

“The Tower of Babel: God’s Diversifying Insurrection!”

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Scripture:

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Genesis 11:1 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. 2 And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 3 And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. 4 Then 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." 5 The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. 6 And 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. 7 Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." 8 So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 9 Therefore 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.

Sermon:

The demographics of our nation have certainly changed dramatically over the past few decades.

Many all-white enclaves of rural America have experienced significant increases in folks speaking Spanish, Vietnamese and Arabic. Immigration and intermarriage has literally darkened the skin tones of the majority of those being born in the good ole US of A.

This loss of homogeneity is a great source of discomfort, anxiety and insecurity for many, especially those who used to be able to make and enjoy the rules.

And of course, let us not forget that many politicians and some members of the news media fan the flames of ignorance and a the myth of a monoculture nation in order to gain votes and serve the interest of their corporate sponsors.

But the embrace of diversity of human communities must go farther than a mere sampling of delicacies or fashion

and even a perfectly respectable wish for political correctness.
Embracing, encouraging and celebrating diversity of human communities
is more importantly a matter of survival.

As James Baldwin wrote in *The Fire Next Time*:

“We may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare and achieve our country and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: ‘God gave Noah the rainbow sign; no more water, the fire next time!’”

Given the destructive impulses we currently face in our world,
I fear that his challenge is of even more dire import now,
than when it was first published in 1963.

But maybe one of the oldest stories recorded in human history
might be able to inspire us to work toward a more hopeful outcome?

Genesis chapter 11 and the Tower of Babel story bring to a close
a literary unit, an extended narrative about God creating the world.

God, we know, creates out of nothing a good earth,
verdant, filled with abundance and with lavish diversity!
But human beings, also initially created good,
However, still manage to mess it up.

The impulse to concentrate people and to “civilize” the world
continually replaces the once vibrant and wild creation of God,
and well... things just seem to go from bad to worse.
It gets so bad that God decides that a reboot is necessary.
God then convinces Noah to collect a remnant of what was created
and then uses them to repopulate the earth!
But as before they just can’t seem to help themselves
and God must once again intervene.

The version of our story we read this morning
was likely written during the Jewish exile in Babylon
during the 5th or 6th century BCE.
It was a story written by the conquered and not the conquerors,
who typically get to write history!

The Hebrews in Babylon had been forcibly relocated there
and their nation/kingdom back in Canaan lay in ruins.
This tragedy lead of course to some deep reflection.
How could this happen to those chosen by God to be his people?

God had made solemn promises (or covenants) that they would be a great nation through the likes of Abraham, Moses and David. God had even selected their leaders; Judges, Kings and prophets to protect them from foreign invasion and impurity.

Had God changed his mind?
Are his promises not reliable?
Or did we, the chosen ones, get it wrong?
Maybe we (mere mortals that we are) misunderstood, early and often what God was really calling us to?

Now for most of my life, and for most of Christian history, this curious little story has been grossly misunderstood. Linguistic diversity has typically been seen as God's curse on the Babylonians, to thwart the threat of a seemingly insecure God. So maybe we should look a bit more closely at the text and perhaps uncover a more correct meaning of the real story.

Verse 1: "One language?"

Most likely a hyperbolic, dramatic way to start a story and a device often used by good storytellers. Chapter 10 goes on and on in depth about all the "nations" that "progenated" from the sons of Noah. Each was said to be distinct and the main distinctions of nations are usually distinct culture and language. Or perhaps it's merely stating an absurdity? Is it even a possibility?

For instance, has the USA ever been an exclusive Christian nation? Or could it be an exaggeration, similar to calling the series played to determine the champion of Major League Baseball (which only includes teams located in the US and Canada) THE "World Series?" Anyway those who are a part of the insurgency know better, snickering sarcastically at those who are so easily fooled.

Verse 2: We are all immigrants!

Humans and even protohumans have always been on the move. Borders between nations are invisible and are in fact a rather new invention in world history. Plain of Shinar was in central Mesopotamia. Some translation call it the "plain of Babylon."

The Babylonian Empire might seem to be working right now for some folks, but it is still an object lesson/warning for those who do not take God seriously. Never forget where you came from! Remember, God made you his people way back when you were still just a rag tag group of refugees wandering around in the deserts between Egypt and Canaan!

Verse 3: But how quickly do folk forget!

A nation always becomes jealous of other nations and wants to become like those others. Immigrants, even those forced to migrate, often quickly assimilate.

Hmm... what other story in Hebrew history mentions making bricks? Joseph's clan immigrated to Egypt, leaving their pastures and their wild and rugged hills, to move into the bright lights and big cities of modern Egyptian civilization. Civilization and the Egyptian empire soon took advantage of these new immigrants by ruthlessly enslaving them!

Verse 4: "We can do it all by ourselves!"

Boy did I hear that a lot when my girls were little. Civilizations, cities, nations and empires must build and expand, exploit natural resources, invade and steal from their neighbors and create ethnocentric identities in order to thrive. "All glory, laud and honor," to us and to our King!

Not only is this cultural arrogance but religious as well. We have arrived and we have a house/temple where God now stays with us! In Akkadian the word "babil" means, "the gate of the Gods!"

Verse 5: "But God doesn't live in one place, anymore!"

So God must come down and check what all the commotion is about. Hm... does this sound familiar? In Genesis chapter 2 God comes down and walks with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day.

Also a pointed reminder, particularly to those insurrectionists who see through the Empire's smoke and mirrors, that God does not live in houses made of stone or even on the tops of the ziggurats built by mortal Kings. The Hebrew God is invisible and dwells everywhere and yet seems particularly fond of real mountain tops, wild deserts

and in the hill country that lies on the edges of civilization.
The real God is feral, uncontrollable, mysterious and just a bit canny.
He also is often discovered sowing discomfort
and making trouble for the wealthy and powerful.
More domesticated deities tend to be more convenient
and supportive of the good ole status quo -
especially those who benefit from the status quo.

The God of scripture seems a bit more demanding,
calling us to meet him on mountain tops, or inside tornadoes,
or on the dry ocean floor while waves crash all around us.
And it is in those places of discomfort that we are usually changed
and where he can gently bend our will to his.

Verse 6: "This is only the beginning of what they will do..."

At first this sounds like the voice of a very insecure Deity
that is threaten by human success and ingenuity!
Or is it, perhaps, as Bruce Cockburn sings;
"the trouble with normal is it always gets worse."
Maybe it is just a statement of fact, a mere observation of human nature?

After all, once you have domesticated the Divine,
once you have contained the Universe Maker into a building,
or into the consummate supporter of the current regime,
the consequences of such thinking may just unravel everything!

Maybe all that clamoring for a King in Israel's history,
"so we could be like other nations," was a big mistake?
Maybe, even though short lived and rather small,
our own Empirical aspirations were misguided?
After all look what became of it all.
Death and destruction has laid waste our homeland and we
who survived are forced to sing our songs out of tune/context.

Yes, indeed, civilization has given us many good things;
 medical miracles, abundant food, amazing technology
and even the basis for things like universal human rights.

But we also know that there is another side to the coin
that includes famine, pestilence and war.
More insidious perhaps than the towers we might have built in the past
are the silos we currently dig to hide our weapons of mass destruction
that can actually destroy our entire world!

Verse 7: “So much confusion here...”

And so the same Divine counsel that,
“created humans in our own image” back in Genesis 2
now must intervene, once again, to keep those same humans
from destroying even more of God’s good creation.

Insurgents know all too well the oppressive death culture of the Empire!
History should teach us of its impracticality as well!
Was it divine judgement or unintentional consequences?
Empires we know are built upon the backs of oppressed people,
and the farther afield this search for labor becomes
the more diverse it will be culturally and linguistically.
Perhaps Babel sowed its own demise?

Sometimes the slaves revolt and slay their masters.
At other instances, like the Hebrew slaves in Egypt,
they begin to disobey the law (by not killing babies)
or conduct sabotage (making inferior bricks without straw).
Supposedly, during WWII, many Jews and non-Germans
who were forced to work in German armament factories
would purposely assemble defective weapons?

Verse 8: “Going back to the country...”

As we reach the end we return to the beginning.
The Tower of Babel becomes a “warning tale” concluding
a larger narrative of God’s Creation of a good world.

Social and political forces of centralization must be resisted
by reasserting God’s original intention,
that human communities be “scattered abroad over the face of the earth
(Genesis 1:28 and 9:1).

As Ched Myers puts it,
“The divine antidote to the centripetal, homogenizing project of empire is a re-dispersion of
peoples, symbolized here by both linguistic/cultural variety and geographic diffusion.”

Verse 9: A blessing or a Curse?

Is this “scattering” a tragic result of God’s judgement?
Or should we read the story as one of centrifugal liberation
from imperial monoculture and urban concentration?

In Genesis chapter 12 the Hebrew scripture turns to
God’s redemptive plan for a seemingly hopeless creation.
Two foundational stories will quickly reinforce

this concept of centrifugal liberation.

Abraham is called out of the metropolis of Ur to take up residency on the periphery of the civilized world in the hills of Canaan.

Later Moses will lead God's chosen out of slavery in the heart of the Egyptian Empire into and through a wilderness where they are actually forged into the people of God.

Conclusion: "More than just boring!!"

Not only is Imperial monoculture extremely boring, it is a perversion of what our Creator intended!

In fact it is downright dangerous and a very threat to our survival!

The Tower of Babel story should be seen as another example of God trying to stir us and things up to resist this destructive impulse on the part of our human brothers and sisters.

Rather than a story that sees diversity as a problem, or as a form of Divine punishment, it should be a story of inspiration, inspiring us to join in God's insurrection that sees diversity not only as part of the original plan but that which in the end is central to our own salvation!

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