The Futility of Man and the Power of God

A Latter-day-Saint–Based Exegesis of the Babel Narrative, Genesis 11:1–9

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Abstract

In the second half of the fourth millennium B.C., a group of the descendants of Noah congregated in unprecedented numbers in southern Mesopotamia. There, they built a massive city, established a widespread cultural hegemony, and pioneered the construction of a temple. Their ambitions were breathtaking: reach heaven by gathering themselves into a united people, constructing a temple to serve as a ritual gate between heaven and earth, and establishing a name for themselves. All this they would do with their own ingenuity.

But Jehovah brought all their ambitions to naught. Punishing their arrogance and rebellion, he confounded their language, halted their building projects, and scattered them throughout the world.

Among the scattered was a small, righteous clan, led by a man named Jared and his brother. They eventually arrived in the Americas, where they preserved a record of the event for thousands of years. Another record of the event was passed down by the ancient Israelites, until at a later date it was combined with other mythic narratives in the opening chapters of Genesis. There, functioning as a trimmed-down story of divine judgement, it served as a narrative bridge between Noah and Abraham, an exposition of God's power and man's impotence, and an origin story for the development of languages. Somewhere in the story's transmission, the name Babel was attached to this city, the ancient ancestor of the later political capital of Babylon. The narrative also acquired a carefully crafted parallel structure, meant to starkly juxtapose the aims and ambitions of men with Jehovah's supreme power to thwart and reverse those ambitions.

The Tower of Babel narrative shows us our utter impotence next to the power of God. It teaches us that the only way to reach heaven is to do it according to God's power, by building a city and temple at *his* command, in *his* way, in the name of *his* son. If in our arrogance and rebellion we attempt any other endeavor, that endeavor will ultimately be brought to naught.

English Translation of the Hebrew

In considering this text, it is helpful to have two translations: a highly literal yet "woody" translation, and a more idiomatic but still accurate translation. Both are presented below. The strict literal translation tries to preserve some of the stylistic wordplay of the Hebrew, such as the cognate accusatives ("brick bricks," "burn a burning") in verse 3 and the play on words in the name "Babel."

The Joseph Smith Translation has one emendation to the King James text in this passage. At the end of verse 8, Joseph Smith adds, "and they hearkened not unto the Lord."[1]

[1] Like most emendations made by Joseph Smith, it is unclear whether this represents an inspired gloss or a restoration of lost original material. Whatever the case, the fact that Joseph Smith was inspired to add the phrase is evidence that the Lord wishes us to interpret the text in light of the added phrase. Therefore, it has been added in the translation below.

Strict English translation:	*Loose English translation:*
1. And it was that all the world was one speech, and one words.	1. And all the earth had the same language, and the same communication.
2. And it was that in their traveling from the east, they found a plain in the land of the two rivers, and they dwelt there.	2. And as they traveled from the east, they found a plain in the land of Mesopotamia, and they settled there.
3. And they said, each man to his neighbor, "Come, let us brick bricks, and let us burn a burning." And the brick was to them for stone, and bitumen was to them for mortar.	3. And they said to each other, "Come, let's bake bricks and light ovens." And they used bricks for building material, and tar for mortar.
4. And they said, "Come, let us build for ourselves a city and a tower, and its head will be in the heavens, and let us make for ourselves a name, lest we be scattered upon the face of all the world."	4. And they said, "Come, let's build ourselves a city and a tower, with its top in the sky, and let's establish a name for ourselves, to avoid being scattered throughout all the earth."
5. And YHWH descended to see the city and the tower which the children of man built.	5. And Jehovah went down to see the city and tower that the children of men were building.
6. And YHWH said, "Lo, one people, one speech to all of them. And this they begin to do. And now is not withheld from them all which they devise to do.	6. And Jehovah said, "Look, the people are one; they all have the same language, and they are beginning to do this thing. And now nothing that they plan to do is withheld from them.
7. "Come, let us descend and let us jumble there their speech, in that each man will not hear the speech of his neighbor."	7. "Come, let's go down and there jumble up their language, so that they can't understand each other's language."
8. And YHWH scattered them from there upon the face of all the world. And they ceased to build the city, and they hearkened not unto the Lord.	8. And from there Jehovah scattered them throughout the whole earth. And they stopped building the city, and they hearkened not unto the Lord.
9. Concerning thus is its name called Jumbly, for there YHWH jumbled the speech of all the world. And from there YHWH caused them to be scattered upon the face of all the world.	9. For that reason, its name is called Babel, for there Jehovah jumbled up the language of all the earth. And from there he scattered them throughout the whole earth.

Analysis of Significant Grammatical Phrases

The end of the first verse has an interesting construction: *debarim ehadim*. The first word, *debarim*, is "words" or "matters" in the plural. The second word is "one" (*ehad)* but is in the plural (*ehadim*). The plural form only occurs a handful of other times in the Hebrew Bible.

Different translators have handled this construction differently. Some suggest the plural "one" denotes "unified" or "same" rather than a numerical sense. One proposed translation is "One and the same words." The Septuagint (Greek) reads "One word to all of them."

A correct understanding of the phrase depends on the meaning of *debar*. It has an extremely wide range of meaning, and can mean speech, word, discourse, saying, message, report, tidings, matter, affair, event, thing, or sum of what is spoken. The core idea of *debar* is communication. The plural can thus express a multitude of communicative acts, suggesting the sum total of a society's communication. The numeral must then match the noun in number. Put together, the expression suggests that all the communicative acts of the society were one, or unified. Thus in my loose translation I rendered this phrase "the same communication."

Verse 2 has an important ambiguity. There the phrase "in their traveling . . . they found" appears without any clear antecedent. Who is "they"? It could be "all the land" mentioned in verse 1, continuing the use of "land" as a personified collective. It could be referring back to the "nations" mentioned in the last verse of the previous chapter. It could refer to the "families of the sons of Noah" mentioned in the same verse. Or it could refer to a group of people deliberately left unidentified. In any case, the fact that the actors are left unnamed is significant; the whole basis of their actions is to establish a name for themselves; yet, no name is afforded them until the derogatory title "Babel," the name assigned to them by Jehovah.

The most interesting phrase in the passage is in verse four: *verosho bashamaim*. The first word is "and its head," meaning the head, or top, of the previously mentioned tower. The second word is "in the heavens," or "in the sky." The meaning of this in light of ancient cosmology will be discussed later. These two words form a complete sentence with an implied *be* verb. Since the speakers are expressing an intention, the *be* verb is understood as in the future: "It's top *will be* in the heavens." The conjunctive *vav* ("and") could have the sense of "so that": "Let us build a city and a tower *so* its head *will be in* the heavens."

Verse 4 has a *pen* clause, which is best translated with the sense of "lest" in English. Both the Septuagint and the Vulgate read "before" here. The difference in meaning is subtle but potentially significant. In the Hebrew, the builders of Babel want to establish a name for themselves, because otherwise they will be scattered. In the Greek and Latin, they want to establish a name for themselves *before* they are scattered. Both convey the implication that they know they will be scattered in the natural course of things. But in the Greek and Latin, it is unclear whether they think that their actions will thwart that eventual fate or not.

Verse 7 contains a grammatical construction with interesting ramifications. There Jehovah says, "Come, let us descend and let us jumble there their speech." Jehovah uses two cohortative verbs, "let us descend" and "let us jumble." The cohortative tense is used when one is speaking to others in a common group, suggesting a course of action. Who is Jehovah speaking to? He could be speaking to unmentioned angels, or speaking with a royal collective sense. Latter-day Saint theology suggests that God the Father could be speaking to His son. In any case, Jehovah is the only actor mentioned elsewhere in the passage.

Verse 9 contains a wordplay. The name given the place, בבל, "Babel," is similar to the verb used to describe Jehovah's punitive confounding: בלל, "balel." Babel is also the name used elsewhere in the Bible for Babylon. Did one word arise in Hebrew because of the other? Or did both words already exist in Hebrew, and the author used them in combination because of the existing similarity? The latter is more likely.

Analysis of Key Words

What follows is an analysis of key words in the passage:

Verses 1, 4, 9: *col ha'aretz*—This can be translated as "all the earth," "all the world," "the whole earth," "the whole world," "all the land, or "the whole land." As used here and elsewhere in Genesis, it denotes more than a single land or place; it denotes the total sum of all dry land and the people and civilizations dwelling thereon. Practically, this would be limited to the lands the Biblical author had knowledge of, which may not have extended much beyond the Near East.[2]

Verses 4, 5: *migdol*—This word comes from the root *gadol*, meaning "great" or "big." The word is used elsewhere to denote a tower, a watchtower, a stronghold, a fortified part of a city gate, an elevated stage or pulpit, or a raised bed. Hence its semantic range is not confined to a tall, narrow, free-standing structure, but is broad enough to include the ziggurats of southern Mesopotamia and other monumental structures. The phrase "and its head/top will be in the heavens/skies" suggests a great degree of height to the structure. However, on a flat plain such as Mesopotamia, any structure higher than a couple stories becomes the highest point for miles around.

Verse 9: *Babel*—This place-name is a word-play on the word *balal* ("to confuse, jumble") which plays a significant role in the passage. *Babel* is also used elsewhere in the Bible as the word for Babylon, which can denote both the physical city in Mesopotomia and a symbol of the world and its vainness and glory in general. In Akkadian, "Babel" meant "gate of El," or "gate of God." This meaning is similar to names of other ancient ziggurats (with titles such as

[2] It is important to ask how much we can expect the inspired authors of the Bible to have known about the world. Enoch saw in vision "all the nations of the earth" (Moses 7:23) and "all things, even unto the end of the world" (Moses 7:67). Moses was shown "the world and the ends thereof, and all the children of men which are, and which were created" (Moses 1:8). The brother of Jared saw "all the inhabitants of the earth which had been, and also all that would be . . . even unto the ends of the earth" (Ether 3:25). On the other hand, Luke used the term "all the world" to describe the Roman empire (or even a small part of it). The Table of Nations, which precedes the Babel account, is meant to account for every nation of the earth, yet it only describes the peoples in the Near East and immediately surrounding it. The famine that afflicted Egypt and Canaan in the days of Jacob and Joseph was described as being "over all the face of the earth" (Genesis 41:56) but was of necessity much more contained. While it is clear that Moses had a knowledge of much more than the Near East, it is uncertain whether other prophets did. Even if they did, the general Israelite population did not. It's also unclear how much scriptural authorship was done by prophets like Moses that frequently and directly communed with God, and how much was done by scribes, priests, or "sons of the prophets" who certainly had a level of inspiration but not equal to Moses. Certainly, the Creation applied to the whole earth. Latter-day revelation confirms the Flood did as well. By the time of the Abrahamic stories, the narrative theatre is clearly limited to the Near East. Where Babel lies on this spectrum is unclear.

"House of the foundation of heaven on Earth") and is reflective of the purported purpose of the tower, which was to get to heaven.[3]

Historical Context

Historicity of the Event

Were we to have the Bible record alone, the actual historicity of the Babel event would be in doubt. We would be left with a mythic legend, one in a book of legends, recounting events that would have occurred thousands of years before the text achieved its final form—events that are difficult to corroborate with archeological or linguistic evidence. The Babel narrative doesn't even have the benefit that the Flood narrative has of being echoed in other Near Eastern texts. For these reasons, most Biblical scholars pass off the story as a tale invented by later Israelites, likely in reaction to the mighty ziggurats of Babylon that they either encountered in exile or knew about through word of mouth.

However, Latter-day Saints also have the Book of Mormon, which reveals that not only does the Babel narrative reflect an actual historical event, but that it does so with a high degree of accuracy. The first mention of the Tower of Babel in the Book of Mormon occurs on the title page:

> A record of the people of Jared, who were scattered at the time the Lord confounded the language of the people, when they were building a tower to get to heaven.

Another reference occurs in Omni 1:20–22:

> And it came to pass in the days of Mosiah, there was a large stone brought unto him with engravings on it; . . . and they gave an account of one Coriantumr, and the slain of his people. . . . His first parents came out from the tower, at the time the Lord confounded the language of the people.

And again in Mosiah 28: 17:

> Now after Mosiah had finished translating these records, behold, it gave an account of the people who were destroyed, from the time that they were destroyed back to the building of the great tower, at the time the Lord confounded the language of the people and they were scattered abroad upon the face of all the earth, yea, and even from that time back until the creation of Adam.

[3] The Book of Mormon never calls the tower or city "Babel." Could this name have been assigned to the ancient tradition when the Jews were in exile? It is a possibility, although the function of the narrative so eloquently hinges on the name and wordplay that to suggest such a late date for the final form seems like a stretch. Babel, or Babylon, had been a significant if not distant political power for most of the history of Israel, and so the legend could have acquired the name at any point since the Conquest (time of Joshua). If so, it likely wasn't used in the Book of Mormon because the place-name carried no relevance with the book's editors, who were oceans and centuries removed from Babylon. It should be noted that, while the Book of Ether never mentions "Babel," it does mention the name "Nimrod" and labels him a mighty hunter. This reference affirms the ancient date of the material in Genesis 10, and reaffirms the reliability of scriptural transmission over hundreds or even thousands of years.

In Moroni's abridgement of the Plates of Ether, we get more detail (Ether 1:33–38)[4]:

> Which Jared came forth with his brother and their families, with some others and their families, from the great tower, at the time the Lord confounded the language of the people, and swore in his wrath that they should be scattered upon all the face of the earth; and according to the word of the Lord the people were scattered.
>
> And the brother of Jared being a large and mighty man, and a man highly favored of the Lord, Jared, his brother, said unto him: Cry unto the Lord, that he will not confound us that we may not understand our words.
>
> And it came to pass that the brother of Jared did cry unto the Lord, and the Lord had compassion upon Jared; therefore he did not confound the language of Jared; and Jared and his brother were not confounded.
>
> Then Jared said unto his brother: Cry again unto the Lord, and it may be that he will turn away his anger from them who are our friends, that he confound not their language.
>
> And it came to pass that the brother of Jared did cry unto the Lord, and the Lord had compassion upon their friends and their families also, that they were not confounded.

Three recurring themes become evident in these Book of Mormon references, all three of which are supported by the Genesis narrative:

1. There was a tower (four out of four)
2. The Lord confounded the languages (four out of four)
3. The Lord scattered the people (three out of four)

By the confluence of evidence, it is safe to say that these three statements form the core of the historical event. It is also clear that all three of these events were interrelated. Now we can consider more details.

[4] The argument can be made that in the references above, and in Moroni's abridgement, the Nephite historians were shaped by the version of the story they already knew from the Brass Plates (which presumably held the same account, or nearly the same account, as the Masoretic text does). Therefore, the actual event could have been quite different, and Ether's record of that event could have been quite different, but the Nephites, out of loyalty (conscious or subconscious) to the form of the story they already knew, altered the account to align with the Genesis version. This argument can be challenged on a number of fronts. First, there is no evidence positively suggesting that the account on the plates of Ether was significantly different. Second, it assumes that a sacred religious text will always change significantly over time, an assumption that (a) ignores the known transmission of the Biblical text with few changes for almost two thousand years, (b) ignores the known transmission of Sumerian and Akkadian texts over hundreds of years with little alteration, and (c) reflects the trend among modern scholars to apply a Darwinian evolutionary model to ancient texts and traditions. Third, the theory insults the efforts of Moroni to accurately abridge a record that he was divinely commissioned to abridge. Fourth, beyond the repeated ideas of confounded languages and scattering (both of which are major parts of Ether's abridged account as well as the Genesis text), no Nephite reference to the tower includes any other ideas from the Genesis account, such as the city, the location, or the building material. This selection of detail suggests that the Nephite historians, in their passing references to this event, relied on knowledge they had gleaned from the plates of Ether as much as or more than the knowledge they gained from the plates of Brass.

Dating the Historical Event

When was Babel built? Dating it in an absolute chronology with any degree of accuracy is impossible; dating it in reference to other Biblical events is still difficult. The narrative contains no names besides deity. It took place after the flood, and before the sojourns of Abraham. It is placed between two genealogies. The first, the Table of Nations, lists descendants of Noah up to his great-great-great-great grandsons, or six generations. The second lists the descendants of Shem down to Abraham. The years given in this second genealogy give a span of 292 years between the flood and the birth of Abraham.

How soon after the flood was Babel built? One clue is an interesting phrase about Noah's great-great-great grandson Peleg: "In his days was the earth divided" (Genesis 10:25, KJV). Is this "division" the confounding of tongues at Babel? The word *peleg* is only used three other places in the Old Testament; once in Chronicles, in a quotation of Genesis; once in Job, referencing a watercourse dividing, and once, very significantly, in Psalms: "Destroy, O Lord, and divide their tongues: for I have seen violence and strife in the city" (Psalms 55:9, KJV). Thus the verbal root can be used to describe dividing tongues. If that is the intended meaning here, then the confounding at Babel occurred in Peleg's lifetime, putting it in a window between 101 years and 339 years after the flood. Traditional chronologies place creation around 4000 BC, the deluge around 2350 B.C., and the birth of Abraham around 2000 B.C. This would place the Tower of Babel between around 2300 and 2100 B.C.

But how accurately can we trust the genealogies in Genesis, especially the early genealogies? These genealogies suggest that Abraham was born only 292 years after the flood. Is that reasonable? By Abraham's day, the whole earth was well populated; could that occur in three centuries? Archeology shows numerous civilizations going back to the third and fourth millenniums with no gap or sudden drop in population, something that must certainly appear if the flood were to be dated so late. There are several reasons to doubt the infallability of the Genesis timeline. First, Genesis was compiled many centuries later. Second, it's unlikely that when the author or authors of Genesis included genealogical years, that they intended them to be used to reconstruct chronology. Third, other ancient genealogies are known to have omitted unimportant ancestors, including only prominent or recognizable predecessors. Fourth, it's clear that the chronology has been simplified. In Genesis 11:26, it states that Terah begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran at age 70. Unless Terah begat triplets or had multiple wives, the best explanation is that the chronicler lumped the births of Terah's children under a single date.

Modern-day revelation sheds interesting light on chronology. The Book of Moses, containing Joseph Smith's inspired translation, preserves the genealogical and chronological data given in Genesis. But was Joseph Smith restoring *everything* that had been lost, setting *everything* aright? Certainly he was restoring, or revealing anew, huge swaths of information about Adam and Enoch. But it's possible that in the genealogies (which are not doctrinally important), he was simply reproducing what was already in Genesis without alteration.

Doctrine and Covenants 107 contains an extended passage tracking the conferral of the Melchizedek Priesthood from Adam to Noah. It states that Adam gave the priesthood to Seth,

Enos, Cainan, Mahalaleel, Jared, Enoch, and Methuselah. It also states that three years before Adam died, he called these same patriarchs to him in Adam-Ondi-Ahman and blessed them. The age is given for each patriarch when he received the priesthood. Interestingly, Lamech did not receive the priesthood from Adam, nor was he called to Adam-Ondi-Ahman. Instead, he was ordained by Seth at age 32. But the Genesis chronology places Lamech as being born 874 years after the fall, when Adam was still 56 years from dying. Why was he not then ordained by Adam, or called to the council at Adam-Ondi-Ahman? This omission suggests that there is an error in the chronology preserved in Genesis, and that Adam died before Lamech was born. Similarly, Noah was ordained at age 10 by his grandfather Methuselah, yet at that time Enos, Cainan, Mahalaleel, and Jared should still have been alive.

The comparison is made more complex by D&C 84, which presents a similar passage that tracks the priesthood from Moses to Adam. It states:

> Which Abraham received the priesthood from Melchizedek, who received it through the lineage of his fathers, even till Noah; And from Noah till Enoch, through the lineage of their fathers; And from Enoch to Abel, who was slain by the conspiracy of his brother, who received the priesthood by the commandments of God, by the hand of his father Adam, who was the first man.

This version differs from the statements given in D&C 107. Did Enoch receive his priesthood from his fathers, in a line of authority going back to Abel, or did he receive it directly from Adam, as D&C 107 states? How could Abel have passed down the priesthood through Seth's line, since he was killed before Seth was born? It's possible that D&C 107 contains an account of *ordination*, whereas D&C 84 presents an order of *patriarchal inheritance*.

On another vein, D&C 84 is incredibly ambiguous about the timeframe between Abraham and Noah, stating merely that Melchizedek received the priesthood "through the lineage of his fathers, even till Noah."

It's instructive that in both places where an ancient genealogy is recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants, it's given as part of a priesthood line. The same emphasis can be found in the Book of Abraham. Consider Abraham 1:2–4:

> I became a rightful heir, a High Priest, holding the right belonging to the fathers. It was conferred upon me from the fathers; it came down from the fathers, from the beginning of time, . . . down to the present time, even the right of the firstborn, or the first man, who is Adam, or first father, through the fathers unto me. I sought for mine appointment unto the Priesthood according to the appointment of God unto the fathers concerning the seed.

Abraham indicates that lineage was used by his contemporaries to track the right to the priesthood:

> Now, Pharaoh being of that lineage by which he could not have the right of Priesthood, notwithstanding the Pharaohs would fain claim it from Noah, through Ham, therefore my father was led away by their idolatry; But I shall endeavor, hereafter, to delineate the

> chronology running back from myself to the beginning of the creation, for the records have come into my hands, which I hold unto this present time. (1:27–28)

It's also clear that one of the purposes of early scripture was to track the right to the priesthood:

> But the records of the fathers, even the patriarchs, concerning the right of Priesthood, the Lord my God preserved in mine own hands; therefore a knowledge of the beginning of the creation, . . . have I kept even unto this day, and I shall endeavor to write some of these things upon this record, for the benefit of my posterity that shall come after me (1:31).

References in the Book of Abraham and the Book of Moses reveal the transmission history of the genealogical data: Adam and his posterity kept a written record of their generations. A copy of this physical record reached Abraham; by that time, if not from the beginning, one of the main purposes was to preserve a record of the priesthood lineage. Abraham expanded on these records "for the benefit of my posterity." Presumably, a version of his writings reached Moses, who passed it on from there. It was then preserved in prophetic, priestly, or scribal circles until it became part of the final form of Genesis.

The evidence from modern revelation suggests that the purpose of the genealogies, therefore, was not to track an exact timeline of births and deaths, but to track the lineage of the priesthood. This leaves room for two types of errors: (1) inaccuracies in the years, either because they were recorded inaccurately, corrupted over time, or added later, or (2) generations being passed over if they were unworthy of the priesthood. There is not much room for this second possibility before the flood, but a large possibility for it afterward. No genealogy preserves the lineage from Noah to Melchizedek. This suggests that the genealogy was either lost or never preserved, and the Lord declined to reveal it in D&C 84 (even though he revealed Jethro's hitherto unknown genealogy). Abraham makes clear that his father and his father's family fell away, and that he did not receive the priesthood from them. He also suggests that people in his day (such as the pharaohs of Egypt) were participating in "genealogy inflating" to boost their own authority. For these reasons, can we trust the accuracy of the genealogy from Shem to Terah?

If we posit that the genealogy in Genesis 11 is untrustworthy, we have room to push back the flood. By how much? On one extreme, we could do as some have done, and push back Adam and Eve to the end of the most recent ice age, about 60,000 years ago.[5] This predates the first indisputably human archeological remains and the first traces of basic human technology such as tools, clothing, and art. Such a solution, while attractive because it reconciles well with science, is very untenable on a scriptural basis. Fifty-six thousand years is a long, long time for the priesthood lineage and a written account to be passed on to Melchizedek and Abraham, especially when the Bible gives no indication of such a long time and when the first archeological evidence for writing starts around 3100 B.C. Reason suggests that if the flood were

[5] See, for example, Alexander Young, "Dating the Genesis 1–11 Events," Objective Christian Worldview, April 27, 2016, https://objectivechristianworldview.weebly.com/blog-posts/dating-the-genesis-1-11-events.

to be pushed back, it can't be pushed back more than one or, maybe, two thousand years before Abraham. That means we could place the flood to between 3000 and 4000 B.C. and Adam to fifteen hundred years before that, to between 4500 and 5500 B.C. While this does not do anything to explain the vast archeological data for primitive agricultural societies going back to 8,000 B.C. and hunter-gathering societies going back thousands of years before that, these dates do predate the rise of major civilizations, large-scale architecture, urban life, and writing. The confounding of tongues at Babel may then have occurred anytime between 3500 and 2000 B.C.

The dating of the Babel event may also be approached through the Book of Ether. The book lays out about 30 generations between Ether and Jared.[6] The destruction of the Jaredites took place sometime between 650 B.C. and 550 B.C., since Coriantumr was still alive to encounter the Mulekites, and since the depopulated Jaredite lands were "the place of their [the Mulekites'] first landing" (Alma 22:30). Back-tracing the chronology from there, however, is enormously difficult. Definitive years are only given for one king, Coriantum, who lived to the "exceedingly old" age of 142. Five sons were explicitly born in their fathers' old age, while at least another five are implied to have been. What did it mean in Jaredite society to beget someone in your old age? Coriantum was at least past 100, and possibly as old as 140, for he begat his son from a second wife after his first wife died at the age of 102. Omer begat Emer in his old age, after enough time transpired for all the following to happen: Omer begat Jared; Jared grew up, had sons and daughters, defected from his father, gained half the kingdom, warred against his father, and captured his father; Omer was in captivity "half his days" (Ether 8:4) and begat two other sons; these sons grew up, raised an army, and overthrew Jared; by this time, Jared's daughter was old enough to dance and please Akish; Omer fled; Akish set Jared on the throne, took Jared's daughter to wife, overthrew Jared, and took the throne; Akish put to death his son (who may or may not have been borne by Jared's daughter; it's unclear); Akish begat other sons; these other sons grew up and warred against their father for "many years" (9:12) until the entire people was destroyed; Omer returned from exile; Omer "began to be old" (9:14), and in his old age begat Emer. So how old is Omer? The most conservative estimate places Omer around 100; more likely he's at least 150, if not 200. If the first generations of Jaredites were living to comparable ages as the patriarchs and the ancestors of Abraham in Genesis, they could easily be living to 200 years old, if not longer.

Taking into account all of these factors, the Jaredite chronology can be placed in an estimated window. The shortest possible amount of time is about 1200 years. The longest possible amount of time is more than 3000 years. A reasonable chronological estimation places it between 2000 and 2500 years. Adding this onto 600 B.C. yields a date for the tower of Babel of between 2600 and 3100 B.C.

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[6] The exact number of generations is unclear, because sometimes the word "descendent" is used instead of "son." In the opening genealogy, "descendent" is used between Ether and Coriantor, between Aaron and Heth, and between Morianton and Riplakish. In the political history, "descendent" is used between Ethem and Ahah, between Morianton and Riplakish, and between Shez and Heth. This inconsistency immediately tips us off that Ether's original account could have contained many minor historical errors, or that Moroni was working from confusing, incomplete, or contradictory source material.

A Possible Archeological Setting for Babel

What connections can we make between the scriptural accounts of Babel and archeological evidence? The Biblical account places the event in Mesopotamia. "Shinar" means "two rivers" (the same etymology as the Greek word "Mesopotamia") and is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe that region. The account describes a flat plain and the use of brick and tar as building material instead of stone. All this fits with a Mesopotamian context.

Many scholars have proposed that the Tower of Babel story came into being when the Jews were carried captive to Babylon. There, they saw Nebuchadnezzar's mighty ziggurat, the E-temen-anki, and were inspired to tell a story about its haughty builders and their fate. This argument is flawed in several ways: (1) It is built upon liberal scholars' often *a priori* assumption that all biblical texts emerged late; (2) It does not explain how a newly-fashioned story could attain the status of myth, much less scripturally authoritative myth, in one generation; (3) It does not explain how such a newly-fashioned story, even if accepted as authoritative and ancient, could be worked into the existing texts that became Genesis; (4) It assumes that a story featuring Babylonian culture could only arise when the Israelites were actually in Babylon, even though the Levant had continuous contact with Mesopotamia for the last thousand years; (5) It ignores the presence of other ziggurats, just as impressive as the E-temen-anki, millennia before Nebuchadnezzar; and (6), for Latter-day Saint audiences, it is refuted by the Book of Ether.[7]

Now that we have a rough (very rough) timetable from scriptures, we can turn to archeological clues. Was there a time period, in Mesopotamia, that matches the Biblical events? There might be one in the Uruk expansion of the 4th millennium B.C.

Uruk stands out as a critical juncture of history. Before 4000 B.C., all human remains have been found in small agricultural villages, such as Jericho or Chatal Hüyük. By 3800, a handful of sites had grown to small urban centers, such as Tell Brak in northern Mesopotamia. Then, in the second half of the fourth millennium, one site in southern Mesopotamia, Uruk, grew to an unprecedented size. New technologies and greater cooperation yielded higher agricultural yields, allowing a larger portion of society to engage in specialized crafts. Some scholars think that the sudden rise in Uruk's population can only be accounted for by migrants from the east or north. The size of houses and grave goods show large disparities of wealth and a complex social hierarchy. Uruk's economy was structured around the temple, which controlled vast swaths of farmland, oversaw scores of temple dependents who worked the land or created other goods, and oversaw the offerings to the god or goddess. Two large temple complexes were built during this period: The Eanna temple, or "House of Heaven," built to the goddess Inanna, and the White Temple, built to the sky god Anu. The Eanna complex included several structures 50 by 80 meters in size. One historian, Marc Van De Mieroop, comments on the magnitude of this work effort:

[7] If you want to argue for the impact of the Babylonian captivity on the Babel narrative, you could argue that Jews' presence in Babylon may have shaped the details of the story, or may have prompted its inclusion in the final canonized form of Genesis (thereby possibly explaining why it is never referenced in other Biblical literature).

> Their monumentality tells us much about society at Uruk. They could only have been built by a large labor-force that required organization and leadership. Archaeologists have calculated that for each complex some 15,000 laborers worked ten hours a day for five years. Although religious sentiments may have partly inspired them to do so, some type of coercion was probably involved as well. While such enterprises could only succeed in large communities, they also strengthened the social ties between the people who were themselves involved or had relatives who were. They generated a common sense of purpose.[8]

Besides the large construction projects at home, Uruk's culture—indicated most clearly by its ubiquitous beveled-rim bowls—spread throughout the ancient Near East, to sites in Northern Mesopotamia, Syria, Elam, and as far away as Miri Qalat in Pakistan. The exact nature of this spread is uncertain, whether it was mercantile colonization, imperial expansion, or cultural influence. But in any case, Uruk's cultural if not political reach was widespread and profound.

The parallels between Uruk and the Biblical Babel are many. Uruk was the first major urban center in world history, the first time that thousands of people congregated in one place. Some of those people likely migrated from other regions, including the east. They built their buildings with mud bricks, many of them baked in ovens. They displayed an unprecedented level of cooperation, commerce, and regional influence. And they built towers, or at least very large structures, that centered around the concept of heaven.

What happened to Uruk? At the end of the fourth millennium, between 3100 and 3000 B.C. (just as it was on the verge of inventing a writing system), Uruk mysteriously collapsed. Contact with far-flung locations was cut off. Local societies reverted to their earlier cultures and formed independent states. The monumental buildings that formed the Eanna complex were leveled and eventually replaced with a new set of structures. Other large urban centers arose in Southern Mesopotamia, signaling a decline in Uruk's centralized power. Van De Mieroop sums up the changes: "There was thus a reorganization of society in southern Mesopotamia into more and similar-scale centers."[9]

The sudden collapse of Uruk mirrors the story of Babel. Just as the people were united in achieving unparalleled advances in technology, architecture, and social control, everything fell apart. The social order collapsed. Long-distance cultural uniformity ceased. The people became more divided.

Can the Babel narrative fit any other time period? Certainly, there were other periods of centralization and decentralization in Mesopotamia in the two millennia after Uruk. Yet Uruk stands out as the first thrust of large-scale urban society, the first emergence of large-scale architecture, and the most dramatic instance of sudden collapse. A date of 3100 to 3000 fits the upper bound of the Jaredite chronology.

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[8] Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2016), 26.
[9] Van De Mieroop, *Near East*, p. 42.

The Confounding of Languages and Historical Linguistics

Did the world's diversity of languages begin at Uruk, then? This is a difficult question. Obviously, different cultures already existed throughout the six habitable continents in the fourth millennium. The Uruk collapse could have spurred a sizable diaspora, but not one that reached much farther than the Near East.

The first writing system known to archeology emerged in Uruk itself right around the time of the collapse. Therefore, it is *possible* (in other words, impossible to disprove) that the whole world had a single language before 3100 B.C. (although practitioners of historical linguistics would strongly object). Around that date, God, prompted by events in the Near East, *may* have confounded the common language throughout the world, causing to spring into being the dozens of language families known today.

Another explanation is that languages began to change as a direct result of post-diluvian expansion. Historical linguistics have shown that languages are constantly changing, and that the slightest physical barrier can cause the languages of two groups to depart from each other rapidly. As the history of early English shows, a new language can arise in only a few hundred years. The ancient writers of the Bible would have been unaware of these linguistic principles, and thus unaware of the correlation between dispersion and language division. As they viewed the expansion of Noah's descendants and the resulting diversification of languages, they may have attributed both to manifestations of God's wrath.

However, this second theory is refuted, at least in part, by evidence in the Book of Ether. There it says, explicitly, that God confounded the language of the people. The phenomenon must have been happening quickly enough for Jared and his brother to take notice, and to pray to have their families spared.

A confluence of the two ideas is possible via the following hypothetical reconstruction. Following the flood, Noah's descendants began spreading out, following the divine mandate to "multiply, and replenish the earth" (Genesis 9:1, KJV). Gradual language diversification resulted, eventually giving rise to the multitude of languages throughout the world.[10] In Mesopotamia, however, a group of Noah's descendants congregated in one location, thus preserving their unified language. There, possibly led by the enigmatic Nimrod mentioned in Genesis 10:8–10, they began to build the city of Uruk and to establish a political entity

[10] Another intriguing possibility is that Noah was not the only person to survive the flood (assuming the flood was universal). God could have reached out to other faithful descendants of Adam on other continents and preserved them by similar means. While the Bible leaves little room for this theory (see Genesis 7:23), this can be explained by saying that the Biblical authors were not aware of any other group besides Noah, and thus only wrote about Noah in their account. The idea of other flood survivors besides Noah is not foreign to the larger scriptural pattern, made clear in the Book of Mormon, that God is no respecter of persons, and that throughout history He has called many different people in many different places to follow Him, while usually keeping each group in the dark about the others. The idea of other flood survivors besides Noah has the advantage of helping to explain the vast diversity of languages, ethnicities, animal life, and flood stories throughout the world, as well as explaining how the world could be repopulated so quickly after a universal flood. Another explanation, of course, is that the flood in Genesis was not a universal flood but a regional flood, perhaps only inundating the Mesopotamian plain or a larger portion of the Near East. This theory, however, is challenged by the presence of flood stories throughout the world and by the universal language used in Genesis.

unprecedented in size and scale. God, displeased with them because of their arrogance, brought an end to their political and social unity by corrupting their common language in a matter of days, weeks, or perhaps years, which led to them becoming scattered. Among the scattered were Jared and his brother, who eventually arrived in the Americas.

Narrative Devices

The Babel narrative is a beautifully self-contained narrative passage, clearly independent of the surrounding material and bookended with *inclusio* (parallel or contrasted statements, in this case "All the earth had the same language" and "he scattered them throughout all the earth"). The structure goes beyond the beginning and ending, however. The passage splits neatly in half. The first half (verses 1–4) follows the activities of the men building Babel; they are the ones speaking and acting. Verse 5 signals an abrupt switch: now it is Jehovah speaking and acting. There is no dialogue, no exchange between the two parties. Once Jehovah enters the scene, the men have become objects, not agents.

In a few short verses, Jehovah effectively reverses everything the men of Babel set out to do. They begin speaking one language; thy end speaking many. They begin assembled in one place; they end scattered "throughout the whole earth" (11:9). They begin constructing a city and a tower; they end abandoning both unfinished. They begin with aspirations of establishing a name for themselves; they end ultimately known by a title that reflects their punishment at the hands of God.

The passage can be structured to reflect this developing parallelism:

	Men as actors	*Jehovah as actor*
Introduction:	1 And all the earth had the same language, and the same communication.	5 And Jehovah went down to see the city and tower that the children of men were building.
Exposition:	2 And as they traveled from the east, they found a plain in the land of Mesopotamia, and they settled there.	6 And Jehovah said, "Look, the people are one; they all have the same language, and they are beginning to do this thing. And now nothing that they plan to do is withheld from them.
Intention ("Come")	3 And they said to each other, "Come, let's bake bricks and light ovens." And they used bricks for building material, and tar for mortar.	7 "Come, let's go down and there jumble up their language, so that they can't understand each other's language."
City and tower:	4 And they said, "Come, let's build ourselves a city and a tower, with its top in the sky,	8 And from there Jehovah scattered them throughout the whole earth. And they stopped building the city, and they hearkened not unto the Lord.

Name:	and let's establish a name for ourselves,	9 For that reason, its name is called Babel, for there Jehovah jumbled up the language of all the earth.
Scattered:	to avoid being scattered throughout all the earth."	And from there he scattered them throughout the whole earth.

Whether this exact structural parallelism was intended by the original author (or authors) or not, the basic overall structure is too clear to be accidental: men act, and then Jehovah acts to overthrow all that the men intended to do.

Analysis of the Literary Form

Babel as a Mythic Narrative

The basic genre of the Babel passage is a mythic narrative. It is a narrative because it presents characters acting in a clear order of events and uses Hebrew grammatical features common to prose and not poetry. It is a myth[11] because it occurs in the deep past, long before the Israelites were even a nation, and it attempts to explain why there are so many languages in the earth. As a mythic narrative, it belongs in the beginning of Genesis with all the other mythic narratives: the Creation, the first humans, the fall, the emergence of murder and sin, the flood, and the emergence of nations and tribes.

The Divine Judgment Narrative Type

The Babel narrative can be classified as a "divine judgment" account. In the full layout of this literary class, God lays out a decree. A human or set of humans perform a set of actions in violation of God's decree. God then arrives, observes the disobedience of the human or humans, pronounces judgment, and performs it.

Genesis is replete with divine judgment narratives. In the Fall narrative, God commands Adam and Eve not to partake of the fruit of the tree of knowledge and good and evil. They are tempted and partake. God arrives, summons them and asks them questions to reveal their guilt, condemns their disobedience, declares a punishment, and casts them out of the garden.

In the Cain narrative, Cain and Abel are offering sacrifices, presumably at God's command. Cain offers an unacceptable offering, is rebuked by God, grows wroth, and slays his brother. God arrives, summons Cain and asks him questions to reveal his guilt, declares a punishment, and establishes safeguards so that the punishment is performed.

The beginning of the Flood narrative also contains the divine judgement type. God has commanded men to call upon his name (4:26). But then they are wicked, presumably related to unapproved interactions between the sons of god and the daughters of men. God sees their

[11] "Myth" here is used in the technical folklore sense, which can be defined as "a story of origin that is generally accepted by its audience as true and that takes place outside of their immediate framework of time."

wickedness, is grieved, and vows to destroy man from off the face of the earth. Only Noah and his family find grace and are spared.

The Flood narrative is immediately followed by the story of Noah, Ham, and Canaan. This can be seen as another divine judgment story, but this time it is Noah, not God, who observes the disobedience and declares the punishment. The next divine judgment is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18–19. After these, the type does not appear for the rest of Genesis. Instead of a judge and punisher, God takes the role of a divine benefactor, guiding and blessing the patriarchs. When people do wrong, they are either left unpunished or punished by temporal means, not direct divine intervention. The closest "divine judgment" is the brief intervention of God at the beginning of chapter 38, where he slays two of the sons of Judah.

The divine judgment type reappears throughout the Old Testament. Examples include the judgments against Pharaoh; the punishments against rebellious Israelites in the wilderness, including the Korah rebellion and the incident with venomous serpents; judgment against Balaam, averted only by the actions of his donkey; judgments against Saul and David after their disobedience; and judgments issued against the kingdoms of Ephraim and Judah due to their idolatry. As the Old Testament progresses, instances of the divine judgment type become progressively more sophisticated, and the declaration of judgment and punishment are usually carried out through prophetic mediators.

Does the narrative type of divine judgment appear in other scriptures? In the New Testament it appears most directly with the divine slaying of Herod in Acts 12. It appears often through earthly mediators. Hence Jesus declares judgment against the fig tree and against Jerusalem, and he evokes divine judgment in many of his parables, such as his parable of the talents. The apostle Peter declares divine judgment against Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 4 and against Simon in Acts 8. The Revelation of John includes letters to the seven churches that each include some statement of divine judgment. Of course, the ultimate divine judgment will be the final judgment recorded in Revelation 20, when all men will have to account for their works. The type also appears, albeit sparingly, in the Book of Mormon. The greatest example there is the judgment and destruction of the wicked cities upon the death of Christ.

Babel and the Divine Judgment Type

The Babel narrative presents an extremely trimmed down version of the "divine judgment" narrative type. First, it does not start with a declaration of divine decree (such as the Fall narrative does). Hence it is unclear what provokes the punishment. Does God disapprove of city building? No where else does he condemn it. Is God jealous of man's power? This makes little sense, because the passage itself displays God's omnipotence and man's puniness. Is God opposed to man congregating in one location? That is possible, based on his earlier decree to Noah to "be ye fruitful, and multiply; bring forth abundantly in the earth, and multiply therein" (Genesis 9:7, KJV). Or is God punishing the arrogance of man, or condemning man's efforts to build a tower whose top will be in the heavens, or thwarting their effort to establish a name for themselves rather than seeking the name of God?

The passage's bare simplicity is also evident in the absence of any named actor. After a chapter full of names, where the founders of every nation known to Israel is mentioned, the Babel narrative is stripped of any individual besides Jehovah. The leader of the men is not mentioned. Nor is there any interaction or dialogue between the men and Jehovah. Jehovah does not directly confront the men; he does not ask them questions nor explains to them their guilt. He merely decrees and executes judgment.

Also lacking is the element of divine grace. After the Fall, God made coats of skins for Adam and Eve. After Cain's punishment, he is given a mark so as not to be killed prematurely. After God swears to destroy the world with flood, he has compassion on Noah and his family. When Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed, Lot and his family are led out. But here, there is no mention of a figure or a family finding grace, or of the punishment being softened.[12]

The net effect of these omissions, I argue, is to present the unequivocal severity to God's power. When God punishes, yes, sometimes he interacts with those he punishes—but he doesn't have to. Yes, sometimes he will make clear what sin has been committed—but he doesn't have to. Yes, sometimes he extends grace—but he doesn't have to.

The Life Setting of the Babel Passage

What is the life setting of this passage, or the social setting in ancient Israel where this story was used and circulated? Without a time machine, of course, such is impossible to verify for certain. But we can hazard some predictions.

The most obvious function of the Babel narrative is its role as a myth explaining a common phenomenon. We can easily imagine a young Israelite, having just encountered foreigners and foreign languages for the first time, asking his mother why different people speak different languages. She then replies by recounting the Babel narrative, explaining that the world began with one language and one communication, but that the wickedness of men prompted the judgement of God, who divided their languages. Similarly, the narrative could have been used to explain why mankind was scattered upon the face of the whole earth.

Literary Context

Whatever the compositional history of the Babel narrative and the manner by which it became part of the finished Genesis text, it plays an important part in that final text.

The Babel narrative is strategically placed between two passages of genealogies. A major theme in this part of the Bible is *division*. The Flood story ended with a single family inhabiting the earth. Soon the Abrahamic narrative will begin, wherein the Near East is already heavily peopled with many conflicting nations and tribes. Genesis 10 and Genesis 11 go hand in hand to bridge that gap. Genesis 10 presents the table of nations, showing how the descendants of Noah branched out and became the founders of all the nations of the earth. Division is brought up

[12] We learn from the Book of Ether, of course, that Jared and his brother found grace in God's sight. But presently we are concerned with the narrative as it is presented in Genesis.

multiple times; first in the reference to Peleg, "for in his days was the earth divided" (Genesis 10:25, KJV), and in a summary at the end: "by these were the nations divided in the earth after the flood" (Genesis 10:32, KJV). The Babel narrative then comes, explaining how, at least in part, these nations came to be divided and scattered throughout the earth.

The Babel narrative also sets the stage for the narrowing of focus on Abraham. It shows the apostate and rebellious nature of the descendants of Noah, thereby displaying why they deserve no further mention in the Biblical history. The generations between Shem and Abraham are then set forth. Without the Babel interregnum, these genealogies would have come immediately after the Table of Nations. The redactor of Genesis likely consciously chose to separate these two genealogies. While at first glance they appear similar, they are actually very different. The Table of Nations lists in rapid fire all the major descendants of Noah up to three or four generations, without any chronological data. The genealogies from Shem to Abraham focus on one patrilinear line and provide years for each patriarch, in a manner identical to that in Genesis 5. If these two genealogies were set back to back, the shift might be disorienting and confusing, and Abraham's special status may have been lost among all the other descendants of Noah. Perhaps the redactor also wished to stave off the reader's boredom.

The Babel narrative sets up some important literary themes for the patriarchal narratives. One of these themes is approaching God. The builders of Babel failed to approach God; Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will succeed. Another theme is the danger of cities, a theme developed in the interplay between Abraham, Lot, and the cities of the plain of Jordan, particularly Sodom.

Another theme is the futility of the designs of man. This theme is introduced with the enigmatic statement that Jehovah makes: "they are beginning to do this thing. And now nothing that they plan to do is withheld from them" (11:6). What does Jehovah mean? He might mean that if mankind is united, and if they speak the same language, then they are capable of accomplishing anything, including the usurpation of Jehovah's authority. Hence, he scatters them and confounds their language, rendering them unable to pose a threat to him or to heaven. This interpretation is problematic on a theological as well as a literary level. Elsewhere in the Bible, as well as in the Babel narrative itself, it is apparent that man's power and man's designs are nothing compared to God. To suggest that man is actually capable of usurping God's authority is nonsense. Two other explanations are possible. The first is to presume a textual corruption and suggest that the passage originally excluded the "not": "they are beginning to do this thing. And now, whatever they intend to do will be withheld from them." This reading makes God's statement an expression of his purpose and intended punishment: man in his arrogance is attempting to reach heaven, but God will withhold from man all that he intends to accomplish. The second explanation is that God is using irony. When he says "and now nothing that they plan to do is withheld from them," he might mean, "these men are foolish enough to think that they can do anything." God's subsequent actions then show the irony in man's thinking.

The contrast between man's intent and God's will is used throughout the patriarchal narratives. Examples include Abraham's notion that he must call Sarah his sister; Abraham's

plan to have an heir through Hagar; the intention of those in Sodom to rape the angelic visitors; and the intention of Joseph's brothers to get rid of him by selling him into slavery. Over and over, the narrative demonstrates that the plans of men rarely come to fruition, while the designs of God always come to pass.

Bible/Gospel Context

The Babel narrative is a short but significant contribution to the Bible. It serves as a narrative bridge between the creation and flood narratives and the patriarchal narratives. It helps to explain the development of mankind and casts the vast whole of mankind in the light of apostasy and rebellion soon after the flood, thus according to Abraham the distinction of one of the few righteous souls who could earn God's favor.

Besides the Book of Mormon, the rest of scripture is devoid of references to the Tower of Babel. The closest allusion to the Babel narrative in the rest of the Bible is one verse in Zephaniah 3:9: "For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve him with one consent" (KJV). It is doubtful whether this verse is even a reference.

This scarcity is striking and hard to explain. It has been noticed that the chapters of Genesis prior to Abraham are referenced rarely in the Old Testament. Was the tower of Babel not significant enough to merit mention? Some scholars have proposed that the first 11 chapters of Genesis were added to the rest of the canon very late, helping to explain the lack of references. While I disagree with this assessment for the creation and flood narratives, I am willing to entertain this option with the Babel narrative. It may have been passed down through Israelite tradition as a mythic tale not afforded the weight of scriptures, and only late in the composition of the Pentateuch was it then canonized. It is also possible, however, that it was in the canon the whole time but simply never mentioned.[13]

Theological and Doctrinal Lessons

What does the Babel narrative teach us doctrinally?

First, the Babel narrative supplies a significant piece of mankind's history. It explains how mankind came to fill the earth after the flood and how they came to have a multitude of languages. The Babel narrative is a crucial part of the esoteric doctrine of the Adamic language, a doctrine that Adam spoke a true and undefiled language later lost because of man's wickedness.

[13] Supporting this second option is the lack of references to Babel in the New Testament. By the first century, the Babel narrative was definitely considered scripture and had been for at least four centuries. Yet it is still never alluded to. Even in Jude and 2 Peter, when the authors are drawing on Old Testament (and extra-biblical) stories about people who rebel against God and are punished, the story of Babel is passed over. The story also goes unmentioned in the Doctrine and Covenants.

The Babel narrative presents a powerful lesson about God's power and authority. It displays God as a decisive being who can halt the progress of mankind's greatest endeavors, scatter mighty nations, and set at naught the designs of man. This story is a great illustration that "it is not the work of God that is frustrated, but the work of men" (D&C 3:3).

The story is also a powerful polemic against the pride and ambition of men. Everything that the men of Babel set out to do ultimately failed. They never completed the city nor the tower, they failed to establish an honorable name for themselves, and they were scattered against their wishes.

The story also teaches that man cannot reach heaven by any means unsanctioned by God. Whatever is meant by the enigmatic "and its top will be in the sky," the Book of Mormon's title page informs us that the men of Babel "were building a tower to get to heaven." Many have speculated on how, exactly, they intended to get to heaven. Regardless of the method, they were trying to get to heaven via their own efforts and not by appealing to the true god. They were rewarded with complete and utter rejection by deity. Not only were they punished and scattered, but they were denied even the privilege of dialoguing with God, a privilege that Adam and Cain had.

The Babel narrative adds to the importance of names stressed throughout scripture. The Book of Mormon repeatedly teaches that we must take upon us the name of Christ, and that by no other name will salvation come. Throughout scripture, acceptable names are always extended by deity, for us to accept or reject. God was the one who named Abraham and Sarah. By angelic decree, Mosiah extended the name of Christ to his people. Christ revealed the name of his church in ancient and modern dispensations. For man to seek to establish a name for himself, outside of the prerogative of God, is an act of arrogance and impudence that will ultimately come to naught.

The Babel narrative also plays a part in the doctrine of apostasy and dispensations. The narrative makes clear that soon after the flood, mankind degenerated into an apostate, fallen, and rebellious state. This state is highlighted by the JST addendum, "and they refused to harken to the voice of the Lord." This general apostasy goes hand in hand with the general apostasy of mankind before the flood to show the inclination of man towards apostasy. This inclination is confirmed repeatedly in the Book of Mormon. For example, Mormon bemoans, "O how foolish, and how vain, and how evil, and devilish, and how quick to do iniquity, and how slow to do good, are the children of men" (Helaman 12:4). There is no sign that the builders of Babel repented; indeed, the JST emendation makes it clear that they did not.

The passage also contains an interesting look at gathering and scattering. Throughout the ages, God has desired to gather a people. "How oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings," the Lord declared to the Nephites (3 Nephi 10:5). His purposes in gathering a people are clear: to prepare a special and elect people, a people that can take upon them His name, build a temple unto Him, receive His law, and be purified and prepared to see His face. This design has been enacted (with varying degrees of success) with Moses and the Tabernacle, Alma and his converts, the Restored Church in the latter days, and Enoch and his people.

On the flip side, when the Lord's people rebel, then the gathering is turned to scattering. The Lord scattered the northern kingdom of Israel when it fell into apostasy, and He scattered the Jews after they fell into apostasy a few centuries later. He scattered the Latter-day saints repeatedly, letting them be driven out of their homes before gathering them again in a new location.

In all these examples, the act of gathering and the act of scattering have been at the Lord's decree. In the Babel narrative, however, it is fallen man that initiates a gathering. There, gathering in the plain of Shinar, they seek to build a city and a form of temple and establish a name. They are usurping God's authority to gather. What's more, they seem to be doing so in a conscious effort to avoid being scattered. Already in wickedness, they seem to know automatically that their fate is to be scattered, and so they are trying to gather themselves according to the ancient pattern of Enoch. But they lack the crucial ingredients: righteousness and obedience. Hence the most fitting punishment is the punishment they receive: a scattering so complete it is not only geographic, but linguistic in scope.

Latter-day Saint Reception of the Babel Story

Gobs upon gobs have been written about the Tower of Babel. Due to space and time constraints, I will limit my discussion to Latter-day Saint commentary published in the magazines and manuals of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.[14]

Features on the Tower of Babel have appeared occasionally in the *Ensign*. These features will often briefly explain the Mesopotamian context of the passage and then focus on applications. One *Ensign* article associates Babel with Nimrod, citing Jewish tradition, although this correlation is not made explicit in the Biblical text.[15] This article points out that the builders of the tower "used the latest technology," but they forgot God and relied on their own strength, and "man's invention is no substitute for God's power." The article also points out that the use of man-made brick went against the Lord's pattern of building with stone, as set forth in Exodus 20:24–25 and 1 Kings 5:15–18.[16] It also points out the meaning of "Babel" as "Gate of God" in Akkadian.

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[14] Incidentally, I found that in all the *Ensign* articles, citations were limited to primary sources or to earlier Latter-Day Saint scholars such as Hugh Nibley—not to external critical sources.

[15] "The Tower of Babel," *Ensign*, February 2018, 66–67.

[16] I feel like a condemnation of the building material might be a bit of an interpretive stretch; the Babel event would have taken place before the commands in Exodus and 1 Kings, and the passage itself gives no indication that the building materials themselves were flawed. Rather, the detail is included, it seems, to explain to a people settled in hilly country how people of a plain constructed large structures. The reference to bricks might also be an allusion to the bricks that the Israelite slaves were forced to make in Egypt. If this is the case, then the *Ensign* article's point has some validity; bricks are associated with the false building projects of the world, while stone is the true building material used by God. This assumes, however, that the Babel passage was flexible enough to be shaped by the Exodus story, and such, as noted elsewhere in this paper, is a tricky proposition. It is also noteworthy that the Book of Mormon is silent on the building material, and that elsewhere in the Book of Mormon there is a lengthy passage explaining the use of cement instead of wood or stone, a passage that seems wholly focused on the oddity, not heresy, of the practice.

An excellent interpretation of the passage was published in the *Ensign* in 1998, coauthored by Lee Donaldson, V. Dan Rogers, and David Seely.[17] Therein they cite Hugh Nibley, who cites Jewish tradition about Nimrod. According to that tradition, Nimrod built the Tower of Babel as a pagan temple in a rebellious attempt to reach heaven and usurp authority. The article focuses on the use of bricks instead of stone, the rebellious intentions of Nimrod and the builders, and their apostate imitation of true temple worship and priesthood keys. The article also proposes that the builders of the tower were trying to escape a second flood. The flood of Noah was in recent memory, and their efforts to build a high tower out of waterproof material may have been motivated by fear of a repeat punishment.

The article also suggests a long-term literary arc spanning the whole Old Testament. In Genesis 11, the Lord makes a covenant with Abraham, takes him out of Babylon, and brings him to Canaan. In 2 Kings 25, the descendants of Abraham break the covenant, are taken out of Canaan, and brought into bondage back in Babylon.[18] Just as the Lord had power to bring them back out of Babylon, so He has power to bring us out of the world.

An illustrated children's storybook of the Bible may seem like a petty source to survey, but it is useful as an illustration of the basic lessons and interpretive lens given to children.[19] The storybook tells the story in simple terms but takes some interpretive liberties. It states that the builders "wanted to climb the tower to go to heaven." It also portrays the tower as a ziggurat and states that the tower remained unfinished because the people, divided by language barriers, could no longer work together (while the Biblical passage is unclear of the exact cause-and-effect relationship between the confounded tongues, the scattering, and the unfinished tower).

A seminary teacher manual provides an in-depth analysis of the lessons to learn from the Babel narrative.[20] The manual stresses the moral lesson that we cannot get away with sin and rebellion. We will be punished in the end. It addresses the ideas of Nimrod as a wicked and rebellious usurper, the tower as a counterfeit temple, the people seeking after the glory, honor, and reputation of the world in their effort to establish a name for themselves, and the possibility that they constructed from bitumen in an attempt to escape a second flood.

The seminary manual provides an interesting interpretation of the phrase "nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do." It suggests that "the people believed that once the tower was built, they could commit any sin without having to worry about God's punishments," and linked the idea to the modern tendency to avoid the consequences of sin.

Another article on Babel was published in the *Ensign* in 1998 by Donald Perry.[21] In the article, he focuses on defending the historicity of the event. Perry focuses on the tower as a counterfeit temple, a place where the people thought to encounter the divine and take a name

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[17] Lee Donaldson, V. Dan Rogers, and David Rolph Seely, "I have a question: The Tower of Babel," *Ensign*, March 1998.

[18] If this long-term narrative arc is intentional, it provides another reason why the Tower of Babel narrative may not have been added to the canon of Genesis until the exile. Instead of being added as an anti-Babel polemic, it may have been added by an inspired redactor to put the nature of the exile in a long-term historical context.

[19] "Chapter 7: The Tower of Babel," *Old Testament Stories* (1980), 30–32.

[20] "Lesson 18: Genesis 10–11," *Old Testament Seminary Teacher Manual* (2014).

[21] Donald W. Perry, "The Flood and the Tower of Babel," *Ensign*, January 1998.

upon themselves. He backs up the historicity of the event using the references in the Book of Mormon. Perry then quotes a statement by President Kimball that in the modern gathering of Israel, "the confusion of Babel is in reverse."

Personal Application

The lessons of the Babel narrative are clear: First, obey God. Do things according to His pattern. Seek to obtain heaven according to His conditions. Build a temple on His terms. Receive a name at His hand. Second, avoid arrogance. Any plan not sanctioned by God is a plan of men, and any plan of men can be stopped at a moment's notice by God, to be left unfinished and ridiculed for the rest of time.[22]

The Babel narrative can be interpreted through a number of symbolic lenses. Like in Medieval hermeneutics, we can find a literal, doctrinal, moral, and anagogical meaning in this passage.

Literal: Soon after the flood, man tried to build a tower and a city contrary to God's will, and were scattered and confounded for it.

Doctrinal: The builders of Babel represent Satan and His angels. In the premortal war in heaven, they rebelled from God and attempted to build a heavenly city and another way to salvation, a way wherein they would establish a name for themselves independently of God. God put an utter stop to their rebellion. He confounded them, stripping them of their heavenly glory, and scattered them, casting them down to earth.

Moral: The builders of Babel represent worldly men generally. Knowing in their hearts that they are condemned by God, they seek to obtain heaven through their own efforts, building up great cities and towers of worldly philosophies, causes, theories, and treasures. They seek to establish great and honorable names for themselves. But in the end their efforts come to naught. They die, their earthly mansions are left unfinished, their name is mocked and derided by their successors, their worldly wisdom is confounded, and they are scattered throughout the various levels of hell.

Anagogical: The builders of Babel can represent ourselves. Do we strive to get to heaven on our own terms? Do we expend our efforts on ambitious worldly projects that are not sanctioned by God? Have we used our God-given gift of language for ill, or for good? Do we seek to be known by any name other than the name of Christ? If we do any of these things, we are liable to be confounded and scattered in mortality and beyond. And, if we do not change, we will not be known by the name of Christ at the last day, for we shall be known by the name of Babel, or the world.

Like the rest of scripture, the Tower of Babel narrative is ultimately a call to repentance. It calls us to reject the world and to fear and obey God.

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[22] Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and The World of the Jaredites*, volume 5 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (1980), 156, as referenced in Donaldson, Rogers, and Seely, "I Have a Question."

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