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Genesis 11:1-9

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# ARCHITECTS AND BUILDERS

*SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS*

In 1415 the English, led by Henry V, defeated a much larger French army in the Battle of Agincourt. This battle is perhaps most famous from Shakespeare's play *King Henry V*. On the eve of the battle Shakespeare has Henry deliver his famous St Crispin's Day Speech: "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers" (4.3). After the miraculous victory, Henry says, "Let there be sung *Non nobis* and *Te Deum*" (4.8). *Non nobis* refers to the opening line of Psalm 115 (Vg 113:9) in the Latin Vulgate: *Non nobis, Domine, non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam*, "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory." Kenneth Branagh's film (1989) has a beautiful rendition of this text set to song by Patrick Doyle who wrote the soundtrack.

These words are easily said but difficult to practice. We want to take glory for ourselves and exalt our own name. We hunger for significance. We want to be noticed and given credit. This is true in secular society. How much of the financial turmoil of the past few years was caused by senior executives seeking to make a name for themselves? How often are wars caused by rulers seeking greater power? Fundraisers play upon this desire for monuments to self, promising naming rights to signature donors. But it is true also in Christian ministry. Though we might say, "To God be the glory," we want to be noticed, to be appreciated, to be needed, to be important, to be necessary. Sadly, there are too many in Christian ministry trying to make names for self, building kingdoms and empires.

This is not a modern problem. Throughout history humans have sought to make a name for themselves. We find this in our text for today, the story of the Tower of Babel. This is the final story of the primeval history, Israel's pre-history. It is the final backdrop to God's call of Abraham which marks the birth of Israel. The story is short, just nine verses. It is a masterpiece, full of wordplays. It is a text with much texture. The story has two halves: human action and divine response. In the first half, humanity in general is the subject and God is completely absent. In the second half, the Lord is the subject and humanity has nothing to say, nothing to do but stop.

## Human Action (11:1-4)

**Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.**

**They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." (Gen 11:1-4 TNIV)**

The Tower of Babel follows on the heels of the Table of Nations as the second half of the account of the sons of Noah (10:1-11:9). It is clear that these two halves are not chronologically arranged. The story of Babel begins when the whole world had one language and one vocabulary. Yet the Table had noted that each of the lines of

Shem, Ham and Japheth had spread out as nations with their own languages (10:5, 20, 31). This story of the Tower of Babel gives us a second perspective on the dispersion of the nations. But there are links between the two sections: Nimrod is the mastermind of the empires of Shinar and Assyria. In the days of Peleg the earth was divided, with Joktan's line leading to Babel, but Peleg's line leading around and beyond it. Perhaps we are to read the story of Babel as taking place around the time of Nimrod and Joktan.

In those days when humanity was unified under one language they moved ever-eastwards. This is the wrong direction. Adam and Eve had been expelled out the east side of the garden (3:24). "Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod (wandering), east of Eden" (4:16). Migrating east is symbolic of moving further and further away from the Lord. Cain had settled in the land of wandering, an oxymoron. Here after the Flood humanity was still wandering: the verb "moved" implies a nomadic existence, repeatedly breaking camp and moving on. Humanity was looking for a place to settle down, but it was wandering in the wrong direction. It did find a place to settle: in a plain in the land of Shinar. This is southern Mesopotamia, the area in which the kingdoms of Sumer and Akkad would develop. This was Nimrod's first center of power before expanding northwards into Assyria. Archaeology agrees that this was the earliest center of urban life. But the Bible isn't interested in mere concordance with archaeology; it adds a theological spin. This was east, far east, of Eden. Humanity settled far from God.

Having settled there, the people became architects and builders. Conferring together, they agreed on a two-part plan, indicated by the two-fold, "Come, let us..." They had a grand building project in mind, but first they needed some new technology. This technology was a two-stage process: they made bricks and they baked them. Bricks had long been made out of mud or clay, packing the material tightly in a wooden form then leaving it to dry in the sun. Such sun-dried bricks were easy to make and adequate for smaller buildings. But they had limited durability and strength. Somewhere around 3000 BC there was a technological breakthrough in the Ancient Near East: the use of fire to bake bricks which were much stronger and more durable. Such firing was an expensive technology, so the fired bricks were used only for the most important buildings. But the use of these bricks allowed bigger and grander buildings.

The Israelites for whom this story was written neither knew nor needed this technology, so the narrator adds a note to explain Mesopotamian building practices. In the rocky hills of Canaan the Israelites had all the building material they needed right at hand: rocks. If you've been to Israel you know that it is very rocky indeed. All construction was with stones. If mortar was used it was clay. But Mesopotamia is an alluvial flood plain without many rocks. What it does have in abundance is mud and clay. So instead of stone the Mesopotamians used brick, first sun-dried bricks and then fired bricks. For sun-dried bricks clay was used as mortar, but fired bricks used bitu-

men or asphalt from naturally-occurring pits—an early indication of the extensive oil fields that underlie Mesopotamia.

Ancient Mesopotamian sources heralded the making of these fired bricks. The bricks were often stamped with the name of the king or the deity, preserving his name in perpetuity. (The same was true of Egypt: one of the remarkable items in the British Museum is a mud brick stamped with the name of Ramesses, possibly the pharaoh at the time of Moses.)

With baked bricks and bitumen in hand the people embarked on their building project: “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens.” The Table of Nations has already credited Nimrod with four cities in Shinar: Babel, Erech (Uruk), Akkad (Agade) and Calneh. Many more cities were built in the land. At the center of each of these cities was a tower, the ziggurat. The Hebrew word for “tower” means something that is big; the Akkadian word “ziggurat” means something that is high. At the center of each city was a monumental building. Since this was the most important building in the city, fired brick was used. The interior was made of sun-dried bricks with an exterior facing of fired brick. The earliest ziggurats were built around 3000 BC; they were still being built when Israel was exiled to Babylonia in 587 BC.

The remains of about thirty of these ziggurats are known. Probably the most famous ziggurat remaining is that of Ur, built ca. 2100 BC. Leonard Woolley excavated it in the 1920s, together with the spectacular royal tombs; many of his findings are now in the British Museum. It was partially restored under Saddam Hussein. But in the ancient world the most famous ziggurat was that of Babylon.

A ziggurat was a high, stepped pyramid. The Greek historian Herodotus reported that the ziggurat in Babylon had seven tiers. It was conventional to say that the top of the ziggurat reached to the heavens. On top was a temple, the temple of the deity of that city. Once a year the king mounted the ziggurat to meet the god in his temple.

The people had two reasons for building the city and its tower: “so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.” In both respects they were acting against God’s purposes. How could they do otherwise, since they had wandered east, far from Eden and from God? Their quest to make a name for themselves mirrored the Nephilim, the mighty men of old who were men of renown (lit. “men of the name,” 6:4). They were the heroes to whom the world looked, but it is clear that the Lord did not look on them with favor. Now the people of Shinar sought to follow in the footsteps of the Nephilim, exalting themselves as famous men, men whom the world would acclaim. They feared insignificance; they feared that they would not be remembered. They also feared lest they be scattered, yet it was God’s intention that the peoples of the earth spread out over the earth. We see that humanity after the Flood is no better than humanity before the Flood. How would the Lord react to this presumptive behavior, this frustration of his purposes? The second half of the story shows us.

### Divine Response (11:5-9)

**But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that they were building. The LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”**

**So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth. (11:5-9)**

What deep irony! What sarcasm! No matter how tall the tower, no matter that the builders considered its top to be in the heavens, the Lord had to come down to see it and the city which it dominated. Today even the remains of the ziggurats are impressive, but back then the fully-built ones were puny in the Lord’s sight. The city and tower were built by “the sons of man/Adam,” mere earthlings. How could such earthlings hope to build something that reached to heaven? But the Lord took the threat of human capability seriously, observing that this enterprise was only the beginning of what they could do with the unity provided by a common language. Their success as architects and builders, in developing technology and using that for grand construction, showed that they could succeed in whatever they turned their mind to: “nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.” This sounds straight out of Silicon Valley, where we are used to ever-advancing technology. There’s nothing that our engineers cannot do. If they can’t do it yet, they soon will be able to do so. But it is clear that the Lord did not look on this human capability and purpose as a good development. Therefore, he, too, announced a plan: “Come, let us...” He purposed to confuse the one language so that the people could not understand one another and so unite in one purpose.

The Lord scattered them from there, that is from this city in Shinar, whose name we still do not know. He scattered them over the face of the whole earth, the one thing that they had been trying to avoid, yet the very thing which he had commanded Noah and his sons to do: “Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth.” Prior to the Flood, the multiplication of humanity upon the earth had produced a multiplication of evil. Now, after the Flood, the Lord intervenes to limit the agglomeration of evil. Scattered from Shinar across the earth, the people ceased building the city. They were forced to stop. Still it is “the city,” a city as yet without a name. Which city is this?

Only in the final verse do we at last learn the name of the city: Babel, which we know as Babylon. The people called their city Babilli, meaning “the gate of the gods.” Their ziggurat they called Etemenanki, “the temple of the foundation of heaven and earth.” Both names reflected their ideology, their understanding of their city’s place in the world. They considered this man-made mountain to be the axis of the world, the meeting point between heaven and earth: not from heaven to earth, but from earth to heaven. But the Biblical verdict on Babylon is that it is not the gate of the gods; it is the place of confusion. The verb used for what the Lord did with the universal language is an unusual one. Elsewhere it is used of cooking: of mixing flour with oil in the preparation of offerings. It is as if the Lord put the language in a blender and scrambled all the letters—a forerunner of the “Will it blend?” campaign!

The story of the Tower of Babel is a rejection of everything that Mesopotamian society, and notably Babylon, held dear. Three times these early chapters of Genesis have rejected the city-builders. Cain (or his son Enoch) was the first city-builder (4:17). He built the first city when he went into voluntary self-exile from God, departing from God’s presence to wander east of Eden. He built a city for security and for significance, naming it after his son. Nimrod was the next city-builder, building the empires of southern and northern Mesopotamia (10:8-12). But he was a rebel; his name means “we

rebel.” Now the third city-builder is humanity gathered together to make a name for itself. The Bible takes a dim view of all three city-builders. Yet Mesopotamian society exalted these city-builders. They were their heroes of old: the mighty men who built cities and empires. These were the men recorded in their ancient chronicles. Genesis dismisses them all.

### God the Builder and Architect

But God is not against cities per se, nor is he against the making of a name. But in both cases he wants to be the architect and builder. Since he is the potter not the clay, that's a role he can best play. Problems arise when it's the clay that tries to be the architect and builder. The tower of Babel forms the final backdrop to the call of Abraham. In the next chapter God will call Abraham to leave the cities of Mesopotamia behind. Abraham will leave the splendor of Ur with its mighty ziggurat and sophisticated urban society to journey to a land he does not know. The city-builders of Mesopotamia sought to make a name for themselves, but God will promise Abraham that he will make his name great (12:2). Notice the architect and builder of this great name: it is not Abraham who will make his own name great, but God. Abraham never did get to live in another city. He lived in tents as a nomad, but he was content doing so because his eyes were on the future:

**By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Heb 11:8-10)**

Abraham had the faith to see beyond the man-made cities of this world, the monuments to human sufficiency, pride and fear, to see a city built by God, a city whose foundations would be far firmer than even the most highly fired clay bricks.

God is a city planner and builder. His first city was the earthly Jerusalem. Several psalms sing the praises of this city, including Psalm 48 from which our call to worship was drawn. Jerusalem was simultaneously the city of David and the city of God, the city of the king and the city of the great king. Here is where heaven met earth, in the temple where God put his presence. Note the direction: this was not earth trying to reach heaven, but God in heaven putting his presence on earth, filling the temple with his glory, his *shekinah* indwelling. This was heaven intruding onto earth.

The Bible closes with a vision of the New Jerusalem. Why is a New Jerusalem necessary? Because the earthly Jerusalem became indistinguishable from Babylon. It became a city opposed to God's purposes, opposed to his prophets. It became a city of rebels. Jesus wept over it, as had the prophets before him, and he died there in the place of rebels. New Jerusalem is the city which comes down from heaven. It is a vast city, larger than any humans could ever build. It is a cube, implying it is the holy of holies. The holy of holies fills the entire city, which fills the entire cosmos. The whole cosmos will be holy, infused with God's glory, with his presence. Heaven and earth will be joined together, not because earth has invaded heaven, but because heaven has invaded earth.

This is what God is up to: invading earth with heaven. The garden of Eden was an intrusion of heaven onto earth. The land of Israel with the city Jerusalem, the temple and the holy of holies at its very

heart was an intrusion of heaven onto earth. Jesus was an intrusion of heaven onto earth, as the disciples beheld his glory tabernacling among them. Where is the heavenly city now? Where is heaven on earth now? It is the church, Zion, where God's people are gathered around the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the meeting place of heaven and earth. The church is not an earthly organization. It is a colony of heaven on earth. It operates completely differently than an earthly institution. It is not motivated by a quest for significance, nor by fear. It is infused with the Spirit of God. It is God who is at work in the church as its architect and builder. He supplies the gifts for the church to function as the body of Christ. He is the architect of the work which he wants us to do. He is building his people into a fit dwelling place for himself.

We get it very wrong when we try to do things the other way around, when we try to be the architect and builder, when we try to reach from earth to heaven. Psalm 115 continues:

**Why do the nations say,  
“Where is their God?”**

**Our God is in heaven;  
he does whatever pleases him.**

**But their idols are silver and gold,  
made by human hands.**

**They have mouths, but cannot speak,  
eyes, but cannot see.**

**They have ears, but cannot hear,  
noses, but cannot smell.**

**They have hands, but cannot feel,  
feet, but cannot walk,**

**nor can they utter a sound with their throats.**

**Those who make them will be like them,  
and so will all who trust in them. (Ps 115:2-8)**

This is what happens when earth tries to invade heaven. This is what happens when people are the architects and builders. People make gods in their own image. Idols and statues that have mouths, eyes, ears and noses, but none of them work. People take a piece of wood; half of it they make into a statue to worship and the other half they burn to keep warm (Isa 44:15-17). In the beginning God made humans in his image, and people have been returning the compliment ever since. On top of each of the ziggurats in Mesopotamia was a temple in which was a lifeless statue, lifeless because it was man-made. But in the holy of holies in the Jerusalem temple there was no statue at all, because God cannot be reduced to a man-made image. In 63 BC, when the Roman general Pompey captured Jerusalem, he strode into the holy of holies and was astounded to find nothing there. He couldn't understand: how could a temple not have a statue in it?

Sadly, too often we try to live in the church according to the principles of Babylon. We seek to make a name for ourselves, seeking to be significant, to be remembered, to be important, to be necessary. We seek to make monuments. But when we do this we make God in our image. We try to make God fit into our plans, rather than seeing how we are caught up into God's great plan. We co-opt him as the God of our cause. As “God of my comfort” we treat him as the Great Therapist who is obliged to make us happy. As “God of my success” we treat him as our Personal Trainer who will coach us to prosperity. As “God of my nation” we treat him as Guardian of Christian America. In these and many more ways we trivialize God.<sup>1</sup>

1. Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995).

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This is a tragedy because God is up to things far grander than my comfort, my success, my nation. He invites me into his love, the love which he shared with his Son since before the beginning, and which his Son brought to earth. When I am secure in that love which comes from heaven down to earth, I don't have to try to make a name for myself on earth, I don't have to act out of fear. I can play my part as a citizen of heaven on earth. I can leave the success and the making of names to God. I can leave the architecture and the building to God himself. I can allow God to receive all the glory rather than seeking it for myself.