

TOWARDS AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF MISSIONS

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Acts chapter two is a classic. It is a classic in that every church, in some measure has drawn strength and direction from what happened to a band of disciples in Jerusalem on a particular day of Pentecost some two thousand years ago. Pentecost or the Festival of Weeks, coming fifty days after the Passover, is one of three great Jewish holidays. Annually, many Jews and proselytes from the Diaspora would make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to at the end of the grain harvest to offer thanks to God by presenting the first-fruits of their labor.¹

On this particular day, the occasion was marked by the sound of wind, light and considerable commotion. We read that followers of Jesus who had assembled themselves in Jerusalem “amazed and perplexed” a crowd of onlookers by speaking fluently in languages that were unlearned to them. Others in the crowd mockingly dismissed the novelty as evidence of a bit too much wine. Yet no matter what one thinks of the events described by Luke in Acts 2, the day marks the birth of the church.

Today in remembrance of that occasion, a typical liturgical reading for Pentecost Sunday starts with both Acts 1:8 (which serves as a precursor for Acts 2) and Acts 2:1-13. Interestingly, Genesis 11:1-9 is often included as an Old Testament reading. As part of the oldest theological tradition of the Old Testament, Genesis 11 narrates as aetiology, the dispersion of people throughout the known world. It tells the story how “human language had become a language of

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¹ Exodus 23:16; Numbers 28:26; Leviticus 23:15-16

disobedience.”² And how God interrupted their speech and put an end to their rebellion by creating a multiplicity of languages.

Given the emphasis on “tongues” (glossolalia) as automatic unlearned speech in Acts 2, it does seem appropriate to make a connection with Genesis 11. Traditionally, it has been suggested that Acts 2 is the reversal of Genesis 11. Namely speech that became confused resulting in dispersion has now been united by the advent of the Holy Spirit.³ This paper will explore the relationship between Acts 2 and Genesis 11. Further, we will challenge the traditional explanation of reversal favoring an explanation that goes to the heart of Luke’s understanding of gospel and missions.

In the words of Walter Brueggemann it is our intention to “move back into the deepest memories of this first century community and activate those very symbols that have always been the basis for contradicting the regnant consciousness.”⁴ We will proceed by surveying separately Genesis 11 and Acts 2. Part three will attempt to synthesize these two passages.

I. Genesis 11:1-9

Genesis 11:1-9 narrates a familiar story of how the earth was populated following the flood. Woven in a tight chiasmic structure the narration begins with “everyone on earth” gathering together (v. 1) and ends with those gathered being scattered over the face of the whole earth. The story is equally divided in two parts. Part one begins with the actions of humankind (v. 1-4) and part two concludes with the actions of God (vv. 5-9). Verse five serves as a linchpin between the two parts as God leaves his domain and performs a divine inspection on earth.

In the first four verses people migrated to the land of Shinar and with the use of bricks and mortar built a city both in an effort to make a name for themselves and to prevent their dispersal to the ends of the earth. In the center of the city a tower was constructed with the aim to reach the

² Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), p. 102.

³ James Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles: Narrative Commentaries* (Valley Forge: Trinity, 1996), pp. 23-25; Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), pp. 173-75.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), p. 66.

sky (heavens). Verses 6-9 narrate the response of God to this so-called intrusion. Reminiscent of the later situation at Sodom and Gomorrah, God is pictured in anthropomorphic terms as coming to investigate what people were building. Ironically while they attempted to build a tower to reach the heavens, commonly thought to be the dwelling place of God, God himself left the "heavens" to appraise the situation. Subsequently, God reacted by confounding the speech of the people, which abruptly halted construction and scattered everyone over the face of the earth.

As a piece of literature in and of itself, the passage cannot help but tickle the imagination of the reader. The passage is a grand example of alliteration. Michael Fishbane describes the story as an acoustical sound track. From the east humankind came to the land of Shinar and settled "there" (*sham*). A tower reaching to the "heavens" (*sham-ayim*) was built so that the people could make for themselves a "name" (*shem*). Subsequently human language was confounded and it was from "there" (*mi-shaam*) that humankind was scattered.⁵ This is in addition to the frequent consonant sound "b" and "l" found in the bricks (*li-b-na*), God "babbling" (*na-bi-la*) the language of the people and the Tower of "Babel" itself.

The alliteration has the effect of underlining the ultimate importance accorded speech throughout this pericope. It is language that binds and then scatters humankind over the face of the earth. It visualizes the power of speech to build and the power of speech to tear down. While God and humans are the actors of this story, it is speech that provides the generative energy. It is, therefore, not surprising that exegetes of Acts 2 invariably look to Genesis 11 as an interpretive reference point. Could Luke have had this ancient tradition in mind when he described the activities of Acts 2? And if he did, in what way does Luke reach back into the memories of his own consciousness and activate the regnant symbols of Genesis 11?

The majority consensus among contemporary scholars is that the confusion of speech created by God in Genesis 11 was in reaction to human hubris.⁶ It is claimed that pride was the predominate factor that led people to rebel against God by creating a tower to reach the domain of God on their own. The gathered people desired to make a name for

⁵ Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture* (New York: Schocken, 1979), p. 34.

⁶ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, Texas: Word, 1987), pp. 232-46; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), pp. 147-54; J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen/Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1975), p. 44.

themselves and achieved immortality through human achievement. Reading diachronically the story is about vertical striving in the same spirit as Genesis 3 (the fall) and Genesis 7-8 (the Noahic flood). J. P. Fokklemann writes, "YHWH finds himself confronted with unexpected concentration of power with a revolution which threatens to subvert the cosmic order created by him."⁷ The tower was a monument of civil insurrection against the powers of their creator. It was a Promethean attempt to storm the heavens and be like God. But God retaliated by confounding the speech of the people thus putting an abrupt halt to their efforts. As a result "maximum concentration led to maximum decentration"⁸ with the dispersion of the people throughout the earth.

In such a perspective, the subsequent scattering is understood in punitive terms. Gordon Wenham writes, "The tower stands as monument of man's impotence before his creator and the multiplicity of human languages is a reminder of divine retribution on human pride."⁹ Such an interpretation is not without support in Jewish literature. Midrash adds some illustrative material. In Genesis Rabbah we read,

Said R. Eleazar, "Who is worse, one who says to the king, 'Either you or I shall live in the palace' or the one who says to him, 'Neither you nor I shall live in the palace?' It is the one who says, 'Either you or I shall live in the palace.'"

So the generation of the flood said, "What is the almighty, that we should serve him" (Job 21:15)? But the generation of the dispersion said [against "The Lord our God, the Lord is one"], "He does not have the power to select the heavenly spheres for himself and hand over to us merely the lower world. So come, let us make a tower for ourselves and put an idol on top of it, and put a sword in its hand, so that it will appear as if it carries on warfare with him. [Thus either you or I shall live in heaven.]"¹⁰

According to R. Eleazar the tower is representative of humanity's desire to usurp God from his place. Such a view however is not without

⁷ Fokklemann, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, p. 44. See also Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 243: "mankind is seen organizing and arrogating to himself essentially divine prerogatives: he builds a tower to reach to God's dwelling in heaven; he tries to make himself a name and he schemes on his own account."

⁸ Fokklemann, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, p. 44.

⁹ Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 242.

¹⁰ Jacob Neusner, *The Components of the Rabbinic Documents, IX Genesis Rabbah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), p. 152.

its problems. One is left to wonder about the omnipotence of a God who is described as feeling threatened by aspiring architects. One may also speculate why the tower, if indeed it is central to the understanding of this story, is left out in the conclusion? Instead of the tower being destroyed the people are scattered over the face of the earth.

Increasingly, in part because of these questions, scholars have been led to a different conclusion concerning the Babel pericope. Although still a minority position these scholars adopt a synchronic perspective that reads Genesis 1-11 as a collective unit, the case is made that God's actions should be understood as being redemptive rather than punitive in nature.¹¹

In such a perspective appeals are made to Genesis 1 over Genesis 3. In the first chapter of Genesis humanity is commissioned to "multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over...every living thing."¹² It was the divine intention that humans would take responsibility for God's creation by going to all parts of the earth.

Proponents of this view note that typically humans are more underachievers than they were prideful overachievers. It is speculated that perhaps the people gathered together in one city in fear of being subjected to another flood? Were they in a quest for security—for fear of being lost? Whatever the reasons, by clinging to each other in a homogenous community, they were avoiding that for which they were created.

In such an interpretation God's action of dispersion is a redemptive, not a punitive act. Scattering then becomes God's redemptive plan for the well being of the cosmos. In the end the people would be forced to create heterogeneous cultures for the benefit of all. Rabbi Ibn Ezra explains, "YHWH wanted mankind to be spread throughout the world, because that would be good for the preservation of the world and would be beneficial for it spiritually as well...easier to learn about the true religion, because with the great number and variety of religions, everyone will in the end realize that YHWH is greater than all the gods."¹³

¹¹ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, pp. 96-100; W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1974), pp. 80-85; Nahum Sarna, *Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), pp. 80-84.

¹² Genesis 1:28

¹³ As quoted by Yehuda Nachshoni, *Studies in the Weekly Parashah* (New York: Mesorah Publishing, 1994), p. 44.

In support of such a reading, Walter Brueggemann notes that the verb “scatter” is the common denominator throughout the story.¹⁴ Not only does it hold the Babel pericope together but also it serves as a bridge to the previous narrative concerning the actions of Noah. In Genesis 9:6, Noah is reminded that he must “be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply it.”

II. Acts 1:8; 2:1-21

In Acts we are presented with the second part of a two-part story that begins in the gospel of Luke with the birth of John the Baptist and ends in the Acts of the Apostles with the imprisonment of Paul in Rome. In between Luke¹⁵ chronicles the footsteps of Jesus and subsequent disciples as they fan the flame of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

In Acts 1:8, Luke echoes the words of the prophet Isaiah (49:6) and announces the missionary mandate of the early church. The disciples were charged with the responsibility to be witnesses of Christ “in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” In short order, Luke not only announces the purpose of Acts but he spells out the geographical progression his story will take. But the disciples were not going to be alone; Jesus is quoted as telling the disciples that the Holy Spirit will accompany them in power.

In Acts 2, that which was promised occurs. Functioning as *précis* for the rest of the story not unlike how Luke 4:18 governs the pace and direction of the Gospel of Luke, the disciples gathered in a dwelling place located in Jerusalem. Not knowing what to expect, the Holy Spirit in the form of a mighty wind greeted the disciples. Witnesses reported tongues of fire resting on each disciple. “And all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.”¹⁶ The Holy Spirit was breaking loose.

The temptation for the modern reader is to dismiss Luke’s description of events as an excitable gloss. To do so, however, is to impose a criterion for truth on the biblical writer that was not practiced

¹⁴ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 98.

¹⁵ While there is no consensus on the authorship of the Gospel of Luke or the Acts of the Apostles, scholars are in general agreement that both books were indeed written by the same author. For the sake of convenience I will refer to the author as Luke.

¹⁶ Acts 2:4

by historians in Luke's day. Our interest cannot be so much what happened but in what was claimed to have happened. And it quickly becomes evident that Luke is drawing on many traditions in underscoring the importance of this event. Once again the Spirit's creative breath (Genesis 1:2) is bringing forth new life. Tongues of fire appear possibly as a referent to the tongues of fire that appeared on Mount Sinai during the giving of the Law.¹⁷ According to Jewish legend, there were 70 tongues of fire on the mountain (Sinai) representing 70 languages of the 70 nations of the earth.¹⁸ Now at the end of the age, Luke is telling his reader, the goal is achieved; all people come under the power of the Spirit of God.

But perhaps the most unusual occurrence on that day was the inspired speech of the disciples in foreign languages that they did not recognize. This will not be the last time in the Book of Acts that followers of Christ will "speak in other tongues" but it will be the only time that it is alleged that they spoke in known foreign tongues. Precisely it will be the only occasion, where tongues (*glossolalia*) imply known languages.¹⁹ However, while the tongues were unknown to those speaking, many of the Diaspora Jews gathered outside recognized their native languages. Moving geographically from the east to the west the list of those present represents a swath of Jews, proselytes and devout gentiles who had come to participate in the Festival of Pentecost. Among them are mentioned the Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, Cyrenaica and Rome. Fittingly the list ends in Rome, as does Luke's account of the early church.²⁰

Later when asked to give an explanation for what is happening Luke records Peter proclaiming that all of this is occurring in fulfilment of the prophet Joel's prophecy "that in the last days, God will pour out his

¹⁷ Deut 4:12; Exodus 19:18, 19

¹⁸ Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 174.

¹⁹ In this case, glossolalia is used in conjunction with the Greek word for "another of a different kind" (*eterais*). In addition it is noted in the text that those listening detected their own languages (Acts 2:8-11). This stands in contrast to latter usages of the word glossolalia (10:46; 19:6) where the impression of a known foreign language is left out.

²⁰ It is the consensus of many scholars that Cretans and Arabs represent a later gloss by those who wished to account for Paul's mission in Arabia (Galatians 1:17), which Luke seems to ignore.

Spirit on all flesh and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.”²¹ Luke through the prophet Joel effectively ties in Acts 1:8 with the outburst of Spirit activity in Acts 2. Through all of this, the effective agent in the accomplishment of God’s purpose is the Holy Spirit. From the infancy stories where the Spirit of God came upon the likes of Mary, Elizabeth and Zechariah, to the stories where Jesus enters into the wilderness “full of the Spirit,” and to the prolegomenon of Jesus where he reads from the prophet Isaiah announcing that the Spirit is upon him to preach the gospel to the poor and to heal the broken hearted, the Holy Spirit is featured front and center.

III. Synthesis

Traditional hermeneutics has favored interpreting Acts 2 as a reversal of Genesis 11. The reading starts with the presupposition that the actions of God in Genesis 11 are punitive in response to human hubris. If in Genesis 11 “humpty dumpty” falls and is scattered all over, it is thought that the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 does indeed put “humpty” back together again. There are, however, difficulties with such an interpretation. First, if the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 is said to reunite language, then it does not follow that there were so many languages present. Acts 2 does not eliminate language diversity, rather it celebrates the same said diversity. The disciples do not leave speaking one language, instead they reflect the languages that are present. Second, in Acts 2 the accent is on proclamation, not human pride. The ontological disposition of the disciples does not change as a result of being “filled with the Spirit.” Instead, they are empowered to speak boldly in the language of the people gathered from the known world.

In light of this we propose a different reading of Acts 2 that remains open to the pulses of meaning found in Genesis 11. As we have already noted Luke is interested in chronicling both the development and spread of the gospel message both politically and geographically. Politically the message begins with the Jewish population and geographically it is centered in Jerusalem. However, while Luke starts with Jews, he clearly anticipates the mission to the gentiles. In Luke 2:39, 40 Simeon prophesies over Jesus claiming Jesus will be “a light for revelation to the gentiles and for the glory to your people Israel.”²² Later Luke again dips

²¹ Acts 2:17

²² See also Isaiah 42:6; 49:6.

into the words of the prophet Isaiah (40:3-5) as he associates Isaiah's words with the mission of John the Baptist. Accordingly John the Baptist is the voice calling in the desert:

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.²³

Finally, Luke records the appointment of seventy²⁴ other disciples who are commissioned to go "two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.'"²⁵ Presumably "every town" included towns with a gentile population.

In Acts 2, although the list is not meant to be exhaustive, Jews from every nation under heaven assemble together for the Feast of Pentecost. Given Luke's earlier hints towards global missionary efforts we need not dismiss the possibility that Luke intended for his reading audience to view the gathered Diaspora as representing not only Jews but include gentile inhabitants. In either case, Luke's attention is on the diversity of speech of the onlookers and not their ethnic nationality. In effect, the text says to those assembled as they spoke in known foreign languages that were unknown to them: here is your audience both actual and anticipated. The commission is now to go to these nations with the kerygma (the gospel message). In this way the physical happenings of Acts 2 reinforce the verbal admonition of Acts 1:8. All of which stands in opposition to the human temptation to stay and build. The missionary mandate is to go and scatter.

With this understanding it is not hard to imagine Luke drawing on Genesis 11 if he interprets the Babel narrative as a redemptive act of God. In this light Acts 2 is not a reversal of Babel, rather Babel is a reminder of the consequences that will result from building instead of going. The redemptive purposes of God require that the people of God, as regents of this world, "scatter" to every nation under the sun. In the end, the health of a given church is not indicated by how large it becomes or how close it brings people to sensing God's presence. Rather its health is indicated by how many people leave its confines to replenish the world

²³ Luke 3:4-6 (NRSV)

²⁴ Other manuscripts say seventy-two.

²⁵ Luke 10:1, 2

for the kingdom of God. Likewise the health of the kingdom of God is reflected by the obedience of God's people to "replenish" every corner.

But the message Luke does not stop here. Onlookers on that day of Pentecost were amazed and perplexed because Galileans spoke in their native tongue. The kerygma was translated into the language/culture of the audience. The audience was not required to make adjustments to understand the message. The movement was from the band of believers to the assembled people. Early Pentecostals from the last century interpreted this to mean that God will endow, through his Spirit, missionaries the ability to speak in known foreign languages thus dispensing with the trials of manually learning another language. Although individual stories of such events have subsequently emerged,²⁶ the teaching was quickly disbanded in favor of more traditional approaches of linguistic training. Nonetheless Acts 2 does serve, as a necessary reminder that the gospel message is not the privy of one form of communication or language. The missionary mandate is to communicate so that the message can be heard and assimilated notwithstanding the fact that critics mocking will say, "They are full of new wine."²⁷

IV. Conclusion

Acts 2 with all of its commotion was filled with promise. Luke describes a scene that inevitably leaves one to reflect on an ancient tradition—the Tower of Babel. The disciples emerged from the house where they were staying speaking in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. We have proposed that Luke draws on this tradition in conjunction with his earlier comments in Acts 1:8 to remind the followers of Christ that:

- ? the Holy Spirit commissions and empowers the faithful to be witnesses/regents of the gospel,
- ? as regents, the faithful redeem the world by scattering to every nation under the sun,
- ? as witnesses, the faithful need to translate the kerygma into the language of those who have not heard.

However, it must not be overlooked that despite such promise entrenched in the traditions passed to them, and despite such clear

²⁶ Serious documentation is largely absent.

²⁷ Luke 2:13

directives given by Christ to be witnesses to the ends of the earth, the disciples did not leave Jerusalem in fulfillment of this mandate until God again "confused" the fledging church through persecution. Directly as a result of that persecution the church "was scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria."²⁸

²⁸ Acts 8:1