

Parashah Nine

Genesis 11:1–32; Isaiah 28:1–16; 1Corinthians 14:20–32

notes by Tim Hegg

Tongues - the Torah Connection

The previous *parashah* (10:1-32), often labeled “The Table of Nations,” was no doubt included within the narrative of *B’reishit* (Genesis) to emphasize a number of things. First, after the flood, the command of God to “be fruitful and multiply” is still in force, and His blessing in giving children transcends the demise brought on by the flood. The Table of Nations shows the diversity which came about within mankind following the flood, and our current text intends to give a reason for this diversity, namely, the confusion of languages. Second, our text teaches us a very important reality, namely, that the flood, while a punishment which mankind deserved, did not effect any change in the heart of man. If the real character of his heart is described before the flood as “the thoughts of his heart were only evil continually,” nothing has changed. Mankind’s natural bent is disobedience and rebellion against his Creator.

Thus, the previous chapter gives to us a broad overview of *how* the nations developed from the single source of Noah’s family. Our current chapter describes *why* they developed as diverse nations instead of as a unified people. Ultimately, both chapters function to describe those nations which, in the end, would be Israel’s enemies, and the manner in which God, therefore, separates Israel from all the nations.

What exactly was the sin of the people as God describes it in our text? The sages give several explanations: that they spoke against God as One [the phrase in v. 1, that all the earth was of “one tongue (literally, “lip”) is understood to mean “speech against the One” rather than “speech which was one”]; or that they spoke against Abraham. This latter explanation takes into account (according to the chronology of the Sages) that Abraham was born in the year 1948 from the creation, and Noah died in 2006. This would mean that Abraham was alive for the last 58 years of Noah’s life. Thus, in the same way that the people of Noah’s day did not heed his message, so the generation following his death failed to hear the message of Abraham. The Sages believed that by the time Abraham was 48, God had already revealed Himself to him as the One true God. This is confirmed by Stephen in his speech recorded in Acts 7. There Stephen plainly says that God appeared to Abraham before he had left Mesopotamia and lived in Charan (7:2).

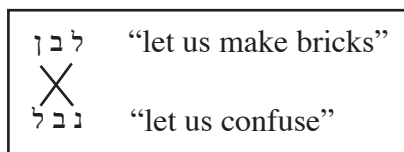
Is it possible that the first thing the people did was to rebel against God’s commandment of “be fruitful and multiply, and *fill the earth*”? In attempting to stay together, and forming a city “fortress” with a ziggu-

rat reaching to the heavens, were they attempting to usurp their own rule against that of their Creator? The narrative would seem to suggest that the ziggurat they were building was viewed by God as a symbol of their rebellion and unwillingness to submit to Him. Their ability to unify around culture (i.e., language) rather than in their worship to HaShem meant that they would be able to live under the false “success” of affluence and never really admit their need for God. Together they could sustain mundane life without considering that all they had actually came from their Creator. Unlike the rural society, the city dweller can rely upon the city to supply when needs arise. The farmer, by nature of his dependence upon the land and crops, constantly is confronted with those factors that are out of his hands, most notably the weather.

Thus, when HaShem says that “nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them,” I take it to mean that mankind would be able to do everything necessary to provide temporal comforts, making it appear as though they were not actually dependent upon God to supply their needs. Since it was never God’s intention to create mankind to be independent from Himself, He intervenes to disrupt the false notions, that mankind might again sense his need of the Creator. Indeed, it was God’s intention that mankind should find their unity, not in self-reliance, but in their faith in and reliance upon God.

This tower of Babel section is full of word plays and other tongue-in-cheek literary devices. First, the section contains some very real puns. The most obvious is the name Babel. The Babylonian word means “gate of the gods” or something similar. However, in Hebrew, the Babylonian word itself sounds like the Hebrew word בָּלַל, *balal*, which means “confusion.” Moses thus hints at his understanding of the word’s real meaning.

Second, Moses has created a very interesting chiasmic arrangement of the words of the people in verse 3 with the words of HaShem in verse 7. In v. 3 the people say, “Let us make bricks” (literally, “let us brick bricks”), the root word being לָבַן, *laban*. In v. 7, the words of HaShem are, “Let us confuse” נִבְּלָה, *navlah* (from the root בָּלַל). Taking the consonants into consideration (the final ה of נִבְּלָה functions as a vowel marker), an interesting chiasmus is formed, as shown in the following diagram:



The word play is obvious: if you flip-flop (=confuse) “let us make bricks,” you get what God actually did, i.e., confuse the brick makers. Or

more theologically, if you go against God, you can count on achieving everything you are trying to avoid.

A third literary feature employed by Moses is to show how futile the efforts were to build a building which reached into “heaven.” Just how “short” this plan actually was is “heightened” by the fact that even with their building acumen, God still has to “come down” even to see the building! How puny the building must be if God must “come down” to see it. Even though it was higher than all other buildings, it was a far cry from honestly reaching into the place of God’s abode, i.e., the heavens. (Some ancient societies believed that their gods lived at the top of the ziggurat they had built for him or her.) In the end, all of these literary devices function satirically to mock Babylon (the name later identified with Babel) as the unworthy foe of God and His people, Israel.

Everyone agrees that the central focus of the opening pericope is the unity of language and God’s subsequent “confusion” of the languages which results in the dispersion of the people. Thus, apart from their own desires, they “fill the earth,” which was God’s plan in the first place. That the Sages also saw the confusion of languages as the central motif is evident in the choice of Isaiah 28 as the corresponding *haftarah*. Here, in vv. 9-13, the same theme is mentioned, namely, that *confusion of speech is a sign of Divine judgment*. This, again, is the connection to the chosen Apostolic passage (1Co 14), for in this text Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11, once again teaching that any speech understood as coming from God, which is not comprehensible to the audience, is a sign of judgment, not blessing.

The context of Isaiah 28 confirms this thesis. As a “woe” oracle, the prophet is condemning Israel (Ephraim is a metonym for Israel, being the most prominent tribe of the Northern Kingdom) for her drunken stupor, a spiritual intoxication in which she has mixed the filth of paganism together with her worship of HaShem. In so doing, her prophets act drunk—as a fool whose speech is slurred and who repeats infant gibberish as though it were something of substance. Note that the translations “line upon line and precept upon precept” entirely miss the mark. If one reads it in the Hebrew the meaning is obvious: *צוּ לְצוּ צוּ לְצוּ קוּ לְקוּ קוּ לְקוּ* (vv. 10, 13), “*tzav latzav tzav latzav kav lakav kav lakav*.” Though some lexicons list the meaning “precept” for the form *צוּ*, *tzav*, the only text given to support this meaning is this one. Likewise, while *קוּ*, *kav* means “measuring line” or “cord” (cf. 1Ki 7:23; Jer 31:39), it never means “line” in the sense of a “line of text” (which is how the English translations are usually understood.) The fact that the two clusters of sounds rhyme adds weight to the commonly accepted interpretation that they represent infant babbling, and are used by Isaiah to mock the nation as she reels in her drunken stupor, intoxicated by the foolishness of idolatry. Note the JPS translation of Is 28:13:

To them the word of the LORD is: “Mutter upon mutter, murmur upon murmur, now here, now there.” And so they will march, but they shall fall backward, and be injured and snared and captured.”

Put against the backdrop of our Torah text, Isaiah 28 hearkens to the well-known Tower of Babel in which unintelligible speech is a clear sign of God’s judgment. In all three texts, the result is confusion and division, not blessing and unity.

That the same thing may have been going on in the synagogue at Corinth to which Paul writes his epistle is likely, since he quotes Isaiah 28 in his rebuke of the practice. It is historically proven that the mystery cults of Corinth, incorporating female priests, engaged in ecstatic speech which was described by historians as a kind of babbling that could not be deciphered as to its meaning. That such a practice had found its way into the messianic community which Paul addresses is surely possible. For the Apostle, what distinguished valid tongues from the spurious counterfeit was the ability to have the tongue interpreted. What is more, valid tongues involved the use of a known language, miraculously expressed, to confront the unbeliever with the gospel of Yeshua. Ecstatic babbling, however, had no place in the venue of spiritual charismata (gifts), for it was not a known language and its interpretation, therefore, could not be tested and thus proven to be accurate. Apparently when the phenomenon occurred in Corinth it was not being “interpreted,” and was therefore functioning, in the Apostle’s mind, as a possible sign of judgment rather than blessing. That Paul had our Torah text, as well as the *haftarah*, in mind, may be strengthened by his use of the Greek terms γλῶσσα, *glossa*, “tongue (= “language”), ἀκούω, *akouō*, “hear,” and φωνή, *phōne*, “sound, voice, speech” in parallel with the Lxx of Gen 11:7, “come, let us go down and confuse their speech (*glossa*) in order that they might not hear (*akouō*) the speech (*phōne*) of their neighbor.” The same Greek cluster of words is found in the Shavuot story of Acts 2, where the curse of Babel (inability to understand) is reversed (“we hear them in our own tongue speaking ...” Acts 2:11).

The remainder of Gen 11 is filled with the genealogies of the family of Shem. The biblical story has narrowed its scope to only one of Noah’s sons. God had determined that He would dwell within the tents of Shem, meaning that the promise of a redeemer made to Eve (Gen 3:15) would be fulfilled in the line of Shem. Ultimately, Moses intends us to see that the narrative of God’s workings will be narrowed to one chosen individual descended from Shem, namely, Abraham. And thus the genealogical notices end with the *toledot* (generations) of Terach, the father of Abram.

Terach had three sons: Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Haran was the father

of Lot, Milcah, and Iscah. Abram took Sarai as a wife, and Nahor took Milcah (his neice) for his wife. Moses notes that Haran died while the family was still living in Ur Chas'dim. But after the death of Haran, Terach, along with Abram and Lot (Terach's grandson) and their wives, left Ur and settled in Charan in the land of Canaan. But one important note is inserted by Moses: "Sarai was barren; she had no children" (v. 30). This sets up the continuing narrative, for Moses is intent on showing us by whom the promised "seed of the woman" would come. The notice of Sarai's barrenness introduces a dilemma into the on-going story: the promised seed would have to come by divine fiat, overcoming man's inability. The seed would come through God's miraculous power.

Some have pointed out what they feel to be chronological discrepancies between our text and that of Stephen's sermon in Acts 7. Since Gen 12 begins with the speech of God to Abram (that he should leave his country), it might appear that this happened after Abram left Charan. Yet Stephen states that God spoke these words to Abram before he left Ur, and before he lived in Charan. But we should remember that the Genesis narrative is not always strictly chronological. The opening of Gen 12 simply reiterates the words of God to Abram which must have occurred years earlier.

Our *parashah* ends, then, by urging us on to read the rest of the story, of how God will make a covenant with his chosen one, Abram, and how this covenant will reveal the mystery of the "promised seed." The revelation of the Messiah continues to unfold.

Further Thoughts on 1Corinthians 14

The Apostolic portion chosen for this Torah *parashah* gives us the opportunity to consider more closely the phenomenon of languages being practiced and experienced by the messianic community in Corinth. The opening verse of 1Cor 14 is translated by some of our English versions as giving a contrast: "Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy" (NASB); "Follow after charity, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy" (KJV). The Greek does not require such a contrast, and it is probably better to understand this opening verse along the lines of the ESV, "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy" or the NIV, "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy." But the primary question that confronts us as we seek to interpret this passage is whether Paul actually recognized the γλώσσα, *glossa*, "languages" that were being uttered in the community meetings at Corinth as an expression of a valid, spiritual gift. Obviously, he is encouraging the people to make some changes in the way that they were conducting themselves in the corporate meeting, but what exactly does he see that needs to

be changed? Is it simply that the phenomenon of languages needed to be done with more order so as not to cause disruption? Was Paul's concern simply that the languages being spoken needed to be interpreted? Or was Paul leery of the phenomenon itself?

Verse 2 is the beginning of Paul's description of the language phenomenon at Corinth, and how one interprets this verse will determine the Apostle's meaning in the subsequent verses. In the NASB v. 2 reads: "For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries." The question we should ask is whether Paul defines the language phenomenon as valid by saying that in a "tongue" one actually is speaking to God. It is hard to conclude that this is Paul's meaning when in v. 9 he states that one who speaks in an indistinguishable *glossa*, "is speaking into the air." This expression describes something that is "useless" (Meyer) or "fruitless and pointless" (Thiselton, *NIGTC*). Paul uses the metaphor of "air" in a similar way in 1Cor 9:26, "Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air." If in the following context Paul describes uninterpreted tongues spoken within the corporate meeting as "speaking into the air," it hardly seems possible that his opening statement (v. 2) should be understood as meaning that one who speaks unintelligent sounds is actually speaking to God.

Another interpretation of v. 2 is possible, namely, that Paul is repeating the viewpoint expressed by those who engaged in unintelligent *glossa*, not his own Apostolic approval. This is all the more possible with the addition of the word "mysteries": "...in his spirit he speaks mysteries." While all current scholarly assessments indicate that Gnosticism did not come into its own as a recognizable movement until later (perhaps 2nd Century CE), most scholars affirm that a latent, early Gnosticism was taking hold well before its formal appearance as a religious movement. Gnosticism was built around supposed mysteries revealed to select individuals, mysteries that gave the "real truth" as over against those who were "unenlightened." One could well imagine that individuals who considered themselves particularly "in touch" with divine mysteries, were explaining their own ecstatic utterances as personal, privileged communication with God, and as delving into mysteries beyond the capabilities of the common person. We might, therefore, understand Paul to be saying in v. 2: "Those of you who speak in *glossa* say that you have a direct communication with God and that you are engaged in deep mysteries." He then goes on in the following verses to show why such an assessment is wrong-headed and why such ecstatic speech is actually "speaking into the air" meaning "of no value."

One other issue in v. 2 requires our attention. Does the word "spirit" (πνεῦμα, *pneuma*) refer to the human spirit or to the Spirit of God? The NASB translates "...in his spirit he speaks mysteries" (also NIV, KJV) but

the ESV has “...he utters mysteries in the Spirit” (also NRSV). In the biblical languages (both Hebrew and Greek), capitalizing a word to indicate human vs. divine was not done (as it is in the English). Thus, the word *pneuma*, “spirit” can refer to either the human spirit or the Spirit of God, and only the context can determine which one is meant.

We may take a hint from the use of *pneuma* in vv. 14 and 32 of our chapter:

14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful;

32 and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets;

In both of these cases, the word *pneuma* is clearly the human spirit and not the Spirit of God. It would seem likely, then, that the same is true in v. 2. Paul is not saying that the Spirit of God is producing the ecstatic utterances even though the *glossa*-speakers themselves may have said this was the case. Rather, the phenomenon of ecstatic utterances was the product of the human spirit. This is not to deny that the Spirit of God could, in fact, give the ability of *glossa* as a distinguishable, known language, and Paul’s own testimony regarding *glossa* would attest to this (v. 18). Moreover, the question of whether *pneuma* refers to the human spirit or the Spirit of God should be asked throughout the chapter. For instance, the NASB considers *pneuma* to refer to the human spirit in vv. 13–19.

One other point may strengthen my suggestion that Paul does not consider the phenomenon of ecstatic utterances to be a valid work of the Spirit. When, in v. 4 he writes, “One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the *ekklesia*,” one hardly can believe that he is making a positive statement about what the *glossa*-speakers were doing. For Paul makes it clear in 1Cor 12:7 that “to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” The spiritual gifts that form the subject of chapters 12–14 are never for one’s own benefit, but for the benefit of others. One need only contemplate the lists of *pneumatikoi* or *charismata* (spiritual gifts) to see that they have their purpose in serving others. The spiritual gifts are not given for self-edification but for edifying others. We should therefore understand that when Paul says the *glossa*-speaker “edifies himself,” he is judging that activity to be self-centered and therefore wrong. While surely the Spirit of God enriches each individual in his or her walk with God, the gift of languages (tongues) is for the benefit of others. As such, the supposed, private “prayer language” that some modern *glossa*-speakers claim, finds no basis in the Scriptures. Whatever such a phenomenon might be (I do not judge motives or the sincere desires of some to find a deeper mystical communion with God in private prayer), it is clearly not the spiritual gift that Paul describes in 1Cor

12–14. Paul’s exhortation throughout this passage is that spiritual gifts are for the edification of the whole community and not for private or personal edification.

The parallels between what Paul describes in 1Cor 12–14 and the phenomenon observed in Acts 2 are interesting. As the disciples gathered in the Temple precincts on the day of Shavuot, the outpouring of the Spirit was witnessed by several phenomena: 1) a rushing wind filled the “whole house” (= Temple and its adjoining structures); 2) fire in the shape of tongues distributed themselves upon the disciples; 3) the disciples began to speak in different languages even though they were known as Galileans; 4) as a result, a crowd gathered, consisting of people from all the regions of the diaspora, and each language-group represented heard their own language being spoken as the disciples related the “mighty acts of God.”

Interestingly, some who mocked the disciples accused them of being drunk. Why? Apparently those who mocked were hearing the foreign languages being spoken by the disciples and, since these were meaningless to them, they judged them to be speaking gibberish. This would indicate that the mockers were native Judeans (Hebrew/Aramaic/Greek speakers).

One obvious point to be made from the Acts 2 account is that those who were from the diaspora, who spoke something other than Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek, were hearing the disciples speak in their own languages. This would strongly indicate that the phenomenon of tongues experienced by the disciples produced known languages, not some mystical “heavenly language” that would have had to be interpreted in order to be understood. With twelve disciples each speaking a different language, the variety of languages represented by those from the diaspora would have been covered. Thus, there was no need to interpret what was being said.

Within the corporate gathering of an *ekklesia* such as in Corinth, however, where one speaker was addressing the group in a foreign tongue, there was a need for the address to be interpreted so that all could benefit from what was being heard. When the gift of tongues (languages) as described by Paul in 1Cor is compared with Acts 2, there is added weight to the interpretation that tongues in the Apostolic Scriptures were always known languages, not indiscernible sounds of a supposed “heavenly language.”