

# The Purpose of Babel

*Jonathan Ross*

What is the tallest building in America? (*One World Trade Center*, NY, 1776 ft.). What is the tallest in the world? (*Burj Khalifa*, Dubai, 2717 ft.). What material allows buildings to be this tall? (*steel*). Before steel, ancient civilizations relied on other materials to build their tallest structures. In Rome, it was the Colosseum (164 ft.<sup>1</sup>—*stone and concrete*<sup>2</sup>). In Egypt it was the Pyramid of Giza (481 ft.<sup>3</sup>—*limestone, granite*<sup>4</sup>). Take your pick of an early civilization; it was common for a community to build tall structures. But what was the purpose for this?

Today in our Bible history lesson, we'll explore an early civilization whose plans to build a great structure fell apart. More importantly, however, we'll see the reason they stopped this massive building project, and how it applies to our relationship with God today.

*Begin with context—Genesis 8:4 (EHV) “...the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat.” Briefly review the account of the Flood, where the ark came to rest, and the family of Noah. Point out the mountains of Ararat on a modern map; a large area in eastern Turkey. Review the command God gave to Noah’s family to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Genesis 9:1 EHV).*

*Read Genesis 11:1-4. Locate the Mesopotamian region on a modern map, in Iraq well south of the mountains of Ararat. Discuss why this region might be good for settling—climate and water sources.*

Despite all the good reasons to build a settlement here, what was the problem with this decision? (*God had given them clear instructions*

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<sup>1</sup> There are conflicting height claims for the original structure varying from 159 to 164 feet.

<sup>2</sup> “10 Facts About the Coliseum!,” National Geographic Kids, <https://www.natgeokids.com/uk/discover/history/romans/colosseum/> (accessed 11-10-19)

<sup>3</sup> “Pyramids –How Tall?,” Nova Online, (accessed 11-10-19) <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/pyramid/geometry/height.html>

<sup>4</sup> “Pyramids –How Heavy?,” Nova Online, (accessed 11-10-19) <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/pyramid/geometry/blocks.html>

*to fill the earth.)) Read verses 1-4 again and look for evidence that shows they had not made God's command their priority. (Kiln-dried ceramic bricks with tar mortar meant they were planning a permanent stay, otherwise they could have used simpler and less attractive construction materials such as sun-dried clay or stone bricks with clay or plant-based mortar.<sup>5</sup> Also, they wanted to make a name for themselves—"so that we will not be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." EHV)*

Read Genesis 11:5-7. Why would God intervene? Was it to stop them from doing something great? *(Remember God's command and recall their priorities—they were putting themselves and their own desires above God; shortly after their ancestors had survived a flood!)*

Does God intervene on our behalf today? One thing is for sure, we too are guilty of giving other things a higher priority than the priority we give to God. In response, God reminds us that he will not allow others to take his glory:

I am the LORD; that is my name. I will not give my glory to another, nor my praise to idols (Isaiah 42:8 EHV).

Yet we know that though we are sinful and fail to put God first, we have proof that God does intervene for us. Though we were spiritually dead and in our sins, God sent his Son Jesus to rescue us from sin:

But God, because he is rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in trespasses. It is by grace you have been saved! (Ephesians 2:4-5 EHV).

God intervened for the benefit of his people who were building a tower for their own glory instead of obeying God's command to fill the earth. Let's read the result of God's intervention together:

*Display Genesis 11:8-9 on the board to read together, but in a foreign language such as Luther's German of 1545 (Public Domain):*

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<sup>5</sup> Carl J. Lawrenz and John C. Jeske, A Commentary on Genesis 1-11, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2004), 322-323.

Also zerstreute sie der HERR von dort alle Länder, daß sie mußten aufhören die Stadt zu bauen. Daher heißt ihr Name Babel, daß der HERR daselbst verwirrt hatte aller Länder Sprache und sie zerstreut von dort in alle Länder.

This is a problem. Our class does not understand this language. It's no wonder the tower and location were given the name Babel—which “sounds like the Hebrew word for *confusion*.”<sup>6</sup> However, this confusion was exactly what the people needed. This building project needed to end, as it would be harmful to its inhabitants by reinforcing their desire to place themselves above God. (*The word “Babel” actually means “gate of God.” Moses uses a play on words by connecting “Babel” to “confusion.”*)<sup>7</sup>

Let's read these verses in a language we can understand: *Display Genesis 11:8-9 on the board and read together.*

How many languages are spoken in the world today? (*about 6,900*<sup>8</sup>) Do you think that many languages developed at the tower of Babel? (*Probably not. The Genesis chapter 10 “table of nations” lists 70 families and refers to some others too,<sup>9</sup> so Babel may have resulted in 70 or so languages. Many of today's 6,900 languages are similar to each other. Linguists place them into about 250 families of languages*<sup>10</sup>).

About 70 families left Babel and scattered across the earth, building new cultures. Genesis chapter 10 lists the families and where they settled.

*Discuss different ancient civilizations and display their ziggurat structures (examples on pages 34-35). Point out the similarities in their architecture. We see evidence of there once being a single common culture in the style of buildings they created throughout the world.*

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<sup>6</sup> Footnote to Genesis 11:9 in the Evangelical Heritage Version (EHV) translation.

<sup>7</sup> Lawrenz and Jeske, 329.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen R. Anderson, “How many languages are there in the world?” Linguistic Society of America, 2010, (accessed 11-10-19)

<https://www.linguisticsociety.org/content/how-many-languages-are-there-world>

<sup>9</sup> Lawrenz and Jeske, 306.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson.

In our lesson today we saw how the people at Babel ignored God's command to fill the earth. God intervened, resulting in the carrying out of that command. Learning about the people at Babel can remind us of how God intervenes on our behalf. Like the people of Babel, we do not follow God's commands as we should. God intervened by sending Jesus to live and die for us, so that we can receive the gift of eternal life in heaven.

Out of thanks for that amazing gift of eternal life, we look to follow God's commands, such as the one Jesus gave when He said,

“Therefore go and gather disciples from all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and by teaching them to keep all the instructions I have given you. And surely I am with you always until the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20, EHV)

We have the privilege to share the message of God's gift of eternal life with all the people scattered across the earth!

### **Assignment Options:**

Write several paragraphs explaining which historical event resulted in a larger effect on the world today: the Flood or the Tower of Babel. (In both of these events, God intervened to address the sins of people.) Support your idea with evidence and sources.

Write a devotion and use a translating program to design a message that can be sent to foreign mission field. Include both the original English and the translation in your final draft.

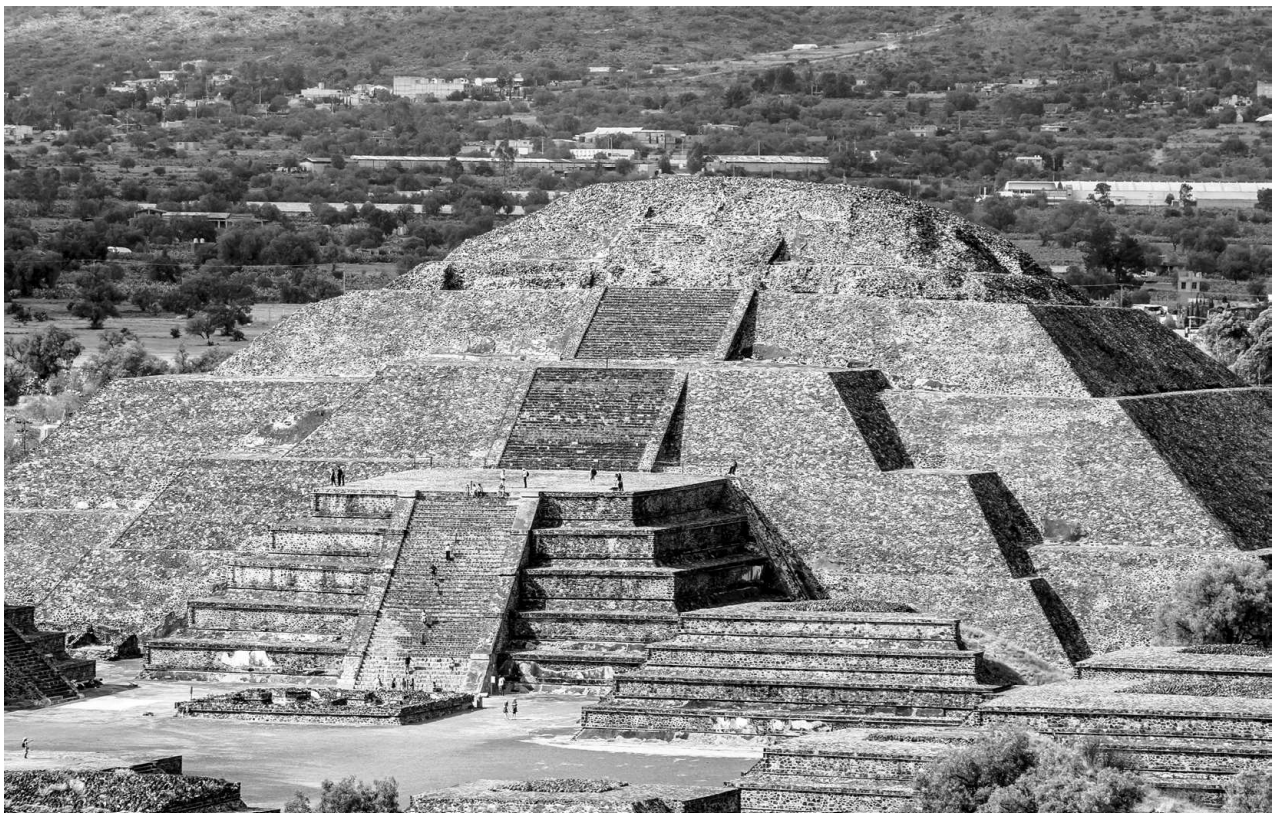
Use clay that can be sun dried or fired to build a structure that reminds us of how God intervenes for us, using the brick building process of the Old Testament. Prepare a short description with your structure.

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The city of Teotihuacán (c. 100-700 AD) in modern Mexico has many ancient structures including the Pyramid of the Sun (shown above, 246 ft. tall) and the Pyramid of the Moon (shown below). Photo credits: Pixabay. This and more at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/414/> (accessed 11-10-19).







*above:* Ziggurat in the Elamite city of Dur-Untash (modern Chogha Zanbil in Iran). This city was “founded by the Elamite king Untash-Napirisha (1275-1240 BCE) as the religious centre of Elam.” The ziggurat was “dedicated to the Elamite divinities Inshushinak and Napirisha.” It was built using mud bricks with a facing of baked bricks. The ruins are 81.2 ft tall while the original is estimated to have been 174 ft. tall with a temple on top. These details and more at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/113> (accessed 11-10-19). Photo credit: Alireza. heydear [CC BY-SA 4.0].

*below:* Ziggurat (c. 2,100 BC) in the city of Ur, modern Tell el-Mukayyar, Iraq. Built “by the king Ur-Nammu of the Third Dynasty of Ur for the moon god Nanna” using mud bricks with a facing of baked bricks and tar mortar. Even though partially rebuilt, it is still missing its top terraces and temple. The original height is estimated at 70-100 feet. These details are from Khan Academy at [www.LutheranScience.org/KhanUR](http://www.LutheranScience.org/KhanUR) Photo credit: Kaufingdude [CC BY-SA 3.0].

