

Babel

At Mass the other day our priest commented that we, as a people of God, are one. He emphasized that we did not make us one body, Christ did. The preferred mode of existence for all of us as Church is unity. We are the body of Christ in the world, a body that exists as a union of its members. Our unity, our wholeness as a people, comes from and is founded upon Christ. Our identity, therefore, as a people flows from our relationship with God and is a tremendous gift of divine grace. When our unity as a people is not founded upon something God-given, it is not true unity. We see this aspect, the other side of that coin in the passage we read today from the Book of Genesis, as it is the banner story for disunity and its' effects. It is, however, not as simple a story as you might expect because, as in the case with Cain and Abel, figuring out what the specific sin was that required such punishment takes a little effort.

Remember from our previous discussion of the Cain and Abel story that the Jewish writers, who first preserved and wrote down these stories, had a somewhat antagonistic view concerning sedentary peoples. As a nomadic people they were suitably suspicious of folks who would abandon that way of life for the more stable and crowded life of the cities. We see a faint echo of that in the shepherd's sacrifice (Abel's) being looked upon favorably by God and the farmer's sacrifice (Cain's) not being looked upon favorably. The story surrounding the city of Babel, which many later commentators took to be the ancient city of Babylon, is similar.

It appears the major sin of this people is self-reliance. Now as modern readers, we immediately assume that self-reliance is a good thing and to some degree it is a very good thing indeed. When we run into danger with self-reliance, the emphasis is solely upon the *self* portion of that word and that appears to be where the denizens of this, our first major city in the biblical tradition, get into trouble. It appears that they were becoming reliant solely upon themselves and their own technological advancements and less reliant upon God, the God who so recently saved their ancestors from the global catastrophe of the flood.

The Magisterium and Genesis

In order to carry out this penitential ministry adequately, we shall have to evaluate the consequences of sin with "eyes enlightened" by faith. These consequences of sin are the reasons for division and rupture not only within each person, but also within the various circles of a person's life: in relation to the family, to the professional and social environment, as can often be seen from experience; it is confirmed by the passage in the Bible about the city of Babel and its tower. Intent on building what was to be at once a symbol and a source of unity, those people found themselves more scattered than before, divided in speech, divided among themselves, incapable of consensus and agreement.

John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, No.13

The Sin of Pride

We need to revisit the sin of pride for a little while before we delve into the tower of Babel story. Putting ourselves before God, putting our wants and desires before the Creator (that we experienced for the first time in the story of the first sin), is an idea that will permeate not only the Book of Genesis but all of Sacred Scripture. Many Christian writers such as C. S. Lewis, whom I have mentioned before, see the sin of pride as the central sin from which all of the other seven deadly sins flow. This is the belief that *our* wants and *our* desires simply must come before those around us as well as before the Divine will. This sin of pride, putting ourselves first, leads to theft, lust, adultery, greed, etc. It is this desire, the desire to put oneself first that drives this story in Genesis.

The story begins quite innocently with the whole world speaking the same language and using the same words, which is the brief calm after the tumultuous Flood ([Genesis 11:2](#)). After a brief discussion of the technological advancements of the post-Flood generation (such as the molding and curing of bricks as well as the inclusion of bitumen for mortar ([Genesis 11:3](#))) we get to the crux of the matter, the point in the story where things go wrong:

"Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and so make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered all over the earth.'"

[Genesis 11:4](#)

At first glance it would be easy to let our biblical builders off the hook. They were attempting, using the technology at their disposal, to construct a city and a tower so they would have a place to live rather than be nomads like the surrounding peoples. Yet two things belie this assumption. First, where they dwell and how they dwell is not necessarily up to them. Choosing a location and building a city (with no thought as to how the Lord might weigh in on the matter) seems to cut God out of the picture. Secondly, and most importantly, we have to examine the first expressed motivations for construction. Their first reason was not the desire for shelter or protection, but to "*make a name for ourselves*" [Genesis 11:4](#). They sought a name, a distinct name not connected to their Creator. They were seeking self-reliance devoid of divine guidance. They were seeking unity without recourse to God and trying to create a community without communion with the Lord.

The Church Fathers and Genesis, St. Augustine

*After the flood, as if striving to fortify themselves against God, as if there could be anything high for God or anything secure for pride, certain proud men built a tower, ostensibly so that they might not be destroyed by a flood if one came later. For they had heard and recalled that all iniquity had been destroyed by the flood. They were unwilling to abstain from iniquity. They sought the height of a tower against a flood; they built a lofty tower. God saw their pride, and he caused this disorder to be sent upon them, that they might speak but not understand one another, and tongues became different through pride. **Tractates on the Gospel of John 6.10.2***

For this sin, their speech was confused and they were scattered. As we have seen before, the punishment for putting our will before the will of God is to be scattered over the face of the earth. Punishment for disobedience is exile, a punishment the Jewish people will know all too well over the course of the Bible.

The Patriarchs

We will notice in our Bibles that we experience a change after Genesis 11:26. In the New American Bible this is normally seen as the beginning of a new section (II. The Patriarch Abraham). This new section alerts readers to the fact that we are passing from one stage of history to another. In this case we are passing from the Primordial History (the time of our most remote ancestors) to the Patriarchal History (the time of historical personages remembered by the people preserving the stories). Even for the first conservators of the biblical tradition the stories surrounding Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and the Tower of Babel were in a very distant time from their own. We see this in Genesis 6:1-4 where giants and heroes are mentioned, ideas that come from a similar period in the religious traditions of the other peoples in the Mediterranean such as the Greeks and later the Romans.

Here, however, we are entering into a time period when the historical nature of the stories begins to be somewhat more concrete for we are approaching approximately 2500-2000 B.C., sometime after the invention of writing. Also, for the Jews, the stories of the Patriarchs were far closer to their own experiences than the stories of the Flood or even more distantly, the story of Adam and Eve. The Jews traced their ancestry back to the Patriarchs and the stories of the Patriarchs were regarded as their national history. Remember from the introduction each and every member of the Jewish community could trace their lineage to the original Twelve Tribes. Each tribe was named after a son of Jacob (who was the son of Isaac, who was the son of Abraham). Thus, the story we are about to embark upon is of pivotal importance to the first recipients, for these stories, the stories of the Patriarchs, defined for the Jews who they were as a people.

As you can imagine Christian readers must approach the text somewhat differently. We are not reading it to discern our ethnic origins, but to discern our origins as people of the New Covenant with Jesus Christ. In a very real sense we are reading not only our story but His story, the story of the Savior of the World. In essence we are getting a glimpse into Jesus' family history and how God brought forth the Lamb of God from humankind.

The cast of characters gets smaller the more we make your way into the Book of Genesis and into the rest of the Old Testament.

We begin with the story of all creation, all humanity. From there we shift to a small remnant of that first group, Noah and his descendants. This group will be pared down still further as the story moves to the family of Abram (later renamed Abraham). This story continues with his offspring and after several generations arrives at only one individual, Jesus of Nazareth. The Patriarchal History for Christians is the beginning of the story of Our Lord.

In addition, the Patriarchal History continues to develop the ongoing story of our relationship with the Lord. From the Covenant with Noah we will proceed to the Covenant with Abraham. Each one shows in its own unique way the covenantal relationship that God is establishing with His people.

The Call of Abraham

You may recall when Noah, our last major character, was called by the Lord in Genesis Chapter 6, it was because of his goodness and his blamelessness. In short, we were given a reason, although not a terribly detailed one, why this particular man was singled out for special treatment. When we read the background material concerning Abram ([Genesis 6:9-10](#)) we are given no such information. We are told the names of his father, Terah (a direct descendant of Noah), the name of his wife, Sarai, and various other family members. We are not given any reason, at least for now, why God chose this particular man among all the men on the earth. This is a recurring theme, not only in the Book of Genesis, but in the entirety of Sacred Scripture, namely that God chooses who God chooses for His purposes. Neither human eyes, nor human rationality, can be used to decipher why God chooses certain individuals. The only thing we can safely say about God's choices as to whom He calls is that it is safer not to guess – we will probably choose incorrectly.

What we do know of Abram and his family is that they are dwelling in the land called Ur of the Chaldees, most probably in the region of modern-day Iraq. However, they will not remain there for the Lord has other plans. Abram is to go forth from Ur of the Chaldees to the land of Canaan. He is to do this for a very special purpose indeed:

“The Lord said to Abram: ‘Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you.’”

[Genesis 12:1-3](#)

The Catechism and Genesis

59-60 *In order to gather together scattered humanity God calls Abram from his country, his kindred, and his father's house, and makes him Abraham, that is, "the father of a multitude of nations." "In you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." The people descended from Abraham would be the trustees of the promise made to the patriarchs, the chosen people, called to prepare for that day when God would gather all his children into the unity of the Church. They would be the root on to which the Gentiles would be grafted, once they came to believe.*

Catechism of the Catholic Church

We have here our first mention of the *first* part of the promises God made to Abram, promises which will become part of the eventual covenant that God will make with him at a later time (Genesis 15:18). Two things concern us in the first part of this promise. First, the idea that from Abram will come a great nation (the promise of a people) and secondly, the idea that all peoples will somehow find a blessing through Abram. You can imagine how fantastic these promises must have seemed to Abram at the time. We are told that Abram's wife Sarai was barren (Genesis 11:30). Thus, the idea that he would become the father of a great nation would seem impossible as far as human minds are concerned. The second promise, the idea of all blessings flowing to the earth through Abram would sound equally fantastic. What about Abram, this distant relative of Noah, would single him out for such special treatment? Again, our minds simply can't see it.

The last part of the promise comes as Abram and his family enter Canaan when the Lord says, "*To your descendants I will give this land.*" Genesis 12:7 This is equally fantastic. How can one small family of foreigners from the distant land of Ur come into Canaan, a land already occupied by the Canaanites (Genesis 12:6), and take possession of it? Abram is not leading an army, but his family of maybe a dozen or so people. In addition, Scripture tells us that he is seventy-five years old, which is quite old indeed, when the average life expectancy is probably in the thirty-five to forty-year range.

As unbelievable and fantastic as the promises sound one thing is clear – Abram believed in the promises of the Lord and he obeyed. As frightening as the prospect must have sounded, (moving his entire family to a distant hostile land quite different from anything he had ever known) he went. We will see further, and indeed greater, examples of Abram's faith, whose name is later changed to Abraham. However, we shouldn't miss getting a glimpse of Abraham's character in these verses. Abraham, like his ancestor Noah many generations before, simply believed and trusted wholly in what the Lord told him.