EXEGETICAL PAPER ON THE TOWER OF BABEL

Expressing the Image of God in the Name of God
Exegetical Paper on the Tower of Babel -- Genesis 11:1-9

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Genesis 11:1-9, the so-called Tower of Babel story, is a beautifully built passage that is intricately structured. The simple account is composed of only nine verses but is so keenly crafted that its structure and language have as much to say about its message as the narrative it uses to communicate that message. Kathleen Farmer calls it a “tightly woven work of art” (Farmer, p. 17). Structurally, the passage uses repetition, chiasm and paronomasia. The narrative uses parallelism and even sarcasm to make its impact. A full understanding of the passage can only come via thorough exegesis and careful hermeneutic.

**Structure**

Gordon Wenham breaks the narrative into seven parts: introduction, followed by five brief scenes and a conclusion. The introduction establishes the situation of one language and one speech. The first two scenes include the travels and settling of humankind and their plans to build a city, tower and name. The middle pivotal scene, which in Wenham’s schema corresponds to verse 5, is the “Divine Inspection” when God descends to see what is going on. After this turning point in the story, the last two scenes are about Divine action to frustrate the plans and scatter humankind. The conclusion which corresponds to verse 9 has the famed punch-line about Babel (Wenham, p. 235). According to Wenham’s schema, the first half of the story details human plans. Verse 5 is the fulcrum on which the story pivots. The second half details God’s plans that are different from the human plans. God’s plan is to scatter humankind on the face of the earth, which obviously thwarts the settling, leaves the city and tower incomplete, provides an ironic and comedic twist on the name and results in the Divine plan’s success and the human plan’s failure.

The narrative structure, presented by Wenham, is clarified further by the palistrophic/chiasmic structure. Key repeated phrases of the passage are set as points and counterpoints to each other with verse 5 being the center of the palistrophe. According to
Wenham, this palistrophic pattern “underlines the fundamental inversion that takes place in the events” (Wenham, p. 236). See appendix 2.

Verse 1, which states “the whole earth had one language,” is counterbalanced by the last verse where the LORD has confused “the language of the whole earth.” Verse 2 tells of the journey and settling “there” [שָׁם] [sham] in Shinar. Its counterpoint is verse 8 which tells of scattering “from there” [מִשָּׁם] [misham]. In verse 3a the people speak to “each other,” Verse 7b balances with the LORD’s plans to confuse so that they may not understand “each other.” In verse 3b the people say “Come, let us make” while in verse 7a, God says, “Come let us confuse.” Verse 4a the people say “let us build for ourselves” while in 5c God refers to that “which humankind has built.” Finally in 4b “a city and a tower” is counterpointed in 5b with “the city and the tower” (Wenham, p. 235). Wenham’s chiasm breakdown, which is echoed by Allen Ross, makes the ebb and flow of the narrative startlingly clear, and yet, this is just the tip of the iceberg in regard to the artistry and resulting theological statement of the passage.

Repetition of words and phrases establish the frame of the chiasm but they also establish themes, tie the passage to the rest of Genesis and secure the passage in its location. The phrase “the whole earth” bookends the pericope and also occurs in verses 4 and 8. David Smith argues persuasively for connection to Genesis 1:28 “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (NASB) [פָּרֹת יִרְצֹה וּפְרָע הָאָרֶץ] (BHS, p. 2) and Genesis 9:1 and 9:7 when Noah and family, the new “first family,” are given the same repeated commission. For that matter, God has the same commission for the animals in Genesis 1:22 and 8:17. Smith writes, “Spreading, like diversity, is rooted in creation” (Smith, p.170).

As noted before “Come let us” is said twice by the people then repeated by God, possibly as a mocking or sarcastic counterpoint to the human plan. The notion of “one” is a repeated
word referring to the one language (v. 1), one speech (v. 1) and the one-ness of the people (e.g. v. 4 the desire to make a singular name; v. 6 God beholds the one language, one people and united scheme). Perhaps also, the one-ness of slime and bricks building material sticking together is a symbolic echo of the theme of one. A change takes place in the story and the passage does not end with one-ness. The notion of “scattering” [פַּתּ] [putz] is repeated is verses 4, 8 and 9. The passage shifts in emphasis from one-ness in the first half of the story to multiple languages and scattering in the second half.

As already noted, parallelism of ideas runs throughout the passage in a chiastic structure. But the parallelism also occurs within verses. The sources cited for this paper did not make note of the parallelism within each verse, but I want to suggest it is there and that it points toward a slightly different translation.

1. one language / same words [הֵן] is most often translated as words or speech
2. journey / settle
3. bricks / slime
4. build a city and name / avoid scatter
5. -turning point-
6. people are one / no restraint
7. confuse language / not understand (or hear)
8. scattered / quit building
9. confuse language / scatter abroad

Verses 2 through 9 use doublets that build an idea. The people journey and settle. They use bricks and slime. They build and avoid. They are one and unrestrained, etc. These verses seem to be constructive parallelism. Verse 1, on the other hand, is treated by translators and interpreters almost exclusively as synonymous parallelism. The one “word” or “speech” is simply treated as a restatement of the “one language”. Wenham even argues for synonymous parallelism in his discussion of the plural form of one which occurs here. He believes it points to synonymy with “one language” (Wenham, p. 238). What if verse 1 is not intended as
synonymous parallelism? What if, like all of the other verses, it is constructive parallelism? [davar] may also be translated as “matter” or “thing” (or purpose, business, custom, idea, cause). The resulting translation would be: “And the whole earth was of one language, and of one purpose.” This would communicate like-mindedness. Perhaps this is the unity of people and planning that the LORD beholds in verse 6. The rationale for such a change is supported by the correspondence to verse 6. It is supported by the consistency of the pattern of constructive parallelism within all of the individual verses. Also, it would fit with the chiastic structure of the whole. Compare the relationship between verses 2 and 8 with the relationship between verses 1 and 9. In verse 2 they journey and settle. In verse 8, its counterpoint, they are scattered and quit building. In verse 1 they have “one language” and “same purposes” which counterpoints nicely with verse 9 wherein language is confused and the people are scattered. The strength of this argument is in the highly structured nature of the passage. The weakness with this suggested translation is that the LXX renders it $\text{φωνή}$ (sound or voice) (BibleWorks 7). Nevertheless, this suggested translation would seem more consistent with the line-by-line parallelism and the overall palistrophe.

Language

The artistry of this pericope goes beyond its structural framework. Paronomasia, or word play, is another tool used in the passage. Some of the playfulness is well known and is even explained by the passage itself, in verse 9, while other wordplay is more subtle but undeniably intentional. The most noted wordplay is found in the conclusion. We have read and heard about these people, settled in Shinar, who want to make a name for themselves. Their name is $\text{בבל}$ (transliterated as Babel and translated as Babylon). $\text{בבל}$ means “Gate of God” (Farmer, p. 19). In the conclusion, that name is phonetically connected to $\text{בלבל}$ [balal] which means “confuse”.
God had confused the language of all the earth. The words are placed in proximity so that the similar sounds call attention to the two words and in so doing provides interpretation of one word by the other (Ross, p. 236). The aural wordplay of balal and Babel points out, perhaps sarcastically, the irony of a people attempting to build a city and tower and make a name for themselves but ending up with an unfinished city and tower and a name that sounds like confusion. This conclusion is strikingly different from the “one language” and “one speech/purpose” in the first verse.

Additional subtle wordplay occurs in verse 3 where the building materials of the people reveal a humorous, possibly sarcastic wordplay. The author, apparently familiar with stone construction which uses clay as mortar, points out that the people in Shinar had no clay [הומר] [homer] for mortar so they use tar [חמל] [hemar]. Ross and Jacobs think this simple soundplay might remind the hearer of a children’s song, reducing the grandiose work of the people to mere child’s play (Ross, p. 245).

The words of the phrase “let us make bricks” [ליבנים ברנים benim] have repeating sounds and related meaning. As Ross points out the phrase literally means “let us brick bricks.” The phrase that follows “and let us burn them hard” [_pen[214] la] [v’nis’pa lisrepa] literally means “let us burn them for burning.” It is another example of repeated sound and related meaning (Ross, p. 236).

The larger chiasm described earlier tied the phrases of verse 3 “Come, let us make bricks” to its counterpoint in verse 7 “Come, let us confuse.” Not only are these phrases counterpoints in the structure, they are also counterpoints phonetically. [ליבנים ברנים benim] repeats consonant sounds LBN. God’s response in verse 7 “let us confuse” is [בלעה nab'l]a, which has
the consonant sounds NBL. The consonant sounds are not only foreshadowing the Babel/Balal sounds, but more importantly here are reversed in order. LBN becomes NBL. Ross calls this a sound chiasmus. “The reversal of the order of the sound reveals the basic idea of the passage” (Ross, p. 236). That is, the sounds reflect a reversal in the same way that the narrative does.

Ross, in discussing Fokkelman, points out the similar sounding words שם [shem] which means ‘name’ שם [sham] which means ‘there’ and שמים [shamayim] which means ‘sky’ or ‘heaven’ (Ross, p 237). From verse 7, Brueggemann notes ישמעו [yishmê-u] a form of shema meaning ‘hear’ which should be added to the list. It is typically translated as “they may not understand” but could also be “they do not listen” (Brueggemann, p. 103). This poetic use of these similar sounding words ties the pericope together, reinforces the narrative and also ties it to Genesis. The tie to Genesis will be discussed later. In the meantime, the people of one language settle there (sham). They build a tower to reach the sky (shemayim). With the intent of making a name (shem) for themselves. After God’s intervention the people of one language no longer understand (yishmê-u) each other. Again, the ironic reversal that takes place in the narrative is emphasized using phonetic wordplay.

There are quite a few reasons the author would use these techniques. As already argued, this playing with sound reinforces and even mimics the narrative itself. Storytelling, whether through recitation or public reading as was the custom, is an oral/aural art. These devices aid the story teller’s memory and entertain the ears of the hearers. Anderson writes, “The written form of the tradition that we have received undoubtedly bears the stigmata of oral performance” (Anderson, p. 177). This pericope is quite simply, a beautiful work of art. The wordplays also provide humor and make the story memorable. In a community that views certain stories as central to their religious identity and heritage, and that views the stories disclosing of their God’s
concerns, being memorable is of no small import, which leads to the last point. These devices are so creatively used that, as previously shown, they make theological statements. They reveal a God whose intentions are different from humankind’s; a God who will reverse human plans and confound if necessary; a God who has a larger narrative in mind.

**Literary Context**

The larger narrative of Genesis, which leads up to chapter 11 and which follows the pericope, can give us greater insight into the passage. The story has gone from creation, to fall, to propagation of sin, to the flood, to the sons of Noah re-populating the earth.

The Hebrew word for flood [םָבֻּל] sounds similar to the story that follows, Babel [בָּבֵל] (Wenham, p. 244). Earlier, we saw the one-ness or unity at the beginning of the story and the scatter [פָּעַץ] at the end of the story. Brueggemann argues that scattering is fulfillment of the divine plan. God’s command in Genesis 1:28 to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” [יִרְבּוּ וְיִשַׁלְמוּ] which in its own right happens to be a good example of assonance, still stands at the time of Babel as God’s plan and command. So the unity, the settling and avoiding scatter are antithetical to God’s purposes (Brueggeman, p. 98). David Smith argues along the same lines. Humanity was made in God’s image. The creation was to live out that image which included being fruitful, multiplying and filling the earth. At Shinar, the people seek to create their own identity and seek to avoid filling the earth. Smith also connects Gen 3:22 wherein God sees what humans have done and prevents more damage by excluding from the Tree of Life and Gen 11:6 wherein God declares that “nothing they do will be impossible for them.” In each case, God acts accordingly to restrain. It so happens that God’s action is also an enforcement of the original command to fill the earth (Smith, p. 177).
The same command to fill the earth for those made in God’s image is repeated to Noah and family twice after the flood in 9:1, and 9:6-7.

The strongest tie of the Babel pericope to the rest of Genesis is by Shem. Throughout Genesis, תולדות [toledoth] or generations serves as a repeated thematic tie. The generations of creation itself and the generations of people echo throughout. After the flood, God repeats the command to Noah and his family. The Table of Nations of chapter 10 describes how the nations descended from the three sons, Japheth, Ham and Shem. Shem’s nation table is the last one listed before the Babel story. As previously discussed, shem, sham, shemayim and shema are sprinkled throughout the Babel story. The person Shem and the word shem undoubtedly tie the passages together (Anderson, p. 168). Then in 11:10, after the Babel story the תולדות [toledoth] of Shem begins. That genealogy leads to Abraham. In 12:1-3 God tells Abram to “Go” from Ur of Chaldeans (the same Mesopotamian region as Shinar). God tells Abram to spread. We learn that God will bless Abram and will make him a great nation, and make his שם great so that he will be a blessing to the nations scattered throughout the world. These promises stand in contrast to the people and events of Babel. God is furthering the scatter. God is making the name great. God is blessing the nations that were just scattered.

Shem, be it Noah’s son or the word shem is so much a part of the warp and woof that there is no question that the pericope belongs in its place. There is no sign that it was simply pasted into place. If an editor did, a thorough re-write of Genesis had to have been required. Smith argues that not only is it not pasted in, there is also no removing it from its place and that it must be treated as part of the whole of Genesis (Smith, p. 171).

Given this intricate integration, is there a contradiction between the Table of Nations that describe the spread of nations each with their own languages and the Babel story that follows?
As argued above, the story belongs in its spot. Ross connects chapters 10 and 11 with Peleg. Verse 10:25 names Peleg (whose name means division) as a descendant of Shem and that it was in Peleg’s day that the earth was divided. Chapter 10 gives no explanation of the division and leaves it to the Babel passage to do so (Ross, p. 243). Another connection to the Table of Nations is in verses 10:8-10 with Nimrod, son of Cush, son of Ham, son of Noah. Nimrod was the first king of Babylon in Shinar (Smith, p. 172).

Brueggemann notes that הָפְצָה [putz] ‘spreading’ or ‘scattering’ comes up in 10:18 and is hinted at 10:32. Then in Genesis 28:14 the spread of Jacob’s family is promised as a blessing to the earth (Brueggeman, pp. 98, 104). Anderson argues that the theme of spreading starts in Genesis 9:18-19 with the disembarking [בָּאוּ] [hayyotz’im] from the ark and the whole earth being scattered [נָפָצת] [nap’tza] from the three sons (Anderson, p. 175). Clearly the literary context includes a web of connections to the whole of Genesis. Babel could stand on its own, but does not. It must be treated within the whole of its Genesis context.

Since the Babel story belongs where it is, one must try to understand the differences between chapters 10 and 11. Smith argues that the “one language” was a lingua franca. He thinks there were many languages, but all people had a single common language which God then confused. This is an observant and creative approach and may well be true, but it is not necessary to reconcile the two in this way. If we, the audience and analysts, are assured that the story was intentionally placed in its spot, then there is no need to harmonize. Instead, treat it as one facet of a singular multi-faceted diamond. Much like the doublet nature of Genesis 1 and 2 need not be harmonized; the Table of Nations and Babel story may stand as they are. Human diversity is God-willed. Human diversity is an expression of their having been made in God’s
image and that diversity has been affected by human sin. Just as Genesis chapter 1 reveals God’s purposes while chapters 2 and 3 introduce the negative implications of sin.

**Historical / Cultural Background**

The books of Joshua, Isaiah, Daniel and Zechariah all refer to Shinar which is located in the Mesopotamian plain. The Hebrew Bible is full of references to בבל which is translated Babylon everywhere except in Genesis 10 and 11 where it is translated Babel. Both are geographically identifiable.

The Mesopotamian plain was well known for being dotted with ziggurats, towers built in a tiered fashion that were topped with temples. The towers were, in a sense, human-made mountains on the plain. The tower in Babylon during the time of Nebuchadnezzar was ninety meters square at the base and 90 meters high. Its temple was a Marduk sanctuary, the patron god of Babylon. Ross believes the Genesis account must certainly be referring to an earlier Babylon (Ross, pp. 238-9). Wenham thinks the story may be referring to an early attempt at construction that was aborted and that became the butt of jokes and legend (Wenham, p. 238).

Archeology confirms that Ziggurat construction included kiln-fired bricks because stone was not a plentiful resource. Bitumen or tar was plentiful and therefore commonly used as mortar. Nahum Sarna points out that stone, being plentiful in Palestine, was used extensively in Palestine, which makes it all the more interesting that the author of the Babel story included detail that is geographically and architecturally accurate about Mesopotamia (Sarna, p. 72).

There are ancient Near East literature parallels to the story of Babel. “Enuma Elish celebrates the building of Babylon and its temple tower, and Sumerian tradition tells of a time when all men spoke or will speak the same language,” writes Wenham (Wenham, p. 236). The stele of King Ur-Nammu refers to one ziggurat in Mesopotamian history:
“The erection of this tower highly offended all the gods. In a night they threw down what man had built and impeded their progress. They were scattered abroad and their speech was strange” (Archer, p. 227).

The story sounds so similar that perhaps this stele refers to the same historical event as Genesis, from a slightly different world view. Or perhaps the Genesis account was written as a polemic against the regional mythology to give a contrasting interpretation of the story—‘This is how the true God is different from your mythology’ (Ross, p. 241).

The Genesis story may be seen as etiologically explaining the existence of many languages in the world, although it is not the main thrust of the passage. Wenham points to the Sumerian epic Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta which says, “The whole universe, the people in unison, to Enlil in one tongue spoke” (Wenham, p. 236). The Enuma Elish tells of the tower. The Sumerian epic tells of one language, but Genesis puts the two together.

The Genesis account also sets up a contrast of gods. Marduk may dwell in a sanctuary on top of a human-made mountain, but the God of Genesis, who dwells in heaven, had to leave heaven in order to be able to see the work that humankind was doing. Genesis makes the massive tower seem relatively puny compared to their God. Genesis uniquely pulls together many of these historical and mythological details and presents a story in contradistinction to the ancient Near East myths (Ross p. 237).

Genre

The historical background suggests some connection to the reality of Babylon, its architecture and its building materials and its mythology. This story was not written in a vacuum. The stele of King Ur-Nammu suggests some historical connections. Genesis may be a case of polemical writing within the culture of the day with the knowledge of the day, as opposed to documenting an historical incident. Chapter 11 is a turning point in Genesis where the epic myths transition to historical accounts of the patriarchs. Falling in that transition makes its
classification a little murkier. However, the complex structure and storytelling technique of the Babel story strongly suggest classifying it with the epic/mythological literature of the first part of Genesis more than with the patriarchal history in the latter sections. The warp and woof of the pericope (with chiasm, parallelism, and wordplay) cry myth—not falsehood, but myth. At the same time, historicity should not be easily dismissed because of the very issues discussed above. In teaching and preaching in the church, the distinction of this particular passage as either history or myth is not essential. The story itself communicates and reveals something about God’s plan, methods and grace in contradistinction to humankind’s plans and methods. This truth stands whether historical or not.

Hermeneutics

The people of the earth had one language and were unified in purpose. Contrary to God’s command to fill the earth, the people settled in the plain of Shinar where they baked bricks and used slime to try to build a city and a tower. They also tried to build a name for themselves in order to avoid being scattered on the earth. Although their tower was to reach to heaven, it was apparently small enough that God had to come down from heaven in order to see what it was. Noting the unity of people, one language and single purpose, God decided intervention was necessary. And so God confused their language so that they did not listen to each other. The construction remained incomplete and the people were scattered, as God had originally commanded. The city of bricks and tar was half built and apparently did not come close to reaching heaven as intended. The name they built, Babel, instead of being the gateway of god, sounds like confusion. Finally the very thing the people intended to avoid happened, as they were scattered over the face of the earth.

This story may contain an etiological explanation for the world’s diversity of language and it may have been a sarcastic response to the mythology of a neighboring culture and it may have
had a punch-line that mocked the name of a subjugating nation but, given the intricacies of its structure and language, the Babel story is much more about unity, diversity and humankind fulfilling the fact that they are created in God’s image.

What is the crime? Kathleen Farmer is correct in pointing out that the “cause of God’s displeasure is left undefined” (Farmer, p.18). You would think that such a carefully crafted story would clearly define the crime that prompts God’s intervention, but that is not the case.

By far, the most prevalent interpretation is that God is angry about human pride. Using technology of the day, the people try to build a tower that reaches to where God lives. Humans ignore their place and try to be like God. Perhaps they even threaten God because in verse 6 God seems to admit that there is no stopping them if they are not restrained. Had the story been about a ziggurat with Marduk living in the temple at its top, this common interpretation would make sense (Smith, p. 175). But there are several problems with the interpretation. The high reaching tower is not the focus of the story. It is only mentioned twice and not mentioned at the end. The high reaching tower never even got close to heaven as evidenced by the fact that God had to leave heaven in order to see what was going on. Architectural hubris does not seem to be the focus of the story. Unfortunately, the commonly accepted title of the story leads the interpreter astray. It is really not about the tower and the name of the city is Babylon, not Babel. “The Scattering at Shinar” might be more a more appropriate title.

Perhaps the events were a threat to God? Maybe the high-topped tower was a rebellion against God (Farmer, p. 18). Given the larger Genesis tapestry into which the story is so clearly woven, this is not a strong interpretation. The God of Genesis would not be threatened by such unity of purpose. After all, the God of Genesis created heaven and earth by fiat. The God of Genesis had flooded the earth and wiped out a wicked people (Smith, p 174). The notion that rebellious human arrogance threatens God does not resonate with the story.
The only place to infer hubris is in making a name for themselves. If making a name for themselves was the crime, then hubris would be the problem. But the text suggests that the name making had a purpose, and the purpose was to avoid scatter.

Avoiding scatter seems to be the most textually and contextually consistent interpretation of the offense. As noted earlier, the flow of the passage is from one-ness to scatter. Spreading is a recurring theme. God had commanded Adam and Eve, animals, Noah and families on multiple occasions to fill the earth. The Table of Nations echoes the theme of spreading out. Now the Babel story climaxes with a scattering of the people. God has clear intentions. The people of Shinar had clear opposite intentions. God’s intentions were not thwarted.

David Smith and Kathleen Farmer are on target with their interpretation. Instead of jumping to the conclusion of hubris, they emphasize the scatter theme that is much more justified by the passage. Instead of the traditional interpretation of humans making the mistake of trying to be like God, Farmer and Smith interpret the problem to be: humans trying to not be like God. That is, humans avoiding the fact that they were made in God’s image--humans avoiding diversity and avoiding scatter. The problem is not overachievement; it is underachievement (Farmer, pp. 19-21).

The scattering of the people is not so much judgment or punishment as it is the fulfilling of God’s intention and fulfilling that for which humans were created. The confusion of language and scattering is an act of God’s judgment and grace (Smith, pp. 177-179). This view is consistent with the theme of the passage. It is consistent with the repetitions in Genesis and consistent with God’s creativity in Genesis. Diversity and spreading are godly. Farmer writes, “The God we worship and whose good news we proclaim wants us to “fill the earth” with the images of God in order to represent God’s interests in every far-flung corner of the universe” (Farmer, p. 28).
This understanding is consistent with the promise to Abram in the very next chapter; that God would make Abram’s name great and that he would be a blessing to all nations. Instead of Abram making a name for himself, Abraham receives his name from God. That name is made great and the diverse nations are blessed by him.

The second chapter of *The Acts of the Apostles* tells the story of Pentecost, when the God-fearing Jews from the nations of the world are represented in Jerusalem, including Jews from Mesopotamia (Shinar). They are gathered for festival. Holy Spirit comes and suddenly each person hears the disciples proclaiming the wonders of God in his/her native tongue. Diverse languages are not eliminated, but hearing is enabled. On the contrary, as Gonzalez points out, diverse languages are blessed. The miracle of Pentecost is not about eliminating diversity. It is about eliminating confusion through blessing (Gonzalez, p. 24).

Part of living out the image of God is to be named by God. Instead of making a name for ourselves, God gives a new name, as God did to Abram, and Jacob. Thanks to the commission of Matthew 28, Christians to this day are baptized in the singular name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and they are sent to the ends of the earth. God’s people share in the name and they share in the one purpose (the One Word) to spread to the ends of the earth making known the good news of God’s blessing to all nations.

Just as knowing the end of a story helps with understanding it beginning, *The Revelation to John* can help with understanding Genesis. In Revelation chapter 3 we are told of a new city coming down from God. The city has a new name. The city is the new Jerusalem. It is not a city being built up to heaven, but is coming down from heaven. It is not built with baked brick and slime, but has a wall made of jasper and jewels and a city of pure gold (NASB, Rev 3, 21). The name is not confusion, but is called the city of Peace. The citizens of this city will come
from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,” and they will sing together in confession (Rev 7:9-10) without confusion and they will be given new names.

Application

For reasons of ease and comfort, how easy it is to surround oneself with like-minded people. I face the temptation of participating in groups that think like me and dress like me. I quite easily assimilate into a so-called “Christian” culture. I’m very much at home with fellow evangelical Presbyterians. It is easier and safer. It is less taxing and less prone to conflict, but it is not the calling of the people of God. That kind of safe living fails to express God’s diversity.

If the church is fulfilling the great commission of Matthew 28, then she is fulfilling the call of Genesis and the call from the story of Babel. We should be celebrating diversity and welcoming spread around the world. Unity in Christ is not homogeneity in Christ. Our identity is in Christ. Our unity is in God’s name, not in a name of our own making. We are God’s people and should reflect God’s creative diversity, living out the fact that we are made in the image of a blessing God.
References


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APPENDIX 1

וַיִּהְיָה כָּל הָאָרֶץ שָׂפָה אֶחָת וּדְבָרִים אֲחָדִים

1. And the whole earth (land) was of one language, and of one (word) (speech) (purpose)

בְּאֶרֶץוַיְהִי בְּנָסְעָם מִקֶּדֶם וַיִּמְצָאוּ בִקְעָה

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

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ הָבָה נִלְבְּנָה לְבֵנִים

3. And they said to each other, Come (give help), let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly; And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָבָה נִבְנֶה לָּנוּ עִיר

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

וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָבָה נִבְנֶה לָּנוּ עִיר

5. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men built:

וַיֵּרֶד יְהֹוָה לִרְאֹת אֶת הָעִיר וְאֶת הַמִּגְדָּל

6. And the Lord said, Behold, the people are one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have schemed to do:
7. Come, let us go down, and there confuse (mix up) their language, that they may not understand each other’s speech:

listen to each other

8. So the Lord scattered them abroad from there upon the face of all the earth; and they left off the building of the city:

9. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confuse the language of all the earth; and from there did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth:
APPENDIX 2

From Wenham p. 235 with the addition of verse information

A (v 1) “The whole earth had one language”
B (v 2) “there”
C (v 3) “each other”
D (v 3) “Come let us make bricks”
E (v 4a) “let us build for ourselves”
F (v 4b) “a city and a tower”
G (v 5a) “The LORD came down…”
F^1 (v 5b) “the city and the tower”
E^1 (v 5c) “which mankind had built”
D^1 (v 7a) “come…let us mix up
C^1 (v 7b) “each other’s language”
B^1 (v 8) “from there”
A^1 (v 9) “the language of the whole earth”