

THE TOWER OF BABEL IN ELIEZER ASHKENAZI'S *SEFER MA'ASEH HASHEM*

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In 1580, in Gniezno, Poland, Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi (1513-1586) completed his magnum opus, *Sefer Ma'aseh Hashem*, an extensive examination of the narrative portions of the Tanakh.¹ Ashkenazi continuously cites earlier commentaries, including talmudic and midrashic sources, the "standard" medieval Jewish commentators, and relevant writings of the medieval Jewish philosophers. Building on the works of some of his predecessors while rejecting the views of others, Ashkenazi offers some novel, innovative interpretations of well-known biblical narratives. A case in point is his interpretation of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9).²

The explicit meaning of the Tower narrative is to explain the etiology of linguistic diversity.³ However; ancient, medieval and modern commentators contend that this is not its primary meaning, but a pretext for articulating a different message. Indeed, the existence of diverse national languages had already been stated in the previous chapter (Gen. 10: 5, 20, 31). Where the commentators differ is as to what the real message might be.⁴ Furthermore, many of them speculate about the presence of a thematic link between the Tower narrative and the unexplained divine initiative toward Abraham described in the following chapter (Gen. 12), beyond the chronological sequence provided by the genealogical list at the end of Genesis 11.

Modern commentators, such as Umberto Cassuto, tend to read the Tower narrative as a pretext for offering a stinging satirical polemic against Babylonian religion, and to explain why the covenant between God and Abraham became necessary.⁵ Some modern commentators, therefore, focus on the role of the "Tower" in ancient Babylonian religion.⁶ Yehezkel Kaufmann does not consider the Tower narrative an etiological explanation of diverse languages, but an etiological explanation of idolatry. In his view, idolatry replaced the monotheism that had existed since the creation of humankind, and that made

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the restoration of monotheism through Abraham both desirable and necessary.⁷

Rather than focusing on the role of the Tower, most classical Jewish commentators point to the alleged sins of the Tower generation and the relationship of those sins to the divine retribution visited upon the Tower generation. A wide variety of views are suggested regarding the possible identity of such offenses. The standard designation of this episode in Hebrew as the story of *dor ha-haflagah* (the generation of the dispersion), rather than as "the Tower story," articulates this preoccupation with sin and punishment. For some, the punishment fits the crime, "measure for measure."⁸ For example, the Tower people, who did not obey God's command to disperse after the Flood, were punished with forced dispersion. For other commentators, the sins of the Tower generation – unlike those of the Flood generation – were implicit rather than explicit.⁹ This view led commentators to speculate as to what those sins might have been. According to some, they may have been overt rebellion against God, human hubris, moral corruption and the dehumanization resulting from urbanization and technological advance, or other sins.¹⁰ Other commentators juxtapose the corruption of the Tower builders and Abraham's virtue and piety, describing a clash between Abraham and the leader of the Tower generation, i.e., Nimrod.¹¹

Eliezer Ashkenazi offers a different portrait of the Tower generation. He builds on Abraham Ibn Ezra's opinion that the single language spoken by the Tower people did not constitute a national language, but a religious discourse.¹² In other words, the people all had one religion, a single belief system. On the basis of midrashic sources, Ashkenazi describes how they consciously produced a moral society, with uniform moral norms, where people "loved one another," as part of a strategy to avoid the moral corruption of the Flood generation and to avoid repeating the subsequent horrific punishment of the Flood.¹³ Ashkenazi further claims that the moral code of the Tower generation was rooted in their belief in the existence of God and in their awe of Him. Their moral and religious consensus produced a society characterized by social and political cohesion. Although their faith upheld certain questionable theological ideas, such as the eternalness of the world and its creation from preexistent eternal matter, the Tower people nonetheless lived

in peace and harmony. Why, then, queries Ashkenazi, did God intervene to disrupt such an enviable, well-functioning, moral, and unified religious community?

For Ashkenazi, truth – especially religious truth – can only be accessed when free, independent intellectual inquiry is available and employed. This includes the opportunity for critical assessment of the convictions held by others, especially those affirmed by social and religious consensus. It is only by a critical intellectual analysis of existing philosophical, scientific and theological claims that truth can be discovered, revealed, and acknowledged.¹⁴ For Ashkenazi, a society like that of the Tower generation, grounded in dogmatic social and intellectual unanimity, is incapable of accommodating free intellectual inquiry. In his view, therefore, God – who desires humankind, especially its intellectual elite, to arrive at truth through free intellectual inquiry – disrupts the solidarity of the Tower generation, thereby creating the opportunity for free inquiry, as well as the effervescence of religious pluralism. God's replacement of one language with many is interpreted by Ashkenazi to mean the replacement of a single, dominant, exclusive religious consensus with religious pluralism. In this unusual interpretation of the Tower narrative, Ashkenazi identifies religious pluralism in historical, i.e., pre-messianic times, as representing God's will, since pluralism is a necessary prerequisite for free religious inquiry and for the absence of intellectual and religious repression.

While Ashkenazi's interpretation might resonate better with today's contemporaries than with his own, his interpretation makes sense within his historical and geographical context. The growing strength of the Reformation in his time and place convinced Ashkenazi that the monolithic religious and social unanimity in Europe represented by the Roman Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire was coming to an end.¹⁵ The rise of various Protestant sects was for him evidence of the growth of religious pluralism. "Radical Reformation" communities which spread into Poland, where he was living, not only increased religious diversity, but also adopted certain "Jewish" practices and beliefs, notably the observance of Saturday as their sabbath, as well as theological ideas such as anti-Trinitarianism.¹⁶ Ashkenazi, who seems to have anticipated the inception of messianic redemption by the end of the sixteenth century, considered the messianic age to be the era when

religious truth, initially discovered by Abraham's utilization of free inquiry, would pervade the world.¹⁷

Eliezer Ashkenazi examines the longstanding question as to why God suddenly appears to Abraham and how Abraham recognizes who is addressing him (Genesis 12). Ashkenazi builds upon certain midrashic and medieval philosophical sources that describe Abraham's successful intellectual search for God;¹⁸ and, in an innovative way, he ties the Tower narrative to that of the calling and covenanting of Abraham.

For Ashkenazi, the inception of free inquiry, made possible by the divine disruption of the Tower generation's belief system, provided the necessary social and intellectual environment for Abraham's critique of existing belief-systems and the potential for Abraham's discovery of God. In Ashkenazi's view, the purpose of human existence is to discover truth through the utilization of free, rational, critical inquiry and to make it known to others. Abraham is the human being for whom God has been waiting.¹⁹ That is why God appears to Abraham and enters into a covenant with him. It then becomes Abraham's task to proselytize humanity, to convey divine truths, and to unmask the falsehoods revealed through free rational inquiry. This task is subsequently inherited by the people of Israel. For Ashkenazi, all of Jewish experience, including religious observance and even exile and suffering, forms part of the mission to promulgate true beliefs and knowledge.²⁰ Access to such truths is not limited to Jews. The mission of the Jewish people in history, and especially in the Diaspora, is to proclaim these truths, first discovered by Abraham and affirmed by revelation, to all of humankind, thereby accelerating the advent of messianic redemption.²¹

NOTES

1. Ashkenazi, *Sefer Ma'aseh Hashem* (Venice, 1583; reprint, New York: Grossman, 1962). Little has been written about this thinker and his work. Various studies contain scattered references; see, for example, H. H. Ben-Sasson, *Hagut ve-Hanhagah* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1959); J. Elbaum, *Petihut ve-Histagrut* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990). Studies of the thought of Judah Loew of Prague (Maharal) have examined Loew's harsh disputations with Ashkenazi; see, for example, B. Sherwin, *Mystical Theology and Social Dissent* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006) pp. 58-69. The first and only comprehensive study of Ashkenazi is N. Ecker-Rozinger's *Universalistic Tendencies in Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi's Teachings* [Hebrew] (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Haifa, 2010).

2. Ashkenazi in section *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, chap 31, fols. 75a-76b.

3. See N. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1966) pp. 66-67. Such a view is already found in midrashic literature, e.g., *Midrash ha-Gadol – Sefer Bereshit*, on Gen 11:1 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1967) p. 187.
4. On the Tower narrative in classical Jewish and modern commentary, see, for example, B. Sherwin, "The Tower of Babel Revisited," in S. Yona, ed., *Or Le Mayer* [English section] (Be'er Sheva, Israel: Ben Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2010) pp. 157-178, and sources noted there.
5. See U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961) pp. 227-8.
6. See, for example, A. Parrot, *The Tower of Babel*, trans. E. Hudson (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955); N. Sarna, op. cit., pp. 66-67.
7. Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, trans. M. Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) p. 387.
8. See Rashi to Genesis 11:7; Bahya ben Asher, *Rabbenu Bahya – Bi'ur al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1971), vol. 1, pp. 129-30.
9. *Genesis Rabbah* 38:6 compares the sins of the Flood generation to those of the Tower generation. According to Rabbi Eleazar, those of the Flood were explicitly stated in Scripture whereas those of the Tower were veiled and implicit. Consequently, various commentators ascribed a variety of "implicit" sins to the "generation of the dispersion."
10. On the sin as idolatry and rebellion against God, see TB *Sanhedrin* 109a. On the corruption of urbanization and technological development, see the lengthy commentary of Don Isaac Abrabanel, *Peirush al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: Seforim benei Abravanel, 1964), vol. 1, pp 174-181. It is noteworthy that comparatively little attention is paid to the Tower narrative in classical Jewish or Christian Bible commentary, and that unlike similar episodes (e.g., the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah) the Tower is never explicitly mentioned elsewhere in Scripture.
11. On Nimrod as leader of the Tower builders, see TB *Hullin* 89a; as Abraham's nemesis, see *Genesis Rabbah* 38:13.
12. Ibn Ezra to Gen. 11:6.
13. *Genesis Rabbah* 38:6.
14. For Ashkenazi's views on the nature and role of free intellectual inquiry, see Ecker-Rozinger, pp. 88-118.
15. See, for example, H. H. Ben-Sasson, *The Reformation in Contemporary Jewish Eyes* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1970) pp. 20-21.
16. See Ben-Sasson, *The Reformation*; G. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973) esp. pp. 763-73 on Poland; S. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. 16 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976) pp. 3-52.
17. Ben-Sasson, *The Reformation*, p. 22, n. 71.
18. Ashkenazi's view of Abraham as a "religious inquirer" is found in his *Ma'aseh Hashem*, sec. *Ma'aseh Avot*, chap 1, fol. 77a. On Abraham reaching belief in a transcendent God by evaluating various forms of faith, see *Genesis Rabbah* 38:13, 39:1; see also L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1925), vol. 5, p. 210, n. 16, and sources noted there.
19. On Abraham in Ashkenazi's thought, see Ecker-Rozinger, pp. 142-60.

20. On this proselytizing mission of Abraham and the people of Israel, see Ecker-Rozinger, pp. 147-160, 202-16.

21. Although he lived in many communities, including Egypt, Prague, and Italy, Ashkenazi spent the last years of his life in Poland. He died and was buried in Cracow, in the cemetery adjacent to the synagogue of R. Moshe Isserles, along with Jewish luminaries such as Isserles, Yoel Sirkes, and Yom Tov Lipmann Heller. His grave is not far from that of the seventeenth-century chief rabbi of Cracow, Yehoshua Heschel, an ancestor of the twentieth-century scholar and theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel, who played a major role in interreligious dialogue. Heschel may have been influenced by Ashkenazi's interpretation of the Tower narrative that sees it as describing the initiation and the desirability of religious pluralism. In his 1965 essay, "No Religion is an Island," Heschel states: "Is it really our desire to build a monolithic society: one [political] party, one view, one leader, and no opposition? . . . In this eon, diversity of religions is the will of God. In the story of the Tower of Babel we read, *The Lord said: 'They are one people, and they have one language, and this is what they begin to do'* (Gen. 11:6). These words are interpreted by an ancient rabbi to mean: What has caused them to rebel against me [i.e., God]? The fact that they are one people and they have one language [i.e., one religion]": A. Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1996) p. 244. The "ancient rabbi" referred to here is R. Nehemyah in *Genesis Rabbah* 38:9, although the idea that his statement "they are one people and they have one language" means "one religion" is reminiscent of Ashkenazi's interpretation.



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