מפרשים

Classical Commentaries

SFORNO

Was the Tower of Babel about idolatry or practicality

Genesis 11:4

Sforno reads the builders' ambition as essentially idolatrous: the "name" they sought to make was an idol to be enshrined in the tower, which, through the city's and tower's grandeur, would be universally recognized as the supreme deity, thereby granting the city's king dominion over the whole world. Radak, by contrast, understands the project in purely practical terms, the city for settled dwelling and the tower as a watchtower for tracking flocks and guiding distant shepherds home, with its "top in the sky" merely a hyperbole for great height, as seen elsewhere in Scripture. For Radak, "making a name" meant establishing a permanent, reputable home base that would psychologically and physically draw travelers back, preventing the dispersal they feared, rather than any theological ambition. AI SUMMARY

“And they said, “Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world.””

Thus we will make for ourselves a name. — This “name” was the idol that was to be placed in the tower. They hoped that on account of the grandeur of the tower and the city this idol would come to be recognized universally as the supreme deity. In this way the king of the city would achieve dominion over the entire world.

RADAK, WHO READS IT DIFFERENTLY

ויאמרו הבה נבנה לנו עיר — the purpose of the city was residential, the purpose of the Tower was to serve as an observation tower enabling the people in the city to keep track of where their flocks and herds were grazing. It would also serve as a beacon for shepherds who were far away to find their way home by focusing on the Tower.

וראשו בשמים — an exaggeration describing that the Tower would be very tall. We find a similar exaggeration when Moses described the walls of Canaanite cities in Deuteronomy 1,28 as “reaching into heaven.”

ונעשה לנו שם — they meant that as a result of having a permanent residence instead of being nomads, they would acquire a far greater reputation of being people to be reckoned with. If they were to travel, and when asked would refer to this city as their home town, this would impress people over the globe. Not only that, the fact that the traveler himself compared his home town with whatever other town or settlement he would encounter, would remind him of his home town comparing favourably with the place he had just visited, and he would be sure to return home. It would act as both a physical and psychological magnet to draw the traveler back home.

