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Difference Begins at Babel

Teach her about difference. Make difference ordinary. Make difference normal. Teach her not to attach value to difference. And the reason for this is not to be fair or nice, but merely to be human and practical. Because difference is the reality of our world. And by teaching her about difference, you are equipping her to survive in a diverse world.

—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s fifteenth suggestion to her friend in *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*¹

Chimamanda Adichie made this suggestion about living with difference to her friend Ijeawele, who asked Adichie for advice about raising her daughter in today’s world. Yet Adichie’s view of difference is an almost perfect description of the message about difference in the ancient story of Babel in Genesis 11, written nearly three thousand years ago. The ancient Storyteller who told the Babel story was also teaching about difference. And he used this story to explain his own culture’s wisdom about it: that difference was normal; that it was a reality of our world. Even more, that difference was God’s intention for the world. Unfortunately, we’ve been taught to read the Bible’s story of Babel as a story teaching that difference is dangerous.

1. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (New York: Knopf, 2017), 61.

A Troubling Legacy

The acclaimed movie *Babel*, winner of the Golden Globe Award for Best Motion Picture in 2006, provides a striking example of how we understand the biblical story of Babel today. Written by Guillermo Arriaga and directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, *Babel* stars Gael García Bernal, Kōji Yakusho, Cate Blanchett, and Brad Pitt, who, in the movie's trailer, reads these words *adapted* from Genesis 11:

In the beginning, all the Lord's people from all parts of the world spoke one language. Nothing they proposed was impossible for them. . . . But hearing what the spirit of man could accomplish, the Lord said, Let us go down and confuse their language so that they may not understand one another's speech.

As Brad Pitt reads from Genesis 11, the movie's trailer projects vivid and troubling images of ethnic tension, misunderstanding, conflict, and violence in Morocco, Japan, and at the Mexico-US border. We are obviously to understand that the cultural confusion and strife we're watching, and the painful experience of difference it portrays, originated as a human trait in the Bible's story of Babel, as told in the book of Genesis.

Because the story of Babel is widely known, this negative understanding of it continues to reinforce our thinking about difference as dangerous. This chapter reexamines the story of Babel. I intend to show how readers over the centuries have imposed this negative perception on top of the story. We will learn how the story of Babel actually sees difference as normal, as part of the reality of our world, and from the biblical point of view, as God's intention for society. We will uncover how and why we've been influenced to read this story so differently, as if difference were a problem we've inherited from the beginning of time and a threat to our living together in the world. By recovering this story's more generous view of difference, I hope to challenge

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pessimistic views about difference that consider it a threat and open up to its readers more helpful and positive ways of living with difference today.

I've frequently asked members of religious congregations in the Chicago area and members of classes I've taught at McCormick Theological Seminary to write out the story of the Tower of Babel as they remember it. Here is an example from a McCormick class.

Human beings gathered together in one place and decided to be one people with one language to build a tower all the way up to heaven. God saw what they were doing and said, "If they are one people with one language they will be as powerful as God," so God confused their languages so that they couldn't understand one another, and dispersed them over the face of the earth, and so they called the place Babel, because there, God confused their languages.

Embedded in this memory of the story is the view that the people of Babel built their tower to reach all the way up to heaven and to become just as powerful as God. God tried to restrain their arrogant ambition to be like God by spreading confusion among people by giving them different languages and different lands.

This student's memory of the story of Babel, with few variations, was shared by everyone in the class. The class was very diverse. It included students who were African-American, European-American, Indian-American, Japanese-American, Kenyan, Korean, and Latinx. This way of reading the story is not a local or culturally specific one. It is widespread across the United States and around the world. We are taught to read the story this way. John Milton inscribed this reading in Western literature when he retold the story of Babel in his great literary epic *Paradise Lost*, and all children's Bible storybooks today interpret the story in just this way. Babel has become synonymous with confusion. It symbolizes the view that difference is an obstacle to living together and a problem to be overcome.

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We may call this interpretation of the Tower of Babel the “pride and punishment” reading of the story. Out of pride, the people build a tower to assert their autonomy, attack heaven, and challenge God. “Nothing they proposed was impossible for them,” narrates Brad Pitt in *Babel*’s trailer. “They will be as powerful as God,” says our student at McCormick. God punishes their arrogance by ending the building project, confusing the peoples’ languages, and scattering the people across the world. This way of reading the story makes difference a punishment. It’s God’s penalty for human pride and God’s way to restrain any further outbreaks of it. Difference becomes a disturbing fact and the reason for confusion and conflict among people. And since the story of Babel is the Bible’s primary account of the beginning of difference, we have learned to connect the Bible itself to this dismal view of difference.

We can trace this “pride and punishment” reading of the Tower of Babel, with its negative view of difference, all the way back to the first record we have of anyone reading and interpreting this story. This reader and writer is the author of *Jubilees*, a priest in approximately 200 BCE who held a very negative view of other nations, believing them impure and destined for destruction. He retells the story by adding details not found in the biblical story, which turn it into the story of pride and punishment that people remember: the people are “evil with perverse counsel,” they construct the tower to “go up in it into heaven,” and, at the end, God sends “a great wind upon the tower and overthrew it on the earth.” None of these details is in the story itself in the book of Genesis, but this negative view of the story and of the cultural difference that it explains became the norm.

Interpreters of the story of Babel for the past two thousand years followed the lead of *Jubilees*. They too read the story as a story of pride with difference as its punishment. This is true of Jewish interpreters, from the first-century historian Flavius Josephus to the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century biblical

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scholar Nahum Sarna. It is just as true of Christian interpreters, from the late fourth- and early fifth-century theologian Augustine of Hippo, through the Protestant Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin, to the twentieth-century biblical scholar Gerhard von Rad. Babel appears in book titles such as *Ethics after Babel* and *Biblical Authority after Babel* to describe the diversity of approaches in modern ethics or the diversity of modern interpretive approaches to the Bible as a distressing difficulty to be resolved.

This is a serious matter. Listen to the great Protestant reformer Martin Luther's response to the story of Babel:

A horrible punishment followed, which, in my estimation, brought greater harm to the human race than the Flood itself. . . . Where the languages differ, there not only no commerce develops, but hatred arises in the heart against that nation whose language you do not understand. . . . Consequently, you can call it the seedbed of all evils.

Put succinctly: Difference is worse than death! If the difference introduced at Babel is the "seedbed of all evils," worse even than the universal death and destruction of the worldwide flood itself, then we all begin thinking about difference dangerously. We begin with the idea that the difference we live with every day is a terrible curse to be borne, an impossible problem to be surmounted, a danger to us all.

Rereading the Story of Babel

As we reexamine the story in this chapter, in its explicit claims and in all its concrete details, the story says nothing about pride and punishment and nothing about difference as the penalty for human sin. The story of Babel is really a straightforward and positive story about cultural identity and cultural difference. It presents the formation of cultural identity as a normal and admirable human activity, and it views cultural difference not as God's

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punishment on the world but as the way God intended the world to be. Along the way, we will see how we got off on the wrong track in our reading of this story and how we came to regard difference as a punishment to bear. Our aim is to retrieve a realistic, wise, and generous story about identity and difference as normal parts of our world. The story of Babel offers its readers a practical and useful view of difference that has been obscured by a long history of interpretation.²

The story of Babel is the Bible's story of the spread of humanity and the beginning of difference after the great flood. According to the larger biblical narrative in which it is located, a great flood destroyed everything, every living thing, except Noah and his family and two of every species of all the animals. A flood narrative such as this, in which a worldwide deluge ends the first era of world history and begins a second era, is actually common in other literature from the biblical world. We will return to the flood as the beginning of a new age in chapter 2. For now we need to know that the story of Babel appears right after the flood at the beginning of the second era of world history. It therefore describes how the new world began, and it explains how the world came to look like the world in which the Storyteller himself lived.

The story of Babel is a narrative in two parts. In the first part, human beings control the action and begin to reconstruct life again for themselves in the new era after the great flood (Gen 11:1-4). At the midpoint of the story, God comes down to find out what the human beings are doing (11:5). In the second part of the story, God controls the action. God responds to what human beings are doing and creates difference (Gen 11:6-9). As we reexamine the story, we will take its two-part structure seriously, and we will examine carefully each of its two parts.

2. More detailed and technical evidence for the interpretation of the story of Babel offered here is found in Theodore Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126 no. 1 (2007): 29-58.

Creating a Common Culture: Genesis 11:1-4

¹All people* on earth had one language and the same words. ²When they traveled east, they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them hard.” They used bricks for stones and asphalt for mortar. ⁴They said, “Come, let’s build for ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and let’s make a name for ourselves so that we won’t be dispersed over all the earth.” (*Hebrew lacks *people*)

In this, the first half of the story, the Storyteller tells us how the first people in the new age of world history after the great flood set about re-creating life for themselves. When he begins their story of rebuilding society, the Storyteller starts with their common language: “All people on earth had one language and the same words.” Their common language is the primary marker of a new and viable culture. It’s the first thing the Storyteller tells us about the people of Babel (11:1). It’s the first thing God notices when God comes down in the middle of the story (11:5) to see what the people have accomplished: “There is now one people and they all have one language” (11:6). And it’s the first thing God responds to when God takes action to diversify human culture in the second half of the story: “Come, let’s go down and mix up their language” (11:7).

After describing their common language, the Storyteller describes the people’s efforts to put down roots in their own land. The people settle in Shinar, an area of the great Mesopotamian river valley, and today part of the modern country of Iraq. Together with the Nile Valley of Egypt, Mesopotamia was one of the two great ancient centers of civilization in ancient West Asia. The people begin by constructing a city with a tower out of fired mud brick (11:2-3), the typical building material in Mesopotamia. Their aim in building their city is simple: so “we won’t be dispersed

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over all the earth.” They wish to establish a particular homeland for themselves. And the way they do this is to begin building the institutions that characterize the ancient kingdoms the Storyteller knew: a chief city with fortified walls and towers that represented the center of a people’s territory. This is as true for the great and dominant civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt as it is for the small, marginal countries in their orbits, such as the Storyteller’s own kingdom of Judah with its primary city of Jerusalem.

A common language and a common land are two of the most fundamental markers of any group’s cultural identity, from antiquity to the present. And our Storyteller shapes his narrative to highlight them. In the first words of the story, the Storyteller tells us the people speak a single language, and in the final words of the story’s first half, he describes the people’s efforts to claim a land and to put down roots. The world’s first people have set about building the world’s first culture at the beginning of history’s new age.

After describing their common language and their common land, the Storyteller introduces one more important aspect of the people’s project to build their culture: “let’s make a name for ourselves” (11:4). In the biblical world, “name” signifies “identity,” and making a name means establishing a unique identity with an esteemed reputation that will endure. It is an honorable and noble venture. We might think of the people’s aim to make a name as the people’s wish to articulate their distinctive identity, to define themselves, to answer for themselves the most basic question: “Who am I?” We might think of their aim to make a name as the people’s wish to establish their sense of belonging, dignity, and pride in their culture.

A collective name, as sociologists point out, is one of the primary markers of a distinctive culture. It defines and articulates a common cultural identity. Biblical authors use “name” in this way for their own people Israel to describe their distinctiveness and status among the nations, as does the prophet Zephaniah, when he says, “I will provide you a name [identity] and a praiseworthy

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place among all the peoples of the earth,' says the LORD" (Zeph 3:20, author's translation). Israel's historians use "name" in this way for its great kings, in particular King David (2 Sam 7:9; 8:13), founder of their greatest dynasty in Jerusalem and Judah, during which our own Storyteller lived. The prophet Nathan delivers this divine message to David: "I will make your name [identity] as honorable as the most honorable men on earth" (2 Sam 7:9, author's translation). In the story of Babel, the Storyteller uses the phrase "make a name" to describe the first people in the world after the flood, seeking to establish—as all cultures following them would aim to do—their own unique, esteemed, and lasting identity in the world. The way a city and its enduring legacy create a lasting identity are both captured in this brief observation by Israel's sage, Ben Sira: "Children and building a city establish one's name" (*Ben Sira* 40:19).

The first half of the story of Babel, therefore, describes the first human effort to create a new common culture with a distinct identity. To do so, the Storyteller uses three of the most common markers of ethnicity: language, land, and name. He describes their project in an entirely realistic and positive way. The first thing the world's first people did after the flood is what all people have sought to do: create and preserve a distinct identity. The Storyteller observed this in the world in which he himself lived, in his own land of Judah and its primary city of Jerusalem with its Davidic dynasty, and in all the societies surrounding him on all sides.

Belonging to a distinctive cultural community with its own ethnic identity is, of course, a fundamental part of human experience, as important for the Storyteller then as it is for us today. It gives its members a unique identity, a sense of who they are in the world. It provides them with a sense of belonging to a community with shared values. It gives them a visible and recognized presence in the world, a pride in their culture, and the experience of affirmation and self-respect that an old and honorable cultural tradition provides. It encourages them to value, maintain, and pass on

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their distinctive traditions to new generations. It is not surprising that re-creating society by creating a common cultural identity that would endure is the first task the people set for themselves in the new world.

Contemporary readers might be surprised that two of the most common markers of cultural identity today, skin color and religious affiliation, are not part of this story. Skin color, as we have seen in the introduction, is not a marker of ethnic identity in the Bible at all. Though it has become a prominent marker of difference in America and other countries today, our Storyteller, as with the other biblical authors of Genesis, does not use skin color to define difference.

Religion, by contrast, is a prominent marker of cultural identity in the Bible. In some biblical texts, such as the book of Deuteronomy, religion is considered the key marker of cultural identity and distinctiveness. So it may be somewhat surprising that religion does not play a role in defining cultural identity for the Storyteller who presents the story of Babel. In fact, our Storyteller never uses religion as a marker of cultural identity in his other stories in Genesis, as we will see in chapters 2 and 3. This is true also for the Priest, the other major writer of Genesis. We will talk more about the significance of this when we encounter these other stories about difference later in chapters 2 and 3.

Culture Becomes Suspect

In spite of the positive way that the Storyteller describes the first people's interest in discovering, establishing, and preserving a distinctive cultural identity for themselves, most readers through the centuries have found their project to reconstruct society after the flood to be sinful and malicious. Because these readings of the story have almost completely erased the story's original intent, we must take some time to acknowledge these readings and

How we engage difference matters to our well-being and survival.

Difference can enrich us or tear us apart. Difference can make our lives stronger, fuller, and richer, or it can destroy them. Therefore, how we engage difference matters. Conflicts between different peoples around the world, the movement of refugees from nation to nation, tensions over immigration, and growing diversity within our society bring difference to our doorstep daily. We can engage people who are different constructively and compassionately, or we can allow the fear of difference to distance us from others and demonize them. At a time when racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious differences have created heightened tensions, we need more than ever to find our bearings. We need to re-examine what we think about difference.

“At a time of increasing diversity in American society, polarized social and political discourse, and heightened suspicions about ‘the other,’ Theodore Hiebert provides this much-needed and accessible study of biblical notions of difference. His readings of texts from Genesis and Acts challenge long-standing interpretations that assume and perpetuate fear of difference and urge instead the recognition, negotiation, and celebration of human identities and differences as divine gifts. The result is an ancient and compelling call for openness, realism, empathy, and generosity with one another for the survival and flourishing of all.”

—**Christine Roy Yoder**, J. McDowell Richards Professor of Biblical Interpretation,
Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA

“Ted Hiebert teaches a better way about diversity from the very inception of scripture. He sets forth his interpretation of Genesis and Acts extensively and compellingly. Hiebert repeatedly demonstrates that old, sectarian interpretations of Genesis are not coterminous with the book called ‘The Beginning’—a book that showcases the God-ordained and God-blessed difference that relates all of us to one another.”

—**Brent A. Strawn**, professor of Old Testament, Duke Divinity School,
Duke University, Durham, NC

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