



Daily Reflections

JOURNEYING THROUGH CHALLENGING TIMES

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THE TOWER OF BABEL

By Father David C. Robinson, SJ

Excerpts from Today's Reading

The Lord said: "If now, while they are one people, all speaking the same language, they have started to do this [build a great tower reaching to heaven], nothing will later stop them from doing whatever they presume to do. Let us then go down and there confuse their language, so that one will not understand what another says." Thus, the Lord scattered them from there all over the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the speech of all the world. It was from that place that he scattered them all over the earth.

GENESIS 11:6-9

Reflection

In the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch), we are met with a virtual encyclopedia of words, names, stories, and precepts that marked the attempt of the early Hebrew communities to communicate the intricacy and wonder of their growing intimacy with the God who was in the process of leading them to freedom as the Chosen People. They had to probe and master the ‘language of God’ as the message of their destiny was related to them—their common life, their unique history, and their promised future among the powers of the world.

The story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis is seemingly derived from the history of the Babylonian tower temple, *Babilu*, (*Bavel* in Hebrew). The similarity to *Balal*, to ‘confuse,’ could have led to the play on words in which God **confused the speech of all the world** (Encyclopedia Britannica) when the imposing and pretentious tower was being built. Babylon was a city, and an empire, of great influence from 2,000 to the mid sixth century BCE. Its shadow would have fallen over the emerging Hebrew world from its inception through the decades of the Babylonian Exile (597-538 BCE). Needless to say, the Babylonian behemoth was not a favored presence in the Hebrew imagination!

In a scriptural context, the Tower symbolized the audacity of power. The notion that human beings could mount the heights of heaven, intruding into the realm of God, was a blasphemy that could not be excused. When humans presume equality with the divine, their role in the world rapidly becomes one of arrogance, violence, and ultimately, the destruction of others’ lives and freedom. After centuries of warfare, exile, and exodus, the Hebrews awaited the saving intervention of their God. Since the power of language, of words, was essential to their very understanding of the unfolding of creation, the act of disrupting human communication was tantamount to undermining the possibilities for creating a common future. If mortals aspired to the role of divinity, their language became corrupted and had to be broken.

The very decision to build the Tower indicated more grandiose ambitions. As God notes in Genesis: **“nothing will later stop them from doing whatever they presume to do.”** As heirs to the reign of God, the Hebrews celebrated the act by which the pagan world was ‘silenced,’ their aspirations blunted. In the wider arc of history, the incapacity of humans to communicate with humility, honor, and respect can only lead to self-deception, egotism, and abuse of others. Centuries of political arrogance have borne out the truth of this mythic narrative.

In our own day, we continue to witness the fruits of ‘corrupted’ language. When political discourse becomes a commodity for ideological ends; when our speaking becomes disconnected from the intuitions of our hearts; when our agreements are only a mask to further harmful ends, we are indeed inhabiting our own Tower of Babel. The story of this Tower is our admonition to speak with the reverence that the truth deserves, to communicate with our neighbors in a manner that builds trust not antagonism, and to hold our language in the depths of our hearts so that our speaking carries the integrity of God’s loving message to all of us. As children of the One whose Word created all that is, we can settle for nothing less.



Tower of Babel by Pieter Breugel the Elder
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For Pondering

- Do you find yourself questioning the ‘true meaning’ of others’ words when they speak of important things to you?
- Are you able to maintain integrity in your speech when those around you are hostile to your views/thoughts?
- What do you feel are the foundational values you hold in your ways of communicating with others?

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