

The end of the universe: After the sacred canopy¹

You will have to look elsewhere for information on the end of the world. This study is about the end of the single universe created by God in Genesis 1 and broken up by God in Genesis 11. It is the incident at Babel that marks the end of an era within the Story of God's mission to the world. Prior to the scattering of humanity and the 'confusion of languages' there was a unity within the world that was never to be repeated. The story revealed in those first eleven chapters is the curtain raiser for the great narrative of Salvation that follows. The creation of the universe with the humanity as the stewards of the earth, is followed by the fall of mankind and the depravities resulting in their rebellion. This culminates in the attempt to build a tower on the plain of Shinar that will accomplish two things. It will stand as a focus of the unity of humanity and provide them with autonomy over against their creator. Both of these ambitions were contrary to God's intentions as expressed in the creation narrative. They were required to fill and subdue the earth, developing and caring for it under the authority of the creator. Instead with their rebellion in what we call the 'Fall', they sought to usurp God and establish their independence. Thus breaking the first covenant between themselves and God. As a result of these actions, and God's response, humanity no longer had open access to fellowship with God and the co-operative relationship with nature was broken and the world became an alien environment against which they had to fight. Thus the sacred canopy was fractured but until the tower of Babel it was not destroyed. At Babel the unity of humanity was destroyed and restoration was only to be accomplished at the end of the ages. The universe has become a multi-verse of ethnicities, cultures and languages.

There is debate as to the severity of the punishment imposed by God at Babel.² It could be seen as simply God imposing his original instruction to fill the world and subdue it, with the added limitation of a multiplicity of languages. Had not humanity rebelled this would have created a world full of cultural and linguistic diversity that would have been a joy to behold. Instead a fallen humanity has twisted and corrupted this glorious intention of God creating alienation, isolation, ethnic and linguistic tension. The punishment of scattering and linguistic diversity would limit the attempts of humanity to challenge God, but in the hands of sinful humanity it released horrendous civil wars between peoples, which lives with today.

From Genesis chapter 12 we have the record of God's long road to accomplish the salvation, redemption and restoration of the universe. It began with the choosing of Abraham. This choice introduced an interesting linguistic/cultural paradox. Having destroyed linguistic unity He chooses a man from a minority language group to be the one through whom He will bless and save all people. This grand narrative was to be written in Hebrew and not one of the standard common languages of the Levant. In doing so God underscored His intention to work through the multi-verse of languages and cultures. In choosing Abraham and his descendants He establishes the **validity of all** cultures and languages and His intention to communicate with humanity through the individual heart language, expressed through diverse cultures. As we follow the story of God's people we see two principles at work. Firstly, the making of a single identifiable "people of God" which is distinctively different to the nations around them, and secondly a welcome to those who recognised that distinction and seek to be identified with them. From the mixed multitude of the Exodus, through Rahab, and Ruth to Isaiah's great vision of the nations coming to Jerusalem, the Old Testament emphasises these two principles. In the New Testament the distinctiveness and comprehensiveness of the People of God is seen in both the ministry of Jesus and the mission of St. Paul.

While individual cultures are distinctive they all have in common a symbiotic relationship with language. Which requires the gospel to be multicultural, cross-cultural, inter-cultural and

¹ Berger, Peter L., *The Sacred Canopy*, Anchor Books 1967

² Compare Calvin on Genesis, with Goldingay's "*Israel's Gospel*", and Smith & Carvill's "*The Gift of the Stranger*"

supra-cultural. As well as multilingual, cross-lingual and inter-lingual. Christian mission therefore has to present the gospel within this milieu. It is contingent on those cultures, which in turn are defined by their use of language. The gospel therefore cannot be expressed in a single propositional proposal that is applicable to all nations, tribes and tongues, for then the glorious song of the redeemed in Heaven would be expressed mono-linguistically. The implications of this for mission are enormous. It means that there is no 'simple gospel message' at the core of evangelism. Salvation is a series of historical interventions by God which are recorded in the contingencies of the culture and language of those who experienced them. Thus the themes of Salvations recorded in Scripture, of which there are many, build a coherent picture of the mission of God and humanities involvement. The Gospel has to be expressed within separate linguistic and cultural contexts.

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