

## Response to “‘Speaking the Same Language’”\*

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The function of Gen 11:11–19 in the Bible seems unclear. Looking at the content of this brief narrative, a few possibilities present themselves. First, this story appears to explain why the inhabitants of the world speak so many languages. Second, this story appears to criticize overblown human ambitions toward significance and renown. Third, this story contributes to the emerging monotheism which was the principal contribution of Israel to the history of world religions. One could posit many reasons why this story is difficult to understand. Perhaps most significant among these reasons is the fact that the events of this narrative are never again referred to in the remainder of the Bible. This is not the case, by contrast, with the story of Gen 3, which—though not reconsidered elsewhere in the Old Testament—becomes a story of humanity’s fall in the hands of New Testament authors, most especially the Apostle Paul in Rom 5 and 2 Cor 11, among others.

Faced with this sort of situation, the reader is left with at least two options. One may either leave the story as the one-off, perhaps mythological, certainly aetiological account that it seems to be. Alternatively, one may seek some way to connect this story to a larger context. My friend and colleague, Dr. Behr, has taken this second option. The first step is to plumb the depths of the story’s immediate context within the book of Genesis. The word “Babel” occurs in English translations twice, both times only here in Gen 10–11. Genesis 10:8–10 indicates that a certain Nimrod, who was a mighty hunter, ruled over a kingdom comprising “Babel, Erech, and Accad, all of them in the land of Shinar” (Gen 10:10 NRSV). This aligns with some things we know about Babel. “Babel,” in Hebrew, is spelled the same as the more significant location Babylon—to which many of the leading inhabitants of Judah were exiled in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE—and thus the possible line of interpretation that this story is directed at the great city gains a little more credibility.

Dr. Behr, however, does not seem particularly interested in the direction

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\* This paper is a response to Dr. Daniel Behr’s installation address, “‘Speaking the Same Language,’” pages 31–33, above.

that this context takes the reader. Instead, he engages in a reading strategy which falls under the general category of “reading against the text.” Various “against the text” reading strategies have risen and fallen in popularity in Biblical scholarship, particularly over the last 50–60 years among Western interpreters. Asian interpreters have also engaged in these sorts of readings, with perhaps the most popular among Asians being some different forms of liberation theology, which got its start in South America, and post-colonial criticism, which seeks to contextualize texts like the Bible in terms of building a secure and just society after foreign minority ruling populations have ceded control or have been driven out through military means. A general characteristic which seems to unify these post-modern approaches to texts is the attempt to decenter some power whose authority seems to be assumed by the text. By questioning the assumptions that seem to be operating behind and underneath textual witnesses, these approaches uncover alternative ways of living, and in particular alternative ways of understanding justice and the full dignity of people who are otherwise marginalized, if not outright ignored, by the dominant forces/communities ideologically supported by the texts.

These approaches usually succeed or fail in the degree to which they are able to coax new meaning(s) out of the text(s) they examine. This, however, is not an “anything goes” proposition; one cannot make the text say whatever one wants it to say. In other words, while post-modern approaches decenter the notion that there is a universally valid meaning to a given text, to be explored in the intent of the author, or the meaning of the words used, or in the form of the text, or in the selection of various antecedent materials, they do not exclude the question of whether some readings are more valid than others. The principal safeguard against invalid readings is to read in context, a point which Biblical scholarship long ago recognized, even before the development of modern, historical-critical approaches which post-modern strategies have worked to decenter.

Dr. Behr, approaching the text from the standpoint of communication theory, may have unintentionally committed the error of making the text say something it does not. While from the perspective of communication it is doubtless important that parties in an exchange do understand each other, according to the internal logic of Gen 11:1–9, the fact that “they” (the unnamed persons who decide to build the tower) understand each other seems to be the heart of the problem. The attempt to build a tower which reaches into the heavens, whatever this is supposed to mean, offends God. He says that if

they are able to do this, speaking all the same language, “nothing they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (v. 6). So God comes down, confuses their language, and scatters them throughout the earth, so that “they left off building the city” (v. 8). Interestingly, the story does not say that God destroyed the tower.

Dr. Behr suggests that a group of people working at a shared goal can have a greater chance of success at meeting that goal if they understand one another. This is undoubtedly true. In saying so, he reads against the text, trying to find an additional layer of meaning. However, the meaning he thus finds in the text must be judged less valid than others. Other Biblical reference would have helped him make his point better, for example, Paul’s exhortations to the Philippians to set aside divisions among them in the cause of Christ (Phil 2:1). In fact, Paul lists “factions,” the opposite of unity, as one of the works of the flesh in another letter (Gal 5:20). Dr. Behr is correct that the students and faculty of APNTS, working together at a common goal, speaking the same language, may potentially achieve great things. Nevertheless, his argument would have been more convincing if he strengthened its Biblical foundation.