

# A PRAGMATIC PEDAGOGY OF BIBLE

EDWARD L. GREENSTEIN

The Initiative on Bridging Scholarship  
and Pedagogy in Jewish Studies

Working Paper No. 2  
July 2006

This is a preprint of an article whose final and definitive form has been published in the *Journal of Jewish Education* © 2009 Taylor and Francis, and is available online at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15244110903079284>

Brandeis University

Mandel Center  
for Studies in Jewish Education

MS 049  
P.O. Box 549110  
Waltham, MA 02454-9110  
[www.brandeis.edu/mandel](http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel)

# A PRAGMATIC PEDAGOGY OF BIBLE

Edward L. Greenstein

## ABSTRACT

*In the past two decades, Bible scholars have become more aware of the ways in which any given methodological approach or interpretive strategy shapes and determines the types of meaning that emerge from the biblical text. In this paper based on his keynote address at the Mandel Center's 2005 conference on Teaching Bible, the author uses multiple readings of the story of the Tower of Babel to build his argument that scholars and teachers should self-consciously determine the types of meanings they are seeking, only then identifying the analytic and interpretive techniques that will best produce those results.*

---

During the past two centuries, the study of the Hebrew Bible became and has continued to be an academic subject. At almost any time within this period, it has been possible to point either to one dominant method of biblical research or to two or three competing methods.<sup>1</sup> The goal of biblical studies has been essentially one: to find the most appropriate and academically well-founded method for analyzing and interpreting the biblical text. The development of the field can be characterized as a sort of Hegelian dynamic of thesis/antithesis/synthesis.

By the last quarter of the twentieth century, we find a number of sets of competing methodologies.<sup>2</sup> For example, the source critics contend that the only proper way to understand a biblical text is to unravel the textual strands that have been editorially intertwined, and to interpret each strand individually before looking at whatever meaning might be inferred from the way they have been combined.<sup>3</sup> The literary critics maintain, on the other hand, that the biblical text must be assumed at the outset to be a unified composition, whatever its prehistory, and interpreted as a single (although not necessarily coherent) unit.<sup>4</sup>

---

*Edward L. Greenstein is Professor of Bible at Bar-Ilan University, having taught formerly at Tel Aviv University and the Jewish Theological Seminary. He has published widely in the fields of Hebrew Bible and ancient Semitic language and culture, and is currently completing books on literary theory and Biblical narrative as well as commentaries on Lamentations and Job.*

<sup>1</sup>For a brief historical survey, see Adele Berlin and Marc Z. Brettler (adapters), "The Modern Study of the Bible," in Berlin and Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 2084-96.

<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes (eds.), *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup>See, e.g., Richard E. Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

<sup>4</sup>See, e.g., Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

Moving on to another set of competing approaches, there are those who tend to see the Bible as a unique and self-contained work. The Bible, in their eyes, had best be interpreted by the Bible, and by the interpretative literature that has evolved out of and around the Bible within the Jewish—or Christian, or Muslim—tradition.<sup>5</sup> Others view the Bible primarily in its original cultural-historical setting as a work of ancient Israelite literature. It is best, in their view, to interpret the Bible first and foremost by way of comparison and contrast with other cultural artifacts and texts from the ancient Near Eastern world out of which Israel emerged.<sup>6</sup>

A turning point of sorts was reached in the mid-1980's with the publication by Marxist Protestant Bible scholar Norman Gottwald of a "socio-literary" introduction to the Hebrew Bible.<sup>7</sup> Instead of approaching the study of the Bible from one perspective alone, which at that time tended to be a historical and history-of-ideas approach, Gottwald spoke of a diversity of approaches, or a set of "angles of vision" as he called them. A conventional historical approach yields one type of meaning, a literary reading of the text as it appears to us yields another type of meaning, a sociological and ideological, or political, analysis yields yet a different meaning, and so on. Gottwald's textbook did not itself create a significant change in the way scholars saw the enterprise of biblical interpretation, but reflected a change that was already in process.<sup>8</sup>

Since then, in the past two decades many scholars have become more aware of the fact that the results we produce are dependent upon the particular approaches that we choose to employ, and have become more self-conscious about the methods we use and the reasons we use them. There are a number of diverse methodologies through which the Bible is studied and interpreted, each offering strategies which may be put into operation in the service of a given approach.<sup>9</sup> Among these are feminist and gender criticism, which are interested in gender issues of various kinds;<sup>10</sup> ideological criticism, which examines struggles for power between classes and other groups;<sup>11</sup> deconstruction, which in exposing underlying and unstated assumptions can turn reading into a scene of criticism and/or play;<sup>12</sup> and the new historicism, which seeks not so much to reconstruct what happened, which is viewed as a futile endeavor, but rather to understand how people have felt and constructed history.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., James L. Kugel, *The Bible as It Was* (Cambridge, Mass.-London: Harvard University Press, 1997). I do not mean to imply that Kugel's own view is restricted to canonical and traditional interpretation, only that the scope of this book is limited to such a perspective. See his more recent volume, cited below in n. 48.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, trans. Timothy J. Hallett (New York: Seabury Press, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> See my *Essays on Biblical Method and Translation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), pp. 3-81.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Gale A. Yee (ed.), *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Alice Bach (ed.), *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York-London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., David J. A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); Susanne Scholz (ed.), *Biblical Studies Alternatively: An Introductory Reader* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., the articles by Greenstein and Derrida in nn. 37, 43, and 44 below.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Gina Hens-Piazza, *The New Historicism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2002).

This should all come as no great surprise to biblicists or to others who work in the social sciences and the humanities. In the so-called hard sciences, the idea that a single approach or method does not suffice to give a full accounting of the physical world has been known for years. To describe the movement of electrons, for example, physicists have seen fit to employ at least two complementary models. On the one hand, the electron seems to have mass and shape and to pass through a plate like a tiny pellet. On the other hand, the movement of the electron does not resemble a pellet-like projectile but rather a wave, like a radio wave. So is the electron a pellet or a wave? Of course, it is not exactly either; but each model captures something that seems to be a usable description of the thing.<sup>14</sup>

Moving a little closer to our everyday lives, we are all familiar with both the x-ray machine and the ultrasound device. The former shows us the skeleton and bones, while the latter shows us the internal organs. Neither gives a complete picture of the body, but each picture affords us a useful “angle of vision.” For the most part, medical professionals know when to use one apparatus or the other. Each device has its function, and will produce a result that contains particular types of information and is useful for particular purposes.<sup>15</sup>

In a similar way, each approach to the analysis and interpretation of a text will yield its own type of meaning or understanding.<sup>16</sup> We can say that each approach will reveal one particular dimension of a text and its meaning. This insight provides the basis for the scholar, the teacher, the student, or any other reader to acknowledge that there are what Barry Holtz in his book *Textual Knowledge* refers to as a multiplicity of orientations.<sup>17</sup> Each of us who becomes aware of and familiar with a variety of orientations to textual interpretation will be in the enviable position of being able to select the approach that we will take when reading a given text.

The question then becomes: how does one decide which approach to take? If there is more than one way to do it, and each way gives us a different advantage or a different sort of result, then I would suggest that we do what the physician or technician does in deciding between the x-ray and the ultrasound machine: use the tool that is likely to generate the type of result that you are seeking. If you are not sure of what kind of information you will get by choosing this or another approach, try out a number of approaches and choose the more desirable approach after the fact, retrospectively, after you have produced a variety of results. This is a procedure that, it seems to me, a superior teacher will often have to perform: see where the various approaches lead you, and then take your students down whichever roads lead to where you want to take them on any particular learning occasion. You can always choose a different purpose, and a different corresponding path, at another time.

---

<sup>14</sup> See Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 71-91. For philosophy and the social sciences, see, e.g.: Stephen C. Pepper, *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948); Donald W. Fiske and Richard A. Shweder (eds.), *Metatheory in Social Science: Pluralisms and Subjectivities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> See Daniel Patte, *The Religious Dimensions of Biblical Texts: Greimas' Structural Semiotics and Biblical Exegesis* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 7-10.

<sup>16</sup> See my “Reading Strategies and the Story of Ruth,” in Bach (ed.), *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 211-31.

<sup>17</sup> Barry W. Holtz, *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and in Practice* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2003), pp. 48-53 and passim.

The idea that diverse approaches will yield diverse results lies at the heart of the third verse in the Tower of Babel story (Genesis 11:1-9). In Mesopotamia, we read, one constructs a building with baked bricks and mortar, while in the Land of Israel one uses shaved stones and clay to hold them together. Some interpreters, like Umberto Moshe David Cassuto, read this remark as a put-down of the Babylonians, who do not know how to build a proper house.<sup>18</sup> However, the fact that there are two alternate methods of building does not need to be taken as reflecting the valuation of one method over the other.

Similarly, one does not need to—and should not—assign inherent values to different approaches to constructing, if you will, an interpretation of a biblical text. One can, instead, take a pragmatic approach. By “pragmatic”, I do not simply mean practical; I am referring to a philosophical outlook that was developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries primarily by the American philosophers Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, and William James. The pragmatist understands that research, or inquiry, begins with a problem or question that we have, and proceeds by means of experimentation.<sup>19</sup> The proof of the pudding is in the eating. The results of our trying out this or that solution to our problem or question are tested by a practical criterion: does the solution work or not? It may turn out that there is more than one possible solution, as is often the case. In that instance, one will choose whichever solution is more useful or desirable. Or one may choose to adopt a number of solutions in parallel or in combination.<sup>20</sup>

Often, the number of solutions that seem possible is limited by the communal contexts in which we live and the institutional frameworks in which we work.<sup>21</sup> In theory, anything goes,<sup>22</sup> but in practice we constrain ourselves from using any and every methodology and from reaching the widest possible range of results by setting limits at the outset. For example, by adopting a source-critical approach to the study of Torah, one will always succeed in finding more than one textual source there.<sup>23</sup> If this eventuality conflicts with one of my basic beliefs or principles, then I will not engage in source analysis.

---

<sup>18</sup> Moshe David Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 5th ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1969), pp. 155-57 (in Hebrew; an English edition is also available); cf. Ze'ev Weisman, *Political Satire in the Bible* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), pp. 39-50.

<sup>19</sup> For a survey, see John P. Murphy, *Pragmatism from Peirce to Davidson* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990). For a classic presentation of literary pragmatism, albeit without explicit reference to pragmatism, see Ronald S. Crane, *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1953). Compare this statement of Crane's (p. 31): “The pluralist critic...would take the view that the basic principles and methods of any distinguishable mode of criticism are tools of inquiry and interpretation...and that the choice of any special ‘language’ [i.e., mode of inquiry and interpretation]...is a practical decision to be justified solely in terms of the kind of knowledge the critic wants to attain.” For further discussion of pragmatic interpretation with bibliographic references, see the chapter “Reading Pragmatically: Interpreting the Binding of Isaac,” in my forthcoming book, *Reader Responsibility: The Making of Meaning in Biblical Narrative*.

<sup>20</sup> For discussion of the theoretical issues involved, see, e.g., Wayne C. Booth, *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism* (Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), esp. pp. 303-55; idem, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 1989), esp. 141-60. For an answer to some criticism of Fish, see my *Essays on Biblical Method and Translation*, p. 68, n. 80.

<sup>22</sup> See Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso, 1978).

<sup>23</sup> See my “Theory and Argument in Biblical Criticism,” *Essays on Biblical Method and Translation*, pp. 53-68.

Similarly, a close reading in the book of Exodus of the rhetoric of the Sinai revelation (19:15—“you may not approach a woman”) and of the Ten Commandments (20:13—“you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife”) shows that God and Moses are in this particular context addressing the menfolk alone and not the women. If that result is unacceptable, one will either avoid a close reading of the text, or counterbalance a close reading according to the peshat, or contextual sense, with a midrashic type of reading—for example, the rabbinic reading of Exodus 19:3,<sup>24</sup> in which God orders Moses to speak to the sons of Israel (*b’nei yisrael*, understood in this midrash as referring to the men) and to the house of Jacob (*beit yaakov*, referring to the women).<sup>25</sup> Or, one might place the biblical text in historical context, applying a relativistic cultural perspective to the interpretation of its meaning.<sup>26</sup> It should be clear, however, and we should be honest enough to admit it, that our beliefs and understandings do not follow from our textual interpretations as much as they shape and produce them.

Textual reading and interpretation, like all other human activity, is goal-oriented. It serves the personal, social, cultural, religious, and political interests of the reader. We engage in an activity in the hope or expectation that we will achieve desirable results. When we teach, we need to consider whether and how the approaches that we take and the meanings that we make will serve the personal interests of our students. What meaning or meanings will interest, arouse, provoke, excite? I will try to choose an approach that will yield the kind of meaning that will produce the response or set of responses I am seeking to produce in the students.

This point can be illustrated by considering a number of different academic approaches to the narrative about the Tower of Babel. One of the most prominent approaches within the scholarly treatments of the story is that of form criticism, which regards this particular story as a myth or legend. Its purpose, in this view, is to explain the name of the city Babylon—Bavel, from *balal*, “to mix up”—and the well-known fact that many different peoples speaking many different languages are spread around the world.<sup>27</sup> The current state of human diversity results from what we read in verses 8-9 of the narrative: God mixed up the languages of all the peoples and scattered them over the face of all the earth.

Rashi (on verse 7) adduces a midrash that can explain how this state of affairs materialized: the word *tit* denotes brick in one language and mortar in another. Once each builder is given a different language, chaos ensues. One builder asks for a brick and his co-worker brings him mortar. The first one looms over the other one and smashes his head. Lack of communication breeds systematic misunderstanding, and the social fabric is rent asunder. The language of the verse that concludes the story seems to give solid support to the interpretation that sees in it an explanation of the way things are (what we call in the academy an etiology): “For this, he called its name Bavel, for there

---

<sup>24</sup> So, e.g., in Rashi’s commentary.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), pp. 25-28.

<sup>26</sup> I.e., in those times, it was understood that God would address only the males; since then, we have come to understand that God addresses women as well.

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 146.

YHWH mixed up the language of all the earth and from there YHWH scattered them over the face of all the earth.” One can further strengthen this interpretation by highlighting verse 7, which relates what is arguably the climax of the story: “Let us go down and mix up their language, so that no man understands the language of his fellow.”

Someone who would want to underscore the great importance of human communication and mutual understanding would do well to choose this way of reading the narrative. And indeed, this interpretation seems to be very well grounded in the text. Nevertheless, the analysis is far from perfect; there are a number of areas where the theory fails to account for some prominent facts. For example, why does it seem so important to locate the site of the dispersion specifically in Babylon? Is it no more than an accidental similarity between the sound of the Hebrew verb *balal*, “to mix up” and the sound of the name of Babylon--Bavel?

Here the historian might enter the arena of interpretation and suggest that the legendary story is rooted, like all legends, in some historical context.<sup>28</sup> In the 12th century BCE, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar I began erecting a sanctuary in the middle of his capital city in the form of a ziggurat, a temple tower. Before the work could be completed, the city, and the temple tower in its midst, were destroyed by the invading armies of Elam, from the east. Perhaps, a historian could suggest, the biblical story is meant to echo this early historical event.<sup>29</sup>

This is possible, of course, but for how many generations would the Israelites have an interest in preserving this information, assuming that in an age before newspapers and CNN they would even have known it? And what historical significance would this event have had for the ancient Israelites? Paradoxically, the historical event might have significance for the Israelites only when the story loses its historical dimension and is transformed into a myth--namely, when the story is no longer limited to a specific time and place but rather comes to describe a recurrent or ongoing state of affairs, and becomes paradigmatic. Who among the Israelites would care that Babylon had been destroyed by the Elamites?<sup>30</sup> Who among us cares?

However, in the period just following the Babylonian assault on Jerusalem and the Israelite temple that stood in its midst, and indeed in every period ever since, the sacking of Babylon by the Elamites takes on a new significance. The nation that destroyed our city and our temple receives its just deserts: its city and its temple were destroyed before they were even completed. And who was it who

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Jacob Klein, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel Story,” in *Olam ha-Tanakh: Bere’shit* (Tel Aviv: Revivim, 1982), pp. 83-84; John H. Walton, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel Account and Its Implications,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995), pp. 155-75. For illustrations of ziggurats, see H. W. F. Saggs, *The Babylonians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 45, 85, 165, and plates I and IX. For a concise history of Mesopotamia, see Karen R. Nemet-Nejat, *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998), pp. 17-45; reference to the Elamite sack of Babylon is made on p. 34; cf. Saggs, *The Babylonians*, p. 121.

<sup>29</sup> For the identification of the Tower of Babel as a ziggurat, see, e.g., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), p. 83; *Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2001), pp. 58-59.

<sup>30</sup> For this and other contemporary understandings of “myth,” see, e.g., Eduardo Rauch, “Toward an Understanding of the Forgotten World of Myth—An Essay in Definition,” *The Melton Journal* 13 (Winter 1982), pp. 4, 18-19; cf. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*.

conquered Babylon in the mid-sixth century BCE but Cyrus the Persian —and Persia was formerly Elam!

Such a historical-mythological interpretation is effective for explaining the geographical setting of the story in Babylon. It can also provide a basis for discussing paradigms in history and in general. However, it is worth taking note of the several elements of the narrative that get lost in the historical interpretation. Missing is the theme of language, which appears in many different ways in this story, and of the dispersal of peoples. The idea of making a name is passed over, even though it is one of the express motivations of the builders.

The etiological interpretation suffers from the same lacks; even more, it is totally superfluous! In the immediately preceding chapter of Genesis (chapter 10), we are already told of how all the early peoples spread over the earth and how all speech was divided into many languages. We don't need the Tower of Babel to explain the dispersion of peoples and languages. For that reason, we might do well to consider other possible readings and their attendant meanings.

The great medieval commentators adopted two main approaches.<sup>51</sup> Rashi is most impressed by the builders' intention to build "a tower with its head in the sky" (v. 4). What would be the point of reaching the sky? Apparently, to make war on God (see his first interpretation on the phrase "one in words" in v. 1).<sup>52</sup> Or perhaps they had heard that the sky was about to collapse, and wanted to reach the sky in order to prop it up with supports; that is also in Rashi's commentary. One can find additional support for this reading in verse 6, where God seems to worry over the builders' attack: "If they are all one people and have one language, and this is what they have begun to do, then they cannot be blocked from doing all they have plotted to do!"

This approach, however, does not deal equally with the builders' other explicit concern, expressed in verse 4: "...lest we scatter over the face of all the earth." Rashbam (Rashi's grandson) and Ibn Ezra as well, place the theme of dispersal at the center of their interpretations.<sup>53</sup> Deuteronomy 1:28 shows that there is nothing inherently objectionable to God about cities whose structures reach the sky. God tolerated the Canaanites' skyscrapers, so why not the Babylonians? Rather, by concentrating in one location, the builders of Babylon violated the command that God had issued humankind after the Flood: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth!" (Genesis 9:1).<sup>54</sup> They were told to

---

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Moshe Sokolow, "The Bible and Religious Education: A Multi-dimensional Approach," *Studies in Jewish Education* 4 (1989), pp. 42-62, esp. 55.

<sup>52</sup> Rashi: One language. The Holy Tongue. One in words. They came with one scheme and said: It is not for Him to choose the upper regions for Himself. Let us go up to the sky and make war on Him. Another interpretation: About the One Who is unique in the world. Another interpretation: One in words. They said: Once in 1,656 years the sky collapses, just as at the time of the Flood. Come, let us make supports for it (the sky).

<sup>53</sup> Rashbam at v. 4: Let us build ourselves a city etc.: According to the contextual sense (peshat), what sin did the generation of the dispersal commit? If it is because they said with its head in the sky, is it not written (in Deuteronomy 1.28) large cities fortified up to the sky? Rather, it is because the Holy One commanded them, Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 1.28), and they chose for themselves a place to settle and said, Lest we be scattered. Therefore, He decreed that they be scattered from there.

<sup>54</sup> For the history of interpretation of this commandment, see Jeremy Cohen, "*Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and*



spread out, and they didn't. Therefore, writes Rashbam, God scattered them from there.

Rashbam reads the story in a somewhat broader context than that of Rashi. By ordering human beings to separate, God seems to indicate that dividing the inhabited world among different peoples, cultures, languages, and outlooks is a good thing. Moreover, without the dispersion of peoples, there would be no background for "*lekb-lekba*": Abraham couldn't be told to leave his native land and go to the Land of Canaan (Genesis 12:1). The whole Jewish paradigm of relinquishing the diaspora and making aliyah to the land of Israel disappears without the dispersion of the peoples.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, as I mentioned above, the dispersion came into existence prior to the Tower of Babel story, and the interpretative line taken by Rashbam and Ibn Ezra does not deal much with the builders' attempt to reach the sky. In other words, this interpretation, too, is only partial; it does not draw out all of the narrative's meaning.

The predominant literary reading of the story in modern times, represented by Martin Buber and the Dutch scholar Jan Fokkelman, focuses on the supposedly symmetrical structure of the text.<sup>56</sup> Compare the following diagram of the narrative structure according to Buber and Fokkelman:

A All the earth one language  
 B There  
 C A man to his fellow  
 D Let us bake bricks  
 E Let us build ourselves  
 F City and tower  
 X YHVH went down to see  
 F' City and tower  
 E' That the humans had built  
 D' Let us...mix up  
 C' A man to his fellow  
 B' From there  
 A' The language of all the earth (he mixed up)

Buber describes the story as two halves: the humans' plot versus God's plot. He points to seven

---

*Master It': The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>55</sup> For the theme of aliyah/yeridah to/from the Land of Israel as a theme in the narratives of Genesis, see Yitzhak Peleg, "Going Up and Going Down: A Key to Interpreting Jacob's Dream (Gen 28, 10-22)," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 116 (2004), pp. 1-11, as well as the Hebrew doctoral thesis (The Schechter Institute for Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, 2000) on which it is based; see further Yehoshua Gitay, "Geography and Theology in the [sic!] Biblical Narrative: The Question of Genesis 2-12," in Stephen Breck Reid (ed.), *Prophets and Paradigms: Essays in Honor of Gene M. Tucker* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 205-16.

<sup>56</sup> Martin Buber, "Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative," in idem and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, trans. Lawrence Rosenwald with Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 116-17; Jan P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975), pp. 11-45; Yitshak Avishur, "The Tower of Babel Story," in *'Olam ba-Tanakh: Bere'ahit* (Tel Aviv: Revivim, 1982), pp. 82-83; Jerome T. Walsh, *Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001), pp. 94-95; cf. Sokolow, "The Bible and Religious Education," pp. 57-59. Diagrams of the alleged symmetrical structures are found in Fokkelman and Avishur.

leading words (*Leitworte* in German, *millim manhot* in Hebrew) that connect the two halves: “all the earth,” “language,” “let us,” “build,” “a city and a tower,” the words “there” (*sham*) and “name” (*shem*), and the verb “to scatter.” What meaning is drawn out of this analysis? In a word: irony—the text is suffused with irony. Our schemes are doomed to fail if they are in opposition to the will of God.

This line of interpretation appears on the surface to be perfect. It is based on a seemingly clear structure that is manifested by the arrangement of the leading words. But this analysis—which is, after all, an interpretation—is only partly correct. The builders declare: “Let us build ourselves a city and a tower...” and God responds: “Let us go down and mix up their language.” The builders mention both a city and a tower, but there is no mention of a tower in what God is reported to say and do in response. (Buber admits this point in a parenthetical remark.) In addition, the builders declare their intention to make themselves a name, but in God’s response there is no reference to this intention. God, we read, mixes up the builders’ language so that “no man understands the language of his fellow.” It seems to me that any adequate reading of the story will come to grips with this theme of language.

I endeavored to provide such an interpretation some years ago by way of a reading in the spirit of deconstruction.<sup>37</sup> The story seems to highlight language by repeating many words and through a long series of wordplays—*shem* (name) and *sham* (there), *l’vena* (brick) and *l’aven* (to stone) *homer* (clay) and *hemar* (mortar), *nilbana* (let us bake) and *navla* (let us mix up)—and of course, *balal* and Bavel. There are also several instances of a word or expression that appears in one place with one apparent meaning and in another place with another. For example, at the beginning of the story, “all the earth” refers to the population, while at the end of the story it is a geographical designation. The polysemy of language receives special treatment in Rashi, where the phrase *avarim ’abadim* is interpreted in no fewer than three (and perhaps as many as four) different ways.<sup>38</sup> You will recall the midrash cited by Rashi in which the word *tit* is shown to mean something different in different languages. There is no natural, fixed correlation between the sound of a word and the meaning we assign to that word.<sup>39</sup>

This concept, which sits well with deconstruction,<sup>40</sup> can in fact be found in verse 3 of the story, in what to many appears to be nothing more than a marginal aside: “Brick was stone for them, and mortar was clay for them.”<sup>41</sup> This seemingly parenthetical remark can be understood as a key to the

<sup>37</sup> Edward L. Greenstein, “Deconstruction and Biblical Narrative,” *Prooftexts* 9 (1989), pp. 43-77; reprinted in: Steven Kepnes, *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 21-54; see there, esp. pp. 25-28.

<sup>38</sup> See loc. cit.

<sup>39</sup> This is a key insight of the founder of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure; see his *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. W. Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

<sup>40</sup> For deconstruction and its intellectual roots, see, e.g., Christopher Norris, Derrida (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987); Mark C. Taylor, *Deconstruction in Context* (Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

<sup>41</sup> Note that the remark is set off by long hyphens in the JPS Tanakh and that it is labeled an “editorial aside” in the *Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary*, p. 59. Cassuto (see above) and others read the comment as a satirization of the Babylonians, who naively thought they could build forever. It is not my purpose here, however, to pick apart this somewhat chauvinistic exegesis.

narrative's meaning<sup>42</sup>; "the rock the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" (Psalm 118:22). Languages are made like the buildings of Babel: they are constructed of materials that can be replaced with different materials. Just as there is no single method of building, there is no one system of language. Meaning can be conveyed by this system or by that system. And there is no stability in meaning; meanings can change.

The builders of Babylon thought they could make a "name" for themselves. A name implies a fixed relationship between word and meaning. But such a thing is neither natural nor possible. The outcome of the story, that language must splinter and disseminate meaning after meaning, is a basic characteristic of being human. We cannot change that fact, either by trying to abolish the differences distinguishing people from people and culture from culture, or by trying to unify humanity artificially by means of a universal language. Any such attempt runs contrary to the divine order that finds expression in our story.<sup>43</sup>

This line of interpretation takes a fuller account of the theme of language. But it treats the building of the city and the tower only by means of allusion or allegorically. None of the interpretations I have mentioned up till now has reckoned with the fact that the word for name, *shem*, which the builders want to make for themselves, is also the name of one of Noah's sons—Shem—who, according to one of the passages in Genesis 10 (vv. 21-22) is the ancestor of the Mesopotamians. The father of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, *zikhrono livrakba*, capitalizes precisely on the connection between *shem* as "name" and the ancestor Shem in his own interpretation of the story.<sup>44</sup>

But what interests me more is the way that Derrida delves into the implication of the diffusion of language with which the story ends—a diffusion that makes obvious the need for translation. The only way for people to communicate after the dispersion is by means of translating from language to language. Derrida uses the opportunity provided by this biblical passage to discuss the well-known theory of translation of the great German-Jewish critic, Walter Benjamin.<sup>45</sup> Derrida, like Benjamin, emphasizes the familiar inability of human beings to convey in one language the complete sense of what is expressed in another language. In highlighting this point, Derrida calls our attention to another, closely related, aspect of the Tower of Babel narrative: the fact that the work of construction was never completed. It was stopped in the middle. God made sure that the work would never be finished.

Translation is born, one might say, under the sign of incompleteness. It has been preordained that translation will never be perfect—it will always leave behind, or add on, or distort. Language itself

---

<sup>42</sup> Acknowledging that center and margin are products of our own perspectives, and consequently redefining what is central and what is marginal, are typical deconstructive maneuvers.

<sup>43</sup> The creation narrative in Genesis 1-2 does not necessarily imply an orderly world; see my essay, "Presenting Genesis 1, Constructively and Deconstructively," *Prooftexts* 21 (2001), pp. 1-22.

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," in *Poststructuralism as Exegesis = Semcia* 54 (1991), pp. 3-34; cf. idem, *The Ear of the Other*, ed. Christie V. McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken, 1985), pp. 91-161.

<sup>45</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 69-82. On Benjamin's theory of language and translation, see my "Theories of Modern Biblical Translation," *Essays on Biblical Method and Translation*, esp. pp. 110-16.

operates the way translation does: in the course of disseminating meaning, meaning changes.

We may not want to turn our discussion of the Tower of Babel story into a philosophical discussion of language. However, were it not for Derrida, we might ignore the subject of translation, which it seems to me is a direct consequence of the plot, and we might overlook the theme of incompleteness, even though it is as clear a feature of the story as any. Any task we undertake is destined to remain imperfect, incomplete. When we focus on the themes of the dispersion of the people and the diffusion of language, we are liable to forget about the city and the tower. They remain unfinished. Any interpretation that does not relate to this fact has surely not given a complete reading to our story. Interpretation, like all other human activity, will always be partial, selective, incomplete.

In concluding, let me briefly cite Nehama Leibowitz's famous reading of this narrative in her *Studies* series, also known as "the *iyyunim*".<sup>46</sup> Since she tended to pay acute attention to the language and literary form of a text, we might have expected her to incline toward the analysis of Buber and other modern literary scholars. A literary reading would have enabled her to incorporate the interpretations of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Rashbam. But Leibowitz chose to delve into the declared intention of the builders to make themselves a name. It will be clear to those who are familiar with her *Studies* that what primarily concerned her were not the techniques of interpretation per se, but rather the meanings, lessons, and values which are the aim of analysis and interpretation.

According to Leibowitz, the builders committed a religious, moral sin. They did not mean for their efforts to lead to *tikkun 'olam*, but rather to an aggrandizement of their own name, an elevation of their status by means of their edifice. She adduces a midrash from Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer in which the builders cared not at all when one of them fell off the tower and died, but they got terribly worried over any brick that fell.<sup>47</sup> Leibowitz draws a moral from the fate of the builders: we must not regard the work of our hands as superior to the work of God's hands. We must not place human technology over the values that are embodied in proper religious behavior. We might even suggest a somewhat broader interpretation: we must not regard technology as anything but a means toward the attainment of our humane goals.<sup>48</sup>

In accordance with this very principle, we ought not place at the center of our studies the analytical techniques we employ in reading texts, but rather the meanings that give significance to our enterprise. It is beneficial to have facility with a variety of interpretive approaches, and to know how to exploit them in order to arrive at the sorts of meaning that matter to us. When we begin an interpretative effort, it is worth asking first: what is important to bring out at this moment? Once we

---

<sup>46</sup> Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in the Book of Bereshit*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1969), pp. 74-78 (in Hebrew; also available in an English edition). Cf. my article, "The Multifaceted Exegesis of Nehama Leibowitz and Postmodern Interpretation," *Limmudim* 1 (2002), pp. 21-33 (in Hebrew).

<sup>47</sup> The version of the midrash cited by Leibowitz is: "The tower had seven steps on its east side and seven on its west side. They would bring up the bricks on one side and go down on the other. If a man fell off and died, they would not pay him any mind; but if a brick fell off, they would sit and cry, saying: Woe is us, when will another one come up and take its place?"

<sup>48</sup> Cf. recently: James L. Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), pp. 85-89.

have settled on what kinds of meaning we are seeking, we can then figure out which approaches and questions will best help us get there.<sup>49</sup>

*This paper is one of a series of working papers on the teaching of Jewish studies, available for free download from the website of the Initiative on Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy in Jewish Studies, a project of the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University.*

*<http://www.brandeis.edu/centers/mandel/bridginginitiative.html>*

---

<sup>49</sup> This article is based on a Hebrew one entitled: "Meaning is the Main Thing: A Pragmatic Approach to Interpretation." The English version is published by permission of the Centre for Educational Technology, Tel Aviv.