

The dream of utopia

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

They said to each other, 'Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly.' They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.' (Genesis 11:1-4)

In the construction of Babel, the Bible reports the trend in human civilisation that characterised the postdiluvian world. A desire to find strength in numbers lies at the heart of it. Forced to migrate and fearing the consequences of global dispersion, human beings feel safer sticking together. The pressure of their collective anxiety provides the intellectual stimulus necessary for the design of novel solutions. Unlike the animals, the human race does not have to wait for evolution to work its slow adaptations. Instead it shapes the environment for its own advantage. The discovery of new materials triggers technological innovation, economic development, and ultimately cultural revolution.

We are familiar with such quantum leaps in social history. They have occurred at a number of key transition points, most recently in the industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries. We are on the brink of just such a dramatic new advance today, as information technology transforms society yet again. There is nothing wrong with such progress, of course. Didn't God mandate the human race to "subdue the earth" (Gen 1:28)? Surely the engineers of Babel were simply exploiting the gifts with which God had endowed them to fulfil that command?

But what do people build and why do they do it? That's the question. There is something ominous about the observation that men were moving "eastward". When Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden, it was on the eastern side (Gen 3:24). When Cain was banished after his murder of Abel, he migrated to a land even further "east of Eden" (Gen 4:16). The writer is portraying a humanity that is moving progressively further and further away from paradise.

Almost certainly the tower was what archaeologists now term a "ziggurat". Such lofty pyramids were common in ancient Babylonia. Perhaps they were modelled on the western mountains that these migrants knew before they were forced to live on the flat Mesopotamian plains. Notice the twice repeated phrase that betrays the psychological motivation driving their construction: "let's make a city *for ourselves*" – "let's make a name *for ourselves*". Proud, but inwardly insecure, fallen human beings are seeking to construct their own secularised, urbanised, alternative utopia, and Babel is the archetypal symbol of that perpetual godless ambition.

But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The Lord said 'If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.'

The prospect of technological achievement which intoxicated the Babylonians disturbs God profoundly. He has a premonition of doom about it. Can he really mean it when he says: 'Nothing

they plan to do will be impossible for them'? Has he really invested the human race with such dreadful potential?

Conservatively-minded Christians often underestimate the humanists. They hear eminent scientists predicting that one day we will visit the stars, create life from inorganic materials, build a robot with self-conscious identity, and so on. In scoffing disbelief, they shake their heads and say: 'No, it's impossible. Only God can do such things.' Not so! There is nothing unrealistic about the humanist's dreams. If mankind sets its mind unitedly and determinedly on a goal, it can achieve literally anything. God says so! But whereas that thought excites the humanist, it horrifies heaven. What on the lips of a humanist would be a glowing testimony of optimism about man's glorious future, becomes on the lips of God a grim foreboding of tragedy and disaster - for he knows what a dreadful responsibility omnipotence is. Humanity is simply not good enough to wield such power safely. That is why, ironically, the more our technology has grown, the more insecure we have become.

God foresaw the danger long ago, and he administered a remedy.

'Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.'

So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel – because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

Many commentators interpret this dispersion as a divine judgment, but there is no indication of that in the text. The writer tells us only that God was concerned about where mankind's foolish charge toward technological advance might lead. Indeed, you could almost say that it was an act of mercy rather than retribution. As a wise father will check his infant son if he sees him running toward a fire, so God diverts human creative energies from a suicidal course.

Yet having said that, confusing human language was a very serious measure. Language does not simply express thought, its syntax controls the way we comprehend things, providing the underlying assumptions that shape philosophy and worldview. So by diversifying human language, God was introducing a profound communication barrier into the world, one which neither the invention of Esperanto nor an army of bilingual interpreters would be able to completely overcome. Human beings would no longer think in the same way. Their aspirations, their values, their cultures would diverge with their languages. They would no longer all want the same kind of world. There would no longer be a consensus about truth. Ethnocentric and nationalist rivalry would breed distrust, disagreement and competition.

It was all very regrettable. But it did mean that the pace of technological innovation was slowed: 'They stopped building the city'. World empires would arise, but they would now be short-lived. Nations would vie for supremacy and in the resulting collisions, cultural impetus would be lost. As in radiotherapy, harm would be done to good as well as to malignant tissue. Great achievements would sometimes be lost and never recovered. But in the wisdom of God, better that than to allow the power of a fallen human race to escalate unchecked. Better a world confused than one which was single-mindedly going the wrong way.

A warning!

There is surely a profound warning in this ancient story. We must be realistic about human depravity. Utopian optimism is a mirage that will inevitably lead us to misery. In particular, we need to be wary about attempts to reverse the dispersion of Babel. The temptation to try to do this is great today, with information technology revolutionising communication, and the prospect of another global war rendered terrifying by the nuclear bomb. Once again, arrogant in their scientific achievement but inwardly insecure, people seek safety in numbers. Whatever its economic advantages, the political trajectory of the European Union is towards a huge, centralised mega-state. If successful, George Orwell's prediction of a world divided between huge power blocs ruled by remote authoritarian elites will have proven disturbingly prophetic. But the message of the book of Genesis is that any such political edifice will prove unstable in the long run. Cultural rivalry will always undermine imperialistic ambitions. The grandiose idea of uniting nations that speak different languages, share different histories, and represent different values has been aborted very time it has been tried. Our fallen race lacks the moral and spiritual perfection necessary to make such a dream come true.

A hope!

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Revelation 21:1-4)

At the other end of the Bible, we find an alternative utopian dream which God emphatically endorses. The prophet John speaks of an innumerable multitude 'from very nation, tribe, people and language' (Rev. 7:9) and reintroduces us to the 'tree of life' that stood in the forfeited Garden of Eden.' Its leaves,' he tells us, 'are for the healing of the nations' (Rev. 22:2).

So the Babel dispersion will indeed be reversed. Indeed, New Jerusalem stands on the ashes of proud Babylon's self-destruction (see Rev. 18).

This is the Christian hope. Because it is eschatological in nature, it fires the imagination and steels the will, yet it fuels no delusions of grandeur or humanistic hubris. Sadly, it must be admitted that millennialist sects have arisen throughout church history that have sought to "realise" John's eschatology and turn it into a programme for political or even military action. They were seriously mistaken, for new Jerusalem 'comes down out of heaven'. It is not built by man, but is the result of the direct intervention of God at the end of human history.

While we wait in faith for that final day, our Christian responsibility is to work within the limitations of the Babel dispersion, foreshadowing the world to come, not in our secular politics, but in the international fellowship of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:8).

A footnote:

It has been widely suggested that the design of the tower of the EU parliament building in Strasbourg deliberately mirrors the painting of the Tower of Babel by Pieter Bruegel the Elder.

Some Christians who wish to interpret the books of Daniel and Revelation as predictive of current events seize upon this as a “sign of the end”. This goes much too far. However, the similarity is provocative.

