



The Confusion of Languages

The sequence of events as presented in the Book of Genesis places the catastrophe of Babel next after the Deluge.

And the whole land was of one language and of one speech. . . . And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven. . . . And the Lord said, behold, the people is one, and they have all one language. . . . Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth.⁽¹⁾

The rabbinical sources explain that the purpose of the Tower was to secure a shelter for the city of Babel in case the Deluge should occur another time:

The men who were before us God has destroyed with a deluge; if he shall again think fit to be wroth with us, and seek to destroy us even with a deluge, we shall all perish to a man. But come, let us prepare bricks and burn them with fire, that they may withstand the waters and building them together with asphalt, let us make a high tower the top of which shall reach to heaven, in order that being delivered from the deluge we may find safety in the tower.⁽²⁾

This purpose of the builders is found also in an account of this catastrophe which the aborigines of Central America transmitted from generation to generation. Ixtlilxochitl, after narrating the story of the Deluge which brought to a close the first world age, Atonatiuh, and destroyed most of mankind, described the catastrophe which ended the second age or Ehecatonatiuh—"the sun of wind."

And as men were thereafter multiplying they constructed a very high and strong *Zacualli*, which means "a very high tower" in order to protect themselves when again the second world should be destroyed. At the crucial moment their languages were changed, and as they did not understand one another, they went into different parts of the world.⁽³⁾

The same author also gives another version of the same catastrophe:

When 1715 years had passed since the Deluge [men] were destroyed by a violent hurricane (Uraacan) which carried off trees, mountains, houses and people, and great buildings, although many men and women escaped, especially those that were able to take refuge in caves and places where this great hurricane could not reach.⁽⁴⁾

Similarly wrote Gomara (ca. 1510-1560): "The wind which occurred at that time was so great and of such force that it overthrew all buildings and trees, and even broke mountains apart."⁽⁵⁾

Many of the sources which recount the destruction of the Tower of Babel maintain, in close accord with the Mexican account, that the catastrophe was caused by a violent wind. Thus the Sibyl is said to have prophesied:

When are fulfilled the threats of the great God With which he threatened men, when formerly in the Assyrian land they built a tower, And all were of one speech, and wished to rise Even till they climbed unto the starry heaven, Then the Immortal raised a mighty wind And laid upon them strong necessity; For when the wind threw down the mighty tower, Then rose among mankind fierce strife and hate. One speech was changed into many dialects, And earth was filled with divers tribes and kings. [\(6\)](#)

In the *Book of Jubilees* it is said that “the Lord sent a mighty wind against the tower and overthrew it upon the earth.” [\(7\)](#)

The Babylonian account, as transmitted by Abydenus, tells that once men “built a high tower where now is Babylon, and when it was already close to heaven, the gods sent winds and ruined the entire scheme. . . . and men, having till then been all of the same speech, received [now] from the gods many languages.” [\(8\)](#)

Other accounts give the impression that a strong electrical discharge—possibly from an overcharged ionosphere—found a contact body in the high structure. According to a tradition known to the twelfth century traveler Benjamin of Tudela, “fire from heaven fell in the midst of the tower and broke it asunder.” [\(9\)](#) In the Tractate Sanhedrin of the Babylonian *Talmud* it is said: “A third of the tower was burnt, a third sank [into the earth] and a third is still standing.” [\(10\)](#)

The Tower of Babel story was found in the most remote parts of the world prior to the arrival of missionaries in those places, thus before the Biblical account became known to the aborigines.

For instance, on the island of Hao, part of the Puamotu (or Tuamotu) islands in Polynesia, the people used to tell that after a great flood the sons of Rata, who survived, made an attempt to erect a building by which they could reach the sky and see the creator god Vatea (or Atea). “But the god in anger chased the builders away, broke down the building, and changed their language, so that they spoke divers tongues.” [\(11\)](#)

The question of Biblical influence was discussed by the folklorist: “They [the natives of Hao] declared that this tradition existed already with their ancestors, before the arrival of the Europeans. I leave to them the responsibility for this declaration. All I can certify is that this tradition contains many ancient words which today are no longer understood by the natives.” [\(12\)](#)

Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the Quiche Mayas, narrates that the language of all the families that were gathered at Tulan was confused and none could understand the speech of the others. [\(13\)](#)

The Kaska (Indian) story makes the result into the cause. The Indians narrate that “a great darkness came on, and high winds which drove the vessels hither and thither. The people became separated. Some were driven away. . . . Long afterwards, when in their wanderings they met people from another place, they spoke different languages, and could not understand one another.” [\(14\)](#)

With this exception—the Kaska story may refer to any great upheaval and is actually an effect of large-scale migrations—the traditions of the peoples make the catastrophe the immediate cause of the confusion of languages and the dispersion as well.

While the account in Genesis, and that given by Abydenos and various other sources connect the story with a certain place in Mesopotamia, other traditions localize it in many different countries.⁽¹⁵⁾ In each case the entire population of the world is said to have been affected. If the nature of the catastrophe was cosmic, the same occurrence could have taken place in different countries. In this case the existence of similar traditions in many corners of the globe is of no avail for tracing the migration of ancient tribes. The Arabic tradition makes South Arabia the scene of the upheaval, followed by confusion of languages and migrations.⁽¹⁶⁾ Similar experiences could have been brought about by one and the same cause in many places.

It appears that after the Flood the plain of Mesopotamia became one of the few cultural centers of the world. Another flood would have caused the utter destruction of the human race, and this was feared because the memory of the Flood a few centuries earlier was very vivid. Observations of the movements of the heavenly bodies may have provided a warning of a new catastrophe and large structures were built for refuge. But when the event came, the structures were overwhelmed and destroyed by hurricanes and powerful electrical discharges.

In the rabbinical concept of the seven earths, molded one out of another in successive catastrophes, the generation which built the Tower of Babel inhabited the fourth earth; but it goes on to the fifth earth where the men become oblivious of their origin and home:⁽¹⁷⁾ those who built the Tower of Babel are told to forget their language. This generation is called “the people who lost their memory.” The earth which they inhabited was “the fifth earth, that of oblivion (Neshiah)⁽¹⁸⁾

In the ancient Mexican traditions it is told that those who survived the catastrophe of the “sun of wind” lost “their reason and speech.”⁽¹⁹⁾

The characteristic of this catastrophe was its influence upon the mental, or mnemonic, capacity of the peoples. The description of it, as told by many tribes and peoples, if it contains authentic features, arouses the surmise that the earth underwent an electromagnetic disturbance, and that the human race experienced something that in modern terms seems like a consequence of a deep electrical shock.

The application of electrical current to the head of a human being often results in a partial loss of memory; also a loss of speech may be induced by the application of electrodes to specific areas of the brain.⁽²⁰⁾

References

1. Genesis XI. 1-9.
2. Quoted in Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Christian Topography* (Hakluyt Society: London, 1897). Cf. Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, I. 4. 2. and sources in L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. V, pp. 199-200. [Some of the sources assert that the builders of the Tower feared a world conflagration. Cf. S. Bochart, *Geographia Sacra*, Lib. I, cap. xiv (Lugduni Batavorum, 1707): “. . . *Video quosquam asserere, illos futuri incendii metu de asylo sibi prospexisse, memores scilicet ‘affore tempus quo mare, quo tellus, correptaque regia coeli ardeat, et mundi moles operosa laboret.’*”].
3. Don Fernando de Alvara Ixtlilxochitl, *Obras Historicas* (Mexico, 1891), Vol. I, p. 12.
4. *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.* [Similarly, the sacred writings of the Burmese relate that “when the world is destroyed by wind . . . the wind begins to

blow and gradually increases. At first it only raises sand and small stones; but at length it whirls about immense rocks, and the summits of mountains." F. Buchanan, "On the Religion and Literature of the Burmas," *Asiatick Researches* VII (1799), p. 244.]

5. F. L. de Gomara, *Conquista de Mexico* (Mexico, 1870), vol. II, p. 261. [The order of the "sun ages" of the ancient Mexicans is given differently by different authors: but the most reliable of the sources—the Vatican Codex, Ixtlilxochitl, and Veytia—all agree that Ehecatonatiuh, or "the sun of wind" was the second age, following after the "sun of water" or Atonatiuh.]
6. Quoted by Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolytus* II. xxxi, transl. by M. Dods in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II (Grand Rapids, 1962); Cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* I. 109-121; Bochart, *Geographia Sacra* I. 13; *The Sibylline Oracles* III. 97-107 in R. Charles ed., *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1913), Vol. I, pp. 380f.
7. *The Book of Jubilees* 10.26 in Charles ed., *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*. Cf. also Midrash Rabba to Genesis, and sources in Ginzberg, *Legends* III. 35.
8. Abydenus, quoted by Cyril, *Adversus Julianum* Bk. I, and by Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* IX, 14.
9. Quoted in Bochart, *Geographia Sacra* I. 13. Cf. M. Adler, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela* (London, 1907).
10. Tractate Sanhedrin XI (fol. 109A) of Seder Nezikin, transl. by H. Freedman, ed by I. Epstein (London, 1935), p. 748. [The tradition that fire from heaven destroyed the tower is also a feature of some of the Meso-American accounts, e.g., the legend recorded by Pedro de los Rios concerning the foundation of the pyramid of Cholula in Mexico. After the waters of the Deluge had receded, one of the survivors came to Cholula, where he began to build a large structure. "It was his purpose to raise the mighty edifice to the clouds, but the gods, offended at his presumption, hurled the fire of heaven down on the pyramid, many of the workmen perished, and the building remained unfinished." (J. G. Frazer, *Folk Lore in the Old Testament* Vol. I [London, 1918]. Frazer adds that "It is said that at the time of the Spanish conquest the inhabitants of Cholula preserved with great veneration a large aerolite, which according to them was the very thunderbolt that fell on the pyramid and set it on fire." Cf. E. B. Tylor, *Anahuac* p. 277. Another Mexican tradition, recorded by Diego Duran in 1579 (*Historia de las Indias de Nueva Espana y las Islas de Tierra Firme* I [Mexico, 1867], pp. 6ff.) tells of giants who built a tower that almost reached the heavens, when it was destroyed by a thunderbolt.]
11. R. W. Williamson, *Religious and Cosmic Beliefs of Central Polynesia* (Cambridge, 1933), vol. I, p. 94.
12. A.-C. Eugene Caillot, *Mythes, legendes et traditions des Polynesiens* (Paris, 1914), p. 16, n. 1. The tradition was among those collected by Caillot in 1912 or 1913; his publication contains the story in the original Polynesian and in a French translation.
13. Brasseur de Bourbourg, *Histoire des nations civilises du Mexique* (1857-59), vol. I, p. 72. [Cf. also the Andean tradition recorded by Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa in his *Historia de los Incas*, ch. 7. In common with other accounts, it places the confusion of languages after the Deluge.]

14. "Kaska Tales," collected by James A. Teit, *Journal of American Folklore*, no. 30 (1917), p. 442.
15. Many different traditions were collected by James G. Frazer in *Folklore in the Old Testament*, (London, 1918), Vol. I, ch. V. Cf. H. H. Bankroft, *The Native Races of the Pacific States*, Vol. V.
16. D. Reiske, *De Arabum Epocha Vetustissima, Sail Ol Arem, etc.* (Leipzig, 1748). [The question of whether the Greeks transmitted an account of the same events was debated by several writers in antiquity, including Philo of Alexandria (*De Confusione Linguarum*), Cyril of Alexandria (*Contra Julianum*, Bk. IV) and Origen (*Contra Celsum* IV. 21). These writers saw a link between the story of the revolt of the giants—the sons of Aloeus who piled Ossa upon Olympus and Pelion atop Ossa in a vain effort to reach the lofty dwelling of Zeus and make war on the gods—and the account of the construction of the tower of Babel in Genesis XI. 3-8. The earliest allusion to these events is in Homer's *Odyssey* (XI. 315-316); Homer ascribes the destruction of the giants to Apollo. Pliny *N. H.* II. 8. 30) and Macrobius (*Saturn.* I. 19. 7) identified Apollo with the planet Mercury. Apuleius wrote (*De Mundo*, 336) that Mercury and Apollo were alternate names for "Stilbon," the planet Mercury.

Hesiod described the battle with the giants as an immense catastrophe involving the earth and heaven alike.

The boundless sea rang terribly around, and the earth crashed loudly: wide heaven was shaken and groaned, and high Olympus reeled from its foundations under the charge of the undying gods, and a heavy quaking reached Tartarus. . . . the cry of both armies as they shouted reached to starry heaven.

Then Zeus no longer held back his might; but straight his heart was filled with fury and he showed forth all his strength. From heaven and from Olympus he came forthwith, hurling his lightning: the bolts flew thick and fast from his strong hand, together with thunder and lightning, whirling and awesome flame. The life-giving earth crashed around in burning, and the vast wood cracked loud with fire all about. All the land seethed, and Ocean's streams and the unfruitful sea. The hot vapour lapped round the earthborn Titans: flame unspeakable rose to the bright upper air: the flashing glare of the thunder shone and lightning blinded their eyes, for all that they were strong.

It seemed as if Earth and wide Heaven above came together; for such a mighty crash would have arisen if the Earth were being hurled to ruin and Heaven from on high were hurling her down.

. . . Also the winds brought rumbling earthquake and duststorm, thunder and lightning, and the lurid thunderbolt, which are the shafts of great Zeus.

Seneca also referred to the same events in mentioning Jupiter's thunderbolts "by which the threefold mass of mountains fell" and a tradition held that this was the first occasion on which Jupiter used his bolts (Ovid, *Fasti* III. 438). The pagans disputed with the Jews and Christians whether Moses took the story from Homer or Homer from Moses, but the common origin of the two accounts was generally conceded. One early writer, Eupolemus, drew on both

sources in asserting that “the city of Babylon had been founded by those who saved themselves from the deluge: they were giants, and they built the famous tower.” (Eusebius, *Praep. Evang.*) From the viewpoint of sequential chronology, the link is plausible. The giants’ revolt is said to have occurred not long after Zeus had taken over from Kronos the dominion of the sky, and it marks the real beginning of Jupiter’s dominion. Cf. Bochart, *Geographia Sacra*, I. 13.].

17. This is told in allegorical form in the tale of the wanderings of Adam. The myth of Man (Adam) traveling through all the seven earths is a transparent allegory of the physical and human history of the earth. See *Sefer Razi'el*; cf. Ginzberg, *Legends* I. 90ff., V. 117f.
18. *Midrash Rabba* to Genesis, Exodus; Ginzberg, *Legends* I. 114; *Zohar Hades* *Bereshit* 8a-8b, *Zohar Ruth* 97b, and other sources in Ginzberg, *Legends*, V. 143. [In *Tractate Sanhedrin* 109a it is said that the place where the Tower once stood retains the peculiar quality of inducing a total loss of memory in anyone who passes it.]
19. H. H. Bankroft, *The Native Races* (San Francisco, 1882), vol. III, p. 64.
20. The electro-convulsive therapy used in psychiatry for the treatment of certain mental cases is administered by passing current through electrodes on the forehead. Conducted through the brain, the electric discharge causes a period of confusion and a subsequent complete, though temporary, loss of memory of the events immediately preceding the discharge. A number of patients complain also of consequent disturbances of longer duration, and some of them suffer a patchy, retrograde amnesia. See the article by Siskind in *Archive of Neurological Psychiatry* (Chicago, 1941), p. 215, 223.

