

Genesis 11:1-9

The tower of Babel or how the quest for atheism failed

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Introduction

- ❖ There are many cities in the world where very high towers have been built. They are impressive and when the sky is clear, they can be seen from afar. It is an illustration of the technical possibilities but of also the financial possibilities available to these cities and countries. These towers are in one sense a sign of pride and power: “see the glory of this city.” A city can become famous because of its tower.
- ❖ The first account in the Bible of a tower and a city is found in Genesis 11:1-9. It is interesting to have a closer look at the motives of these people to build this tower and the intervention by God.
 - These people were atheists because they were building this tower (of Babel) for their own sake. It had to be a very high tower. The exact height is not known and we cannot reconstruct the form of this building, although it has been tried on the basis of excavated structures in nowadays Iraq.

These structures were built to honour the gods, especially the god Marduk. However, in the Genesis narrative, there is no mention of God or gods; rather of an intention to make a NAME for themselves.

Is this the first expression of atheism – the belief that there is no (a-) god (theism)? Or is this a sign of anti-theism – instead of honouring the NAME of the Lord, establishing a name for themselves? Is this the ultimate rebellion (anti-) against God (theism)?
- ❖ This Biblical story is also interesting with regard to the relation between science and religion.
 - “They have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them” (Gen 11:6). And indeed, many people are impressed by the achievements of science and technology.

- ❖ The context, form and structure, theological, technical and hermeneutical notes given in this sermon outline overlap with other sermon outlines taken from Genesis. This makes it possible to use this sermon outline as a “stand-alone”. You can also fit this outline into a series of sermons.

Context

- ❖ The building of the tower of Babel and the subsequent scattering of the people over the earth is part of the Genesis narrative, which is beautifully structured.

<i>THE CREATION</i>	
Genesis 1:1-2:3	“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”
<i>THE HISTORY OF HEAVEN AND EARTH</i>	
Genesis 2:4-4:26	“account of the heavens and the earth” (2:4)
Genesis 5:1-6:8	“account of Adam” (5:1)
Genesis 6:9-9:28	“account of Noah” (6:9)
Genesis 10:1-11:9	“account of Shem, Ham and Japheth, Noah’s sons” (10:1)
<i>THE HISTORY OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB</i>	
Genesis 11:10-26	“account of Shem” (11:10)
Genesis 11:27-25:11	“account of Terah” (11:27) > Abram/Abraham
Genesis 25:12-18	“account of Abraham’s son Ishmael” (25:12)
Genesis 25:19-35:	“account of Abraham’s son Isaac” (25:19)
Genesis 36:1-37:29	“account of Esau” (36:1)
Genesis 37:2-50:26	“account of Jacob” (37:2)

- ❖ The Book of Genesis consists of three main parts:
 1. Genesis 1:1-2:3: In the beginning;
 2. Genesis 2:4-11:9: The history of heaven and earth, Noah and Babel;
 3. Genesis 11:10-50:26: The history of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- ❖ Within the second and the third part of Genesis, the main narratives are interspersed with shorter genealogies.

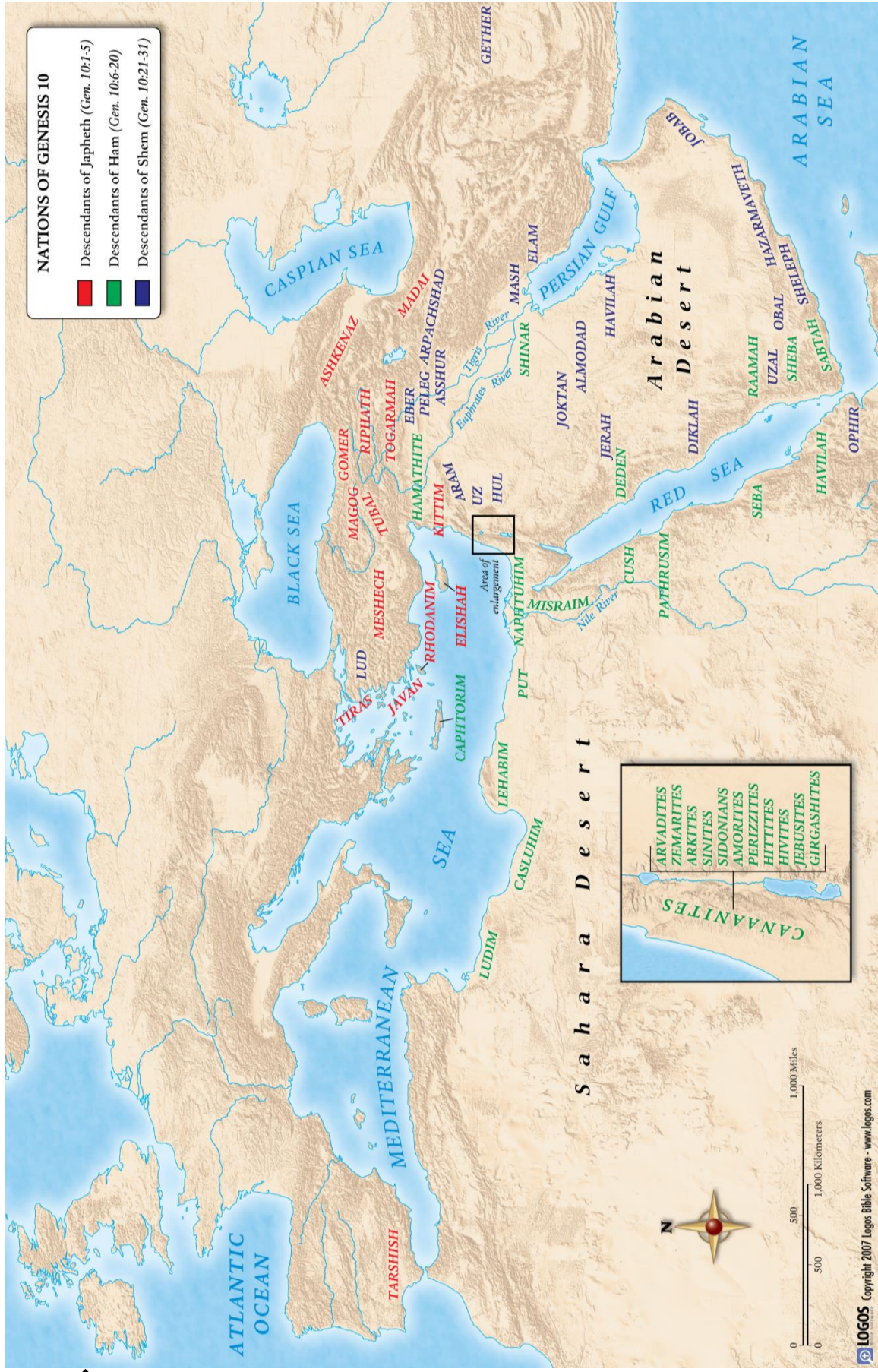
- The story of the city and the tower of Babel is thematically connected with the preceding genealogy of the sons of Noah (Gn 10:1-32):
 - After listing a table of the nations (see the map), the narrative of Babel recurs to the beginning of the history after the flood:
“These are the clans of Noah’s sons, according to their lines of descent, within their nations. **From these the nations spread out over the earth after the flood**” (Gen 10:32).
 - Genesis 11:1-9 explains how this came to be:
“**So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth**, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. **From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth**” (Gen 11:8-9).
- After telling the story of the building of the tower of Babel, the narrative will focus on the forefathers of the Israelites: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

NATIONS OF GENESIS 10

Descendants of Japheth (Gen. 10:1-5)

Descendants of Ham (Gen. 10:6-20)

Descendants of Shem (Gen. 10:21-31)



CANAANITES

- ARVADITES
- ZEMARITES
- ARKITES
- SINITES
- SIDONIANS
- AMORITES
- PERIZZITES
- HITTITES
- HIVITES
- JEBUSITES
- GIRGASHITES

Form and structure

- ❖ This narrative consists of four parts:

The tower of Babel	
<i>The original setting</i>	Genesis 11:1-2
<i>The purpose of men</i>	Genesis 11:3-4
<i>The answer of God</i>	Genesis 11:5-7
<i>The resulting setting</i>	Genesis 11:8-9

- ❖ Verse 8-9 shows the following composition:

<i>Action (A)</i>	“So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth,
<i>Result (B)</i>	and they stopped building the city.
<i>Comment</i>	That is why it was called Babel— because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world.
<i>Action (A)</i>	From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.”

- The preventive action by the LORD is repeated, stressing the point that it was he, who caused the building of the city to be stopped, by scattering the people of all the earth. A comment was added to this part of the narrative.

Technical, hermeneutical and historical notes

- ❖ Make a name for ourselves = “שֵׁם” (sjém): **b.** = *reputation; make oneself a name.*¹
- ❖ For the name of this city:
 - In the old Akkadian language Babel = “gate of god(s)”
 - In Hebrew “Babel” sounds a bit like the verb “בָּלַל” (bálal), which means *to confuse.*²

¹ Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977, p. 1028).

- Given the situation, the Akkadian meaning is preferred, because at that site the LORD God entered the city (and the world) to confuse the language.
- ❖ **“Ziggurat”**: Term meaning “temple tower”; a ziggurat was similar in profile to the step pyramid of Egypt and was used for worship. They were frequent in the major cities of Mesopotamia. The Tower of Babel (Gn 11:1–9) is believed to be of this construction. It was widely believed that deities dwelt above, in high places. Therefore worship was more appropriate on hills or mountains. (...) The ziggurats of mud brick were constructed as substitutes for hills, where the worshiper or priest could get closer to the gods. Like the pyramids of Egypt, these temple towers were square. Instead of having sloping sides, there was a succession of terraces, each smaller than the one below. Access to each level was by stairways or ramps. The shrine or altar was on top, where the priests would officiate at sacrifices, incantations, and prayers. The great seven-story ziggurat at Babylon measured nearly 300 square feet at the base and rose to about the same height.³

Exposition

Verse 1-2 *The setting*

- ❖ “Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.”
 - This is the first historical record after the Flood. It is still one big family.

Verse 3-4 *The plan of men*

- ❖ **“Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.”**
 - Babel was situated in what was called by the Greeks Mesopotamia. It means: “Between the rivers,” the river Tigris and the Euphrates (see map).
 - Clay for the baking of bricks was readily available on this plain. **“They used brick instead of stone.”** Stones, which the Egyptians used for their temples, palaces and pyramids, were not available, except by transport over a long distance.
 - When the great city of Babylon (BC) was built by the Babylonians, they baked the bricks thoroughly and used some kind of enamel.
 - **“And tar for mortar.”** The availability of tar indicates that oil could be found in this area.

² This similarity seems a bit far-fetched, because in Hebrew Babel is pronounced like Bávèl (“בָּבֶל”), which doesn’t sound like bálal

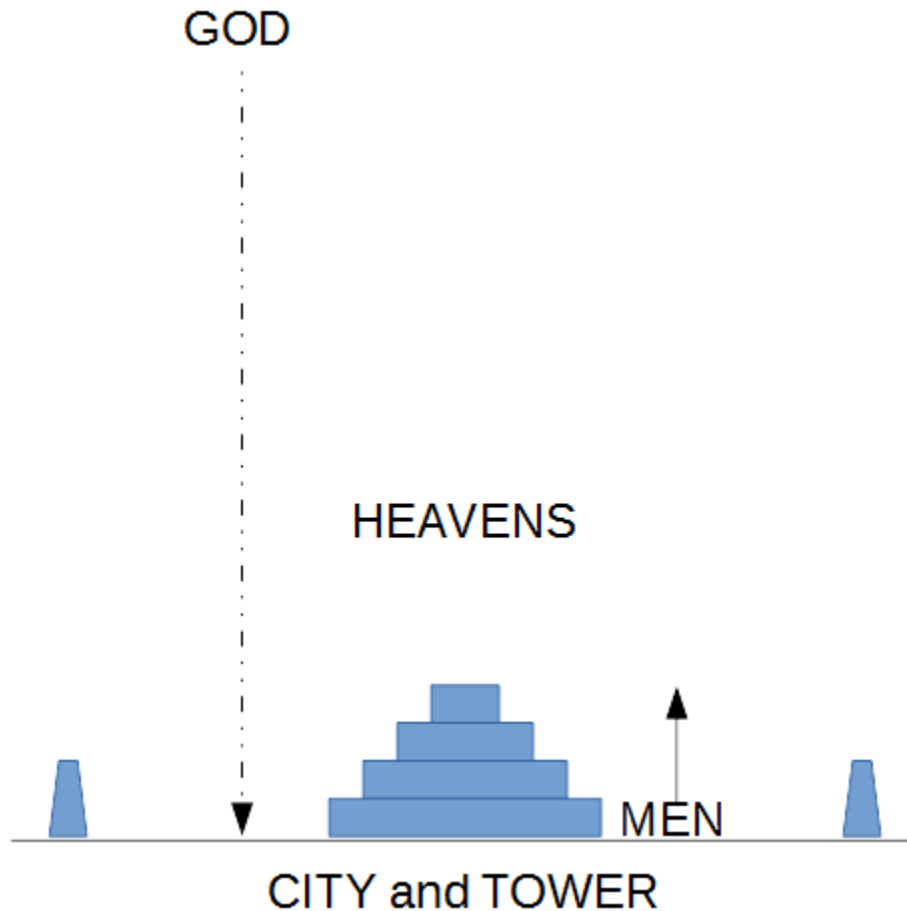
³ Ziggurat. In: *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible* (p. 2198).

- ❖ **“Then they said.”** A (longer) period of time must have elapsed before they undertook this new plan.
 - **“Come, let us build ourselves a city.”** This means that they would build walls and gates to protect the city against intruders and to serve as a refuge in times of danger. Cain was the first one to build a city, a fortified settlement (Gn 4:17), because of fear for other people (Gn 4:13).
 - **“With a tower that reaches to the heavens.”** This tower will be much higher than the surrounding buildings. The height is not mentioned. Some have tried to reconstruct the building on the basis of excavations in nowadays Iraq, where the so-called ziggurat (see above) was found. This structure was meant to honour the god Marduk, the Babylonian god of the heavens.
- ❖ They had two motives for building this tower.
 - 1.: **“So that we may make a name for ourselves.”**
 - This contrasts with the narrative of Genesis 4: “Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh. At that time men began **to call on the name of the LORD.**”
 - The prerogative of ‘making a name’ belongs to God (Isa 63:12).
 - The explanation “name for ourselves” = “reputation” is not satisfactory. “Reputation” is important in relation to others outside the city. “Name for ourselves” has probably the function to impress the city’s own inhabitants, to show the pride, the power, the impressiveness of the city and the tower, lest:
 - 2. **“and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”** This probably shows two things:
 - The people fear being scattered, probably having the history of flood still in their memories.
 - Resistance to the command (and blessing) of the LORD God, because He had said in the beginning after He had created man in his own image:
 - “God blessed them and said to them, **‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth** and subdue it’” (Gn 1:28). God repeated this command after the flood:
 - **“Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth”** (Gn 9:1, 7).
 - This might be called:
 - atheism > there is no god, we need to govern ourselves and save ourselves in times of crisis;
 - anti-theism > we will resist god, his commandments and make a name for ourselves.

“Here is a communal rejection of the necessary separation between the heavenly and the earthly. Our human sin is that we fail to recognize that God is God, and we try, both individually and corporately, to take God’s place.”⁴

Verse 5-7 *The answer of God*

- ❖ “But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building.”
 - There is some humour or, more aptly named, irony in this narrative (see figure). The city and the tower were so tiny that the LORD had to come down to see their building activities. It shows the greatness of the LORD and also the smallness of the people. But...



⁴ Atkinson, D. (1990, p. 178).

- ❖ “The LORD said, ‘If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.’”
 - **“This is the beginning of their achievements.”**
 - **“And nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.”** Remember that man has acquired knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3:4-6). Technological inventions can be used to improve and protect life, but it can also be used to destroy the lives of many people during the wars which have been fought because of confusion, greed for power, selfishness, discrimination and slavery.

Verse 8-9 *The result*

- ❖ “So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.”
 - The people didn’t have the power to resist God, as when the first man and woman were expelled from the garden of Eden (Gen 3:20-22).
- ❖ That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.
 - Confusion, misunderstanding one another, is often the cause of separation.

Application

- ❖ There is an enormous amount of books written on the subject of science and religion and especially about the issue of how Christians should view modern developments in the fields of science and applied technology.⁵
 - “As Westermann (a German scholar) puts it, ‘Genesis 11:2–9 in essence anticipates the possibility of a development that would be realized only in the technical age in a way that would affect the whole of humanity.’ Here there are hints of **political power and technological achievement**. Allied with both, and motivated also by a sense of corporate insecurity (*‘lest we be scattered’*) is a striving for fame: *‘Let us build ourselves ... Let us make a name for ourselves’* (11:4).”⁶

⁵ For further information:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Relationship_between_religion_and_science

<http://www.cslewis.org/journal/science-and-christian-faith-conflict-or-cooperation/>

<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/374103-science-works-by-experiments-it-watches-how-things-behave-every>

⁶ Atkinson, D. (1990, p.177).

- ❖ “Genesis 11 is inviting us to reflect on the meaning of human community, human achievement, human pride from the vantage point of God’s purposes for human well-being, and God’s judgment against yet another human attempt to cross from ‘man’s place’ to God’s.”⁷
 - We are living in an age of advanced technology. Even in the remotest areas people have smartphones, but still, there are exceptions in this world. There are all kinds of questions concerning privacy, although many do not care about it. By using smartphones, people can be tracked wherever they are, with whom and when they are calling. Some governments are continuously tracking their citizens.
 - Dependency on technological solutions might enhance the idea that we are independent of God, or one step further, that God will become redundant.
- ❖ Science, politics and technology are not bad if they are used to the glory of God and the well-being of societies and individuals.
 - God has created this marvellous world (Genesis 1:1-2:3). He created clay and tar, stone and mortar. Science tries to understand this creation and makes all kinds of discoveries.
 - But as soon scientists say that they do not need God as an explanation for the existence of this world, science will change into a substitute religion (scientism) and will try to cross the God-given boundaries.
Science is based on theories, experiments, new theories which can or cannot be proven. But science can neither prove the existence of God nor his non-existence. He is the completely other ONE.
 - God has given man the mind, the skills, and the power to make use of this creation, his creation. By working together, man can achieve many things. Man has been created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-28). Being created in the image of God means also that man is a creative man, just like his Creator. And indeed man is very creative in his thinking and discovery of solutions for all kinds of problems. Man is also creative when it comes to the arts, such as music, literature, dance, architecture, etc. There is a lot of technology which is beneficial to man. One example is the discovery of medicine.
 - But history has also shown the destructive power of technology, for example military technology and the atomic bomb, causing the death of millions of innocent people. There were also major incidents at nuclear plants which caused the death of many people and affected the lives of many more, and destroyed the ecological environment for many years.
 - Paul wrote in Romans 13:1-7 about the government and politics: “for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been

⁷ Atkinson, D. (1990. p.177).

established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted” (Rom 13:1-2).

- ❖ With all these developments, Christians are at risk when they try to defend their faith and their position against attacks and take refuge in the god of the gaps and fringes of life. In that case, God will become:
 - the explanation of all open questions (gaps), which haven’t been answered yet by scientific research (but for how long);
 - the ultimate refuge when someone is in serious trouble, for instance, when the doctors don’t have any remedy left. God might become the great therapist, who helps you through tough times;
 - the one, who guarantees eternal life.
 - But the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ is not God of the gaps or the fringes of life. He is the ultimate source of life and stands at the very centre thereof to be worshipped and loved. And his commandments and wisdom affect all aspects of life. To mention only two:
 - “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:39);
 - “He has showed you, o man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Mi 6:8).
 - “The people of Babel have banished God from their midst; they no longer have anything that binds them to *each other*. Always the trend is the same: wherever God has been deposed, some substitute point has to be created to bind men together in some fashion or other. You start a war, perhaps, in order to divert attention from internal political dissensions and thus create a new solidarity by making people feel that they are facing a common threat. Or you build a tower of Babel in order to concentrate people’s attention upon a new center by rallying them to united and enthusiastic effort and this way pull together the dispersive elements.”⁸
 - Nowadays we can discover different substitutes for unifying the people:
 - A strong political leader;
 - A totalitarian political system;
 - Even sports can unify a nation, eg. football as a religion in some countries.

⁸ Atkinson, D. (1990, p. 181), quoting Helmut Thieiecke at full length.

- ❖ Therefore the new solidarity is only found in Jesus Christ, who didn't build a tower to make a name for Himself. But He died on the cross for all our sins and transgressions. There is no need for Christians to visit one central place in the world to worship:
 - We can call upon the name of the Lord (Gen 4:26) anywhere in the world. And Jesus said to the Samaritan woman: "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:23-24).

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