

Babel Undone

by Steven Tuell, James A. Kelso Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary

This Sunday is the feast of Pentecost, the birthday of the church. The famous story of the descent of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:1-13 alludes to the story of Babel, in Genesis 11:1-9, where “the LORD mixed up [Hebrew *balal*, punning on “Babel”] the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD dispersed them over all the earth” (Gen 11:9).



In the Acts account, the Spirit conveys the gift of tongues to the followers of Jesus praying in the upper room, prompting Pentecost pilgrims from across the Roman world to declare,

“Look, aren’t all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them? How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language? Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions

of Libya bordering Cyrene; and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!”

(Acts 2:7-11)

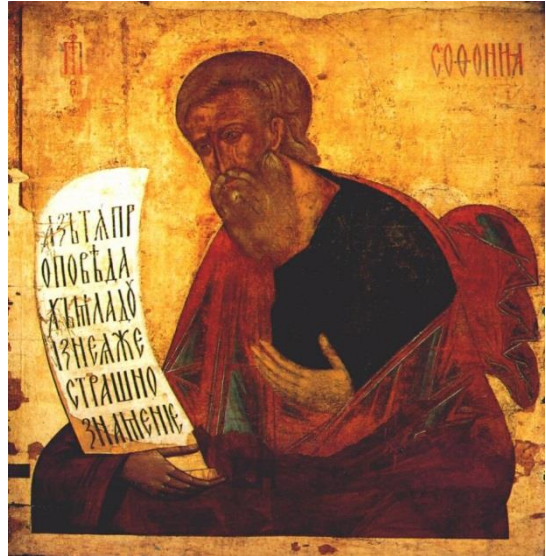
With the coming of the Holy Spirit, the confusion of Babel is undone.

This is not the first time that Scripture recalls the Babel story, however. Zephaniah 3:9-13 deals with the restoration of Judah after the Babylonian exile. But this promise of restoration begins with *the nations*, not with Judah!

*Then I will change the speech of the peoples into pure speech,
that all of them will call on the name of the LORD
and will serve him as one.*

(Zeph 3:9)

The Hebrew is *ki-‘az ‘ekhpok ‘el-‘amimsaphahberurtah* (“then I will change to the peoples a pure speech”[?]), which clearly assumes that *something* unspecified will be changed; the CEB “I will change *the speech* of the peoples to a pure speech” seems to make best sense. Again, the allusion is to the Babel story—indeed, in the three-year cycle of Scripture readings once used in the synagogue, Zephaniah 3:9-17, 20 was read together with Genesis 11:1 (Ehud ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Zephaniah*, BZAW 198 [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991], 24-25). While in Zephaniah the nations are given “a pure speech” (*saphahberurtah*), in Genesis God *confuses* their speech (again, *saphah*; see Gen 11:7), so that humanity, which had been united by “one language and the same words” (Gen 11:1), became scattered.



Zephaniah envisions the undoing of Babel’s confusion, to the end “that all of them will call on the name of the Lord and will serve him as one” (Zeph 3:9). This promise, that the scattered and separate nations will one day be reunited in the worship and service of the LORD, calls to mind the Zion song in Isaiah 2:1-4:

*In the days to come
the mountain of the LORD’s house
will be the highest of the mountains.
It will be lifted above the hills;
peoples will stream to it.
Many nations will go and say,
“Come, let’s go up to the LORD’s mountain,
to the house of Jacob’s God
so that he may teach us his ways
and we may walk in God’s paths.”
Instruction will come from Zion;
the LORD’s word from Jerusalem.
God will judge between the nations,
and settle disputes of mighty nations.
Then they will beat their swords into iron plows*

*and their spears into pruning tools.
Nation will not take up sword against nation;
they will no longer learn how to make war.*

In Zephaniah, reversing Babel in turn reverses the exile—an idea expressed, appropriately, through word play! Just as, through the confusion (Hebrew *balal*; Gen 11:7) of their speech, the nations had been scattered (Hebrew *puts*; Gen 11:8), so through the purification (Hebrew *barar*; Zeph 3:9) of the nations' speech God returns the exiles—those God calls “my dispersed ones” (Hebrew *bath-putsay*; Zeph 3:10).

And just as God has purified the speech of the nations, reuniting them in order to deliver God's people from exile, so also God purifies the people Israel. The restored nation will no longer be haughty, but “humble and powerless” (Zeph 3:12; Hebrew *'oniwadal*). This small and humbled remnant of Israel, the prophet says

*won't commit injustice;
they won't tell lies;
a deceitful tongue won't be found on their lips.*
(Zeph 3:13)

Thus Israel's speech will be purified, just like the speech of the nations! As the flock of the LORD,

*They will graze and lie down;
no one will make them afraid.*
(Zeph 3:13)

This image of the LORD as the good shepherd calls to mind John 10:1-18, as well as Psalm 23. But the rest conveyed by this peaceful, bucolic image is only possible after the nations have been reunited, by being gifted with “a pure speech.” Just as, at Pentecost, the Spirit sends that first church into the streets to declare God's praise in the languages of all the nations—thus undoing Babel—so in Zephaniah Israel's peace is gained, not through the conquest or destruction of the nations, but through their healing.

