

TOWER OF BABEL EPISODE OPTS FOR DIVERSITY, NOT UNITY

Slogans like “united we stand, divided we fall” have such a fine ring to them they seem self-evidently true. It’s the sort of *e pluribus unum* thing that sounds positively patriotic. Who could argue against unity? Surely not the Bible.

But don’t bet the rent on that. There must be dozens of verses which suggest that people need to get together, to cooperate more, in short, to be united.

But there are at least a few biblical passages which opt for something else, if not for out-and-out disunity, then perhaps for some diversity.

Try the story of the Tower of Babel on for size. It’s a short one. You’ll find it in the Hebrew Scriptures at Genesis 11:1-9.

If you remember the episode from Sabbath- or Sunday-school, you probably recall it as a warning against human pride. Or perhaps it was told as an explanation of the origins of the world’s many races, languages and nationalities.

Such readings miss a lot. It’s only nine verses long, but the Babel story is so carefully balanced and told with such gentle satire that it’s a positive gem.

The first four verses present the people’s point of view. Some ancient folks finally migrated to a spot which looked good. There they decided to make a permanent home.

“Come on, let’s do this,” they said. And, “Come on, let’s do that.” Their plan was to make a name for themselves and write it in brick and mortar.

A city around a skyscraper would do the trick. It would keep them safely united.

Humanly speaking, this was to be a heroic undertaking, a triumph of civilized culture and engineering. End of Scene One.

Scene Two, Genesis 11:5-9, gives a different perspective to the whole enterprise. It’s the God’s-eye view, looking through the wrong end of a telescope. Large size operations become puny.

Here’s where the story teller’s sarcasm surfaces. What started out to impressively from the builders’ point of view was so tiny from the Lord’s vantage that he had to climb down to get in on the action.

“Would you look at that,” observes the Lord. “They’re getting the idea they can do whatever they want!” And then, mocking the people’s own slogan, “Come on, let’s go down there.”

So the language of that civilization was confused. When the citizens couldn’t understand each other, they abandoned their half-built metropolis and scattered.

You can catch two insights from this incident. One has to do with the need for security. You get the idea that the people were opting for a crudely self-centered social security.

They had banded together in the hopes of warding off the frightening prospect of scattered loneliness. Consequently they had left the Lord out of the picture.

The result of their final confusion and dispersion, suggests the story, is that they could no longer depend solely on themselves.

That’s only one step away from depending on the Lord. Thus by confusing their speech the Lord was doing them a favor.

The second theme has to do with the need for diversity. Obviously the world is not homogeneous.

Different languages and nationalities, contrasting colors and cultures—all are part of the earthly mix. And that’s good. If the Lord’s scattering operation at Babel was an act of kindness, then the resulting diversity is something of a blessing.

All things considered, the Tower of Babel tale is another in a growing list of biblical surprises. Just when we would expect a premium on unity, the ancient literature comes through with an unexpected insight.

There’s something to be said for diversity, too. Homogenization is fine for bottled milk. But when it comes to people, variety is the spice of life.

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