

Decoding Babel

Fr. Thomas Ryden

June 8, 2025

Scriptures: Genesis 11:1–9 ; Psalm 104:24–35; Acts 2:1–21 or 2:1–11; John 14:8–17

I have shared before a couple of the ways in which I have gotten myself into trouble attempting to communicate in Spanish, a language I have some proficiency in, but certainly not enough to avoid some catastrophic errors. The example I want to share today happened in my high school Spanish classroom and so thankfully no one was harmed as a result of this blunder, though I caught plenty of flack from my classmates.

Earlier, I had stepped in an ant pile or something, and had several ant bites on my feet. I was trying to express this in Spanish. The Spanish word for the insect that builds and lives in mounds is *hormiga*. Having crossed two vocabulary lessons in my mind, I told my class that I had multiple bites from an *oveja* all over my foot. *Oveja* is the Spanish word for sheep. And so I was communicating a dramatically different level of injury than what I had intended!

Bungled communication reaches back to the beginning of human history and has carried with it a catastrophic cost - financial, relational, and even in terms of human lives lost. Consider the common phrase we use when we are having a disagreement with someone: “I feel like we aren’t even speaking the same language.”

Understanding is key not only for human progress, but for human flourishing.

The Scriptures trace the source of the many languages of the Earth back to the story of Babel, a tower built by a post-Flood homogenous human culture, who decided they would make sure everyone knew how great they were by building a tower up to heaven.

Babel is an example of several in the Scriptures where the city is presented in a primarily negative way, a symbol of humanity's efforts to play at being God. The first city is formed by murderous Cain. Out of the cities flow the violence that leads to the Flood. Even after the Flood, cities like Sodom and Gomorrah are exemplars of depravity and injustice. The great civilization of Egypt at first welcomed in, but then built the greatness of its cities with the people of Israel - no longer as guests, but as slaves. The enemies encountered in the Promised Land? Cities of pagan worship. The great powers that take God's people into Exile? Based in powerful cities.

But a negative view of the city doesn't tell the whole story, of course. God's Law commands his people to construct cities of refuge, havens for those who have killed by accident, so they can be protected from the scourge of revenge killing. In Jericho, Rahab chooses to help Israel's spies, and the portion of the city's wall that her family lives in is preserved on account of her faithfulness. God calls his people to Jerusalem, his holy city. And even when it comes to the exiling powers, God's instruction to the prophet Jeremiah is for the people to seek the good of the city in which they find themselves, to build houses there, and to raise families there.¹

We heard a few weeks ago in our lectionary that great crescendoing climax at the end of Revelation, as John describes the heavenly city of New Jerusalem, a city that is a garden and a city at the same time, coming down out of heaven to bring to fullness

¹ Jer 29:7ff

God's New Creation. The city may be of fallen origin, but it is not beyond God's redemptive work. The story ends with an unequivocally good city.

Now you may have noticed that I have not yet mentioned Pentecost this morning. If an Anglican doesn't mention the high feast of the day in the first five hundred words of the sermon, you may be in trouble. But I don't think we are this morning because I make all of this big deal about the story of the city and Babel as the negative standard bearer because of this: Pentecost is the healing of Babel.

Think about it. In Babel we have a people unified in a purpose, a selfish and self-agrandizing purpose, but a unified one, and their efforts lead them to utter confusion and disarray, specifically in the confusion of their languages. In Pentecost, we have a host of people, gathered in a city, divided by their languages and cultures, and yet, they hear the good news of the gospel: a unified message, a message not of human greatness but of God's great and powerful love.

So the wonder and beauty of Pentecost is that it shows us what turns Babel into the New Jerusalem.

Human ambition produces Babel. But human partnership with the Spirit in the work of New Creation looks like Pentecost. How do we distinguish between the work of human hands that builds Babels and Babylons and the work of the Spirit that builds God's New Creation Kingdom?

Our Scriptures bring us to two marks that separate the two that I want us to examine further. The first may seem obvious, but bears reflecting upon: in the work of the Spirit, it is God who does the work, not human beings.

Returning to Genesis 11, I want to go back to where it all went wrong for the builders of Babel. I don't think God is against building towers *per se*. The problem, as it is so often, is in the heart. Do you remember what the Babel engineers say to one another as they begin to put brick upon brick? "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth."

"Let *us* make a name *for ourselves*." You see the problem. Whether they had forgotten God or simply didn't care what he thought is unclear, but the motive is plain. "Let's build this tower so everyone knows that we are something, that we assure ourselves that we matter; let's prove to God that we matter. Won't everyone be impressed with us? Won't God be impressed with us?"

I don't think we would necessarily hear things put so bluntly today, but I grow suspicious of human achievement for its own sake. We hear about the promises of artificial intelligence, mining other planets and even the audacious notion of achieving immortality through medical science or the uploading of the human consciousness to the cloud. But are these merely bricks that build up our mound into the sky for our own sake? Once again, the problem is not always in the methods themselves, though we seem to quickly be leaving behind the ethics of these things, but in the heart. Why do we desire these things? Is it for God's glory and the renewing of his Creation? Or is it because we seek to be at the top of a tower of brick and stone?

There is a great irony in the story of Babel. This is something that was brought to my attention by the Old Testament scholar J. Richard Middleton, and I am relying on his

work for what follows.² The story of Babel interrupts the Table of Nations, a record of the families of Noah's sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. The insertion of the Babel story into this list tells us that there is a deeper story being told. These records culminate in the character who will become the most central figure in the rest of the Genesis story - the man called Abram, who would become Abraham. In short, the Table of Nations' primary purpose is to tell us the story of how we get to Abraham.

And here is the irony. Abraham comes from the line of Shem. Shem's line is the line that comes immediately after the story of Babel. Shem's name is the Hebrew word for "name." Shem's descendant, Abraham, is given the following promise in Genesis 12, immediately after the Table of Nations: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great..."³

So to recap, the story of the generations of Noah's sons is interrupted by the story of Babel, where those who seek to make their own name great are scattered throughout the Earth, and then the genealogies continue with Noah's son whose name means "name." And it is his descendant Abraham to whom God promises that his name will be great and that it will be God himself who "I will make your name great."

God was working for his chosen people what the architects at Babel sought and failed to attain for themselves. Jesus might say of this contrast that those who seek to be first will be last and those who are last will be first. That's the difference between Babel and the Heavenly Garden City. The Spirit does the work of making things, names, peoples, great. No human effort can match up.

² This article in particular, but the whole series is of note: Middleton, J. Richard. "The Genealogies in Genesis, Part II. *Biologos*.

<https://biologos.org/series/how-should-we-interpret-biblical-genealogies/articles/the-genealogies-in-genesis-part-ii>

³ Genesis 12:2

We also should notice in the contrast of Babel and Pentecost the different messages. The presumed power of Babel preaches the message that humans are the center of the universe. Babel acts as if everything else, God included, should consider itself lucky to be in our presence. "Let us make a name for ourselves." That is the refrain of Babel.

But whose name is made great at Pentecost? Those who hear Peter's words in their own native tongues describe what they hear by saying this: "we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." Imagine Peter had gotten up to speak to the gathered masses at Pentecost and began to talk about how special he was that Jesus had chosen him, how he had been chosen to see the Transfiguration, how Jesus had changed his name... I think it is safe to say that the Holy Spirit would not have made that message discernible to the masses.

If you are wondering if a gifting that you have, a calling that you sense is from the Holy Spirit, here's a pretty good test question: Will using this gift or pursuing this conviction bring about honor and praise for myself, or for God? An honest answer to that question will go a long way to revealing our motives and where the Spirit is actually leading us. Pentecost is a day where God's name is made great. The names of the builders of Babel are buried in the sand.

When the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthian church about how some of their public gatherings have gotten out of whack, it is because the human person has overshadowed the person of the Holy Spirit. The gift recipient has overshadowed the Giver of the gift. Read through 1 Corinthians 14 sometime this week and note what Paul is advocating for - order, clarity, modesty and singularity of purpose - he is pointing the Corinthian Christians back to God.

We are welcoming three new members in the family of God this morning through the waters of baptism. After they are baptized, they will receive the sign of the cross on their head as a sign that they receive the Holy Spirit, just as every Christian who comes to these waters.

And so as I think about them, and all of us who have received in baptism the gift of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, I pray we would remember the difference between Babel and Pentecost.

Babel faith is faith in ourselves. Pentecost faith is faith in God

Babel faith relies on our own work and timing. Pentecost faith waits for the working of the Holy Spirit.

Babel faith puffs up our own names. Pentecost faith lifts up the cross.

Babel faith divides. Pentecost faith unifies.

May all we who are baptized live a life of Pentecost faith.

Jesus' words to us in the Gospel seem a bit audacious don't they? "whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it." If we start to play fast and loose with this promise, we start to think that we can ask God for parking places, promotions, nice houses, and an expense account. We ask the Spirit to build Babel for us.

The Spirit cannot be contrary to the one from whom he proceeds. Jesus said the Spirit would enable us to do greater things than he did, but we easily forget the way

that Jesus talked about what it means to be great. This is why it is so important that we connect the gift of the Holy Spirit with our baptism into Christ. We are empowered by the Holy Spirit to more faithfully follow Jesus and to inaugurate his Kingdom.

We stand at the beginning of what we call in our church calendar Ordinary time. But those of you who have been on a journey with Jesus for some time will attest that there is nothing purely ordinary about a life of being on mission. Because when we are living in the spirit of Pentecost, the Spirit-filled life that waits on, follows, and is empowered by the Lord, we will indeed do and see those greater things that Jesus talked about with his disciples. So don't let the counterfeit greatness of Babel woo you into mediocre life. Instead, watch the Spirit work through the Church to take take the confusion of Babel, and transform it into the harmony of the New Jerusalem.