

The Day of Pentecost

MONUMENTAL INTOXICATIONS

Genesis 11:1-9

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Analysis by Jerome Burce

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.

Notes:

- The "let us go down" of v. 7 evokes the "let us make man"

of the Priestly creation account (1:26) and invites us to read the present story as a Yahwist narrative with a Priestly stamp, for which 1:26 serves as an interpretive key. Thus John T. Strong in "Shattering the image of God: A response to Theodore Hiebert's interpretation of the story of the tower of Babel" (*Journal of Biblical Literature*, 127 no. 4 Winter 2008, pp. 625-634).

- In plainer English, we're dealing here (according to Strong and others) with an old Israelite story that was retooled to address hearers shaped by the Mesopotamian milieu of Israel's exile in the 6th century B.C. and its subsequent diaspora. The creation story of Genesis 1 speaks to that same milieu. The occurrence in both stories and nowhere else of the "divine we" (technically, "the first person plural cohortative, as spoken by God," Strong, p. 628) suggests that they ought to be read in tandem as intentionally connected bookends of the Bible's primeval history.
- Featured in the Mesopotamian milieu were innumerable stelae (commemorative pillars) erected by assorted conquerors to trumpet their victories and cow would-be rebels. A text attributed to an Assyrian emperor describes one of them as follows: "At that time I fashioned an image of my own likeness, the glory of my power I inscribed thereon, and in the mountain of Edi, in the city of Assur-nasir-pal . . . I set it up" (Strong, p. 630).

1. Strong's thesis could be summarized with the word "smashed." So could the charge leveled by skeptics against Peter and company on Pentecost Sunday (Acts 2:13). Hence the section titles below.

DIAGNOSIS: Smashed

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Drunk with Ambition ("Higher, higher!")*

"Come, let us brick bricks and burn for burning." So reads the Hebrew behind v. 3, the repetition conveying as great a sense of urgency and determination as you'll find in any modern construction crew with a deadline to meet. And why not? The project is immense, the vision grand, and the forces driving it are eager to get the thing done. "Let us make a name for ourselves" (v. 4) by building big and building up, if not on the Shinar plain (v. 2) then wherever else a human influx can get itself organized. So it is that Egypt and the Yucatan sport their pyramids, and Paris its tower, and the island of Manhattan its thicket of skyscrapers. Or consider the Burj Khalifa, opened only this January as the tallest building in the world; it rises in Dubai, on the far side of the Persian Gulf from our story's Shinar, to over twice the height of the Empire State Building, and 1100 feet taller than its nearest rival, Taipei 101, built in 2003. Now Arabs can bask in the Oohs and Aahs of an admiring world, all the more when they consider that here at least the Westerners will have ceded the game, having neither the nerve nor the wherewithal to try and beat them. As for those Westerners and Americans in particular, say hello to the ashy taste that filled the mouths of ancient Israelites when they were forced to gaze on monumental Babylon.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *"Back off, Buster!"*

And isn't that the point, whether then or now, of all this building, building, building, ever bigger, ever taller? It bruits the might, wealth, and savvy of the builders and the peoples that host them. It projects a nation's image and girds

its reputation. It announces Who We Are. It barks at others to back off, to give up, to feel low and weak and foolish. "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair" (see Shelley's poem, "Ozymandias"). What is the world's tallest building or fastest train or biggest corporation or most attended church (that too) if not a stele of sorts (see Note 3 above), an object that for all its grandeur betrays a pathetic, primordial fear, namely that others are itching to take us down; that unless we cow them, they'll stir and conspire to do to us as the armies of Mesopotamia once did to Israel and others of that ilk, inflicting poverty and ruin and forcing us to be "scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (v. 4). Behind the fear lies a primordial forgetting, one that has long since lost sight of humanity's status as God's own stele. "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness," says God (1:26), whereupon God sets us up, so to speak, as the ultimate testimony to his triumph over darkness and chaos. And will not God protect and safeguard this wondrous living monument to the glory of his power (again, Note 3)? No, say the Shinar builders. And so say all others who have followed in their wake.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Landing in the Gutter*

"Come," they keep saying, "let us make a name" not for God but "for ourselves" (v. 4). Translation: "Let's get others praising and fearing not God (the one we don't trust) but us." In other words, "Let's set God's image aside and replace it with our own." Bad move. Authorities do not take kindly to having their images tampered with. Gasoline pumps in the county I live in display a certifying sticker, and on it a photo of the elected official responsible for ensuring the accuracy of local weights and measures. Fine print at the bottom of the stickers threatens legal action against miscreants who would remove or mar them. That presumably includes the many who keep adorning the

official's photo with mustaches and horns. The old Assyrian potentates were likewise protective, fiercely so, of their victory stelae and other monuments. They left texts behind that call down wrath, ruination, and unrelenting curses on anyone, vandal or rebel, who would dare to damage them. God too will not be mocked. So when his stele defaces itself—when collective humanity starts broadcasting its own glory, not his—he does what others are forbidden to do and knocks it down himself. Then he scatters the pieces hither and yon. Again and again he does it, at Babel by confusing languages, at other times and places by using other tools, earthquake, famine, conquest, revolution and the like. (And modern terrorism too? It will be as hard for post-9/11 Americans to admit that as it was for Israel's exiles to confess God's hand in their calamity.) As for the bits and pieces of the shattered, scattered humanity, these too return to dust, each in due time. At length the wind blows and the particles that once were us are wafted here and there across the face of the earth.

PROGNOSIS: Spirited

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God in the Gutter*

Meanwhile God continues a massive and singular building project of his own, the nature of which is hinted at already in the present story by the striking "Let us go down . . ." (v. 7). "Let us go down," that is, not merely to confuse and scatter, but also to clarify and gather; not merely to shatter the old damaged monument (collective humanity) but also to erect a new one, a new tribute and testament to the breathtaking wonder of God's power, God's glory. The new work is launched, of course, in Genesis 12 with the call of Abram, one of those dispersed fragments of the Babel disaster. It leads through twists, turns and repeated episodes of gathering, scattering, and gathering again to the one man, Abraham's singular seed (as Paul insists,

Gal. 3:16), through whom “all the [scattered] families of the earth shall be blessed” (12:3). Irony of ironies: the blessing erupts only when scattered humanity momentarily reunites, Jew and Gentile working together, for the ultimate act of insurrection. Together they crucify the Son of God (cf. Acts 2:23), thinking thereby to tear him down. Instead they unwittingly erect a new and permanent monument to God’s power and glory, a cruciform stele. On it is mounted not the image of God but God himself in the person of his Christ whose stated intention in hanging there is to undo Babel and its fruits. “I, when I am lifted up . . . will draw all [the scattered] people to myself” (John 12:32). And to ensure that this happens, the Master Builder engineers two marvels in quick succession. The first is Easter, the second Pentecost.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *“Lead on, Lead on!”*

Back to Abraham, who in getting the project started exemplifies the key characteristic of all others who find themselves drawn into it. Abraham “believed the LORD and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness” (15:6). This believing entails three operative assumptions that were not to be found on the Shinar plain. Assumption 1: God alone is the maker of the name that lasts and the builder of the future it leads to. As he says, “I will . . . make your name great,” emphasis on the “I” (Gen. 12:2). Assumption 2: God can be trusted to keep his promises, even when available evidence suggests otherwise. Assumption 3: Because God can be trusted, God alone is to be feared. This is what Abraham believes, if not steadily—see for example the Hagar episode (16:2-3)—then ultimately, as on the mountain in Moriah (22:2). In believing so well with so little to base it on (voices in his head? inexplicable impulses?), he demonstrates that faith in God is itself a divine construction. He also paves the way for believers to come, the ones who will find in the

death and resurrection of Jesus all the confirmation they need to cling like limpets to the promise of Abraham's God. And in their clinging, if you ask them "Who are you?" they'll answer, "We're people Jesus died for." Or perhaps they'll say, "Bad question. Try asking 'Who is Christ for us?'" Whereupon God, listening in, finds this "very good" (1:31) and reckons it to them as righteousness.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *The Holy Ambition ("Lower, lower!")*

And another thing about these God-trusters: they exhibit strange ambitions. Their interests run not to the vertical but to the horizontal; not to building big and building tall but instead to being scattered far and scattered wide. The very thing that others fear they embrace with joy, and if there's a name to be made or glory bruited anywhere on the face of the earth, they want it to be Christ's, not theirs. This driving ambition is the first and greatest of God's Pentecostal accomplishments, a direct outcome of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter and company are all but crazy with it. So will hordes of others be who follow in their wake. They will see the earth not through Shinar lenses, as a place to settle and build, but rather as a land in which to make like Abraham, forever on the move, always trusting the promise of gifts to come by God's doing, not theirs. Over time they'll be wafted to the world's far corners. When the Spirit's gusts blow them into the massive works of humankind—Western, Asian, Middle Eastern, whatever—they will not be impressed, nor will their eyes travel upward to the peaks of the skyscrapers but rather down and outward to the alleys and underpasses, the better to spot the human ruins that Christ died to reassemble and resurrect by the power of his Spirit. Yes, and every so often someone will notice their strange behavior and pause to praise the name of God, if only in a backhanded sort of way. (See e.g. Nicholas D. Kristof, "Who Can Mock This Church?"

New York Times, May 1, 2010.) Of course wherever they go they'll plant the cruciform stele and tell of God's glory that hung there for all; and always, always, they'll await a city, not one of their building, rising from the ground up, but "the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Rev. 21:2). To God alone the Name, the glory, world without end.