

Therefore it was called Babel

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For at least two millennia, confusion has reigned over the reason Babel received its name in Genesis 11:1–9. An attempt is made here to demonstrate that, although the passage does contain many clever examples of sound similarities between the words used in Hebrew,¹ Babel received its name because God descended in that place (i.e. it was the “door” through which he passed) to thwart men’s plans and scatter them over the face of the earth. This new understanding wrests just one more weapon from the hands of those who question the historicity of Scripture.

While in seminary, I concentrated my studies on the Old Testament, taking every course I could which might help me understand the history and civilizations of the Ancient Near East and their influence on the Hebrew Scriptures. Among these was a course in Akkadian, a Semitic language represented by Assyrian and Babylonian. We memorized vocabulary, studied the grammar, deciphered transliterated cuneiform texts, and discussed their relationship to biblical Hebrew. One day, the professor, Dr Lawson Stone, commented on the name Babel, an obviously Akkadian word meaning the “door/gate of god”. He noted that the biblical author almost certainly had known the real meaning, and yet he chose to make a play on the similarity between the sound in Hebrew of “Babel” and the Hebrew word for “to confuse” (*bālal*). Our professor concluded by saying essentially, “This just goes to show that the biblical authors did not intend to write history, but theology.”

In other words, Stone was implying, in line with his university instruction, that Scripture is not the infallible Word of God, but rather a collection of legendary, perhaps even mythological stories, recorded for religious purposes, but not intended to be taken as a representation of past, historical realities. Unfortunately, this line of thought essentially removes all connection between the Bible and reality. Although many would disagree with me, I cannot stake both my physical life (literally) and eternal life on myths and unfounded legends.

The assumption that the author of Genesis 11:1–9 was making a play on the word “to confuse”, in connection with the name Babel, has become entrenched in the minds of scholars and laymen alike, regardless of their theological leanings. A quick look at a few sources can quickly demonstrate that this is the case. The *Holman Bible Dictionary* even erroneously defines the name Babel as “a Hebrew word meaning ‘confusion,’ derived from a root which means ‘to mix.’”² By contrast, although the commentators of the *Bible Knowledge Commentary* recognize the original Akkadian meaning, they explain that “the passage culminates in a name play: Babel (*bābel*) sounds similar to the verb confused (*bālal*) ... The Babylonians took great pride in their building; they boasted of their city not only as impregnable, but also as the heavenly city, *bāb-ili* (‘the gate of God’).”³ The famous *Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* also recognizes the original meaning, but again assumes a link with the Hebrew verb: “In Assyrian written *Bab-ilu*, gate of god... Genesis 10:10, 11:9 (where connected with בלל *confuse, confound*).”⁴

Notwithstanding, Stone’s comment served an important purpose: it pushed me to examine the Hebrew text anew to look for clues to the author’s original intent. Upon doing

this, I soon recognized a much more satisfactory explanation which respects both the biblical author’s knowledge of the true meaning of Babel, and yet shows that his intention was not merely a wordplay involving the sound of “to confuse”; thus freeing the text from the misunderstanding imposed upon it so long ago.

Anyone doing in-depth study on a biblical passage should look for words which are repeated because they will provide important clues to its understanding. As I read and reread the passage in Hebrew, I observed that the word “there”, (Hebrew “sham” or *šām*) was repeated five times in the nine verses. Furthermore, the Hebrew word for “name” (“shem” or *šēm*), which only differs from “there” by a single vowel (unwritten in the original paleo-Hebrew texts), appears twice. The full meaning of the author’s true emphasis quickly became clear.

Despite what has been understood and held as true by so many scholars over the centuries, I am convinced that the biblical author’s emphasis in verse nine was not on the confusion of the languages, but rather on God’s decision to appear “there”. This is the real reason the place was named “the door of God”, because God chose to come down in that specific place (*šām*) and confound the futile plans of men (Genesis 11:5)! The relationship between the intention of the inhabitants to “make a name (*šēm*)” for themselves and God’s action which made a name for *himself* (Babel), coupled with the emphatic repetition of the word “there” (*šām*), clues the reader in to the author’s intended meaning: Although men wanted to build up their pride and renown *there*, God turned the tables on them and perpetuated his own renown (*šēm*) in that very spot (*šām*)!

Of course, until I was finally able to do a reasonably thorough search of the literature dealing with this passage, I wondered whether anyone had entertained this understanding of the text previously. Every author and commentator I consulted, without exception, follows the traditional understanding of a wordplay between the sounds of “Babel” (*bābēl*) and “confuse” (*bālal*) in Hebrew. Nonetheless, different ones come amazingly close to discovering it without making the final connection. For example, Osborne points out the importance of the word “there” (*šām*) and its close connection with the word “name” or “renown” (*šēm*). He reminds us that Cain wanted a place to commemorate his “name” (*šēm*, Genesis 4:17) and the sons of God, who were destroyed by the worldwide Flood, were “men of renown” (*šēm*, Genesis 6:4). “The Babel builders also set out to make a name (*šēm*, Genesis 11:4) for themselves in that place (*šām*, Genesis 11:2), but they were scattered from that place (*šām*, Genesis 11:8).”⁵ Another author, Roberts,



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Figure 1. Babel received its name because God descended in that place to thwart men’s plans and scatter them over the face of the earth.

states: “The author of Genesis 11:1–9 offers the parody that Babel was in fact ‘the gate of God,’ through which God came down and judged the people for their polytheistic system.”⁶ So, even though various authors saw the connection between “name” and “there”, and still others emphasized God’s descent through a figurative “door” or “gate” in order to confuse the languages and scatter the people, no one managed to connect both concepts into a unified interpretation.

This failure to make the connection between the repetition of “there” (*šām*) and “Babel” (the door of God) puzzled me until I checked on the Septuagint’s rendering of the passage. The name Babel doesn’t even appear! The 2nd century BC translator, obviously the perpetuator of the problem, evidently had no idea that Babel meant “door of God” and translated it as “Synchysis”: quite literally “confusion”. Brenton’s English translation of the Septuagint reads, “On this account its name was called Confusion, because there the Lord confounded the languages of all the earth, and thence the Lord scattered them upon the face of all the earth.”⁷ Isn’t it delightfully ironic that God’s act of confusing the languages cropped up again in the attempt to alleviate that confusion with a translation of the Old Testament into Greek!

Still, the case was not open-and-shut until I had one of those eureka moments. As I read Schmutzer’s personal translation of verse nine,⁸ I suddenly realized that the Hebrew text begins with “therefore” (*‘al kēn*), but instead of only stating one reason, it actually states *two reasons* for the naming of Babel! Following is a visual representation of what I am trying to express:

“For this reason, one called it Babel (the door of

God), because THERE the Lord confused the speech of all the earth, and from THERE the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.”⁹

The verbs for both “confuse” and “scatter” are subordinated to the words “for this reason”, and, although “confuse” can be seen as somewhat phonetically similar to “Babel”, the verb “scatter” (*hefts*) has no similarity whatsoever, thus showing that, even if the author intended a *phonetic* similarity between “Babel” and “confuse”, he did not mean to imply that the words were *etymologically* related.

Conclusion

Perhaps scholars, or even the readers of this article will continue to hold to the “traditional understanding” of Genesis 11:1–9. Nevertheless, this challenge to God’s Word, expressed in a theologically conservative seminary, spurred me to examine the biblical text very carefully to discover the original meaning. “Confusion” was introduced quite literally into the Greek translation and passed down from generation to generation, giving an excuse for accusation to certain opponents of the truth of Scripture. This confusion is removed, however, when we place the emphasis on the repeated word “there” and realize that the reason for confounding the languages was dual and not singular.

Personally, the process led me to a deeper appreciation for the unfathomable depths of Scripture. As Christian laymen or scholars, we engage in an ideological “survival of the fittest”, in which even our opponents can serve as a stimulus to more thorough study and deeper understanding of the scientific and historical accuracy of the account of God’s activity, also known as the Bible.

References

- 1 See, for example, Roberts, F., *Confusion Reigns: An Exegetical, Literary and Archaeological Study of Genesis 11:1–9*, Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, TX, 2001.
- 2 Butler, T.C. et al., *Holman Bible Dictionary*, Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN, p. 140, 1991.
- 3 Walvoord, J.F. and Zuck, R.B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, pp. 44–45, 1985.
- 4 Brown, F. et al., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, p. 93, 1999.
- 5 Osborne, W., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, Alexander and Baker (Eds.), InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, pp. 73–75, 2003.
- 6 Roberts, ref. 1, p. 80.
- 7 Brenton, L. (Ed.), *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, p. 12, 1998.
- 8 Schmutzer, A., *An Exegetical and Theological Analysis of Genesis 11:1–9*, Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, TX, p. 42, 1994.
- 9 Personal Translation from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.

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