

Genesis 11:3-4 (Jane J. Leake) 131670

Clay and Stone: Babylon the Great and the New Jerusalem, Chapter 3: The City of Clay (11:3-4)

"Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city, and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." (Gen. 11:3, 4).

"A CLAY CITY"—that is our subject, and I quite expect that the first thing that comes into your mind when you hear it, is a collection of round mud huts, such as savages use. But no, something far more imposing has to come before our view. But first please follow me along a pleasant country road and over several stiles, more or less dilapidated—across these open fields, and through these sunny meadows, where the larks are singing overhead, and the wild flowers are blooming beneath your feet—till we come to a rickety plank bridge over a little stream, and then find ourselves among a few humble cottages built beside a brick field. Summer and winter, wet or fine, through dust or mud or snow, as the case might be, my feet have trodden that path for years, and I want you to see now with my eyes, as it were, the work going on in that out-of-the-way corner of the earth.

Good "brick earth", as they call it, has been found in that quiet meadow, and piles of clay have been dug out of it, and you can see it now molded into the size and shape of bricks, and these bricks are built up into heaps around burning matter. The smoke is ever rising from those piles of bricks, for they are burning them thoroughly, so that the clay shall lose its plastic character and become hard and brittle; and when they are finished they are carted away, and sold for building purposes. I have brought you to this brickfield in fancy, that you may realize that bricks are formed out of the clay just as much as the little china jug whose lesson we have already had.

And now please come with me up the stream of time a little further. Yes; all the way back to the time when I was a little child. A great day has come for us country-bred youngsters. It is my eldest brother's birthday, and we—the three or four elders of a large family—are to keep it by going to see the wonders of a great clay city. Perhaps you have never thought of London as a clay city before, and that is why I asked you to first visit the brickfield. London is built of bricks, and each brick comes out of the clay-pit. When we reach London, and see the long gay streets, we wonder where the end can be. But we can little judge of its size while we wander about its streets, or through its beautiful parks, and therefore our father has arranged that today we are to climb to the very highest possible point on the dome of its great cathedral. Even our young feet ache as we go up stair after stair; and after amusing ourselves in the whispering gallery, we climb again till we find ourselves on a carefully protected pinnacle, from which we can gaze north, south, east and west, over the roofs of the great clay city. It is said to be the largest city on earth, the metropolis of our land.

Here we can see endless blocks of brick-built houses, factories, churches, and docks. The river Thames slowly wends its way through all this. Our father points out to us various points of interest, as far away as the smoke and mist will allow. We are full of pride as we think of this great city, and that it is the capital of our country, and that it boasts of being perhaps the greatest city in the world. But we must hasten onward.

Soon we are in the British Museum. Those were the days when Layard had recently startled the world with his discoveries in Asia Minor. He has found out that beneath the huge mounds where wild things live, there are great cities buried. We children had gazed with wonder at pictures of the great winged bulls, and other figures he has recovered, but now our own eyes see them, as they stand before us in all their silent grandeur: strangers to our great Western clay-built city.

Let us stay a while with these great strange creatures around us, as they bear silent witness to the realities of a by-gone age, and let us listen to the voice of the Bible, and gaze by its light on what has happened even before these great cities were built. There come the tribes journeying from the East, the descendants of the clay vessels ruined in lovely Eden. They have reached the great plain in the Land of Shinar, and there they have found clay: and floating on the waters of the river Iss they find slime. What do they want more? "Go to," they cry; "let us make brick and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar." That is the first great brickfield, and there the fire is hardening the plastic clay: hardening it thoroughly. Man, of the "earth earthy," is building now, and he is preparing clay for his work. Listen, they are talking together. They have a grand ideal before them. "Go to," they say; "let us build us a city, and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

There, look at them! Busy as ants, and small as ants, in comparison with the great works they are making, these men are using the knowledge and wisdom stolen in Eden to claim the earth for themselves, and to raise a mighty, clay-built city—to their own honor and glory; and more—they are building a stupendous tower temple, by which they purpose to find their way back to communion with the heaven they have lost. We get just a glimpse of this busy scene, and no more, for the Bible shines, not to give us chronology or history, but to teach us great moral lessons. We see man making himself a name in the earth; we see man making, as he thinks, a metropolis for himself on the earth; we see him rearing a great temple by which he hopes to raise himself to heaven, and all is of clay. Who rules his self-will? Who directs his building? For whose worship is that mighty tower?

And as we sit here in the midst of this great modern clay city, let us listen, for out of the dust of ages gone by these tablets of Ninevah whisper to our ears of the great city of bricks and of slime which had been reared on the plain of Shinar, called by its haughty builders "The Lady of Kingdoms," and of its mighty tower temple rising in seven stages of mystic meaning, called "The Gate of Heaven," where its builders "went to sin wickedly"; and closes its narrative with one word thrice repeated—"Overturned—overturned—overturned."

Yes; they call their clay city "The Lady of Kingdoms," and their tower temple, "The Gate of Heaven," and know not that a mighty Visitor has come down to view the work of their hands, and has written across it, in letters of fire, "Babel." A veil hangs over the terrific judgment that destroyed man's first great effort at combination, his first attempt to find his own way to a heaven of his own conception. Short is the inspired record: "And they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel" (that is, 'confusion'), "because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth" (Gen. 11:9).

But was this the end of the great clay city? No, indeed! It was no more the end of Babel than it was the end of the pride and lawlessness of man. Here as we sit with these strange, silent witnesses to the glory of past ages standing around us, let us pause to muse on that past history of our race. Those stony eyes stare vacantly at the wondering Westerners who throng around them; those mighty wings, symbols of departed power, remain in motionless grandeur; those huge mouths are closed and silent, yet from their earthen tomb of three thousand years duration they whisper, as from the dust, of the might and grandeur of the East, and of the mutability of all things human. The name Nimrod, the mighty hunter, sounds in our ears, and from the Bible we learn that the Babel whose end we have seen was the beginning of his kingdom, and that Ninevah herself was younger than Babel. And now out of the mists and gloom of a long antiquity "The Lady of Kingdoms" and "The Gate of Heaven" once more loom upon our sight. Not now as the Babel of the inspired story, but as the "Babylon the Great" of both inspired and profane lore.

And hush! for just as we have been standing on the pinnacle of the chief cathedral of our great metropolis, beholding it with pride, so now, the mightiest monarch of the then mightiest nation of the earth walks upon the top of his huge palace, and boasts to himself of the glory of his capital.

"Is not this great Babylon," he cries, "which I have built for the house of the kingdom, by the might of my power, and for the honor of my majesty?"

And what a city he gazes upon! There she sits, "a Lady of Kingdoms" in very truth, fifteen miles square, built to rule and measure, lying four-square, bestriding the wide and rapid river which flows through her toward "the Sea of the Sunrise." Her fifty streets, intersecting each other at right angles, and crossing the river by splendid bridges which are six hundred feet long, and thirty feet broad, and ending in one hundred brazen gates—twenty-five to the north, twenty-five to the south, twenty-five to the east, and to the west. Her mighty walls, sixty miles long and three hundred and fifty feet high and eighty-seven feet thick, are surmounted by two hundred and fifty towers, and beyond them lies a moat, as deep and as broad as the walls are high. He looks down on the six hundred and seventy-six squares within the shelter of those stupendous walls, all built to rule and measure, the houses three stories high, the land richly cultivated to supply the inhabitants in case of siege—the vast river flowing from north to south through brazen gates, shut in by inner quays and walls, with brazen gates leading into the city from the water, and spanned by those twenty-five splendid bridges. Each half of the city thus divided contains a large building—the one the palace on which the king stands, lost in pride and self-admiration, with its wide inner wall, its brazen gates, flashing in the sunlight, its hanging gardens—the wonder of the world; and the other half holds a building more marvelous still, with its solid temple tower, rising in eight separate stories of mystic meaning, tower upon tower, gleaming with silver and gold, painted in gorgeous colors, and surrounded by a circling stair. This is the temple of the great city, and here, with rites and mysteries such as we dare not name, these men and women, formed out of the clay, worship the foul divinity of Zeus Belus.

We cannot wonder that that poor mortal heart throbs with pride as he gazes on such a metropolis as this—man's masterpiece in the way of a city. He knows not, poor heathen that he was, whence came his glory; that the prophet of Jehovah had seen in vision an eagle, "long-winged and full of feathers, and of divers colors," pluck the topmost twig from the lordly cedar of Lebanon, and fly with this insignia of imperial power, and plant it beside the many water-courses and irrigation works of his lordly city. There it was to grow, a tree of low stature, but for all that it meant that the imperial power of the world had been taken from the idolatrous house of Israel, and had been given to the idolatrous Gentile. He has seen himself as the head of gold in his heaven-sent vision—he has seen himself as the great tree cut down in judgment, yet spared to learn that a mightier than Zeus Belus overrules the affairs of earth.

Hush! What Voice is this that comes from heaven crying, "O King Nebuchadnezzar, to thee it is spoken; the kingdom is departed from thee, and they shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and they shall make thee to eat grass like the oxen! and seven times shall pass over thee, until thou know that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever He will!"

It is the Voice of the great Unknown, and this poor heathen king bows his proud head to the just punishment of his sins, and tells us in his own words, how that, at the end of those days of chastisement, "I Nebuchadnezzar, lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the Most High; and I praised and honored Him that liveth forever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom from generation to generation—and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What doest thou? Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of Heaven, all whose works are truth, and His ways judgment: and those that walk in pride He is able to abase." Wonderful words are these, echoing from far off ages to us boastful Westerners, while the Israel of His choice cries, "He hath no hands," and "We will do according to our own wills."

But pass on. We have to gaze again at this splendid clay city, Babylon the Great, "the Hammer of the whole earth." It is a day of festival, a day of great rejoicing for her victorious armies are marching homeward, across that fertile plain of Shinar. They have been fighting in far-off Judaea, whose coasts are washed by the great sea of the sunset. The rebellious Hebrew king has broken the oath, sworn in the Name of Jehovah, to serve the great Nebuchadnezzar's son; and the Chaldean armies have once more taken and destroyed rock-built Jerusalem. They have burnt the temple, they have burnt her palaces, they have cast down her walls, and they come now laden with the residue of the treasures of that far-off land—leading a wretched band of foot-sore captives, and a blinded and manacled king.

Oh, gaze at him! A son of great David's royal line, an heir of the promises of Israel's great Jehovah, thus dragged in chains to end his wretched life a captive in the great clay city! Look at them all; they are sherds of the clay nation whose doom we have seen foreshadowed: no longer plastic clay, but fragments of the Potter's earthen vessel "that cannot be made whole again." Over the wide plain they march, past the vast irrigation works, over the fertile fields; the great brazen gates swing open to receive them, the spacious streets are ringing with the acclamations of their haughty conquerors. But he, the guilty king, sees not the lordly grandeur of his captors; he gazes not at the stupendous walls, at bridge or river, at brazen gates or towering temple, or kingly palace; he has looked his last at all earthly scenes, and has closed his

view with that of the dying agonies of his own tortured children.

But it is over—this day of speechless shame and sorrow. The fiery sun has rolled down into the far west; the taunts and the scorn of the victors are hushed. The moon rides high over the great plain, the flowing river, the lordly palace, and gleams coldly on the towering temple, the walls, the towers, the moat, the sleeping city.

The heart-sore captives of high degree may rest their fettered limbs, and forget, we may trust, in sleep, the misery of the past, and the greater misery of a hopeless future; but the captives of low degree are free to earn their living within the city walls, and they creep with shame-bowed heads, and tearful eyes, to those of their race who have long been exiles in the great clay city. All too late they weep when they remember Zion. Refusing Jehovah's rule, they now must bow to Nebuchadnezzar's. Practicing idolatry, and loving idols, they now are crouching in corners of an idolatrous city, and sheltering under the shadow of the great tower of Zeus Belus.

Does no eye see their tears? no ear hear their moans? Is there no hope for the broken sherds of the once great clay nation? Has their Jehovah forgotten forever His tender mercies? Will He pardon no more? Crouching together in the quiet night-time, look at them, those travel-worn weeping exiles. They that wasted them have departed; they that required of them mirth have listened awestruck to their mournful melody, as they sat down by the rivers of Babylon, and have left them now to mourn alone.

Suddenly a prince "of quiet mien" rises from their midst, and draws forth a scroll. He has brought them a message from their forsaken Jehovah in this their hour of woe. Let us listen. It is the wild, free song of His inspired but ill requited prophet. Their drooping heads are raised. There is new hope in their tear-stained eyes, strange scenes pass before them, strange sounds rise on their ears. Jehovah has not forgotten them utterly. When they seek Him He will yet hear them. He will yet arise for their help. Stupendous clay walls, and brazen gates, and towers, and armed men, and Zeus Belus himself are nothing to Jehovah, when once He rises up to their succor. Listen! He calls to the nations: "Put yourselves in array against Babylon." He "opens His armories," for the day of His vengeance is come.

What sounds are these that rise on ears so recently filled with the scorn and ridicule of foes? Is it the rolling waves of their loved sea of the sunset? or whence comes this dull roar, ever growing louder, ever growing nearer? What means this excitement around, this furbishing of weapons, this swinging-to of these great brazen gates, this unfurling of the standard on the broad outer walls, this watch being made strong? What means it all? Babylon the Great, the Hammer of the whole Earth, is besieged. None can go out or come in. Listen to her scornful song: "I am: and there is none else; I shall never be moved. I sit a Queen forever." She laughs behind her moat, her walls, her gates, at the utmost that her foes can do; and within she opens her store-houses, and feasts with drunken revelry.

The night is dark, the watch is strong, the siege has lasted long, the hopes of the foe have sunk low before the spreading moat, unscalable walls, and gates of brass; when, listen the drunken king calls in the madness of his folly for the sacred vessels of Jehovah's rock-built temple, that he and his wives and his concubines and all that heathen crowd, may sip the sparkling wine from their golden rims. The mighty walls stand firm around, the brazen gates are fast, but look! look at the river! There is "a drought upon the waters" Lower and lower sinks the stream. The river, the mighty river, is dry! The reeds are on fire, and foemen, fierce and destructive, swarm into the river-bed, and, like lions rushing up from the bed of Jordan, they swarm into the streets of the startled city, they rush over the bridges. The houses are blazing; post gallops to meet post, and one messenger to meet another, to tell the feasting king that his lordly city is taken from end to end.

"The mighty men of Babylon are affrighted, they have forborne to fight, they have remained in their holds, their might hath failed.... the king of Babylon hath heard report of them, and his hands waxed feeble; anguish took hold upon him—pangs as of a woman in travail."—"A sound of a cry from Babylon.... because Jehovah hath spoiled Babylon.... for the Lord God of recompenses shall surely requite. The broad walls of Babylon shall be utterly broken, and her high gates shall be burned with fire: and the people shall labor in vain, and the folk in the fire, and they shall be weary."

It goes on and on, that wondrous song, one moment full of Jehovah's pitying love, telling out that the iniquity of His people shall be sought for and not found; the next ringing with the roar of coming judgment on the foes who had exceeded the punishment He had decreed for them. The heathen king is but His battle-ax, the nations are His weapons of war, and then there is the sound of captives escaping from Babylon: "Ye that have escaped the sword, go away, stand not still: remember Jehovah afar off, and let Jerusalem come into your mind." "My people, go ye out of the midst of her, and deliver ye every man his soul from the fierce anger of the Lord." The wild prophetic cadence rises and falls upon their ears, till they forget that they are captives, till the mighty walls, the splendid palaces, the temples, the broad streets, the brazen gates of their prison-city fade from their view, and dragons dwell, and owls hoot, and satyrs dance amidst the crumbling ruins.

But it closes, that strange prophetic song, and once more they see around them the walls, the towers, the brazen gates of the city of their captivity. Then see, he steps forth—that "quiet prince," that messenger of Jehovah's comfort—and bids them follow him through the silent streets, where the moonlight rests on the storied houses—on till he reaches the quay of the swiftly flowing Euphrates. Then see, he picks up a stone, and binds it firmly to that priceless scroll. Then swift as thought he flings it far out into the silent, sullen waters. A sudden splash, a momentary circle of moonlight ripples, a few floating bubbles, and a solitary voice cries through the silence of the night: "Thus shall Babylon sink, and shall not rise from the evil that I will bring upon her, and they shall be weary."—It is done; the doom of the great clay city is sealed forever. There, under the waters on which she proudly sits and sings, "I am, and there is none else. I sit a lady forever." There, where no human eye can see it, where no human hand can reach it, lies the mystic scroll of the fate of Babylon.

And where is the great clay city now? A few years ago that question would have been asked in vain. None knew. But now let us look around us with strange awe, as we gaze at these huge trophies, disintombed from the Birs Nemroud, dug out of vast mounds of sand and rubbish, and brought here to this Western clay city to be the gazing-stocks of men who once even doubted if the existence of the "Lady of Kingdoms," "the Gate of Heaven," "the Hammer of the whole earth," had not been a myth!

Yes, out of the sand-heaps and the mounds on the plain of Shinar, low out of the dust, rises a whispering voice: "Here lies Babylon the Great,"—"O thou that dwellest upon many waters, abundant in treasures, thine end is come." (Jer. 51:13).

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