

**The story of the Tower of Babel with the eyes of the Global South
Contributions from the staff of the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS)
for the meditation on Genesis 11
at the “Development policy conference of churches and organizations”
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1. Georg Meyer, Head of Department: Regions and Mission Associations at Evangelical Mission in Solidarity, Liaison officer Africa

South Africa

The Tower of Babel can be considered as one of the key biblical texts that were initially utilized (framed) by segregationist (Calvinist) clergy in South Africa for their theological justification for Apartheid. It is the narrative that formed the basis of the “Apartheid Bible” that argues for God’s will being in favour of the segregation of (apartheid) society in contrast to the (British imperialist) forced integration of peoples.

The same story was later reframed for liberation and reconciliation by prophetic theologians (i.e. Desmond Tutu), also in the light of the good news of the resurrected Christ that bursts the language barriers (cf. Acts 2:11) but does not alter the plurality and difference of languages. The reframed narrative serves as a story of hope that climaxes in the unification of all peoples through the Holy Spirit, refuting the biblical justification of apartheid.

Both biblical hermeneutical approaches of (re)framing the narrative of the Tower of Babel highlight the fact that interpretation of scripture is not a value-neutral process, since framing can be an explicit act of silencing (misusing?) aspects of a narrative to gain control of the story – and its context.

Even the blessing / curse of God upon Noah’s (Gen 9-10) and Abraham’s (Gen 12) descendants are instrumentalised according to the respective hermeneutical frameworks. According to the segregationist reading, blessings are reserved for some superior lineages (i.e. Japhet and Sem) who rule over the cursed Ham / Canaan. In colonial / Apartheid society some are (pre)destined to rule over those who cannot escape the divine lot of slavery / servanthood. In a similar vein the blessing of Abraham is understood exclusively to apply to his (spiritual) descents according to an apartheid hermeneutic.

In contrast, the liberationist reframing of the narrative highlights the “imago dei” in the creation accounts (Gen 1) and views the blessing of Abraham (Gen 12) as inclusivist, i.e. becoming a blessing to ALL nations.

For a long time, the above-described biblical hermeneutical trajectories seemed to have belonged to a historical period of Apartheid South Africa. However, the recent global developments, including the growth of right-wing Christianity in the US and other settler societies, have brought about a resurgence of segregationist / nationalist views attempting to gain a dominant interpretative paradigm by reframing counter-narrative(s) against globalisation, “wokeness” and justice.

2. Alfred Moto-Poh, Referent for community and partnership work

Cameroon

Reflection: *The Misuse of Languages in the Cameroonian Context Based on the Tower of Babel*

The story of the Tower of Babel, found in Genesis 11:1-9, illustrates the consequences of human pride and the misuse of language. The builders of the tower sought to make a name for themselves, reflecting the dangers of pride and the desire for self-sufficiency. This serves as a reminder for Christians to remain humble and recognize their dependence on God.

In the Cameroonian context, recognizing the beauty of linguistic diversity is crucial for fostering peace and understanding. But unfortunately, instead of the rulers celebrating language differences they indulge in language manipulation for political and social ends thus inciting division or marginalization of minority languages. Thereby, leading to tension and feelings of exclusion.

The narrative illustrates the tension between unity and diversity. In the Cameroonian society, which is multilingual and multicultural, the story can symbolize both the beauty of diverse languages and cultures and the challenges they pose for communication and collaboration. We are encouraged to transcend language and cultural barriers to share our faith.

The builders' ambition to reach the heavens can reflect contemporary aspirations for progress and development. It raises questions about the balance between ambition and humility, and the consequences of striving for greatness without considering ethical implications.

The disruption of the builders' plans serves as a reminder of human limitations and the belief in a higher power's role in shaping events. God intervened by confusing their language and scattering them across the earth. This illustrates the idea that God has ultimate authority and can disrupt human plans that go against His will. This resonates with the spiritual worldview prevalent in the Cameroonian society.

In essence, the Tower of Babel story serves as a metaphor for the complexities of identity, ambition, and unity in our context today. It serves as a cautionary tale about pride and self-reliance, while also providing hope for unity and divine purpose in diversity in a rapidly changing world.

3. Djoko Wibowo, liaison officer Indonesia

Indonesia

Indonesia has 282 million people who speak 715 languages and belong to 1,300 tribes. The story of the Tower of Babel is told in a way that reflects the country's diversity, as any religious story is always part of the daily interreligious conversation of different communities and families. In Islam, the "same" stories can be found in the Qur'an, in Surah Al A'raf (verse 69), Surah Al-Fushilat: 1, 15 and Surah Adz-Dzariyat: 41-42; (Islam) and Genesis 11:1-9 (Christian/Catholic). Here are some thoughts on the story of the Tower of Babel from Indonesia:

1. The narrative depicts individuals who *exhibit arrogance and disregard for divine authority*. While God is not afraid of losing, the narrative highlights human arrogance, making it appear that God is the one who is threatened. The narrative conveys the notion that God's power is superior to that of humankind. It is asserted that God possesses the right and ability to act in any manner He chooses, and that His power is superior to all else. Consequently, it is in man's best interest to refrain from challenging God. The root of disorder, according to the narrative, does not stem from God or the diversity of languages, but rather from human arrogance itself.
2. *The diversity of languages is regarded as being by divine will*. However, it is important to note that this diversity can be disruptive if it is accompanied by arrogance or ambition. Consequently, it can be concluded that linguistic diversity is not inherently negative. It is therefore erroneous to perceive linguistic diversity as an unmitigable disaster.
3. Indonesians have a long-standing familiarity with linguistic diversity. Despite the linguistic diversity, *communication is possible because understanding is not solely reliant on linguistic similarity*. It is possible to comprehend the intentions of others and to collaborate if this is not driven by ambition or a desire for power. The capacity for diverse languages to unite is predicated on the willingness to engage in *humble learning* and *to listen to one another*. In the Indonesian context, the collaborative problem-solving process known as '*musyawarah*' (*deliberation, decision-making process, consensus*). In the context of this process, it is important to emphasize that, if all parties involved exercise humility and act by divine will, any differences in opinion can be transformed into a source of benefit for all. It is only through this process that language can be used to build the common good, and not misused solely as a means of expressing personal arrogance. Language in the Indonesian context is always part of the commons (the community) so its meaning must be part of the community's consent. This is where the filter of wisdom should occur.
4. Furthermore, it is evident from this narrative that *language alone is insufficient* to understand the divine will. It is therefore suggested that people should learn from each other's different languages (perspectives) that are discussed together in humility. The utilization of language alone is inadequate in this context. In Indonesian cultures, the concept of God's will is not confined to language, but is often accompanied by symbols, dances, music, or stories. The inherent limitations of language itself underscore the necessity for a more comprehensive (intercultural) approach to understanding the divine will.

4. John Samuel Raj, retired professor at the United Theological College in Bangalore, India and former ecumenical coworker in the Protestant Church of Baden

India

On the political situation:

We have been witnessing sloganeering in India since 2014 (Make India Great Again). Votes were polarized, misusing the sensitive faith component, which is dear to the common men and women, compounded with the caste-factor, in our case. India is a splendid land of diversity, which marks its beauty and uniqueness. But the incumbent 'fascist' regime at the centre, is systematically eliminating the country's life-affirming religio-cultural variety to be replaced with life-negating ideas that annihilate harmony. It is hard to believe that the world is still carried away by slogans such as MAGA (Make America Great Again), MARA (Make America Rich Again) as if America is not great and rich (according to standards being projected for being/ becoming great and rich). A President, who chose to swear on the Bible (this time, he forgot to touch it though it was made available), was in such a hurry to withdraw his country from the WHO and stop all AIDS that could affirm life for millions of poor across the globe. The way Zelensky was humiliated in front of the cameras for not thanking the President 'enough', has, in fact, taken the country back to the dark ages and reflected an arrogant colonial mindset. This has in no way made America great again but only showcased its petty mindset, especially when comments to that extent came from JD Vance, who represents young America. We are proud to be part of any society that strives for unity and not for uniformity. Each of God's creations is unique in its own way considering the diversity it brings with it.

On language variety:

Hindi is the language spoken by the most people in India. Even if you look at all the languages of India, you can see the influence of Hindi. If you know Hindi, you can travel to most places in India. Since Hindi studies are not very popular in Tamil Nadu, it is not possible to maintain a presence even in the cities if you use Hindi. Malayalis are studying Hindi, but they do not study it in depth as a spoken language. But it is a fact that if Malayalis come to work in other states (except Tamil Nadu!) after studying, they will learn to speak Hindi very quickly. Even if Tamils come out, they will learn to speak Hindi, but they will have a lot of difficulty reading and writing it.

If you reach Bangalore, you can speak Hindi, Kannada, and English. But if you go to the interior villages of Karnataka, Hindi is of no use.

Marathi is a language that is very similar to Hindi. Maharashtrians living in Pune and Mumbai can speak both Hindi and Marathi. But even there, if you go to the interior villages, there are many people who do not know how to speak Hindi well.

The fact is that no matter how you look at it, no matter where you go, there will always be people everywhere in India who understand at least a little Hindi.

Learning a new language is always good. Anyway, Malayalis will not be able to move forward without learning Hindi in the future.

5. Eleanor McCormick, Head of Department Programmes and Networks; Head of Unit Intercultural Theology, Education, Women and Gender

USA

When Donald Trump won the 2016 Presidential Election, the Alt-Right was emboldened. My United Church of Christ Colleagues saw this as they stood in protest against the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klansmen and other white supremacists marched through the University of Virginia campus bearing torches and terrorizing students with chants of "Blood and soil" and "Jews will not replace us." [1]

In 2024, when Donald Trump was re-elected the Alt-Right was not just emboldened it came into power. The vision of the Alt-Right is a vision of Ethno-Nationalism, which essentially amounts to the idea of 'one race for one country.' You see this in extreme anti-immigrant policies, you see this in efforts to change public school curriculum attacking Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the withdrawal of funding for racial sensitivity trainings for federal agencies, you see this in the broad and pernicious attacks on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Initiatives. In Alt-Right ideology, a prosperous society is a society predicated on racial homogeneity / white supremacy. Homogeneity, a word that also defines the Tower of Babel. The idea of diversity stands in the way of prosperity. Diversity of language. Diversity of thought. Diversity of ethnic, racial or cultural background threaten prosperity/affluence and expansion.

"And now nothing will be restrained from them" – this is God talking in the Genesis story. But you hear this rhetoric from Donald Trump and his advisors too: as he threatens to take over the Panama Canal, make Canada the 51st State, invade Greenland or own mineral rights in the Ukraine. Trump, and his followers, say "now nothing will be restrained from them" as they pursue prosperity for a homogenous few at the cost of a diverse many. God saw this "lack of restraint" as dangerous – and so should we.

Homogeneity enriches the few and seeks a life / a pursuit of what it wants without restraint(s) – brick by brick and by design.

Diversity enriches the many – brick by brick and by design.

If we truly believe that our diversity is enriching, we, the church, have work to do.