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“Let Us Make a Name for Ourselves”
*Human Innovation and Technology in
Genesis 1-11*

R. Mark Shipp

This morning when I woke up I slipped out of bed and took a shower in hot and cold running water. The temperature was a pleasant 72°, controlled by a central air-conditioning system. I went into the kitchen, opened up the refrigerator and took out food items to make my children school lunches. Some containers I noticed had gone bad, so these were flushed down my recently installed disposal. The kids' lunch boxes are designed to hold heat and cold and are made of durable vinyl. Afterwards I sat and watched a news show on my Trinitron T. V. I drove to work in my air-conditioned van and rode the elevator to my office. There, I sat own at my computer and checked my e-mail. One morning the e-mail server went down and work virtually came to a standstill. Indeed, we live in a web of technology which orders and determines much of our attitudes and behavior.

Recently, the cover story for *Newsweek* magazine related to the pervasive influence of the Internet and related technologies on our lives. The thrust of the article is that commerce, medicine, entertainment, education, and socializing will be increasingly done on the Internet. Technology will, to some degree, determine increasingly the quality, quantity, and procedures for each of these areas of human concern. Until recently, however, there has been correspondingly little attention given to the ethical and religious questions which such unrestrained dependence upon technology raises.

This is not only a concern in the social, commercial, and political realms. In recent writings about technology, theology, and the Church, technology has been alternately praised as an unambiguous tool for the minister and theologian or cautiously accepted as a useful gift of God.¹ What has often been missed in our headlong plunge into a technological society (and a technological church?) is the inherent ambiguity of all human striving, including technology.

Human Technology and Innovation in Genesis 1-11

Any discussion of technology and innovation must begin with the Fall. All human technology and innovation come after the expulsion from the garden. It has been often noted, on the other hand, that work (*‘abōdāh*, “service” or “work” in Hebrew) is a human activity in the garden and that work necessarily implies innovation and technology.² Jacques Ellul has reminded us that the very purpose of technology is to advance, improve, make things more accessible and convenient.³ As such, technology is not in view in the garden,

¹See, for example, Kurt Anders Richardson, “The Naturalness of Creation and Redemptive Interests in Theology, Science, and Technology,” *Zygon* 30 (1995): 281-291. To Richardson, technology can and should serve a redemptive function: [T]he history of technology, including the biographies of the scientists and inventors, while uneven, is replete with the “common grace” discernible in the well-intentioned innovation and genuine altruism driving many of the research programs by which the technologies were and are developed . . . Essential to theological reflection on technology would be its integration into the larger, genuinely creative and redemptive activities of the human party. As this integration into theology has a chance to take place, surely a “theology of technology” will emerge (p. 285).

²Richardson suggests that human technology is a natural extension of human life, rooted in the human creature itself, and capable of great good or great harm. Note the following: “[The] ambiguities of technology within nature could be compensated for by real amelioration. The technological ways in which human beings interact with nature and other living populations could become ameliorative rather than pejorative” (p. 282).

³Jacques Ellul, “Technique and the Opening Chapters of Genesis,” in *Theology and Technology: Essays in Christian Analysis and Exegesis*, Carl Mitcham and Jim Grote, eds. (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), 125.

for God made the garden perfect, without need of modification or improvement. Human activity was not engaged in to advance or improve the garden, for it needed no improvement. Human activity in the garden, therefore, was to “work” (Hebrew *‘abad*) or “guard” (Hebrew *šamar*) the garden, but this work implies no essential alteration to the garden. Ellul asks the interesting question that if work is intended in the garden to advance, improve, or alter what God had already pronounced “good,” then what is Adam expected to “guard” the garden against, as these words occur parallel? Ellul suggests that Adam simply “worked” and “guarded” because God desired that he do it and not in order to achieve an end, goal, or product.⁴

With the Fall, the man and woman are still commanded to work, but this time the work is designated *‘iṣṣābôn*, “toil.” From now on their work will be characterized by the attempt to produce from the soil, but with the caveat that the soil would not produce the expected fruit or in a manner commensurate with the labor expended. Work, as with every other aspect of humanity created in the *imago Dei*, is now ambiguous. It is part of God’s gracious command from the beginning, but now, East of Eden, it is part of the lot of fallen humanity and the fractured image of God.

Human Innovation and Technology

There are two main complexes of literature which relate to human innovation and technology in Genesis 1-11: 4:15-24, the genealogy of Cain, and chapters 9:18-11:9, including the account of Noah’s vineyard (9:20-27), the “Table of Nations” in chapter 10, and the story of the Tower of Babel (11:1-9). It is significant that in both of these complexes, human technology is at best ambiguous.

To underscore this last point, if one looks at the flow of the narrative from chapters 4:1-11:10, the following outline emerges. First, there is the

⁴Ellul, “Technique and the Opening Chapters of Genesis,” 127.

story of murder in the first family after the expulsion from the garden (4:1-16). The result of this sin is that Cain is sent out to wander and be a fugitive in the earth. Following this story, there is the first set of genealogies in 4:17-24 (the corrupt line of Cain, ending in unconstrained violence) and 4:25-5:32 (the new line of Adam through Seth, ending in worship). Third, 6:1-4 is the strange story of the sons of God having relations with the daughters of men, which sets the stage for the flood. Gen. 6:5-9:17 is the account of the flood and the covenant with Noah and his descendants. Following the flood account is another brief account of impropriety, sin, and cursing (9:18-29, Noah's drunkenness and Ham's impropriety). Chapter 10 is the second extensive genealogy, the descendants and their respective nations of the three sons of Noah. Finally, 11:1-9 is the story of the Tower of Babel and the subsequent scattering of people over the face of the earth.

The following outline emerges from the foregoing description of contents:

- A:** Cain and Abel; Cain's sin; Cain driven out to *wander* (4:1-16).
- B:** *Genealogy* of Cain and Seth (4:17-24, Cain; 4:25-5:32, Seth).
- C:** Sons of God and daughters of men, *illicit sexual union* (6:1-4).
- D:** The flood account and covenant with Noah (6:5-9:17).
- C':** Noah's drunkenness and Ham's *gazing on his nakedness* (9:18-29).
- B':** The *Genealogy* of the Nations (chapter 10).
- A':** The Tower of Babel: people *scattered* (11:1-9).

The sin of Cain and his wandering, fugitive status corresponds to the presumptuous sin of the people in Babel and their scattering over the earth. The genealogies of the two sons of Adam (Cain and Seth) corresponds to the genealogies of the three sons of Noah (Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the curse of Cain corresponding to the curse of Ham). The illicit sexual union between the sons of God and the daughters of men corresponds to Ham's inappropriate gazing on his father's nakedness. The flood account is the

central narrative in the whole section, with accounts leading up to it and flowing from it. It is significant to note that all the accounts of human technology and innovation in Genesis 1-11 occur in contexts relating to sin (Cain and Abel; Cain’s genealogy, leading to utter corruption; Noah’s drunkenness; and the Tower of Babel).

The Origin of Civilization (chapters 4-5)

Many have suggested that the account of Cain and Abel contains the first reference to the development of civilization in terms of the origin of *pastoralism* (Abel) and *agriculture* (Cain).⁵ This is complicated by the statement in 3:23 (“therefore the LORD God sent him [Adam] forth from the garden of Eden, “to till [Hebrew *’ābad*, “work”] the ground from which he was taken”) and by 4:20, the account of Lamech’s son Jabal (“Adah bore Jabal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have cattle”). Furthermore, attribution for the origin of agriculture later on goes to Noah (9:20: “Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard”). It is ambiguous, therefore, whether Cain should be considered the father of agriculture, as it is attributed elsewhere to Adam (although we are not specifically told he worked the ground) and Noah.

Nevertheless, Cain works the ground and the fruit of his labor is considered unacceptable to the Lord. While many have seen reflected in this story the etiology of pastoralism and an apology for Israel’s original pastoral roots, it is more likely that Cain pursues the cultivation of what was cursed

⁵Some scholars see in this account a memory of the origin of the Kenites, a desert tribe related to the Israelites. John Sawyer in particular attempts to make a connection between Cain, the Kenites, and the Edomites on the basis of personal names found in Genesis 4 and the metal-working of Tubal-Cain and the Edomites. Assuming that the traditions found in Genesis 1-11 were arranged and explained for theological and not just antiquarian reasons, one is justified in claiming that Genesis 4 has much more to say about human culture than the origin of the smith trade. See John Sawyer, “Cain and Hephaestus: Possible Relics of Metalworking Traditions in Genesis 4, *Abr-Nahrain* 24 (1986): 163.

in Gen. 3: 17-18:⁶

[C]ursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.

After the flood, God removes the curse from the ground (“I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth”, Gen. 8:21) in a passage reflective of a “new creation”, with much the same commands and promises given in chapters 8-9 (“be fruitful and multiply”), with the added statement that the curse on the ground was removed.⁷

Genesis 4 contains the only significant etiologies (origin stories) about human culture. First, the origin of *cities* is attributed to Cain. Gen. 4:17 says that Cain “became the builder of a city and called the name of the city according to the name of his son, Enoch.” The first city was born out of Cain’s wandering, fugitive status, after murdering his brother and being driven from the presence of the Lord.⁸

⁶See Thomas Mann, *The Book of the Torah: The Narrative Integrity of the Pentateuch* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 19-20. Mann says we do not know the reason for God’s disregard of Cain’s sacrifice.

⁷David Clines [“Theme in Genesis 1-11,” in *I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1-11* (Richard Hess and David Tsumura, eds. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 299] does not think that Gen. 8:21 has anything to do with the curse on the ground in chapter 3, but the “curse on the ground” here refers to the flood. His statement is puzzling, given the exact verbal parallel between 3:17 and 8:21. Furthermore, 5:29 echoes the same curse on the ground, which Noah was to ameliorate: “Out of the ground that the Lord has cursed this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands.

⁸Clines says of the origin of civilization in Genesis 4, “[W]hile the genealogy appears on the surface to be a list of the founders of the arts of civilization (the city, cattle-breeding, music, metal-working) . . . it is made clear by the point to which the progress of civilization reaches, namely Lamech’s tyrannous boast (4:23f), that this has been a progress in sin as much as in civilization. In the seven generations of the line of Cain, history has seen a ‘progress’ from an impulsive act of murder to a deliberate reign of terror.” See Clines, 295.

Many have noticed the similarity between Enoch’s son, Irad, and the well-known Mesopotamian city Eridu, mentioned in the ancient Near Eastern text *The Eridu Genesis* as the first city. In this text, and in general in Near Eastern myth, cities originate in the will of the gods and are a part of the blessing of the gods on humanity. Note the goddess Nintur’s commandment to build the first cities:

May they come and build cities and cult-places,
that I may cool myself in their shade;
May they lay the bricks for the cult-cities in
pure spots . . .

The firstling of those cities, Eridu,
She gave to the leader Nudimmud,
The second, Badtibira, she gave to the Prince
and Sacred One⁹

Not so in Genesis 4. The city has its origins in Cain and Cain’s line, not in the divine will or mediation. The genealogy in chapter 4 lists only seven generations of Cain. They are sufficient to illustrate the line of Cain as resulting in corruption and uncontrolled violence.¹⁰

Walter Brueggemann has suggested that Cain’s construction of the city and the beginning of human civilization ought not to be considered resultant and illustrative of the curse on Cain. He suggests that these verses have no connection to the preceding curse of Cain, but are rather a celebration of life and culture. He does admit the uneasy relationship between a murderer and the development of a high culture, but he makes no attempt to explain the presence of two parallel genealogies, Cain and Seth, except to assign

⁹Patrick D. Miller Jr., “Eridu, Dunnu, and Babel: A Study in Comparative Mythology,” in *I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1-11* (Richard Hess and David Tsumura, eds. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 161-162.

¹⁰See Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 39.

them to different original sources.¹¹ As a literary unit, Genesis 4 begins the major theme of Genesis 1-11 which Gerhard von Rad has called the “increase of sin to avalanche proportions.”¹² The building of the first city and the origin of human civilization happens as part of this “avalanche,” in Cain’s wandering and fugitive state, away from the presence of God.

Pastoralism (Jabal), the *arts* (Jubal), and *metalworking* (Tubal-Cain) are mentioned as originating through three sons of Lamech.¹³ Claus Westermann says this relative to the origin of crafts and professions:

Faced with the mythology of the ancient Near East, the Bible takes the same stand as does the modern secular historian. All progress in civilization is a human achievement. Cattle breeding, horticulture, metal work and other arts and crafts are the work of human beings, not the outcome of the internal conflicts of the gods. This accords well with the description of the destiny of humanity in Genesis 1-3 which is quite different from that found in Babylon and Egypt.¹⁴

However, Israel does see a divine activity behind human achievements. It is not God’s creative action, but the blessing which God has bestowed on the person as his creature.

It is curious that human civilization first is described in Genesis 4 as proceeding from the line of Cain, including human society, the arts, industry, pastoralism, and agriculture (but see my comments above). While I agree with Westermann that human achievement is capable of great good as well

¹¹Brueggemann, Walter, *Genesis*, Interpretation Commentary (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 64-65.

¹²Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (revised edition), Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 152.

¹³All of these individuals have names based on the Hebrew root *yābal*, relating to “leading” or “conducting along”, and in its noun form refers to watercourses or streams.

¹⁴Westermann, Claus, *Genesis: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1992), 61. He distinguishes between the Yahwist’s focus on the curse and the Priestly editor’s focus on blessing. Regardless of the possible concerns of original sources, Genesis 1-11 has been so ordered and composed as to make a coherent narrative with its own structure, themes, and motifs.

as great evil, Westermann does not notice that technological advancements and human innovation in Genesis 1-11 are uniformly resultant of human sin and a cursed family line.¹⁵ The good which is accomplished, as well as the potential for great harm, are alike done “East of Eden,” in Cain’s fugitive and wandering state, and therefore bear all the ambiguities of human life after the Fall.

Furthermore, it is important to note that in the line of Seth, as opposed to the line of Cain which it immediately follows, there is no etiology story relating to human technology. Rather, there is a single origin story in 4:26: “At that time, calling on the name of the LORD was begun.” The point of such juxtaposition may be that human technology and endeavor have their origins in the corrupt line of Cain, while the “new creation” brought about in the new line of Seth (see 5:3, compare with 1:26-27!), issued in the origin of worship.

The point is simply this: that human endeavor is at best ambiguous and at worst presumptuous and evil. After the Fall, East of Eden is where all human technology and striving originate.

Chapters 9-11

The other cluster of passages which relates to human innovation occurs in chapters 9-11. The first relates to the origin of wine-making and Noah’s drunkenness and the events which surround it in 9:18-29. The second is the so-called “Table of Nations” in Genesis 10 and the third the Tower of Babel account in chapter 11:1-9.

No sooner had Noah and his family been saved through the flood

¹⁵See Westermann, p. 60: “Human achievements in the area of civilization correspond not only to the will of the creator, but go back to his word of command. . . . The existence of humankind in the primeval period is colored not only by humanity’s revolt and over-stepping of limits, but also by human progress as people fulfill their destiny.”

and received the covenant injunctions and promises when Noah became drunk and Ham, his son, compromised himself by “looking on his father’s nakedness.” An inauspicious beginning to postdiluvian human culture! Some have suggested that this story illustrates the lifting of the curse on the ground (8:21) by the gift of fruitfulness exemplified in the vineyard and wine-making, while others see it as simply temporary relief from the curse.¹⁶ What is overlooked is the close connection between human innovation and technology in Genesis 1-11 (here, the origin of vineyards and wine-making) and human sin (here, Noah’s drunkenness, leading to the unhappy events of the curse on Ham/Canaan).

From such beginnings, all human families spread out over the earth. The spread of human culture is recorded in chapter 10, a result of God’s scattering of nations at the end of the Tower of Babel episode.

The Table of Nations in Genesis 10 is the other extended genealogy in the section under review.¹⁷ Of the three sons of Noah, Japheth’s descendants are mentioned first, receiving only four verses (vv. 2-5). Ham is next, in vv. 6-20 and finally Shem, vv. 21-32. I suggest that Japheth’s genealogy is included for completeness sake, but the author’s focus is elsewhere. The line of Ham, cursed in 9:18-29, precedes that of Shem, as Cain’s line precedes Seth’s in chapter 4. Ham’s line, as Cain’s, produces a city builder. Seth is presented as a new creation, after “the likeness of Adam.” Likewise, Noah

¹⁶Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon: Mercer, 1997 [orig. 1901]), 66 and Clines pp. 299-300.

¹⁷Genesis 10 is sometimes overlooked as a genealogy due to its function as an etiology of the various nations. Note that while chapter 10 deals with the origin of nations rather than strictly with individuals, much of the genealogical formulae are identical between chapters 10, 5, and 11:10-32 (“X became the father of X”). See also J. Simons, “The ‘Table of Nations’: Its General Structure and Meaning,” in *I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1-11* (Richard Hess and David Tsumura, eds. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 245.

and his sons usher in a new creation after the flood, with similar genealogies and narratives pertaining to them and their descendants as those prior to the flood.

The only significant passage in the Table of Nations which relates to human innovation is 10:8-12, concerning Nimrod, son of Cush, son of Ham. First, note that the second account of city-building, in this case in the context of the origin of empires, also is in the line of one who was cursed, as was the case with Enoch. Second, Nimrod builds the city of Nineveh, later the capital of Assyria, Israel’s most feared and hated enemy.

The final passage relating to human innovation and technology in Genesis 1-11 is that of 11:1-9, the Tower of Babel. Surely this passage is intended to be an etiology for the city of Babylon (*Bābel* in Hebrew is Babylon in English), but more than this it points to the spread of human arrogance and rebellion. David Clines asserts that the Tower of Babel account, far from being an example of divine over-reaction to trivial sin, is an appropriate response to human attempts to scale the heights of heaven and usurp divine authority.¹⁸ “Let us make a name for ourselves” is contrasted at the end of the Primeval History (11:4) with the name (*’ādām*) which God bestows on the man and the woman in 1:26.

It is interesting that all three accounts of city-building in Genesis 1-11 occur in contexts which are ominous: the first in the corrupt line of Cain, the second in the cursed line of Ham, and the third in 11:1-9, the ill-fated attempt to build the Tower of Babel.

Divine Innovation in Chapters 3-11

Adding to the ambiguity of innovation and technology in Genesis 1-11 are the two references to divine intervention in human technologies. One might construe from what has been said heretofore that all innovation and technology

¹⁸Clines, pp. 297-298.

are a result of the Fall and therefore unredeemable and negative. God himself, however, intervenes in human affairs with technologies intended to preserve and protect humanity.

The first is in Gen. 3:21:

And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them.

The first point to make is that after the Fall, God himself is the first innovator. He clothes the man and the woman in order to cover their nakedness and shame. God, therefore, preserves his sinful creation as his very first act after the Fall, demonstrating his magnanimity and grace. But this act of grace occurs after the Fall and the curse on the man and woman: "By making garments for men God shows them that this is necessary because of their wickedness."¹⁹

The second passage in which God provokes human technology is in the flood account. In chap. 6:12ff:

And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth. And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh; for the earth is filled with violence through them; behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch.

As with the account of clothing Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, so too here the reason for divine intervention is human sin. All human technology in Genesis 1-11 occurs East of Eden, burdened with the ambiguity of life lived outside of God's original intention and provision.

But there is an implicit promise in God's utilization of human technologies. It is the promise that even in a sinful, estranged state, God involved himself in human affairs in such a way that the curse points to the

¹⁹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1-3* (New York: MacMillan, 1959), 88.

blessing. In Adam’s expulsion from the garden, God provides for him. In Cain’s expulsion from the presence of God, God marked him and preserved his life. It is in this “curse with a promise” that Cain goes forth and builds a city. In the flood account, God undid his creation and yet preserved a remnant of it and provided for its future and blessing.

Conclusion

According to Genesis 1-11, human technologies originate in our estranged state, “away from the presence of the Lord.” This is not to say that good is not accomplished through technology. It is to say that technology, as in all other arenas of human endeavor, is touched by the Fall and inherently reflects the need to “make a name for ourselves.” Human technologies and innovations serve to provide what God had originally given as a gift—shelter, security, meaningful labor, and community. Given that human technology originates in the curse and is born under the conditions of estrangement—no matter how brilliant or beneficial—it cannot be instrumental in overcoming this estrangement. “East of Eden” is not a destination, it is a condition. Genesis 1-11 is the account of human alienation and attempt to make a name, to build a city, to create community apart from God. The Church, on the other hand, is the community which is given by and receives its name from God. We await the city, the New Jerusalem, which we cannot build and in which human technologies will be superfluous. As those who live “away from the presence of God” and are shaped by the “blessing within the curse,” we in the Church must regard technology for what it is.

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