

On Culture, Migration and the Tower of Babel

The OFW phenomenon, while an economic necessity for many, is a sociological trend that perhaps will not let up in an increasingly interdependent 'global village.' Not only are we now face to face with each other because of mass access to travel. We are also needing each other's brains and brawn in a time when countries, in order to survive, have to specialize and market the things they do best. We are caught up in an increasingly global market system.

We are not quite ready to name this movement towards centralization of the world's economic and political organization as a 'mark of the Beast.' Instead, it conjures for us images like the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11, -- symbol of the human capacity for inventing contrivances that make life without God bearable, or at least more or less secure.

It was, said the story, a time of migration: people moved eastwards. Then, having found a plain in the land of Shinar, they settled there. It was not that they got stuck and got too comfortable. It was more that they needed to be secure and feared to scatter. They invented new building technologies, and built a city and a tower.

The city was to secure their being together as "one people", and the tower was, they said, to "make a name for ourselves." They all had one language, a cultural uniformity that made consensus and a common project possible. The tower was but the beginning of what they could do. God himself said that "nothing that they propose to do now will be impossible for them."

Was God threatened by this show of power in unity?

The question brings to mind the heroic figure of Prometheus – who stole fire from the gods and was punished for it. The answer is perhaps yes, if Yahweh is anything like the Greek gods. But then he is not, and so we need to find some other explanation for the confusion or 'babel of tongues' that he caused.

It is possible that the scattering was to force the population to 'fill the earth', the original mandate to the first man and woman.¹ God, according to Paul, had allotted to every race habitations and the boundaries for them.² The people were to cultivate the piece of earth allotted to them and in the process develop cultures out of their interaction with the unique terrain of their environments. The consequent diversity is part of God's design for the world.

Unlike the Tower of Babel, which is a project made possible by uniformity, God meant us to embark on enterprises built out of diversity, out of the uniqueness we all bring as races to the table of nations. Against the monocultural drift of globalizing forces, crowding us all into global centers, we are to stand rooted where we are, and discover the richness of our diverse dwelling places.

¹ Gen.1:28

² Acts 17:26-27