

Framing ethnicity (Acts 2:1-21)

Luke slows down to elaborate the diversity of the crowd—simply for the pleasure of it.

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Every once in a while Acts slows down to relish details that, on the surface, might not excite contemporary readers. As a storyteller, Luke is expert in pacing: sprinting through the basics of a story, then slowing down to luxuriate in particulars.

For example, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch starts fast. But when Philip meets the eunuch, Luke layers on the details:

And look! A man, an Ethiopian, a eunuch, an official of the candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was responsible for her whole treasury and was returning home, seated upon his chariot and reading the prophet Isaiah (8:27-28).

There's pleasure in introducing this character, surely exotic to Luke's readers, one detail at a time. Ancient Greek readers knew about Ethiopians, and Luke takes his time exploring their curiosity. We could explore similar examples.

Something similar happens at Pentecost. Filled with the Spirit, men and women proclaim the gospel in Aramaic, but Jews "from every nation under heaven" hear the message in their own languages. Luke slows down here as well: "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and

visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs.” None of this is necessary, except that the pleasure of visualizing this diverse crowd hearing the gospel reinforces the power of the miracle. Hardly cosmopolitan, Galilean preachers have reached people from all over Luke’s world.

It’s been common to read Pentecost over and against Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). Conventionally, we imagine Babel as a sort of tragedy: humankind divided by language. Now at Pentecost, language no longer poses a barrier. The gospel, it’s thought, reverses the misfortune of Babel.

But by no means is it obvious that Babel is a tragedy. Genesis has already established that God intends to keep humankind from getting too big for its britches, as my mom would have said (3:22-23; 6:1-4; 11:6). God wants humankind to scatter, and the decision to build a massive city frustrates God’s plan. God forces the scattering by “confusing” their language. By scattering peoples and languages—by inventing ethnicity—God provides a safer context for human flourishing.

More than any other scholar, Eric Barreto has done a deep dive into ethnicity in Acts. He has taught me that Acts does not unify humankind [as if ethnicity did not matter](#). Instead, Acts celebrates ethnic diversity and occasionally pauses to tease it out. Here at Pentecost, one common ethnicity unites most of the crowd. They are Judeans and converts to Judean identity. Yet ethnicity is scarcely static: even as Judeans they represent a broad spectrum of other ethnic identities. Something similar happens in Acts 6:1-7, where we encounter conflict between Aramaic-speaking Judeans and Greek-speaking Judeans. Even Paul identifies with three identities, foregrounding each one when it suits his purposes. He is a Judean, a Roman, and a citizen of Tarsus in Cilicia.

Lots of Christians hope to transcend ethnic division by erasing ethnicity. “I don’t see color,” some will say. But Acts sees in color and values ethnic difference. Acts imagines unity that embraces diversity rather than bleaching it out. The miracle of Pentecost is not that one language brings everyone together. It is not that everyone learns English Aramaic. It is that all the people hear the gospel in their own languages.

Once I was in a denominational meeting where Black and White Christians were trying to overcome conflict. I’d been invited to help. (I’m White.) A Black pastor offered an opinion, and his words received vocal affirmation from Black people in the

room but near silence from White people. Moreover, I did not understand the point he was making at all. After the session I walked up and asked him to tell me more. The pastor graciously elaborated his point. I can't say I agreed with him, but I understood him better. In that moment I realized how important it is that we all learn to hear, and speak, one another's languages.