

THE TOWER OF BABEL

GENESIS 11.1-9

Encountering God Series

OPENING PRAYER

O God, for the beauty and frustrations of the multitudes of language and the variety of your creation we give you thanks. Grant us the courage to live with uncertainty and the honesty to admit when we don't understand each other. Amen.

EXEGESIS

The story of Babel is likely a myth, but like many myths, it's truer than truth. Reinhold Niebuhr has suggested that the legend may have been inspired by "an unfinished temple of Marduk in Babylon" that led "surrounding desert people ... to speculate on the reason for its unfinished state."

Regardless of its origins, however, there's a lot going on in this short text. In Genesis, it's placed right after a lengthy chapter detailing the descendants of Noah, and if we go by Avivah Zornberg's readings of the text's accompanying midrash (creative interpretations of "gaps" in the language of the Torah), the memory of the great flood looms heavily over this text as well. Verse 4 suggests there's some kind of survivalist impulse at work here; the people decide to build "a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens ... otherwise we shall be scattered over the face of the earth."

We have already been told that the people in the story "had one language and the same words" (v. 1) and here we see that they still fear fragmentation in the wake of Noah's flood. However, the "unity" they create is one without diversity or plurality, and the contrast between the vertical tower and the level, horizontal plain in which the people settle in verse 2 suggests an oppressive, artificial hierarchy with pretensions of divine knowledge (the tower's top is "in the heavens" (v. 4)).

The tower meets its antithesis yet again in verse 5; where the people build a tower ascending upward, we are told that "the Lord came down to see the city and the tower." God warns that, with the people now under the rule of one language and residing in their monolithic tower, "nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them" (v. 6). So God decides to "confuse their language there, so that they will not understand each other's speech" (v. 7).

The text ends with the people's worst fears outlined in verse 4 coming to fruition: the people are "scattered ... abroad from there over the face of all the earth" (v. 8), and the cultures and nations that form as a result no longer share a language. And yet, despite their fears of being wiped out yet again, something remarkable happens: they survive.

REFLECTION

In the American South we have a saying about people who are “so heavenly minded they’re no earthly good.” That’s what comes to my mind when I read this story, in which the people try to build a tower that places humanity on the same level as God ... and yet God is not in the sky. God is down below, on the level plain among the people. By focusing their minds on lofty aspirations of power and understanding “in the heavens,” the people turn their focus away from each other, and as a result they miss out on where the divine image— and their true means of survival and fulfilment—is truly found.

This doesn’t by any means indicate that we shouldn’t be ambitious or curious about understanding the nature of the world or God: by all means, we should! But we should do so with the humility to understand that our perception, our language, is not the final word; it is not all-encompassing. Therefore, we need not be so afraid of our worldview falling apart when we open ourselves to people and experiences that might seem foreign or threatening to us—as this story suggests, that might be where we experience God the most profoundly.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What are some “towers” in our own world—literal or metaphorical—that might be similar to Babel?
Is the confusion of language in this story a punishment, or a blessing? Why or why not?
Why doesn’t God destroy the Tower?

CLOSING PRAYER

O Lord, throughout history and myth you have humbled yourself to live among the people. Humble us also in our pursuit of understanding, and lead us from this time with open eyes and ears for your divine image as revealed in the diverse people and communities that surround us. Amen.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Crystal L. Downing, How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith
- Reinhold Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History
- Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious