

Messianic Rabbi: If Only We All Spoke the Same Language

There has never been a time when humans could communicate faster than the time in which we live. When I was a young man, if I wanted to communicate with someone far away, there were only three valid options: a telephone (which meant either calling from home, office or a pay phone), sending a letter (which could take weeks, or even months, to arrive), or sending a telegram (which would be delivered quickly, but at a much higher cost than a stamp).

Today, we can make a call on a cell phone, send an instant message, write an email or even video conference instantly around the world. Yet with all of the advancement in communication technology, we have never been able to say more in less time while understanding less of what has been said. The thought that today we say more while understanding less of what is said caused me to think about another time when communication became an issue. In Genesis 11 (TLV), we find the story of the Tower of Babel, which begins with these words:

“Now the entire earth had the same language with the same vocabulary. When they traveled eastward, they found a valley-plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, ‘Come! Let’s make bricks and bake them until they’re hard.’ So they used bricks for stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, “Come! Let’s build ourselves a city, with a tower whose top reaches into heaven. So let’s make a name for ourselves, or else we will be scattered over the face of the whole land.”

While this story is well known to almost every believer, most of what we know about the Tower of Babel was taught to us from children’s Bibles, storybooks or coloring books. So let’s take

a look at what the Bible actually says in context. First, take a look at the first verse where it reads in English, “the entire earth had the same language.” The word translated earth in this text is ארץ *eretz*, which can mean earth, land, territory or country. Most Bibles translate this word earth; however, if we only read down to verse 4, we will see why that translation doesn’t make sense. The fear was that if they didn’t make a name for themselves, they would be scattered over the face of the whole land. If the entire earth was one people with one language, why would they fear being scattered over the face of the whole land? By the way, the word translated “land” at the end of the fourth verse is the same word that was translated “earth” in the first.

You may be saying, “What difference does this make?” Well, it makes a big difference if you want to understand the Bible and what it says or doesn’t say. If you have your Bible open while reading this, which I hope you always do, please turn back one chapter. In Genesis 10:5, we read: “From these the coastlands of the nations spread out in their lands, each one according to his language, according to their families, into their nations.”

In Genesis 10:20, we read: “These are Ham’s sons according to their families, according to their languages, in their lands, in their nations.”

And in Genesis 10:31, we read: “These are Shem’s sons, according to their families, according to their languages, in their lands, according to their nations.”

So according to the Bible, the nations and their languages were established after the flood and before the Tower of Babel took place.

Genesis 10:32 records, “These are the families of the sons of Noah according to their genealogies in their nations, and from these the nations were dispersed on the earth after the

flood.”

Some would say that the event of the Tower of Babel in chapter 11 takes place before the narrative of the genealogies in chapter 10. However, if we read chapter 10, we see that the establishment of nations and languages didn’t happen all at once, as we see in Genesis 10:18: “the Arvadite, the Zemarite and the Hamathite—and afterwards, the Canaanite families were scattered.”

But the confounding of languages takes place at one time:

Genesis 11:7 records, “‘Come! Let Us go down and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand each other’s language.’ So Adonai scattered them from there over the face of the entire land, and they stopped building the city. This is why it is named Babel, because Adonai confused the languages of the entire world there, and from there Adonai scattered them over the face of the entire world.”

Notice that the Bible doesn’t say G-D changed their language; it says G-D confused their language. G-D didn’t divide people by languages at the Tower of Babel. Nations had different languages in chapter 10. G-D simply made it so that the people speaking to each other didn’t understand what the other was saying.

Just as we find today, people are speaking to each other more and faster than ever before. Yet our language has been confused. We use the same words but hear different things. We can talk instantly across the world and, because of our technology, we are no longer scattered over the whole face of the land. Yet with all of our talking, texting, messaging and video conferencing, because our language has been confused, we understand less of what we are saying than ever before.

If only we would take the time to speak and listen to each other once again, we could all speak the same language. {eo}

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