

## 17A BABEL AND TECHNOLOGY

Is God Opposed to Technology?

In the familiar story of Babel, the people of Shinar decide to build a tower to heaven to make a name for themselves so that they're not scattered.

God is angered by what He sees.

God confuses their languages, and they are scattered.

The unfortunate account appears in Genesis 11:1-9:

*Now the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as the people journeyed from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they settled there. Then they said one to another, "Come, let us make bricks, and bake them thoroughly." So they used brick for stone, and tar for mortar.*

*Then they said, "Come, let us build a city and a tower, whose top reaches to heaven, and let us make a name for ourselves, so that we are not scattered abroad across the whole earth."*

*Then the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men were building. And the Lord said, Behold, the people have become as one, and they have one language. This is what they have begun to do. Now nothing will be restrained from them which they can imagine. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language, so that they may not understand each another's speech."*

*So the Lord scattered them from there across the face of all the earth, and they stopped building the city. Therefore, the name of it is called Babel, because the Lord confused the language of all the earth there, and from there the Lord scattered them abroad across the face of all the earth.*

The account of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 has led many to question whether God has a fundamental bias against human ingenuity, technology, or progress.

Bible scholars, however, are quick to point out that the problem lies in the hearts and motives of the builders, not in the structure per se.

Josephus, in *Antiquities of the Jews*, gives us this information:

*1. Now the plain in which they first dwelt was called Shinar. God also commanded them to send colonies abroad, for the thorough peopling of the earth, - that they might not raise seditions among themselves, but might cultivate a great part of the earth, and enjoy its fruits after a plentiful manner: but they were ill instructed, that they did not obey God; for which reason they fell into calamities, and were made sensible, by experience, of what sin they had been guilty; for when they flourished with a numerous youth, God admonished them again to send out colonies; but they, imagining the prosperity they enjoyed was not derived from the favor of God, but*

*supposing that their own power was the proper cause of the plentiful condition they were in, did not obey him. Nay, they added to this their disobedience to the divine will, the suspicion that they were therefore ordered to send out separate colonies, that, being divided asunder, they might the more easily be oppressed.*

*2. Now it was Nimrod who excited them to such an affront and contempt of God. He was the grandson of Ham, the son of Noah, - a bold man, and of great strength of hand. He persuaded them not to ascribe it to God as if it was through his means they were happy, but to believe that it was their own courage which procured that happiness. He also gradually changed the government into tyranny, - seeing no other way of turning men from the fear of God, but to bring them into a constant dependence upon his power. He also said he would be revenged on God, if he should have a mind to drown the world again; for that he would build a tower too high for the waters to be able to reach and that he would avenge himself on God for destroying their forefathers!*

*3. Now the multitude were very ready to follow the determination of Nimrod, and to esteem it a piece of cowardice to submit to God: and they built a tower, neither sparing any pains nor being in any degree negligent about the work: and, by reason of the multitude of hands employed in it it grew very high sooner than anyone could expect; but the thickness of it was so great, and it was so strongly built, that thereby its great height seemed, upon the view, to be less than it really was. It was built of burnt brick cemented together with mortar, made of bitumen, that it might not be liable to admit water. When God saw that they acted so madly he did not resolve to destroy them utterly, since they were not growing wiser by the destruction of the former sinners; but he caused a tumult among them, by producing in them divers languages, that they should not be able to understand one another. The place wherein they built the tower is now called Babylon; because of the confusion of that language which they readily understood before; for the Hebrews mean by the word Babel, Confusion. The Sibyl also makes mention of this tower, and of the confusion of the language, when she says thus:- "When all men were of one language, some of them built a high tower, as if they would thereby ascend up to heaven; but the gods sent storms of wind and overthrew the tower, and gave everyone his peculiar language; and for this reason it was that the city was called Babylon." But as to the plain of Shinar, in the country of Babylonia, Hestiaeus mentions it when he says thus:- "Such of the priests as were saved took the sacred vessels of Jupiter Enyalius, and came to Shinar of Babylonia." [1]*

Babel became Babylon, the mighty pagan empire that destroyed the nation of Judah:

*Dr. Lehman Strauss (1911-1997) writes, "Babylon was founded by Nimrod, the great-grandson of Noah (Genesis 10:8-10). Surviving a series of conflicts, it became one of the most magnificent and luxurious cities in the known world. Superbly constructed, it spread over an area of fifteen square miles, the Euphrates River flowing diagonally across the city. The famous historian Herodotus said the city was surrounded by a wall 350 feet high and 87 feet thick, wide enough for six chariots to drive abreast. Around the top of the wall were 250 watchtowers placed in strategic locations. Outside the huge wall was a large ditch, or moat, which surrounded the city and was kept filled with water from the Euphrates River. The large ditch was meant to serve as an additional protection against attacking enemies, for any attacking army would have to cross*

*this body of water first before approaching the great wall. The cost of constructing this military defense was estimated to be in excess of one billion dollars. When we consider the value of a billion dollars in those days, plus the fact that it was all built with slave labor, one can imagine something of the wonder and magnificence of this famous city.” [2]*

A study of the text shows that the root problem at Babel was human pride and a conscious refusal to move out into the wider world. Without the advanced technology, however, they could not have attempted the project.

We shouldn't miss the humor and sarcasm:

*Humor comes in the story of Babel, so that when the tower is built, the great tower, with its “top reaching to the heavens,” the truth is, it is actually so puny that God has to come down from heaven to see it. The text says,*

*And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built (Gen 11:5).*

*Now, of course, as omniscient, God clearly sees everything, and the humor in the text is not some primitive notion of God. Rather the humor is for our benefit. For, in effect, it says that our greatest, tallest, most prominent and glorious work that we saw as reaching heaven itself, is in fact so puny, that God has to stoop to even “see” it. He has to descend to get a glimpse of it. [3]*

The most well-known representation of Babel was the painting by Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel. Bruegel shows the Roman-looking tower collapsing as people stand apart and watch.



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Writers take two different views of the account at Shinar:

1. Genesis 11 is about human pride and rebellion against God's plan. The use of technology is purely incidental.

2. Genesis 11 is about human pride and rebellion against God's plan. The use of technology is a major aspect of the episode and must be analyzed in detail.

In addition, scholars disagree on whether the human project was primarily an attempt to declare independence from God, to communicate with pagan gods, to establish a unified government, or to resist the command to fill the earth (or possibly all of these).

## Human Pride

Babel shows the attempt of man to usurp the glory due only to God. It happens in every age.

*The biblical account of the Tower of Babel illustrates how far people will go to take God's glory from Him. According to the biblical account, the people schemed, "Come, let's build a great city for ourselves with a tower that reaches into the sky. This will make us famous and keep us from being scattered all over the world." (Genesis 11:4) The structure likely resembled an ancient Babylonian ziggurat—a cone-shaped tower with a spiral staircase leading to a zodiac-inscribed pinnacle designed to represent heaven. Note the emphasis on human effort, "Come, let's build," and self-glory, "This will make us famous." The Living Bible identifies this tower as the idol it was: "a proud, eternal monument to themselves" (11:4 TLB). God stopped the blasphemous project by confusing the people's languages and scattering them (11:5–9). [4]*

Babel emphasizes the contrast between Genesis 11 and Genesis 12:

*"Oh, so you've built a tower, have you? Whatever will you think of next?" That's the tone of voice we find in Genesis 11, when God comments, sardonically, on the pathetic little efforts of human beings to make themselves big and important...Arrogant and insecure, they have become self-important. God scatters them across the face of the earth, confusing their languages so that they can no longer pursue their grandiose projects.*

*The story of the tower of Babel is an account of a world given to injustice, spurious types of spirituality (trying to stretch up to heaven by our own efforts), failed relationships, and the creation of buildings whose urban ugliness speaks of human pride rather than the maturing of beauty. It all sounds worryingly familiar. That is the scene within which, in Genesis 12, we find the great turning point. God calls Abram...and makes spectacular promises to him – "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." [5]*

In Genesis 12, God chooses a man and a family. What the builders at Babel sought was offered to Abraham, whose focus was on God, not on himself.

MacArthur adds:

*The structure of the text is very simple. It's a structure of reversal. Verses 1 to 4, man is building up what he wants. Verse 5, God steps in; and verses 6 to 8, God tears down what man has built*

*up. It's just the structure of reversal. Verses 1 to 4, the action of man. Verses 5 to 8, the action of God. And that's a simple way to understand it. Verse 9 is a summary by Moses.*

*Now, the action of man is indicated in verse 3 with this statement. "They said to one another, 'Come, let us.'" They repeat it again as in verse 4, "'Come, let us.'" That was sort of the statement indicating that they were going to launch their great ambitious active rebellion. The action of God is described in verse 7, same words, only this time God says, "'Come, let Us.'" So, you have then the action of man in verses 1 to 4, the action of God in verses 5 to 8.*

*The contrast in this brief text is between what man desires to achieve - directed at self-glory, self-fulfillment – and what God does to show man's impotence and emptiness before Him. It is man at his best and his noblest, trying to achieve his greatest anti-God act, and God steps in and undoes the whole thing. Frankly, the attitude of the people at Babel is essentially the same as the attitude of the Adam and Eve in the garden. It is an attitude of rebellion; it is an attitude of wanting to live apart from God, driven by personal ambition and personal pride.*

*And interestingly enough, the locations are the same. Shinar, the plain in which they built Babel, was very near to the location of the Garden of Eden. Both of them were in the Mesopotamian valley, the lower Euphrates valley between the Tigris and the Euphrates River. So that man, then, is twice thrown out of what was the most beautiful place on the planet. Once it was just Adam and Eve thrown out of Eden. Now it's the whole of the population of the world thrown out of the Plain of Shinar. [6]*

*It [Babel] was to maximize their power, glory and autonomy. Yet even this boast reveals their radical insecurity. They built the city to "make a name for themselves" through their accomplishments--but if we lack a name, it means we don't know who we are. "To make a name" in the language of the Bible is to construct an identity for ourselves...*

*Derek Kinder writes, "The elements of the story are timelessly characteristic of the spirit of the world. The project is typically grandiose; men describe it excitedly to one another as if it were the ultimate achievement....At the same time they betray their insecurity as they crowd together to preserve their identity and control their fortunes. "... Our pride and need for personal significance necessarily lead to competition, disunity, and strife...The two things we want so desperately - glory and relationship- can coexist only with God...*

*Babel is a case study of the impossibility of building any collective endeavor-a society, an organization, a movement- that really "works" unless it is grounded beyond itself, in God. [7]*

*Gerald Chester sees the Babel account as an attempt by humans for self-glorification (instead of God-glorification) and draws these lessons: [8]*

1. Everyone seeks self-glorification.
2. No plan will succeed against the Lord.
3. Communication is essential for enduring success.

*God therefore must act. Pride is our mortal enemy. There is nothing so destructive in us, as individuals and as a race, as pride. Pride is the most deadly of all drives. It leads to every other sin, for we think ourselves wiser than God. It makes us forget of God, and our debt to others and to the resources of this world. Through pride we think too highly of ourselves and forget our fragility, we stop accepting necessary and healthy limits, and consider the wisdom of the past to be childish. We over rule God and our ancestors too. Pride is so foolish, but, being blind, it does not even recognize itself.*

*Thus the Lord must act and put an end to this foolishness before we did something really stupid.*  
[9]

## Rebellion against God

Allen Dwight Callahan notes that Babel is linked to the mighty rebel Nimrod:

*The story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 is one of Western literature's earliest and most famous accounts of "the strength of Collective Man." In the story's history of interpretation, the tale becomes Nimrod's story. Nimrod is implicated in the project of Babel because of his association with Babel and the land of Shinar in the preceding chapter of Genesis. The biblical theologian Gerhard Von Rad insisted that "chapters [10 and 11] must be read together because they are intentionally placed next to each other,"<sup>1</sup> and ancient commentators read the two chapters together in their unanimous identification of Nimrod as the principal architect of the Tower of Babel. Chapter 10 features the so-called Table of Nations: the lineage of "the generations of Noah" (10:1)...*

*According to Genesis 10, Babel in the land of Shinar—the region of Babylonia as it is referred to in Egyptian and other ancient sources<sup>2</sup>—is "the beginning" of Nimrod's kingdom (Gen. 10:6–10), and Babel heads the list of cities in the land of Shinar according to Genesis 10...*

*The name Nimrod resembles the Hebrew root "to rebel," and the rabbis enlist this linguistic accident in their exegesis. "Both the story [of Babel] itself and the name [Nimrod] suggested that Nimrod was some sort of rebel against God ...a 'mighty hunter before [and perhaps a would-be snarer of, a hunter against] the Lord.'" [10]*

The builders of Babel had made a strong boast, and it was a boasting of rebellion. "It has been said that the more excessive the rebellion the more brazen is the demonstration of arrogance and mastery over one's own destiny. Mankind was commanded to multiply, and, by multiplying, fill up the earth with their descendants. The men of the plain of Shinar arrogantly renounced any authority over their lives but their own and made plans for their own security and reputations."  
[11]

## Independence from God

Babel becomes an enormous monument to human independence from God:

*Babel is built on technology: mortar, well-dried bricks and sophisticated architecture. Mortar, bricks and city buildings have a different relationship to nature than a garden. Whereas the garden essentially arranges the given goods of nature, the city is built on cultural goods like bricks that are dramatic departures from nature, fundamental reinventions of the underlying clay and bitumen.*

*So the primordial story of Genesis begins in a garden and ends in a city--begins with the shaping of nature and ends with the supplanting of nature...*

*So the city of Babel amounts to a massive declaration of independence from God: a defiantly human effort to deal with the world in its wonder and terror--and to put distance between humans and God in all his wonder and terror. Babel and its tower are the logical end point of the process that began when the man and woman made fig leaves in their first moments of self-and sin-consciousness--a completed cultural project, a city, whose entire purpose is to cover, protect and shield its people from other human beings and from their Creator. [12]*

Schaeffer observed:

*Verse 4 makes what might be called the first public declaration of humanism...We have already found this sort of humanism in the family of Cain, but what a strong humanistic statement this is! Let's make a name for ourselves so that we can maintain a human unity and we can achieve social stability. In verse 7 God acts into this situation: "Come, let us (note the communication among members of the Trinity) go down"... [13]*

R. C. Sproul wrote:

*We've been called to have dominion over the earth to the glory of God, but we want dominion over the earth and over the heavens for the glory of man. That's what was going on at Babel—a distortion, an evil twisting of the legitimate task that God has given to mankind. There's nothing wrong with building. There's nothing wrong with sowing and reaping. Those are the tasks that God gave to us in creation, but they're to be done under the authority of God. They're to be done coram Deo, before the face of God, under the authority of God, and unto the glory of God...). Nothing built for the glory of man will survive His scrutiny. But what is done for God's glory will endure forever. [14]*

*The Lord saw this claim to autonomy for what it was and perceived man thought nothing would be impossible for him (v. 6). This does not imply divine impotency but recognizes the dangers of collective apostasy. Depraved men will eagerly join with others to fight against God and His people. So the Lord judged mankind, dividing our tongues to curtail our efforts (vv. 7–9). The differences in language make it harder for the serpent's seed to unite against the woman's. [15]*

## Idolatry

In Genesis 11 we see people joining together around a technology, trying to overcome the limitations of their world and live independently from God.

*Rather than using their creative powers to honor God...the people of Babel wanted to bring glory to themselves. Rather than live in dependence upon God ...they tried to achieve complete autonomy from him...At Babel we find humans creating a city as their anti-Garden and a tower as an image to themselves. [16]*

Dyer finds three lessons in the narrative [17]:

1. God worked against the values of technology.
2. Technology can't be separated from the social world.
3. Technological change results in social change.

David Wilkerson wrote:

*Baal worship originated at the Tower of Babel, under Nimrod. This godless man declared, "Let us make us a name" (Genesis 11:4). So Babel was built as a monument to human success and accomplishment. At the top was an observatory, where astrologers followed the heavenly bodies. These proud people literally "reached for the stars."*

*In Elijah's day, the god Baal supposedly granted its worshippers success, fame and prosperity. Those who kissed the idol's feet sought fulfillment in every area of materialism and sensuality. Who were these Baal worshippers? They were God's chosen people, backslidden worshippers of Jehovah. Like me, you may wonder how God's people could be drawn to such blatant idolatry.*

*First of all, these people had already been judged by God for lusting after prosperity. They had to flee to Egypt, where they faced poverty, hunger and homelessness. There they saw Baal's followers being blessed materially. And they reasoned, "We had plenty of food back in Jerusalem, when we bowed to our idols. We were blessed and successful then, with no suffering. But ever since we stopped worshipping those idols, we've faced only hardship. Let's go back to burning incense and making drink offerings to the queen of heaven. Then maybe we'll get the things we want again" (see Jeremiah 44:16-19).*

*God's people had fallen under the powerful seduction of a "success gospel." A spirit of greed and covetousness had gripped them, so that their lives now centered around wealth and recognition. Of course, there's nothing wrong with succeeding, if you do things God's way: clinging to Christ, tithing faithfully, submitting to his will. But in Israel, there was an unholy mixture: the people bowed to Jehovah because they feared his judgment, yet they also coveted material things.*

*Right now, the same spirit of Baal is raging in our nation. On Wall Street, in front of the U.S. Stock Exchange, we see the very image of this pagan god. It's a bronze statue of a huge bull, representing a "bull market": ever-increasing prosperity, great wealth and fame, human achievement. These are the gods our nation bows to. [18]*

## Ancient Postmodern Mindset

Gene Edward Veith suggests:

*The culture that built the Tower of Babel parallels our modern age. Confident in their human abilities, their reason and scientific knowledge, the postmoderns have no need for God. To make a name for themselves, they not only built cities, they engineered new social and economic orders, such as socialism. Their technology, more advanced than the Babelites', enabled them to build not just a tower to reach the heavens, but spaceships to reach the moon. Moreover they can transgender.*

*God judged the pretensions of Babel. Noting their genuine accomplishments and the vast potential of human achievement, the Lord saw that a united, technologically sophisticated human race would be nearly unlimited in their capacity for evil. "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". God mercifully thwarted this primitive but dangerous beginning (what "they have begun to do"). He shattered their self-deification and brought their famous tower to ruin.*

*(Splintering into inaccessible groups) is exactly what has happened with the fall of modernism. The monolithic sensibility of modernism, which seemed to have an unlimited potential, has fragmented into diverse and competing communities. People can no longer understand each other. There are no common reference points, no common language. Totalitarian unity has given way to chaotic diversity. Scattered in small groups of like-minded people, those who speak the same language, human beings today are confused...*

*God's people can only agree with the judgment on the Tower and the curse of Babel. They will likewise agree that modernism is idolatrous and will rejoice in its fall. The curse of Babel, while appropriate, was a punishment for sin. [19]*

## Pagan Worship

Whitcomb held that the tower project involved building a ziggurat temple modeling the earth, moon, and stars, for Mesopotamian pagan worship. "This was not an innocent, scientifically naive, primitive effort to reach the highest heavens! It was, instead, a brilliant but blasphemous effort to dismiss forever the God who had commanded Noah and his three sons after the Flood to 'be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.'" [20] The earth's "division" in the days of Peleg (Genesis 10) was, therefore, he states, not a geologic division, but rather this linguistic division at Babel.

John Walton suggests that the tower was probably a ziggurat. As such, the early Babylonians were not trying to ascend to heaven. Rather, the ziggurat was a "sacred space," a type of "executive elevator" where gods could come down from heaven to receive gifts from people and, in turn, meet their needs. God absolutely rejects such false religion and destroys the tower. By

the very next chapter God begins His own initiative, through a chosen family and a covenant. [21]

### United Humanistic Government

The end result of the building project was confusion and scattering. "It was this confusion of languages and scattering of the people across the face of the earth which gave birth to nations. If God had not confounded their language and scattered them, a one-world government and one-world religion would have been established on the earth, but it would have been a government and religion in opposition to its Creator." [22]

*In effect, the dictators in Babel wanted to rule the world. Their centralized kingdom would be located in the "land of Shinar." Man, through the agency of statist power, would become God as he ascended the Tower of Power, grabbing for himself more and more control over God's created order, centralizing his domain and subjugating the people to do his bidding. [23]*

North writes-

*The Tower of Babel, the First Tower of Power, is a good place to start in our understanding of the nature of political power. These early empire-builders wanted to make a name for themselves (Gen. 11:4), to supplant the government of God and replace it with a centralized, bureaucratic government where all of life would be controlled from Babel. Making a name for themselves, like naming in general, was an act of sovereignty and power; it was to declare authority over the thing that is named." [24]*

*The builders of the tower of Babel were attempting to construct a symbol of their unity-religious, cultural, linguistic, and political. Their symbol was to be a great tower, probably a Babylonian ziggurat, which was a multi-tiered structure that resembled stepping stones to heaven from whichever direction a person approached it. Men sought to "make us a name," that is, to define themselves and their existence autonomously. Like Adam, who had named - defined, classified - the animals in the garden, these men also had the power of naming. They wanted to build a symbol of their unity in order not to be scattered (Gen. 11:4). They needed political and religious unity in order to enforce the unitary power to define mankind. They feared disunity, which would compromise the ability of a unitary name-giver to enforce its names and definitions...*

*God scattered them in order to restrain the outworking of their evil imaginations (Gen. 11:6). The quest for total unity in terms of principles other than those laid down in the Bible is a perverse quest. Unity is to be ethical, not egalitarian or humanistic. There are always distinctions in any community, different functions, different responsibilities, different skills (1 Cor. 12). The attempt therefore to construct a one-world order was doomed from the start, for the nations survive throughout Bible history and into the very city of God (Rev. 21:24-26). Such a one-world order has to involve extensive political centralization and therefore the loss of personal freedom and personal responsibility. [25]*

## Resisting God's "Fill the Earth" Command

Peter Hong emphasizes the people's fear of being scattered as a prime motivation for building the tower. God's purpose, however, was for them to move out beyond their familiar and comfortable boundaries to be a blessing to the nations.

*In choosing to remain together in their safe, homogenous existence, instead of spreading out over the earth, they were thwarting God's purposes. Walter Brueggemann writes,*

*The fear of scattering is resistance to God's purpose for creation. The people do not wish to spread abroad but want to stay in their own safe mode of homogeneity. They try to surround themselves with walls made of strong bricks and a tower for protection against the world around them. This unity attempts to establish a cultural, human oneness without God...*

*Living in Babel is what enables ethnocentrism, nationalism, racism, and other "isms" to thrive. Living in Babel is what causes the great divide between the "haves" and the "have-nots." Living in Babel is what leads us to believe that nothing important exists outside of our own walls. Living in Babel encourages us to label people unlike us as "others" and see them as the enemy. It's what allows the "us vs. them" mentality to thrive. [26]*

Middleton sees the account of Babel as a critique of Mesopotamian culture. "The Genesis 11 ideology/critique unmasks the human impulses that masquerade as religious legitimacy." The underlying impulse is to exercise power over others. The tower was most likely built by the labor of enslaved masses, much like we see in Exodus. [27] God's response is to confuse their language (undone at Pentecost) and to scatter the population. "It redresses the attempt at Babel to resist the original charge to the human race to multiply and fill the earth (Gen. 1:28)" [28]

## Technology Issues

The Genesis 11 account seems to involve more than human pride and paganism. Babel does involve a basic technology- the ability to make bricks changed their world.

*And this is very much our stumbling block today, for we are very technological. The fact is, we have been through a period of wondrous invention, ingenuity and technology. We have been to the moon and back! We have seen the dawn and advancement of electricity, computers, televisions, medical science, physical sciences, and all the endless gadgets and devices that enhance and simplify our life.*

*But technology has a way of fooling us, as we see in the story of the Tower of Babel. We start to think we are so great, that we can save ourselves, that we don't need God or the wisdom of our ancestors. If Babel rose high, look at our Skyscrapers! It is very easy to be impressed with ourselves.*

*But it is an illusion. We really know so very little. What we know amounts to a period (.) at the end of a sentence, in one book in the Library of Congress. Our technology inebriates us, just like it did of old at Babel. And in our stupor we overestimate our strength and become braggadocios.*

*Like teenagers we proclaim, "I know a few things!" To which God must have to laugh and say, "You are right, you do a few things....very few things." ... [29]*

Tony Reinke notes that Technology is inherently dangerous because it is the product of purposive human activity, and we need help from God in limiting its use (Tower of Babel). [30]

*One thing that technology has the potential to do is numb us to the reality of our situation. Constant connectivity to the world seems to mask our broken connection to God in sin. One Google search will fill the affirmation void we crave in justifying our sinful desires as we find communities at the click of a button that are more than willing to call our sin "harmless self-expression". The relational and physical distance of wireless communication allows us to deal substantial emotional and spiritual damage without having to witness their affects or pick up the pieces. [31]*

*(W)hat we discovered is that the people were moving eastward. Yet the people began to settle. In essence they began to move away from their nomadic roots. And with their "rootedness" they began to create something of permanence that wasn't a possibility before. They wanted to create a Tower. Yet the only reason this becomes a possibility is through technological innovation: the creation of a brick. Bricks are uniform, they are mass-producible, and functional. They open up the ability to building projects never even dreamed of before*

*Technology has a tendency to infect and increase our pride. Look at how people strive for the better car, phone, house, or cool gadget so that they feel secure. These are the same emotions and insecurities that drove people thousands of years ago to make the Tower of Babel. We desire our own permanency, and monuments to our greatness but the message of the text is that in chasing after those things we end up scattered and alone. [32]*

Derek Schuurman writes-

*It [Babel] was a technological project that employed new technology for making bricks, but it was directed by people who wanted to build their own bridge between heaven and earth and "to make a name for themselves" (Genesis 11:4). God disrupted their plans, but this temptation to place our trust in technology continues; efforts to build modern-day towers of Babel persist. The term technicism is a word that has been coined to refer to the faith in technology as savior or rescuer of the human condition. A recent book titled **Infinite Progress** includes the subtitle "How technology will ultimately solve ignorance, disease, poverty, hunger, and war." This is religious language, proclaiming a bold trust in technology. Any time we put our faith in something created rather than the Creator, it becomes an idol. [33]*

*But what of deeds without faith – a category which could incorporate much of modern engineering? In 1 Cor.13: 1-13, we read that even great works of charity are meaningless without Faith, Hope and Love. The greatest technological engineering project will not succeed without a complete appreciation of the social purpose and the spiritual dimension. The Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) gives a strong case study of the folly of embarking on a civil engineering project with cutting-edge technologies whilst ignoring God "Come, let us build ourselves a city,*

*with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves.” (Genesis 11:4b). [34]*

Are big technological projects like Babel always driven by pride?

*I think that big technological projects are often driven by pride, a starting point that likely means the direction is not God-honoring. However, pride is not the only reason for pursuing a big technological project. In the name of stewardship of resources, we might seek economies of scale, such as building large wind turbines instead of smaller ones. In pursuing a calling to develop and unfold God’s creation, we might build big. Competition might drive a big project, not because of pride, but in order for a company to survive. Engineers might view a large project as pursuing their calling, following Colossians 3:17 “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” [35]*

### Unbridled Technology

*If we look earlier in biblical history we find further examples of the right and wrong use of technology. The people who built the tower of Babel...seem to have been technologically advanced (v.3). They used their skills for self-aggrandizement, seeking security behind man-made walls and looking for an identity based on their own spectacular achievements (v.4). There is no suggestion that they acknowledged responsibility for, or accountability to, anyone outside their society. They lived in a world with limited horizons. In these circumstances, God intervened very directly to prevent an even more critical situation developing, and the whole technological society they had constructed was destroyed. [36]*

The contrast, Jiggins notes, was in Genesis 6, where God used man’s technological skills to build an ark and continue the divine plan for creation. [37]

*They didn't want to use anything natural or 'God-made'. There was no room for God's involvement in their project. Thus their choice of bricks and mortar. They reject using natural 'God-made' materials like stone or clay and choose to create their own inventions for building materials.*

*God descends into the world to make sure that man does not claim the world as his own without God's involvement in it. He must make sure that man does not only make a name for himself (as the verse states) without God giving His stamp of approval and direction. So, God disperses man into many languages and nations thwarting the global village concept for thousands of years.*

*Today we experience some of the unifying force of the Tower of Babel as we live in a veritable global village. And perhaps this is where the problem begins. Over the past 200 years, since the advent of modern technology, man has become increasingly secular. The more we can figure out the hows and whys of the world, it seems, the less we need to believe and trust in God and religion. Man has become too confident, too secure with his control over many things in the world and looks at religion as designed for primitive thinkers. [38]*

Gayle Ermer notes the pride associated with technology:

*Technology can have the effect of making us proud. There is a fine line between celebrating the advantages and rewards that modern technology has made possible and worshiping that technology. Worship in our modern world likely does not include bowing down to the technology in an obvious way, but rather relying too much on the powers of modern technology to provide self-sufficiency. Technology is something we should do in response to God's stewardship requirements, not something we go out and do ourselves to eliminate our dependence on him. Engineers and others who interact with technology need to be reminded that our built things are just as dependent on God's sustaining power as the "natural" things are.*

*One way of decreasing the focus on technology as a means of providing self-sufficiency might be to broaden our horizons relative to who the stakeholders are for any given technological development. The Babel story reminds us of the dangers of having an inward focus and using technology for the purpose of benefiting the "insiders" while keeping the "outsiders" at bay... Engineering as a career has also sometimes been promoted as a way to allow America to keep its technological edge relative to other countries. While it may be true that America's affluence depends on having enough good engineers, this should not be the ultimate motivation for choosing engineering as a career.*

*The Babel story emphasizes the need to recognize our own dependence on God, in all our activities, but also in our technology. Ellul assumes that mastery over things, which is part of our current technological paradigm, must lead to mastery over others (injustice) and mastery over God (human independence). I don't think this has to be the case. Our mastery over things is a pleasure to God when those things are designed not to bring glory to particular individuals or societies, but to bring glory to God by serving others. This is not an easy thing to do as engineers working in the current business climate. We as Christians need to constantly fight to bring technology into service of others, especially the others that Jesus highlights in the New Testament: the poor and oppressed. We need to join with others (including non-Christians) who recognize the dangers inherent in technology development and are committed to implementing technology responsibly. [39]*

*The tendency to place our trust in human ingenuity is also apparent in our modern times. Sinful pride and trust in technology lead some to disregard limits. Speculation about emulating brain functions and uploading minds into computers [Transhumanism] lead some to believe that computer technology will eventually free humans from the limits of their mortality... When such activities lead to pride, forgetting God and ignoring limits, they become like building a modern-day tower of Babel. [40]*

## Digital iGods

*The primeval prologue in Genesis concludes with a cautionary tale about attempts to become like God. Noah's offspring included Nimrod, a mighty hunter whose kingdom began with Babel.*

*They built a tower in Babel to reach heaven and make a name for themselves before God leveled such presumption. History has come to judge such self-seeking as Nimrod's folly. Today's tech leaders built platforms to elevate our status. Apple has given us the illusion of control—packing our friends, our followers, our schedules, and our diversions into one essential device--the iPhone. We poured riches upon these techno-lords in appreciation. The iGods of Amazon, Google, Facebook, and Twitter have responded to our praise by offering us a form of divination. We can extend our brand, broaden our reach, and spread our clout by joining the digital parade. Yes, it can be exhausting to be an iGod. The electronic din can resemble the confusion that followed Nimrod's folly. At Babel, everyone was talking, but no one could understand. They were confused. [41]*

### Computers/ Man-Machine Systems

*A man-machine system reflects the spiritual condition of its builders. It may reflect submission to the Lord, or rebellion...*

*This desire to be self-sufficient, independent of God, is one of the prime expressions of man's sinful nature.*

*This purpose is also typical of modern man-machine systems. The stated purpose of a computer system is usually "to extend man's abilities." This reflects the deeper purpose of the heart: to be equal with God, "to reach to heaven." A computer data bank is an attempt at "omniscience"; teleprocessing and remote sensing suggest "omnipresence"; computer control of huge machines suggests "omnipotence." Computer systems are often vehicles for man's attempt at technological self-sufficiency. The building materials of the Tower of Babel illustrate striving for self-ufficiency: man-made brick rather than natural materials such as wood or stone. Similarly, computer programs are the epitome of a man-made building material: they are simply ideas. Man keeps trying "to reach to heaven" by his own efforts.*

*There is also an analogy between Babel and our computerized society in the Lord's judgment against them. The judgment against Babel was confusion; today, much of the complexity and confusion of society has been made possible only by the computer. "To err is human, but it takes a computer to really fool things up."*

*The similarity between the Tower of Babel and modern computer systems has little to do with the technologies; it lies in the similarity of the heart conditions of their respective builders. The world is still rebelling against the lordship of the Creator, and is using technology to express that rebellion. [42]*

### Babel and the Internet

*God confounded their language (v. 7), effectively nullifying their ability to unite. The less they understood one another, the more they argued. Arguments grew into fights—and work came to a*

*screeching halt. Not understanding their neighbors, many moved away to seek a living in distant parts of the land. The tower was never completed.*

*But today, man has finally succeeded in overcoming communication barriers. And he is once again uniting and merging his scientific genius. The Information Age—and especially the Internet—is a prime example of this.*

*Yes, we can accomplish technological feats. When it comes to constructing an intricate technological wonder such as the Internet, people can unite with absolute determined effort to produce a nearly miraculous achievement. But try to work together to formulate some kind of a plan for harmonious living, and it seems we're doomed to abysmal failure!*

*Unlike at the Tower of Babel, where God forbade the people getting together, this time our Creator will allow men to get together one last time. He said, through the prophet Daniel, that at the time of the end "...many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased" (Dan. 12:4). The word "knowledge" in this verse is rendered trouble in the Moffatt translation. The Companion Bible says that this "knowledge" equals calamities or wickedness.*

*Our troubles and calamities have not just doubled; they've multiplied—thanks to modern technology! But our God has allowed modern communication methods to dramatically increase. The Internet is bridging the gap that He put in place some 4,000 years ago. [43]*

## **Babel and AI**

*Fred Brooks observes that rhetoric in the field of AI has "echoed the builders of the Tower of Babel: 'We will make machines that think; we will make Giant Brains. '" Brooks suggests that these goals "although glamorous and motivating, sent the discipline off in the wrong direction." We are responsible for the direction of our technology, also in the area of AI. [44]*

*Human history is littered with examples of hubris and foolishness, but the one I'm drawn to in this instance is the Tower of Babel. Contrary to what many people assume or believe, the goal of the tower wasn't to literally reach to Heaven (a goal that the people who built it would have recognized as impossible). Instead, it was a monument to human greatness and a direct violation of God's command to disperse throughout the earth.*

*God's confusion of humanity's language as the Tower went up was a strike against humanity's foolish and vain attempts to avoid his will. By mixing the language everyone spoke, he forced them to find their own groups and spread out from Mesopotamia. The vast dispersion of humanity followed this moment — the greatness of mankind had tried and failed to resist God's commands.*

*If there's a "Tower of Babel" moment coming for the AI Revolution, I won't pretend to know or profess what that could look like. Humanity is sprinting down a rabbit hole that it doesn't really understand. To be clear, I'm not arguing that God is about to smite humanity for its adoption of AI (though that's certainly possible). What I'm arguing for instead, is that humanity's history of*

*charging full-steam-ahead with no consideration other than progress, profit, or some other measure of success nearly always ends in some kind of disaster.*

*One exuberant proponent of AI argued that, “AI is quite possibly the most important — and best — thing our civilization has ever created, certainly on par with electricity and microchips, and probably beyond those.” I’d argue that this is not the case. Instead, AI has much more in common with a long-decayed ziggurat somewhere in the fields of ancient Mesopotamia. [45]*

## Utopian dreams

Charles Eisenstein in *The Ascent of Humanity* (a book with Bruegel’s Tower of Babel on the cover) examines human attempts to build utopia through technology:

*The Biblical story of the Tower of Babel provides one of the central metaphors of the book. In the story, the builders sought to build a tower that reached to heaven—a metaphor for the attempt to reach the infinite through finite means. Similarly, human beings through their technology—social and material—have sought to create a perfect world, a Utopia... No matter how many problems we solve, the sky seems just as far away as ever. Meanwhile, the higher we build the more problems appear in the base of our structure, as if our civilization were beginning to collapse under its own weight. Look at Pieter Bruegel’s painting. The lower sections begin to crack and crumble even as they build the tower higher. Similarly, even as technology achieves new wonders, fundamental problems as old as civilization proliferate. We have microchips and nanotechnology, yet a large and growing portion of humanity cannot meet basic human needs for food, health, and security from violence. One look at the Tower in the painting is enough to see that the builders’ project is obviously doomed. It is absurd, in fact. The higher the building goes, the greater an insulation from reality is necessary to continue the effort. Yet continue it they must, because their whole way of life is built around its construction... We as well are addicted to the ascent of technology. Faced with the problems caused by previous technology, we know no other way to solve them but through new technologies that generate their own unintended consequences. Helplessly, we build the Tower higher...*

*Together, the Scientific Program and the Technological Program form a defining myth of our civilization. The two are intimately related: technology, our ability to control the world, arises from science, the means by which we understand and explain the world. Technology in turn provides the means for science to probe even more deeply into the remaining mysteries of the universe. Technology also proves the validity of science—if our scientific understanding of the world were no better than myth and superstition, then the technology based on that science wouldn’t work...*

*What I am talking about is the faith encapsulated in the saying, “Science will surely explain it someday.” It is the faith that the answer is there, the answer is accessible to science, and that science itself is well-grounded in its primary principles and methods. The technological corollary to this faith in science is our faith in the technological fix. Whatever the problem, the*

*solution lies in technology—finding a way to solve the problem. Science will find an answer. Technology will find a way.*

*Underlying the Technological Program is a kind of arrogance, that that we can control, manage, and improve on nature. Many of the dreams of Gee Whiz technology are based on this. Control the weather! Conquer death! Download your consciousness onto a computer! Onward to space! All of these goals involve controlling or transcending nature, being independent of the earth, independent of the body. Nanotechnology will allow us to design new molecules and build them atom by atom. Perhaps someday we will even engineer the laws of physics itself. From an initial status of subordination to nature, the Technological Program aims to give us mastery over it, an ambition with deep cultural foundations...*

*In the Bible we find a...warning in the Tower of Babel, a metaphor for the futility of reaching the infinite through finite means. Have we not, through our technology, attempted to rise above nature—sickness, uncertainty, death, and physical limitation—to attain to an immortal estate?...*

*In the reduction of reality to number and name, in the program of owning and controlling the world, we have wrought a Tower of Babel, seeking with our finite tools to take the infinite by storm. To do this we have so specialized and separated, and so reduced and exhausted the world, that the coherency of the vast megamachine that makes possible our ascent to the heavens is threatened. Our tools of control are insufficient to manage the chaos we have unleashed. Our ascent, even the illusion of our ascent, slows to a standstill as the effort merely to hold everything together grows to consume all resources. Now, as the Tower totters under its own weight, now as each attempt to shore up its crumbling sections adds to the instability of the whole edifice, perhaps we can see more clearly, from amid the ruins of our civilization, what the collective purpose that we have yearned for might be.*

*The supreme irony in our Babelian quest of attaining the infinite through finite means is that we are actually enacting precisely the opposite. We are liquidating all that is infinite, sacred, and unique, converting it into the finite, the controlled, the generic, standard, and measurable. [46]*

## Language Confusion

Did Babel mark the origin of human languages? Possibly. Possibly not. These were descents of Shem alone. The community at Shinar was not the whole of humanity at the time. Other languages may possibly have developed before the incident. It is not certain that the language confusion was permanent, although it probably was.

*God nipped the problem in the bud at Babel by removing one of the important cultural norms that unifies the people of a land—their language. Since they began to favor different languages, they could no longer relate to each other and this initiated the great dispersion—a migration into the far reaches of Europe, Africa, and Asia.*

*This also established the Babel principle. For the remainder of human history, men have continued to build their empires only to see them collapse. As the Christian philosopher-*

historian, Francis Schaeffer put it, “Men build their towers so high that they fall down.” From Babel, Egypt, Assyria, and Rome in the ancient world, to Spain, France, and England in the modern era, the empires of men grow in force only to dissipate away. Immigrations, imperialist insurgencies, civil wars, internal corruption, cultural diversity, and natural disasters dismantle the towers that men build. Directly following Babel, civilization was reduced to small city states. The same thing happened after the fall of Rome, and it will happen again after the empires of the modern era fade away. [47]

One might ask if God will act again and scatter our language or some other thing. Perhaps he will.

But I wonder if he has not already do so. Consider how hard it is (in this age of communication) to actually communicate. People have developed such different world views and work from such fundamentally different premises that it almost becomes impossible for us to have a conversation. We have dabbled in the language of relativism so long, we really have little left to say, and do not agree even on some of the most basic moral, let alone civic principles. And as developing any consensus becomes increasingly impossible we see a breakdown in the unity we desperately need to survive. The West as we have known it is passing away. We are depopulating, our families are disintegrating, our economies are in ruined states and there seems to be no agreement on what to do about it. We know we should spend less, but no one is willing to do so, so deeply selfish have we become. Economic reform means some other slob has to take a hit, but don't touch my precious program or benefit. Developing any moral or political consensus seems quite a remote hope. Even as things get more and more critical we still can't come to any agreement or even agree on the language of an agreement. (Babel anyone?)

Perhaps we are being scattered and our language has been confused. Perhaps this is increasingly why we can no longer agree or even hold intelligent conversations, let alone reach consensus. Hence our unity is scattered. Perhaps God has taken the proud and now thoroughly secular West and made it less possible for us to “build our city.” [48]

Babel is not the end of the story. Acts 2 recounts the events of Pentecost, where those present, from all over the world, heard Peter present Jesus' death and resurrection in their own language.

When Christ atoned for the sins of His elect people, the curse for sin was removed. When the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church, the curse of Babel was undone.

What (Acts 2) means, among other things, is that the gospel is for the whole human race in all of its diversity, that through the Word preached by the apostles the Holy Spirit communicates faith to people of every language and culture. Far from being some unintelligible utterance, the tongues of Pentecost were uniquely intelligible—to everyone, no matter what their native language. The restoration of language was a sign of the Kingdom of God.

\*On Pentecost the Holy Spirit began gathering the Church from all nations (Acts 2:41). This Church was a different kind of community, neither unified in an autonomous humanism like the Tower-builders and the modernists, nor fractured into alien groups like the Babelites and the postmodernists. Rather, the Church is a balance of both unity and diversity, a single Body

*consisting of organs as different from each other as a foot and an eye (1 Corinthians 12), but unified in love for each other and faith in Jesus Christ. [49]*

## Conclusions

Udo Middelmann looked at the collapse of the World Trade Center in the attacks of 9-11 in comparison with the Babel account and concluded that the former was pure evil of man and not the judgment of God:

*The Twin Towers were not idols as such; they were not built to deny God. Tall buildings, whether in Medieval Sana'a in Yemen, in Renaissance Bologna in Italy or 20th century New York are an accomplished use of space, skill, vision and need. They are not an idol or objects of worship. The pride of those working there is not in itself a sign of rebellion against God. Trade is a rightful occupation between people with different skills. It is an exchange between various commodities of time, ideas and materials. Jewish writers talk about God's blessing on "our coming in and going out" (Deut) as an affirmation of trade. In trade we exchange one commodity against another of acceptable value to the partners. Thereby we have available to us what may otherwise not be within reach. There is nothing wrong with a form of exchange taking place when partners agree on the terms. Through trade more things become available to each of us less from nature than from human design and effort.*

*Neither is banking per se a form of cheating, lest we bow to the materialist vision of a Marx and see all investment, all stock trading, and every loan as a form of creative theft by the powerful. Banking makes the commodity of funds available to be used with gain for both the depositor and the borrower. It allows for trade other than through barter, i.e. where I do not have to carry a sack of potatoes across the country and exchange it for a book, which I then take to a car dealership as down payment for a car. [50]*

*There is another moral issue outside of rebellion, arrogance, and idolatry; people never seem to address this other issue when talking about the Tower of Babel. As you have read in Genesis 11 mankind was working together in one location. They had moved from the east to settle in Shinar and there technology in architecture was growing rapidly. God made it clear that nothing is outside of man's grasp as long as all the great minds and the most skilled people are all concentrated in one area. Man is made in the image of God we create, build, and destroy, we are independent thinkers, and we have free will. We are capable of great things when we act as one; that is why the church must act as one. As for technology and advancement we are capable of advancing our technology faster than we are able to meditate on the consequences of our inventions. Which seems to be God's main concern in the Bible; instead of destroying man He scattered mankind all over the world. Look at how quickly we are advancing technology, we don't even have time to address any ethical or moral concerns new technology may bring up. [51]*

The lessons of Babel? All of the above:

- Pride is a trap.

- Technical accomplishments fuel our pride.
- God is aware of all of our futile plans.
- Rebellion against God is disastrous.
- Confusion and scattering are the results of our rebellion.

*They had pursued their name rather than expressed in their lives the name they had from God. They wanted to occupy not only earth, but also heaven and thereby replace God from their world of thought and practice. They had begun to see themselves as alone in the universe and wanted to make sure they had a common focus in the tower. To it and their consensus they would all turn for orientation. But only the God of the Bible, the eternal and living one, whose character is the law of the universe, could fill such a place. All other gods are made in the image of man and his wishful thinking. They are temporal, tribal and personal and therefore cannot provide the absolutes required to address questions of morals and meaning for all of Man. [52]*

The story didn't need to end as it did. The builders could have halted the project and sought the Lord.

*The story of the building of the Tower of Babel calls for a halt in human efforts to build a future of our own making, to our own, grand, global design. Instead, we are to turn in praise to the God who created the world and everything in it (Acts 17:24). This can be a first step in a transformation of relationships with one another and with the whole creation: it will be a converting experience, turning hubris into humility, pride into repentance, individualism into companionship, and self-interest into concern for community. [53]*

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