A “BABELISH” WORLD (GENESIS 11: 1–9) AND ITS CHALLENGE TO CULTURAL-LINGUISTIC THEORY

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ABSTRACT

After decades of optimism, interreligious dialogue is now confronted with a considerable amount of scepticism. In theology, this scepticism is primarily being fed by the cultural-linguistic theory of religion. This theory seems to be in keeping with what the Babel narrative has always said: people belonging to different “language” communities can do no more than *babble* at one another. The author asks, first of all, whether the story of Babel indeed affirms the cultural-linguistic argument for the end of interreligious dialogue. After showing that there are theological and exegetical reasons to doubt the classical interpretation of the Babel narrative, the author demonstrates how a renewed hermeneutics of this story actually challenges the cultural-linguistic discourse concerning the incommensurability of religions. Indeed, she argues, ultimately, the Babel story is not a narrative about the end of communication, but about its beginning.

After decades of theological optimism concerning religious diversity and interreligious dialogue, a theological shift is taking place. It is becoming ever clearer that the divide between religions is somewhat deeper than originally thought, and the entire enterprise of interreligious dialogue now has to deal with a considerable amount of scepticism. In theology, this scepticism is primarily being fed by the so-called cultural-linguistic theory of religion.¹ This theory of religion swings the

¹Although Lindbeck’s most important work, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, appeared as long ago as 1984, the cultural-linguistic theory of religion developed therein has only really made its way into theological reflection on interreligious dialogue in more recent years. See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984). His cultural-linguistic religious theory laid the foundation for the particularist theology of religions. See, among others, Norbert Hintersteiner, *Traditionen Überschreiten*:

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theological pendulum from the virtue of openness to the value of particularity, teaching that religions are incommensurable and untranslatable. If similarities do exist between religions, then these similarities are probably superficial.² Believers of different religions speak many tongues, so they do not understand one another.³ Thus interreligious misunderstandings are more often the rule than the exception. The result is confusion.

This overview of the situation brings to mind the biblical myth of the tower of Babel, which is imprinted on our collective memory as a cultural symbol of confusion.⁴ The cultural-linguistic theory seems to be in keeping with what this age-old biblical myth has always said, namely that people belonging to different “language” communities can do no more than *babble* at one another. Thus, the cultural-linguistic scepticism with regard to the feasibility of interreligious dialogue seems to be validated biblically by the curse of Babel.

There are however fundamental theological and exegetical reasons to doubt the classical interpretation of the story of “the tower of Babel.” A critical hermeneutic of Genesis 11:1–9 demonstrates that the confusion of languages and the scattering of peoples that occurred at Babel is not a curse, but a divine blessing. Based on these insights, this article intends to show how a renewed hermeneutics of the story of Babel actually challenges the cultural-linguistic discourse concerning the incommensurability of religions and the end of interreligious dialogue. It goes without saying that the story of Babel is an insufficient basis upon which to build an entire theology of interreligious dialogue. It is, however, indeed appropriate to consider this story as paradigmatic of the tension inherent in the biblical tradition: a tension between particularity and universality, between identity and openness, and between familiarity and strangeness. Therefore, a thorough reflection on the story of Babel is indeed a good start towards a theological reflection on the difficulties and possibilities of interreligious dialogue.⁵ Indeed,

Angloamerikanische Beiträge zur interkulturelle Traditions hermeneutik (Vienna: WUV, 2001); Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), esp. 178–91; Marianne Moyaert, “Interreligious Dialogue and the Debate between Universalism and Particularism: Searching for a Way out of the Deadlock,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 15 (2005): 36–51.

²Lindbeck, “The Gospel’s Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability,” *Modern Theology* 13 (1997): 433.

³Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 49.

⁴Theodore Hiebert, “The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World’s Cultures,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126 (2007): 29–58, at 29.

⁵For the paradigmatic character of Babel, see Jürgen Ebach, “Wir sind ein Volk. Die Erzählung vom Turmbau zu Babel: Eine biblische Geschichte in aktuellen Kontext,” in *Weltdorf Babel: Globalisierung als theologische Herausforderung*, ed. Gabriel Collet (Münster: LIT, 2001), 21.

ultimately, the Babel story is not a narrative about the end of communication, but about its beginning.⁶

I. The Impact of the Cultural-Linguistic Religious Theory on Interreligious Dialogue

Religious plurality is one of the most important challenges for contemporary theology. During the final decades of the last century, the prevalent theological attitude was one of openness, inspired by the idea that religious plurality was enriching. So-called pluralist theory primarily took the lead as the advocate of interreligious dialogue.⁷ According to pluralism, different religious traditions “constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it.”⁸ The singularity of religions should not be sought only in their religious and cultural differences, but also in that which transcends these differences. Faith is nourished by depth experiences (the religious “inside”) that are only secondarily colored by all sorts of cultural and religious practices, rituals, doctrines and narratives (the religious “outside”). Where necessary, the particular religious identity can be rewritten, because what really matters is the “inside,” that is, the religious experience and the relationship to the Ultimate. In line with this, religious identity is something that one can obtain by opening up to the religious other.⁹ Thus, interreligious dialogue can become a place where particular faith perspectives can be expanded.¹⁰

⁶The present article makes no attempt at a historical-critical exegesis of the Babel narrative. Thus I leave aside issues of source, form and redaction criticism, and consider the passage from the perspective of biblical theology. I consider the Bible as the first theological source of the attempt to reflect, in dialogue with experience, on the enigmas of human existence and the way in which human beings are called to relate to one another and to God. The Bible continues to give rise to thought even in today’s complex context of diversity. What more apt illustration than the myth of Babel, which recounts the dispersion of peoples and the confusion of language and culture? In this I place myself alongside more philosophical and literary readers of the Bible like Roger Burggraeve, “Biblical Thinking as the Wisdom of Love,” *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Reimund Bieringer et al., Jewish and Christian Heritage Series 1 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2001) 229–38; Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press, 2003); and Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts* (Oxford: One World Publications, 1998). See also Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

⁷See John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds. *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (London: SCM, 1987).

⁸John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (London: MacMillan, 1989), 235–36.

⁹Marianne Moyaert, “In Response to the Religious Other: Levinas Interreligious Dialogue and the Otherness of the Other,” in *The Awakening to the Other. A Provocative Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Roger Burggraeve (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 172.

¹⁰Hick, “The Next Step Beyond Dialogue,” in *The Myth of Christian Superiority. A Multifaith Exploration*, ed. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 4.

In recent years, pluralism has been criticised from various perspectives. The criticism that occurs the most often targets the difficulty that pluralists have in doing justice to the particularity of religious traditions and faith commitments. In reaction to pluralism, a position is being developed in today's theology that takes the particularity of faith commitments as a fundamental given. I will, therefore, refer to this position as "particularism."¹¹ Particularism is not about transcending or overcoming interreligious differences, but about promoting their acceptance.¹² Underpinning particularism is a theory that understands religions to be analogous to languages and cultures.¹³ For this reason, George Lindbeck, who first formulated this theory of religion, speaks of a cultural-linguistic theory of religion. Cultural-linguistic theory compares the ways in which people become "religious" with the ways in which people make a language their own and appropriate a culture for themselves. Becoming a believer is a long process of interiorization in which the person appropriates the language and learns to carry out the customs, practices, and rituals in a proper way.

Cultural-linguistic theory also compares the impact of religion on the identity of the believer with the way in which language and culture orient people's thinking and behavior. The cultural-linguistic presupposition is that cultural and linguistic forms shape, mould, and even create experiences.¹⁴ Only by appropriating an all-encompassing religious model do meaningful experiences become possible. Thus cultural-linguistic particularism implies an important critique of the pluralist hypothesis, which holds that religions are historically-and culturally-determined expressions of an experience of the Ultimate. The critique says that pluralism has a mistaken understanding of the relationship between the "inside" and "outside" aspects of religion. It is not the "inside" that precedes the 'outside' but the other way around: the 'outside' precedes the "inside." In other words, we do not first have a religious experience that we then accordingly express in a language; rather, there is first a language and only then experience.¹⁵

¹¹Yong Huang, "Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue: Beyond Universalism and Particularism," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 37 (1995): 127–44; Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue and the Debate between Universalism and Particularism: Searching for a Way out of the Deadlock," in *Studies for Interreligious Dialogue* 15 (2005): 36–51.

¹²Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 173.

¹³George Lindbeck, "Relations interreligieuses et œcuménisme: Le chapitre 3 de *La nature des doctrines revisité*," in *Postlibéralisme? La théologie de George Lindbeck et sa réception*, ed. Marc Boss et al. Lieux théologiques, vol. 37 (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2004): 183–203.

¹⁴Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 34.

¹⁵Lindbeck, "Relations interreligieuses et œcuménisme," 190.

The believers of different religions have, quite simply, different experiences.¹⁶

The upshot of particularism is the incommensurability of religions. There is no common framework in which it is possible to compare religions. Even if religions employ the same categories, such as God, love, peace or justice, these words mean something different, precisely because they derive their meaning from the particular religion in which they function. It literally makes no sense to claim that all religions are merely historically-and culturally-determined translations of the “same” religious experience. Religions, so Lindbeck goes on, relate to each other like poetry and mathematics. “Thus when affirmations or ideas from categorically different religious or philosophical outlooks are introduced into a given religious outlook, they are either simply babbling or else, like mathematical formulas employed in a poetic text, they have vastly different functions and meanings than they had in their original settings.”¹⁷ Lindbeck’s position actually amounts to saying that the different religions are talking past one another.

However, religions are not only incommensurable, they are also untranslatable.¹⁸ “Nothing can be translated out of the idiom into some supposedly independent communicative system without perversion, diminution or incoherence of meaning.”¹⁹ Explaining the particularity of this or that religious faith commitment to outsiders always implies a translation, and translations are always a dilution of the original. Real insight into what it means to be a Christian, Buddhist, or Jew supposes an insider’s perspective. The only solution that cultural-linguistic religious theory foresees with regard to interreligious dialogue is bilingualism. But this, Lindbeck acknowledges, is so rare that the difficulties facing interreligious conversation actually still remain. Indeed, the cultural-linguistic theory puts both the belief in the meaningfulness and the possibility of interreligious dialogue at risk. The cultural-linguistic description of relations between Christian and other religions is of “synchronic wholes, each using a completely different set of language-games, such that we cannot *know* whether we mean the same or not when we engage in interreligious dialogue. He cannot tell us whether or not people are referring to the same reality or realities, speaking the truth or uttering conflicting truth-claims, when they compare notes on

¹⁶Lindbeck, “The Gospel’s Uniqueness,” 433.

¹⁷Ibid., 427.

¹⁸Marianne Moyaert, “The (Un-)Translatability of Religions? Ricoeur’s Linguistic Hospitality as a Model for Interreligious Dialogue,” *Exchange* 37 (2008): 337–64.

¹⁹Lindbeck, “The Gospel’s Uniqueness,” 429.

what is ‘most important’ in their lives.”²⁰ Lindbeck acknowledges this, saying that “those for whom conversation is the key to solving interreligious problems are likely to be disappointed.”²¹

The outcome of cultural-linguistic particularism reminds me of the *curse* of Babel: there is a plurality of religious languages and believers who belong to different religions cannot understand one another. Indeed, it seems that the Babel narrative actually gives biblical validation to Lindbeck’s theory of religion and his scepticism regarding the possibility and meaningfulness of interreligious dialogue. Let us take a closer look at this biblical story, which addresses the human struggle with the enigma of linguistic and cultural diversity, so that we can assess this apparent affinity between the Babel narrative and the cultural-linguistic theory. Is the seemingly natural “alliance” between the Babel narrative and the cultural-linguistic theory of religion convincing?

II. Living in a “Babelish” World: Diversity as Curse or as Blessing?

In the classic interpretation of the story of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9), both geographic dispersal and linguistic confusion are punishments from God for the alleged pride of people who want to make themselves equal to God.²² Here, the focus is primarily on verse 4a in which the building of the tower is central. “Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens. . . .’” The likelihood of succeeding at this massive undertaking is increased by the linguistic unity. A single language binds the people together and creates a sense of “we.” This unified community rallies around its dream: “a tower with its top in the heavens.” In addition, it is also clear that the people wish to stay together, because they say: “. . . and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” The expression, “a tower with its top in the heavens”, then, is understood in terms of the human striving to become like God and is thus an expression of pride. God opposes this pride and punishes the builders of the tower. God confuses their language so that the people are no longer

²⁰Peter Slater, “Lindbeck, Hick and the Nature of Religious Truth,” *Studies in Religion* 24 (1995): 69. For a similar critique see also Jeffrey Groh, *Christian Tradition Today: A Postliberal Vision of Church and Word* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 257; James Fredericks, “A Universal Religious Experience: Comparative Theology as an Alternative to a Theology of Religions,” *Horizons* 22 (1995) 81; Jerome Stone, “Philip Hefner and the Modernist and Postmodernist Divide,” *Zygon* 39 (2004): 767; John Cobb, “Incommensurability: Can Comparative Religious Ethics Help?,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 16 (1996): 45.

²¹Lindbeck, “The Gospel’s Uniqueness,” 426.

²²This widespread classical interpretation of the story of Babel in literature and art is demonstrated in Theodore Hiebert, ed., *Toppling the Tower: Essays on Babel and Diversity* (Chicago: McCormick Theological Seminary, 2004).

able to understand one another. As a result, the people become strangers to one another. The name, Babel, expresses multiplicity and confusion.²³ The plurality of languages and the scattering of the peoples herald the beginning of the plurality of cultures and religions that spread out to cover the whole world (Gen. 10). By means of language, people give shape to their cultural and also to their religious identity.

Generally, there is a parallel drawn between the Babel episode and the Paradise Narrative's forbidding of the eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. With the transgression of the first prohibition, human beings were driven from Paradise. The price that the builders of the tower must pay for their pride is the confusion of their language. Babel is thus also called the second Fall.²⁴ According to this reading of the story of Babel, this cultural and religious scattering is also marked by the pride that is to blame. “Just as the lost paradise corresponds to the future promise, so the promise is directed at the return of that global, universal unity of people and languages. The historical time that we experience, characterised by a multiplicity of nations, languages, cultures and religions, takes place following this “regrettable” verdict. Multiculturalism, pluralism, diversity, otherness—all this is then regrettable, all this is a punishment for the hubris of Babel.”²⁵ In addition to this regrettable loss of unity, there is a nostalgic longing for the restoration of Paradise, as it was before the Fall, and the restoration of the unity of language.²⁶ This is also a nostalgia for a language that allows for “complete” comprehension, that is, a longing for a transparency free of misunderstandings.²⁷ In the hope to restore the Paradisial unity of language, as well as in the idea that Babel is a curse, one sees the assumption that a common language is necessary in order to arrive at mutual understanding. The multiplicity of languages is seen as a hindrance to communication. A language of unity would remove this obstacle and make it possible to understand one another.

This view of language and this vision of communication are also implicit in the cultural-linguistic analogy between language and religion.

²³There is an explicit connection made between Babel and to confuse (*balal*).

²⁴George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 59.

²⁵Ebach, “Wir sind ein Volk,” 26.

²⁶Hubert Bost, *Babel: Du texte au symbole* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1985), 215.

²⁷This longing for a restoration of the original language of unity probably lies at the origin of various projects by theologians and philosophers to undo the curse of Babel. So, among others, there is the search for the *Ursprache*, the language that was spoken before the confusion of language and that would have been spoken in Paradise. This language not only put people in a position to understand one another and to immediately communicate with one another in a perfectly transparent way; the *Ursprache* was also in total accord with reality. See Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

Religion is understood as a language system (a way of life) that enables the believers who belong to it to understand one another. It is the shared language that makes meaningful communication possible and, therefore, linguistic plurality is problematic for communication between various linguistic communities. Between people speaking different religious languages, “genuine argument is impossible, and neither agreements nor disagreements can be probed at any depth.”²⁸ In this way, the cultural-linguistic model supports the classic reading of the story of Babel: the multiplicity of languages is a curse. The differences between the religious traditions are too great and it is not possible to find a common language transcending these differences.²⁹

To accept this classic reading of the Babel narrative is to validate the cultural-linguistic theory of religion and to bring down the curtain on interreligious dialogue. Moreover, due to the paradigmatic character of this biblical story of diversity, the very future of the search for an interreligious theology is put at risk. The question is, however, is this classic reading of the Babel narrative *theologically* and *exegetically* convincing? Is this story really about the *curse* of diversity?

Though the abovementioned interpretation of the story of Babel belongs to a traditional Christian hermeneutic, there are, first of all, several theological reasons to question the exclusive focus on the curse of the language confusion. Perhaps the most important problem is indeed that there is friction between the curse of Babel and God’s blessing of Creation. The God of the Jewish and Christian traditions is a relational God, a revelatory transcendence who unceasingly reaches out to the people that he created.³⁰ God’s behaviour during his creative activity is aimed at furthering the interconnectedness of Creation. He repeatedly enters into conversation with people, who are always linguistically, culturally, and religiously contextualized. God’s salvific actions are always directed toward the formation of *communio* and he calls his people, and stimulates them, to work with him to that end. The dialogue with the world, and thus with people speaking other languages and belonging to different cultures and religions, is at the heart of the biblical tradition. If we look at things this way, then it seems rather unlikely that this same God would proclaim a punishment or even a curse that would hinder his plan for Creation. The outcome of divine punishment as understood in the classic reading of the Babel narrative,

²⁸George Lindbeck, “Confession and Community,” *Christian Century* 107 (1990): 495.

²⁹Moyaert, “Interreligious Dialogue and the Debate,” 45.

³⁰Roger Burggraeve, “A Conversational God as the Source of a Response Ethics,” in *Theology and Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology*, ed. Peter De Mey and Jacques Haers (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 337–57.

is not interconnectedness, but isolation. The same holds true, for that matter, for cultural-linguistic theory, which the philosopher of religion Henk Vroom once depicted as follows:³¹

“The problem with these constructions,” it has been said, “is that they create all too empathically a separation between Christians and persons of other faiths.”³² The questions are whether God intended the cultural dispersal and linguistic fragmentation to be a punishment, and whether God wants human beings simply to accept dispersion and separation. Is that his vision for his creation? Is it, theologically speaking, not more likely that the linguistic confusion and the cultural diversification are, strangely enough, in line with God’s blessing-rich activity in Creation?³³

This theological ‘hypothesis’ is supported by *exegetical argumentation*. Indeed, it is worthwhile taking a critical look at the Babel narrative, because, as I will show, the story actually points to the opposite of what the classic reading suggests. Indeed, Babel shows itself to be a blessing both for creation and for intercultural and interreligious communication.³⁴ What follows is a close-reading, narrative approach to the story of Babel³⁵ in order to argue this, with special attention

³¹Henk Vroom, *Religions and Truth: Philosophical Reflections and Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 379.

³²Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation? A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (New York: Orbis, 2005), 76.

³³François Marty, *La bénédiction de Babel: Vérité et communication* (Paris: Cerf, 1990); Claude Geffré, *De Babel à Pentecôte. Essais de théologie interreligieuse* (Paris: Cerf, 2006).

³⁴The reader will notice that the story of Babel is not about the plurality of religions but indeed about the multiplicity of languages and cultures. I answer this criticism with two points. (1) The criticism that the story of Babel is about languages and cultures and not about religions overlooks the historical fact that no specific term comparable to “religion” was available in the Hebrew of the biblical authors. Israel did not consider the covenant with God to be a religion, and likewise did not think about the surrounding peoples and cultures in these terms. (2) Among other things, the practice of inculturation teaches us that language, religion, and culture are usually very closely associated with one another, so closely even that a negative/positive evaluation of the ‘culture’ almost automatically leads to an equally positive/negative evaluation of the religion. See Felix Wilfred, “Weltreligionen und christliche Inkulturation,” *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 73 (1989): 205–20. It seems to me that in light of this it would also be correct to argue that the moment in which God scattered the people and confused the languages, and in so doing initiated the multiplicity of cultures, He at the same time gave the initial impetus to the plurality of religions. In light of this, I think that is fitting to argue that God’s attitude towards religions is analogous to his attitude towards cultures.

³⁵This approach is not concerned with discovering layers of redaction or original literary forms.

to the way this narrative functions within the biblical episode of Genesis 1–11.³⁶

God Blesses Diversity

Genesis 11, about the confusion of language and culture, follows on from Genesis 10, the ‘family of nations’, which gives a summary of the nations that then existed, dispersed across the earth, each with their own language. It is a sort of map of the world as it was then known. In Genesis 10, the language confusion and the scattering of the peoples has already happened. The various nations are introduced as descendants of the sons of Noah: Shem, Ham and Japheth. Through this genealogy, the fundamental unity of all humanity is affirmed.³⁷ In total, this story mentions seventy tribes that each “represent a nation, a tribe or an area and that thereby represent the ethnic and linguistic multiplicity.”³⁸ In Genesis 10, cultural dispersion and linguistic diversity are recorded simply as aspects of the human condition.³⁹ Being human entails speaking a specific language and belonging to a particular culture—not a very dramatic assertion. What is more, the multiplication of the nations is seen as the fulfilment of creation. The cultural peoples are, like creation, blessed. They are fruitful and multiply.

Following on from the above-mentioned genealogy of nations, the story of Babel at first appears to be “out of place, since it explains how people came to be dispersed throughout the earth just after chapter 10 has presented in detail the results of God’s plan for repopulation after the flood.”⁴⁰ In fact, Genesis 11 needs to be read as a sort of flash-back in which one aspect of the preceding narrative is highlighted and further elaborated.⁴¹ The story of Babel recalls a situation before chapter 10—a situation consisting of one people, one language and one place—and then tells us how the dispersal of nations and the confusion of languages and culture came about.

If we look at the story itself, then a number of things stand out. First, the story only talks about “the people;” nobody is mentioned by name.

³⁶I will set aside the diachronic issue of authorship in this close reading. The approach developed here is synchronic, taking the texts as they now stand.

³⁷Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox: 1983), 93.

³⁸Christoph Ueling, “Het genesisverhaal, een cultuurhistorische lezing” in *De toren van Babel*, ed. Ellen van Wolde (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2004), 55.

³⁹Gen. 10:5, 20, 31.

⁴⁰Donald Gowan, *From Eden to Babel: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 1–11* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 115.

⁴¹Ellen Van Wolde, “The Earth Story as Presented by the Tower of Babel Narrative,” in *The Earth Story in Genesis*, ed. Norman Habel and Shirley Wurst (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 147–57.

The grammatical subject is “they.” Who they are, we never find out. We are, however, told what they do. They migrate to the east, they establish themselves there, and they build a city with a tower. When the people speak, they do so in an inspiring way: “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly. . . . Come, let us build ourselves a city, Let us make a name for ourselves” (Gen. 11:3–4). The goal of this whole undertaking becomes apparent in verse 4: “otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” The theme of *one language* is thus complemented by the theme of *one place*.⁴² Human striving does not appear to be geared towards ‘becoming equal to God’, but rather towards staying together. It is at this moment that God intervenes by confusing their speech and scattering them. God, it seems, is not really worried about the building of the city or the tower, but indeed about the fact that there is only *one people* and *one language* and that this people intends to stay together at *one place*.⁴³ The whole earth must be populated, and the unity of language, place and people hinders this. God’s intervention is not a punishment, but rather an action that is necessary for creation.⁴⁴ Indeed, the idea of the scattering of the peoples over the whole world clearly harks back to aspects of the Creation Narrative, in which God calls upon his Creation to multiply. The whole world must be populated (Gen. 1). The same theme is found following the story of the Flood. Again, Yahweh says that people and animals must be fruitful, must become great in number, and must populate the whole world. Genesis 1–11 is the story of creation: of separation and distinction, of multiplication and population, and of scattering. Babel must be read in light of this theme. Thus, the story of Babel assumes an important position, since it fulfils the conditions necessary in order to make the continued survival of Creation possible, namely, the scattering.⁴⁵

Babel as a Blessing for Communication

The question that remains is this: what constitutes the blessing of Babel with respect to communication? In order to answer this question,

⁴²Hiebert, “The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World’s Cultures,” 35.

⁴³This is borne out by the fact that in verse 8, no mention is even made of the tower. It only says that the construction of the city was stopped. From this perspective, the classic focus on the tower, though it clearly speaks to the imagination, is not only misplaced, but it also lures us away from the actual storyline that revolves around unity and dispersion. It would also therefore be better not to call this story “the tower builders” or “the tower of Babel,” but rather the story of “the scattering of the peoples.” See Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961), 226.

⁴⁴Ulrich Berges, “Gen. 11,1–9: Babel oder das Ende der Kommunikation,” *Biblische Notizen* 74 (1994): 37–56, 55.

⁴⁵Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 98.

I return once more to the story. This time, the Jewish Talmudic scholar André Neher⁴⁶ will be my guide.⁴⁷ His reading of the Babel narrative is especially interesting because, according to him, Babel does not mean the end of communication, but rather its beginning. Neher's point of departure is the observation that in the first ten chapters of Genesis there is no successful dialogue. This means, first, that the language confusion of Babel cannot mean the end of dialogue: there was, after all, no successful dialogue to speak of before Babel. Indeed, dialogue only became possible *after* speech was liberated by the confusion of Babel. Neher's reading of the story of Babel entails, in other words, a reversal of the classic interpretation. This somewhat unconventional hermeneutic throws important new light on the cultural-linguistic hypothesis that the plurality of religious languages spells the end of interreligious dialogue.

Neher begins his reading of the Babel narrative by drawing attention to the word *davar*. It is one of the most important terms in the Bible. This word has a "dozens of meanings". It even compelled "Edmond Fleg and Buber-Rosenzweig to forgo their fondness for literal translation and to chose to render *davarn* one of the following possibilities: thing, fact, object, revelation, commandment."⁴⁸ Strangely enough, this important word does not appear in first ten chapters of Genesis. The Hebrew *davar* only arrives on the biblical scene in the first verse of the eleventh chapter: "Now the whole earth had one language . . ." (Gen 11:1). This observation is surprising. Does it mean that God did not speak in the first ten chapters of Genesis? Does it mean that people said nothing and did nothing before the story of Babel? No, the issue is more complicated. According to Neher, God did indeed speak, "but not words (*devarim*)". He did create, "but not things (*devarim*)". In the first ten chapters of Genesis, there is only stammering and stuttering, an initial, hesitant, and wavering start that leads to nothing, an embryonic attempt that fails. The first ten chapters of Genesis tell the story of the "failure of the word."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ André Neher (1914–1988), Jewish scholar, philosopher and writer. Neher was professor of Hebrew and Hebrew literature at the University of Strasbourg. He authored various books on the Torah, the Talmud, the Midrash and the Prophets.

⁴⁷ André Neher, *L'Exil de la parole: Du silence biblique au silence d'Auschwitz* (Paris: Seuil, 1970). We follow the translation *The Exile of the Word: From the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz*, trans. David Maisel (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981).

⁴⁸ Wilhelm Gensenius and Francis Brown, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966).

⁴⁹ Neher, *The Exile of the Word*, 96.

The reason for this “failure” of the word is, according to Neher, connected to the failure of dialogue. In the first eleven chapters of Genesis, the word is prevented from bearing its full, “natural fruit”: dialogue. Neither vertical dialogue between God and human beings, nor horizontal communication between people was successful. Communication became stuck in a monologue. “From Adam through chapter 11 of Genesis, that of the Tower of Babel, the word is spoken only to go astray, dialogue is entered into only to get lost.”⁵⁰ Let us look at some of the narratives in this regard.

The first human couple, Adam and Eve, do not succeed in communicating with one another but simply talk past one another. The only verse where one might actually be able to speak of a dialogue between the man and the woman is Genesis 2:23. There, it states, “Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.’” One cannot, however, really call this passage a dialogue. It is a monologue “wavering between the first person and the third person, oblivious of the second person, the ‘thou’ and the address, which are the sole foundation of dialogue.”⁵¹

Eve also only speaks in monologues, first at the birth of Cain (Gen. 4:1) and then at the birth of Seth (Gen. 4:25). There is no I-thou conversation. Neher notes that Eve is well aware of the techniques involved in dialogue, “(only its technique not its essence, for she does not reply in the second person, answering her interlocutor directly), but she uses it only with the serpent (Gen. 3:2)! Eve keeps for the serpent the sheer mechanics of a dialogue which she denies to her husband.”⁵²

The failure of horizontal dialogue continues with Cain. Here, the silence is deafening, even frightening. Abel says nothing and remains silent during the entire dramatic course of events. Cain on the other hand speaks a great deal, but there is absolutely no dialogue between the two brothers. Cain does of course begin something that resembles a conversation. Literally translated, “Cain said to his brother Abel.” In the Hebrew text, Cain’s speech has no content.⁵³ The fact that no mention is made of the content is significant. After all, it indicates the emptiness and the lack of content in the relationship between Cain and Abel. What follows these strange opening lines is well known: “And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and

⁵⁰Ibid., 94.

⁵¹Ibid., 96.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³This gap is usually filled in with “let us go to the field.” This occurs in Samaritan, Greek, Syriac and the Vulgate.

killed him" (Gen. 4:8). According to Neher, "it is as if the obliteration of the dialogue were the cause of the murder. Because the brothers, like the parents, were incapable of inventing the dialogue, they invented something else, a substitute for the missing word: death, which appears here for the first time explicitly in the text."⁵⁴

It is not only the dialogue between people that fails, but also the dialogue between God and human beings. Here, too, there is no exchange, no word and response. The human being hides from God, takes shelter in lies, resists or remains silent. The human being lacks responsibility, i.e., the ability to respond. This is again evident in the various creation myths. In the Creation Narrative, following the creation of Adam, God addresses himself the human being and blesses him: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen. 1:28). Adam does not answer God.

The same silence occurs in the Garden when God forbids Adam to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam gives absolutely no indication that he is even interested. "In response to the law he can express nothing, say nothing. It is not he who would invent the *hineini*, the 'here I am!' which Abraham, Moses, and the Jewish people were to enunciate in order to enter with God into the dialogue of the mitzvah and the torah."⁵⁵

With Cain, the silence extends still further. The Lord speaks to Cain and asks why Cain is so angry. Cain does not answer God. Instead of beginning the vertical dialogue by formulating an answer, Cain addresses his word horizontally to Abel, with the well-known dramatic course of events that follow: Cain murders his brother. Not dialogue, but death is the outcome.

Neher calls the third moment of silence the most scandalous. Noah, who is the replacement for humanity and is chosen by God because of his righteousness, is just as unsuccessful as Adam and Cain in formulating a meaningful answer to what God says to him. God speaks to Noah several times. He announces the Flood, gives Noah the task of building the ark (Gen. 6:13–22), tells Noah about the final preparations and informs him of the timing of the Flood (Gen. 7:1–5), tells him when they can leave the boat (Gen. 8:16–17), gives Noah his blessing and promulgates a new law (Gen. 9:1–7), and establishes a covenant with Noah (Gen 9:8–17). But Noah never says anything to God. According to Neher,

⁵⁴Neher, *The Exile of the Word*, 97.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 99.

Noah’s silence is an expression of indifference attributable to self-involvement.⁵⁶ Creation is turned in on itself.

And then, in Genesis 11:1, “the word” (*davar*) finally appears. And yet, the appearance of *davar* still does not spell the triumph of the word. After all, the Hebrew shows that the *devarim* spoken of in this story are *ahadim*, “which teaches us the surprising lesson that the *devarim* were ‘closed’.”⁵⁷ The words have not yet been able to become spoken words or speech. The words are self-absorbed. They are open neither to transcendence nor to otherness. The reason is that the word does not have a chance because the builders are so focused on the things. Stated otherwise, in the story of Babel, the thing-dimension of *davar* smothers the word-dimension.

The language of the builders of the tower is an efficient language that seeks to facilitate immediate comprehension; there is no discussion or interpretation necessary. The builders know precisely what is expected of them. They all rally behind a common goal, which gives them a clear sense of belonging and identity. But in this instrumental striving for unity, the word is suffocated: “The word has become an economic unity, not of a qualitative economy which knows the price of the word and wishes to pronounce it worthwhile, but of a quantitative economy which dispenses words according to their efficacy and the mechanical requirements of their use.”⁵⁸ In this praise of economic instrumentality, individuality, difference, and transcendence are smothered. The nation of Babel is entirely focussed on itself. The world of Babel is a world of anonymity. We see that the people express themselves in the first person plural, in an encouraging way: “Let us . . .” Here, too, there is no dialogue. Instead, there is demagoguery. The collective speaks. There is no room for individuality. All the people can do in the context of demagoguery is listen and obey.⁵⁹ The I-thou of dialogue has yet to develop.

With Neher, we can, then, also conclude that the situation before Babel was not one of a perfect language and perfect communication. On the contrary, “time and again it becomes clearer that this is not about a genuine dialogical communication, but about a pure self-talk, pure redundancy. The successive exhortations (nine times) make the means of unhindered communication clear. Nevertheless, communication in pure consensus means the death of communication, because if

⁵⁶Ibid., 103.

⁵⁷Ibid., 95.

⁵⁸Ibid., 105–06.

⁵⁹Ibid., 98.

everybody agrees about everything, what is left for one to talk about?"⁶⁰ As a consequence, the discovery of *davar* does not relieve the closedness, because the *davarim*, the language of the tower-builders, is so closed that it excludes the possibility of dialogue. The dialogue of Babel is a collective monologue.⁶¹ There is no successful dialogue, only the totalitarian demagoguery of a nation immersed in itself. Through the closedness of the word, the discourse of unity only results in an egocentric image of the builders of the tower. The tower does not reach God; it bends back towards the human being. The language forms a closed circle. As long as the language is closed and self-absorbed, the people are also self-centered and not in a position to attain or to refer to transcendence. As long as the language is no more than a self-reflection, it can never refer to God as living reality, because God is never *in* the world in the same way that things are.⁶²

And so there is need of an agent who will break through the tower builder's collective and establish difference. God breaks the instrumental language. "It sufficed for God to break the insulation—like a strong draft bursting into a hothouse—for the word of the outside kingdoms to confuse the system and put it out of order. No word, henceforth, was any longer intelligible, for, in the face of an impersonalized humanity, man arose once more in his inalienable otherness. The confusion of the tongues had reopened the word to diversified meanings; the word had detached itself from the thing."⁶³ In other words, God breaks the suffocating connection between "the thing and the word." He creates a "breach" between words and things. Words and things no longer coincide. As a consequence, the polysemy of words is brought about: "the feature by which words in natural languages have more than one meaning."⁶⁴ Yet this breach, which is generally referred to as "the confusion of tongues" does not mean the end of communication, but, indeed, its beginning. Language becomes creative when words lose their immediacy, transparency, and univocality. This breach gives rise to subtle and sensitive conversations, to the plurality of meanings, to nuances, poetry, creativity, and individuality. Here, room is made for otherness and transcendence. Only then does a language come into being which

⁶⁰Berges, "Gen. 11,1–9, 44.

⁶¹Ebach, "Wir sind ein Volk," 29.

⁶²Christoph Brabant, "Vertalen en vertellen: Theologische epistemologie van religieuze ervaring in het grensgebied tussen deconstructie en hermeneutiek. In dialoog met Jacques Derrida en Paul Ricoeur" (Phd. diss. K.U.Leuven, 2004), 154.

⁶³Neher, *The Exile of the Word*, 113.

⁶⁴John Thompson, introduction to Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, (1981; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1–26, at 11.

can refer to God and allow human beings to talk about God. For God does not coincide with the world of things, nor can God be locked up in an instrumental language that can only talk about things that can be grasped. To speak of God requires a language other than the instrumental language. It requires a symbolic and poetic language that can never be exhausted.

By breaching the immediate transparency, space is not only created for talk about God, but also for dialogue between God and man, a dialogue that begins with God and Abraham. And so it happens that Abraham, who received his name from God, calls his wife by her name (Gen. 12:11), and likewise his nephew Lot (Gen. 13:8).⁶⁵ Abraham breaks through the silence of the word. The scattering and the confusion of Babel mark the transition to the salvation history that begins with Abraham. The history of God and Israel can only begin when all the peoples have been dispersed and the language has been confused. “At Babel it goes from world unity to scattering: with Abraham/Israel it goes from a scattering to world unity. The scattering of Babel is the scenario as it existed before the gathering that begins with the call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3).”⁶⁶ When considered thus, God’s intervention in Babel is a continuation of the creation project that he began in Genesis 1–2: creation as separation. God wants to bless his Creation, not curse it.

III. Beyond the Scepticism of the Cultural-Linguistic Model: The Word Freed for Interreligious Dialogue

The story of Babel teaches us important theological lessons that can shed new light on the challenge of religious plurality and interreligious dialogue. The first lesson concerns the relationship between unity and diversity. It suggests that there are different forms of unity and solidarity, just as there are different forms of diversity and dispersion. Unity *per se* is not the goal of creation, just as diversity and dispersion *per se* do not belong to God’s plan either. Both unity and diversity can be signs of disobedience to God. Unity and diversity, solidarity and dispersion must be qualified. God is opposed to a unity that leads to a safe homogeneity and a self-absorbed, autonomous unity that turns against heterogeneity, difference and transcendence. Babel tells us that the

⁶⁵Even though Abraham had discovered dialogue, this does not yet mean that he has mastered this skill. The dialogue proceeds with difficulty. Catherine Chalié notes in this regard, for example, that Abraham speaks to his wife Sarah as a you, but that she is still the object of what he says: “I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance” (Gen 12:11). Sarah only speaks to Abraham in Gen 16:2. See Cathérine Chalié, *Les Matriarches: Sarah, Rébecca, Rachel et Léa* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1987), 14–59.

⁶⁶Berges, “Gen. 11,1–9, 53–54.

people intend to achieve just such a unity. The people want to make a name for themselves. This expression, too, has nothing to do with rebellion. It refers, rather, to the desire to form a lasting identity.⁶⁷ This intention is analogous to the building of the city: the people want to stay in one place. They want to stay together, and belonging to the same culture, sharing in the same identity, and speaking the same language are all associated with this intention. The unity of humanity that comes about at the cost of its cultural diversity is disagreeable to God.⁶⁸ God's intervention implies that linguistic and cultural diversity are part of the human condition, which is blessed by God.

It should at the very least be remarkable that, in its classic interpretation, this story received such a one-sided, negative reading, in which cultural and linguistic diversity are understood as a curse and a punishment from God for human hubris. This is telling with regard to the perpetual difficulty that human beings experience when dealing with diversity and otherness. In this regard, I subscribe to Theodore Hiebert's view that the classic hermeneutic of Babel says more about the tension that humans experience in dealing with both cultural solidarity and diversity than about the way in which God values diversity.

Perhaps the story's interpreters have outdone the story's own characters in the quest for ethnic uniformity. Perhaps our interpreters have recognized not only the value of identity and belonging, as does the story itself, but have taken the next step and devalued difference, seeing it as an obstacle, a source of confusion and chaos, and a curse upon the human race, and ultimately, a judgment of God. This is a step the story itself does not take. By contrast, it takes a step in the opposite direction, valuing difference by explaining it as God's aspiration for the new world after the flood.⁶⁹

This implies an important criticism of cultural-linguistic theory, for is not one of the problems facing this theory of religion that it presupposes a concept of religion that implies the inevitability of a solitary world, divorced from other cultures with other values, convictions, feelings and habits; a humanity divided in discontinuous blocks; different

⁶⁷Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," 40: "The people's wish to establish a common identity is closely related to the larger goal of remaining together to preserve a single culture. A collective name is, as sociologists point out, one of the primary markers of a common cultural tradition. Viewed in this light, the phrase 'let us make a name for ourselves' expresses no conceit or defiance but rather the impulse toward cultural homogeneity at the heart of the human project."

⁶⁸Valeer Neckebrouck, *Gij alleen de Allerhoogste: Christus en de andere godsdiensten* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2001), 19.

⁶⁹Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," 58.

cultures as distinct from one another as the different planets? Does this theory of religion not entail an interpretation of religious diversity which corresponds to the punitive reading of the Babel narrative? The alternative hermeneutic developed above shows that the idea that God divided humanity into closed linguistic, cultural or religious communities does not take God’s creative purposes seriously enough. Splitting humanity into a number of languages of unity places one-sided emphasis on diversity and loses sight of both creaturely and eschatological connectedness. Theologically, the idea that religious plurality insurmountably and inevitably divides people is unfounded.

The second theological lesson to be drawn from this reading of Babel is the problematisation of the language of unity in so far as it is self-involved and closed, destroying, negating or denying anything that is strange.⁷⁰ The Babel narrative tells us about a language that is both univocative and self-involved. God opened a breach in language. Thanks to this breach, space is created for transcendence and for alterity. This breach should not be understood privatively as a lack or a deficiency that can or must be filled in. The breach is the very foundational structure of language; it is the condition of possibility for the manifestation of transcendence. “The blessing of Babel is the renunciation of the unique language that ignores differences.”⁷¹

In the context of interreligious dialogue, this implies that Christian churches should bear witness to the living, transcendent God, who not only makes himself known in the known and the familiar, but also in the strange(r). This witness thus also means testifying to the fact that, on the one hand, God never fully expresses himself, and that, on the other hand, God can never be fully expressed and comprehended; and thus believers must attend to where God unexpectedly reveals himself. God reveals himself in the “strange,” in the margins and the in-between spaces, where people, despite their diversity, or better, because of their diversity, come together to sustain the conversation. But believers can only recognise God in the strange(r) if they have not yet become stuck in the known and the familiar. By acknowledging the breach that God has opened in language, and by keeping it open, the faith community avoids getting stuck, avoids “capturing” God, or reducing God to the known. In this way, believers give shape to the idea that it is not up to

⁷⁰Jürgen Ebach, “Rettung der Vielfalt: Beobachtungen zur Erzählung vom Babylonischen Turm,” in *Mit dem Fremden leben: Perspektiven einer Theologie der Konvivenz. Theo Sundermeier zum 65. Geburtstag*, vol. 2: *Kunst, Hermeneutik, Ökumene*, ed. Dieter Becker Missionswissenschaftliche Forschungen, Neue Folge, Band 12 (Erlangen: Erlanger Verlag für Mission und Ökumene, 2000), 259–68, at 265.

⁷¹Domenico Jervolino, “Herméneutique et traduction, L’autre, l’étranger, l’hôte,” *Archives de philosophie* 63 (2000): 79–93, at 90.

them to first establish the boundaries of God's activity. Unlike the cultural-linguistic model, the Babel narrative argues that dialogue is not only sustained through consensus, but also by dissensus—within and between religions. The space between the religions can be one of the places where we can encounter God.

This brings me to the third theological lesson which can be learned from the Babel narrative. With Paul Ricoeur, I would argue that after Babel, human beings are called to translate. The appropriate attitude is not that of isolation, but rather that of linguistic hospitality “where the pleasure of dwelling in the other's language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home, in one's own welcoming home.”⁷² This linguistic hospitality is realised in translation. To translate means to nourish the familiar with the unknown, and hence to keep the familiar alive. It means giving the necessary oxygen to meanings. In contrast to Lindbeck, Ricoeur thinks of translation in terms of enrichment. Translation enables one's own language to rediscover forgotten dimensions of the other's language. For it is always possible that translation reveals a meaning which was concealed in the original language. Thus, translation has the potential to open people to new horizons of meaning. This is the benefit of translation. According to Ricoeur, the cultural-linguistic resistance or refusal to translate amounts to a refusal to recognize what is foreign as a challenge and a source of nourishment for one's own “linguistic identity.” It is probably prompted by a strong desire to sacralize one's own tradition and the fear of losing one's particular identity.⁷³ This fear is, however, exactly, what God reacts to in the story of Babel, for fear leads to isolation and exclusion. Translation, on the other hand, implies accepting the possibility of meaning loss, the reality of dissensus and the espousal of diverse meanings, even when they are brought in by religious strangers, thereby expressing respect for God's otherness. Forget not to show love unto strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. (Hebr. 13:2)

⁷²Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation* (London: Routledge, 2006), 12.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 4.