

## The Tower of Babel

Like virtually everything in the Bible, the brief story of the Tower of Babel is routinely taken literally, which—not to put too fine a point on it—is ridiculous. Yet although one of my favorite activities is to try to discern the hidden meanings in ancient texts, I have not paid close attention to much of the Bible. This is for several reasons. First and foremost, the Bible has been explained to death from all directions, and I strongly believe we need to give it a rest. Our society has been mesmerized and stupefied, as much as inspired, by it. Then too, its symbolic language is very odd, intentionally obscure in fact, and without the key it is often a hopeless case. Lastly, the stories it contains, especially in the earliest parts, are fragmentary. It's like holding up a few shreds of a decomposed tapestry, and trying to determine how it once appeared. I'm am by no means the type of expert who can unearth a fossilized dinosaur toe and provide a plausible rendering of how the whole creature must have looked. But after the subject of the Babel Tower came up in our Isa Upanishad class, I read it over again, and a few things did occur to me.

Perhaps you haven't perused it recently yourself. The sketch appears smack in the middle of two lengthy (very Biblical) lists of who-begat-whoms. The "whole earth" where it took place was a small area in the Middle East. Babel, according to the previous chapter, was part of the kingdom of Nimrod, the mighty hunter, which might be a subtle tipoff that the tower is a symbol for swaggering egotism. Here's the fragment that has come down to us, from Genesis 11:

[1] And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.

[2] And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there.

[3] And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime

had they for mortar.

[4] And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

[5] And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.

[6] And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.

[7] Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.

[8] So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.

[9] Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

According to literalism, the story explains why there are different languages on Earth, although the human race was thought to have begun with just Adam and Eve, who were on the same page linguistically if not—like men and women everywhere—conceptually. But we can follow our intuition and take this explanation as trivial and unnecessary. Any god that is affronted by a tower a couple of hundred feet high obviously has too much free time on his hands.

The meaning of the myth has got to be that we conceive our goals as if we are a united people, but personal interests sabotage our ability to accomplish those goals. Our language is “confounded” and we don’t understand one another, because our selfish interests, like a secret language, are invisible to our fellows, intentionally kept out of sight. This produces a kind of historical sine wave, where tasks are initiated, performed for awhile, and then abandoned, often with considerable debris left over. To avoid

periodic disasters, a truly serviceable universal language must necessarily be grounded in an ideal greater than ourselves.

What struck me most about the myth this time was that the people built their tower out of thoroughly burned bricks held together with slime. The Absolute—including the one in Genesis—is often conceived as a molder of clay. This means spiritually alive ideas are flexible and light as long as they are less rigidly formed. As they are burned into our psyches—meaning held onto and reinforced without regard for their accuracy—they become hard as rocks, flinty, capable of being hurled at others and causing great damage. The bricks thus represent the evil of inflexible beliefs. They are the blocks with which the ego builds its mountains out of molehills, its bombastic towers of misguided thinking. As Robert Frost so eloquently wrote, with stones like them the ego walls itself in and walls contradictory evidence out.

Egotistical fixed ideas are cemented in place by opinions, which are more or less slimy depending on their degree of selfishness or generosity. The adjective is still used today. There is something about uncouth opinions that makes us shiver, as if we've noticed slime on the yogurt we've just dipped our spoon in. And slime is slippery, so it doesn't bind as well as we imagine it is going to. Our opinions tend to be based on expediency rather than facts, so they don't hold up well under pressure.

With these slime-coated bricks of ignorance, humans ever go forth to construct their shortsighted, egotistical fortresses, ignoring the gentle pleading of the spirit to build a world of peace, justice and fair play. Since such structures are built of faulty materials, they are bound to fail, but they often get piled pretty high before they do.

In the Biblical story as we have it, God doesn't actually topple the tower, though many later commentators consider that a given. He merely scatters the participants and makes them unable to understand each other. Selfishness is isolating, like clinging to a personal language that others don't speak. For instance, in the world of spies, who do you dare trust? Once you begin to practice

deception, you can never be sure about anyone ever again. Whose side are they on? Our persona is more an undercover operative than we may realize, a fictitious character striving to pass incognito through a hostile world, while trying to gather damning evidence on our opponents. This seems likely to be the gist of the meaning of the Tower of Babel, though everyone is bound to have their own interpretation, since we are already Babeling.

I did some research, enough to see that most of the commentaries are rather lite. As usual though, Dr, Mees, in *The Revelation in the Wilderness*, provided some pithy exegesis. For those who are allergic to overblown Biblical-style language—and I don't blame you—feel free to skip this part. If you can stand it, and translate the terms to something less agitated, Mees throws a lot of light on the scattering of the people that God accomplished. When everyone spoke the same language:

There was at first still unity and universality in rational and moral matters. But when people began to develop ambitious schemes, and built the Tower, their language became confounded, and they were scattered abroad on the face of the earth. Rationalism and moralism are claimed by their adherents to work for synthesis and unity, but it is always evident from the facts of their manifestation that they fail “to keep the world together,” and easily serve as tools in the hands of Ahankara. (Vol. II, 296-97)

Ahankara, or ahamkara, is Sanskrit for the I-sense or ego.

In explaining the Rod of Iron, which is capable of smashing the baked pots of the potter, similar to the bricks by which the Tower was built, Mees says:

The Power of God will break the crooked vessels of Maya into fragments.... The soul of him who brings and cuts fragments in the World without will be separated into fragments in the world within, and vice versa, for the within and the without are

intimately related. This symbolism should be understood in connection with the Tower of Babel. (Vol. III, 227-28)

The key, then, is not to identify with the fragments, but to find a non-egotistical way to regain unity.

While explaining the whacked-out Book of Revelation, where symbolism is taken to an extreme of incomprehensibility, Mees mentions Babel in its symbolic role, standing for the separatist mentality:

A myth is not a fanciful tale of generations of dreamers but a means of initiation into the mysteries of our own soul....  
Babylon is the Babel of Genesis (11). The word is said to mean “confusion.” The confusion is that of “language” (11; 7-9) which implied the “scattering of the fragments.” These fragments are the “peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues” which are mentioned in the 15<sup>th</sup> verse [of Rev. 17].  
(Vol. III, 274)

Keeping in mind that sin means separation from God, or missing the target in our aims, which happens whenever the isolated ego takes over the reins from our inner guiding light, or what the Bible here calls the Mystery of God, Mees concludes:

[The kings, who represent separatism] fulfill the design of God because they are bound by the very Karma which they represent. Their nature is to obey the Ahankara. That cannot but lead ultimately to self-destruction. Freedom from Sin comes when the Commandments of the Tradition are “obeyed.” That happens at the end of the Spiritual Path, when the Mystery of God finds its fulfillment.

Chapter 18: “And the woman which thou sawest is that great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth.” The great city referred to is Babel, symbol of “the world,” with its aspects of “confusion” or “chaos,” “wilderness,” moral “formlessness” and

“darkness.” It represents society on the physical plane, victim of heredity of Maya. (Vol. III, 276)

Speaking of the heredity of Maya, it appears that civilization is once again on the verge of another tower collapse, a real whopper this time, too, almost like tall twin towers toppling. Our scientific hubris has caused us to play God with technology, always assuming that it would lead us to a golden age. We have consistently ignored the shadow side of our achievements, and failed to address our psychological failings, which turn technology to nefarious ends. And now, once again the edifice of our efforts is being destroyed by corruption, and people are flying off in all directions, their umbilical connections severed. While this may produce a spiritual quantum leap in the long run, it looks like tough going in the sprint.

Scientific hubris is one of our twin towers; the other is humanism as it has been practiced. Civilization has vaunted goals of achieving equality, liberty and fraternity, but we too often press toward them with unequal access, punitive constraints, and hatred. We engage in perpetual war for perpetual peace. Because we are never honest about the situations we’re facing, as if to admit a problem is to endorse it, our progress only lasts for a while, and then there are serious setbacks as the veneer peels off. Whenever our insecurity increases, it’s back to everyone for themselves, and place the blame somewhere else. The ego always defends itself first by blaming others.

Despite the raving assertions of True Believers, the Bible doesn’t foretell the future exactly, it’s just that the truths of human nature continue to produce repetitions. History repeats. Humans love to ignore the downside until it creeps up and bites us from behind. It’s not that we are “playing God” exactly, as Biblical interpreters like to put it, but we are building our well-intentioned towers with a structural weakness: positive expectations are highlighted while negative potentialities are downplayed. The

result is everyone involved being scattered to the winds, as if a bomb has gone off.

The cure is to “love God,” in the words of the Bible. Actually “love God” only occurs in it four times, all in the New Testament, but a lot is made of the concept. Vedantins similarly suggest we love the Absolute and treat it as the hub of our actions, and then nothing will be left out. This means we should stop pretending we are without faults, which is a posture the ego desperately insists on, and dare to be completely honest. That should ensure that the modest towers we build in our lives are strong and stable. The wisdom engendered by sublimated love is the uniting mortar that really can overcome the ego’s resistance to openness. After all, everyone agrees that love is the true universal language. Don’t they?