

Bookends

A Meditation on Acts 2:1-21 and Genesis 11:1-9

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“How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?”

– Acts 2:8

Sitting in a circle around the evening fire at church camp, I remember one camp counselor telling us the Tower of Babel story. Not reading it from the Bible. Not reciting it from memory. Simply telling it, like any other story, while we listened, under the starry night sky, watching the logs burn and the flames flare, waiting for the embers’ glow so we could roast marshmallows.

After telling the story, the counselor casually explained that the Tower of Babel story is one of the most ancient camp stories of all, passed along century after century by nomadic Hebrew tribes, gathered around end-of-the-day campfires, each generation sharing this story with the next -- a family story repeated so many times what it could never to be forgotten.

The Tower of Babel story, the counselor went on, would be told whenever a child asked: “Why is it that people speak different languages?” An elder among the shepherds would toss another stick onto the campfire, set the inquisitive child down in his lap, and begin: “Once upon a time, a long time ago, the whole earth had but one language and all had the same words...”

I learned the story of Pentecost in Sunday School. Truth is, as a child, I could not make heads nor tails of it! Tongues of fire leaping out of the disciples’ heads? Mobs jostling through narrow streets, from countries I had never heard of? Peter drunk at 9:00 in the morning? The Holy Spirit: what is that! Portents in the heavens? Not a clue! The moon turning to blood? The earth covered by a smokey mist? Sounded like gobbledygook to me.

When I asked my Sunday School teachers to explain, all they said was that Pentecost is the birthday of the church. Which did not exactly explain anything. But, hey, the classroom was decorated with balloons! We got to blow bubbles! Birthday cake after worship! Even if I did not understand the story, if the church wanted to have a party, and I could get the corner piece of chocolate cake with the red icing, it was all good with me.

Leaving home for college and seminary, the professors taught me that the two biblical texts are more than a child's campfire story and the rationale for the church's birthday party. From the 4th century on, these two stories have been linked like bookends, complementary yet opposite.

- The Tower of Babel is the last story in the opening prehistory chapters of Genesis, leading directly into Abraham and Sarah being called to start the family of God's people in the world. Pentecost is the first story of history's closing chapter, at least according to Luke, when the church is called to extend the mission of God's people worldwide.
- The Tower of Babel story appears in the middle of a lengthy list of nations. A list of the world's nations is inserted into the middle of the Pentecost story.
- The Tower of Babel story focuses on human pride and God's punishment. Pentecost focuses on the humble being empowered and embolden by God's Spirit.
- In the Tower of Babel story, humankind attempts to ascend into the heavens. In the Pentecost story, the heavens descend upon human beings.
- The Tower of Babel story is about setting limits on human power. Pentecost is about what people can accomplish through the unlimited power of God.
- The Tower of Babel story has one people with one language becoming many peoples with many languages. The Pentecost story has diverse peoples with different languages all hearing and understanding a common word from God.
- The Tower of Babel story transitions from unity to confusion. The transition in the Pentecost story is from confusion to unity.

In short, for some seventeen centuries now, Pentecost has been understood as the reversal of the Tower of Babel. The Pentecost sermons you have heard were based on that understanding. The Pentecost sermons I previously delivered were grounded in that classical interpretation.

Now, I am not so sure. Modern theologians, archaeologists, historians, students of literature are noticing further details, unearthing more artifacts, and reaching a quite different analysis.

- For example: that conglomeration of people listed as being in first century Jerusalem for Pentecost? It is historically impossible. The Medes and the Elamites had not existed for 5½ centuries. That part of the Biblical story is "the equivalent of the statement, 'You should have been in church Pentecost Sunday. We had a huge number of visitors, some from Montana, others from Arizona and Michigan, not to mention the vanload of Assyrians and the nice little Hittite couple who signed the friendship pad.'"¹

¹ Long, Thomas. "A Night at the Burlesque: Wanderings through the Pentecost Narrative," *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. 14, No. 4, 1991, Pages 25-31.

- Turns out the Tower of Babel story is not prehistory after all. It was authored during the 6th century BCE, not prior but 1300 years after Abraham and Sarah, during the Babylon exile, when Nebuchadnezzar initiated a massive building project that included a seven-story ziggurat (a 300' high temple), the tower alone requiring over 17,000,000 bricks.²
- And if the Pentecost story is about moving from division to unity, what do we do with the fact that a great deal of unity existed prior to the Holy Spirit's arrival? Luke begins: "[The 120 or so first Christians] were all together in one place..." The people of the various ethnicities already understood one another. They were not tourists, visitors, pilgrims in town for the festival as we were taught. Luke writes they were "living in Jerusalem" – residents of the Holy City. They knew how to communicate, if not in their native tongues, then in Aramaic or Greek. And if Pentecost is about the creating of Christian unity, how do we handle that division and confusion also were caused by the Holy Spirit. "But others sneered," says Luke, "and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'"³

The Tower of Babel story? It is not about the creation of nations and the multiplication of languages after all, but about God's people (and others) forced to live in Babylonia when that empire was expanding, making a name for itself. It is about a powerful king proudly parading prisoners-of-war back to work on his building projects, testaments to Babylonia's might. It is about how, after 43 years of labor, the tower atop the temple still was not completed. Why? Constant delays caused by communication problems among a multicultural labor force. It is about the Babylonian story of its god, Marduk, the god of the storm, being the highest god, the conqueror of all other gods,⁴ countered by an alternative Jewish narrative in which their god, Yahweh, is the Most High God, the one who conquers Marduk through the multicultural diversity of exploited laborers, thereby thwarting the plans of an entire empire.

Pentecost? It turns out that story also is about God, multiculturalism, and the building of an alternative realm. The unity created at Pentecost is not uniformity. The movement is not from many languages back to only one. No, the Pentecost story is about diverse people, from diverse cultures, with diverse gifts, being so valued for who they are and what they can contribute to the common good, that God honors each of them by speaking in all their own native tongues.

And that makes Pentecost less about the birthday of the church, and more about our so respecting God's other children that we would never demand that they become like us. Rather, ours is to reach out and engage others in their languages, sensitive to their customs, learning from their experiences.

² "The Tower of Babel, King Nebuchadnezzar II, and the Schøyen Collection," *Archaeology and Arts*, Dec. 29, 2011. Also "Tower of Babel: Truth or Myth," May 8, 2017. <https://www.schoyencollection.com>.

³ Gonzalez, Catherine and Justo. "Babel and Empire: Pentecost and Empire," *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 1993. Pages 22-26.

⁴ The *Enuma Elish*.

Pentecost is about the creation of a new world in which “the other” is not “talked to” or “talked down to” but engaged in genuine relationship and communication leading to greater appreciation and understanding.⁵

Ah, but what about the scoffers? With everything going on in the Pentecost story, why did they not experience the miracle of the Holy Spirit, too?

Let me ask you some questions. Why are male dominated legislatures today still unable to hear what women are saying about autonomy over their own bodies? Why are boards of education afraid to have the history of institutional racism taught in the schools? Why is the city council in nearby Arlington Heights, where I live, refusing to raise the Pride Flag during pride month? Why are “Christians” continuing to resist efforts to reduce gun violence?

Let me give you a hint. Perhaps the scoffers in the Pentecost story did not hear God speaking because they were not open to listening to any voice outside their own dominate culture.

Perhaps it is the white, male, heterosexual, “Christian” language of privilege that is keeping our own nation from getting what the Holy Spirit is doing in God’s diverse, multicultural, new world.

⁵ For an extended discussion, see Fernandez, Eleazar. “From Babel to Pentecost: Finding a Home in the Belly of the Empire,” *Semeia*, 2002. Pages 29-50.