

turn philosophy to what he considered “the important questions of everyday life,” says Kimball. Although he prized clarity of

language, he was somehow gravely misunderstood on this point by his academic successors.

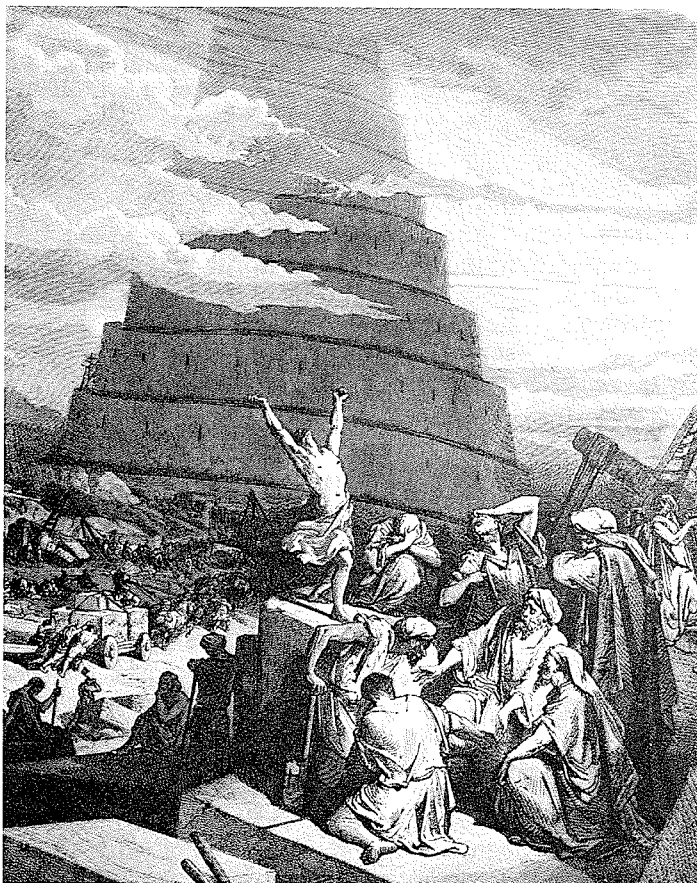
Babel

“What’s Wrong With Babel?” by Leon R. Kass, in *The American Scholar* (Winter 1989), 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

“Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth.’”

Thus did the biblical people of Babel plant the seeds of their own destruction, recalls Kass, who teaches at the University of Chicago. What was their sin?

The story of Babel, he notes, is one of a series of tales in Genesis—Eden, Cain and Abel, the Flood—in which man is told of human possibilities that have been tried and have proved impossible. The still-valid lesson from Babel, Kass believes, is that the “recurrent dream of universal human community living in peace and freedom” is a delusion.



Reaching towards heaven, the Tower of Babel, as depicted in 1866 by Gustave Doré, symbolized man's quest for omnipotence. In the Bible, God destroyed the tower before it was completed.

At the time of Babel’s creation, the “whole earth was of one language and one speech,” the Bible says, suggesting a shared human understanding of the world. The creation of the orderly city “proudly celebrates the powers of human reason” and the human quest for self-sufficiency. The tower “is a human effort to link up heaven and earth,” and, in a sense, to control heaven and human destiny, says Kass. “In Babel, the universal city, with its own uniform language, beliefs, truths, customs, and laws, [men] neither know nor seek to know anything beyond.”

God punished the people of Babel for their implied wish to be as gods by confounding their language and scattering them “upon the face of all the earth.” The result, Kass observes, was “the emergence of separate nations, with separate tongues and separate ways, with the near-certain prospect of difference” and war.

Yet, this is the key to the lesson, Kass says. "God's dispersion of the nations is the political analog to the creation of woman: instituting otherness and opposition, it is the

necessary condition for national self-awareness and the possibility of a politics that will . . . hearken to the voice of what is eternal, true, and good."

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

The Iron Planet

"Mercury's Heart of Iron" by Clark R. Chapman, in *Astronomy* (Nov. 1988), 1027 N. 7th St., Milwaukee, Wisc. 53233.

More than a decade after America's unmanned Mariner 10 flew near the planet Mercury during 1974-75, scientists have finally digested all of the data from the flight. And they are starting to ask some big questions, reports Chapman, of Tucson's Planetary Science Institute.

Located about midway between the Earth and the Sun, Mercury is a "truly bizarre" planet. Its rock crust is unusually thin; a "metallic iron core" accounts for 70 percent of the planet's weight.

The most surprising discovery made by Mariner 10 was that the tiny planet has a magnetic field, like Earth's but much weaker. Until then, scientists had believed that the core was solid and relatively cool, and thus lacked the moving currents of molten metal needed to generate a magnetic field. But the presence of a magnetic field suggests that the core must be at least partially molten. And that means that the core may contain chemical "impurities," such as sulfur, which serve as a kind of "planetary antifreeze."

Does this matter?

Mercury's make-up, Chapman explains,

plays a vital role in the two leading theories of the origins of the solar system. According to one theory, formulated by cosmochemist John Lewis during the 1970s, the solar system was created in a more or less orderly fashion. Lewis believes that the planets formed out of gases that cooled and condensed. At some point, billions of years ago, the sun flared up briefly, blasting away many gases. According to Lewis's theory, there should not be any sulfur, or anything like it, on Mercury.

A more recent theory, propounded by George Wetherill of the Carnegie Institution, is that the solar system emerged from "chaos." Mercury, in particular, bounced around the solar system like a billiard ball, colliding with large asteroids and other planets. According to Wetherill's scenario, sulfur and other materials should be randomly distributed around the solar system.

Until recently, Chapman says, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) had ruled out a second Mercury probe. But now, partly because of Mercury's new importance, another visit to the "metal planet" may be planned.

Sex and Skin Color

"Human Skin Color: A Possible Relationship Between Its Sexual Dimorphism And Its Social Perception" by Peter Frost, in *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* (Autumn 1988), Univ. of Chicago Press, P.O. Box 37005, Chicago, Ill. 60637.

From medieval England to Aztec Mexico and contemporary Nigeria, men generally have found the lightest skinned women of their society the most desirable. To a lesser extent, women have preferred darker-colored men.

Why should this be so? asks Frost, an anthropologist at Quebec's Université Laval.

The male preference for light-skinned women is not a result of white racism or European colonialism. Modern spectrophotometry shows that women in every so-