Paired Perspectives on the Parashah: Noah

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Noah:

The Tower of Babel

The Tower of Babel occupies only nine verses in the Torah, yet it is the only narrative between the Flood and the introduction of Abraham's family. Its prominent placement suggests that it marks a critical turning point in human history. However, the Torah never explicitly identifies the sin of the builders. What exactly did they do wrong, and why did God intervene so dramatically?

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 109a) maintains that the builders rebelled against God. Some sought to ascend to heaven and wage war against Him, while others intended to worship idols. Rabbi Nathan concludes that all of the builders were motivated by idolatry. This interpretation explains the severity of God's response, but it is difficult to establish from the biblical text itself. The people simply declare their intention to build a city and a tower reaching toward heaven, thereby making a name for themselves and preventing their dispersion (Genesis 11:4).

Ibn Ezra emphatically rejects the notion that the builders literally intended to ascend to heaven. They were not so foolish as to believe that a tower could reach God's dwelling place. Rather, they wanted to establish a permanent city, with an impressive tower serving as a landmark and a monument to their achievements. Their desire to remain together, however, conflicted with God's plan that humanity populate the entire earth (Genesis 1:28; 9:1). According to Ibn Ezra, the builders did not necessarily intend to rebel against God. They simply pursued their own aspirations without recognizing that these aspirations

contradicted God's will.

Other commentators offer variations on these approaches. Radak and Bekhor Shor understand the refusal to disperse as a deliberate rejection of God's plan for people to populate the earth. Hizkuni and Netziv perceive a more sinister dimension in the people's insistence on unity, suggesting that their society suppressed individuality and freedom. These interpretations offer important insights into the dangers of human ambition and enforced conformity. Nevertheless, the biblical narrative does not explicitly identify any of these offenses.

The twentieth-century biblical scholar Umberto Cassuto offers a compelling interpretation by placing the narrative within its ancient Mesopotamian setting. His approach enables us to appreciate the significance of details that otherwise seem incidental, while also bringing us back to the Talmud's interpretation.

Ancient Babylonian cities featured monumental stepped towers known as *ziggurats*, associated with temples dedicated to their gods. These towers symbolically connected heaven and earth. The Babylonians viewed these sacred structures as symbolic meeting places between heaven and earth, where the divine realm could intersect with the human world. The towers thus reflected a religious worldview in which people sought to establish contact with, and exercise influence over, the divine realm.

The most famous Babylonian ziggurat was associated with the temple of Marduk in Babylon. Its name, *Etemenanki*, meant "House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth." Babylonian traditions attributed the construction of the sacred complex to the gods themselves. The city of Babylon likewise was understood as *Bab-ilim*, "Gate of the God," reflecting its inhabitants' conviction that their city was a center of divine presence.

With this background, several unusual features of the Torah's account become intelligible. Why does the narrative devote an entire verse to the process of manufacturing bricks? Because monumental construction in Mesopotamia depended upon baked bricks rather than the stone commonly used elsewhere. Why does the Torah emphasize that the tower was built by human beings (Genesis 11:5)? Because Babylonian religious tradition attributed its sacred construction to the gods. Most strikingly, why does God need to "descend" to inspect a tower supposedly reaching heaven? The Torah employs biting irony. No matter how impressive human architecture may be, it cannot bring people closer to God or compel Him to appear. God remains utterly transcendent and free.

Even the name Babylon becomes part of the Torah's theological critique. The Babylonians celebrated their city as the gateway to the divine realm. The Torah instead associates *Bavel* with the Hebrew root *balal*, meaning confusion (Genesis 11:9). What the Babylonians regarded as the center of cosmic order becomes, in the Torah's account, the place where human unity collapses.

Cassuto's interpretation thus illuminates the Talmud's striking assertion that the builders engaged in idolatry and rebellion against God. The Sages expressed their interpretation through the dramatic imagery of ascending to heaven and waging war against God. The ancient Near Eastern evidence suggests that their underlying theological insight was remarkably perceptive. The builders sought to bridge the boundary between humanity and divinity through their own monumental achievements. Their error was not technological innovation itself, but the presumption that human beings could control access to God.

This interpretation also clarifies why the Tower of Babel appears immediately before the emergence of Abraham. Humanity's attempt to establish a religious center through its own power ends in confusion and dispersion. God then chooses Abraham to begin a different religious journey, one founded upon obedience to God rather than the manipulation of divine power.