishment is, rather, God relating to the humans the "reality of adult life," of life outside the garden.¹⁹¹ For the woman, adult life is characterized by procreation and for the man, working the land. The final transition is into adulthood. At this point the couple get their adult names, Adam and Eve. God prepares them "to leave the childhood world of the garden by clothing them fully, a sign of civilization and social, physical, sexual and

¹⁸⁹ Bechtel writes, "scholars have long recognized the problems and illogical aspects of this traditional interpretation." Bechtel, 3-4.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 19.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 21.

psychological maturation.”¹⁹² Since the tree of life symbolizes childhood knowledge, it is cut off from them. Now, fully matured, Adam and Eve are ready for life outside the garden armed with the knowledge, that of oppositional forces, necessary to survive, procreate and, ultimately, to build a society. As Parker writes, “the removal from Eden, that gigantic womb which is no longer appropriate now that the man and the woman have language and knowledge, completes the maturation process: the man and woman, though alienated beings, are suitable for social life.”¹⁹³

The maturation theme is thus a very fitting interpretation of the text. The language nowhere promotes a sin and punishment (or fall) reading. Those words are not used in the text, and as Bechtel points out, “the ‘sin and fall’ interpretation is not mentioned elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, despite the plentiful opportunities – particularly in the prophets.”¹⁹⁴ In other words, Adam and Eve are not referred to as the paradigm of sinners in the Hebrew tradition. Furthermore, the phrase knowing “good [and/or] evil” is used several times in the Hebrew Bible and never to denote knowledge that is beyond the scope of human development. Therefore the interpretation that eating the forbidden fruit was an attempt to alter their created status is unjustified. As a result of this recent, but perhaps original, reading of the text, it is only natural that such a re-evaluation be afforded to the Tower of Babel.

As a result of reading the tower narrative as being absent of sin, then Yahweh’s actions cannot be viewed as a punishment. As Anderson writes, “there is no basis for the

¹⁹² Ibid., 25.

¹⁹³ Kim Ian Parker, “Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Must We Leave Eden Once and for All? A Lacanian Pleasure Trip through the Garden of Eden,” *Journal for the Study of The Old Testament* 83 (1999): 28.

¹⁹⁴ Bechtel, “Genesis,” 4.

negative view that pluralism is God's judgment upon human sinfulness. Diversity is not a condemnation."¹⁹⁵ Yahweh's intention was that the earth be filled with diverse creatures and human beings. During creation, Yahweh does not create a couple of species, but many varieties of species to fill the oceans, earth and sky. Likewise, he did not create Adam and Eve to be the sole humans but to multiply and fill the earth. Eden was a safe place to grow and learn the ways of the outside world; it was never intended to be a permanent home. As is clear from the structure of the six days of creation, humanity is the culmination of creation. Why would Yahweh create the world if he only intended for the human population to number two people who were secluded in the garden? Rather, the world was created for humanity and humanity was then given the responsibility of having dominion over the animals and to till the earth. This can only be accomplished once humanity has multiplied and filled the earth, not if they are gathered together in a group at Babel. His intentions demarcated during the Creation and garden narratives have not changed by the tower narrative though the people are either unaware of this divine will or unwilling to acquiesce to it. Either way, diversity is enforced and the now mature people are scattered to fulfill the mandate of filling the earth. The people, first fearful of this outcome, are well equipped to face the outside world, just as were Adam and Eve were: they just required a little push.

Conclusion

¹⁹⁵ Anderson, *From Creation*, 177.

While many commentators have argued that pride lies at the root of the sin of the people of Babel, my literary examination of the narrative has tried to demonstrate that unity is more likely the matter at hand. The unity of the people in the Tower of Babel is unmistakable. The repetition of the word "one," the frequency of the pronouns referring to the people as a unified, anonymous, and universal group are among the most obvious signs. But, we also notice that collectively the narrator, the people themselves and Yahweh all describe the people as one, of having one language. There are several signs that point to creation, where diversity is emblematic of the proper characteristic of nature, as well as to the garden narrative. In Eden, Adam and Eve develop the skills necessary for life outside the garden as they mature from children to adults capable of procreation. It is the outside world, which encompasses hardship and pain as well as knowledge and procreation, that is the proper home for humans. Only there can humanity fulfill the divine mandate to multiply and fill the earth. Likewise, humanity cannot remain in Babel. Though there is security in numbers, humanity cannot thrive under such conditions. We need a sense of self that comes from the recognition of the "other," the balance that comes with opposition, the progress that comes with competition. It is the difference between looking into a mirror and looking out the window; both are necessary for self-awareness and knowing one's place in the world.

When seen in this light, the tone of Genesis 1-11 is much different. People do indeed act in a sinful manner at times, most notable in the generation of the flood, but sin is certainly not the overall theme of the narrative as a whole. Without the assumption of sin, a much more suitable theme emerges, that of maturation. The maturation of humanity from childhood to adulthood conveys, arguably, the proper meaning of the garden

narrative and opens Genesis 1-11 with a specific purpose. Yet it is not the only narrative that welcomes a departure from the traditional sin and punishment interpretation. The artistic language and structure of the tower narrative unquestionably demonstrate the complexity of the narrative which is often overlooked. These literary features deserve more than the conventional 'sinful-humanity' interpretation. The purpose of Genesis 1-11, then, is to delineate the journey of humanity from creation to a developed civilization filled with a variety of cultures, nations and languages.

Conclusion

With the introduction and influence of literary criticism it is hoped that scholars and readers alike will move past the notion that the Bible is a hopelessly fragmented text and, rather, see what the biblical authors were capable of. As Sternberg writes, "the Bible's verbal artistry, without precedent in literary history and unrivaled since, operates by passing off its art for artlessness, its sequential linkages and suprasequential echoes for unadorned parataxis, its density of evocation for chronicle-like thinness and transparency."¹⁹⁶ Readers must recognize that biblical authors were first and foremost writers, not just compilers who assembled various fragmentary tales but writers who took pleasure in the creative act, in word play, structure and language. By accepting that the Hebrew Bible in general and our narrative in particular is a work of narrative art then we the reader can appreciate the Bible on several different levels, including its writing, language and design, basically as literature.

It is clear that the narrator of the tower narrative took great pains in creating a tale that can be read on many levels. Perhaps its most basic meaning reveals the opposing nature of humanity and God. God strives for diversity, for the earth to be filled. Humanity, on the other hand, feels more secure when it can maintain a united front. Their fear of being scattered is completely justified on the one hand as Yahweh does indeed scatter them across the earth. However, since the people fare so well after the dispersion as depicted in the Table of Nations it is clear that Yahweh's foundation of diversity is the proper route for humanity. Yet what prompted this fear in the first place? Where they

¹⁹⁶ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 53.

aware of the divine mandate and therefore fear Yahweh's intervention? The narrative simply does not provide information to make a proper conclusion. The narrator does not provide information he deems superfluous. Alternatively, the narrator also wishes for the reader, by his or her own efforts, to determine meaning and make judgments. As Anderson writes, "the narrator does not attempt to fill in the gaps and resolve all tensions prosaically, leaving nothing to the imagination; rather the hearer is invited into the story's dimension of depth and mystery."¹⁹⁷

To assist the reader, however, the narrator does provide hints. These hints, or clues, generate a second level upon which the narrative can be read. When the tower narrative's placement in the Primeval History is taken into account then subtle nuances of meaning emerge. The words the narrator chooses, then, become laden with significance, pointing back to earlier narratives where the words had been used before. On this second level of reading, when the narrator states that the people have one language and one words, a statement which is echoed by Yahweh who similarly describes the people as being one and having one language, the word 'one' is meaningfully connected to the garden narrative where Yahweh had told the man that it was not good to be alone, or one. Linguistic hints such as this abound in the tower narrative not only illustrating the narrator's mastery over language but also of the nature of storytelling.

One of the elements of the tower narrative which certainly brings it into the realm of narrative art is its structure. As Fokkelman writes:

because the symmetrical structure is the most powerful and most fundamental formal aspect of our story we may expect that its interpretation will enable us to push through to the last pre-dominating perspective, to that one decisive concept

¹⁹⁷ Anderson, *Creation*, 170.

of the narrator's which inspired and guided him in choosing and handling his tools.¹⁹⁸

Using such a structure, the narrator is able to highlight certain fundamental aspects of the narrative without having to spell out his intentions to the reader or compromising his artistic aim. By structuring the text to focus on 11:5 (section E) where Yahweh descends to earth, the narrator can do several things at once: he causes the reader to question what the people have done to warrant Yahweh's immediate attention, what Yahweh will do upon viewing the actions of humanity, and how the people will fare in the end. In prompting such questions the narrator ensures the participation of the reader. In short, employing a chiasmic structure results in much more than displaying artistic ability.

The point the reader is perhaps meant to take from this narrative is that the diversity called for by Yahweh in the creation narrative is the best way for humanity to prosper; this means, of course, that the unity described in our narrative is at best a path to social stagnation and, at worst, simply dangerous. As Ajzenstat writes, human merging is "as much a spiritual danger as it is our deepest craving."¹⁹⁹ There are many things that could go wrong in a society in which individuals are over-identified with the group as a whole. A lack of self-identity could result in failure for individuals to thrive and a loss of imagination (the arts). On the more dangerous side, a society of 'one' could very well be fearful, hostile, or feel superior to any outsider. This is not what is meant by "be fruitful and multiply."

There are as yet further avenues of study which may not only reveal noteworthy aspects of the text but in doing so also enhance our understanding of it. Comparative and

¹⁹⁸ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 29.

¹⁹⁹ Ajzenstat, "Liberal Democracy," 33.

contemporaneous literature, though scarce, could aid with cultural questions. This is, however, a dubious course of action since texts written too long after the tower narrative may have no more in common with it than today's drama share a commonality with Shakespeare. Words and language, after all, are fluid, always in motion, ever evolving.

An appealing course of study would be an attempt to successfully apply Sternberg's argument that the narrator does not create characters or situations which are purely black and white to the tower narrative or to the Primeval History as a whole. He writes the narrator's presentation "stops well short of dichotomizing the world into paragons and brutes, attractive protagonists and repulsive antagonists. Esau and Saul, even Abimeleck and Ahab, have their sympathetic features; while Jacob and David, or even Elijah, are certainly not idealized."²⁰⁰ If the narrator abstains from stereotypes leaving it up to the reader to make the appropriate value judgments then this trait would have implications for the tower narrative. If even characters traditionally viewed as villains in fact are given sympathetic features by the narrator then why would the people of Babel be depicted as wholly sinful as many scholars have traditionally argued? Would an alternative to sin then be considered or would the response be that they are sinful but also have a sympathetic quality? To delve deeply into this train of thought could be indeed enlightening.

I do not contend that my interpretation reveals *the* meaning of the tower narrative, only that it is a possible meaning which I believe is supported by the text. The cultural and temporal gap between the biblical author and present-day readers is a difficult one to overcome. The nature of the text, leaving the reader with questions and forcing

²⁰⁰ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 494.

assumptions is without a doubt something that the original audience would have managed without much difficulty if any at all. The fear that the people felt over the prospect of being scattered, for instance, would not have held the same ambiguity that it holds for us. Though they may have understood the narrative without the same consternation as, for example, the present interpreter, it does not mean that they could have appreciated the text any more. If a reader must determine the language and structure of the text, it will result in not only a more creative interpretation, but also a profound respect for biblical writing.

The placement of the tower narrative at the end of the Primeval History is a perfect introduction to Abram and the Patriarchal History. In the first eleven chapters of Genesis the narrator has artistically crafted the history of humanity from creation to a familiar time for the audience, not exactly in the author's time but one in which readers could recognize. As Westermann writes, "the itinerary moves from the distant darkness of primeval time into clear light where history begin."²⁰¹ Though this is no doubt secondary to the thematic purpose of the narrative it does add yet another layer onto the narrative. With the tower narrative placed in a historical time frame it encourages the reader to relate to the events and characters in a more personal way than narratives which depict significant temporal or cultural gaps from the reader's own experience. Indeed, the narrative still resonates today with commentaries, art, as well as movies. Has its original meaning been lost to the ages or does the fact that it remains, however distorted, in the minds of those living today offset its evolving significance? This of course remains to be seen. The importance, however, of analyzing the Hebrew Bible using the techniques of

²⁰¹ Westermann, *Genesis*, 544.

literary criticism has hopefully become evident. By examining the narrative in this holistic manner, it is hoped that new light has been shed on an old tale.

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