Phillip Michael Sherman

*Babel’s Tower Translated: Genesis 11 and Ancient Jewish Interpretation*

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Sherman concludes his study of Gen 11:1-9 with the following comments:

The excessive ambiguity of the narrative allowed for its exegetical manipulation by later readers; the tower could easily be re-constructed with each passing era to speak in a new voice to the ever-changing problems and possibilities encountered by Israel. (332)

By exploring the manifold interpretive voices of ancient Jewish readers, I have argued that interpretation is a historically conditioned and highly contextualized activity. (335)

The work proceeds in three parts with eight subdivisions and a separate introduction. The introduction sets out Sherman’s methodology and connects organically to part 1, which contains Sherman’s own close reading (what Sherman calls “reading without the canon”) of the story as well as an integration of the wider canon. Part 2 contains Sherman’s interaction with five authors and their reading of the Babel account: Jubilees, Pseudo-Philo’s *Biblical Antiquities*, Josephus, 3 Baruch, and Philo. Part 3 contains a
treatment of rabbinic literature, with priority given to Genesis Rabbah, but also includes a quick treatment of Acts 2:1–47 and a short, three-page conclusion.

I would like to compliment Sherman on his work. He has a deft interpretive touch that I found insightful in many places, particularly in part 2. I found a few places of disagreement with his conclusions in the second and third parts, but these are minor and I am not entirely sure that I am correct. Part 2 in particular lives up to the title of the work, and I am confident that it will find a perch in the study of Second Temple period Judaism and its methods of interpretation.

Sherman’s work does not, however, have the intention of functioning exclusively as a clarification of Jewish interpretive practices in the Second Temple period and the early rabbinic period. His interaction with the texts in part 2 provide test cases for an exploration of modern interpretive practices and theory. For Sherman, his approach to the act of interpretation orbits around the history of interpretation (Rezeptionsgeschichte) of the Babel account. The ancient interpreters therefore provide a means by which the practice of interpretation can be better understood. He refers to this history of interpretation as “translation,” which he defines as:

I speak principally of translation in its most literal and basic sense: the transference of an object from one location or context to another. The Babel account, like so many biblical characters and narratives, has been translated and transformed as it has moved throughout the interpretive histories of those traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—which treat the Hebrew Bible as sacred text. (3)

Sherman does not interact with Islamic exegesis. He does include Acts 2:1–47 as an “ancient Jewish interpretation,” but the passage is given slight attention and curiously located within his discussion of the rabbinic material (Acts 2 as midrash?). But, Sherman’s treatment of the ancient sources is not only careful; it takes their observations seriously (5 and passim) even while stressing that meaning is a culturally, historically, and ideologically conditioned set of conclusions. Sherman has prepared the reader for this in the introduction by stating, “There is, finally, no ‘exclusive meaning’” (6).

After this introduction, Sherman undertakes his own close reading of the story, referred to as “reading without the canon.” Despite many excellent and insightful observations (Sherman is a good reader of the texts), such a reading is, in reality, impossible. Even if Sherman intends this phrase rhetorically, it seems that it would have been better to call this a “close reading” and suspend notions that he (or any other reader) is uninformed by a broader biblical canon. I raise this objection because it is clear that Sherman knows the
broader biblical canon; suspending any reference to that tradition does not indicate that he is reading without it. For instance, Sherman notes that the biblical narrator in Gen 11 may have been influenced by “biblical poetic parallelism” (23). But being able to identify and comment on “biblical poetic parallelism” assumes knowledge of that device, which is a construct developed from the broader biblical canon. That is, it assumes that one is reading with the canon (and at both the authorial and interpretive levels). This may be a bit nitpicky, but the premise is essential to Sherman’s program of interpretation that one needs a biblical foundation to assess later interpretations. Since later authors are reading with the canon and it appears that Sherman is as well, it may be that this methodology needs to be nuanced.

In his close reading, Sherman is drawn to the literary theory of gap reading, following literary critics such as Iser, Eagleton, and Schwab. Texts contain “gaps” that invite interpreters in to fill in the void (interpretation abhors a vacuum, perhaps?). For Sherman, this promotes multiple meanings in interpretation, which modern literary theorists have simply defined. However, the connection between his comment on there being no “exclusive meaning” and gap theory is not clear to me. It does not follow that a gap, which is filled in by different authors in different ways, leads, ipso facto, to the conclusion that there is no exclusive meaning. Rather, it suggests that interpreters can come up with different views when reading the same ambiguous text. Whether or not they are correct in their conclusions is another matter. That is, we can begin to “exclude meaning” by virtue of testing it in our different filters (e.g., our academic or faith communities). It is true, to cite Levinas obliquely, that the biblical text begs to be interpreted, but neither this nor the gap theory provide a systematic view of interpretation that says filling the gaps is merely a matter of social, cultural, political, or ideological location. It depends on other factors, such as elements of belief or broad-based canonical understanding, intertextuality and inner-biblical (or inner-genre?) exegesis. The fact that there have been numerous interpretations of Babel does not necessarily mean that multiple interpretations must occur as a hermeneutical principle and much less that “there is, finally, no ‘exclusive’ meaning.”

It may be that Sherman is trying to hold together too many things. His own reading points out exegetical miscues of others (as do we all), citing at one point that, because the text has made no specific claim, Wenham and von Rad are mistaken in reading the Babel account as a critique of Babylonian building practices (29). But, are not Wenham and von Rad “gap filling”? Is the criticism of eisegesis even possible given Sherman’s ideological starting point? Sherman seems to mean that meaning derived from interpretive activities is an inclusive activity with some restraints. But this is not very helpful in the long run because the line in the sand shifts continually; exclusive readings could just as well be inclusive readings with greater restraints. For instance, what makes Wenham incorrect...
for Sherman is that the meaning he derives is not explicitly stated in Gen 11:1–9. But all of the ancient texts Sherman cites would be guilty of this type of “in-reading.” Moreover, it seems unlikely to me that Philo and Josephus would go to the elaborate interpretive ends that they do entertaining the notion that they were simply producing one reading among many. It seems to me that the postmodernistic notion of interpretation as a multifaceted activity, which is objective by virtue of its subjectivity, may have some limitations in explaining what the ancient authors actually thought of the work that they were producing and, therefore, display some limitations in articulating modern, hermeneutical conclusions drawn from these texts. Philo may very well have understood his reading of the Babel account as “exclusively correct” and, importantly, may have been wrong.

Finally, the issues I have noted (and about which I may be mistaken) with Sherman’s understanding of interpretation may stem from his understanding of the function of these texts in their immediate environment and with his notion of what “translation” actually is. In part 2 Sherman introduces the reader to the genre classification of “Rewritten Bible” (the title to part 2 is “Rewritten Babel”). At one point, Sherman suggests, against the grain, the following:

I argue that the authors of those works discussed in the following section did indeed intend for their works to “replace” the biblical text—at least among a certain readership. Rather than focusing on the authors and their intentions (something ultimately beyond our ability to determine), focus should be placed on the texts and their potential impact. (90)

It is difficult to follow the argument here, and two levels of authorial intention, one that can be understood and one that cannot, is too convenient. Sherman goes on to differentiate between what a text “claims” to do and what affect it may actually have on a reading community (91). He concedes that, “Many examples of rewritten Bible … do not claim … to replace or supersede the biblical base” (emphasis original). I am not sure that any actually claim to do this, much less function in that way for an ancient community. Even if one follows Sherman in the view that interpretation shapes communal thinking about the source text (which seems plausible to me), the source text remains the binding element for the interpreter (this is even true for the midrashim). In fact, this is what often causes tensions within contemporary communities who read and reread texts; they end up with different views of what the source text means. But this neither endorses multiple readings as a hermeneutical goal nor suggests that interpretation ultimately eliminates the source text.
Despite some of these reservations, Sherman’s work should be read by those interested in early Jewish (and Christian) exegetical practices, as it offers insights into this complex world and renews discussions about the fluidity of this early Jewish period.