Genesis 11:1-9

11 1 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. 2 And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 3 And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. 4 Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” 5 And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men had built. 6 And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. 7 Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech.” 8 So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 9 Therefore its name was called Babel [balal, confusion], because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.
Reflection

The French philosopher Voltaire quotes a Madame of the court of Versailles in a letter to Catherine the Great: “What a pity that bother at the tower of Babel got language all mixed up; but for that, everyone would always have spoken French!” I don't think the story of the Tower of Babel is as simple as that!

Looking at the story in Genesis more closely, the drama itself is very straightforward: Once upon a time, after the Deluge, the whole earth spoke one language. The descendants of Noah moved eastward to the Babylonian plain, settled there, and decided to build a city and a gigantic tower to "make themselves a name" and keep them from being scattered. They built the city and the tower, and God “came down” to see this achievement. God decided this tower was a foretaste of humanity’s ability to create whatever they could imagine, and so God confounded their one language and scattered the people.

Strangely, there is no further mention of this episode whatsoever in the entire rest of the Bible! It is popular in Jewish legends, however, with one account saying the tower was seventy miles high. Truly it was, as the name Babel means, the “gate of God.” According to Genesis 10:10 Nimrod, the great-grandson of Noah, made the city of Babel the center of his kingdom. A legend says that God, when he heard of the tower being built, told the seventy angels closest to the throne to go down with him and make the one tongue into seventy. One legend says that the result of this confusion of tongues was that a bricklayer would ask for a brick, and his helper would hand him a bucket of mortar, and get a brick thrown at his head for his troubles.

The overwhelming lesson of this story of the Tower is that it reveals in a graphic fashion our sinful nature and why we act the way we do. Together with the stories of Adam and Eve and of Noah and the Ark, the story of the Tower of Babel amply demonstrates Ronald Hendel’s claim that the first chapters of Genesis are “characterized by a series of transgressions of boundaries” that had been set up to separate humanity from the dwelling place of Divinity. Therefore it should be no surprise that the “same stress on a borderline between the divine and human spheres is found in … [the] passage on the Tower of Babel, [which] presents ‘the tower whose top assaults the sky—a perfect and natural metaphor for the human assault on the divinely ordained cosmos.’” In other words, the tale is a clear demonstration of “human hubris and its consequences … The diversity of languages and nations become limiting conditions of human existence. As a story about language and power, it employs language artfully to express and undermine the human pretensions to power.”

But what were boundaries precisely that the descendents of Noah transgressed? Was it simply that the people were “invading God’s space”? In the Old Testament, transgressing boundaries is about more than not respecting God’s rights. It is about rejecting God’s will, Gods good order and plans. For instance, here, it is obvious from the garden onward that God's intention for humankind was to scatter and have dominion over the earth (Genesis 2:28; 8:17; 9:1, 7). But Noah's descendants rejected that plan, and determined they would stay together (11:1-4). That decision was unanimous, but it was a false unanimity. Here, at the start of the story, we see in humankind an unheard of solidarity! This reminds us that a group can be unified in the wrong direction and around the wrong goals. I remember years ago, during the arguments over sexuality at a diocesan convention, one of my fellow clergy challenged appeals to unity by asking: “for what purpose? At what cost?” Simple unity is not enough.

The men who built the Tower were, evidently, filled with a humanistic pride. It was humanistic in the sense of seeing human beings as the measure of all things and self-sufficient. This tower was a
monument to their illusion that they could do without God. Notice the reasons given for the building of the tower: to make a name for themselves and to prevent being scattered across the earth (v4). Gustave Doré’s famous biblical etchings (below) show a man standing on a block of stone in a stance of arrogance, raising clenched fists to heaven. The Jewish historian Josephus says Nimrod built the tower to defy God and escape any further flood. The whole project was human-centered and man-made from the start, and literally so, as evidenced by the choice in verse 3 of man-made bricks over natural building materials.

Theologian Helmut Thielicke puts his finger on the heart of the story when he says the builders had displaced God from the center of their lives, and, thus unbalanced, the spiritual centrifugal forces flung them into the darkness of the world. When they put God out of their lives, life, like an unbalanced clothes dryer, began whirling faster and faster, thumping and shaking and flinging itself to pieces into the darkness.

Now if we stopped here, there would not be much that is good news or positive about this story. The sin of Babel left us with the confusion of language, and what happened on the Day of Pentecost shows us how that barrier is removed. At Pentecost we see the disciples unified and dedicated to a purpose. But as they preached, a miracle took place. Whether it was a miracle of the tongue or a miracle of the ear is not as important as the fact that people of over a dozen native tongues all heard the gospel in their own language! The confusion of tongues was undone in the sharing of the single, united message of God’s salvation in Jesus. Pentecost is the reversal of Babel.

At Pentecost the crowd asked, “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:12). One way to answer that question is to see Pentecost in the light of the tower of Babel: first, in Jesus Christ there is a true basis of unity beyond nationality or language; second, when God's will for us is at the center of our lives, we have true unity, peace, and purpose.

That we are to understand Pentecost this way is evidenced in the vision of the prophets in the Old Testament and the seer in the New Testament, where the curse of Babel is lifted in the coming of Christ: As the prophet Zephaniah foretells: “For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord.” (Zephaniah 3:9). Similarly, in the last book of the Bible, John of Patmos tells us how he saw heaven opened, and the throne room of God Almighty stretched before him. And the four and twenty elders sang a new song because God had redeemed his people out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation (Revelation 14). The point is clear and constant: in Jesus there is true unity in diversity, one message shared by all: the good news of Jesus Christ on the tongues of peoples of every tribe, language and nation.

One last point. After the destruction of Babel, God abandons efforts to reform all of humankind all at once. Instead, He chooses to advance His plan for humanity by working first with only one nation. After Babel, the Bible turns directly to its main subject, the formation of the nation of Israel. However, as we will see next week, in God’s turning of attention to Israel, the other nations are not abandoned. Through Abraham, Israel will be commissioned to be the instrument through which God will bless all the nations of the earth. With the ultimate fulfillment of a glorious vision that will dwarf the self-serving pretensions of Babel, God continues to carry out His objective to make of the whole earth new again, to restore creation and remake us human beings into the priestly people we were intended to be.
The Tower of Babel, Iconography of a Timeless Story

As part of the primeval history of the Bible, and thus among the foundational stories of the three major worldwide religions, the tower of Babel exists not just as part of biblical imagination, but as an ever-present metaphor. In the following survey of artistic depictions of the Tower, I like to observe how the same subject is taken up several times throughout history in an ever new and original vision, closely linked to the social and artistic period and to the individual sensitivity of the artists.

In the biblical story, the Tower, reaching up into heaven, represents the arrogance of humanity, the arrogance of man who defies nature, who pushes himself beyond the limits that his morality or religion sets him. In the book of Genesis 11:1-9, we can read how men set out to build a tower whose top touched the sky and how the Lord, offended by such presumption, put an end to their intentions simply by confusing their languages.

The oldest images that refer to the biblical story date back to the French and English medieval illuminated manuscripts. Here the tower looks a lot like a normal tall, narrow building, perhaps with battlements. Yet, there is no “official” image of this architecture.
In the 15th century, despite the dawn of the Renaissance, the iconography of the tower of Babel remains quite variable and still similar to medieval towers or castles: cylindrical or polygonal buildings with Gothic-style mullioned windows.
This changed suddenly in the Flanders area (Netherlands), during the second half of the 16th century, when appeared an unprecedented quantity of paintings with this subject and with a completely new iconography. The Tower of Babel in these works is an immense construction, with a generally circular plan and spiral shape, with classic arching that wreath the perimeter surfaces.

The shape of this new Tower was popularized by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, who is considered the inventor of the icon of the tower as it has been handed down in the collective imagination. Bruegel’s depiction of the architecture of the tower, with its numerous arches and other examples of Roman engineering, is deliberately reminiscent of the Roman Colosseum, which Christians of the time saw as both a symbol of hubris and persecution. (Bruegel had visited Rome in 1552-1553) The parallel of Rome and Babylon had a particular significance for Bruegel’s contemporaries: Rome was the Eternal City, intended by the Caesars to last for ever, and its decay and ruin were taken to symbolize the vanity and transience of earthly efforts. The Tower was also symbolic of the turmoil between the Catholic church (which at the time did services only in Latin) and the polyglot Lutheran Protestant religion of the Netherlands.”

At the same time, the design of these Towers seemed to echo the spiral minaret of Great Mosque of Samarra (9th century, north of Baghdad). While it is uncertain how familiar the artists would have been with that exotic structure, together the Colosseum and the minaret symbolize the enemies of the Christian faith: one the pagan persecutors of the early Christians and the other the Islamic conquerors of the Holy Sepulcher.

In truth, this new shape appears for the first time in a painting by Joachim Patinir (Flemish, 1480-1524), though the structure there looks more like a sort of terraced mountain than a constructed edifice.
In an engraving by Hans Holbein from 1538 the image of the tower returns as a small building on a human scale in the typical style of the time. Other images by unknown contemporary authors continue to show us an urban-scale tower.

The collapsing tower in the engraving by Cornelis Anthonisz (Dutch, 1505–1553) from 1547 appears to be composed of an overlapping of amphitheaters.
The two works by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Dutch, c1525-69) of 1563 (a third has been lost) therefore appear out of thin air. From that moment on, whoever painted the tower had to deal with an image so strong that it surpassed any comparison.

Thus, here is the “Little Tower of Babel.” Still under construction, it is already threatened by dark clouds surrounding it. Above you can see the internal brick skeleton, with radial septa and ring-like walkers of clearly Roman derivation.

Looking at it carefully, you realize that there is no uniformity among the arches of an amphitheater: the windows inserted inside them are continuously variable in shape, size and number; almost a sign of the confusion that was already beginning to reign, confusion that emerges most in the other painting, the "Great Tower of Babel".
In this second version the rock emerges from the structure of the building (or the building emerges from the rock?) which, although more regular in its external wall face, appears much more incomplete and also more unstable.

Swarming around the building is an entire city with sharp roofs, with workers moving at every level, complete with construction machinery of the time and, in the foreground, King Nimrod, the descendant of Noah who ordered the construction of the tower. All represented with the typical “Flemish” care for every detail.

Bruegel probably did not know that the tower really existed. Certainly there was no suggestion of the sacred to interrupt the construction, but, surely, the historical tower must have been a colossal ziggurat, a Mesopotamian temple of Sumerian origin in the shape of a step pyramid.

The ziggurat (Akkadian ziqqurratu, ‘temple tower,’ from zaqāru, ‘build high’) of the god Marduk rebuilt by Nebuchadnezzar (6th century BC) was 91 meters high (a thirty-story building!) and had the square base of the same size, with decreasing size for each of the seven levels above. The Jews at that time deported to Babylon would have seen it is as a manifestation of human pride.

We have a possible reconstruction thanks to an original stele, an upright inscribed stone, in which both the plan and the elevation were traced:
Demolished in 478 BC when the Persians under Xerxes conquered Babylon, it could have inspired the biblical story, naturally enriched by a moralizing ending.

It would have been difficult, at the time, to build tall structures with vertical walls. The inclination of the walls and the progressive contraction of the various levels (overlapping or spiraling) was a guarantee of stability.

Thus, after the Bruegelian archetype, we find Hendrick van Cleve (Belgian, 1525–1589) who painted almost twenty paintings of the subject, some with very subtle differences.
Then there are several by Lucas van Valckenborch (Flemish, c1535-1597)
And those of his brother Marten van Valckenborch (Flemish, 1535-1612).

Another prolific author of the imaginative towers of Babel is Abel Grimmer (Flemish, 1570-1619). Here are some of his paintings:
In the following centuries the images of the tower became a little more rare and the shape tended to stiffen and elongate to an almost pillar-like shape:

With Gustave Doré (French, 1832-83), here in his 1865 print, the visionary nature of the Flemish painters is combined with a romantic interest in the human pathos and majesty of the forces that overwhelm humanity.
Later artistic movements—Impressionism, Art Nouveau and the Avant-garde—ignored the tower theme. One suspects this is on account of the too many moral and religious implications of the subject, which made it unfitting for movements linked to their middle class audience.

The only example from this period is a woodcut from 1928 by M.C. Escher (Dutch, 1898-1972) in which the tower is a rather anomalous construction framed in a bold inclined perspective.

Another example, quite late, is a 1964 watercolor by surrealist Salvador Dalí (Spanish, 1904-1989). Which is not surprising as Dalí is one of the most visionary characters of the 20th century. This work is part of his illustrations for the Bible.

The subject has also had limited popularity among abstract and cubist artists, with the following two examples as the exception. The first, by Hungarian Endre Rozsda (1958) is from the mid-20th century and the second, by Romanian Klein Ioana (2009) from the 21st century.
There has however been a sudden recovery of this subject in the late 20\textsuperscript{th}/early 21\textsuperscript{st} century with works that reproduce it in all sorts of ways: from photomontage to installation, from pictogram to illustration. Here is a collection of three-dimensional versions of the tower, in the form of installations or sculptures:
There are many other versions to be explored ...
The Tower is also presented in the new medium of photomontages, where the depictions recall the apocalyptic atmospheres of the film *Metropolis* (1927). This movie, in a flashback, plays upon themes of lack of communication between the designers of the tower and the workers who are constructing it. The short scene states how the words used to glorify the tower's construction by its designers took on totally different, oppressive meanings to the workers. This led to its destruction as they rose up against the designers because of the insufferable working conditions.
Strangely enough, another place where the Tower of Babel is depicted—or at least where the tower metaphor is echoed—are on tarot cards, where the “Tower” card represents confusion and frustrated plans. In each, the tower is destroyed by a heavenly force.
One of the other developments to occur in recent depictions of the Tower is its destruction. This is despite the fact that the story in Genesis recounts no divine destruction, but rather the construction ending, on account of the confusion of tongues.
By contrast, these illustrations of the tower are certainly more “serene”: 

![Image of the tower by Tomislav Tomic](image1)

![Image of the tower by Colin Thompson](image2)

![Image of the tower by Chuck Sperry](image3)

![Image of the tower by John Borowicz](image4)
Curiously, the following three paintings make the tower look somewhat farcical and almost cheery, which is far from the reality of the historical situation.
A few artists have chosen to focus not in the tower, but on the ramifications of their arrogance of the builders—the confusion of languages.

Tamas Galambos (Hungarian, 1939-), *Tower of Babel*, 1995

Aba Bayefsky (Canadian, 1923-2001), *The Tower Of Babel*, 1992

*Le mur des je t’aime (The I Love You Wall)* in Paris features the phrase 'I love you' 311 times in 250 languages.
The reason for the renewed interest is unknown. Is there a parallel between the uncertainty with which the happy era of the Renaissance ended at the end of the sixteenth century and our own era? Maybe the interest is reflective of experience of what it means to defy the laws of nature (or God) by reaching beyond the limit with self-destruction? Maybe we like to play with the imagination and recover a fantasy world that is closed to us? Or maybe all three of these things together? Whatever the reason, it is interesting to observe the extreme versatility of this metaphorical theme—in all, a warning against transgressing limits, against wanting to be God, against reaching up to heaven in order to secure a place there.