

Contract vs. Covenant: How Genesis 11 Rejects the Ziggurat's Model of Divine-Human Relationship

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1. Introduction

The Tower of Babel saga has traditionally been interpreted in a number of ways: a condemnation of hubris,¹ a subversion of humanity's technological and societal ambition,^{2, 3} or a rebellion against God.^{4, 5} Whilst these readings each capture important aspects of the episode, they do not fully explain its theological significance, nor its placement in the wider narrative structure of Genesis.

This essay argues that Genesis 11:1-9 is best understood as a targeted Israelite polemic against the Mesopotamian ziggurat and the contractual theological system it represented. By contrasting the imperial-transactional theology of Mesopotamian society with the framework that emerges immediately afterwards in the Abraham narrative, the text rejects a transactional model of the divine-human relationship in favour of a theology grounded in covenant.

In exploring this, we first turn towards Ancient Near East (ANE) archaeology to establish a contextually grounded understanding of the ziggurat and its role in Mesopotamian society. Engaging with the biblical text in its canonical form, we then apply a midrashic and literary lens to illustrate how Genesis 11 deconstructs the "ziggurat theology" and clears the ground for the introduction of a new paradigm: covenant.

2. The Ziggurat

The Tower of Babel is widely understood to evoke the Babylonian ziggurat tradition.⁶ Ziggurats were colossal structures in ancient Mesopotamia which served as the epicentres of thriving city-states of the lower Tigris-Euphrates valley. Etymologically, the term ziggurat derives from the Akkadian *zaqārum*,⁷ "to protrude, to build high." A bridge between the heavenly and earthly realms,⁸ the ziggurat was a symbol of social stability,

¹ RaDaQ on Genesis 11:1.

² Abarbanel on Genesis 11:1.

³ RaLBaG on Genesis 11:1.

⁴ BT, *Sanhedrin* 109a.

⁵ RaSHI on Genesis 11:9.

⁶ George, A. R. (2005). The Tower of Babel: Archaeology, History, and Cuneiform Texts. *Archiv Für Orientforschung*, 51, 75-95.

⁷ CAD Z, sv *zaqāru*.

⁸ For the etymology of Babel (*Bāb-ili*, "gate of the god/gods"), see CAD B, sv *bābu* and CAD I/J, sv *ilu*.

political legitimacy, and religious piety.^{6, 9} It functioned as a sanctuary for a patron deity's statue and provided a structured means by which priests could approach the divinity. Believed to mediate divine favour for the city, the ziggurat was a source from which blessing would emanate, providing agricultural and military success in exchange for offerings and maintenance.

The first multi-tiered ziggurats emerged during the Third Dynasty of Ur (c. 2100 BCE). Supported by a highly advanced social labour system, these structures grew increasingly elaborate, cementing their role in Mesopotamian imperialism, culture, and religion. This architectural tradition culminated in Babylonian masterworks such as E-temen-anki—the ziggurat thought by many scholars to have influenced the biblical account of Genesis 11.^{6, 10}

Translating to “Temple of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth,” E-temen-anki served as the primary sanctuary for Marduk, leader of the Mesopotamian pantheon. With domain over creation, agriculture, justice, and magic,⁹ Marduk embodied several attributes at the core of Mesopotamian culture. E-temen-anki faced repeated cycles of destruction and redevelopment over the ages, and so its original form is difficult to resolve from the echoes of ancient history. However, an ancient tablet records the structure as having a huge square base of 91 by 91 metres, a measurement matched by its height.¹¹ Rising above the city as a series of stacked terraces, the ziggurat was likely constructed from raw mudbrick encased in a durable outer shell of fired bricks. Integrated into Marduk's larger temple complex, the ziggurat featured staircases that ascended to its first terrace and beyond, guiding priests towards the shrine at its apex.

The ziggurat was a symbol of pride, representing both technological achievement and societal advancement. However, more than that, it unified the divine scale with the human; it was traversable, bringing the priests to a meeting point with the deity. This interaction with divinity was the focal point of the whole structure and by extension the whole city.

3. *The Mesopotamian Relationship with the Divine*

A central feature of Mesopotamian religion was the conception of the relationship between humans and the gods in terms of reciprocal obligation: temples functioned as earthly residences of the gods, while ritual and offerings expressed human dependence upon the divine and sustained a reciprocal relationship between the two.¹² Man served and

⁹ Black, J., & Green, A. (1992). *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary*. University of Texas Press.

¹⁰ Cassuto, U. (1964). *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part 2: From Noah to Abraham* (I. Abrahams, Trans.). Magnes Press.

¹¹ Montero Fenollós, J. L., Vegas, F., & Mileto, C. (2016). Etemenanki: nuova ipotesi di ricostruzione dello ziggurat di Nabucodonosor II nella città di Babilonia. *ISIMU*, 8. Whilst modern scholarship indicates the height was likely closer to two-thirds of that stated in the tablet, E-temen-anki was nonetheless an impressive feat of architecture.

¹² Cunningham, G., & Salzman, M. R. (2013). Sumerian Religion. *The Cambridge History of Religions in the Ancient World* (pp. 31–53). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

provided for the gods, and in return sought divine protection, prosperity, and political stability. The mention of a sacred bed-chamber in ancient records¹³ indeed highlights just how personal and material this relationship was conceived to be—Herodotus writes the deity was not only served but also housed and visited.

With this contractual relationship in mind, the Babel project could be understood as an attempt to collapse the distinction between human power and divine sovereignty; rather than serving a higher power, these ancient Mesopotamian empires were projecting their own collective identity onto the divine. This resonates with the Maimonidean presentation of pagan worship as a corruption of the proper relationship between creation and Creator,¹⁴ and echoes the sociologist Émile Durkheim's account of religion,^{15, 16} in which the objects of worship are ultimately collective representations of the group itself.

This theology, which constructs the divine in the image of the empire, translates directly into a political drive for absolute uniformity, treating human collectives as a means through which to establish hegemony. Expansion of territory, language, and culture formed the imperialist social order of the Mesopotamian empires. The later Neo-Assyrian empire provides a useful illustration of this linguistic and cultural conformity. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes, one Neo-Assyrian inscription records that the king “made the totality of all peoples speak one speech”, starkly reflecting the opening line of the biblical text, כָּל-הָאָרֶץ שָׁפָה אֶחָת (*all the land was of one language*, Genesis 11:1).¹⁷

Ultimately, Babel represented the failure of pagan society to recognise the boundary between man and the divine. The people wanted a deity that served as a reflection of their society: a manageable god for which the ziggurat functioned as the theological focal point. However, a theology in which reciprocity functions primarily as a transaction has little room for the relational loyalty on which the covenantal paradigm centres.

4. *The Text as a Polemic*

Having established the theological problem the text is responding to, we now turn to the text itself, reading Genesis 11 through a midrashic lens that prioritises moral, philosophical, and theological truth over strict historicism or literalism. From this perspective, whether the Babel saga literally occurred is secondary, if not irrelevant. Ibn Ezra, for instance, reads וַיֵּרָד ה' (*its top in the heavens*, v. 4) and יֵרֵד ה' (*God descended*, v. 5) as hyperbole and metaphor.¹⁸ By viewing these descriptions as a satirical illustration—God descending from His throne-upon-high through the hierarchy of existence

¹³ Herodotus. (1998). *Histories* 1.181–182 (R. Waterfield, Trans.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published c. 430 BCE).

¹⁴ RaMBaM, *Hilkhot Aboda Zara* 1-2.

¹⁵ Durkheim, É. (1995). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (K. E. Fields, Trans.). Free Press. (Original work published 1912).

¹⁶ Sacks, J. (2009). A Tale of Four Cities. The Rabbi Sacks Legacy. <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/noach/a-tale-of-four-cities/>

¹⁷ Sacks, J. (2011). Individual and Collective Responsibility. The Rabbi Sacks Legacy. <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/noach/individual-and-collective-responsibility/>

¹⁸ Ibn Ezra on Genesis 11:4-5.

to examine this mortal city—the text highlights how infinitely short the tower falls of its lofty ambitions.

Yet, despite the saga's popular title, the Tower of Babel does not appear to be the narrative's true focal point. The episode's culmination (Genesis 11:8-9) details the scrambling of speech, the scattering of society, and the stagnation of the city's construction, but makes no mention of the tower itself. The city's beacon, whose head protruded into the heavens, vanishes from the text.

This apparent omission can be resolved by examining the passage's chiasmatic structure:

- A: (v. 1) One language (LANGUAGE)
- B: (v. 2) Settling in a valley (LAND)
- C: (v. 3) *Come, let us*—the people (COLLECTIVISM)
- D: (v. 4) People undertake city-tower project (PROJECT)
- E: (v. 5) God descends to the city-tower (CLIMAX)
- D': (v. 6) God judges the city-tower project (PROJECT)
- C': (v. 7) *Come, let us*—God (COLLECTIVISM)
- B': (v. 8) Scattering from the valley (LAND)
- A': (v. 9) Fragmented languages (LANGUAGE)

Centred on God's descent to judge the people and their tower, it emerges that each element in the first half of this biblical narrative is inverted in the second. The Babel project is thus systematically dismantled through three interrelated themes: land, language, and collectivism.

Language

The Babel saga begins with the theme of unified speech, as it states *וְהָיָה כָּל-הָאָרֶץ שָׁפָה אֶחָת וְדִבָּרִים אֶחָדִים* (*The entire land had one language and a common speech*, v. 1), and culminates with its fragmentation, *בָּלַל יְהוָה שָׁפַת כָּל-הָאָרֶץ* (*God confused the languages of the entire land*, v. 9). Upon first examination, this inversion illustrates God's undoing of the imperialist uniformity as linked to ziggurat-theology. However, upon closer scrutiny it becomes clear that in truth this is a restoration. Just one chapter before, the nations were described as *spread out into their lands ... each with its own language* (Genesis 10:5). Therefore, when God confounds the speech of Babel, He is not creating a new state of affairs; rather, He is restoring the divinely intended order of Genesis 10.

Land

In God's first charge to humanity, He commands: *be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and master it* (Genesis 1:28). This divine injunction is reiterated to Noah after the deluge (Genesis 9:1), setting an imperative for how to rebuild society. However, the people of Babel directly contravene this divine command. After settling in the valley of Shinar (v. 2), they explicitly state their objective to build the city-tower complex *lest we be scattered*

across the face of the Earth (v. 4). The people desired to remain together in one place, and so they decided to build for themselves, by cooperative endeavour, a grand city centred on the ziggurat. God's response: to cause their scattering.

There is also a subtle literary wordplay centring on the root שם (Sh-M), referring to a location ("there") or an identity/lineage ("name") depending on the vowelisation. Both forms appear frequently across our text, seeming to emphasise the link between place and identity. The people's aim to "make a name (*shem*)" for themselves (v. 4), reveals their desire to anchor their identity to a monument of their own making. God subverts this by halting the construction project, and then immediately introducing *the generations of Shem* (v. 10). God's response to humanity's desire for a "name" is not a monolith, but a lineage—a paradigm shift that culminates in the covenantal promise to Abraham that follows: *I will make your name (shem) great* (Genesis 12:2).

Collectivism

The final theme, collectivism, is illustrated by God's inversion of the people's language. In their call to action to assemble bricks and mortar, the people state הָבֵה נִלְבְּנָה (*Come, let us build*, v. 3). This is directly mocked and paralleled by God's declaration of His intention to fragment their communication: הָבֵה נִרְדָּה וְנִבְלָה (*Come, let us descend and confuse*, v. 7). Within this very inversion lies a subtle phonetic chiasm: the Hebrew consonants for "brick" (L-B-N / ל-ב-נ) are perfectly reversed to form the word for "confuse" (N-B-L / נ-ב-ל).¹⁹ The very building blocks of their collective rebellion become the instrument of their undoing.

Importantly, the biblical text is not condemning human cooperation, but rather the sentiment underlying the collectivism in this case. Babel's group identity was centred on the power of the collective and the transactional theology that united them. By dismantling their language, land, and collectivism, Genesis clears the ground for a new model of divine-human relationship.

5. Covenant and Encounter with the Divine

The three themes of land, language, and collectivism are reflected clearly in the text's subsequent introduction of Abraham (Genesis 12). With the divine call of לֵךְ-לְךָ, *go forth*, Abraham is tasked with uprooting himself from his land, his birthplace (culture and language), and his father's household (collective identity). Echoing the themes of the Babel narrative, where society clung to one land, one language, and one collective identity, the text now sets the stage for a radically new paradigm.

Whereas the people of Babel built a tower to control their environment and force a transactional relationship with the divine, the Abrahamic paradigm rejects the premise that God can be manipulated. There can be no blurring of the ontological divide: God is God, and humanity is humanity. Following Mendenhall's analysis of Israelite covenant

¹⁹ Sacks, J. (2007). *A Story of Heaven and Earth*. The Rabbi Sacks Legacy. <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/noach/a-story-of-heaven-and-earth/>

forms, the biblical covenant is presented as a relationship initiated by a superior party towards an inferior party, grounded in past benevolence and grace.²⁰

This is not to say that covenant does away with reciprocity. The Israelite covenant likewise entails mutual responsibilities; the distinction lies in what underlies those obligations. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks articulates, a contract is fundamentally an exchange between parties pursuing their respective interests, whereas a covenant establishes a relationship of loyalty and moral commitment.²¹ In the Mesopotamian paradigm, man provided for the gods and sought divine favour in return. By contrast, the biblical covenants begin with God's commitment. For example, the Decalogue begins not with a demand, but with the declaration, *I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt* (Exodus 20:2). The commandments that follow are therefore not payment offered to secure divine benevolence, but obligations arising from a relationship already established through it.

This theological shift necessitated a radically different social structure. The dominant political structure in pagan ANE cultures was distinctly vertical: authority originated with the gods, flowed down to a quasi-divine king, and was enforced upon the masses. The Sinai covenant—the ultimate national realisation of the Abrahamic promise—introduced what José Faur describes as a “horizontal society.”²² Because all humans are created in the image of the One True Sovereign, they are fundamentally equal. The covenant established God's will, as revealed in the Torah, as the supreme authority; kings, priests, and prophets alike were accountable to the same law as the common citizen.

Crucially, covenant relies on being a bilateral relationship entered into freely, rather than through coercion; precisely because the framework is rooted in relational loyalty, it demands an ethical transformation from humanity, running orthogonally to the contractual theology of Mesopotamian religion. Eliezer Berkovits presents Judaism as a sustained intimate encounter with a personal God. Yet, this raises a theological paradox: how can finite man encounter the infinite God without being utterly obliterated? Berkovits argues that God deliberately withdraws, restraining His divine presence so that humanity is not annihilated in the encounter.²³ In doing so, God creates space for a personal relationship; man is empowered to freely accept the covenant and thereby called into moral responsibility.

Rabbi Joseph Dweck applies this distinction to the practice of mitzvot, warning against reducing the Torah to the same transactional mechanics that characterised the pagan paradigm. The mitzvot are modes of acting within the covenant, designed to build and express our relationship with God; they are not tick-boxes or tokens exchanged for

²⁰ Mendenhall, G. E. (1954). Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition. *The Biblical Archaeologist*, 17(3), 50–76.

²¹ Sacks, J. (2018). The Bond of Loyalty and Love. The Rabbi Sacks Legacy. <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/yitro/bond-of-loyalty-and-love/>

²² Faur, J. (2008). *The Horizontal Society: Understanding the Covenant and Alphabetic Judaism* (Vols. 1–2). Academic Studies Press.

²³ Berkovits, E. (2002). The Encounter with the Divine. D. Hazony (Ed.), *Essential Essays on Judaism* (pp. 215–234). Shalem Press.

personal reward.^{24, 25} To treat them as such is to regress towards a theology centred primarily on personal gratification rather than devotion.

In the end, the divine encounter does not offer humanity a mechanism to control nature, as the ziggurat promised. Instead, it thrusts humanity into history with a moral imperative: a call to act as co-architects with God, transforming the physical world through the ethical reality of covenant.

6. Conclusion

This reading of the Babel narrative does not displace prior interpretations so much as explain their common root. Genesis 11:1-9 is a deeply Israelite text, representing a theological framework fundamentally opposed to that of ANE pagan societies. The narrative systematically dismantles the pagan paradigm of self-worship, imperialism, and contractual theology through the motifs of land, language, and collectivism. It opens the doors for the Abrahamic covenant, anchoring the origins of the Jewish people in a relational, moral responsibility lived out on earth.

As Zephaniah prophesies for the messianic era, God will one day restore a “pure language” to the nations (Zephaniah 3:9), bringing Babel’s linguistic division to its ultimate resolution. The “one language” of the builders was a means of consolidating human power: united by a common vernacular, they sought to make a name for themselves and constructed a political and theological order centred on their own ambitions. By contrast, Zephaniah envisages a shared clarity of devotion in service of God, so that humanity may call upon the name of God and serve Him together. The unity Babel sought was unity in service of humanity’s own power; the unity of the messianic age is unity in the recognition and service of God.²⁶ Only when humanity abandons the ziggurat of self-interest for the covenant of mutual responsibility is the Lord truly exalted.

About the author

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²⁴ Dweck, J. (2016). Perspectives on Mitzvot (Season 1, Episode 4). YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2RPzGr_Del

²⁵ Dweck, J. (2020). Mitzvot, What are they For? Sefaria. <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/237052>

²⁶ Cf Abarbanel and ibn Kaspi on Zephaniah 3:9.