

Genesis 11:1-9

Now the whole earth had one language
and the same words.

²And as they migrated from the east,
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 the language
of all the earth;
and from there the LORD scattered them abroad
over the face of all the earth.

Acts 2:1-13

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.

⁵ Now 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?

Reading Genesis this Week

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.'

The risk this week is that we think we know the story –
The last of the primeval myths of universal humanity,
Before the legends of the patriarchs, roots of particular peoples

We're after Noah, and 3 sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth
Talmud credits Nimrod with leading here at Babel
Gen 11 follows with *toledot* issue of Noah's Shem, 'name'

As we were 'east of Eden', so we are 'from the East' in Shinar
Not yet real geography, as Avram will be from c.12 on
It alludes to Ancient Near Eastern parallel mythic roots

One language, few words, uniformity
Human technology, bricks/tar, not stone/mortar
What's wrong with either? Tyranny, autocracy, slavery

God observes and 'comes down' –
As in Eden when Adam and Eve 'hid'
Was God really threatened by human ambition?

The divine chat is like Job's opening tale –
'let us' mess with the humans – a Persian style story
'confuse' is '*bābel*' – play on Babel and Babylon

Imagine recycling old stories centuries later –
Origin myths of 1000BCE, used in 500BCE
'The Excited States', 'Great Satan', reggae 'Babylon'

This is parody and sarcasm toward centralizing empire,
To the hegemony of the day, over-reaching
For labourers, razing Babel is a blessing!

2001: <http://www.billbrucewords.com/2001/06/babbling.html>

2007: <http://www.billbrucewords.com/2007/05/babble-gen11-acts2.html>

2013: <http://www.billbrucewords.com/2013/05/how-we-talk-godtalk.html>

2016: <http://www.billbrucewords.com/2016/05/babbling.html>

Reading Acts this Week

Our working hypothesis can be that Acts is Luke, volume 2
Even if it's a separate effort by another, it's framed as such,
Carrying on the Jesus story into the church's story

Like Babel, the risk it that we think we know the story –
After Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension, now Spirit
That's the Lucan linear sequence, and our liturgical calendar

Often lay leaders learn this from reading the place names!
Sometimes, it's timed for June 10 church union, or pride,
Liberal 'unity in diversity' uses this as a proof-text or pretext

Is it a historical event, in Jerusalem, during pilgrimage festival,
'All' (how many) of Jesus' followers gathered in one place,
Transformed by supernatural tongues of fire and talk?

Is it a mythic framing of the existential shift: disciple to apostle,
hiding in fear to proclaiming fearlessly
If so, does it 'recycle' the Babel myth, and repurpose it?

What languages did Galileans speak? Aramean, Greek, Latin?
What languages did pilgrims from Africa, Asia, Europe speak?
In your movie, what do you hear and see?

An ethnocentric start from a marginal region of illiterate fishers
Spreads in a generation across the empire and beyond
How does it engage new alliances, overcome old resistance?

By the time Acts is edited in our form, Jerusalem is razed
Roman suppression of Jewish rebels and homeland is complete,
The centre of church 'pivots' to Asia Minor and Rome

2002: <http://www.billbrucewords.com/2002/05/blown-away.html>

2005: <http://www.billbrucewords.com/2005/05/isms.html>

(and the Pentecost sermons above which also used Genesis 11)