The Tower of Babel

Genesis 11.1–9

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HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED why people all over the world speak different languages? The Bible has an explanation which concerns an extraordinary construction which came to be known as the Tower of Babel.

This all happened some years after the Great Flood which had lasted for one hundred and fifty days, wiping out everyone except for Noah, his family and the animals that went into the ark. For a long time, the world was a terrible mess with puddles everywhere but finally things dried out and humankind began to re-establish itself. Soon, there were thousands of men, women and children and they decided to live together in a beautiful place known as the Land of Shinar which may or may not have been somewhere near Iraq. The Bible is rather vague about the precise location but then it was written a very long time ago. Anyway, everyone was extremely happy. They had olive trees, dates, fig trees, camels, goats, fresh drinking water, peace and perfect weather.

And, at this time, they all spoke the same language.

The trouble started when someone decided to build the biggest, tallest tower that had ever been seen. The Bible doesn’t actually tell us who this person was but many scholars point the finger at King Nimrod, a rather cruel and self-important figure who happened to be the great grandson of old Noah himself. Like many tyrants, he was always showing off and he thought that, by building a tower that reached as far as heaven itself, he would prove to the people that he was as powerful as God. It never occurred to him that a vast structure, several miles wide and even more miles high would be completely useless in the middle of the desert and that actually schools, hospitals and community centres would have been a much better bet. No. He called together his architects and engineers and set to work on this fantastic scheme — and even though they would have to do all the heavy lifting and carrying, not one of his people complained.
Very quickly, the Tower of Nimrod began to rise and it really was an amazing sight. It looked a little bit like a wedding cake only it was pale yellow, not white, and actually broke through the clouds.

It had hundreds of thousands of archways all the way round and behind the archways there were doors and windows, corridors and staircases. There were slanting roofs, domes and steeples. In fact, if you can imagine every great building you’ve ever seen, jumbled together and piled on top of each other, you’ll still only be halfway there. (There’s actually quite a good picture of it by a man called Peter Bruegel. Do go and look at it if you ever happen to be in Vienna.)

Of course, there were no modern materials. The tower was made of bricks, stone and clay and as cement hadn’t been invented yet, the builders stuck it all together with slime which they pulled out of the sea. Because of the huge
weight, it sank deep into the sand but that was probably for the best as it helped
the whole thing stay upright.

Now God had watched all this with a certain amount of dismay. It wasn’t just
that Nimrod was unpleasant and annoying. He saw that human beings, if left to
themselves, could waste their time doing all sorts of stupid things. It was all very
well people wanting to build and to make their lives better but they really had to
think about what they were doing. What they needed to do was to slow down. And
that gave God an idea. One night, while everyone was asleep, He acted. In exactly
one trillionth of a second, he changed the way they spoke.

So when they all woke up the next day, everyone found that they were talking
in a different language.

“Good morning,” one builder said to another.
“Buenos días,” replied the second (in Spanish).
“Bună dimineața,” cried out a third (in Rumanian).
“Merhaba!” (Turkish)
“Sawubona” (Zulu)
“Was ist los?” asked one of the architects (in German).
“Je n’en ai pas la moindre idée!” replied the assistant chief engineer (in French).
“为什么每个人都在说这么奇怪?” demanded the deputy director of

This went on for some time. In fact, by late afternoon, nobody had done any work
and King Nimrod came rushing down to the building site with fury in his eyes.

“Why is nobody working?” he screamed.

But nobody understood a word he was saying either.
And that was about it. Not one more brick of the Tower of Nimrod was laid. After a while, people got fed up and drifted away and after that, nature took over. The winds blew and the desert sun beat down and bit by bit the gigantic structure crumbled and fell down. Nobody knows what happened to King Nimrod although he was always referred to as “Nimrod the Evil” after that and, many thousands of years later, had a long-range air to surface missile (the Nimrod) named after him.

His masterwork is never called the Tower of Nimrod, by the way. It was given the name the Tower of Babel after *balal*, a Hebrew word meaning confused. Or you could say that everyone spoke the same language until it was built but babbled ever afterwards — which is most certainly true.