The Tower of Babel and the Birth of Nationhood

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In the compendium of foundational myths that open the Hebrew Bible, one tale seems to be oddly out of place. The first chapters of Genesis, the prologue to "the book of the generations of Adam,"[1] raise issues of cardinal human significance. The creation narrative introduces the concepts of "man, heaven, and the created order"[2]; the story of the Garden of Eden explores questions of temptation, sin, responsibility, and sexuality; the tale of Cain and Abel grapples with hatred and murder; and the flood deals with the inevitable imperfection of humankind. But what about the story of the Tower of Babel? What fundamental truth about the human condition does it seek to impart?

Adding to the story's enigmatic character is its unique context, situated as it is between the tale of the flood, which concerns humanity as a whole, and the election of Abraham, which deals with one nation. What are we to make of this position? Why does the Bible effect the transition from the universal to the particular through this strange tale of the origins of languages?

The answer to these questions lies, I believe, in the story's singular function. If the creation narrative introduces the Bible's metaphysics, the story of the Garden of Eden its theology, and the tales of Cain and Abel and the

flood its ethics, then the story of the Tower of Babel serves to present the Bible's politics. It is here that the biblical text sets forth its ideas of nationhood, ethnicity, and heterogeneity, notions that were revolutionary for their time and went on to play a central role in the political thought of generations to come.

This essay thus offers an in-depth reading of the Tower of Babel narrative with a view toward exposing its political underpinnings. As we shall see, a close literary analysis of the text reveals it to be an eloquent argument in favor of the ethnic-cultural commonwealth—a precursor of sorts to the modern nation-state—as an indispensable condition for human freedom and self-realization.[3] This is an idea of far-reaching consequences. For if our reading is correct, it demonstrates that the concept of nationhood—of a distinct group identity based on common language, culture, land, and blood ties—was not a modern European innovation, as some scholars proclaim it to be, but rather an integral part of the Jewish tradition from its very beginnings.[4]

II

Let us start by examining the story, reported in the first few verses of Genesis 11:

Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard." Brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world." The Lord came down to look at the city and tower that man had built, and the Lord said, "If, as one people with one language for

all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they conspire to do will be out of their reach. Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech." Thus the Lord scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel, because there the Lord confounded the speech of the whole earth, and from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.[5]

Given their ambiguity, it should come as no surprise that these nine verses have given rise to a multitude of diverse interpretations. According to the prevalent view, the story is, in the words of the late Assyriologist and biblical scholar Ephraim Avigdor Speiser, a "criticism of man's folly and presumption."[6] Another approach regards the tale as a prelude to the introduction of the figure of Abraham. As noted ethicist Leon Kass writes in his commentary on Genesis, "this report of human failure prepares and encourages us to pay attention when, in the immediate sequel, God undertakes to educate Abraham in the new way of righteousness and holiness."[7]

Both explanations are certainly sound. That this is an incident of human folly seems to be substantiated by the story's conclusion, in which God intervenes and humankind, consequently, "stopped building the city." Likewise, one cannot ignore the tale's juxtaposition with the introduction of Abraham (or, we might add, with the story of the flood that precedes it). A comprehensive reading of the Tower of Babel narrative must therefore take both interpretations into account, explaining the precise nature of humanity's error *and* the positioning of this tale within the larger literary context of the book of Genesis.

The first issue that demands our attention concerns the transgression of which humanity was obviously guilty. Many readers believe the Tower of Babel to be a clear case of human hubris, of a desire—to quote the German Jewish thinker Samson Raphael Hirsch—"to demonstrate that, if all join forces and work together, mankind can overpower nature."[8] There is even some evidence in the Bible itself to that effect: Referring to this tale, the prophet Isaiah speaks of the "song of scorn" to be sung over the king of

Babylon in response to his boasting, "I will climb to the sky; higher than the stars of God I will set my throne…. I will mount the back of a cloud; I will match the most high."[9] For Isaiah, at least, Babylon seems to be implicated in the sin of overreaching pride.

Yet in spite of this intrabiblical exegesis, and of the plethora of hubris myths in many ancient cultures, the story itself does not seem exhausted by such a reading.[10] In fact, as Robert Alter notes in his recent translation of the Pentateuch, the tale may not really be about hubris at all: "Although there is a long exegetical tradition that imagines the building of the tower as an attempt to scale the heights of heaven, the text does not really suggest that."[11] Alter's alternative interpretation, however, by which the story is a polemic "against urbanism and the overweening confidence of humanity in the feats of technology," does not explain why city-dwelling is wrong, or why other instances of urban construction are not impeded by God.[12]

A third possible interpretation identifies humanity's sin in its eagerness to confine itself to a single geographic—and ideological—plane. The great nineteenth-century exegete Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (the Netziv), for example, sees the story as a warning against man's eagerness to achieve uniformity.[13] This reading, according to contemporary scholar Aviezer Ravitzky, lends itself to the Netziv's principled defense of tolerance and pluralism.[14] Similarly, political theorist and Israel's former Minister of Education Yael (Yuli) Tamir claims that "the biblical story of the Tower of Babel could be interpreted as a mythical description of the origin of nations… the beginning of multiplicity and diversity."[15] In other words, the tale of the Tower of Babel is a foundational myth, not of a particular civilization or group, but of cultural plurality in general.[16]

Such an interpretation is well-grounded in the text. Yet on its own, it does not sufficiently account for the story's role as an overture to the Abraham narrative. For this, a fuller explanation is still needed.

In what follows, I seek to propose just such an explanation. Examining the literary techniques used to construct this artful tale, the following reading will reveal it to be not only a general call for dispersion and multiplicity,

but also a specific endorsement of diverse ethnic-cultural entities—or, as we might call them today, nation-states. It is precisely the existence of such entities that enables the transition from the universality of the flood to the particularity of the election of Abraham, whose descendants will go on to become the collective protagonist of the Bible and its model of political order.

<p style="text-align:center">III</p>

Our reading of the Tower of Babel story cannot ignore the incident's immediate context. For while the narrative is composed of nine fairly self-sustaining verses, it has already been preceded by several instances of foreshadowing.[17] Any interpretation of this story must take these instances into account.

The first literary clue is the description of humanity in the aftermath of the flood. Genesis 8-10 is, in many ways, a second creation story. Disappointed by the failures of mankind, which resulted in the expulsion from Eden and the deluge, God attempts to recreate humanity. A new world order is established after the flood, with God—echoing the first creation narrative—commanding Noah and his sons to "be fertile and increase, and replenish the earth"; prescribing what human beings may and may not eat; and laying down a prohibition on murder.[18] Given humanity's poor record, God seeks to provide it with a specific set of moral guidelines (it is to this passage, significantly, that the sages attribute the origin of the seven Noahide laws, which serve as Judaism's blueprint for ethical societies everywhere[19]).

These edicts are followed by a covenant, and then—almost matter-of-factly—the Bible says: "These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the whole world branched out."[20] This is the first intimation of peoplehood,

of the separation of humankind into distinct groups that spread out over the earth.[21] Lest the reader fail to appreciate the importance of this dramatic development, the Bible subsequently reiterates: "Two sons were born to Eber: the name of the first was Peleg, for in his days, *the earth was divided*."[22] The fact of dispersion is offered simply, without comment—neither positive nor negative. "Branch[ing] out" seems an inevitable, indeed requisite, process in the divine attempt to "restart" creation.

The following chapter, devoted to "the lines of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah," expands the determinants of "branching out" from a common genealogy to land and language.[23] It also introduces the term "nation" (*goy*) for the first time: "From these the maritime *nations* branched out. [These are the descendants of Japheth] by their lands, each with their language, their claims, and their *nations*."[24] An all but identical formulation is used to cap the genealogies of Noah's other two sons, Ham and Shem. "These are the descendants of Ham/Shem, according to their clans and languages, by their lands and *nations*."[25] The repetition leaves little room for doubt: The dispersion of nations, each coalescing around a common land, language, and lineage, is the natural state of affairs in the world after the flood.

Finally, the genealogical lists conclude in quite the same way they had begun (here, again, the term "nation" is mentioned twice): "These are the groupings of Noah's descendants, according to their origins, by their *nations*; and from these the *nations* branched out over the earth after the flood."[26] This recapitulation is the last statement the Bible makes before proceeding to the Tower of Babel tale. The emphasis on nationhood and dissemination is of particular consequence in light of what follows.

"Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words."[27] This seemingly innocent introduction to the next chapter now sounds somewhat ominous. If the newfound nations were rapidly "branch[ing] out over the earth," forming distinct languages, how has it come to be that "everyone on earth had the same language?" What has happened to disrupt the natural process of human development?

One may, of course, argue that this is merely a case of biblical anachronism, whereby the human dispersion described in Genesis 10 is actually the *result* of the Tower of Babel incident in Genesis 11. Such an explanation, however, does not account for the reason the Bible chooses to present the events the way it does. To understand the dissonance between the last verse of chapter 10 and the first verse of chapter 11, there is one more literary clue that remains to be deciphered.

That clue is the towering figure of Nimrod, who, we are told in Genesis 10, "was the first man of might on earth… a mighty hunter before the Lord." Yet Nimrod was much more than a stalwart hunter; he was also the world's first imperialist, the "mainstays of his kingdom" stretching from Babel to Calneh, in the land of Shinar.[28]

These geographical coordinates ought to sound familiar by now: It is precisely here that the scene of our drama is set. "And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there."[29] That the story of the Tower of Babel takes place in the region of Nimrod's rule may serve to explain the mysterious homogeneity that besets humankind just as it was beginning to divide itself into nations. For what is imperialism if not the forceful binding of different peoples under a common regime? "The same language and the same words" at the opening of Genesis 11 may well be the consequence of an imperialist attempt to artificially hold humanity together.

Before we have even begun our reading of the story, then, we seem to have amassed sufficient textual evidence to understand what it is about. Humankind, the Bible has already stated, *ought* to separate into distinct nations, each with its own land and language.[30] Dispersion, in this sense, is part of a divine plan. It is only thus that human beings may fully realize their own unique potential, just as it is only thus that they may fulfill God's command to "replenish the earth." Mankind had taken its first steps toward this ideal after the flood, but its progress was effectively stunted. The Tower builders of Babel, we shall presently discover, sought to sustain this uniformity. That was their sin, and that, ultimately, is why they had to be stopped.

IV

Turning now to the story itself, we find that its action is triggered by a technological breakthrough: "They said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard.' Brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar." Mankind can now bake bricks, and relative to what had been technically feasible before, significant new possibilities suddenly present themselves.[31] Technology, even in this rudimentary form, is the key to human creativity; the possibility of building allows human beings to design their world as they would like it to be. Man has become an architect of the world, a creature—not only of necessity—but of vision.

And in this instance, its vision does not bode well. "They said, 'Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world.'" The natural process of dispersion that had begun after the flood—and that God himself desires—is now regarded as a fate to be avoided. Human beings, we have learned, ought to scatter. Yet the people of Babel reject this ideal, refusing to allow for the territorial, cultural, and linguistic diversity so essential to the new humanity envisioned by God.

This, then, is the real sin committed by the builders of the Tower of Babel, and not, as is commonly suggested, their hubristic aspiration "to make a name" for themselves. For, after all, who among us does not seek to leave behind a name of sorts? Who does not hope that his or her legacy—be it large or small—will be remembered for a generation or two? There is nothing terribly sinful about the desire to achieve greatness and recognition. God himself promises Abraham the very same thing in the next chapter: "I will make of you a great nation... I will make your name great."[32] The real transgression of the Babel generation thus cannot be ambition as such, but the determination to evade humanity's destiny to "be scattered all over the world."

God's reaction, in the following verse, points to the grave danger of such an endeavor:

> The Lord came down to look at the city and tower that man had built, and the Lord said, "If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they conspire to do will be out of their reach. Let us, then, go down and confound their speech."

God knows that, united in purpose and in language, humanity can achieve anything it conspires, and may well succeed in its resistance to his plans of dispersion.[33] His response, therefore, is to thwart its enterprise by breaking down its speech. This is not so much a punishment for a sin as it is a solution to a problem. Unlike other divine punishments in the book of Genesis, which always involve a measure of suffering, here the response is designed simply to put an end to humanity's folly.[34] "Let us, then, go down and confound their speech" is, in this sense, evocative of God's earlier declaration: "Let us make man."[35] This is not a sanction, but another step in the process of creation, goading mankind into fulfilling its purpose. God confounds the languages, which causes humanity to scatter over the earth—as per his original intention.

If by this point the reader still entertains any doubts as to the nature of the problem caused by the Tower, there comes the final verse and resolves any remaining ambiguity. True, the penultimate verse may be read as an implication that the Tower builders sinned by the very act of constructing an urban dwelling ("Thus the Lord scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth, and they stopped building the city"). Such a reading, however, is immediately undermined by what follows: "That is why it was called Babel, because there the Lord confounded [*balal*] the speech of the whole earth, and from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth." God's objective, the "branching out" of mankind into distinct peoples (the verb *n-f-tz*, "to scatter," appears three times in the brief nine verses), has been accomplished. Humanity is back on track.

V

Thus far, we have charted the following progression: After the flood, nationhood is introduced; humanity begins to disperse into distinct peoples, each with its own lineage, land, and language. This natural process is interrupted by a sharp U-turn toward homogeneity, a state of affairs that the Tower of Babel is meant to preserve. Dispersion is then resumed with the confounding of human speech, and linguistic variety leads to geographical diversity. Humanity is once again "scattered… over the face of the whole earth."

And so, with mankind broken up into individual nations, the Bible can now "zoom in" on the chronicles of one particular people and its quest for nationhood and a land of its own. The patriarchs' cycle, then, is a direct continuation of the themes introduced in the Tower of Babel narrative.

Immediately after our story's denouement (and its epilogical genealogy of Shem), God reveals himself to Abraham, pledging to "make of [him] a great *nation*."[36] Here again, we encounter the word *goy*; humanity's renewed diversification sets the stage for the election of one man and, ultimately, one nation. A few chapters later, the promise of nationhood is followed up with an assurance of kingship: "I will make you exceedingly fertile, and make nations of you; and kings shall come forth from you."[37]

To merit these blessings, Abraham must do two things. First, he must leave his homeland, Ur of the Chaldeans, which—like the kingdom of Shinar—is located in Mesopotamia. Abraham cannot beget a distinct nation unless he removes himself from Nimrod's former domain. Yet escaping this seat of imperialism and uniformity is not enough. To sire "nations… and kings," Abraham must also seek his *own* territory. Land, we have seen, is a necessary constituent of nationhood; hence God's command to the patriarch to "Go forth from your native *land*… to the *land* that I will show you."[38]

Abraham obeys, and a few generations later his progeny becomes a sizeable clan. It is not, however, until the descent to Egypt that this clan becomes the Israelite nation. The Exodus story thus brings to fruition the process that had begun with the failure of the Tower of Babel enterprise. Indeed, the two narratives, as any attentive reader will discover, are intimately connected.

It is Pharaoh, archenemy of the Israelite people, who is the first to refer to it as a nation. Alarmed by its growing numbers, the Egyptian ruler declares that "the people, the children of Israel, are much too numerous for us."[39] The seemingly redundant formulation *am bnei Yisrael* ("the people, the children of Israel," as opposed to the customary "people of Israel" or "children of Israel"), which appears nowhere else in the Pentateuch, underscores the Abrahamic progeny's newfound status as a distinct national tribe.[40]

Pharaoh's concern over Israelite demographics is not, as one might expect, motivated by the fear that this nation of foreigners might revolt and perhaps even dethrone him. Rather, he is afraid that, in the event of war, the Israelites might "rise up from this land." Taken simply, Pharaoh is worried that the People of Israel will leave in search of its own land.[41] After all, that, as we have seen, is what nations ought to do.

Hence, the king of Egypt seems to intuit (probably before the Israelites themselves) that this immigrant clan has not only become a proper nation, but that—like all proper nations—it will inevitably seek the autonomy and self-determination that come with the possession of territory. The association of nationhood with land, introduced in the Tower of Babel story, is reinforced by the Exodus epic: Territorial sovereignty, which the book of Genesis depicts as the ordinary outcome of natural dispersion, now becomes a goal worth fighting for.

The connection between these narratives, however, does not end with the motifs of nationhood and land. There are two more literary devices that serve to weave them together: the word *leveinim* ("bricks") and the injunction *hava* ("let us"). The word *leveinim* is mentioned in the Pentateuch in only two instances: once to indicate the building material of the Tower

of Babel and a second time to describe the hard labor of the Israelites in Egypt.[42] *Hava* appears in several cases, yet only in these two stories is it used to preface a plan.[43] The word introduces humanity's decision to build a tower ("*let us* make bricks and burn them hard… and… *let us* build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky") and God's determination to foil this endeavor ("*let us*, then, go down and confound their speech"); it also, tellingly, appears in the context of Pharaoh's scheme to oppress the Israelite people ("*let us* deal shrewdly with them"[44]). Thus, the Bible's carefully-chosen language subtly links the Tower of Babel narrative and the Exodus drama, implying, perhaps, that the two are essentially parts of the same story. The failure of the Shinar building project led humanity to recognize the necessity of national and geographical diversity; the Exodus is the Israelites' attempt to achieve just that.

This quest for territory and consequent political autonomy goes on to occupy great parts of the Bible. From the conquest of the land in the book of Joshua, through the struggle for self-rule in Judges and Samuel, to the destruction and exile in Kings, and Cyrus' proclamation of the Jews' right of return in Ezra and Nehemiah—the Bible charts the course of an arduous national project, establishing a model not only for Jews, but for mankind at large, for anyone concerned with human freedom and flourishing.

VI

In 1861, John Stuart Mill proclaimed that "the boundaries of government should coincide in the main with those of nationalities."[45] As I have tried to demonstrate, Mill was merely articulating an age-old political wisdom found in the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, a close reading of the biblical oeuvre in general—and of the Tower of Babel narrative in

particular—reveals, I believe, a fundamental argument in favor of the ethnic-cultural commonwealth. Human beings naturally differ from one another, and so must form distinct settings for the search of the good life. Diverse national (or protonational) entities—each with its own identity, culture, land, language, heritage, and destiny—can provide humankind with the conditions it needs to prosper and thrive, to enjoy the benefits of "positive liberty" (according to Isaiah Berlin's apposite phrase[46]).

This biblical vision is especially pertinent today, when the nation-state is commonly rejected as a thing of the past, and national identity as a prejudice humanity must learn to transcend. Israel, specifically, is reviled as a chauvinistic anachronism[47]; the Jewish state, once a paradigm of the struggle for liberation and self-determination, is now associated with colonial conquest and the violation of human rights. Such a view has become increasingly popular even among Jews themselves, many of whom regard Israel's national particularism as a moral aberration and an abandonment of Judaism's universal values. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. The insistence on the importance of the ethnic-cultural state lies, we have seen, at the very core of the Hebrew Bible.[48] When the Zionist movement set out to found a Jewish state, it, like Mill (and countless others), was simply following the dictates of Hebraic political thought. From the initial call for humanity to "replenish the earth" to the final exhortation for Jews to "rise up" (the concluding verse of II Chronicles), it is the story of the Jewish nation that the Bible tells. And it is that same story we continue to tell today, a reminder to peoples everywhere to reclaim what is rightfully theirs.

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Notes

1. Genesis 5:1.

2. Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press, 2003), p. 25.

3. Scholar Anthony Smith sees in the pre-modern ethnic community the antecedent of the nation-state. See Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

4. See, for example, Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1983); Carlton J.H. Hayes, *A Political and Social History of Modern Europe* (New York: Macmillan, 1916); and E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1990).

5. Genesis 11:1-9.

6. Ephraim Avigdor Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 76.

7. Kass alternatively claims that the story may be a "reflection on language, technology… [that] exposes fully the core of civilization and man as a rational and political animal." See Kass, *Beginning of Wisdom*, p. 217.

8. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch*, trans. Gertrude Hirschler (New York: Judaica, 1986), p. 54. See also the JPS Bible commentary, which attributes the building of the tower to a "Promethean hubris on the part of a humankind still unwilling to accept subordination to their Creator." Adele Berlin and Marc Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation* (Oxford: Oxford, 2004), p. 29.

9. Isaiah 14:13-14.

10. Among the numerous hubristic mythological characters are Niobe, who boasted that her children were superior to those of the goddess Leto, only to have her offspring killed and herself turned into a rock that perpetually weeps; Arachne, who challenged Athena to a weaving contest and was consequently transformed into a spider; Marsyas, who claimed to be a better musician than Apollo, but was defeated in contest and skinned alive; Bellerophon, whose attempted ascent to

Olympus on Pegasus' back ended in a tragic fall that left him crippled; Phaethon, who tried to drive the sun chariot but lost control of the horses and was struck down by a thunderbolt; and, of course, Icarus, who flew too high until his man-made wings melted. See Geoffrey Miles, ed., *Classical Mythology in English Literature: A Critical Anthology* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 36-37.

11. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 58.

12. Alter, *Five Books of Moses*, p. 58. See, for example, Genesis 4:17, which presents Cain as the first builder of a city, or Exodus 1:11, where we read of the store-house cities the Israelites built for the Egyptians, or Jonah 3:3, in which Nineveh is described as "an enormously large city a three days' walk across." The description of the people of Nineveh, in this context, as God-fearing (3:5), as well as the subsequent atonement for their sins, suggest that the city's distinctly urban character was not intrinsically sinful.

13. Naftali Z.Y. Berlin, *Haamek Davar* (Jerusalem: Bamberger and Wahrmann, 1937), Genesis 11:4 [Hebrew].

14. Aviezer Ravitzky, "The Question of Tolerance in the Jewish Religious Tradition," in Yaakov Elman and Jeffrey S. Gurock, eds., *Hazon Nahum* (New York: Ktav, 1997), p. 364, cited in Gil S. Perl, "'No Two Minds are Alike': Tolerance and Pluralism in the Work of Neziv," *Torah u-Madda* 12 (2004), p. 76.

15. Yael Tamir, "The Enigma of Nationalism," *World Politics* 47:3 (April 1995), p. 418.

16. Foundational myths, for the most part, are concerned only with the origin of the culture to which they belong. There are, however, a few notable exceptions. See, for example, S.N. Kramer, "Man's Golden Age: A Sumerian Parallel to Genesis XI.1," *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* 63:3 (July-September 1943), pp. 191-194. Kramer claims the Sumerian text to be a "parallel to the 'Tower of Babel' story of Genesis 11:1-9, although it must be stressed that to all indications, the Sumerian explanation of the distribution of mankind into peoples speaking diverse languages was quite different than the biblical."

17. The chapter opens, after all, with the classically biblical *vayehi* ("and it came to pass"), which often suggests the beginning of a new episode (several other incidents in Genesis open with the same formula: see, for example, Genesis 12:10, where it is used to introduce the tale of the world's first famine; or Genesis 14:1, in which it heralds the world's first war).

18. Genesis 9:1, 3-5, 6.

19. Sanhedrin 56a.

20. Genesis 9:19.

21. While the family tree that descends from Adam splits as various sons each beget their own children (see Genesis 5), there is no explicit indication that these progenies become peoples as do the descendants of Noah.

22. Genesis 10:25.

23. Genesis 10:1. The verse continues with the seemingly redundant "sons were born to them *after the flood*," emphasizing, perhaps, the importance of the descendants of the sons of Noah to the new order established after the flood.

24. Genesis 10:5. The insertion, quoted in the JPS translation, is based on verses 20 and 31.

25. Genesis 10:20 and 31, respectively.

26. Genesis 10:32.

27. Genesis 11:1.

28. Genesis 10:8-9, 10.

29. Genesis 11:2.

30. There are, of course, many other components of nationhood, such as culture and history, though these are not mentioned here.

31. According to Ibn Ezra, the people chose to use man-made bricks rather than natural stone ("brick served them as stone"). This interpretation, implying a preference for human handiwork over God's creation, lends itself to the traditional readings of the story as a tale of hubris (see above).

32. Genesis 12:2.

33. Though the JPS translation renders *yazmu* as "propose," I believe "conspire" is more reflective of the negative sense of the word.

34. Adam and Eve, who ate from the Tree of Knowledge, were sentenced to an eternity of laborious breadwinning and painful childbearing, respectively (Genesis 3:16-19); the serpent, implicated in the same sin, was condemned to leglessness (Genesis 3:14); Cain, for the murder of Abel, was doomed to become a "ceaseless wanderer on earth" (Genesis 4:12).

35. Genesis 1:26.

36. Genesis 12:2. Berlin and Brettler see in this divine promise recompense for some of the punishments of the Tower of Babel. "Whereas the builders of Babel sought 'to make a name for [them]selves' on their own, the Lord, in the next chapter, promises to make Abram's 'name great' himself (12:2). And whereas they feared being 'scattered all over the world' (11:4), the Lord calls Abram out of Mesopotamia and promises him a land of his own (12:1, 7). Whereas the builders of Babel are cursed with an inability to understand each other (11:7, 9), the Lord blesses

not only Abram but all those who bless him (12:2-3)." See Berlin and Brettler, *JPS Tanakh Translation*, p. 29. While the parallelism between the two passages is too striking to be ignored, I cannot agree with the editors' conclusion that "Human disunity and exile are not God's final wish." The claim of this paper is that, quite to the contrary, God *does* seek human disunity, if by "disunity" we mean the division of humanity into distinct ethnicities and cultures.

37. Genesis 17:6.

38. Genesis 12:1.

39. Exodus 1:9.

40. The phrase does, however, appear elsewhere in the Bible (see II Samuel 18:7 and 19:41, Ezra 2:2, and Nehemiah 7:7).

41. Exodus 1:10. The phrase is also understood in the non-literal sense, as "gain ascendancy over the country" (see Sotah 11a); yet I see no reason to stray from the literal translation, which, in our case, is the most compelling.

42. Genesis 11:3, Exodus 1:14, 5:16-18. The word, it must be noted, also appears in non-narrative sections of the Bible (see Isaiah 9:9 and 38:19; Zechariah 6:3; and Ecclesiastes 9:8).

43. *Hava* generally precedes a request, as when Jacob asks Laban for his wife (Genesis 29:21), when Rachel demands children of her husband (Genesis 30:1), or when Judah solicits Tamar (Genesis 38:16).

44. Exodus 1:10.

45. John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1869), p. 313.

46. Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford, 1969), pp. 118-172.

47. Tony Judt, for instance, argued in a 2003 essay that

> The problem with Israel, in short, is not—as is sometimes suggested—that it is a European "enclave" in the Arab world; but rather that it arrived too late. It has imported a characteristically late-nineteenth-century separatist project into a world that has moved on, a world of individual rights, open frontiers, and international law. The very idea of a "Jewish state"—a state in which Jews and the Jewish religion have exclusive privileges from which non-Jewish citizens are forever excluded—is rooted in another time and place. Israel, in short, is an anachronism.

Tony Judt, "Israel: The Alternative," *New York Review of Books*, October 23, 2003, www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2003/oct/23/israel-the-alternative/.

48. At the same time, it is true that the Bible is, in places, distinctly universalist (see, for example, Zephaniah 3:9: "For then I will make the peoples pure of speech, so that they all invoke the Lord by name and serve him with one accord"), though there are those who argue that its universal visions are not a historical ideal, but will be realized only after the end of human history.