

Babel Reversed

GENESIS 11:1-9 (NRSV) *Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ²And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." ⁵The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶And the LORD said, "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. ⁷Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." ⁸So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹Therefore it was called Babel,*

because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

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ACTS 2:1-8 (NRSV) *When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?"*

You may have noticed the contrast—even contradictions—in these two texts. At Babel, God confuses human languages so that no group understands what any others are saying. At Pentecost, God's Spirit fills a few disciples and people of every language understand every word they say.

In each case the text implies that God's will is accomplished. Conflicting occurrences, same result. And in each case, the context shows the intent.

First, consider Babel: *"Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves..."*

A vain and ambitious people: "Let us build ourselves a city..." "Let us make a name for ourselves..." And they sought by their own effort to move into the realm of the divine. Israel was among the first human cultures to understand that God comes to dwell with a people. Prior to that, the human practice was to build tall structures on which to place their altars—reaching into the heavens.

The intention at Babel was to remain—all of them—in one place, in direct defiance of God's instructions to those first humans in Eden: **"Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth (KJV says "replenish the earth") and subdue it..."** God repeated that same command to Noah, as he and his family were leaving the ark.

Paul Ehrlich, author of the 1968 best seller, *The Population Bomb*, crusaded

to control human population growth, which he felt was becoming a serious global problem. The issue was quite controversial. Ehrlich was a frequent guest on Johnny Carson, and one evening a woman in the audience confronted him with this Scripture: "God told Adam and Eve to '***Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...***' How do you respond to that."

Ehrlich replied, "We say to God, 'OK, we've done that. What's next?'"

By the way, that word that unfortunately gets translated "subdue," actually means to govern or manage, rather than to conquer or exploit for profit. Humanity from the beginning is charged with stewardship of the earth—the whole earth. But at Babel, the people intended to stay in one place and "make a name" for themselves. So, God scrambled their language. And since humans have great difficulty tolerating differences in other humans, when they encounter those differences, they either scatter or fight.

In contrast, consider the disciples at Pentecost: No more discouraged people could be found than that bewildered, broken, frightened little group of disciples.

Of course, they had reason to fear: some of those who'd had Jesus crucified still stalked the streets, redneck holdouts from the mob violence of that Friday, 52 days earlier. So, the disciples huddled together, peeking through the curtain, cringing at the sound of every step on the stair. Blow out the lamp! Lock the door!

Again, in direct contradiction of Jesus' departing words: "*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" So, God reversed Babel, and people from all over the earth heard and understood the Gospel in their own languages.

The church today, its members and its leaders, await—no, we yearn for—that same kind of gift of newness from the Spirit. In our yearning we confront our common uncertainty that drives us to seek new choices beyond all our old jaded, worn-out options that no longer are—and perhaps never were, really—effective.

And in our yearning for that newness from the Spirit, several temptations confront Christians. One is to adopt the dominant image of our society ("...let us make a name for ourselves...")—and somehow to morph that image into a more attractive, more competent, more ambitious, more prosperous Gospel. You can hustle and achieve, because we're all high achievers here. But studies are beginning to show that followers of the "Prosperity Gospel" are becoming some of the most spiritually disillusioned people in our culture.

A second temptation is to decide that, if there is to be any newness, we'll have to achieve it ourselves ("...let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens...") So: ten ways to a healthier body, six steps to better sex,

four steps to prosperity. As good as those self-help strategies may be in the short run, eventually we all encounter the limitations of the clay of which we are made.

Of course, at the other extreme, the temptation may be despair (like those disciples at Pentecost), knowing that in our deepest places, we don't want to be changed. "But," writes Walter Brueggemann, "the news is that we are being changed by the power of God, aligned with the purposes of God by a power that is not discouraged, even by our deepest despair"¹ because God will not give up on us!

Brueggemann continues: "The spirit is wind; not wall. It is possibility; not coercion. It is opportunity; not threat. And when we do wall and coercion and threat, we only imitate the dominant narrative of consumer militarism. Ours, however, is an alternative narrative. The wind, says the scripture, is about new creation—new freedom from slavery—being born again."²

And so, while Babel and Pentecost may seem contradictory, they share two problems: first, whether from ambition and arrogance or from isolation and despair, the people in both stories were staying put, when they had been told to go. Second, whether overestimating their abilities, as at Babel, or underestimating their abilities, as at Pentecost, the people were blocked by the limitations of their own strength, their own vision, their own lack of openness to change.

And here is the difference between the two stories. At Babel, the human spirit was the driving force of the people's vision and purpose. At Pentecost, the people had reached the end of their own strength and vision and purpose. There was no place left for them to go.

Jesus uttered those parting words to them, and Luke tells us they went back to the room upstairs where they were staying... and they were constantly devoting themselves to prayer. Abraham Lincoln said, "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day."

When a people strive to fulfill their own vision through their own power, the presence of God becomes a disrupting, confusing, fragmenting force.

But when a people acknowledge and accept the limitations inherent in human existence apart from God, and intentionally place themselves in a position to link with that divine source of whom Paul said, "*In him we live and move and have our being...*" (ACTS 17:28), the presence of God becomes a uniting, empowering partnership in which our message of God's love will be understood by all who hear us. **Prayer Slide**

¹ Adapted from Brueggemann, Walter. A Gospel of Hope (p. 99). Presbyterian Publishing. Kindle Edition.

² Ibid., pp. 97-98.