

The Tower of Babel

11 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ²And as they migrated from the east,^[a] 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^[b] the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

The Coming of the Holy Spirit

2 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? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

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Words Have Power

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-13

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The Tower of Babel is an origin story. Biblical scholars call it an *etiology*. Same thing. It's an explanation, in story form, of why things are the way they are. At the time of its writing, human beings were aware of other cultures, other languages, and experiences of being human that would seem strange because of such differences. And to those writing this narrative, that seemed more a hindrance than a help. Wouldn't it be better if human beings had one language and the same words? Then they could build an impressive city with a tower reaching all the way to God.

Whether there was an "actual" tower or not is likely not the main point. In fact, some biblical scholars would call the tower itself a "minor motif." The main point of the story is that language "confusion" is a reality in their world, and they don't much like it. Jan Christian Gertz, a professor at Heidelberg University writes, "The people who built the tower of Babel were driven by fundamental human concerns. They preferred settlement to the uncertainties of dispersion, uniformity to diversity, fame and power to obscurity and weakness." And yet God denies their human preferences. (<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/main-articles/tower-of-babel>)

God may still be denying us the very same preferences. We still struggle to understand and cooperate with those who speak different languages. We prefer the settled life. We consult our favorite media echo chamber to see if our views match those we consider to be like us. We desire fame and power, if not for ourselves, at the very least for those who are selling our brand, or promoting our religion, or celebrating our nationality. But the Hebrew people knew something of what it meant to be a stranger in a strange land. Whether it was as slaves in Egypt, or exiles in

Babylon, more often than not, they were far from being the dominant culture in whatever society in which they found themselves. They were frequently the displaced, the refugees, the immigrants. Or they were the natives being pushed to the side by greater powers. To get a taste of this power where you could feel like everyone had to speak *your* language and know *your* words seemed sweet, but it also seemed so far away that they might have to build a tower to heaven to obtain it.

The Hebrew people could tell the story of wandering scared on nothing but a promise of descendants more numerous than the stars. They could tell the story of a lone family surviving a 40-day flood to witness God's covenant in the rainbow. They could tell the story of escape from slavery guided by the hand of God and the tenacity of Moses. What they couldn't tell or chose not to tell is the story of being on top and in control, of "winning" in the ways of the world. There's a reason that the biblical command to love the stranger is so prevalent, especially in the Old Testament. When you survive in spite of the desires of those other people to wipe you out, it becomes important, like really incredibly important to show hospitality to those who may be finding themselves in your well-worn shoes. So, they continued to write this history from the side of history not usually told. History as we know it tends to be told from the perspective of the winners, so much so that the evil that is perpetuated to guarantee the win gets buried to make the victor look all the more meritorious. This is not so in the sacred writings of the Israelites.

The power of the biblical narrative, I think, comes from those who claimed the authority to tell their own side of the story, and it accurately describes the faith of those who put their trust in God even in the midst of great uncertainty. The prayers and proverbs and prophets continue to speak this truth to power. The words try to make sense of the place where people find themselves, whether it's in God's favor or trying to understand God's displeasure with humankind. So, we get to participate in their story through the power of their words that we read in our translated Bibles.

Great desire and love for these words has kept them being written, and studied, and translated into multiple known languages for centuries, millennia really - from the time when they were only inscribed by hand on Torah scrolls, to the Bible I keep handy in my phone app.

That power of language has always interested me. I liked taking language classes. I relished in studying other cultures. I find it fascinating to learn the origins of words and used to thrill at diving into the jigsaw puzzle of biblical translation. And my first tastes of travel were to try to fling myself as far from home as I possibly could. It's not that I don't have those same human desires for knowing my home, and people, and place – but the allure of difference was quite a pull for me.

That's where the Pentecost story of the power of language comes in. In Jerusalem, by now, there were Jews from every nation, speaking every language. In a cosmopolitan place like Jerusalem, you are bound to hear multiple languages and dialects. Some may be able to understand each other, some not. Some whose languages are far apart from understanding in nuance can at least communicate through the bodily gestures of the marketplace.

You want those fish? Yes. How many? 2.

But on this day, filled with the Spirit, those who were there to tell about God's deeds of power through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ were granted language abilities they didn't know they had. They could speak – each of them – all of them - so that those who were listening understood completely as if they were hearing the message with perfect clarity in their own native tongue. What God divides at Babel, is somehow reunited at Pentecost. It was considered a miracle of the Spirit. And it was a gift that was both celebrated and misunderstood. Was it a true connection to the divine, or merely that everyone was so drunk it seemed like understanding was completely possible?

That's one of the great complications of language. A common language has the power to unite people in both passion and purpose. But that same gravitational pull toward those who "speak your language" can be used to shut others out and stoke the fear of difference. We may even speak the same language, English, but given whatever "sides" may divide us, we can find ways to refuse to understand each other. Though we are learning more by observation as to how animals communicate with one another, the gift of speech and especially the gift of written words, belong to the unique realm of human creatures.

The Bible admonishes us often to use the gift of speech wisely – for love rather than hate, for connection rather than separation, for paying attention to the reality that God is not solely on "my side" of the world's events or cheering on the world's victors. The powerful words in scripture become the living Word when we apply them to our lives. Yes, they can be just words on a page - ancient words at that – often hard to understand or bring into the context of our contemporary lives. It takes work to get from Hebrew to English. It takes even more patience to understand how to translate one time and culture into what it means for another time and culture 2,000 years later. The Greek of the New Testament is no easier. And then recognizing that the texts come from two different languages and cultures creates some dissonance even in the Bible itself. The Hebrew understanding of spirit isn't the same as the Greek understanding of the spirit. And we today still lack the words to adequately describe the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Truth be told, especially having my old seminary so accessible in this time of my life, I sometimes envy those professors who get to play around with the scholarly pursuit of biblical and theological studies as part of their day jobs. But the real joy, I think, is to be the regular old person of faith who lights up at reading a familiar passage of the Bible as if you never saw it before. Or taking one of the truths of scripture and placing those words in the very heart and center of your

life. That's where the real action is, when the words become a part of who we are, and more importantly, they become a directive for who we want to be.

Words have power. Language creates understanding. Stories give our lives meaning. And the Spirit, well the Spirit, is creating us anew when we seek guidance and purpose in our own lives. Let the power and holiness of scriptural words move you. Sink into them and make them your own. Love the lilt and flow of your own language, and seek to understand those who may speak it differently or who speak another language altogether. We humans have more in common than we often think. Amen.