

Is the Tower of Babel wobbling? A new view of the tower: A new view of the tower

by [John Dart](#) in the [August 7, 2007](#) issue

The unfinished Tower of Babel has stood for centuries in art, literature and biblical commentaries as an outrageous, heaven-reaching challenge to the God of Genesis, who responded by scrambling the common language of the citizens and dispersing them around the world. The brief account has nearly always been lumped together with the punishment stories involving Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and the great flood—stories about how Yahweh deals with arrogant, sinful humanity.

The Babel settlers, who all spoke the same language, had decided to “build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and . . . make a name for ourselves” as a way to stay together and preserve their common tongue.

The Lord, Yahweh, descending to take a closer look, noted that this was “only the beginning” of what the people would be able to achieve. So the Lord “confused” their language and “scattered” them over the face of the earth, leaving the city’s buildings uncompleted, according to the NRSV Bible.

But a recently published study aims to tear down this view of Babel. It contends that the Genesis story was told merely to account for the origin of different languages from a city in old Mesopotamia, which was, from the biblical perspective, the patriarchal cradle of the civilized world.

Upon analysis, “there is no support in the story for viewing God’s actions as punishment, judgment or curse upon the human race, nor as a catastrophe which doomed humanity to confusion and chaos,” writes Old Testament professor Theodore Hiebert of McCormick Theological Seminary in the spring issue of the *Journal of Biblical Literature*. “The world’s cultural diversity is represented as God’s design for the world, not the result of [God’s] punishment of it.”

Those conclusions differ from a long history of Jewish and Christian interpretation of Genesis 11:1-9 that continued in Western literature, including works by John Milton (*Paradise Lost*), Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Jacques Derrida, among others. The story of the foolish residents of Babel is standard in both children's Bible stories and scholarly commentaries.

Some scholars besides Hiebert have noted that the story has been mislabeled the Tower of Babel rather than the City of Babel because past interpreters have focused on the tower as a clue to the meaning of the tale. The tower is not the central element, Hiebert said, for when God ended the human project, the narrator says "they stopped building the city." "With its top to the sky" is a Near Eastern "idiom for impressive height," he said, and implies "neither an attempt to scale the heavens nor an arrogant revolt against divine authority."

Translations of certain words in the Babel story lent credence to the idea of arrogance, he said. The verb for God's multiplication of languages is literally *mix*, as in recipes, rather than *confound* or *confuse*. And *disperse* is a more neutral translation than *scatter* for the forced movement of people from their city.

Most recently, Hiebert said, Babel has been cited as an example of human *hutzpah* by some scholars who argue that the Bible frequently talks of God's judgment on cruel empires. The ambitious city of Babel, in that view, was an imperialistic attempt to suppress the development of local languages and cultures. Nearly 2,000 years ago, the Jewish historian Josephus also regarded Babel as a forerunner of Babylonian kingdoms which periodically oppressed the Israelites and Jews.

By contrast, Hiebert sees the settlers in Babel as bold but benign human beings in the period after the great flood.

Does Hiebert, who holds a Ph.D. in Hebrew scriptures from Harvard, stand a chance of toppling the Tower of Babel as an icon of mortal hubris?

He notes in the journal, published by the Society of Biblical Literature, that a few academic colleagues, including Bernhard Anderson and Walter Brueggemann, have shifted away from the pride-and-punishment interpretation toward seeing the story as explaining cultural diversification.

"I think Hiebert's piece is down the right track; I am glad if I nudged the matter a little," Brueggemann told the *Century*. Old Testament specialist Kent Richards, who

is executive director of the Society of Biblical Literature, said flatly that Hiebert's thesis "accurately presents current thinking."

Another supporter is Richard Elliott Friedman, emeritus professor at the University of California, San Diego, who teaches Jewish studies at the University of Georgia. "I don't take the story as being about human pride and arrogance," Friedman said by e-mail. And like Hiebert, he does not see the story as "a critique of empire."

The Babel story "may be about rebellion" and the divine-human struggle, Friedman said. But he added that he's taught for 31 years that it explains the reason for "the existence of languages and the widespread population of the earth rather than all living in one place." Though Hiebert's article critiques Friedman's translation that Yahweh "babbled their language" as conveying something negative, Friedman said that all he was doing "was conveying the pun in the Hebrew."

Indeed, the word-play in the Babel story, plus the tone and nuances attributed to Yahweh in Genesis, leave scholar Ron Hendel unconvinced by Hiebert's thesis. Hendel, who wrote the Genesis commentary for the updated *HarperCollins Study Bible*, said in comments to the Century that the story is certainly about the origins of the world's cultures. "But it is also about ancient hubris, an implicit critique of the greatness of Babylon, and a foil to the following story about Abraham, who makes a 'great name' in a completely different way," said Hendel, professor of Hebrew Bible at the University of California, Berkeley.

"Yahweh systematically reverses the humans' deeds and aspirations" in the second half of the Babel story, he said. Yahweh's speech "in verses 6 and 7 convey a mixture of surprise, regret and punishment," Hendel said.

Subtle touches in the text contribute to the disagreements. Hendel notes that before God expels Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden, he says, "See, the man has become like one of us" (3:22, NRSV). The word translated "see," Hendel says, is echoed in the Babel story when God says, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do" (11:6, NRSV). But Hiebert sees the Hebrew word here translated "look" as a simple utterance introducing a description of the situation.

In a sense, the accounts early in Genesis are all stories on how things came to be, but Hiebert said he hopes to propose next that the primeval age ends at the flood, not at the end of Genesis 11.

“Those stories before the flood clearly mention human disobedience or sin and God’s punishment, while both of these are absent in the Babel story,” he said. “Thus, the Babel story is not the last great human sin of the primeval age . . . but rather the beginning of the new age in which God re-creates the earth and its peoples.”