

THE TOWER OF BABEL REVISITED

Pentecost: the Reversal of the Curse of Babel

Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-12, 8:1

Wati Longkumer

We know the story of the Tower of Babel as the place where God “confused” the people – “sons of Adam”- and scattered them abroad, and the Pentecost when God sent the Holy Spirit and the people from “every nation under heaven ... each one heard their own language being spoken.”

In this article, I wish to study an underlying theme that has a link in these two passages and with further implications affecting even the contemporary missions.

“Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.”

Gen 11:1-2

Genesis 11 is the Biblical history of early migration of the human race when a primitive and nomadic race settled down and built a city with state-of-the-art infrastructure through innovative technology.

The people of Babel were intelligent, innovative and hardworking. The Egyptians of Moses’ time (ca. 1300 BC) knew the use of bricks and asphalt for building. But, if we are to take the Bible at its face value, we conclude that the people in the “plain of Shinar” dates back to thousand of years before Moses’ time. Thus, this makes the people in the plain of Shinar the pioneers in this technology of building secure and enduring high-rise buildings.

We also see that they were a united community through “one language and a common speech”, and unity in purpose and action with no dissention “*come let us... make bricks Come, let us build a city...*”.

It was because of their innovation and unity they excelled in what they purposed to achieve.

But they had a problem. They used their unity and skills for the wrong purpose of *making a name for themselves* and to *settle down* with the view to stem the tide of migration.

As human race progressed both in number and in intelligence it made man conceited. Instead of acknowledging the Creator God and seeking his will, human began to rely on ones own strength and ability and began to plow through ones own path; “let us make a name for ourselves”. The proposal to build a city “with a tower that reaches to the heavens” is an indication that they want to compete with God and thereby relegate the Creator to the margins. Moreover, their attempt to stem the tide of migration “otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth” was contrary to the command given by God to Adam and Eve at creation. One of the purposes of God at

creation was that as mankind “increase in number” they were to scatter abroad and “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen.1: 28). Yet here in the early history of human race we see that they are thwarting that purpose of God, deliberately or inadvertently.

Therefore, God acts: they, the triune God, “*came down*” to re-align the course of history and to put it in line with the Divine will and purpose.¹

Sadly, this re-alignment came at a severe cost, namely their disunity and diversity; “*So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.*” (Gen. 11:8). Since then, mankind has been divided and warring one against the other for dominance as well as for mere survival.

This brings us to the day of Pentecost thousands of years after the Babel episode where the stage was set to reverse the curse of Babel.

Acts 2:4-8, “*All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. ...*”. This being ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ was not merely an occasion when every linguistic group “under heaven” heard the Galileans and Jews talk in their own native languages but it has far-reaching significance.

First, it was an indication that the curse of Babel is reversed, at least symbolically. Luke records that on the day of Pentecost there were men from “*every nation under heaven*” and “*each heard in their own language being spoken*”. The scattered people of Babel is now gathered at Jerusalem and united through their ability to communicate with each other freely. Secondly, and more significantly, it was the inauguration of the era of the Holy Spirit as promised by Jesus Christ, to empower the saints, “*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you*”. However, it is important to note that this promise had a *task* attached to it, “*you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*”.

Thus, we see the interlinking theme of God scattering mankind at Babel and gathering his chosen people at Pentecost. The curse of Babel happened because mankind did not acknowledge the will and purpose of God instead attempted to establish themselves as their own masters. The Pentecost was the fusion of the invocation of God’s Love (Jn.3:16) with the restoration of divine will and purpose for mankind. Because of the Divine love mankind is once again restored into a *koinonia* relationship with Him tasked to go to the

1. There are several interpretations on the history of the Tower of Babel but my purpose is not to enter into a theological discourse but simply attempt a reflection from a missional angle.

ends of the earth as his ambassadors. United once again and once again tasked to “fill the earth” with God’s redemptive message.

Sadly, our story do not end here with this “*happily ever after*” feeling. Fast forward to Acts 8:1 we see another scattering of God’s people. This time, sadly through martyrdom and persecution. Why? we may ask!

My submission is that it happened because the people of God, once again, were not aligned with His will and purpose.

A cursary reading of the book of Acts chapters two to six will reveal a few common theme running through it: the outpouring and empowering work of the Holy Spirit, the unity and joy of the believers and bold witness of the apostles, resulting in earning the respect and awe of the people and more importantly rapid and tremendous increase in number of Christ’s followers.

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Today, we see much opposition to the gospel and persecution of believers, particularly coming from India we are witnesses to one of the most severe persecutions of Christians in the entire history of India as a democractic nation. I ask myself what could be the reason that God is allowing this to happen? Is it because we are also caught in the cycle of settling down and making a name for ourselves - building

our own little kingdoms, when God is expecting us to scatter and to gather?

Christianity in India is as old as the Christianity of Jerusalem. We rejoice in the fact that Christianity has spread to every nook and corner of India, though insignificant in terms of the percentile representation.² But it seems that Christian missions in India has come to a saturation point.

Many Churches and Mission orgnsations are “settling down” by acquiring property and building up infrastructure and institutions, thereby “making a name for themselves”. Missionary recruitment is decreasing gradually, perhaps, it is because of the lure of ‘glitters’ and comforts of the IT world overshadows the joy of “rescuing the lost” in obedience to the Master’s call.

CONCLUSION

In the issue of Migration and Mission, it is worthwhile for us to take time to mediate on the original purpose of God for mankind. The signs of the current times suggests that perhaps we are also in the mode of settling down and making a name for ourselves. Perhaps, God is once again speaking to us through the events of the nations for us to re-dedicate and give a vigorous push to fill the earth with God’s redemptive message.

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2. While we attribute this movement to the empowering work of the Holy Spirit we need to also acknowlege the sacrificial mission zeal of the pioneering missionaries both natives and foreigners.



Wati Longkumer
wlongkumer@gmail.com

Dr. Wati Longkumer is the General Secretary of India Missions Association (IMA). He is an ordained minister of the Nagaland Baptist Church. He joined IMA in April 2014, as the Associate General Secretary. He came to IMA after serving as the Director of the Nagaland Missions Movement (NMM). Prior to the NMM assignment. He served as missionary to Cambodia for over eleven years. He received his tertiary education and training from Shillong, Pune, Singapore and Oxford.