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INTERPRETATIONS OF A SACRED TEXTS

"Come, let us build us a city and a tower with its top in the heavens"

Separation and Confusion between Heaven and Earth in Genesis Narratives

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The story of the tower of Babel recounted in the book of Genesis is extremely short—only eight or nine verses, divided into two more or less parallel sections. As Umberto Cassuto notes in his commentary on Genesis, the first section describes the situation as it was before (v. 1) and what the humans did (2–4); while the second section tells us what God did (5–8) and the final outcome (9):

> And all the earth was one language, one set of words. And it happened as they journeyed from the east that they found a 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 brick served them as stone, 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 went 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, now nothing they plot to do will elude them. *Come, let us go down and confuse 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 was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them over all the earth. (Gen. 11:1–9)

The sages of the Talmud (BT, *Sanhedrin* 109a) and the Midrash (*Bereshit rabbah* 38) ask what was the sin of the 'generation of separation' (viz. the builders of the tower of Babel), because the biblical text does not say so explicitly (as it does, for example, in the case of the generation of the flood)? Various answers to this question can be found in rabbinic tradition and in extra-biblical literature (the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha), from

simple 'trespassing' to an attempt to wage war against God. Nearly all of them, however, refer to some kind of human challenge to Heaven.

I would like to suggest a solution based on a careful reading of the biblical text, comparing the story of the tower of Babel to other stories in the first chapters of Genesis, also drawing on extra-biblical tradition and the work of modern scholars. The biblical author offers two clues: the humans' intentions and God's reaction. The humans' intention was to build 'a city and a tower with its top in the heavens'. To what end? To make 'a name' for themselves, to avoid being 'scattered over all the earth'. That is, to build a magnificent and renowned city, in order to promote social cohesion and inspire people to want to remain in the metropolis. The idea of building 'a tower with its top in the heavens' would thus appear to have been motivated by the desire to create a monument worthy of the city—an imposing structure that would be a source of pride for its inhabitants. But what is wrong with that? It seems like an attempt to build human community rather than a challenge God. Why then did it have to have its 'top in the heavens', and why did God consider it a threat that had to be stopped?

Now let us take a look at God's reaction. The first thing God does is 'go down [*vayered*] to see the city and the tower that the human creatures had built'. This type of anthropomorphism is common in the Torah (see e.g. Gen. 18:21), as a way of introducing God into the story—here in the role of judge, 'investigating' facts with which he is already fully acquainted. Even in a figurative sense, however, the action of 'coming down' seems significant, considering that: a) it is the opposite of the human action of ascending to the heavens, and b) it is repeated again in verse 7: 'Come, let us *go down* [*nerdah*] and confuse their language'—also considering the fact that it is redundant or even illogical to speak of God going down in verse 7, since he had already gone down and there is no indication that he had returned to heaven in the interim.

God then makes the connection between a fact stated at the very beginning of the story and the construction of the city and the tower: 'As one people with one language for all….' He also expresses the need to stop them, to prevent them from completing their project. The solution is therefore to take away the very thing that rendered their actions possible—that is, the language that unites them, their common identity, their ability to understand one another. In so doing, he prevented them from making themselves a name, from preserving their social cohesion. They are thus dispersed, and the city left unfinished. The story ends with a Hebrew etymology of the name Babel, from the verb *BLL*—to confuse or mix (while the original etymology is probably *bab-il*, the gate of God, or *bab-ilani*, the gate of the gods).

Based on the information provided in the text, what else can we say about this generation, known in rabbinic literature as the 'generation of separation' (Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 10:3), 'because in its time the separation of the inhabitants of the earth came about' (Gen. 10:25)? The crucial concepts would appear to be: earth, unity, heaven, going down (as explained earlier), confusion, and dispersal. The symmetry between the actions of the humans and the actions of God is very clear in the text. Moreover, the sages of the Talmud teach us that 'all of God's actions are measure for measure' (BT, *Sanhedrin* 90a). Once again, from the text itself we learn that their punishment was precisely their separation and dispersion—in response to their improper use of their unity and cohesion. But it is not merely a punishment. It is also a kind of prevention, depriving them of the ability to accomplish all that they 'plot to do' (vv. 6–8). But what exactly did they want to do that required divine intervention?

I would like to add a further element, to which I will return later. To the question 'What was the sin of the generation of separation?' in the tractate *Sanhedrin*, the School of Rabbi Sheila replies: 'Let us build a tower and ascend to the firmament and strike it with axes to cause its waters to flow.'

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Let us now turn to the first story in Genesis that may offer some insight into what exactly God was trying to prevent in the story of the tower of Babel. I refer to the story of Adam and Eve and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

In this story, what were the humans' actions and intentions and what was God's reaction to them? Let us start with the prohibition against eating the fruit of this tree: 'And the Lord God caused to sprout from the soil every tree lovely to look at and good for food, and the tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil', and God commanded the human, 'From every tree of the garden you may surely eat. But from the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day you eat from it, you are doomed to die.' What was this tree? Why was it forbidden? And when God says 'for on the day you eat from it, you are doomed to die', is it a threat or merely a warning.

The talking snake (to which I will return later) adds a further explanation when it attempts to convince Eve to eat the fruit: 'You shall not be doomed to die. For God knows that on the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will become as gods knowing good and evil' (3:4–5). At least according to the snake, God was not trying to save the humans from death, but wanted to prevent them from eating of this tree, because he

wished to maintain his divine monopoly over the knowledge of good and evil and to stop the humans from becoming like him. Surely this was just propaganda, devised by the 'most cunning of all the beasts of the field that the Lord God had made' (3:1)! Yet, God himself admits as much towards the end of the chapter: 'The human has become like one of us, knowing good and evil' (22). It matters little whether God meant literally like him or merely like one of the heavenly beings, the angels, as some of the traditional exegetes explain. Thus, the prohibition against eating from the tree of knowledge—according to God himself—was intended to prevent the humans from becoming divine.

What did the humans do in this case? They intentionally chose to become like God, 'knowing good and evil'. The woman, 'saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was lust to the eyes, and that the tree was *desirable to make one wise*, took of its fruit and ate' (6), and in this decision, at that moment, Adam was, as the text states, '*with her*'. In short, they wanted to become wise and like God, which is why they disobeyed his command. And it worked! No sooner had they eaten of the fruit, than 'the eyes of the two were opened, and they knew they were naked' (7).[1]

Their punishment (or perhaps the natural consequence of their action, at least in part) is divided in three: the punishment particular to the woman—'I will terribly sharpen your birth pangs, in pain shall you bear children. And for your man shall be your longing, and he shall rule over you' (16); the punishment particular to the man—'Cursed be the soil for your sake, with pangs shall you eat from it all the days of your life. Thorn and thistle shall it sprout for you and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread till you return to the soil, for from there were you taken, for dust you are and to dust shall you return' (17–19); and the punishment inflicted on both—to be banished from the Garden of Eden. I would like to say a little more about this punishment, or rather act of prevention: 'Now that the human has become like one of us, knowing good and evil, he may reach out and take as well from the tree of life and live forever. And the Lord God sent him from the Garden of Eden' (22–23).

It seems as if there were two elements of divinity or elements that separate the human from the divine, represented in the two trees: knowledge and immortality. Since the humans had already crossed the threshold of divinity, it was imperative that God prevent them from becoming immortal, which would have removed the final barrier between heaven and earth. To this end, God drove them out of the Garden of Eden and 'set up

[1] A rather banal first taste of knowledge, as Cassuto notes.

east of the Garden of Eden the cherubim and the flame of the whirling sword to guard the way to the tree of life' (24).

Before proceeding to the final and perhaps the strangest story of this analysis, I would like to return to the subject of the talking snake. It is interesting to note an ancient tradition, found in the book of Jubilees (second century CE) 3:27–28, whereby prior to the banishment of the humans from the Garden of Eden, all of the animals 'used to speak with one another with one speech and one language', but on that day—the day of the humans' punishment—they 'stopped from speaking'. Thus, as in the story of the tower of Babel, we find linguistic unity shattered forever by a divine punishment.

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We now come to the last of the three stories, recounted in the Bible in only four verses:

> And it happened as humankind began to multiply over the earth and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were comely, and they took themselves wives howsoever they chose. And the Lord said, 'My breath shall not abide in the human forever, for he is but flesh. Let his days be a hundred and twenty years.' The giants were then on the earth, and afterward as well, the sons of God having come to bed with the daughters of man who bore them children: they are the heroes of yore, the men of renown. (6:1–4)

This story is a little different from the other two. In the story of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and in the story of the tower of Babel, it is humans who attempt to ascend towards heaven and divinity. Here, on the other hand, it is heaven and divinity that descends to earth. In fact, in this story, the humans appear entirely passive. It is the 'sons of God' who 'saw', 'took', and 'chose' the daughters of man. However, when it comes time for the punishment (and again, it is unclear whether it is indeed a punishment), it is the children of these relations between the humans and the sons of God who pay the price.

Who are these sons of God? A number of modern scholars (see e.g. Darshan, Zakovitch, and Shinan) have suggested—citing similar myths in Canaanite and Greek traditions—that an earlier version of the myth incorporated into the biblical text featured actual Gods. Already in antiquity (Ethiopic Enoch 6:2), however, we find a tradition—also present in later midrashic texts (*Pirké derabi Eliezer* 22)—that these sons of God (*benei*

elohim) were none other than angels.[2] This also brings to mind the use of the plural in God's declaration after Adam and Eve had eaten from the tree: 'The human has become like one of *us*, knowing good and evil' (3:22). The plural pronoun would thus refer to heavenly beings in general—God and the angels.

Returning to our story, it is not entirely clear whether anyone, if not the sons of God, had actually sinned, but the problem had been created and is readily apparent: There was a violation of the separation between God and humankind, heaven and earth—which had even produced fruits: 'the giants … the heroes of yore, the men of renown [*anshei shem*—lit. "men of name"].' ('Men of name' brings to mind the intention of the builders of the tower of Babel to make 'a name' for themselves.)

How does God react to this violation of the separation between heaven and earth? Looking only at our brief passage, the answer can be found in verse 3: 'And the Lord said, "My breath shall not abide in the human forever, for he is but flesh. Let his days be a hundred and twenty years."' What is the connection between this and the story of the sons of God or between this and the description of the giants, fruit of the union between the sons of God and the daughters of man? The Hebrew לֹא יָדוֹן רוּחִי בָאָדָם לְעֹלָם—translated here, 'My breath shall not abide in man for ever'—is not easily understood.[3] The mediaeval exegete Rashi explains the phrase slightly differently: 'My spirit shall not be perturbed and agitated because of man.' Following Rashi's interpretation the connection between God's reaction and the rest of the passage becomes somewhat clearer. God's spirit is perturbed and agitated because of the violation of the separation between heaven and earth and because of the fruits of this violation, and this verse offers a solution the problem: Limit the lifespan of all humans, but especially the giants, who are demigods.[4] The giants are half divine, but also half human: 'for he is but flesh'. This solution is not unlike the solution to the problem of Adam and Eve having become 'half divine', after having eaten of the tree of knowledge. There too God decided to prevent them from becoming immortal, by driving them out of the Garden of Eden and placing guardians—the cherubim and the flame of the whirling sword—to block their way to the tree of life, thereby maintaining the separation between heaven and earth, despite it having been partially violated.

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The story, however, does not end there. Immediately after our four verses, we find the following:

[2] See Cassuto, 'The Episode of the Sons of God and the Daughters of Man'.
[3] See Cassuto, *Commentary*.
[4] See Zakovitch and Shinan,

> And the Lord saw that the evil of the human creature was great on the earth and that every scheme of his heart's devising was only perpetually evil. And the Lord regretted having made the human on earth and was grieved to the heart. And the Lord said, 'I will wipe out the human race I created from the face of the earth, from human to cattle to crawling thing to the fowl of the heavens, for I regret that I have made them.' (6:5–7)

Perhaps it is true that the humans did nothing wrong in the story of the sons of God, but the proximity of that story to the story of the flood suggests a connection between the two. This connection is clear to Darshan, as it is to Zakovitch and Shinan, and it clearly emerges from the extra-biblical literature. In Jubilees (5:1–11), for example, the two stories merge into a single event, in which the sons of God (explicitly called 'angels') are punished, along with their children, the giants. In the Greek and Slavonic Baruch (3 Baruch 4:10), not only is there a connection between the story of the sons of God and the flood—the text notes that 409,000 giants ('only' 104,000 in the Slavonic version) perished in the flood—but there is also a connection between the flood and the story of Adam and Eve, since the vine planted by Noah is none other than the tree of knowledge of good and evil! According to another tradition, once again from the extra-biblical literature (Pseudo-Eupolemus), it was the giants, who had survived the flood, who built the tower of Babel! We thus find more and more connections between these three stories (or four, if we count the flood as a separate story), which evidently share many common elements and have been associated with one another since antiquity.

Returning to Genesis and the flood, God decided to destroy the earth and all of the animals, except for the ones brought onto the ark. But why destroy the animals? In the subsequent verses (12–13, 17), we find the following explanation: 'And God saw the earth and, look, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted its ways on the earth. And God said to Noah, 'The end of all flesh is come before Me, for the earth is filled with outrage by them, and I am now about to destroy them, with the earth. … As for Me, I am about to bring the flood, water upon the earth, to destroy all flesh that has within it the breath of life from under the heavens, everything on the earth shall perish.' The Midrash (*Bereshit rabbah* 28) explains the corruption of the animals in their having 'mixed species', thereby violating the will of God, who had created them separately.

All of this leads to the understanding that the story of the flood—for reasons of textual proximity, thematic similarity (violation of separations imposed by the Creator), and extra-biblical tradition—is in fact connected to that of the sons of God, and is part of the punishment not only for the promiscuity between angels and humans, but for far more widespread corruption, among all living creatures, to the point of jeopardizing creation itself.

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As noted earlier, all of God's actions are said to be measure for measure. Where is the measure for measure in the story of the flood? If we accept the premise that the sin punished with the flood was the violation of the separation between heaven and earth, the connection between the punishment and the sin is clear. And indeed we find the following description of the flood in the biblical text itself (7:11): 'In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day, all *the wellsprings of the great deep burst and the casements of the heavens were opened*.' As if to say, you sought to remove the separation between heaven and earth, destroying the order of creation? Let us remove it then! Let us allow the wellsprings in the depths of the earth to *ascend* and the waters of the heavens to *descend*, annihilating every living thing, because *that* is the result of your actions. It is interesting to note that the words *eretz* and *adamah* (both signifying earth) appear nineteen times in the twenty-two verses of chapter six. In verse 17, not only does the word *eretz* appear twice, but the text underscores the contrast between earth and heaven: 'As for Me, I am about to bring the flood, water upon the *earth*, to destroy all flesh that has within it the breath of life *from under the heavens*, everything on the *earth* shall perish.'

In order to understand just how crucial this separation between heaven and earth is, it is worth returning to the beginning of Genesis. On the first day, 'God created heaven and earth' (1:1)—that is, the very first act of creation, the foundation of all of God's works is the separation between heaven and earth. Just before the creation of humankind, the principle of separation between heaven and earth is reaffirmed—twice in the same verse (2:4): 'These are the generations of *the heavens and the earth* when they were created. In the day that the Lord God *made the earth and the heavens*.' So complete was this separation in the beginning, before Adam and Eve ate of the tree, that 'God had not caused rain to fall on the earth'! The Garden of Eden, the Bible tells us, was watered by a 'mist' that 'went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground' (2:5–6). After the violation of this separation by the first humans, creation itself was transformed, and the waters above the firmament began to descend to earth in the form of rain, but since God had managed to preserve the separation by preventing the humans from becoming immortal, creation did not break down completely.

When the sons of God lay with the daughters of man, however, creating beings that united heaven and earth in a single body, such a violation of the separation between heaven and earth could no longer be kept in check merely by ensuring their mortality. In this act, they destroyed the foundation of creation itself, and the firmament that separated the waters had to give way, destroying everything.

Earlier, I mentioned the view of the School of Rabbi Sheila, regarding the sin of the generation of separation: 'Let us build a tower and ascend to the firmament and strike it with axes to cause its waters to flow.' According to this explanation, the builders of the tower did not merely wish to construct a renowned tower and city, in order to promote social cohesion. They wanted to attack the foundation of creation, to destroy the firmament that separated the waters of heaven and earth. They wanted to 'make a name' for themselves, that is to become like the giants and the heroes (*anshei shem*, 'men of name'), who united the human and the divine. This time, however, they did not fear a flood, because God had already promised Noah that 'never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth' (9:11). In any event, they had to be stopped, because this separation is the foundation of everything, and creation could not possibly survive without the separation between heaven and earth, established 'in the beginning' as the founding principle of all things. God thus saved creation and humankind by denying them the possibility of violating this separation. The story of the tower of Babel ends with a Hebrew etymology of the name Babel: 'Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused [*balal*] the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them over all the earth.' The 'punishment' precisely reflected the 'sin'—the desire to confuse things that must remain separate. And in the language of the Mishnah, that generation became known as the 'generation of separation'—that is, the generation in which separation, the founding principle of all creation, was reaffirmed.

Thus, what appeared at first like petty jealousy or insecurity, a fear of 'competition', of humans becoming 'like one of us', was actually an attempt to save creation, to preserve the principles that make human and all other life possible. Perhaps this is the meaning of God's affirmation regarding the tree of knowledge of good and evil, that 'on the day you eat from it, you are doomed to die'—whether as the necessary consequence of the collapse of the separation between heaven and earth, or as a measure taken by God to prevent it.

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