

# NOTES FOR A COMMENTARY ON GENESIS

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# I *The Tower of Babel*

## I.1 INTRODUCTION

Babel, after *mabul* (topsy turvy flood), another sort of chaos under the guise of order: one language (Aramaic, or Hebrew?), one city (one ziggurat), to make war unto the gods?

The first verse of the story invites a reflection about the origins of language and more accessibly writing, which was perhaps thought of as very ancient already in Babylonia. While reading the illuminating pages by Jean Bottéro on the topic, I found my self thinking about the story of Babel and its myth on the origin of the multiplicity of tongues.<sup>1</sup> The beginnings of writing in Sumerian (a problem lies in this wording: they represent objects, not the Sumerian tongue, see below) provide another example of the necessity (and capacity?) humans have to suspend meaning, or immediacy and “presence”, to provide access to what is eventually a more intelligible world. Sumerian developed writing as we know it—*id est*, a system of signs referring to the sounds of the language, however imperfectly, still aiming at the whole “sound-object”—when someone realized one could use the ideogram (“pragmagram” would be a better word) for “arrow” to point to its sound TI, and thereby refer also to its homophone, “life”.<sup>2</sup> The signs for objects (“pragmata”) represented in sound by monosyllables, such as AN (sky), SHE (grain kernel), or SAR (grass), became phonetic, pronounceable, not simply references to the visual object.<sup>3</sup> It was a fascinating and prodigious leap, to dare to represent a fleeting sound (yet, also part of the aura of the object, its name).

There is a problem with this system of writing: the pictogram, which had been polyvalent to a degree, and could bear this polyvalence or metaphorization based on context (e.g., the foot pictogram could refer to “walking”, “standing”, and “carry”) now could point to completely different syllabi sounds: DU (to walk) GUB (to stand), TUM (to carry).<sup>4</sup> Why not simplify and go to a simpler syllabary? Conservatism, or a refusal

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<sup>1</sup>Bottéro, Herrenschmidt, and Vernant, *L'Orient ancien et nous. L'écriture, la raison, les dieux*, 112, and other pages.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 40–41.

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.*, p. 41.

to go all the way and abandon the primary functions of signs, their ability to represent visual reality? Hence phonetic representation only as help.<sup>5</sup>

The story is also a reflection on writing and writing civilizations. דְּבָרִים אֲחֵרִים, what does this apparently simplistic view mean? The first “signs” were already abstracting things meant for the gods and goddesses. The play on words, and the confusion are a reflection on the multiplicity of languages in large subject areas. Language is not a conquest by man but something received, transformed, thanks to a form of erasure of corporality (= abstraction). The story comes from an author who belongs to a world in which sounded (and also written?) words are names that emanate from things and are aspects of them. No differentiation: *Καὶ ἦν πᾶσα ἡ γῆ χεῖλος ἓν, καὶ φωνὴ μία πᾶσιν.* “Cette idée du langage, condition autoréférée du mythe.... l’écriture l’use et la détruit.”<sup>6</sup> The “many” of the tongues, versus the “one” (emanation of things), this is indeed fully developed under imperial conditions. It is completely eroded by the knowledge of many writing “systems” (and spoken tongues)... which cannot therefore be divine (and for other reasons too).

More fascinating and apposite to this discussion, the origin of writing in Sumerian (and even in proto-Elamite): “une valeur à chaque signe, et un seul signe à chaque syllabe.”<sup>7</sup> The movement from logograms to phonograms is not even through history. In Elamite, for instance, one observes an increase in the number of logograms by –600 (to about half of the signs in the inventory).

Aramaic: radical de-symbolization, in process since the 9th c. (see B. Sass). It is a radical move by Hebrew Judaeic authorities to abandon the so-called paleo-Hebrew writing (already abstracted) and choose the Aramaic script. This is the language and especially the script used by the masters (Persian) for convenience and “fallen in the public domain”, that is, de-ethnicized and therefore de-sacralized, separated from the original Aramaean, competing kingdoms (all now subject).

There is a long and rich history of interpretation of this story.<sup>8</sup> As we will see at the end of this chapter, in his *De linguarum dispersione*, Philo reasons allegorically about Gen 11, basing himself on the Septuagint translation. For Philo, unicity of tongue—Greek in his case, the uncontested language of empire and civilization—is desirable, so something else must be at play. Whereas Douglas Adams is biblically inspired in his new myth:

Meanwhile, the poor Babel fish, by effectively removing all barriers to communications between different cultures and races, has caused more and bloodier wars than anything else in the history of creation.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Note that in Elamite syllabaries, the number of pictograms will increase again in the first millennium and will represent about half of all signs around –600.

<sup>6</sup>Bottéro, Herrenschmidt, and Vernant, *L’Orient ancien et nous. L’écriture, la raison, les dieux*, p. 113.

<sup>7</sup>ibid., p. 114.

<sup>8</sup>See Kugel, *The Bible as it was*.

<sup>9</sup>*The hitchhiker’s guide to the galaxy*, page?

## 1.2 TEXT AND TRANSLATION

ויהי כל־הארץ שפה אחת ודבָרִים אֶחָדִים: <sup>2</sup> ויהי  
 בְּנִסְעָם מִקֶּדֶם וּמִצְאֵי בְקֵנָה בְּאֶרֶץ שִׁנְעָר וַיִּשְׁבוּ שָׁם:  
<sup>3</sup> וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ הִבָּה נִלְבְּנָה לִבְנוֹיִם וְנִשְׂרָפָה  
 לְשֵׁרָפָה וְהָיִי לָהֶם הַקִּיָּיִל לְאֶבֶן וְהַחֲמֹר הִיָּה לָהֶם  
 לְחֵמֶר: <sup>4</sup> וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֵבָה | נִבְנֶה־לָּנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ  
 בַּשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה־לָּנוּ שֵׁם כְּדֹפְרַיִן עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ:  
<sup>5</sup> וַיִּרְדַּד יְהוָה לְרֹאֵת אֶת־הָעִיר וְאֶת־הַמִּגְדָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ  
 בְּנֵי הָאָדָם: <sup>6</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה הֵן עָם אֶחָד וְשִׁפְהָ אַחַת  
 לְכָל־ם וְהָיָה חֲלָמָם לַעֲשׂוֹת וְעָתָּה לֹא־יִבְצָר מֵהֶם כָּל־אֲשֶׁר  
 יִזְמוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת: <sup>7</sup> הִבָּה נִרְדָּה וְנִבְלָה שֵׁם שְׁפָתָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא  
 יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שֵׁפֶת רֵעֵהוּ: <sup>8</sup> וַיִּפֶץ יְהוָה אֹתָם מִשָּׁם עַל־פְּנֵי  
 כָּל־הָאָרֶץ וַיִּחְדְּלוּ לִבְנֵת הָעִיר: <sup>9</sup> עַל־כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ  
 בָּבֶל כִּי־שָׁם בָּלַל יְהוָה שֵׁפֶת כָּל־הָאָרֶץ וּמִשָּׁם הִפְיָצָם  
 יְהוָה עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ:

And **all the earth** was one **language**, one set of words. And it happened as they journeyed from the east that they found the valley in the **land** of Shinar and settled there. And they said to each other, “Come, **let us bake bricks** and burn them hard.” **And the bricks served them as stones**, and **bitumen served them as mortar**. And they said, “Come, **let us build us** a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, that we may make us a name, lest we be scattered over **all the earth**.” And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the **human creatures had built**. 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. Come, let us go down and **baffle** their **language** there so that they will not understand each other’s **language**.” And the Lord scattered them from there over **all the earth** and they left off building the city. Therefore 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**.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Translation by Robert Alter, *Genesis*.

## 1.3 COMMENTARY

**11.1** One language (“lip” שִׁפָּה, translated as *χελος*, “lip”, a literal translation, using a word not used in the sense of “language” in normal Greek). “And (it happened) the whole world had one language and one vocabulary.”<sup>10</sup> Alter’s translation is similar, “... one set of words.” רבֵּרִים אַחָדִים means both “words” and “things.” The sweep of the story since chapter 1 is of a progressive separation and categorization of elements, happening partly as an effect of the divine word and action (for instance in Gen 1). The

<sup>10</sup>Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, p. 533.

preceding genealogy of Gen 10 presents a multiplying and diversifying world in which peoples spread widely: “...from these spread the nations on the earth after the flood.” Note that the Hebrew word for this flood, מַבּוּל (mabbul), sounds like the words used for “confusion” and “Babel” in our story.

Rashi (11th c. Jewish commentator from Troyes in France) comments:

*One language.* The holy tongue [i.e. Hebrew]. *And of few words* [understood as “one speech”]. They came in single counsel [one plan] and said: “It is not right that he keeps the heights for himself, let us go up to the firmament and make war upon him.” Another interpretation: it (few words) refers to the one being of the world. Another interpretation: *And of few words.* They said: once in one thousand six hundred fifty-six years, the firmament shakes as it did in the days of the Flood, Come and let’s make supports for it (*Bereshit Rabba* 38).

Further commentary, following “Malbim” at Gen 11.1:

*And the whole earth was one language.* The deed/story of the generation of the Dispersion was in the days of Peleg [‘dispersion’ has the same root as Peleg] who was born 101 years after the Flood. Noah and his sons surely had a single language (and according to the Sages’ tradition, it is Hebrew [= the Holy Tongue]), and likewise they had ‘few things.’ ‘Things’ (*devarim*) is at times explained as ‘words,’ and at times by ‘things,’ as in “and they made bad things,” or “good things” (?), because since the days of Noah until this period, family life was quiet and secure, and needs or possessions were not many, and their ‘interests’ (? *inyanim*) were little and similar, which is expressed by the expression “few” (*abadim*). [...] The Sages said that the deed of the generation of the Dispersion is not explained, and one can only understand by allusion [*remez*] in the story what their sin was.

11.2 “And it happened in their traveling from the east,” or “eastward:” מִקְּדָם. Often translated as “eastward,” but all ancient versions, such as the LXX, understand the word as “from the east.” The direction of travel, from the East, would be going against the general movement we have seen so far in Genesis, i.e. a dispersion eastward. “in the land of Shinar:” Babylonia. “And they settled there:” this settlement contradicts the order of dispersion, the sowing or *διασπείρειν* movement from which will be called back a few elects and first among them the typical faithful, Abram, in Gen 12.1-2.<sup>11</sup> [Another possibility is that “east” here is a place name, perhaps a mountain called Qedem, seen above in Gen 10.30: “And their territory extends from Mesha toward Sephar [as far as] the mountain of Qedem.”]

11.3 “Come, let us make bricks and thoroughly burn [them]; and the brick was a stone for them and the bitumen mortar” = וְהַחֲקִיר הָהָם לָהֶם לְחֵקֶר. Babylonia made extensive use of

<sup>11</sup>The verb *διασπείρω* is found especially in Gen 9–10 (9.19; 10.18,32; 11.4,8) and Ezra (32.15; 9.19).

sun-dried bricks, and only for decorative purposes of oven-baked bricks. The word for bitumen is Hebrew, not the borrowing from Akkadian found in Gen 6.14, כִּפֶּר (kopher), where Noah is told to “cover [the ark] with pitch.” Note however that in both passages (11.3 and 6.14), the author is interested in homophony, while insisting on allopraxis. This whole verse plays with homophones, in a heavy-handed way: the word for bricks, when put in the appropriate syntactic environment, sounds like the words for stones, children (later in 11.5), and to build. Add the words for bitumen and mortar (one would almost expect the word for donkey, חֲמֹר, to appear, esp. in the context of building, when this beast of burden was surely used).

11.4 city and tower, reaching into heavens, to acquire fame, and to fight the order of dispersion: I read into this passage a Judean irony regarding their own dispersion and the Babylonian spreading, by 539...

11.5 Yahweh comes down. Unity is seen as danger: why?

11.6–7 *And the Lord said: Behold, they are one people and one language, and that is the beginning of what they will do. And now there will be no restraint to what they mean to do? Come, let us go down and there confuse their language so that a man may not understand his neighbor's language. Let's go down: destroy instead of build, and “confuse.”* The root of Babel is bab-El (gate of god = temple), לְבַלְבַּל (to confuse). Babel may be the most sophisticated city of the time, or so it claims, with its grand science and vast political power, but underneath it is barbarity and confusion, and the impossibility of understanding each other. The דְּבָרִים אֶחָדִים or *few words* at the beginning of the passage could be read as being a criticism of notions and appellations that purport to be uniting and strengthening but are actually empty and confusing, as any nominalism is likely eventually to appear when its thin veneer crumbles. This is a punishment for what sin, however? In the book of Acts, the scene of the Pentecost resumes this story of dispersion and misunderstanding, subsuming multiplicity under a new unity. Rashi's commentary:

*Behold, they are one people.* They have all this advantage, that they are one people, and all have one language, and this is what they begin to do. *The beginning* [a verb] like “their speaking”, “their doing”: They begin to do. *And now there will be no restraint to what they mean to do?* It is a question. “restraint” is an expression of avoidance, as the targum has it. Similarly, *He restrains the spirit of princes* (Ps. 76.13). [...] *a man may not understand.* One asks for a brick, the other brings lime. The first one attacks him and splits his brain.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup>My translations of Rashi.

## 1.4 PHILO ON BABEL

Dispersion didn't solve the problem, and community of languages per se is not a problem either. Philo surely is thinking of the importance of Greek as a civilizing language that binds many diverse communities together. So why did God disperse the people? Allegorization will give the solution.

(12) ... so that a community of language is an advantageous thing rather than an injurious one: since, even at the present day, nothing contributes so greatly to the safety and protection of the people of each country, and particularly of the natives, as their being of one language. (13) For if a man has learnt many dialects, he immediately is looked upon with consideration and respect by those who are also acquainted with them, as being already a friendly person, and contributing no small introduction and means of friendship by reason of his familiarity with words which they too understand; which familiarity very commonly imparts a feeling of security, that one is not likely to suffer any great evil at the hands of such a man. Why, then, did God remove sameness of language from among men as a cause of evils, when it seems it should rather have been established as a most useful thing?

Then launches in a very long dissertation on "lip" (of the river), Moses, the human soul, the evil associations either inside the soul (appetites, passions) or associations with evil men...

Then seems to turn what Gen 11 says upside down but he is arguing about the right kind of unity....:

(42) For they who make out many beginnings of the origin of the soul, being devoted to the evil which is called polytheism, and turning each individual of them, to the honour of different beings, having caused great confusion and dissension both at home and abroad, from the beginning of their birth to the end of their life, filling life with irreconcilable quarrels; (43) but they who rejoice in one kind alone, and who honour one as their father, namely right reason, admiring the wellarranged and all-musical harmony of the virtues, live a tranquil and peaceful life, not an inactive and ignoble one...

See 76-77 on sojourners: a good example of the method.

For if they had looked upon themselves as sojourners among them, they would have changed their abode at a subsequent time, but now having settled fixedly among them they were likely to dwell there for ever. (77) For this reason all the wise men mentioned in the books of Moses are represented as sojourners, for their souls are sent down from heaven upon earth as to a colony; and on account of their fondness for contemplation, and their love of learning, they are accustomed to migrate to the terrestrial nature.

And here:



And the statement, “The Lord went down to see that city and that tower” must be listened to altogether as if spoken in a figurative sense. For to think that the divinity can go towards, or go from, or go down, or go to meet, or, in short, that it has the same positions and motions as particular animals, and that it is susceptible of real motion at all, is, to use a common proverb, an impiety deserving of being banished beyond the sea and beyond the world. (135) But these things are spoken, as if of man, by the lawgiver, of God who is not invested with human form, for the sake of advantage to us who are to be instructed, as I have often said before with reference to other passages. Since who is there who does not know that it is indispensable for a person who goes down, to leave one place and to occupy another? (136) But all places are filled at once by God, who surrounds them all and is not surrounded by any of them, to whom alone it is possible to be everywhere and also nowhere.

Allegory:

(190) This, now, is our opinion upon and interpretation of this passage. But they who follow only what is plain and easy, think that what is here intended to be recorded, is the origin of the languages of the Greeks and barbarians, whom, without blaming them (for, perhaps, they also put a correct interpretation on the transaction), I would exhort not to be content with stopping at this point, but to proceed onward to look at the passage in a figurative way, considering that the mere words of the scriptures are, as it were, but shadows of bodies, and that the meanings which are apparent to investigation beneath them, are the real things to be pondered upon.

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