

THE BOOK OF JUBILEES AND THE MIDRASH

PART 3: THE TOWER OF BABEL

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In previous articles ("The Book of Jubilees and the Midrash on the Early Chapters of Genesis," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* July 2013, 41:3, and "The Book of Jubilees and the Midrash on Noah," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* April 2014, 42:2) we saw how the Book of Jubilees dealt with various textual difficulties in the early chapters of Genesis in ways sometimes similar to and sometimes very different from the later rabbinic midrashic literature. This time we will focus on how Jubilees dealt with the narratives connected with the Tower of Babel, as compared to the rabbinic Midrash.

HOW PELEG WAS GIVEN HIS NAME

Genesis 10:25 recounts that Eber named his son Peleg, *for in his days the earth was divided*. According to the rabbinic calculation, the division of languages as a result of the Tower of Babel occurred at the end of Peleg's life, so his father named him after an event that was many years in the future. Thus, *Genesis Rabbah* 37:7 understands that Eber was a great prophet and named his son on the basis of what he knew would take place in the future, a view found also in *Seder Olam Rabbah* (chapter 1) and reiterated by Rashi.

Jubilees (8:7) understands that Peleg was not named after a future event, but after what was taking place when he was born: *And he called him Peleg, because in the days when he was born the sons of Noah began dividing up the earth for themselves*. In Jubilees, the sons of Noah divided the earth secretly among themselves,¹ with Noah approving after the fact (Jub. 8:9-11, 18). They then swore an oath not to violate each other's boundaries (Jub. 9:15). This division into various lands even before the Tower of Babel episode seems to be indicated in the Bible, where the lands of the descendants of Noah's sons are listed in Genesis 10, before the Tower of Babel narrative in Genesis 11. This appears to be a simple understanding of how Peleg was giv-

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en his name, since the naming is mentioned in Genesis 10:25, right in the middle of a passage indicating which descendant of Noah received which territory.²

Among the rabbinic commentators there are various opinions as to whether the lands assigned to Noah's descendants in Genesis 10 were actually settled before the Tower of Babel or afterwards, leading to different ways of understanding who participated in that endeavor. Genesis 11:2 speaks of a migration to Shinar, which Ibn Ezra and Ramban take to mean all the people then living in the world moving from Ararat to Shinar. Thus, the entire world sinned by participating in the Tower's construction, and all were punished by having their languages confounded, after which they dispersed in the lands previously listed in Genesis 10. However, Rashi, in his commentary to Genesis 11:2, indicates that only the people living in Mount Kedem journeyed to Shinar and were responsible for the tower. We have here two different rabbinic views of who participated in the Tower of Babel, either all of humanity or just the descendants of Shem who lived in Mount Kedem (or "the mountain of the East," Gen. 10:30). Jubilees explains that although the earth was divided among the sons of Noah, they were not actually dispersed to settle their assigned areas beyond Ararat until the first migration to Shinar (Jub. 9:18). Up to that time, everyone lived in different areas on the same mountain (Jub. 7:14-17).

So far, we have found two explanations for the naming of Peleg. According to *Genesis Rabbah*, he was named for the future dispersal (after the Tower of Babel). According to Jubilees, he was named *after* the division of the earth among the sons of Noah, an event that took place when he was born. Radak, in his commentary to Genesis 10:25, offers an alternative approach – that Peleg was in fact born precisely when the Tower of Babel incident took place and was named for the dispersal, but not prophetically.

THE TOWER OF BABEL

The biblical narrative does not explicitly mention the sin committed by the builders of the tower, only that they planned to build *a city and a tower with its top in the heavens* and said *let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered all over the world* (Gen. 11:4). Based on the plain reading of this verse, Saadiah Gaon explains that their sin was wanting to stay in one area

and not filling the earth as God commanded, which led Him to disperse them.³

Jubilees adds a few words to the statement of the builders, '*Come, let us go up in it into heaven*' (Jub. 10:18), implying that the purpose of the tower was to storm heaven. This idea is found in TB *Sanhedrin* 109a as well as in later rabbinic literature. For example, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (chapter 24) states that Nimrod instigated the plan as a way to invade God's "power base," the heavens.

Other rabbinic sources interpret the battle against God in a less literal fashion. *Genesis Rabbah* 38:6 records a view that the plan was for an idol to be placed on top of the tower holding a sword pointing upward to heaven, as if to do battle with God. TB *Sanhedrin* 109a opines that some of the builders were intent on climbing up to heaven and performing idolatrous acts there, a figurative "battle with God." Still, the more literal approach found in Jubilees was not rejected by the Rabbis for although it is patently impossible to engage God in physical combat, it was thought plausible that men of that era, and certainly the villainous pagan Nimrod, would believe that such a scheme could work.

Another element found in both Jubilees and the Midrash is the idea that remnants of the tower that can still be seen. Jubilees explains that these remains are now *between Ashur and Babylon in the land of Shinar* (Jub. 10:26). TB *Sanhedrin* 109a does not give the location of the tower's remains, but does affirm that one third of it is extant. A similar opinion can be found in *Midrash Tanhuma* (Noah 25), where it is stated that if a person climbs onto the remaining third, he will be able to see all the way to the palm trees of Jericho. The idea that remnants of the tower may still exist is not at odds with any theological concept of the Rabbis, and can thus be found in both Jubilees and rabbinic literature.

CANAAN SEIZED SHEM'S LAND

Jubilees provides a detailed account of how Canaan took the land between Lebanon and Egypt for himself, despite its being allotted to Shem, and despite the warnings of his father and brothers (Jub. 10:27-34). This serves to explain how that area came to be called Canaan (Jub. 10:34), and also to legally justify the takeover of that land by the Israelites later on. This concept

is echoed in the Midrash. *Torat Kohanim* on Leviticus 20:24 declares that the Israelites have a moral and legal right to expel the Canaanites from the Land of Israel, since, as descendants of Ham, the Canaanites had no right to be there in the first place.⁴ *Midrash Aggadah* (Gen. 12:6) explains, like Jubilees, that Noah pronounced a ban on whoever seized a portion of land that was allotted to another, and notes that this is why it was appropriate for the land of Canaan to be turned over to Abraham, a descendant of its rightful owner, Shem.⁵ Here, too, the solution provided by Jubilees to the problems in the biblical narrative was incorporated in rabbinic literature, as it was considered reasonable and did not raise any theological problems.

While certain ideas put forward in the Book of Jubilees are later disputed in the rabbinic Midrash, those that deal with the motivation for building the Tower of Babel and with the Land of Israel's seizure by Canaan *are* represented in midrashic literature. They were not found to be at variance with the rabbinic outlook. With regard to the naming of Peleg, however, the opinion stated in Jubilees could not be maintained by the Rabbis, since it clashed with the predominant view that all of humanity participated in building the Tower of Babel.

NOTES

1. On this, see James C. VanderKam, *From Revelation to Canon: Studies in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2000) p. 487, and Andrea Lieber, *Heavenly Tablets: Interpretation, Identity and Tradition in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007) pp. 119-120.
2. See Michael Segal, *The Book of Jubilees: Rewritten Bible, Redaction, Ideology and Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2007) pp. 128-9.
3. Saadiah Gaon, quoted in Adin Steinsaltz, *Bible Commentary in Responsa Literature* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1978) p. 8 (Hebrew).
4. See R. Judah Leib Maimon's article, "Kadmut Eretz Yisrael," in *Sefer ha-Yovel le-Shmuel Kalman Mirsky* (New York: Balshon Printing, 1958) pp. 333-4.
5. James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: The Bible As It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) p. 291.