

Technicity as False Ascendancy: A Review of Ellul's Treatment of the Tower of Babel Narrative

By Ted Lewis, July 2012, Ellul Conference, Wheaton College

Many European poets and artists of past centuries who engaged the Tower of Babel story before our modern times understood well that Babel was as much a spiritual force as it was a physical form. Sir David Lyndsay, in 1554, wrote, "The shadow of that Hyddeous Strength / Sax myle and more it is of length." This line gave C. S. Lewis the perfect springboard for his final novel in his space trilogy, where an anti-utopian attempt in England, like the Tower of Babel story, is thwarted by higher powers. The significant element here is that between, behind and beyond what we might call the "flesh and blood" of human culture are pretentious powers that are always stronger than what most people would like to think. Even George Orwell, in reviewing Lewis' book in 1945, would have preferred if the "magical element" had been left out. "Unfortunately," he commented, "the supernatural keeps breaking in." But where, then, does one locate the hideous strengths of our day, those invisible yet powerful forces that are no less powerful than gravity itself?

One year after Orwell's review, Jacques Ellul wrote his seminal article, *Chronicle of the Problems of Civilization*, that presented his two-fold track of sociological and theological analysis. "Beyond the social and economic forms, there are forces that condition the life of our time" (*Chronicle*, p. 19). For Ellul these forces were independent of human will, yet never separable from social forms. "We are in an essentially materialist time, or rather, a time of radical separation between two realms, material and spiritual" (p. 20). And if the perennial problems of civilization are always found in the combination of social and spiritual factors, the modern separation will lead to an incomplete diagnosis of the problems that threaten the foundations of society. In this post-war period, Ellul keenly recognized the *kairos* moment for Christian scholars to advance this double-analysis of the "principalities and powers" in modern institutional life. Any saving hope for "our civilization which is perhaps not far from total collapse" would, for Ellul, necessitate this blend of sociological and theological analysis. "We are at an absolutely decisive point," he announced prophetically in 1946 (p. 15). And for the next half-century he spent the rest of his career naming the forces for what they are, the hideous strengths that fuel our modern technique-driven society.

To be expected, Ellul made numerous references to the Babel narrative from Genesis 11 in his writings, and the main goal of this paper is to expand on Ellul's treatment of this story in five of his books. In addition to this, Ellul referenced a counter-narrative to Babel, namely the kenosis hymn of Philippians 2, which he referenced in direct juxtaposition to the Babel story. By identifying the contrasting themes in these two narratives, Ellul's interpretation of Babel forces will be summarized in a chart. This will allow for a more comprehensive telling of the Babel narrative that harmonizes with Ellul's larger thesis of technological totalism. The various elements are there in his writings from 1970 to 1990, but it may be that Ellul missed the chance to weave all of these elements together in a single text. For the Babel archetype truly depicts all of the major components of what he called technique, and what I may refer to as technicity. This includes linguistic, sociological, technological and spiritual dimensions. A final goal is to associate the Babel force with the metaphor of an anti-gravity force. This upward 'pull' will be useful in helping us complete a picture of how technicity draws everything into its value system that ultimately leaves no place for the God who is grounded in creation and revelation.

Before we look at references to Babel in Ellul's writings, it is helpful to consider Ellul's view of sacralization and desacralization. This will help us to better understand his references to spiritual forces as noted above. When *The Secular City* by Harvey Cox came out in 1965, the book had wide sales in France, and Ellul was very much aware of the book's appeal. The impetus for Ellul to write *The New Demons* (1975) was largely to provide some counter-point to Cox's thesis of secularization and his view of the city. Ellul notes that where Cox praises

science for exorcising the old sacralism away for the cleaner air of secularism to enter in, this house cleaning simply opened the way for seven new demons to take the place of the former one.

“Consequent upon this scientific operation, modern man is much more religious, much more dependent, much more sacralized than ever before, and more insidiously so” (Demons, p. 213).

Ellul describes how secular society has turned in on itself, preventing outside input, outside questioning, indeed, outside revelation. The new facts of modern life judge the old sources of authority rather than vice versa. In this light, argued Ellul, the secular setting cannot even detect how it can become a new religious setting. And since there is seemingly no fundamental difference between Christian religion and Christian revelation, Christianity can blend with anything new, let alone, with any other religion. But the greater issue is not how Christianity is compromised or limited in a secular setting. The root issue for Ellul is how modern society becomes resacralized in order to maximize the unification of all aspects of societal life. As Lewis portrayed in *That Hideous Strength*, the anti-utopian experiment can only commence when it has a new religious framework that effectively binds everything together into a seamless cultural unity.

The Secular City, therefore, is really an enslaved Sacred City, whether it is informed by Nazism or Market Mammonism. This city is forever following suit in the pattern of Babylon, the great (archetypal) city of the Bible. And running through Babylon, for Ellul, is Babel. In short, Babel shows that when a previous social-spiritual orientation is replaced by a new one, the latter is by no means less religious. In fact for Ellul, given his Barthian view of religion, if the new orientation is at odds with God, the new system will be even more religious, more sacred. Secularization, then, is nothing more than “the enthronement of new religions” (Demons, p. 213). By the close of this paper, we will end up with Ellul’s invitation for Christians to join God’s pattern of response by desacralizing all social forms that are at odds with God’s creation and revelation.

Ellul’s Writings on Babel

In *The Meaning of the City*, Ellul is clear that what is of greater significance in the Genesis 11 text is not the tower but the city itself. This book came out during the same period as *The New Demons*, providing additional response to Cox’s *The Secular City*. Man’s city making is accompanied by man’s name making. Of interest to Ellul is humankind’s urge to make things in contrast to receiving things. In his analysis of “Technique and the Opening Chapters of Genesis,” Ellul suggests that “technique was impossible in Eden” and that it is a “phenomenon of the Fall” (p. 132; 135). When the original unity of relationships in Eden is lost, everything in human life became an object of potential use. This, for Ellul, brings about the proliferation of means which meant that human life became filled with intermediaries that could lead to desired ends. To make a city, to make a name, to make an idol, and so forth, allowed people to distinguish themselves by what they could affect, and this opened the way for a greater independence from God. By redefining relationships in terms of objects that could be controlled and mastered, people could now become subjects like God. The Babel project, then, is not simply a Promethean effort to take over God’s power; “it is the desire to exclude God from his creation” so that man could assume God’s place (Meaning, p. 16).

Babel was therefore “the sign and symbol” of humanity’s collective enterprise to build something without the help of God. Babel was a new milieu, “built by man for man,” and that is precisely the setting where man, as a mass, could make a name for himself (Meaning, p. 16). Ellul reminds the reader that naming is essentially a spiritual act; it establishes a relationship between the one naming and the one named, as well as the link between the essence and expression of something. Humanity, then redefines its relationship with itself, unaware that the new subject-object configuration will entail new chains that will require the opiates and roses of a man-made religion. Man now controls his own sacrality, having removed the previous Creator-creature relationship, exchanging it for a new glory that promises mastery over anything that humanity can think of doing.

And so we have Ellul's pessimistic view of the city, rooted in the pride of Babel, excluding God, proliferating the technicity of means, taking over nature, birthing greater alienation among people, and all along being blind to its inevitable consequences. Man's thirst for technological conquest is tied to his thirst for spiritual conquest. But this will not go unchecked. "Sin always eggs (collective man) on to use things over which he is master in a way conducive to a spiritual destruction that nothing, in the natural order of things, can stop. Such is the city" (Meaning, p. 17). But at this point, Ellul notes that God's response is not an iconoclastic smashing of man's enterprise. It is rather an intervention before things get completely bad. In *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, Ellul explains how "God permits...Babel enterprises because he respects man's freedom and these frenzied methods fall within the perspective of his own design" (Politics, p. 175). In other words, God is not responsible for the fallout, but God can foresee the fall in relation to the natural order or design of things. What seems to be a harsh judgment is in fact a divine redirection at the best possible time.

Because Ellul sees the problem as a spiritual one (the desire to make a name without God's involvement), God's response is not to disrupt the form of the city but to disrupt the form of the communication required to make such a city and such a tower. Confusion of language, which provides the etymology for Babel, is not an explanation for the birth of languages. Ellul, leaving no stone unturned in his biblical exegesis, quickly sees that the word 'language' is singular, not plural. The builders of Babel did not understand the *one* language they had relied upon. "By confusion of tongues, by non-communication, God keeps man from forming a truth valid for all men, that is, for man as a mass. Henceforth, man's truth will only be partial and contested" (Meaning, p. 19). What God was mainly thwarting was the place of unity for the human race, the point of convergence for human-made truth. And what people lost by God's response was "the meaning of the city," that is, the opportunity to find ultimate meaning in human-generated enterprises that left God out of the picture.

In *Perspectives on our Age* (1981), Ellul advances the notion that Babel provides a new type of unity and oneness for humankind. The previous chapters of Genesis set the stage of human tensions: man against God, brother against brother, man against nature, ruler against servant. Without proper relationship to God, all other relationships were marked by conflict and violence. Humanity needed a 'new normal'. Ellul sees how the Tower of Babel was able to offset the harsh reality of destabilized life by offering a new solution to the social problems of the day. It offered a "the substitution of a cultural unity for God himself" (Perspectives, p. 130). In effect, the tower restored that unity in a world of sin and slavery as a way to make life's hardships more bearable. The ultimate questions of life are put to rest because all issues are accounted for within the scope of man's social, material reality. Religion, namely, the cultural unity represented in the ascending tower, gave the glue for unifying everything, and by this the people of Shinar were reconnected to the realm of the gods. But in this unity, every aspect of life must be integrated. Even sin itself is woven into the whole, and thus violence, indulgence and social prestige all have their proper place and legitimacy. This unity also serves to legitimize "the unlimited growth of the means without our being able to guide them toward human ends" (Perspectives, p. 87). Altogether, Ellul recognizes how Babel illustrates the chief values of modern technique: unification and limitlessness.

Humiliation of the Word, coming out in the mid-1980s, gave Ellul the chance to further his presentation of communication dynamics in Babel. At the outset he wrote how "sight makes me the center of the world" (Humiliation, p. 5), whereas the hearing of words places one in relationship to time and to others. Next, Ellul associates images with reality and words with truth, and then goes a step further to say that images tend to reinforce conformity, but words can speak into reality and disturb it. The problem lies here: as people manufacture cultural images and these images take on the qualities of artifice, they pose as conveyers of truth. This communication environment, where all reality is normalized, begins to devalue the capacity for words to truly speak a counterpoint truth that is at variance with 'reality', and eventually, words can only function as images do.

“In such a situation, when the word claims to speak only of reality, it is so rapidly outdistanced by the image that the word loses its vitality and gravity. The image is ever so much more efficacious and the word is stripped of its authenticity” (Humiliation, p. 32).

With this in mind, Ellul has much to say about why God confuses the mono-language of Babel where image trumps the word. Making a name was only possible by making an image. As discussed earlier, the rejection of God’s name for humanity was essentially a rejection of the object-subject relationship implied in all naming. To name oneself, outside this relationality, was indeed a way to assert autonomy, literally, ‘auto-nomos’. If people were to successfully break away from God, they had to leave the realm of words that define genuine relationships and response-abilities, and embrace the realm of images that gave them greater mastery. “Being master of the words about oneself is in reality claiming to be one’s own subject and completely autonomous” (Humiliation, p. 53). Consequently, God is turned into an object that can either be used or removed. But this, from God’s angle, cannot happen. In the end, God makes the image-dominated language of Babel to be a form of non-communication. The former mono-language that rejects outside questioning, outside truth, due to the fusing of imagery and language, which normalizes a human-made reality with no contradictions, cannot continue in a world where God seeks to communicate with people. A similar problem happens with idolatry, and later we will discuss how the domination of form over content is problematic for a God who reveals true content through form.

Also in the mid-80s came *Living Faith*, a unique book that built on Barth’s distinction between religion and revelation. “While religion sacralizes and absolutizes human realities, revelation desacralizes and relativizes them” (Faith, p. 143). Ellul uses the Babel story to show how people use religious beliefs and activities to hold all aspects of society in unity, all “convergences”, for the building of Babel projects. And as the Babel tower goes upward, so “religion goes up; revelation goes down” (Faith, p. 129). Ellul recognizes that religion serves human communities by helping them to be organized, orderly, and sustainable. “All this is fine,” says Ellul, “but it is not God; it doesn’t bring us any closer to God” (Faith, p. 143). The religious impulse is always a matter of “grasping”, as Barth said, and this is illustrated by an upward reach for either divinity or a higher destiny. And in this ascent, wrote Ellul, religion “always expresses itself in a show of power” (Faith, p.141).

“People build the tower to climb up and enter into contact with God, to equal him. To get hold of him, and whatever else one can imagine. In the face of this, God proclaims his intention to go down and see” (Faith, p. 137).

These matrix of ascendancy, acquisition and power, all within a religiously framed context is essential for Ellul. And this is not simply because Christianity or any other traditional religion can be used as the glue for societal integration; it is important because even a so-called post-Christian framework requires a sacralizing ‘religion’ to hold things together. We will return to the idea later that ascendancy and power-intensification go hand-in-hand.

The last Ellul book to be considered for its reference to Babel is *What I Believe* (1989). Significantly, Ellul added the notion of Babel being a ‘closed system’ that will help us carry the conversation into his broader theory of technique. From the inside, this system had, as discussed above, a ‘cultural unity’ that provided a self-legitimizing aspect to Babel. But no system that is closed or totalistic can exist indefinitely apart from God, for God is the one who reveals himself to humanity from the outside.

“Because God reveals himself, the world can never be a closed reality. It cannot find fulfillment in itself or shut itself up in a total system. The technological system comes under the historical law of Babel. This was a city meant to enclose the whole race and its gods. It was a universal city. It had no place for a separate ‘transcendent’. The walls of Babel were meant to shut out God, and leave him only a gate” (Believe, p. 185).

Therefore God “opens it up from outside.” When human evil and human misery reach a frenzied degree, God comes “down to see” what is happening, leaving his place of rest to intervene. This is important language since

the tower image is in the opposite direction, a moving upward to reach the place of God. Ellul makes a new comment here: "...the building of the city and the tower of Babel is a two-fold offence against God, a repetition of the fall of Adam" (Believe, p. 158). Here we see how the tower project adds an additional affront to God beyond the city project, being a clearer demonstration of human hubris, and this added enterprise prompts God to come "down".

Ellul's Counterpoint Narrative

In five places in books listed above where Ellul references the Babel story, he also presents the Philippians 2:5-11 text to further illuminate the themes of Babel religion and divine revelation. Unlike the common, sermonic juxtaposition of Babel and Pentecost stories, Ellul insightfully sees how the real contrast is not about matters of human languages and human dispersion, but rather about the human capacity to reject God's mode of operation and replace it with an oppositional mode of operation. Again, we are reminded that the text does not move from one language to multiple languages, but rather from a legitimizing, means-intensive language to an incoherent, useless language. Ellul does well to see Babel in the same context as the Hebrew polemic against all idolatry, and because idolatry is an inversion of divine revelation, Ellul gravitates toward a counter-text that illuminates true revelation. We are dealing here with themes of power and force, where theology and sociology meet and mingle, and Ellul rightly identifies the best New Testament text that illustrates a reversal of Babel ways.

The context for the Philippians hymn has two sociological layers that are inter-related. First, there is the relationships that church members have with each other. The theological hymn actually emerges out of this theme of church unity and disunity. Paul's bedrock concern is that the Philippians are motivated by "rivalry and vain glory" and this needs to change. These barriers to unity find their cultural legitimacy within Roman society, where political leaders only succeeded by overcoming their rivals, and advanced themselves through means of "empty glory," a literal translation of 'kenodoxia' (verse 3). This then is the second layer: the relationship between church members and the surrounding Roman citizenry in the military colony of Philippi. Ellul did not present this background to the text, nor was he aware of Paul's usage of the terms for 'polis' (city) to help his readers think into being an alternative 'politaima' (citi-zens). But he was tuned into the power issues implied in the descent of Christ. In *Living Faith*, Ellul noted four levels of Jesus coming down (emptying, taking on human nature, becoming a powerless servant, and dying in humiliation), ultimately being condemned to the punishment of rebellious slaves. Nothing could be further away from the god-like prestige enjoyed by Caesars who ruled the known world. "And with that we have the capstone on the radical contrast between this God's revelation and all religions" (Faith, p. 140).

This counter-matrix of descendancy, non-acquisition, and powerlessness provides not only a new basis for human unity but also a new pattern for how such unity is maintained. Freedom and love, expressed through self-giving, opens the way for a non-coercive community that works together in perpetual descent rather than perpetual ascent. The emptying of Christ, within this Babel contrast, is not a giving up of qualities of God as God really is, but rather qualities of God as viewed in the Greco-Roman world, such as status and self-importance. Again, this fits best with the earlier context of empty-glory (keno-doxia) which is contrasted to genuine (kenotic) emptying. One moves from pseudo-revelation to authentic revelation. Ellul points out that the vital element of God's revelation is that God speaks, and not only speaks, but comes down to the level of real human experience to speak in the best 'language' we can understand. The biblical problem, as noted in *The Humiliation of the Word*, is when that which belongs to the order of the word is reduced to the order of sight (Humiliation, p. 89). In Jesus, Ellul's sees the "correct equilibrium" or synthesis of the word and image, whereas in Babel, no less than all idolatry, one finds the domineering role of image over word.

When sight played its role to cause "all humanity and language to swing to its side," and "coveting" – the primal sin of both Eden and Babel – became the psychological root of all other sins (Humiliation, p.100,101), it laid the

foundation for humanity to use whatever it chose to use, including language, to leverage power. For Ellul, Jesus represents the full denial of covetousness; Ellul builds his point in full juxtaposition to the Babel story. “We have the exact antithesis of this attitude in the famous passage in Philippians that describes the decision of the Son to strip himself...” and so forth (Humiliation, p. 101). This divine downwardness becomes the way for the truth of God’s core character to be revealed, establishing Jesus’ credentials to be given the Name above every name. This is the complete opposite of Babel upwardness that inverts the dynamics of revelation, and people construct their own name for their own glory. In this setting where image and coveting have full sway, all truth is obscured in the service of social (and seemingly total) reality. Again, Ellul sees how language suffers the greatest casualty. “Because human words are no longer in harmony with the Word of God, languages become separate and then diversity in accordance with their subordination to different realities....Once inserted into reality, the word changed to the point where it became incomprehensible language” (Humiliation, p.100).

Twice in *Perspectives on our Age*, Ellul pairs up the Babel and Philippians narratives. Again, the root issue is the nature of revelation. In the Babel setting, humanity would prefer to “use the divinities.” But a God of revelation cannot be used. Hence we see Ellul’s sharp contrast between the ascendancy of religion and the descendancy of revelation. “Religion seeks to go from below, where we are, to above, where God is. But the Bible shows us the opposite. I am thinking of that great passage in...Philippians...” (Perspectives, p. 78). The problem with Christianity is that revelation is continually deformed by the agendas of religion. Ellul is sympathetic with the Marx and Feuerbach critiques of religion on sociological grounds. But if and when revelation can be held distinct from religion, it then can have a transcendence which even technology, in its totalism, can never supercede (Perspectives, p. 94,95). Only then can technology be critiqued from the outside, and the nature of means can be called into question. (more to be added from Perspectives on Our Age)

All of the themes reviewed above can now be presented in the following table to summarize the main points.

THEME	BABEL Narrative of Ascent	PHILIPPIANS Narrative of Descent
Attitude	Covetousness institutionalized (pride) expressed in grasping	Covetousness rejected (relational humility) expressed in non-grasping
Naming	“Make a name for ourselves” asserts autonomy from God (auto-nomos)	“the name of names” is not sought but bestowed by God onto Jesus
Form and Content	Form dominates over content after truth is emptied out and grandiose surface image remains	“Form of God” reveals God’s true content/nature when grandiosity (a false content) is emptied out
Power	Surface image of tower generates power	Image of God generates powerlessness
Language	Mono-language controlled by image-intensification and utilitarianism (which devalues words/meaning)	Word of God and Image of God in full synthesis through incarnation and enactment, and is meaningful

Means	Proliferation of means (any means) to reach desired ends	Integrity of selfless means with selfless ends
Ends	Human-centered exaltation through independency from God; assertion of importance and maintenance of power	Betterment of others through interdependencies; relinquishment of importance leads to exaltation of Jesus
Limitations	“Nothing is impossible!” New morality based on what can, not ought to, be done	God limits power in order to accomplish God’s purposes and to express morality
Reality	Reality = human-made fabrications (a closed system) in tension with what is real and with the created order; all is contrived by technique	God’s revelation (in tension with human-made ‘realities’) enters an open system to show humanity what is real; revelation is non-contrived
Social Dynamic	Model of centralized mass-man living in conformist and coercive setting	Model of diverse individuals living in harmony and freedom
Unity	Cultural unity normalizes and legitimizes everything, and is non-dialectical, denying disruptivity	God’s ‘yes/no’ revelation is disruptive to human life; true unity comes by alignment with God’s ways
Spirituality	Sacralization of culture (increase in myth-making, de-historicization, promoting the status quo through fascination, etc.) More religious	Desacralization of culture (true myth rooted in God’s work and ways, motivating new change, counterpoint, etc.) Less religious

Babel and Ellul’s View of Technique

Having summarized the contrasting themes in the Babel/Philippians chart, it is easier to recognize how the elements of the Tower of Babel are, for Ellul, the same elements that define his views on modern technique. In other writings, he clearly deals with “complexes” to account for how technique operates in a totalistic system. What I will briefly do now is point out a few texts that do not reference the Babel story directly, but fit well with the composite picture presented above. Ironically, some of these writings appear to fit better with Ellul’s articulation of Babel dynamics without making any mention of Babel itself.

In *The Technological Bluff*, Ellul shows how technology seemingly holds great promise, but in the end, never quite delivers the goods. A section on the influence of television and “telematics” concludes with Ellul’s prophetic view that “we are in a process of universal transformation without really knowing what is happening. This confirms our older judgment regarding the autonomy and collective supremacy of technique” (Bluff, p. 346). Just as Babel was a compensation for humanity’s dilemma of being spread out, so television, to offset the dispossession and alienation that people feel, is itself “a religion, a kind of God, . . . a revelation for humanity.” Through a sustained fascination in the power of televised images, Ellul says that we “deify the technical devise.” This is not unlike Babel that first removes God from the scene only to give the project God-like properties. “Television is universal and spectacular; it defies my attempts to master it; it performs what would usually be called miracles; to a large extent it is incomprehensible. It is thus God. . . . This is in keeping with absolute fascination” (Bluff, p. 346). Similarly, advertising, for Ellul, is a “driving force of the whole system” (Bluff, p. 349). Originally, advertising drove people to buy the product and support the capitalist system. Then it drove people to buy the image and support the consumer system. Now it drives people to remain fascinated with its techniques, and thus support the technical system. Similarly, the Tower of Babel includes this reified element of building and sustaining public fascination to keep the wheels of the project turning. Again, this is more than the creation of awe-inspiring imagery; it is the fusing of divinity into the imagery that makes Babel akin to ancient idolatry and modern advertising.

In his discussion on “Technological Morality” in *To Will and to Do*, Ellul describes how this new morality overcomes and absorbs all other moralities. He then speaks of additional ‘virtues’ of technological morality, one being a “confidence in the future” to remedy any problem in the present.

“It is the virtue of ‘all is possible,’ which of course expresses in large part the value of the normal. All is possible. Not only is there no predetermined moral or spiritual limit to action, but further, the only acknowledged barrier is that which is not possible today but which will be tomorrow. Nothing is surprising any more, atomic fission, sputnik: that all belongs to the normal course of events. Tomorrow it will be done better. In fact, this virtue especially expresses a morality of the unbounded, of the limitless, to which modern man is perfectly adapted” (To Will, p. 197).

This morality could rightly be called a Babel morality, for “The boundlessness of means and of technical success produces a morality of the gigantic and the limitless. The colossal, the ‘world’s biggest,’ are expressions of this morality” (To Will, p. 197). Here, says Ellul, “man no longer recognizes any limits to his conquest.” And because one always believes that technological solutions always lead to the good, there is no halting of this march of progress. “The greater, the higher, the more powerful, that suffices. The new morality justifies automatically that which is ‘more’” (p. 198). Finally, “the good . . . appears as the surpassing of limits.” Here we are back to the confidence in the future. If not today, then tomorrow. This kind of morality, for Ellul, and again, in concert with the collectivist nature of Babel, becomes totalistic and totalitarian, never to be questioned, thus suppressing the virtues of individual or personal morality. In the end, the virtue of limitlessness points to the loss of freedom.

While passages like this, with Babel-theme resonance, are plentiful in Ellul’s writings, I’ll touch on one more example. In *The Ethics of Freedom*, Ellul begins by describing how modern (technological) man is more alienated than industrial man due to a new “collection of mechanisms of indescribable complexity” (Ethics, p. 27). This view strengthens his theory of technological determinism, and he understands how human freedom is challenged more in modern times for two reasons. “First, all the forces and structures of the social order have an unavoidable tendency to expand until they become as total as possible” (p. 39). This expansionist and universalizing movement forces itself upon all people, and makes it harder for them to have any control. The second reason is that since all social forces move toward totalism, “they all necessarily take on a spiritual meaning and value” (p. 40). The social form, therefore, has to become larger than itself, to re-present meaning in a world without meaning. Again, we see the Babel impulse. “It cannot in effect be universal unless it ceases to be itself in order to be more than itself by taking on spiritual significance” (p. 40). So first we have an external necessity where all social forces have to converge together, carrying people along with the tide, and then we have

what Ellul calls an “internal necessity” which imbues spiritual power upon the social forms, as it happens with idolatry, so that people can retrieve that power for themselves. But at this point the Marxist would rightly ask, “Which people?”

Beyond Babel’s city we see how Babel’s tower was the ultimate way for spiritual significance and meaning to be given to the urbanizing enterprise. It’s one thing to have something made by human hands; it’s another thing for that made object to receive innate powers to the extent that it has a social force on society. Here we find a point of convergence for Ellul’s adherence to Karl Marx and Karl Barth. The Marxist critique sees how in a “world without heart or spirit, (religion) gives to man the illusion of heart and spirit” (Ethics, p. 25). People overlay culture with sacrality. The Barthian view adds that this upward push of religion is indeed more illusionary than substantial, but thereby demonstrating humanity’s need for God’s downward revelation. Here we return to the clash of forces represented by the contrasting narratives of ascent and descent. What revelation is to God, culture-making is to humanity. The problem comes when culture takes on the Babel elements of spiritual significance, and in this idolatry, it becomes an inversion of all aspects of divine revelation. Is it possible that in naming the upward forces of Babel as having spiritual dimensions, while not ceasing to have sociological dimensions, that Ellul advances on the Marxist critique of religion? Does he not provide a fuller accounting for the forcefulness of technique-driven forces that are shaping modern life with their hideous strength?

False Ascendency and the Tower of Babel

As it was mentioned in the introduction, and as Marva Dawn pointed out in her book, *Sources and Trajectories*, Ellul made it a life-long goal to make an inventory of forces that could account for the “principalities and powers” of biblical times (Sources, p. 23). We know that Ellul wanted to link spiritual causes with economic and political problems, and that is partly why Babel presents such a compelling story for our times. Modern man wishes to control his own destiny, acting autonomously from God, (again, to make a name for himself). Babel not only reveals the sociological dynamics of people who act collectively through centralization and mono-communication, but Babel also reveals how spiritual and sacred forces can work at an institutional level. But are these independent forces working from the outside or are they projected powers working within human agency? Ellul plots a middle path. The powers “are characterized by their relation to the concrete world of (human beings). According to the biblical references they find expression in human, social realities, in the enterprises of (human beings). In this sense the occasion of their intervention is human decision and action” (Ethics, p. 152). For example, the power of money personified as Mammon is outside the person, yet never outside the social dynamics of people. But while this force has real influence within a society, it also has a real ‘falseness’ in the sense of drawing its power from a lie, namely, from the loss of integrity between an object’s original truth or historical context and it’s subsequent manufactured reality. From where, then, does such a force derive its forcefulness?

This final section will take some of the Babel themes developed above to account for the way modern technicity can have such a strong force akin to gravity itself. To begin with, the vertical metaphors of downwardness and upwardness, related to gravity and anti-gravity forces, can be understood apart from their vertical or even spatial references, though at some level, all of our language is metaphorical to help us build meaning and understanding. In *The Humiliation of the Word*, Ellul spoke of truth and reality as being either in unity or in tension with each other; in the latter case, reality supercedes truth just as image supercedes the word. This overtaking is parallel to what I have called the domination of Form over Content. When the weight of true content (or historical context) is emptied out of a cultural form, the result is a detachment from its groundedness in creation and community, and that’s when a form is able to ascend upward away from the earth. It becomes lighter, and thus more susceptible to the draw of an anti-gravity-like socio-spiritual force. In this rising, the surface image of the form takes on greater importance, a life of its own, and yet the form, parasitically, still has to feed off of the nutrients of its former content. This fits with an expansion dynamic where the outside form spreads out with greater grandiosity.

Eventually, this ascendancy and detachment, along with the hollowing and expansion, leads to forms that are seemingly more real in relation to what they once were. One can see how they have taken on a new independent life of their own. To quote Ellul from *The Ethics of Freedom* again, “It cannot in effect be universal unless it ceases to be itself in order to be more than itself by taking on spiritual significance” (p. 40). The upward force then is really a factor of the transformation of forms away from their groundedness in truth content and toward their new re-presentation as higher (hence more influential) forms.

This dynamic is necessary for the mobilization of social power, and again, we see the falseness at work here. It would be appropriate to call this imbuing of “spiritual significance” as a pseudo-spiritual quality, not unlike the way the Hebrew prophets spoke of idols. For idols to be called a “lie” or “nothing” (no-thing) or “vain” (literally, empty), is a way to expose the way they generate power solely by their surface imagery that is tied to cultural associations projected onto them. Power is given and power is retrieved, but the falseness of this power has to do with the social perception of what constitutes power. The group first has to have a shared belief in what is ‘real’ and what is ultimate. In this way the Caesars sustained their power through pomp and ceremony. But what needs to be emphasized over and over, and this is why Ellul’s double analysis of sociology and theology is so vital for our age, is that the reason this social power is so powerful is because it is a socio-spiritual power, and never one or the other alone. This fusion creates more legitimization as well as more obfuscation so that uses of social power are not challenged. And this is what makes such a power so hideous: it cannot be easily destroyed.

But God will not permit such power to go on unchecked, not only because it is a challenge to true divinity but also to true humanity. At stake is freedom. And here we have the central concern of every anti-utopian novel. The Babel over-orchestration of images and forms is the basis for any anti-utopian society. And there is no anti-utopian society without “the accumulation of means and the increase of technology” which, for Ellul, spells the “glorification of man” as a rejection of God (*Ethics of Freedom*, p. 268). In this “heaping up of means in the form of technology” the new activity may promise more freedom for people, with the suggestion that greater acquisition and greater accomplishment amount to greater freedom, but in the end all pursuits for greatness lead to “a suppression of freedom,” both for God and for humanity (p. 269). In stark contrast to this, Jesus is the Means of God that is a rejection of the proliferation of human means. Through the relinquishment of status and power, through the rejection of contrivance and orchestration to reach effective ends, the downward revelation of God becomes pure action without self-sought efficacy. This kenotic pattern becomes both a mindset and a model for others to follow, and this is always a non-coercive invitation. Here we see how form (not only in incarnation but in servanthood and cruciformity) becomes fully united with the content of God’s nature, and humanity has a full picture of what integrity means.

But such revelation that comes down is also disruptive in order to achieve the ends of God. In contrast to the false ascendancy of technique-driven means, revelation is a decent of truth that illuminates the reality that pre-figures the fabricated realities made by human hands. “Revelation leads to the affirmation of powerlessness, the destabilization of human communities, the shattering of unity, the invalidating of law, and the impossibility of establishing an explicit, definitive content for faith” (*Living Faith*, p. 141). Revelation shakes culture. God’s intervention in Babel is not merely a judgment, but also an infusion of truth that grounds people in communities that can better accept interdependency with God, with each other, and also with outside strangers. And that is why God strikes not at the building project itself, but at the mono-communication ideology that was essentially anti-revelational, leaving no place for incoming truth, and no place for individual and social diversity.

As Christians discern their response and participation to and with God’s disturbing revelation, the opportunity is there to engage a type of iconoclasm that does not tear down the forms themselves, but rather targets the manipulative mono-communications of our day that reject dialogue and correction. In his “Coda for Christians” at the end of *The New Demons*, Ellul presents a litany of modern powers that all rely on the mechanics of false ascendancy.

“Iconoclasts, yes. That means destroying the gods of the world... gods of the stadium, of speed, of consumer goods, of utility, of money, of efficiency, of knowledge, of delirium, of sex, of folly, of revolution, of agnostic learning, of politics, of ideologies, of psychoanalysis, of class, of race, gods of the world calling for unheard-of holocausts” (Demons, p. 225).

These are the “truly living myths” of our day, writes Ellul, that need to be demythologized and desacralized, for these are the very powers that present themselves as being not myths at all but living realities. What a dilemma: today’s man is “...a prisoner of his myths, he is completely alienated in his neo-religions – this brave ‘modern man’” (Demons, p. 234). Without knowing it, “we are in the most religious of all worlds, at the sacred heart of a technical universe” (Demons, p. 209). The only iconoclasm that will work in this kind of setting will have to strike at the jugular of what gives technicity its spiritual significance, and this is a challenge since its spiritual dimension is obfuscated from modern man’s perception. But if this obfuscation relies on the anti-gravity force that allows forms to parasitically dominate over their related, though impoverished contents, I should think that one key aspect to today’s iconoclasm would be to turn these forms inside out and thus expose their hollowed-outness. To be sure, the target is in the realm of communications, and the model at hand is God’s style of revelation.

In closing we return to *That Hideous Strength* where we find Ransom explaining to Merlin about the consequences of Babel enterprises that over-extend their reach. “If men by enginry and natural philosophy learn to fly into the Heavens, and come, in the flesh, among the heavenly powers and trouble them, He has not forbidden the Powers to react.” (Lewis, *Hideous*, p. 290). Merlin has trouble understanding how this modern dark force cannot be easily vanquished. But after more explanation of the unique strength of modern forces, Ransom reveals the Achilles Heel in the Babel project.

“That Hideous Strength holds all this Earth in its fist to squeeze as it wishes. But for their one mistake, there would be no hope left. If of their own evil will they had not broken the frontier and let in the celestial Powers, this would be their moment of victory. Their own strength has betrayed them. They have gone to the gods who would not have come to them, and pulled down Deep Heaven on their heads” (p. 294).

Like the biblical account, humanity triggers its own demise. If you poke into the heavens with ill intent, you’ve opened up a window for the gods to come down. By seeking limitlessness, the builders are left with greater limits. Ellul’s technological determinism, especially seen as a pessimistic vision in his sociological writings, would suggest there is no other end to the story. For “the technical society must perfect the ‘man-machine’ complex or risk total collapse,” he wrote in *The Technological Society*. “There is no other place to go but up.” But in Ellul’s theological writings we find a balance to this pessimism that speaks of human responsibility and God’s responsibility to bring about a positive end to humanity’s story. There is a coming down that can make a difference. His view of the Bible was such that its message speaks to our time as it spoke to any time. “I am surely fully cognizant of the novelty of this age,” he wrote, “yet I am immediately struck by the modernity of the biblical proclamation” (Demons, p. 226). In this light, Ellul applies the dynamics of Babel to the systems of modern technique without any question of relevancy. Human pride is human pride, be it ancient or modern.

If the upward Babel impulse amounts to a socio-spiritual force that seeks to conquer all things through all possible means, then it can readily be seen as an apt archetype for the way Ellul understood the totalistic agenda of modern technique. Ellul’s scattered references to Babel in his writings from the 1970’s through the 1980’s can all be joined together to form a composite picture of his theory of technique, and one wonders why he did not unify all of these elements in one single text. His consistent counterpoint narrative to Babel, being the Philippians 2 hymn, provides the best interpretive key for Ellul’s core understanding of Babel, and this corresponds well to his consistent contrast between divine revelation and human religion, which, of course, involves the sacralization of all things modern. At stake in the clash of divine and human narratives is freedom, and this entails both God’s freedom and human freedom that are inseparably linked. “Our freedom... bears

witness to others that God is free, and that he has put himself at our disposal” (Ethics of Freedom, p. 216). The root issue is that our freedom is itself a reflection of God’s revelation, of God’s glory. And this glory is everything to God, not as an effort to make a name for himself, but as a freedom to disclose himself to humanity and thereby putting himself at our disposal. This is both responsibility and vulnerability on God’s part. What remains, then, is whether we will act as God acts. And if we do anything less than that, we will be presenting a false image of God. Thus we return to Babel, a sight to behold, the most complete metaphor for our idolatrous habits.

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