

# CHAPTER 11

1,2 **A** 1 And all the earth was one language, one set of words. 2 And it happened  
as they journeyed from the east that they found a valley in the land of  
3 Shinar and settled there. 3 And they said to each other, "Come, let us  
bake bricks and burn them hard." And the brick served them as stone,  
4 and bitumen served them as mortar. 4 And they said, "Come, let us  
build us a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, that we may  
5 make us a name, lest we be scattered over all the earth." 5 And the LORD  
came down to see the city and the tower that the human creatures had  
6 built. 6 And the LORD said, "As one people with one language for all, if  
this is what they have begun to do, nothing they plot will elude them.  
7 7 Come, let us go down and baffle their language there so that they will  
8 not understand each other's language." 8 And the LORD scattered them  
9 from there over all the earth and they left off building the city. 9 There-  
fore it is called Babel, for there the LORD made the language of all the  
earth babble. And from there the LORD scattered them over all the  
earth.

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1.—9. The story of the Tower of Babel transforms the Mesopotamian ziggurat, built with bricks (in contrast to Canaanite stone structures) and one of the wonders of ancient technology, into a monotheistic fable. Although there is a long exegetical tradition that imagines the building of the Tower as an attempt to scale the heights of heaven, the text does not really suggest that. "Its top in the heavens" is a hyperbole found in Mesopotamian inscriptions for celebrating high towers, and to make or leave a "name" for oneself by erecting a lasting monument is a recurrent notion in ancient Hebrew culture.

The polemic thrust of the story is against urbanism and the overweening confidence of humanity in the feats of technology. This polemic, in turn, is lined up with the stories of the tree of life and the Nephilim in which humankind is seen aspiring to transcend the limits of its creaturely condition. As in those earlier moments, one glimpses here the vestiges of a mythological background in which God addresses an unspecified celestial entourage in the first-person plural as He considers how to respond to man's presumption.

2. *a valley in the land of Shinar.* The Hebrew for "valley" might also mean "plain," as was recognized as long ago as ibn Ezra in the twelfth century. That would fit the Mesopotamian setting better.

3. *Come, let us.* As many commentators have noted, the story exhibits an intricate antithetical symmetry that embodies the idea of "man proposes, God disposes." The builders say, "Come, let us bake bricks," God says, "Come, let us go down"; they are concerned "lest we be scattered," and God responds by scattering them. The story is an extreme example of the stylistic predisposition of biblical narrative to exploit interechoing words and to work with a deliberately restricted vocabulary. The word "language" occurs five times in this brief text as does the phrase "all the earth" (and the "land" of Shinar is the same Hebrew word as that for earth). The prose turns language itself into a game of mirrors.

*bake bricks and burn them hard.* A literal rendering of the Hebrew would be something like "brick bricks and burn for a burning." This fusion of words reflects the striking tendency of the story as a whole to make words flow into each other. "Bitumen," *heimar*, becomes *homer*, "mortar." The reiterated "there," *sham*, is the first syllable of *shamayim*, "heavens," as well as an odd echo of *shem*, "name." Meaning in language, as the biblical writer realized long before the influential Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, is made possible through differences between terms in the linguistic system. Here difference is subverted in the very style of the story, with the blurring of lexical boundaries culminating in God's confounding of tongues. The Hebrew *balal*, to mix or confuse, represented in this translation by "baffle" and "babble," is a polemic pun on the Akkadian "Babel," which might actually mean "gate of the god." As for the phonetic kinship of babble and *balal*, *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (1966) notes that a word like "babble" occurs in a wide spectrum of languages from Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit to Norwegian, and prudently concludes, "of echoic origin; probably not of continuous derivation but coined from common experience."