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Gleanings

A Modern Day Tower of Babel?



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Solutions that Transform

Early in the history of the earth, there was a group of people who were traveling from west to east through what is now Iran and Iraq. They apparently had enough resources that they were able to retire from gainful employment to pursue their own ideas. One of their ideas was to make a name for themselves—to become famous and highly regarded. They decided to build a spectacular city and at the center of this project would be a tower that reached the heavens—they would bridge heaven and earth.

To successfully build this project, particularly the tall tower, would require knowledge and wisdom about the universe. For example, what materials and methods should be used, and how to organize and manage the labor force. The project leaders apparently were taught a number of these principles either by their heirs or they learned them heuristically. In any case, they practiced many sound principles that would enable them to build this project, which is why they enjoyed success, at least initially.

Then something unexpected happened. There was a flaw in their worldview. Apparently, they believed that the Creator of the universe would not mind if they engaged in self-glorification and would therefore not interfere. But they were wrong. The Creator of the universe does not support human self-glory. So before the project was completed, the Creator stopped the project. His means were simple; he disrupted the communications.

You probably recognize this as the story of the Tower of Babel recorded in Genesis 11. The Tower of Babel illustrates that men in rebellion against God can have a modicum of success for a time when they practice godly principles. It reveals that God is engaged with his creation and can use natural means to project his will on those who operate in rebellion against him. We also see that God mercifully forbears with man's rebellion, that is, he delays his judgment giving man opportunity to repent. But ultimately man's will that is at odds with God's will is thwarted.

The Tower of Babel is a story from biblical history. When the Bible records something there is always a reason. The apostle Paul notes that the stories in the Old Testament are given to us as examples and warnings (1 Corinthians 10:11). It seems prudent, therefore, that we learn to recognize organizations and projects that are modern-day "Towers of Babel." Sadly few people seem to recognize modern-day examples. What if there are a plethora of examples throughout history, but we have failed to see them? Then we have failed to heed God's warnings—a scary thought.

Consider, for example, a possible example of a modern-day Tower of Babel—the famous ship the *Titanic*.

When launched in 1912, the *Titanic* was the largest ship in the world at the time and was dubbed unsinkable by the media. The ship was a marvel and viewed as a monument to human ingenuity.

This past month marked the one-hundred-year anniversary of the sinking of the touted vessel, which occurred on its maiden voyage. Many commemorative events and documentaries recalled the event.

A NatGeo documentary was perhaps the most exhaustive effort to find an explanation for the tragedy. The presupposition of the researchers was that the event could be fully explained by natural causes.

Given this as an a priori assumption, any explanation outside of natural causes would be automatically dismissed. I find this puzzling since scientists, of whom I am one, consider themselves to be objective, which means that all possibilities are examined. Nevertheless, the presupposition of naturalism, which excludes non-natural causality, seems to be the norm for science today. Naturalism assumes that either

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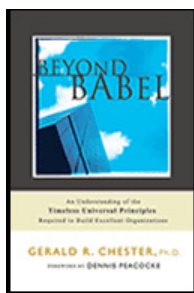
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God does not exist or, if he exists, that he is not engaged in the physical world.

Naturalism appears to have been the assumption of the NatGeo documentary.

In this documentary, the researchers claimed to have examined all available evidence associated with the sinking of the *Titanic*. For example, they considered the iceberg reports that were ignored by the wireless operator. Shortly before the collision with the iceberg, the *Titanic* received a warning from the nearby SS *Californian*. But the warning was not sent to *Titanic*'s bridge because it was not properly coded.

The ship was moving at 21 knots – nearly top speed. Why? This was common protocol based on the theory that ships should move through ice fields as quickly as possible, even though the winter of 1912 was the warmest in years and therefore the iceberg field was unusually large.

The evening of the *Titanic*'s sinking was a calm, cold, dark, and moonless night making it difficult for the lookouts to see icebergs ahead. In normal conditions, lookouts should be able to spot an iceberg at least ten miles away at night. But on this night, the weather conditions, though very peaceful, were not conducive for sighting icebergs.

When the iceberg was sighted, the ship had ~37 seconds to react. The ship's crew responded quickly and instead of a head-on collision, the ship suffered a glancing blow.

You might assume that a glancing blow would do little damage, after all, most on board did not notice anything. But this assumption would be wrong. The actual damage was not a long gash, as many assumed, but many small holes. The NatGeo investigation concluded that the pressure on the side of the ship from the collision caused rivets to fail. Tests revealed that the rivets were weakened because of too much slag in their construction.

NatGeo concluded, as most naturalists would, that rivet failure caused the sinking of the *Titanic*. Based on this, most would call it an unfortunate accident, which suggests only natural causes were involved.

According to Proverbs 16:33, there are no accidents. God is sovereign over his universe so even what appears to be random to us is not random to God. According to Ephesians 1:11, God works everything in conformity to his will. What therefore would be a biblical view of the sinking of the *Titanic*?

Those with a biblical worldview recognize that there is a reality greater than the natural—that is, spiritual reality. Spiritual reality drives physical reality. Spiritual reality that is contrary to the will and ways of God leads ultimately to judgment, though there may be apparent short-term success (Psalms 73).

Short-term success can be deceiving. In the Tower of Babel project, the organizers had what appeared to be success for a time, but their motive of self-glorification was wrong. Hence, they were judged by God using natural means—their communications were disrupted.

So also with the *Titanic*, there was short-term success—the ship was built and started on its maiden journey with grant grandeur. And like the Tower of Babel, natural events led to her demise. In the case of the Tower of Babel, we know that the disrupted communications originated with God in response to the wrong motives of the project organizers. Could that be true of the sinking of the *Titanic*?

Interestingly, as with the Tower of Babel, communications were a factor in the sinking of the *Titanic*. Not only did the *Titanic* receive and ignore wireless warnings of the danger of icebergs, but, after the collision, a nearby ship did not respond to the *Titanic*'s distress signals, which were transmitted both wirelessly and visually.

Was the *Titanic* about human glorification, as was the Tower of Babel? Was hubris associated with building the *Titanic*? If so, was the sinking of the *Titanic* a sign of the spiritual reality at work in the hearts of the owners and builders of the ship? Could the *Titanic* have represented the hubris of a world mesmerized by the cleverness of people who were rapidly developing technology during the industrial age?

In this life, we will probably not know the answers to these questions for certain, but we must ask the questions. For those who want to walk in a biblical worldview, we must be open to the possibilities that some organizations and projects are modern-day Towers of Babel and therefore will be judged. For example, how do you explain the demise of once venerable organizations such as Arthur Andersen, Lehman Brothers, Pacific Gas & Electric, Global Crossing, and Enron?

Events like the sinking of the *Titanic* are intended, as Paul noted, as illustrations and warnings. The warning is that if we do the will of man according to the ways of man, it will only lead to judgment. But doing the will of God according to the ways of God will lead to blessings.

May the Lord grant us grace to believe in Jesus Christ and to live in obedience to him. This is the only way to lasting blessings. Any other way of life will end as did the Tower of Babel.

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