

## BABEL TOWER – AN INDICATION OF HUMAN ASPIRATION TO SACREDNESS

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***Abstract:** Babel Tower, regardless of the signification that people used to give it, represents the place where the sacred and the profane communicate. The legendary building – which used to represent the ancient wish of people to surpass their condition, to make a huge ontological leap – is mentioned as a place (Babel) in **Genesis 10**, as belonging to the land of Nimrod. As proto-fathers have lost their status and their immortality, the ambitious „architects” of pride would lose the comfort to be able to understand to one another in one language. Considered a surrogate of the lost Eden, this city is the symbol of human ambition and arrogance: „Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth” (Book of Genesis 11, 4). If Eden was “planted” by Jehovah (Book of Genesis 2, 8), being a garden, or rather an orchard (2, 15), „ pleasing to the sight and good for food “ (2, 9), Babel would be built with bricks and tar (Book of Genesis 11, 3-4). Thus, nature is confronted with construction material, especially produced. In the Old Testament, Babel and its temples become a symbol of decadence, a fact that is revealed by the meaning of its name in Hebrew: “confusion, mixture“(balal).*

***Keywords:** Babel tower, idolatry systems, qadhos, transcendent, imitatio Dei.*

It is definitely not a coincidence the fact that Babel Tower was the first city built after the Flood, a place where humanity was united, all people speaking one language. According to the legend, Noah’s descendants built the Tower to get to the sky. The first Babel tower disappeared under Hammurabi, around 1700 B.C., but the descendants of this king built another one on the same foundation. It seems that the Tower existed for one century, until Xerxes, the Persian king, conquered the Babylon and ordered its destruction. When returning from India, Alexander the Great felt overwhelmed by the colossal ruins and tried to destroy them, as Strabo mentions. First, 10,000 men worked there, and then the entire Macedonian army destroyed the tower.

In Akkadian, Bab-ilim means „Gate to God:”, yet they were not looking for God, but for the certitude that they are able to do something by their own power. The builders did not intend at all to worship God; they built the tower based on a fake religion, with the purpose to gain fame.

In Book of Genesis 11, 7: „Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another's speech.” This is the third place where the Holy Trinity is mentioned. The fact that plural is used, has determined the Holy fathers to see intervention of Holy Trinity in the Tower of Babel.

When building this tower, people wanted to have a chance to recover the lost paradise, without God's help. As in the unfortunate attempt of Adam and Eve, who want to become like God, yet not by sharing Him, this seems to be a new attempt to surpass the mean condition of humanity, which is a sick ambition. The Babel Tower appears as people's choice to live their condition and to say no, even to God. With this construction, people refuse to share” real life”. The failure of this project reflects the fallen human nature, unable to reach their objective, as people do not surpass their conditions, unless they achieve God's existence. The fame that people claim refers to “name”. An essential aspect is ignored, that is the real name is not obtained autonomously, but with God's help.

For all religious systems in Antiquity, the conviction that Babylon was a sacred place, the centre of the world and Gods' house was common. The idea of a holy town, where people felt they connected to the divine force, the source of everything that exists and moves will remain important in all three monotheist religions<sup>1</sup>. Herodotus, a traveler in the entire world and the historian of antiquity, a witness of the secret presence of religion and rituals in numerous countries mentions how Babylon was the primary source of all idolatry systems. Bunsen says that the Egyptian religious system came from Asia and from „Babel primitive empire”. In his work, *Nineveh and its Remains*, Layard declares that we have the proof of sacred and profane history that says that idolatry has its origins in Babylonia – the oldest religious system<sup>2</sup>. These historians were

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1 Armstrong K., *Istoria lui Dumnezeu*, Ed. Nemira, 2009, p. 31.

2 [http://books.google.ro/books?hl=ro&lr=&id=5NFPAAAACAAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=austen+layard+nineveh+and+its+remains&ots=zdAxZPFtsz&sig=WpeT1fpp8AzKzKaFzJ26KXn30uY&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q=austen%20layard%20nineve](http://books.google.ro/books?hl=ro&lr=&id=5NFPAAAACAAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=austen+layard+nineveh+and+its+remains&ots=zdAxZPFtsz&sig=WpeT1fpp8AzKzKaFzJ26KXn30uY&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=austen%20layard%20nineve).

Layard, Austen Henry. *Nineveh and its remains: with an account of a visit to the Chaldean Christians of Kurdistan, and the Yezidis, or devil-worshippers; and an inquiry into the manners and arts of the ancient Assyrians*. D. Appleton and Co., 1856.

quoted by Hislop<sup>3</sup>. When Rome became a global empire it assimilated in its system the gods and religions of all different pagan countries it had conquered<sup>4</sup>. Due to the fact that Babylon was the source of paganism of these countries, we can understand the fact that early religion of pagan Rome was similar to Babylon developed under different forms and different names in the regions where it arrived.

The tower that was supposed to reach the sky has an allusion to Babylonian religion where the temple could have the form of a pyramid with stairs, ziggurat. After describing the end of conflict between gods, the creation of the world and human kind, the Babylonian epos of creation, *Enuma eliš*, tells how Anunnaki gods build for the great god Marduk the Babylon, after they make bricks for a year. The construction in the middle of the Babylon, called Esagila, representing the temple of Marduk, resembles the tower of Babel: „*They raised the peak of Esagila reaching the height of Apsu/ They built a tower high as Apsu*”<sup>5</sup>. In height and centrality, the temple and the ziggurat become the world axis, the navel of earth, the place where gods rest, where the sacred and the profane communicate. But for the Old Testament, the Babylon and its temples become symbols of decay. If in Akkadian the name means “God’s gate” (bab ilu), in Hebrew, the name means „confusion”, „mixture” (balal).

If, initially, people were structurally good, because they had inside the Holy Spirit that made their being saint, once sin planted its deep roots, the human being pushed away consciously the Holy Spirit through his sins. Saint Pavel says that our body is a „Temple of the Holy Spirit” (*Corinthian 6, 18*). Thus, He lives only in those with clean bodies and souls. But, most of the times, people sin, that is why the Holy Spirit left those who are “only body”.

J. Zizioulas states that „*Outride the communion with God, a person loses its uniqueness it becomes a common being, a „thing” without absolute „identity”, “without name, without face*”<sup>6</sup>. Thus, divine blessing given to Noah’s son is disregarded in *Book of Genesis 9, 26*. In Hebrew, Sem means exactly „name” (šem), which means that real name is not obtained autonomous but through God. Avraham’s call from *Book of Genesis 12* suggests how to get a name. God promises that a great people will come of him, with a great name, where all people will be blessed: „*I*

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3 Hislop, *The Two Babylons*, p.12, [http://ldolphin.org/PDFs/The\\_Two\\_Babylons-Alexander\\_Hislop.pdf](http://ldolphin.org/PDFs/The_Two_Babylons-Alexander_Hislop.pdf).

4 Bailey, *The Legacy of Rome*, p.245, <https://archive.org/details/legacyofrome00bail>.

5 tăblița VI, în: ANET, ed. 3, 1969, p. 69.

6 Zizioulas I., *Ființa eclesială*, Ed. Bizantină, București, 2007, pp. 37-44.

will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (12, 2-3). Thus, Avraham heals the desert fame of babel Tower, bringing God’s blessing to all kinds, and the Bible shows how Avraham’s faith becomes the real link of spread peoples. God’s relation to Avraham (*Book of Genesis 15, 18*) is the beginning of the relationship, with divine initiative, between people and God, a communion broken by people’s mistake and with devil’s help (*Book of Genesis 3, 6-10*).

As Mircea Eliade<sup>7</sup> shows, the religious man puts his model on a trans-humane level that is revealed in myths. He does not become a man unless he imitates Gods. Such an *imitatio dei* implies sometimes, for primitives, a great responsibility. Saint Basil the Great is alleged to have said: „Man has, once the Holy Spirit is inside him, the gift of foretelling, of being an Apostol, an angel, although he is dust and ash”<sup>8</sup>. Saint Gregory the Great claimed that anyone who really tries can get to all heavenly gifts<sup>9</sup>.

Without an “opening” to transcendent, life becomes „chaos”, meaningless. In most religions, *Axis Mundi* was the point of meeting between 3 levels of existence: our world, the upper world (Heaven), the lower world (inferno, return to primordial chaos). This vertical axis was imagined either as a pole, as a stair (Jacob’s stairs), a mountain (Olympus, Gerizim, Sinai, and Sion), a tree (the Tree of Life), liana etc. Mesopotamians considered that Babylon was the link between Earth and lower regions, as the town was built on „Apsu’s gate” – a name given to waters of chaos before creation. The same tradition is seen at Jews. The rock of the temple in Jerusalem was placed over „tehom’s mouth” (the mouth of depth: = primordial waters, underground). In the middle of the garden of Eden *Axis Mundi* was present – the relation between Heaven and Earth – the tree of life which ensured immortality. The river coming out of the garden divided in four parts.

Moving further, Jews become the chosen people to keep the true worship. Inevitably, they took the same vision where the chosen people is situated in the centre of the world. Thus, although Yahweh declares repeatedly that earth belongs to Him, Jews consider certain areas more

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7 Eliade, M., *Sacral și profanul*, Humanitas, 1995.

8 *Filocalia*, cap. “Calist și Ignatie Xanthopol”, vol. VIII, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1077, pp. 220-221.

9 Cf. Kurz, L., *Gregors des Grossen Lehre von den Engeln*, Bader’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Rottenburg A.N., 1938, p. 119.

saint than others: Mountains such as Horeb, Sinai, Carmel, were places that God offered Law, fire from sky and other manifestations of His presence. Sion is considered „God’s mountain”, as Jerusalem was seen as the new centre of the world. Betel, Mahanaim and any other place where God presents Himself to a patriarch became a sacred place where an altar was built. Later, true worship is possible only in the sanctuary built upon divine model, which is seen in the Jerusalem Temple.

In *New Testament*, Jesus shows that true worship is „*in spirit and truth*”: God is not in a certain place in our world, he is beyond and everywhere, omnipresent.

Babilon becomes in the Bible an image of evil. *Isaiah 13-14* contains prophecies against Babylon and announces its destruction: „*Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the pride and glory of the Babylonians, will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah. She will never be inhabited or lived in through all generations; there no nomads will pitch their tents, there no shepherds will rest their flocks. But desert creatures will lie there, jackals will fill her houses; there the owls will dwell, and there the wild goats will leap about. Hyenas will inhabit her strongholds, jackals her luxurious palaces. Her time is at hand, and her days will not be prolonged.*” (13, 19-21). It is the symbol of evil and the king of Babylon, called „Lucifer” („bright stare” in Bible) and „star of the morning, son of the dawn” (14, 12), goes to hell (şeol), „Sheol, To the recesses of the pit” (14, 15) because he thought to himself: „*But you said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, And I will sit on the mount of assembly In the recesses of the north. 'I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High*” (14, 13-14). The holy Fathers identify the king of Babylon who wanted to take God’s place with the help of the devil (cf. Sf. Basil the Great, Commentary to Isaiah’s book, 88).

Maintaining the comparison with Eden perspective, where paradise is an orchard (*Genesis 2,15*), Babel being built from bricks and tar (*Genesis 11, 3-4*), reminds us of the Inferno.

The problem of Babel is present in the work of holy fathers who compare Babel with the gathering from the fifth part: the tower is the symbol of all languages mixed together, peron confusion, breach in a dialogue with God and people; the fifth is the symbol of new dialogue and personal communion with God. St. Basil the great interprets in a personal manner *Psalms 136*<sup>10</sup>: „*He observes that the Psalm does not*

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10 In Psalm 136 we see a surprising image. The Israelites exiled in Babylon are asked to sing psalms of Sion (v. 3), but they refuse, as they cannot sing God’s song on a

*protect the one who kills anyway the Babylonian child, but first want that their new-born to be slaughtered, not letting them grow up, not letting them become evil. Secondly,, the way they are killed, because the happy are those who conquer and defeats in wisdom the birth of children in the mixed mind, which is called Babylon (mix), and then they are crushed against a rock. And the Rock is Jesus. The one who crushed evil against truth that is the one who crushes Babylonian children against the rock. They are the words that move the soul of the one who receives that, the child must be well crushed against the rock.”* (Commentary to Isaiah, 272).

The Hebrew term „qados” (saint), although expresses the idea of *distinct*, does not mean that Yahweh remains separated from the world. He reveals His sanctity to man, urging him to become a saint. In his desire not to let man in the situation to be far away from Him God Himself diminished the distance that separates Him from man, his creation, first by revealing His sanctity and then by calling him to sanctity and spiritualization. Thus, God shoed his sanctity to the world by bringing it into existence, maintaining it in existence and taking care that it achieves its final purpose. Because man cannot stand in front of divine sanctity which is revealed ceaselessly and diversely in creation, in the old books there is an idea that „*God is adapting to man’s weakness, in a way*”. That is why, every time he reveals Himself to man, to a whole community, He „does not live fully and definitively in a human being”. When accepting to reveal Himself to the world, divine sanctity looks like something that is out of this world (***I Kings 2, 2***), "I am going the way of all the earth. Be strong, therefore, and show yourself a man." Thus it appeared as a cloud, or a pole of fire that led the Israelites (***Exodus 13, 21-22***), or “the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench” (***III Kings 18, 38***).

Although frightening the spiritual experience of meeting God, reveals to the believer the fact that He is a Person that can share sanctity. Even if the cleanest of the mortals in front of God lose courage and feel awkward like when meeting something of a different nature than the profane world, they still have the desire to stay as long as possible close to the divine presence. Obvious feelings of fear, but also exaltation accompany saints’ religious experiences.

To show the tight relation that must exist between God and the chosen people, God is also called in the Old Testament „Israel’s saint”.

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foreign ground. Finally, the exiled ones are very cruel: „ a *"Daughter of Babylon" of the delight of "he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks"* (v. 8-9).

This name does not intend to illustrate the categoric distinction between God, Saint by excellence, or „The one who is totally Another, in front of Gods of other nations who have nothing to do with its sanctity, His greatness being unique and with no rivals”, for He is the only God.

God’s call in the *Old Testament* „Be saint for I your God am saint” (*Leviticus 11, 44; 19, 2; 20, 7, 26*) shows us that ne after God’s free decision, a special category of believers exists: it has infinite perspectives to progress to goodness, for a closer resemblance to God and a full image of the Creator. The whole period from the Old Testament is dominated by the call to sanctity and purification.

When we use the word „saint” today, we usually refer to a state of moral excellence. But the Hebrew term „qadhos” (kaddosh) had no relation to morality, it meant „alterity” and it showed a radical separation. God’s appearance on Mount Sinai underlined the huge gap between man and divine world<sup>11</sup>.

In his work *The Sacred*, Rudolf Otto – the great theologian and historian of religions – describes the frightening transcendental reality experience as *mysterium terribile et fascinans*. The feeling is frightening because it is shocking and fascinating as it transmits an irresistible attraction. While *tremendum* represents „the rejecting element of the lighted” (transformed into the saintly „anger of God” that the Books talk about), *fascinans* is the element which attracts the numinous, with traits of goodness, pity and love<sup>12</sup>.

Mircea Eliade synthesized Otto’s conception which designated all these experiences with the term *numinous* (from Latin *numen*, „God”), because the revelation of an aspect of divine power is determined. The numinous is a sort of *ganz andere*, something special, which has nothing human or cosmic, and gives man the feeling of unimportance, as he is just a „being” or, as Avraham said when he addressed God, only „dust and ash” (*Book of Genesis 18, 27*). The sacred manifests as a completely different reality from “natural” realities. Language can only reproduce naively the notions of *tremendum*, *majestas*, *mysterium fascinans*, using terms from nature or from the profane spiritual life of man. Yet, this analogic terminology comes from man’s incapacity to express the *ganz andere*: language can only suggest what surpasses man’s natural experience, with the help of terms taken from this experience”<sup>13</sup>.

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11 Armstrong K., *op. cit.*, p. 66.

12 Otto, R., *Sacrum*, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, p. 168.

13 Eliade, M., *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

In order for God to reveal Himself as absolute being, man must make an exercise of profound humbleness, to exercise the conscience of his own unimportance: „When man is poor and and humble, God become everything in all”<sup>14</sup>.

As C. Yannaras underlines, „what is individual, egocentric, interested, represents for Church a way of survival of mortal physical entity –it is sin (failure and existential failure), death. What is transcendence of the self, a refusal of the self, totally giving up the ego, love, is life, triumph of life over death. Even if knowledge disappears, if languages disappear, even if prophecies will not become true, love will never disappear (Corinteni1, 13, 8)”.<sup>15</sup>

The man of our times is an image of the Babel Tower. Thus, this tower is not only an historical building, but it dwells in every person who loves himself. Spiritually speaking, Babel represents an interior reality of the fallen world. Every person builds inside his soul a Babel tower and consumes all resources in order to gain a famous name. The chance of humanity is to gain the Holy Spirit, thus the confusion provoked by the Babel Tower is healed and takes to the communion of gathering in the same place, or as St. Basil the Great interprets it, it provokes the crushing of „Babylonian” thoughts of man against the Jesus-Rock.

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14 *Ibidem*, p. 30.

15 Yannaras, C., *Contra religiei*, Ed. Anastasia, 2011, p. 57.