

Noach Torah Thought, 2025.
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Excerpted from his *Genesis in Poetry*,
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TOWER OF BABEL
(Gen.11:1 – 9)

Noah's offspring kept together,
Living in one place.¹
Just like him, they loved to build
Wherever there was space.

The same language, they all spoke—
It was a sacred tongue.²
The one that God would one day use
To teach right from wrong.³

But when their families grew, in size,
And their flocks consumed the grass,
They fixed their sights on Shinar,⁴
A land so rich and vast
That there was space for everyone,
And its pasturage would last.

A sage among them added
That, once in two thousand years,
The heavens came close to touching earth⁵ —
An aberration of the spheres.

“So, if we link the two by a tower,”
He excitedly exclaimed,
“We could climb to heaven and assume the power
That God has hitherto claimed.
Then we'd be immortal
And gain a name, unique,

As the ones who vanquished heaven,
And decoded its mystique.”

Noah’s kindred, to a man,
Gave their rapt attention
To this most audacious plan
For the eternity of their nation.

They all set to—
Man, woman and child—
Preparing mortar
From whatever grew wild,
Pouring it into a brick-shaped mold,
Which they baked in ovens,
Exactly as told.⁶

One day, God arrived to see
How it had progressed.
That was the defining moment
He’s chosen to arrest
The building of the tower that stretched
Into the sky,
The moment when he’d make man
Eat his humble pie:

*“Let the language they’ve all spoken
Be as useless as a pot that’s broken.
Not a single word shall they recall—
Contributing to their downfall.*

*“From now, they’ll talk in tongues, diverse,
Some in prose and some in verse.
A few, in words of just two letters,
Others, outtalking their betters.”*

So, if a builder called for a spade or trowel,
He was handed, instead, a cloth or towel.
If another sought mortar to secure a brick,
He was handed a scraper or a yardstick.⁷

That swiftly led to scuffles and fights,
With builders being knocked down from the heights,
Breaking their necks in all that melee—
With the project abandoned
Before sunset that day.

God scattered the rebels all over the earth.
Their babble of tongues creating a dearth
Of comprehension and goodwill.
With peace among them
Spiraling downhill.

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NOTES

(*Genesis in Poetry*, pp.208-209)

Tower of Babel

1. *Living in one place*: The biblical story of the Tower of Babel is a highly condensed version, contained within a mere nine verses (Gen. 11: 1-9), and omitting the names of any leaders of the revolt against heaven. It depicts the entire human race, offspring of Noah, as living in one area after the flood. Their nomadic existence eventually leads them to ‘the Land of Shinar where they settled down (v.2). Shinar is identified with Babylonia, which embraced the lands of Akkad and Sumer (See Gen.10:10 - 11), the north and south of the country, respectively.

2. *It was a sacred tongue*: Jewish tradition takes it for granted that the original language spoken by Adam, and with which he communicated with God, was Hebrew. ‘Our biblical story views the disruption of communication between human beings as the consequence of man’s placing himself in disharmony with God’ (Nahum. M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis*. Jewish Publication Society, N.Y., 1989), p.81.

3. *To teach right from wrong*: The reference here is to the language of the Torah, given centuries later at Sinai.

4. *Shinar*: Hebraised form of Babylonian Sumer. It occurs again later, in the episode of the battle of the four kings against the five in which Abraham became embroiled (See Gen. 14:1). The leader of the former confederacy was Amraphel, king of Shinar.

5. *The heavens come close to touching earth*: The Midrash (*Ber. Rabb.* 38:6) states that some of the Sodomites believed that once every 1,656 years the firmament disintegrated. They therefore suggested that it be supported with pillars at the north, south and west, with their own structure, the Tower, to the east. The origin of this curious tradition is obscure, as is the precise objective of that structural activity. We may conjecture that, according to the Midrash, the shallow, disintegrating firmament could more easily be penetrated to the east by the Tower.

6. *Exactly as told*: See Gen. 11:3.

7. *He was handed a scraper or a yard stick*: Both examples of the Tower building confusion in this stanza are freely chosen and based, with poetic license, on Midrashic tradition (*Ber. Rabb.* 38 (15)).