

Trinity College Cambridge

6 November 2011

## **Telling Tales: Stories from the book of Genesis**

### **Babel**

Genesis 11:1–9; Acts 2:1–13

Janet Tollington

The story of Babel is a beautifully crafted tale with an extended chiasmic structure and lots of alliteration and word play in the original Hebrew – (you will be pleased to know that I don't intend to concentrate on the Hebrew!). It is a short narrative that now concludes the section of Genesis known as the primeval history; the mythological stories about origins and about the relationships between God and humanity, God and the earth, and humans with one another and the earth. The story probably belongs to the oldest theological tradition in Genesis, one that emerged during the early period of the monarchy; and Babel was no doubt understood in different ways over the years as Israel's history unfolded and her literature developed.

To a Babylonian Babel meant 'the gate of the god' and the ancient myth Enuma Elish includes a story of the gods building a great temple tower. Ancient Sumerian traditions include stories of a time when all people spoke the same language and how this was disturbed by the god Enki – an act of mischief making in the divine realm among the gods. God's people of old in Israel would have been familiar with these stories, just as they would have been aware of some of the magnificent ziggurat towers built by the Babylonians at different times during the height of their political power. These were symbols of empire: the fancy brickwork being a source of pride about human capabilities and creativity, with urban culture itself signifying strength and control.

The story of Babel was probably used, at times, as a polemic against Babylonian power and all that it represented; just as the story was probably used, in a way that basically poked fun at Babylon, to explain why so many languages existed in the world. But the structure of the story suggests that it has far more important ideas to convey – to anyone who has ears to hear.

It begins by focusing on the whole earth - and it ends there too. This story has implications for all creation and all its people, for all are within the concern of God. It is also a story about place – about the contrast between being settled, rooted, in one location, or being scattered, dispersed; but it is not about being rootless, homeless, constantly on the move. The issue is rather a question about whether God's people should remain gathered together - somewhat like being in a holy huddle - interacting only with their own kind, with people who believe similar things and think in similar ways; or whether they should be spread across the whole world in accordance with God's will, as expressed in God's blessing on humanity in Genesis 1:28, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth'.

It is a story about wisdom and discernment too; one that reminds us that no matter how much learning or growth in knowledge we gain, that we are but frail humans and that God remains God supreme over everything. The great irony of the story of Babel comes right at its centre in verse 5. Humanity has constructed a huge edifice believing that this reached right up into the heavens, into the very realm of God; but, alas, how far short of its goal is this human endeavour. God still has to come down from way up on high even to look from above at the city and the tiny tower that the humans have actually built. And so God comes down and enters into the human realm and sees the human condition and determines that divine action is needed if the divine will is to be fulfilled.

The story is often understood as one of punishment on humanity for pride, arrogance and striving to be like God, whereby different language groups are established with an inability to communicate with one another to prevent us getting above ourselves – like the idea of divide and conquer – but is this actually what the story says?

The dispersal, scattering, across the earth serves to emphasise that God's will shall be done; God will not be thwarted, the blessing will be fulfilled. The confusion is caused to halt humanity, to stop us effectively becoming totally alienated from God by our own schemes and ideologies, or lack of wisdom. But the confusion among humans is not expressed in terms of how they speak – confusion arises because they no longer understand one another. Or to translate the Hebrew another way: because they no longer hear or listen to one another.

In our second reading this evening, from Acts, the story of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, the emphasis is on the ability of people to hear and to understand. The story tells of how each one heard the gospel in their own language and understood its significance. The people of various places gained a fresh capacity to listen and to interpret, in relation to their own lives and context, God's message of love and forgiveness.

This is good news. God's people can be dispersed around the world but still all share a common language of faith, of the gospel, which can be understood in different cultures and tongues. Wherever we find ourselves we can still hear the good news of God's love for us and for all creation. We can hear the message of divine blessing and of God's good purposes for all.

God grant us discernment that we may be people who are ready to listen to the good news, to hear and understand its meaning in our own lives. And God grant that we may be people prepared to go out into the world, to be dispersed, to share the good news in the tongues of those places, that all may be able to hear and understand.