

Answering Babel

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One doesn't need to be a biblical scholar to recognize the link between the story of the Tower of Babel and the story of Pentecost. The former is the divinely appointed confusion of human languages, while the latter shows how the Holy Spirit transcends that barrier to translate the good news of Jesus Christ into every language. In many intentional ways, the two stories go together, and I'm a little surprised that the [Genesis 11](#) reading is only available in lectionary Year C.

That means that this year is the triennial opportunity for the congregation to be thoroughly baffled by a God who (apparently) wants to confuse human speech to prevent us from accomplishing whatever we want and then see how God's will is for Christ to override that separation as he is proclaimed in the power of the Spirit in [Acts 2](#). Does it get any better than that?

Biblically speaking, the Tower of Babel is an etiological story written to explain how human kind could advance from a single post-flood family (Genesis 10) to the nations of the earth whom Abraham will encounter (Genesis 12 and beyond). Anthropologically speaking, the advent of different languages is a product of limited resources. I'm no expert, but it seems to me that, when early human families could not find enough food or water to stay in one place, they moved and separated. Decades, centuries, even millennia passed, and different dialects and eventually languages arose—all because of competition over limited resources. If there were unlimited food and water and land and reproduction partners, we would all be together in one place, speaking the same language. But we're not. And the fact that I'm writing this in English on a computer to be published electronically on the Internet where anyone with online access could read it and, in theory, ask Google to translate it into almost any language is a sign that, despite our separations and linguistic confusion, the human species has turned out OK.

So what does Babel represent? Is Pentecost an answer for Babel? How do we make sense of a God who would say to God's self (or selves?), "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language. And this is only the beginning of what they will do;

nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." If God wanted us to be stifled in our efforts, why is the work of the Holy Spirit to unite all peoples? How do these two chapters of salvation history fit together?

Maybe the answers come not from reading scripture as if they were primarily insights into God's nature but insights into human nature—or, more specifically, insights into how our ancient human relatives understood God's nature. Instead of asking, "What does the Tower of Babel show us about God?" try asking, "Why would the ancient Israelites have explained linguistic diversity with this particular story?" And, accordingly, we then ask, "What does Pentecost say about first-century Christians' understanding of a God who would confuse human speech in Genesis 11 but whose Spirit would then transcend that language barrier in Acts 2?"

Have you ever wondered what sort of place the world would be if we didn't have crime, violence, war, famine, natural disasters, poverty, or oppression? I have. And I think the ancient Israelites did, too. "What could the world be like?" they must have wondered to themselves. The last few chapters in Genesis before the story of Abraham shows up are a dark and twisted tale of failed attempts to establish a utopia. Humankind is wicked. God floods the earth, preserving only Noah and his family. Yet Noah and his family don't turn out to be perfect, either. Sin returns, but God promises not to flood the earth again. In short, we've got to deal with the imperfect world that is the product of our sinfulness. But isn't it fun to dream about how it might be different—the impossible dream of perfection?

That's where the Tower of Babel comes in. And that's why Pentecost is so hopeful. Genesis 11 represents the ancient people of God trying to understand why things were so tough. It wasn't simply a recollection of God's will for confusion and conflict. It was—and is—an answer to the question, "What if things were different?" If they were, nothing would be impossible. Acts 2 is God's response to our wondering. "Let me show you what is possible," God seems to be saying to us. On Sunday, we are invited to marvel in two different directions: "Why is it like this?" and "How could it be different?" And, in the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God answers both.

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