

The Tower of Babel in the Bedford Book of Hours

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Especially of late, various scholars have dwelt more and more on traces of influences of Jewish legends on Christian art.

We would like to add more examples to the available list by making reference to illustrations portraying the story of the building of the Tower of Babel.

In the depictions of Biblical stories, there are occasionally details, scenes and images which are incompatible with what is related in the Bible, and have no explicit justification in the sacred text. One used to ascribe them to errors arising from copiers' misunderstanding and their maladroit interpretations of their models. Sometimes they appear to be figments of the artist's imagination. More recently, however, the feeling has grown among scholars that such incongruities should be explained by the impact of other literary sources, and that these texts or stories originated in Jewish legends of the Midrash or Aggadah types.

Thus, in many paintings of the Tower of Babel, next to the Tower a large figure is shown, dressed as a soldier-hero in full armour, as for example in a manuscript of St. Augustine,¹ or wearing splendid clothes, sometimes even with a crown on his head, as in the *Bible moralisée*.²

Scholars have already pointed out that this is the figure of Nimrod, mentioned in Genesis 10, 11 as King of Babel and the land of Shinar, but not as the builder of the Tower. However, the Bab. Talmud³ says: "And why was he called Nimrod? Because in his

¹ Tours, 1473, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, fr.19, fol. 81 v.

² French, mid 13th century, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 2554, fol. 50.

³ *Erubin* 53 a.

reign he led all the world in rebellion" ('Nimrod' is derived from the Hebrew root *m-r-d* which means to rebel).

Further in *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*⁴ it is said: "Nimrod said to his people: Come let us build a great city... Let us build a great tower in its midst ascending to heaven..." Flavius Josephus, whose *Antiquities of the Jews* was widely read in the Christian world, reiterates the report that it was Nimrod who incited his people (I, 4, 2). This tradition was passed on to Christianity, which saw in the giant Nimrod the builder of the Tower, a figure of Satan-typus *diaboli*.

In contrast to this depiction, rooted in Christian literary sources which adopted a Jewish legend, scholars have dwelt on another detail which originated in Jewish legend, and until recently had been noticed only in two works of Jewish art. The depictions in the "Golden Haggadah" of 1320⁵ and in the iconographically similar "Sister to the Golden Haggadah",⁶ are unusual.

In the "Golden Haggadah", to the right to the tower, a man is depicted stabbing in his back another man, who is pulling a bucket in a pulley. Beneath him, a man digging is being stoned by a man peeping through a window in the Tower. In front of the Tower, two people stab one another. Also, the man on the left, perhaps Nimrod, is stoned by another man who throws stones at him from a window. At the top of the Tower, a man is depicted stabbing in the back.

In the "Sister Haggadah" there is an inscription above the picture: "The divided generation who are killing each other". The depiction is basically similar. At the top of the Tower, two people are seen trying to strike each other with their work tools, a hammer and a plasterers trowel. A man on the right, pulling a rope on the pulley, is being pushed from behind by another, who is also holding the rope, while a third man is gripping the nose of the first, and raises a heavy sword to chop off his head. On the left a kneeling man can be seen being stoned by two people, one at his side and the other throwing stones through the Tower window.

The source of the strange depictions lies in the Bab. Talmud⁷ which says of the builders of the Tower: "The generation of the

⁴ Chap. 24.

⁵ Barcelona, London, British Library, Add. Ms. 27210, fol. 3 r.

⁶ Spain, 14th century, London, British Library, Or. 2884, fol. 3 v.

dispersion have non portion in the world to come. What did they do? They split up into three parties. One said 'let us ascend and dwell there', the second 'let us ascend and serve idols', and the third said 'let us ascend and wage war'." Rashi, the greatest and most popular Jewish medieval Bible commentator, expounds the verse as follows: "No-one understood the language of his fellow— one asked for a brick, another brought dirt, while another stood upon him and split his skull." Rashi relies here on an earlier legend in *Genesis Rabba* (38, 10), which says: "One of them would ask his fellow 'Bring me water' and he brought him dirt. So he hit him and split his skull. 'Bring me and axe' and he brought him a spade, so he hit him and split his skull." So also in *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* (chap. 24): "... they wished to speak one to another in the language of his fellow-countryman, but none understood the language of his fellow. What did they do? Everyone took his sword, and they fought one another to destroy (each other), and half the world fell there by the sword."

We can add to the illustrations in the above two illuminated Jewish manuscripts, another depiction in a Christian manuscript of the fifteenth century, *the Book of Hours* of the Duke of Bedford.⁸ On the top floor of the tower, strange occurrences are seen. On the upper horizontal balcony stands a man, who lifts up a club against another. On the right, higher up on the ascending spiral diagonal balcony, a figure is seen throwing a stone in an attempt to stone the figure underneath him. On the left another figure lies on the ground, apparently thrown down from the upper scaffolding. On the scaffolding itself, a figure on the right is shown beating another, and on the left are two people wrestling with each other.

The depiction is similar to those in the two Jewish manuscripts and is undoubtedly based on a Jewish legend.

We are not familiar with any other Christian manuscript in which the builders of the tower are depicted as striking one another. However, in the eleventh century Anglo Saxon manuscript of Caedmon poetry two people are depicted standing on the balcony of the tower.⁹ The one on the upper floor is holding out his hand swinging an axe to the right, and the other on the floor

⁷ Sanhedrin 109 a.

⁸ 1430, London, British Library, Add. 18850, fol. 17 v.

⁹ Anglo-Saxon, 11th century, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 11, fol. 83.

below is swinging a pick to the left. They do not seem to be involved in building activities.

If we compare the depiction in the Caedmon manuscript with the one in the "Sister to the Golden Haggadah", we can perhaps see the source of the two figures in the Caedmon. Their swinging work tools threateningly is very reminiscent of the Haggadah, where two people are seen at the top of the tower lifting their tools and threatening to strike each other. Furthermore, the man with the pick on the left side in the tower in the Caedmon manuscript apparently attempts to strike the man standing opposite him on the ground with a kind of axe or halberd in his hand. Other people in the crowd on the ground are carrying similar instruments which also do not look like work tools, but rather like halberds. The picture evokes the image of war, and was apparently similar to the depiction in the Jewish manuscripts, which the Caedmon artist copied without understanding it.

In the Bedford Book of Hours, two angels can be seen above the tower in the star-filled sky, one wielding a sword and the other an axe. The angels are not mentioned in the Genesis version of the Tower of Babel episode, whereas God, who is clearly mentioned there, is not depicted in the painting.

In other depictions of the Tower of Babel God is sometimes presented looking from above at the builders of the Tower, as e.g. in the stained glass window in the Saint Étienne church at Mulhouse (14th century). Sometimes God appears descending from heaven to disperse the tower-builder all over the earth, as in the ivory Palliotto of Salerno,¹⁰ or in the fresco at Saint Savin sur Gartemple (12th century). In other sources as in the Anglo Saxon manuscript of the Aelfrik paraphrase of the Bible,¹¹ God is shown descending from heaven accompanied by an angel.

God is shown in the mosaic of San Marco in Venice (13th century), enclosed in a segment of heaven and accompanied by three angels. Similar is the depiction in the *Histoire Universelle* of the same recension.¹² In the scene on the right, God is seen in the company of group of angels, scattering the tower-builders in four

¹⁰ Amalphi, 11th century, Salerno Cathedral.

¹¹ Anglo Saxon, 11th century, London, British Library, Claudius B IV, fol. 19.

¹² North Italian, written in french, 14th century, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, 2576, fol. 9 v.

different directions. Thus the depictions capture three stages of the story, which sometimes merge: the building of the tower, God looking down from heaven at the builders, and his descent from heaven when he confounds their language and disperses them all over the earth. In some depictions God is shown alone, and in others he is accompanied by an angel or several angels. In the *Seragio Octateuch*, on the other hand, God is represented by only hand coming out of a segment of heaven.¹³ The abstention from depicting God originated in Jewish art which steered clear of portraying God anthropomorphically. Scholars indeed presume that the archetype of the *Seragio Octateuch* is a manuscript which goes back to early Christianity, and which may have been of Jewish origin. In the Bedford Book of Hours, the artist portrays only the angels striking the builders of the tower and does not show God at all. We offer the thesis that the depiction of the angels in the Bedford Book of Hours, as in the other items mentioned, also have their source in the Jewish legend.

The Midrash debates in Genesis the use of the plural rather than the singular in reference to God: "Let us go down and there confound their language...". In *Pirke de Rabi Eliezer* (chap. 24) it is said: "Whence (do we know) that the Holy One, bless be He, descended with the seventy angels... and they confused their speech (and divided them), into seventy nations and seventy languages... Because it is said "Let us go down..."(Gen 11:7). So also in the Palestinian Targum.

The *Great Midrash* (Noah) adds: "It seems that the Holy One blessed be He does not do a thing till he consults his court. How can that be? It shows that the Holy One blessed be He does not do anything otherwise than through an angel..." This idea eventually found expression in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* (late 12th century). There, the eminent philosopher and exegete affirmed the motion expressed in the legends that any action undertaken by the Almighty is actually performed through angels carrying out Divine orders.

Indeed, in Jewish art, not only do the artists avoid anthropomorphic depictions of God, even when they show an activity that the Bible explicitly attributes to God, but rather depict an angel

¹³ Byzantine, 12th century, Istanbul, Topkapu Seray, cod. 8, fol. 65 v.

carrying it out. Thus, for example, in the *Sassoon Haggadah*,¹⁴ the illustration of the verse “And I will pass through the land of Egypt I myself, and not an angel”, just above those words an angel is shown flying over Egypt.

It may be assumed that the source of the angels in the depiction of the Tower of Babel in the *Bedford Book of Hours*, as in other items especially those in which the angels are depicted “in activa” is to sought in Jewish legends, and in the Jewish pictorial tradition. In the fourteenth century Egerton Genesis Manuscript,¹⁵ in which there are indeed many portrayals which originale in Jewish legend, the angels are depicted blowing strongly and destroying the tower.

While the figure of God is portrayed in other paintings in keeping with the text of Scriptures, and with Christian tradition, which does not avoid anthropomorphic presentations of God, in the miniature of the *Bedford Book of Hours* only the angels are shown. This can be explained by assuming that the artist, or the painter of his model, intended to avoid depicting the figure of God, possibly in keeping with the already mentioned Jewish tradition of avoiding anthropomorphic depictions of God. This strengthens the proposition that the source of the painting in the *Bedford Book of Hours* is a Jewish pictorial depiction, and not only a Jewish literary source, since the illustration in the Bedford manuscript of the builders fighting each other is apparently exceptional in Christian art and is known only from Jewish manuscripts.

Another unusual facet of the miniature of the Bedford Book of Hours is the strange and rare depiction of stones seen falling from both sides of the Tower.

In contrast, in the fourteenth century Bohemian manuscript of *the Welislav Bible*,¹⁶ God is seen through the clouds intent on destroying the Tower with a kind of pitchfork.

In the *Egerton manuscript* four angels, or perhaps personifications of the four winds, are depicted blowing strongly to destroy the Tower whose bricks are falling in a pile.

¹⁴ Franco-Spanish, 14th century, Jerusalem, Israel Museum, 184/41; 583,75, fol. 86.

¹⁵ English, London, British Library, Egerton ms. 1894, fol. 6.

¹⁶ Bohemian, Prague University Library, 412.

The source of the depiction was ascribed to the *Historia Scholastica* of Peter Comestor. However, the primary source of the image is in fact to be found in Josephus Flavius *Antiquities of the Jews* (I, 4): “but the God sent storms of wind and overthrew the tower”. The writings of Josephus, were familiar to Christians from ancient times, and apparently influenced also Peter Comestor.

In the Bible, the destruction of the tower is indeed not mentioned at all. Jewish legend talks explicitly about the destruction of the tower. Thus, for example, *Midrash Tanhumah* (Noah): “we shall divide the tower into three parts, a third has sunk, a third has fallen and a third is still standing.”

The Egerton manuscript is characterised by the fact that it contains many Jewish motifs. Accordingly, it is also possible that the motif depicted in the Welislav manuscript and in the *Bedford Book of Hours* originated in Jewish writings, which in the *Bedford Book of Hours*, were known to Christian authors.

The miniature of the Tower of Babel, together with some other depictions from the Bible, is not part of the usual iconography of a Book of Hours, and was apparently later added to the manuscript. The manuscript was probably given to the wife of the Duke of Bedford in 1432 as a wedding present. In 1430, Anne of Bedford gave it, with the consent of her husband, as a gift to Henry IV, the child King of England, when he was crowned King of France, while his uncle, the Duke of Bedford, served as regent. Probably then the pages with the Old Testament scenes were added. Scholars have suggested that the illustration of the Tower of Babel was chosen especially as an allusion to the expectation that the young king would remedy the confusion of languages between France and England. Can the legendary France in the painting also be a further hint at the long war between the two countries and at the hope that with the conquest of France by England peace would reign. But perhaps the allusions to war were unintentionally added to the painting, because they had been present in the model and were based, not only on Jewish legends, but also on Jewish pictorial source. This conclusion is buttressed by the avoidance of anthropomorphic depictions of God in the miniature, and the depiction of angels instead.