Tower of Babel

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This article is about the Biblical story. For other uses, see Tower of Babel (disambiguation).

The Tower of Babel by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1563)

Engraving The Confusion of Tongues by Gustave Doré (1865)
The Tower of Babel (Hebrew: מגדל בבל Migdal Bavel Arabic: برج بابل Burj Babil) forms the focus of a story told in the Book of Genesis of the Bible. According to the story, a united humanity of the generations following the Great Flood, speaking a single language and migrating from the east, came to the land of Shinar (Hebrew: שנער), where they resolved to build a city with a tower "whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

God came down to see what they did and said: "They are one people and have one language, and nothing will be withheld from them which they purpose to do." "Come, let us go down and confound their speech." And so God scattered them upon the face of the Earth, and confused their languages, so that they would not be able to return to each other, and they left off building the city, which was called Babel "because God there confounded the language of all the Earth".

The Tower of Babel has often been associated with known structures, notably the Etemenanki, a ziggurat dedicated to the Mesopotamian god Marduk by Nabopolassar, king of Babylonia (c. 610 BC). The Great Ziggurat of Babylon base was square (not round), 91 metres (300 ft) in height, and demolished by Alexander the Great. A Sumerian story with some similar elements is told in Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta.

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The narrative of the city of Babel is recorded in Genesis 11:1-9. Everyone on earth spoke the same language. As people migrated from the east, they settled in the land of Shinar. People there sought to make bricks and build a city and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for themselves, so that they not be scattered over the world. God came down to look at the city and tower, and remarked that as one people with one language, nothing that they sought would be out of their reach. God went down and confounded their speech, so that they could not understand each other, and scattered them over the face of the earth, and they stopped building the city. Thus the city was called Babel.
The phrase "Tower of Babel" does not actually appear in the Bible; it is always, "the city and its tower" (אֶתְוֶרֶת קְפָר אֲדֹנָי-קְפָרָה) or just "the city" (הָעִיר). According to the biblical etymology, the city received the name "Babel" from the Hebrew word balal, meaning to jumble. (The Hebrew verb לבלבל Lebalbel means "to confuse").

[edit] Composition

[edit] Themes

The story explains the confusion of tongues: variation in human language. The story's theme of competition between the Lord and humans appears elsewhere in Genesis, in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The 1st century Jewish interpretation found in Flavius Josephus explains the construction of the tower as a hubristic act of defiance against God ordered by the arrogant tyrant Nimrod. There have, however, been some contemporary challenges to this classical interpretation, with emphasis placed on the explicit motive of cultural and linguistic homogeneity mentioned in the narrative (v. 1, 4, 6). This reading of the text sees God's actions as not a punishment for pride but as an etiology of cultural differences, presenting Babel as the cradle of civilization.

[edit] Genre

The narrative of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11.1-9) is an etiology or explanation of a phenomenon. Etiologies are narratives that explain the origin of a custom, ritual, geographical feature, name, or other phenomenon. The story of the tower of Babel explains the origins of the multiplicity of languages. God was concerned that humans had too much freedom to do as they wished, so God brought into existence multiple languages. Thus, humans were divided into linguistic groups, unable to understand one another.

[edit] Authorship and source criticism

Tradition attributes the whole of the Pentateuch to Moses, however in the late 19th century, the documentary hypothesis was proposed by Julius Wellhausen. This hypothesis proposes four sources, J, E, P and D. Of these hypothetical sources, proponents suggest that this narrative comes from the J or "Yahwist source." The etiological nature of the narrative (see Genre above) is considered typical of J. In addition, the intentional word play regarding the city of Babel, and the noise of the people's "babbling," is found in the Hebrew words as easily as in English, and is considered typical of the "Yahwist source."

[edit] Historical context
Hanging Gardens of Babylon (16th century), an engraving by Martin Heemskerck, depicts the Tower of Babel in the background.

The Greek form of the name Babylon is from the native Akkadian Bāb-ilim, which means "Gate of the god", which summarizes the religious purpose of the great temple towers (the ziggurats) of ancient Sumer (Biblical Shinar). In Genesis 10, Babel is said to have formed part of Nimrod's kingdom. It is not specifically mentioned in the Bible that he ordered the tower to be built, but Nimrod is often associated with its construction in other sources. The Hebrew version of the name of the city and the tower, Babel, is attributed in Gen. 11:9 to the verb balal, which means to confuse or confound in Hebrew. The ruins of the city of Babylon are near Hillah, Babil Governorate, Iraq.

The peoples listed in Chapter 10 of Genesis (the Table of Nations) are stated by 11:8-9 to have been scattered over the face of the earth from Shinar only after the abandonment of the Tower. Some see an internal contradiction between the mention already in Genesis 10:5 that "From these the maritime peoples spread out into their territories by their clans within their nations, each with his own language" and the subsequent Babel story, which begins "Now the entire earth was of one language and uniform words" (Genesis 11:1). However, this view presupposes a rigid chronological sequence of 10:5 and 11:1, whereas the traditional Judeo-Christian interpretation is that 10:5 refers to the same later scattering as mentioned more fully in 11:9. An alternative resolution to the apparent contradictory material of Genesis 10:5 and 11:8-9 is found in the documentary hypothesis which suggests different sources for those verses. The commonly held view of biblical scholars holding to the four-source origins of Genesis (J, E, P, D) is that 10:5 comes from the Priestly (P) text source and 11:8-9, and actually the entirety of the Babel narrative, from the Jahwist source (J). The final editors of Genesis were not concerned with the narrative continuity between sources.

[edit] In other sources

[edit] Destruction

The account in Genesis makes no mention of any destruction of the tower. The people whose languages are confounded simply stop building their city, and are scattered from there over the face of the Earth. However, in other sources such as the Book of Jubilees (chapter 10 v.18-27),
Cornelius Alexander (frag. 10), Abydenus (frags. 5 and 6), Josephus (Antiquities 1.4.3), and the Sibylline Oracles (iii. 117–129), God overthrows the tower with a great wind. In the Midrash, it said that the top of the tower was burnt, the bottom was swallowed, and the middle was left standing to erode over time.

[edit] Etemenanki, the ziggurat at Babylon

Reconstruction of the Etemenanki, which was 91 metres (300 ft) in height.

Etemenanki (Sumerian: "temple of the foundation of heaven and earth") was the name of a ziggurat dedicated to Marduk in the city of Babylon. It was famously rebuilt by the 6th century BC Neo-Babylonian dynasty rulers Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar II. According to modern scholars such as Stephen L. Harris, the biblical story of the Tower of Babel was likely influenced by Etemenanki during the Babylonian captivity of the Hebrews.[11]

Nebuchadnezzar wrote that the original tower had been built in antiquity: "A former king built the Temple of the Seven Lights of the Earth, but he did not complete its head. Since a remote time, people had abandoned it, without order expressing their words. Since that time earthquakes and lightning had dispersed its sun-dried clay; the bricks of the casing had split, and the earth of the interior had been scattered in heaps."

Scholars have recently discovered in the Schoyen Collection the oldest known representation of the Etemenanki. [12] Carved on a black stone, The Tower of Babel Stele (as it is known) dates from 604–562 BC, the time of Nebuchadnezzar II. [13]

The Greek historian Herodotus (440 BC) later wrote of this ziggurat, which he called the "Temple of Zeus Belus", giving an account of its vast dimensions.

The already decayed Great Ziggurat of Babylon was finally destroyed by Alexander the Great in an attempt to rebuild it. He managed to move the tiles of the tower to another location, but his death stopped the reconstruction.
**Book of Jubilees**

The *Book of Jubilees* contains one of the most detailed accounts found anywhere of the Tower. And they began to build, and in the fourth week they made brick with fire, and the bricks served them for stone, and the clay with which they cemented them together was asphalt which comes out of the sea, and out of the fountains of water in the land of Shinar. And they built it: forty and three years were they building it; its breadth was 203 bricks, and the height [of a brick] was the third of one; its height amounted to 5433 cubits and 2 palms, and [the extent of one wall was] thirteen stades [and of the other thirty stades]. (Jubilees 10:20-21, Charles' 1913 translation)

**Pseudo-Philo**

In *Pseudo-Philo*, one of the earliest accounts (c. AD 70) though not thought to be by Philo, the direction for the building is ascribed not only to Nimrod, who is made prince of the Hamites, but also to Joktan as prince of the Semites, and to Phenech son of Dodanim as prince of the Japhetites. Twelve men are arrested for refusing to bring bricks, including Abraham, Lot, Nahor, and several sons of Joktan. However, Joktan finally saves the twelve from the wrath of the other two princes.[14]

**Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews***

The Jewish-Roman historian Flavius Josephus, in his *Antiquities of the Jews* (c. AD 94), recounted history as found in the *Hebrew Bible* and mentioned the Tower of Babel. He wrote that it was Nimrod who had the tower built and that Nimrod was a tyrant who tried to turn the people away from God. In this account, God confused the people rather than destroying them because annihilation with a Flood hadn't taught them to be godly.
Now it was Nimrod who excited them to such an affront and contempt of God. He was the grandson of Ham, the son of Noah, a bold man, and of great strength of hand. He persuaded them not to ascribe it to God, as if it were through his means they were happy, but to believe that it was their own courage which procured that happiness. He also gradually changed the government into tyranny, seeing no other way of turning men from the fear of God, but to bring them into a constant dependence on his power... Now the multitude were very ready to follow the determination of Nimrod and to esteem it a piece of cowardice to submit to God; and they built a tower, neither sparing any pains, nor being in any degree negligent about the work: and, by reason of the multitude of hands employed in it, it grew very high, sooner than any one could expect; but the thickness of it was so great, and it was so strongly built, that thereby its great height seemed, upon the view, to be less than it really was. It was built of burnt brick, cemented together with mortar, made of bitumen, that it might not be liable to admit water. When God saw that they acted so madly, he did not resolve to destroy them utterly, since they were not grown wiser by the destruction of the former sinners [in the Flood]; but he caused a tumult among them, by producing in them diverse languages, and causing that, through the multitude of those languages, they should not be able to understand one another. The place wherein they built the tower is now called Babylon, because of the confusion of that language which they readily understood before; for the Hebrews mean by the word Babel, confusion...

[edit] Greek Apocalypse of Baruch

Third Apocalypse of Baruch (or 3 Baruch, c 2nd century), one of the pseudepigrapha, describes the just rewards of sinners and the righteous in the afterlife. Among the sinners are those who instigated the Tower of Babel. In the account, Baruch is first taken (in a vision) to see the resting place of the souls of "those who built the tower of strife against God, and the Lord banished them." Next he is shown another place, and there, occupying the form of dogs,

Those who gave counsel to build the tower, for they whom thou seest drove forth multitudes of both men and women, to make bricks; among whom, a woman making bricks was not allowed to be released in the hour of child-birth, but brought forth while she was making bricks, and carried her child in her apron, and continued to make bricks. And the Lord appeared to them and confused their speech, when they had built the tower to the height of four hundred and sixty-three cubits. And they took a gimlet, and sought to pierce the heavens, saying, Let us see (whether) the heaven is made of clay, or of brass, or of iron. When God saw this He did not permit them, but smote them with blindness and confusion of speech, and rendered them as thou seest. (Greek Apocalypse of Baruch, 3:5-8)

[edit] Midrash

Rabbinic literature offers many different accounts of other causes for building the Tower of Babel, and of the intentions of its builders. According to one midrash the builders of the Tower, called "the generation of secession" in the Jewish sources, said: "God has no right to choose the upper world for Himself, and to leave the lower world to us; therefore we will build us a tower, with an idol on the top holding a sword, so that it may appear as if it intended to war with God" (Gen. R. xxxviii. 7; Tan., ed. Buber, Noah, xxvii. et seq.).
The building of the Tower was meant to bid defiance not only to God, but also to Abraham, who exhorted the builders to reverence. The passage mentions that the builders spoke sharp words against God, not cited in the Bible, saying that once every 1,656 years, heaven tottered so that the water poured down upon the earth, therefore they would support it by columns that there might not be another deluge (Gen. R. l.c.; Tan. l.c.; similarly Josephus, "Ant." i. 4, § 2).

Some among that sinful generation even wanted to war against God in heaven (Talmud Sanhedrin 109a.) They were encouraged in this wild undertaking by the notion that arrows which they shot into the sky fell back dripping with blood, so that the people really believed that they could wage war against the inhabitants of the heavens (Sefer ha-Yashar, Noah, ed. Leghorn, 12b). According to Josephus and Midrash Pirke R. El. xxiv., it was mainly Nimrod who persuaded his contemporaries to build the Tower, while other rabbinical sources assert, on the contrary, that Nimrod separated from the builders.

[edit] Kabbalah

According to another mysterious Kabbalistic account, one third of the Tower builders were punished by being transformed into semi-demonic creatures and banished into three parallel dimensions, inhabited now by their descendants.¹⁵¹

[edit] Qur'an and Islamic traditions

Though not mentioned by name, the Qur'an has a story with similarities to the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, though set in the Egypt of Moses. In Suras 28:38 and 40:36-37, Pharaoh asks Haman to build him a stone, or clay tower so that he can mount up to heaven and confront the God of Moses.
Another story in Sura 2:102 mentions the name of Babil, but tells of when the two angels Haroot and Maroot taught the people of Babylon the tricks of magic and warned them that magic is a sin and that their teaching them magic is a test of faith.

A tale about Babil appears more fully in the writings of Yaqut (i, 448 f.) and the Lisan el-'Arab (xiii. 72), but without the tower: mankind were swept together by winds into the plain that was afterward called "Babil", where they were assigned their separate languages by God, and were then scattered again in the same way. In the History of the Prophets and Kings by the 9th century Muslim theologian al-Tabari, a fuller version is given: Nimrod has the tower built in Babil, God destroys it, and the language of mankind, formerly Syriac, is then confused into 72 languages. Another Muslim historian of the 13th century, Abu al-Fida relates the same story, adding that the patriarch Eber (an ancestor of Abraham) was allowed to keep the original tongue, Hebrew in this case, because he would not partake in the building.

Though variations similar to the Judeo-Christian narrative of the Tower of Babel exist within Islamic tradition, the central theme of God separating humankind on the basis of language is alien to Islam according to author Yahiya Emerick. In Islamic belief, he argues, God created nations to know each other and not to be separated.[16]

[edit] Book of Mormon

In the Book of Mormon, a man named Jared and his family ask God that their language not be confounded at the time of the Tower of Babel. Because of their prayers, God preserves their language and leads them across the sea to the Americas. See the Book of Ether[17] in the Book of Mormon.

[edit] Irish folklore

Irish texts such as Lebor Gabála Érenn and Auraicept na n-Éces claim that the legendary king Fenius Farsa chose the best features of all the confused languages and fused them to create Goidelic, the forerunner of the Irish language.

[edit] Western culture

Historical linguistics has long wrestled with the idea of a single original language. In the Middle Ages, and down to the 17th century, attempts were made to identify a living descendant of the Adamic language.

Pieter Brueghel’s influential portrayal is based on the Colosseum in Rome, while later conical depictions of the tower (as depicted in Doré’s illustration) resemble much later Muslim towers observed by 19th century explorers in the area, notably the Minaret of Samarra. M. C. Escher depicts a more stylized geometrical structure in his woodcut representing the story.

The composer Anton Rubinstein wrote an opera based on the story, Der Thurm zu Babel.
American choreographer Adam Darius staged a multilingual theatrical interpretation of The Tower of Babel in 1993 at the ICA in London.

Fritz Lang's 1927 film Metropolis, in a flashback, plays upon themes of lack of communication between the designers of the tower and the workers who are constructing it rather than confusion of languages. The short scene states how the fact that the tower, so glorious to its designers, was meaningless to the workers led to its destruction as they rose up against their oppressive working conditions.

's novel Babel Tower (1996) is a book about the question "whether language can be shared, or, if that turns out to be illusory, how individuals, in talking to each other, fail to understand each other".[18]

According to one modern legend, "sack" was the last word uttered before the confusion of languages.[19]

[edit] Comparable mythemes

[edit] Sumerian parallel

There is a Sumerian myth similar to that of the Tower of Babel, called Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta, where Enmerkar of Uruk is building a massive ziggurat in Eridu and demands a tribute of precious materials from Aratta for its construction, at one point reciting an incantation imploring the god Enki to restore (or in Kramer's translation, to disrupt) the linguistic unity of the inhabited regions — named as Shubur, Hamazi, Sumer, Uri-ki (Akkad), and the Martu land, "the whole universe, the well-guarded people — may they all address Enlil together in a single language."[20]

One recent theory first advanced by David Rohl associates Nimrod, the hunter, builder of Erech and Babel, with Enmerkar (i.e., Enmer the Hunter) king of Uruk, also said to have been the first builder of the Eridu temple. (Amar-Sin (c. 2046–2037 BC), third monarch of the Third Dynasty of Ur, later attempted to complete the Eridu ziggurat.) This theory proposes that the remains of the historical building that via Mesopotamian legend inspired the story of the Tower of Babel are the ruins of the ziggurat of Eridu, just south of Ur. Among the reasons for this association are the larger size of the ruins, the older age of the ruins, and the fact that one title of Eridu was NUN.KI ("mighty place"), which later became a title of Babylon.[21] Both cities also had temples called the E-Sagila.

A story similar to the incantation and linguistic confusion mentioned in the Enmerkar tablet was featured in the plot of Neal Stephenson's 1992 cyberpunk novel Snow Crash, except that the nam-shub is supposedly cast to make all peoples forget the Sumerian language.

[edit] Towers

Various traditions similar to that of the tower of Babel are found in Central America. One holds that Xelhua, one of the seven giants rescued from the deluge, built the Great Pyramid of Cholula in order to storm Heaven. The gods destroyed it with fire and confounded the language of the
builders. The Dominican friar Diego Duran (1537–1588) reported hearing this account from a hundred-year-old priest at Cholula, shortly after the conquest of Mexico.

Another story, attributed by the native historian Don Ferdinand d'Alva Ixtlilxochitl (c. 1565-1648) to the ancient Toltecs, states that after men had multiplied following a great deluge, they erected a tall zacuali or tower, to preserve themselves in the event of a second deluge. However, their languages were confounded and they went to separate parts of the earth.

Still another story, attributed to the Tohono O'odham Indians, holds that Montezuma escaped a great flood, then became wicked and attempted to build a house reaching to heaven, but the Great Spirit destroyed it with thunderbolts. (Bancroft, vol. 3, p. 76; also in History of Arizona)

According to David Livingstone, the Africans whom he met living near Lake Ngami in 1849 had such a tradition, but with the builders' heads getting "cracked by the fall of the scaffolding" (Missionary Travels, chap. 26).

In his 1918 book, Folklore in the Old Testament, Scottish social anthropologist Sir James George Frazer documented similarities between Old Testament stories, such as the Flood, and indigenous legends around the world. He identified Livingston's account with a tale found in Lozi mythology, wherein the wicked men build a tower of masts to pursue the Creator-God, Nyambe, who has fled to Heaven on a spider-web, but the men perish when the masts collapse. He further relates similar tales of the Ashanti that substitute a pile of porridge pestles for the masts. Frazer moreover cites such legends found among the Kongo people, as well as in Tanzania, where the men stack poles or trees in a failed attempt to reach the moon. He further cited the Karbi and Kuki people of Assam as having a similar story. The traditions of the Karen people of Myanmar, which Frazer considered to show clear 'Abrahamic' influence, also relate that their ancestors migrated there following the abandonment of a great pagoda in the land of the Karen 30 generations from Adam, when the languages were confused and the Karen separated from the Karenni. He notes yet another version current in the Admiralty Islands where mankind's languages are confused following a failed attempt to build houses reaching to heaven.

Traces of a somewhat similar story have also been reported among the Tharu of Nepal and northern India (Report of the Census of Bengal, 1872, p. 160).

**[edit] Multiplication of languages**

There have also been a number of traditions around the world that describe a divine confusion of the one original language into several, albeit without any tower. Aside from the Ancient Greek myth that Hermes confused the languages, causing Zeus to give his throne to Phoroneus, Frazer specifically mentions such accounts among the Wasania of Kenya, the Kacha Naga people of Assam, the inhabitants of Encounter Bay in Australia, the Maidu of California, the Tlingit of Alaska, and the K'iche' Maya of Guatemala. (See also: Mythical origins of language)

The Estonian myth of "the Cooking of Languages" has also been compared.

**[edit] Height of the tower**
The narrative in the book of Genesis does not mention how tall the Biblical tower was. The phrase used to describe the tower, “its top in the sky” (v.4), was an idiom for impressive height; rather than implying arrogance this was simply a cliché for height.\[25\] The tower's height is discussed in various extra-canonical sources.

The *Book of Jubilees* mentions the tower's height as being 5,433 cubits and 2 palms, or 2,484 m (8,149.606 ft), about three times of Burj Khalifa, or roughly 1.6 miles high. The *Third Apocalypse of Baruch* mentions that the 'tower of strife' reached a height of 463 cubits, or 211.8 m (695 ft), taller than any structure built in human history until the construction of the Eiffel Tower in 1889, which is 324 m (1,063 ft) in height.

*Gregory of Tours* (I, 6) writing c. 594, quotes the earlier historian Orosius (c. 417) as saying the tower was "laid out foursquare on a very level plain. Its wall, made of baked brick cemented with pitch, is fifty cubits wide, two hundred high, and four hundred and seventy stades in circumference. A stade contains five agrippennes. Twenty-five gates are situated on each side, which make in all one hundred. The doors of these gates, which are of wonderful size, are cast in bronze. The same historian Orosius tells many other tales of this city, and says: 'Although such was the glory of its building still it was conquered and destroyed.'"

A typical medieval account is given by Giovanni Villani (1300): He relates that "it measured eighty miles round, and it was already 4,000 paces high, or 5.92 km (3.68 mi) and 1,000 paces thick, and each pace is three of our feet."\[26\] The 14th century traveler John Mandeville also included an account of the tower, and reported that its height had been 64 furlongs or 13 km (8 mi), according to the local inhabitants.

The 17th century historian Verstegan provides yet another figure - quoting Isidore, he says that the tower was 5,164 paces high, or 7.6 km (4.7 mi), and quoting Josephus that the tower was wider than it was high, more like a mountain than a tower. He also quotes unnamed authors who say that the spiral path was so wide that it contained lodgings for workers and animals, and other authors who claim that the path was wide enough to have fields for growing grain for the animals used in the construction.

In his book, *Structures or why things don't fall down* (Pelican 1978–1984), Professor J.E. Gordon considers the height of the Tower of Babel. He wrote, 'brick and stone weigh about 120 lb per cubic foot (2,000 kg per cubic metre) and the crushing strength of these materials is generally rather better than 6,000 lbf per square inch or 40 megapascals. Elementary arithmetic shows that a tower with parallel walls could have been built to a height of 2.1 km (1.3 mi) before the bricks at the bottom were crushed. However by making the walls taper towards the top they ... could well have been built to a height where the men of Shinnar would run short of oxygen and had difficulty in breathing before the brick walls crushed beneath their own dead weight."

[[edit]] Enumeration of scattered languages

There are several mediaeval historiographic accounts that attempt to make an enumeration of the languages scattered at the Tower of Babel. Because a count of all the descendants of Noah listed by name in chapter 10 of Genesis (LXX) provides 15 names for Japheth's descendants, 30 for
Ham's, and 27 for Shem's, these figures became established as the 72 languages resulting from the confusion at Babel — although the exact listing of these languages tended to vary over time. (The LXX Bible has two additional names, Elisa and Cainan, not found in the Masoretic text of this chapter, so early rabbinic traditions such as the Mishna speak instead of "70 languages"). Some of the earliest sources for 72 (sometimes 73) languages are the 2nd century Christian writers Clement of Alexandria (Stromata I, 21) and Hippolytus of Rome (On the Psalms 9); it is repeated in the Syriac book Cave of Treasures (c. AD 350), Epiphanius of Salamis Panarion (c. 375) and St. Augustine's The City of God 16.6 (c. 410). The chronicles attributed to Hippolytus (c. 234) contain one of the first attempts to list each of the 72 peoples who were believed to have spoken these languages.

Isidore of Seville in his Etymologiae (c. 600) mentions the number of 72, however his list of names from the Bible drops the sons of Joktan and substitutes the sons of Abraham and Lot, resulting in only about 56 names total; he then appends a list of some of the nations known in his own day, such as the Longobards and the Franks. This listing was to prove quite influential on later accounts which made the Lombards and Franks themselves into descendants of eponymous grandsons of Japheth, e.g. the Historia Brittonum (c. 833), The Meadows of Gold by al Masudi (c. 947) and Book of Roads and Kingdoms by al-Bakri (1068), the 11th century Lebor Gabála Érenn, and the midrashic compilations Yosippon (c. 950), Chronicles of Jerahmeel, and Sefer haYashar.

Other sources that mention 72 (or 70) languages scattered from Babel are the Old Irish poem Cu cen mathair by Luccreth moccu Chiara (c. 600); the Irish monastic work Auraicept na n-Éces; History of the Prophets and Kings by the Persian historian Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (c. 915); the Anglo-Saxon dialogue Solomon and Saturn; the Russian Primary Chronicle (c. 1113); the Jewish Kabbalistic work Bahir (1174); the Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson (c. 1200); the Syriac Book of the Bee (c. 1221); the Gesta Hunnorum et Hungarorum (c. 1284; mentions 22 for Shem, 31 for Ham and 17 for Japheth for a total of 70); Villani's 1300 account; and the rabbinic Midrash ha-Gadol (14th c.). Villani adds that it "was begun 700 years after the Flood, and there were 2,354 years from the beginning of the world to the confusion of the Tower of Babel. And we find that they were 107 years working at it; and men lived long in those times". According to the Gesta Hunnorum et Hungarorum, however, the project was begun only 200 years following the Deluge.

The tradition of 72 languages persisted into later times. Both José de Acosta in his 1576 treatise De procuranda indorum salute, and António Vieira a century later in his Sermão da Epifania, expressed amazement at how much this 'number of tongues' could be surpassed, there being hundreds of mutually unintelligible languages indigenous only to Peru and Brazil, respectively.

[edit] Usage in conlanging
The flag of the Language Creation Society has a picture of the Tower of Babel at its center.

The text of the Tower of Babel is commonly used today by people who devise constructed languages (conlangs) as an example translated text. It is used because of its dealing with the creation of many languages from one, and because it serves as a useful comparison between different conlangs due to its nice array of sentence structure, verbs, nouns, etc.

[edit] See also