

Let Us Go Down and Confuse Their Language

11: 5-9

DIG: What does the LORD do in this passage? Why? How would confusing their language aid in fulfilling the first Great Commission (12:1-3)? What do you learn about judgment and mercy from these verses?

REFLECT: How is unity in the Messiah (see Ephesians Chapters 1 and 2) different from the unity at the Tower of Babel? Where are you feeling scattered or confused? Why might that be?

Normally the LORD allows men and nations to pursue their own ways without supernatural interference on His part. In other words, we can say no to God and make it stick. Man is free and responsible; and though he will eventually suffer the consequences of his evil deeds, Elohim is long-suffering. Therefore, ungodliness often seems to thrive without His interference in the affairs of men. But there have been a few occasions on which the accomplishment of ADONAI's very purposes for the world became so endangered that divine intervention was required. The antediluvian corruption was one such example (6:1-8), and the rebellion at Babel was another.²⁰⁹

Just as 8:1 is the hinge of the Flood story, so this is the hinge of the Babel account: **But Elohim came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building (11:5). This is anthropomorphism. God did not need to do this, but the purpose is to teach us that a judge must not condemn the accused until he has seen for Himself.** No matter how high man built his tower, Ha'Shem still had to come down to see it. This shows that He is interested in the affairs of man. But the LORD is so high and man is so small by comparison that He has to come down to get a better look. This section deals totally with the judgment of God in response to the rebellion of man in the previous four verses. Before this verse, there was only human activity and after this verse there is only divine activity. As always, ADONAI has the final word.²¹⁰

The Tower that they built was a religious symbol called a *ziggurat*. It had a square base and sloping, stepped sides with a small shrine on top. They were often painted with blue enamel in order to make them blend in, in their minds, with the heavenly home of one or more of their gods. They believed that the gods would briefly live in the shrine when they came down to meet with the people. The people would climb up the side of the *ziggurat* all the way to the top in the hope that the gods would condescend to meet with them.

The story of Jacob's dream at Bethel (28:12) refers to a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven. In the same way, here they built a tower that reached to the heavens (11:4). Other towers in Mesopotamia had similar names and served the same purpose. The one at Asshur was called the House of the Mountain of the Universe, Borsippa's tower was called the House of the Seven Guides of Heaven and Earth, and Larsa's people knew theirs as the House of the Link Between Heaven and Earth. The tower at Babel was referred to by the Babylonians themselves as the House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth.²¹¹

The LORD said: It is as one people speaking the same Hebrew language they have begun to do this (11:6a). The rabbis teach that all their advantages, which they were using ungratefully, arose from the fact that they were one people and spoke one language. But this was only the beginning, only the first act of rebellion. More rebellion would follow and they would sin in many other ways as well. Then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them (11:6b). Two uncommon words are used here, both of which are found only where Job is responding to the LORD. He says: No plan of yours can be thwarted (Job 42:2). The first word is *batzar*, which means to thwart and is translated be impossible here. The second word is *zamah*, which means to purpose and is translated they plan to do. Both of these verses make the same point. In Job, nothing or nobody can restrain or thwart the workings of God. And here, He states that nothing will be able to restrain or thwart the workings of mankind unless their initial building project, a threat to the divine will and rule, is halted.²¹² The rabbis interpret this verse to mean with such unity they will enthrone idolatry for all time, so that no man will ever be able to turn to the worship or the true God. Basic to everything was their ability to communicate with each other.

Therefore, Elohim said: Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other (11:7). The LORD takes their scheme quite seriously. God cannot ignore this rebellion, for it is rebellion against Him.²¹² This is the second time He comes down, but this time He comes down to thwart man's purpose. By using the word **us**, it implies a plurality in the Godhead. Because Jews do not believe in the Trinity, so the rabbis interpret this to mean the LORD was talking to the angels. But the purpose of their coming down was to confuse their language. Literally, the Hebrew reads: *they will not hear a man, the language of his friend*. In 11:3 they said to each other, "Come let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." But here *they will not hear a man, the language of his friend*. The point is that what they could do before, they will no longer be able to do. Knowing the evil in their hearts, the LORD of mercy moved to protect them from even more evil schemes.

But why not simply topple **the tower**? Because that would solve the problem only temporarily. Towers are replaceable. Even if the people did not build another **tower**, they could choose another equally arrogant project. The answer must be deeper than that. It is not **the tower** that must be done away with, but what makes possible the building of **the tower** - an international language that provides communication among them. If this ability to communicate is removed, it is unlikely that the individuals will continue with their work.²¹³ The next two verses show us the results.

Not content to **confuse their language**, the LORD scattered them from there all over **the earth**. It seems that much more than egotism on the part of mankind was involved. God decided that as good as unity and harmony were, division and separation were better than collective sin and apostasy.²¹⁴ This is how the dispersion of 10:5, 20, 31 and 32 was accomplished. **What they feared actually happened**. The tower was probably finished, but **they stopped building the city** because they could not understand **each other** (11:8).

That is why it is called Babel - because there the LORD confused the language of **the whole world** (11:9a). What we have here is a play on words. The Akkadian word translated as **Babel** literally means *gateway to a god*, and this was a fitting description of what the *ziggurat* was intended to do. But the word **Babel** sounds enough like the Hebrew word *balal*, which means *confused*, to provide an opportunity for a play on words by Moses, the human writer. Despite the fact that the people called it *babel*, the gateway to god; **God** made a *balal* of it.

From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth (11:9b). **The rabbis teach that this indicates that they have no portion in the world to come. For whose sin was greater, theirs or that of the generation of the Flood? The latter did not plan a rebellion against God, whereas these did; and yet the former were drowned while these were saved! The generation of the Flood, however, robbed and quarreled with each other, while these were united and acted with brotherly love toward each other. This demonstrates how hateful dissension is and how great peace.**

Babel was the reverse of the feast of Weeks (Acts 2). On that day the Holy Spirit restored order to **the languages** so that everyone **together in one place** understood **each other**. Today the Bible has gone out in more **languages** than any other book. It is still being translated into **tongues** and dialects and is being brought to literally hundreds of tribes throughout the world. The Gospel is for all mankind and the purpose for speaking in **tongues** at the feast of Weeks was to let **the human race** know that **the LORD** had answered **the Tower of Babel** problem. **He** had a plan of redemption for **mankind** now! The mission had been accomplished. It is no longer necessary for **humans** to try to work out **their** salvation

on **their** own. **They** can listen to **God's** message and turn to **Him**. The Gospel is for you, whoever you are and whatever **language** you speak. It's for you. It's for all the nations of the world. We are told in the final book of the Bible that there will be gathered into **His** presence **a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language (Revelation 7:9).**²¹⁵ At that time the LORD says that **He will restore to the nations a pure language, that they all may call on the name of ADONAI for redemption and mercy and serve Him with one accord (Zephaniah 3:9).**