

**Traditions II: Medieval Biblical Commentary  
An Introduction to the *Mikra'ot G'dolot* --  
Rashi and Beyond...  
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**Introductions and Welcome**

**For the study of Torah**

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.  
Barukh atta Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam  
asher kiddeshanu b'mitzvotov, v'tzivanu l'asok b'divrei Torah.

Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Sovereign of Existence,  
who made us holy with Your mitzvot, and commands us  
to “soak up”/ immerse ourselves in words of Torah.

**A Jewish Defense Against Univocal Literalism:  
An Introduction to the *Mikra'ot G'dolot***

**Meet the “Companion”:  
Who Was Rashi?**

**Rashi's Method and Message**

**Trivial Pursuit is wrong!**  
**What does the first word of the Torah mean?**  
**What is the first sentence?**  
**Rashi on Genesis 1:1f**

בראשית – אמר רבי יצחק לא היה צריך להתחיל [את] התורה אלא (שמות יב ב) מהחודש הזה לכם, שהיא מצוה ראשונה שנצטוו [בה] ישראל, ומה טעם פתח בבראשית, משום (תהלים קיא ו) כח מעשיו הגיד לעמו לתת להם נחלת גוים, שאם יאמרו אומות העולם לישראל לסטים אתם, שכבשתם ארצות שבעה גוים, הם אומרים להם כל הארץ של הקב"ה היא, הוא בראה ונתנה לאשר ישר בעיניו, ברצונו נתנה להם וברצונו נטלה מהם ונתנה לנו:

בראשית ברא – אין המקרא הזה אומר אלא דרשני, כמו שדרשוהו רבותינו ז"ל בשביל התורה שנקראת (משלי ח כב) ראשית דרכו, ובשביל ישראל שנקראו (ירמיה ב ג) ראשית תבואתו. ואם באת לפרשו כפשוטו כך פרשהו בראשית בריאת שמים וארץ והארץ היתה תהו ובהו וחשך ויאמר אלהים יהי אור. ולא בא המקרא להורות סדר הבריאה לומר שאלו קדמו, שאם בא להורות כך, היה לו לכתוב בראשונה ברא את השמים וגו', שאין לך ראשית במקרא שאינו דבוק לתיבה של אחריו, כמו (שם כו א) בראשית ממלכות יהויקים, (בראשית י י) ראשית ממלכתו, (דברים יח ד) ראשית דגנך, אף כאן אתה אומר בראשית ברא אלהים וגו', כמו בראשית ברוא. ודומה לו (הושע א ב) תחלת דבר ה' בהושע, כלומר תחלת דבורו של הקב"ה בהושע, ויאמר ה' אל הושע וגו'. ואם תאמר להורות בא שאלו תחלה נבראו, ופירושו בראשית הכל ברא אלו, ויש לך מקראות שמקצרים לשונם וממעטים תיבה אחת, כמו (איוב ג י) כי לא סגר דלתי בטני, ולא פירש מי הסוגר, וכמו (ישעיה ח ד) ישא את חיל דמשק, ולא פירש מי ישאנו, וכמו (עמוס ו יב) אם יחרוש בבקרים, ולא פירש אם יחרוש אדם בבקרים, וכמו (ישעיה מו י) מגיד מראשית אחרית, ולא פירש מגיד מראשית דבר אחרית דבר. אם כן תמה על עצמך, שהרי המים קדמו, שהרי כתיב ורוח אלהים מרחפת על פני המים, ועדיין לא גלה המקרא בריית המים מתי היתה, הא למדת שקדמו המים לארץ. ועוד שהשמים מאש ומים נבראו, על כרחך לא לימד המקרא סדר המוקדמים והמאוחרים כלום:

1:1 “In the beginning” (*Bereshit*) [Rashi opens by quoting from a Midrash]: Rabbi Isaac said: The Torah should have commenced with the verse (Exodus 12:1) “This month shall be unto you the first of the months” which is the first commandment given to Israel.

What a place to begin! Ignore all of Genesis? What kind of Torah would this be? Why would anyone want to start at Exodus 12:1 -- even as a rhetorical question, who would say such a thing? Note that the Silbermann translation of Rashi adds a key phrase here: The Torah... “*which is the Law book of Israel*”

Note also that the italics below are Silbermann’s interpolations, meant to “clarify the clarifier,” to make Rashi’s point more clear to us.

What is the reason, then, that it commences with *the account* of the Creation? Because of *the thought expressed in the text* (Psalm 111: 6) “He declared to His people the strength of His works (in other words, God gave an account of the work of Creation), in order that God might give them the “heritage of the nations.” For should the peoples of the world say to Israel, “You are robbers, because you took by force the lands of the seven nations of *Canaan*”, Israel may reply to them, “All the earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be God; God created it and gave it to whom God pleased. When it was God’s will, God gave [the land] to them, and when it was God’s will, God took it from them and gave it to us” (Yalkut Shimoni. Exodus 12: 2).

The whole purpose of the Torah is to secure our claim to the land of Israel?  
What might lead to such a view of the world?  
On the other hand, this is an important reminder:  
The Zionist dream is not new, nor is it peripheral to Judaism.  
It is the heart and core, one of the purposes of our existence,  
read back in to the very first words of the Torah.

We are now going to look at the unusual -- perhaps incomprehensible -- grammar of the first word of the Torah. For the word, as Rashi will point out, does *not* actually mean “in the beginning.” *That* word would have been “*barishonah*.” The word *B’reishit* is in conjunctive form; it means “in the beginning of,” which is why the new JPS translation has “When God began to create the world...” Even that, though, is an odd formulation. Perhaps, thinking outside the box, the concept here is that “with *reishit* God created the world.” If so, the question becomes: what is *reishit*? And here, we turn to all other significant references to the word *reishit* (which means “first of” or “head of”) that appear in the Tanakh. The results are startling.

“In the beginning God created” (*Bereshit bara*): This verse calls aloud for explanation [literally: this verse says nothing except “come and interpret me!"]. in the manner that our Rabbis explained it: *God created the world* for the sake of the Torah which is called (Proverb 8:22) “The beginning (*reishit*) of God’s way.”

The point here is the equation of “Torah” with “wisdom.”  
The full citation, beginning with Proverbs 8:12 and then skipping to 8:22:

אֲנִי־חָכְמָה שָׁכַנְתִּי עִרְמָה וְדַעַת מִזְמוֹת אֲמָצָא:  
יְהוָה קִנְנִי רֵאשִׁית דְּרָכָו קִדְם מִפְּעֻלָּו מֵאָז:

12. I, wisdom, dwell with prudence, and find knowledge and discretion.
22. The Lord created me at the beginning of his way, the first of his acts of old.

This is a technique similar to what might be called a *g'zeirah shavah*, an explanation of one term (*B'reishit*) through the comparison with an identical or very similar term (*reishit*) elsewhere, using the context of the second instance to shed light on the first. The first sentence of the Torah is now seen to read: “With *reishit* = wisdom = the Torah God created the world.

But we are not done with the possible meanings of the word *reishit*.

[Alternatively/additionally we can read that God created the world] for the sake of Israel who are called (Jeremiah 2:3) “The beginning (*reishit*) of God’s increase.

The text here:

קִדְשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל לַיהוָה רֵאשִׁית תְּבוּאָתָהּ  
Israel is holy to the Lord, the first fruits of his produce

Thus: “For the sake of *reishit* = Israel = the Jewish people God created the world.

If, however, you wish to explain it in its plain sense...

Rashi is fully aware of how much of a stretch these opening readings are, and therefore wants to hew closer to the line of explaining the text in its contextual and surface meaning.

explain it thus: “At the beginning of the Creation of heaven and earth, when the earth was without form and void, with darkness over the face of the deep, the spirit of God hovered over the water, God said “let there be light,” and there was light. (emphasis here added for effect)

In other words, the first sentence of the Torah is much longer than that which we are accustomed to hearing. It *does not say* “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” In fact, there are major implications for reading the sentence according to the proper rules of Hebrew grammar.

One implication: this is *not about* creation *ex nihilo*!

It also assumes a primordial state of chaos, upon which order is imposed.  
*That* is the fundamental act of creation.

The text does not intend to point out the order of the *acts* of Creation — to state that these (heaven and earth) were created first; for if it intended to point this out, it should have written “*barishona*” [meaning] “At first God created...”

*And for this reason:* Because, wherever the word *reishit* occurs in Scripture, it is in the construct state (it “clings” to another word), as, for example, (Jeremiah 26:1) “In the beginning of (*b*”*reishit*] the reign of Jehoiakim”; (Genesis 10:10) “The beginning of (*reishit*) his kingdom”; (Deuteronomy 18:4) “The firstfruit of (*reishit*) your corn.” Likewise, here, too, you must translate *b’reishit bara* as though it read *b’reishit b’ro’*, “at the beginning of God’s creating.” Similar to this (a similar grammatical construction, a noun in construct followed by a verb) is: found in Hosea 1:2, where we read *t’chilat dibber Adonai b’hoshiya*, “in the beginning God spoke through Hosea,” which really implies/means *t’chilat diburo shel HaKadosh Barukh Hu b’Hosiyah*, “at the beginning of God’s speaking through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea.”

If, however, you insist that it [really does] come to show/intend to point out that these (heaven and earth) were created first, and it’s interpretation should be “*b’reishit hakol bara elu*; at the beginning of everything God created these,”

Silbermann’s commentary takes some time to explain this maneuver. Those who still want to say that this familiar text refers to the order of creation would have to concede the grammatical point that the word *reishit* is in the construct state, but could continue to hold onto what they thought was the original meaning by claiming that this is an elliptical text, that a word is missing here. Rashi goes on to provide some examples of elliptical texts.

you do have [cases of] Biblical verses which “shorten their language,” as for example (Job 3:10) “for closed not the doors of my womb” where it does not explicitly explain who it was who was doing the closing, or (Isaiah 8:4) “shall take away the spoil of Samaria” without explaining who shall take it away; and (Amos 6:12) “if plows with oxen,” and it does not explicitly state, “if *a man* plows with oxen”; or (Isaiah 46:10) “declares from the beginning the end,” and it does not explicitly state, “declaring from the beginning of *a thing* the end of a thing’ - if so (if that is your argument, that this is simply a case of an elliptical text, and you still assert that this verse intends to point out that heaven and earth were created first), you should be astonished at yourself, because as *a matter of fact* the waters were created first! For is it not written (Genesis 1:2) that “the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters”? -- and the Bible had not yet revealed/said anything about when the creation of the “water” took place. Thus you must learn [from this] that the “water” preceded the “earth.”

And further (*that the heavens and earth were not created first*): that the heavens (*shamayim*) were created from fire (*esh*) and water (*mayim*)

This is based on an assumed etymology of the word *shamayim*, consisting, as it seems, to be a combination of the Hebrew words for “fire” and “water.”

*from which it follows that fire and water were in existence before the heavens.*  
Therefore you must admit that the Biblical verse teaches nothing whatsoever about what preceded or followed [the order, the sequence of Creation]!

So if the opening of the Torah is *not* about the *order* of creation, what *is* it about?  
Here a new picture emerges: the imposition of order on a pre-existing state of chaos, the creation of the world through words, the focus on the binary patterns: light and darkness, day and night. Meaning emerges through the act of perception and separation, division and distinction.

Let us read the newly translated words, and discover for ourselves what each of us sees... in the opening sentence:

**When God began to create heaven and the earth --  
the earth being unformed and void,  
with darkness over the surface of the deep,  
and a wind from God sweeping over the water --  
God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.**

(Genesis 1:1-3, JPS translation)

**The Spin on the Sin:  
Medieval Jewish Commentary on  
the story of the Tower of Babel  
Genesis 11:1-9**

**The Text:**

א ויהי כל־הָאָרֶץ שְׂפָה אֶחָד וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים: ב ויהי בְּנִסְעָם מִקֶּדֶם וַיִּמְצְאוּ בְּקֵעָה  
בְּאֶרֶץ שִׁנְעָר וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם: ג וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ הִבֵּה נָלַבְנָה לְבַנִּים וְנִשְׂרַפָּה  
לְשִׂרְפָה וְהָיִי לָהֶם הַלְבֵנָה לְאֶבֶן וְהַזֹּמֶר הִיָּה לָהֶם לְזֹמֶר: ד וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִבֵּה |  
נִבְנֶה־לָּנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה־לָּנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן־נִפְוֶץ עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ:  
ה וַיֵּרֵד יְהוָה לִרְאֹת אֶת־הָעִיר וְאֶת־הַמִּגְדָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְנֵי הָאָדָם: ו וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה הֵן  
עַם אֶחָד וְשִׂפְהָ אֶחָד לְכָלָם וְזֶה הַזֹּמָם לַעֲשׂוֹת וְעַתָּה לֹא־יִבָּצֵר מֵהֶם כָּל אֲשֶׁר יִזְמִנו  
לַעֲשׂוֹת: ז הִבֵּה נִרְדָּה וְנִבְלָה שֵׁם שְׂפֹתָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שְׂפֹת רֵעֵהוּ: ח וַיִּפֶץ  
יְהוָה אֹתָם מִשָּׁם עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ וַיִּזְחַדְלוּ לְבַנְתַּת הָעִיר: ט עַל־כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ בָּבֶל  
כִּי־שָׁם בָּלְלָה יְהוָה שְׂפֹת כָל־הָאָרֶץ וּמִשָּׁם הִפִּיצָם יְהוָה עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ: פ

1. And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. 2. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they lived there. 3. And they said one to another, Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. 4. And they said, Come, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach to heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. 5. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men built. 6. And the Lord said, Behold, the people are one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have schemed to do. 7. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. 8. So the Lord scattered them abroad from there upon the face of all the earth; and they left off the building of the city. 9. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confuse the language of all the earth; and from there did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

**Background to the Story:**

**The rule of Nimrod**

וְכוֹשׁ יָלַד אֶת־נִמְרֹד הוּא הָחַל לְהִיזֹת גִּבּוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ: ט הוּא־הָיָה גִּבּוֹר־צָדִד לִפְנֵי יְהוָה עַל־כֵּן  
נִאֶמַר כְּנִמְרֹד גִּבּוֹר צָדִד לִפְנֵי יְהוָה: י וְהָיָה רֹאשִׁית מִמְּלַכְתּוֹ בָּבֶל וְאַרְדּוֹ וְאַפְדּוֹ וְכַלְנֵה בְּאֶרֶץ  
שִׁנְעָר:

And Kush fathered Nimrod; he was the first on earth to be a mighty one (Or: he began to be a mighty man in the land.). 9. He was a mighty hunter before the Lord; therefore it is said, As Nimrod the mighty hunter before the Lord. 10. And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar.

(Genesis 10:8-10)

This is a strange formulation. What does it mean that Nimrod “began to be” a mighty man in the land? Strange phrases or unusual wording is like a red flag to the commentators, it is an opportunity -- to learn a lesson, to make a connection with phrases which are found elsewhere.

The 15th-century Portuguese commentator Isaac Abravanel sees “began to be mighty” as a new development in human history:

The Torah wished to stress that, hitherto, human beings had been equal, until Nimrod became mighty, and lorded it over his contemporaries. “He began to be a mighty man in the land.” In other words, he became a tyrant. Indeed, it was stated further (10:9): “he was a mighty hunter before the Eternal.” You already know how our sages interpreted this phrase: that he trapped people with his wiles. But I think he was literally a great hunter of animals.

The text implies that he resorted to two subterfuges to gain ascendancy over people. First, he made himself a mighty hunter, hunting the wild beasts and conquering them. When people saw how he vanquished bears and lions with all their strength, they also stood in awe of him and were vanquished...

Second: he built towers and highly fortified cities from which to rule over the whole country. Ensnared in a forbidding tower, the fear and dread of him inspired all the inhabitants of the plain. This is implied in the text “And the beginning of his kingdom Babel, and Erech, Accad and Calneh” (Genesis 10:10), for he made them [towers; fortifications] there, in the powerful countries where he built the seat of his kingdom.

Abravanel

Note that this interpretation links three apparently separate stories: the rulership of Nimrod, the Tower of Babel (his “project”), and the early life of Abraham (whom, according to the Midrash, Nimrod attempted to “trap by his wiles.”)

Another interpretation: “began to,” in this grammatical form, always refers to the same thing, thus allowing us to “see” and understand what the “sin” in the story to follow is really about.

“Then they began (*huchal*) to call on the name of the Eternal.” (Genesis 4:26). Said Rabbi Simon: In three places the text uses this expression in the sense of rebellion against God: 1) here (Genesis 4, which he interprets to mean): “then they rebelliously called on the name of the Eternal,” 2) “And it came to pass when human beings rebelled (*hechal*)(by mixing with Divine Beings?) to multiply over the earth, and daughters were born to them” (Genesis 6:1), and 3) “he rebelled (*hechel*) to be a mighty man in the land.” (Genesis 10:8)

Midrash: Genesis Rabbah 23:7

How can we be sure that *hechal* can be linked to rebellion? Probably there is a word play going on here, linking the word *hechal* with the word *challal*, which means to profane. This link is made explicit in the Talmud (Tractate *Megillah*)

## The Story and Its Interpretation

“And all the land was one speech, and few words.” (Genesis 11:1). The sin of the generation of Babel was similar to that of Adam and Cain and his descendants. With the increase of creature comforts and leisure time, they became dissatisfied with the natural bounty provided by God, and became interested in improving human techniques, in building cities, in leaving their agricultural life and becoming urbanized, and developing a highly organized political and social life, imagining that this was the goal of humankind, with all the offices, prestige, acquisition of wealth, violence, robbery and bloodshed that they, of necessity, involved -- a state of affairs that did not obtain when they lived each one for themselves a pastoral existence. As Solomon said: God created man upright, but they have sought out many inventions.” (Proverbs?)

The true implication of the text is that, originally, human beings shared one universal language and *all their possessions were common to them all* (emphasis added). No one had any private property. Everything was in common, just like their language. But when they engaged in building the city and tower and the invention of artificial works, they forsook their universal bond (literally: brotherhood) and established private property, through barter and monopolization prompted by their covetousness to take everything for themselves and saying: “Mine is mine and yours yours!”

Our rabbis expounded the text “they journeyed from *kedem*” (Genesis 11:2; *kedem* is usually translated as “east” but literally means “the first” or “forward”) as: they divorced themselves from the *first* of the word, the pristine order, from being content with the essential natural products of the universe, and went after vanity, in seeking artificial things to satisfy their craving for luxuries. This diverted all of them from knowing Divine truths. The text was accordingly expounded to imply that they journeyed away from the Eternal.

Abravanel

This is an astonishing reading! First of all it sounds as if it could have been written yesterday, not in the 15th century. What an attitude: towards cities, towards politics, towards technology! This is a biting socialist condemnation of capitalism before either modern capitalism or modern socialism were born!

A 13th-century Spanish Talmudist, Rabbi Yitzchak Arama, made a similar point, in his commentary called Akedat Yitzchak:

That generation being united by one common language and sharing the same ideas became unanimously convinced that the aim of their existence was a political society. Their sin was not in trying to achieve this, but in regarding it as an end in itself, rather than as a means to a still greater end -- spiritual wellbeing.

Akedat Yitzchak

The greatest commentator of them all, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi), offers an exegetical, “running” (ongoing) commentary. To approach a comment by Rashi, you need to know that it is like playing “Jeopardy.” He only gives the answers. To *understand* the answer, you have to remember to ask: what’s the question? *Mah HaKoshi?* What’s the difficulty, the underlying issue to which he is giving an answer. What’s bugging Rashi? Rashi’s first comment on this story is a classic and easy to understand example of this approach.

(א) שפה אחת – לשון הקודש:

“One language” (Genesis 11:1). -- The Holy Tongue. (Hebrew)

So. What’s the question? If everyone spoke the same language....

Rashi goes on, making a distinction between the opening words “speech” and “language,” which, in the original context, might simply have been poetic repetition.

ודברים אחדים – באו בעצה אחת ואמרו לא כל הימנו שיבור לו את העליונים, נעלה לרקיע ונעשה עמו מלחמה. דבר אחר על יחידו של עולם. דבר אחר ודברים אחדים, אמרו אחת לאלף ושש מאות חמשים ושש שנים הרקיע מתמוטט כשם שעשה בימי המבול, בואו ונעשה לו סמוכות:

“...and one speech (*d’varim achadim*).” (Genesis 11:1) They came with *one plan*, saying: “God has no right to exclusive use of the heavenly realms; let us ascend to the skies and make war upon God.” Another explanation [often offered when Rashi is not that comfortable with the answer he just gave]: *d’varim achadim* [seen now as words referring to the “One”]: words regarding the Sole Being (God) of the Universe. Another explanation [sensing that the last one was a stretch, but, turning to Midrash and going even farther out on a limb, Rashi will now read these words leaving out the *aleph* of the second word, which is a legitimate thing to do since it makes no sound on its own and the Torah has no vowels]: *d’varim chadim* -- *sharp* words. They said: “Once in every 1650 years (the period that elapsed from the Creation to the Flood) there is a heaven-shaking; just as there was in the days of the Flood. Come, then (before it happens again), let us make “supports” for it.” (quoting Genesis Rabbah 38).

Of these three separate explanations -- one about wanting access to heaven, another about the nature of God, and a final one as a kind of cosmic insurance -- only one is clearly and obviously a sin. It’s just not that straightforward a question regarding what they were doing wrong here!

Before we go on with Rashi, here is another Midrash, one which places this project in the classic category of an Edifice Complex:

כשבעה מילין מקנה מעלת היו לו במזרחו ובמערבו, ואלו שהיו מעלו מעלין לבנים היו

עולין ממזרחו, ואלו שהיו יורדין היו יורדין ממערבו, ואם נפל אדם ומת לא היו שמים לבם עליו, ואם נפלה לבנה היו יושבין ובוכין ואומרין מתי תעלה אחרת תחתיה,

The tower had seven steps from the east and seven from the west. The bricks were hauled up from one side; the descent was from the other. If a man fell down and died no attention was paid to him, but if one brick fell down they would sit and cry and say: Woe are we, when will another be hauled up in its place?

Pirkei DeRebbe Eliezer 24

We return to Rashi for a moment.  
What is it that they were worried about?

(ד) פן נפוין – שלא יביא עלינו שום מכה להפיצנו מכאן:

“Lest we be scattered” (Genesis 11:4) -- that God shall not, by bringing some plague upon us, scatter us from here.

What are they worried about?  
What does Rashi’s comment add?

We turn now to different interpretations, beginning with that of the Italian Renaissance-era writer Ovadia Sforno, who is interested in issues of leadership and intellectual development:

ומגדל וראשו בשמים ונעשה לנו שם. “נעשה שם”, עבודה זרה שתהיה במגדל, ויצא בכל המין האנושי שם גבה מקומה וגדל עירה, באפן שתחשב אלהי האלהים אצל כל בני האדם, ואליה ידרשו כלם. והפונה בזה היתה שהמולך על אותה העיר ימלך על כל המין האנושי בהיות שם דרישת כלם.

“A tower, with its top in the heavens. And let us make a name for ourselves.” (Genesis 11:4) “Let us make a *shem*, a name.” An idol, which will be situated in the tower. The fame of its height, and the huge size of the city, will spread among the whole human race in such a manner that this deity will be considered as the ‘deity of deities’ among humankind, and all will seek it out. The one who would rule over that city would rule over the entire human race, since everyone would seek it out -- and this was indeed their intent.

וְעַתָּה לֹא יִבָּצֵר מֵהֶם. אִם בֶּן אִיִן מוֹנֵעַ לָהֶם מִהַשְׁלִים כְּוֹנְתָם וְתִהְיֶה אוֹתָהּ עֲבוּדָה זָרָה  
אֲשֶׁר יִבְחָרוּ בְּלִית לְכָל מִיִן הָאָדָם, וְלֹא יִפְנֶה אֶחָד מֵהֶם לְדַעַת אֶת הַבּוֹרָא וְתִבְרָךְ  
וְלִהְיֶין בִּי יוֹצֵר הַכֹּל הוּא. וְהִפְךָ זֶה יִקְרָה כְּשֶׁתִּהְיֶה מִחִלְקַת בֵּין הָאֻמוֹת בְּעֵינֵי אֱלֹהֵי  
הַנֶּכֶר, כִּי כָל אַחַת מֵהֵנָּה תִחְשַׁב שֵׁישׁ אֱלֹהֵי הָאֱלֹהִים שְׂכָל הָאֱלֹהוֹת מְסַכְּמִים לְדַעַתוֹ,  
וּבוֹ יִשְׁלַם סִדְרָם וְסִדְרֵי הַמְּצִיאוֹת, כְּאָמְרוּ "כִּי מִמְזִרְחַ שְׁמֶשׁ וְעַד מְבֹאֵי גְדוֹל שְׁמֵי בְּגוֹיִם"  
(מלאכי א, יא).

"And now, nothing will be withheld from them." (Genesis 11:6). Therefore there is no deterrent to prevent them from completing their intentions, and the religion (deity) they choose will become universal for the whole human race so that no one will turn to seek the knowledge of the Creator, the blessed One, or to understand that God formed all. The opposite of this will happen when there will be division between the nations regarding their strange gods, for each one of them does believe that there is a 'god of gods,' with whom all the other gods agree, and through him their governance and the governance of all existence reaches its perfection, as it says "From where the sun rises to where it sets, My Name is honored among the nations." (Malachi 1:11).

Sforno

This, too, is an incredible reading! What Sforno argues for here is nothing less than the power of diversity! For what is the problem with unity? Unity brings strength! But if you are united behind something which is wrong, then you have strengthened a lie, and discouraged inquiry which will lead away from the lie. Diversity, however, will lead people to ask questions -- and their questions will lead them back to God. Unity behind God would presumably be the best situation, but failing that, let us look at all the different practices in the world, let us wonder, and ask questions!

The word *shem*, or "name," is, of course, a key issue here. Ramaban, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, otherwise known as Nachmanides, was a mystic who was closely concerned for the protection of the faith. He therefore sees "making a name for ourselves" in the most dire possible light.

ואנשי הפלגה על דברי רבותינו (סנהדרין קט א) מורדים בבוראם. ורודפי הפשט  
(הראב"ע, והרד"ק), אומרים שלא היה דעתם אלא שיהיו יחד מחוברים כי הגיד הכתוב  
דעתם "פן נפויז", ולא ספר עליהם ענין אחר. ואם כדבריהם יהיו טפשים, כי איך תהיה  
עיר אחת ומגדל אחד מספיק לכל בני העולם. או שמא היו חושבים שלא יפרו ושלא  
ירבו, וזרע רשעים יכרת:  
אבל היודע פירוש שם, יבין כוונתם ממה שאמרו ונעשה לנו שם – וידע כמה השיעור  
שיזמו במגדל לעשותו, ויבין כל הענין, כי חשבו מחשבה רעה, והעונש שבא עליהם  
להפרידם בלשונות ובארצות מדה כנגד מדה, כי היו קוצצים בנטיעות.

The men of the dispersion, according to our Rabbis (Sanhedrin 109a), rebelled against their Creator. But those who are *rod'fei haP'shat*, pursuers of the “plain” meaning of the text, say that their idea was only to be closely united, citing as their intention the verse “lest we be scattered,” without anything more being said of their intent. But if it be as those commentators say, then those of the dispersion were fools, for how could one city and one tower suffice for all the people of the world. Or perhaps they thought that they would not be fruitful and multiply, as it is written “the seed of the wicken shall be cut off.”

But the one who knows the meaning of the word “name” -- as they said “let us make a name for ourselves” -- will understand their intent, and will know the extent of their evil plan in constructing the tower. And then the whole subject will be understood, namely that theirs was an evil thought, and the punishment that came over them -- namely, to be dispersed in their languages and countries -- was meted out measure for measure, for they “multiplied the shoots” [of faith by seeking to undermine the principle of Unity.]

Ramban

In contrast to the spiritual sin seen here by Ramban, Abraham Ibn Ezra reads this story in a much more naturalistic way.

וראשו בשמים, כי הנה כן דבר משה ערים גדולות ובצורות בשמים (דבר' א, כח). ואלה הבונים ראו בעצתם שלא יפרדו, והשם לא יעץ כן, והם לא ידעו:

“It’s top in the heavens.” An idiomatic expression for high in the air, as Moses described the cities of Canaan as being “great... up to heaven.” A structure of this height would be visible from a considerable distance and become a rallying point for all people.

(ה) ומלת וירד ד' בעבור שכל מעשה התחתונים תלויים הם בכח הגבוהים, ומהשמים יתכנו כל העלילות, על כן נקרא השם רוכב שמים (דבר' לג, כו), היושבי בשמים (תה' קכג, א). וכדרך לשון בני אדם אמר הכתוב וירד:

“And God descended.” This is an anthropomorphism. It is in the “language of human beings,” as, for example, are several other references to God being “up there” or “dwelling” somewhere.

Ibn Ezra concludes that the birth of languages was the *result* of their dispersion. He also adds that it was, in effect, for their good, and an act of blessing, for God had, earlier, said: “fill the earth” (Genesis 1:28). The only issue with their coming together in one place, and their fear of

being scattered, is that it contravened this commandment.

**פסוק א**  
שפה אחת. ל' הקודש:

ודברים אחדים. באו בעצה א' ואמרו לא כל הימנו שיבור לו את העליונים נעלה לרקיע ונעשה עמו מלחמה. ד"א על יחידו של עולם. ד"א ודברים אחדים (ס"א דברים חדים) אמרו אחת לאלף ותרגו' שנים הרקיע מתמוטט כשם שעשה בימי המבול בואו ונעשה לו סמוכות (ב"ר):

**פסוק ב**  
בנסעם מקדם. שהיו יושבים שם כדכתיב למעלה ויהי מושבם וגו' הר הקדם ונסעו משם לתור להם מקום להחזיק את כלם ולא מצאו אלא שנער:

**פסוק ג**  
איש אל רעהו. אומה לאומה מצרים לכוש וכוש לפוט ופוט לכנען:

הבה. הזמינו עצמכם. כל הבה לשון הזמנה הוא שמכינים עצמן ומתחברים למלאכה או לעצה או למשא. הבה הזמינו אפקרליי"ר (בלע"ז) בערייטען צוריקטען):

לבנים. שאין אבנים בבבל שהיא בקעה:

ונשרפה לשרפה. כך עושין הלבנים שקורים טוול"ש (ציגעל דאכשטיינע בלע"ז) שורפים אותם בכבשן:

לחמר. לטוח הקיר:

**פסוק ד**  
פן נפוץ. שלא יביא עלינו שום מכה להפיצנו מכאן:

**פסוק ה**

וירד ה' לראות. לא הוצרך לכך אלא בא ללמד לדיינים שלא ירשיעו הנידון עד שיראו ויבינו. (במ"ת):

בני האדם. אלא בני מי שמא בני המורים וגמלים אלא בני אדם הראשון שכפה את הטובה ואמר האשה אשר נתת עמדי אף אלו כפו בטובה למרוד במי שהשפיעם טובה ומלטם מן המבול:

פסוק ו

הן עם אחד. כל טובה זו יש עמהן שעם אחד הם ושפה אחת לכולן ודבר זה החלו לעשות:

החלם. כמו אמרם עשותם להתחיל הם לעשות:

לא יבצר מהם וגו' לעשות. בתמיה. יבצר ל' מניעה כתרגומו ודומה לו יבצור רוח נגידים (תהלים עו):

פסוק ז

הבה נרדה. בבית דינו נמלך מענותנותו יתירה:

הבה. מדה כנגד מדה הם אמרו הבה נבנה והוא כנגדם מרד ואמר הבה נרדה:

ונבלה. ונבלבל נו"ן משמש בלשון רבים וה"א אחרונה יתירה כה"א של נרדה:

לא ישמעו. זה שואל לבינה וזה מביא טיט וזה עומד עליו ופוצע את מוחו:

פסוק ח

ויפץ ה' אותם משם. בעוה"ז מה שאמרו פן נפוץ נתקיים עליהם הוא שאמר שלמה (משלי י') מגורת רשע היא תבואנו:

פסוק ט

ומשם הפיצם. למד שאין להם חלק לעוה"ב וכי אי זו קשה של דור המבול או של דור הפלגה אלו לא פשטו יד בעיקר ואלו פשטו יד בעיקר להלחם בו ואלו נשטפו ואלו לא נאבדו מן העולם אלא שדור המבול היו גזלנים והיתה מריבה ביניהם לכך נאבדו ואלו

היו נוהגים אהבה וריעות ביניהם שנא' שפה אחת ודברים אחדים. למדת ששנאוי  
המחלוקת וגדול השלום: