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THE FIRST PEOPLE'S SIN IN THE DESCRIPTION OF GEN 11, 1—8

Comments on the Genesis do not assign any major theological importance to the description of the dispersion of the peoples over the whole world. Usually the description is regarded as a folk, aetiological story explaining the variety of human languages. We are more interested in the deeper sense of the story: after the Flood mankind manifests growing pride. Therefore contentions and misunderstandings grow, too. In such a way God foils arrogant enterprises or, more exactly, such enterprises foil themselves, according to God's law.

Other commentators stress the historicity of the story. The description of the building of the city (vv2—4) is taken from the Mesopotamian realities. The tower is often identified with Etemnanki, the tower-temple in Babylon.

I. Difficulties of interpreting Gen 11, 1—9

1. a) In the last verse we come across the name Babel¹. According to this verse the text explains the source of the name. The proposed etymology is connected with the contents of vv1—8. But this etymology is incorrect². The association with Hebr. *balal* (confounded) could only come into existence in a Hebrew milieu. On the contrary the realities of the story prove that it was written in Mesopotamia. If so, this association could be made during the long formation of the biblical tradition as a gloss to the older text Gen 11, 1—8.

A redactor did not understand the old story and wanted to add an explanation. Vv1-8 show no traces of adaptation to v9. This fact suggests that the text Gen 11, 1—8 was placed in the form as it is known at present in J or even in the Genesis and v9 was added later. The best explanation seems to be as follows: the author of the gloss spoke Hebrew, he knew the troublesome variety of languages in Babylon and he disliked the city for its pride. Such circumstances point to the period of the Exile in Babylon when the ziggurat was being rebuilt there³.

¹ The use of "Babel" in this place derives from Vg. LXX: *Synchysis*.

² S. Łach, *Księga Rodzaju*, Poznań 1962, 315.

³ C. Jakubiec, *Pradzieje biblijne — teologia Genesis 1—11*, Poznań 1968, 108.

b) Some other arguments prove the inauthenticity of v9. They point to the contradictions between v9 and the contents of vv1—8. According to v8 the building of the city was stopped and the inhabitants scattered. Meanwhile Babylon existed and was powerful. The sentence „Yahwen dispersed them from there over the whole earth”⁴ v8) is repeated in v9 as if somebody wished to stress he was talking about the city from vv1—8. That would have been obvious for the author of the whole, but it was not obvious for the author of the gloss. An intentional parallelism cannot be considered because there are no such recurrences in vv1—8. Furthermore v9 contrasts with the symmetry between the description of the sin in vv1—4 and the description of the punishment in vv5—8, which make an independent aetiology.

According to the text, Babel had to be first city in the world. If it was not, the punishment of the dispersion would be unnecessary. But according to Gen 4, 17, Enoch was the first city and according to Gen 10, 10, Babel existed among other cities.

The story belongs to J tradition. Universalism is an attribute of J. The text in vv1—8 has universal features. If so, v9 expresses particularistic opinion of a late Hebrew author.

The verse 9 must be isolated from the whole story, which has been included in the inspired texts much earlier and which contains its own theological conceptions. Vv1—8 are an independent part of the Primeval History. Their contents and their place in the whole composition of the Genesis can be valuable sources for the theology.

2. The presence of Mesopotamian realities as well as the presence of the problem of sin are beyond any doubt. But what was the essence of the sin described in vv1—8? When did it take place?

a) The building of the city does not seem the sufficient reason for God's punishment. A. P a r r o t draws particular attention to this fact⁵. Nowadays giant buildings are erected, but even the most severe moralists do not forbid the builders to be proud of their work. The Genesis approves of human efforts, ordering to subdue the earth. As for the ziggurats, they were erected from the deepest religious motives (as gothic cathedrals). There was no reason for the punishment.

The city is mentioned first and the tower belongs to its description. There are only a few words concerning it (v4, v6): „a tower with its top in the sky” (the subsequent words concern the whole enterprise). So the mention about the tower simply describes the city as a large one, possessing a big ziggurat. Moreover, the bibli-

⁴ Quotations from Gen are taken from: *Genesis*, transl. E. A. Speiser, The Anchor Bible, New York 1964.

⁵ A. P a r r o t, *La tour de Babel*, Paris 1954.

cal city remained unbuilt, while Mesopotamia was full of cities with Babylon at the top. God's punishment seems completely ineffective⁶.

The motives of the builders mentioned in the text seem strange, too. The newcomers to Mesopotamia could have built the city to defend themselves or to rule over the conquered territory. The text tells about something different, about making a name and avoiding the dispersion.

b) Commentators maintain that „the whole world" (v1) means only „Mesopotamia with its surroundings". „The same language" could be a remembrance about the unity of Semites⁷. But the variety of languages is much older, of course. The Semitic author could be aware of it. The Semites coming to Mesopotamia (v2) met other people there, having their own languages. The variety of languages in Mesopotamia with surroundings had lasted for a very long time. The period of the unity of languages must have seemed very ancient for the Mesopotamian author.

As for "the whole world" we can admit that the "geographical horizon" of the author was rather narrow. But he surely heard about the lands around Mesopotamia. He included them into "the whole world". The then people imagined the earth as a giant discus. The expression "the whole world" could be understood as "the whole (inhabited) surface of the flat earth".. If so, the author consciously tells about all the people, not about any single group. It contrasts with the Mesopotamian realities used in his description.

c) The variety of nations in Mesopotamia was obviously connected with a gathering of nations, not with their „dispersion over the whole earth". V7 suggests the people were concentrated and the earth was prepared for colonization. Such a situation could take place shortly after the creation of people or after the Flood. Nevertheless the story is placed at the end of the biblical prehistory.

3. The localization of the story in this very place of the Genesis seems accidental. It could be placed much earlier. Mankind before the Flood was already numerous, developed and quarrelled, too. Then the lingual misunderstandings should appear. Suppose a redactor believed Noah was the sole father of mankind, without any metaphors. Then the description should be placed before the Tables of Nations which told about numerous cities (Babylon including) and about some details of the dispersion over the world.

⁶ C. Destermann, *Genesis, I: Teilstand Genesis 1—11*, Neukirchen 1974, 727.

⁷ S. Lach, *op. cit.*, 309f.

The Tables of Nations simply describe the world from the biblical time (*terminus ad quem* of dispersion).

Gen 11, 1—8 cannot be a commentary to the Tables of Nations. The dispersion in Gen 11 is presented as a sudden and compulsory punishment. The dispersion in the Tables of Nations is natural, gradual, long-lasting and positive (or at least neutral) from the moral viewpoint. These two opinions are contradictory.

II. The attempt of solution

All these difficulties lead many authors to the conclusion that the text does not tell about any definite city or historical fact. The building of the city is the picture of a sin — and not its historical description. But what was the essence of the sin? With the reference to the preceding remarks I shall try to prove that all the difficulties could be removed or explained by the theory assuming that the subject of the story is a primeval people's sin, presumably identical with the sin described in Gen 3.

1. a) The beginning of the story with the words "the whole world had the same language and the same words" surely directed the reader's (or rather hearer's) attention to the extremely ancient times, prior to any recorded history. "The whole world" means „all the people". Suppose "all the people" means „inhabitants and neighbours of Mesopotamia". This territory was a mosaic of nations during the biblical period. Such a situation seemed to be everlasting for the then people.

Some exegetes find a metaphor there, translating *úapah* not as "the same language" but rather as "the same idea, aim". Such an understanding is doubtful in the face of the explanation "the same words" (*debarim ahadim*)⁸. Besides, the period of unity and unanimity in Mesopotamia was equally unimaginable as the period of the same language.

Concluding: the author consciously puts the story in prehistory. He has explained it in the first sentence.

c) N. S. Kramer has stressed the similarity between Gen 11, 1—8 and the Sumerian text about Enmerkar and the ruler of Aratta⁹. At the beginning of this text we find a description of the golden age. The people of this age speak one language! As a result of a quarrel between gods Enki and Enlil the confounding of speech takes place and other disasters, too.

The biblical author could use this theme, replacing the quarrel between gods with the conflict between people and Yahweh. It

⁸ S. Łach, *Powstanie języków w świetle Pisma św. (Rdz 11, 1—9)*, *Zeszyty Naukowe KUL* 4/1961/ nr 3, 9f

⁹ N. S. Kramer, *The Babel of Tongues. A Sumerian Version*, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88/1968/108—111.

would mean that Gen 11, 1—8 describes the beginning of mankind and the loss of the Paradise. The genetical connection between both texts cannot be proved. Nevertheless we gain a valuable argument that the golden age was associated with the unity of language.

c) In v2 we read "as the men migrated from the east". Hebr. *miqqedem* occurs also in Gen 2,8: "a garden in Eden, in the east". This similarity seems to have small meaning, because in Gen 11,2 "men migrated from the east" and Gen 2,8 describes their dwelling place. Nevertheless *miqqedem* can be translated „at the beginning"¹⁰. Both texts could tell about the beginnings of mankind.

d) At this point, an objection could be raised. The composition of the Genesis argues for the later dispersion. The story is obviously placed many years after the Flood, a very long time from the first people. Nevertheless it has proved to be independent of the whole contents of the Genesis. The genealogies, bringing the whole history together, omit those nine verses. The text is not linked with persons, cities or actions mentioned before. It contains no name. The preceding chapters connect every action with the named person or at least with the named group (Gen 6, 1—4). Hence we should first analyse the internal contents of the story and only then explain its function in the composition of the Genesis.

2. The story links the time of human unity with the existing dispersion of nations. The change was caused by an act described as a building of a city. This building is a picture of a sin. What kind of sin was committed by the people?

a) Let us analyse the contents of vv2—4. Their author lived in Mesopotamia. The land was full of cities with temples on ziggurats. The agricultural territories were dependent on the cities. When a sole king ruled over the whole land, the cities nevertheless retained some autonomy. In such a land a building of a city by a group of people must have been understood as an attempt of gaining autonomy and independence. The people of „the whole world" had no rival in it — except Yahweh. The building of the city by all mankind is a picture of an act of independence of God, an act of autonomy¹¹.

b) "To make a name for ourselves". Hebr. *sem* can be translated as "renown", "fame", "sign", "monument", because the word in question possesses a wide meaning. In all those cases pride is the source of such desires. For Semites, "name" was a synonym

¹⁰ Translations omit this possibility, but it can be found in the dictionaries e.g.: Koehler-Baumgarten, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros*. Leiden 1953, 823.

¹¹ "Auto-nomy" derives from Greek "own-law" — it suggests the independence of state, according to our text.

of "person". It expressed the essential nature of its bearer determined his attributes¹². If so, a making of a name for oneself is an act of self-determination. Such an act also implies full autonomy and independence of God — because only God may determine human nature, person, name.

c) "Nothing that they may presume to do will be out of their reach". According to the author, the people wanted to get the power independent of the power of God.

d) "A tower with its top in the sky". The ziggurats were described in cuneiform texts as "ties" between the earth and the sky. Their names (Etemenanki, Duranki etc.) hinted at that¹³. Moreover the firmament seemed to be low for the then people. Accordingly the mention about the top in the sky was quite natural for a Mesopotamian. Hebrew redactors did not consider that fact. Their interpretation could be only a monotheistic one. If somebody believes Yahweh is the only master of the sky, he will consequently regard the whole enterprise as a great sin. The sky belongs only to God, to Yahweh. An enormous building was intended as a way to become gods. The sinful pride is a main motive of the work.

We have found in the story the description of human pride, disobedience, desire of self-determination and usurpation of God's rights. We can find the same sins in the description of the first people's sin in Gen 3. In both instances there is only one sin, which gives a sufficient reason for the punishment depriving people of a possibility to do, whatever they want.

All the people committed the sin and all the people were responsible for it, because they have commonly sinned (comp. Rom 5, 12). The unity of sin expressed in common decision and common work is stressed stronger in Gen 11 than in Gen 3. But also the sin described in Gen 3 was a social one, as committed by two persons.

3. What is the role of Gen 11, 1—8 in the composition of the Genesis? If we want to explain that, we must change the popular division of this book into "the first 11 chapters" and "the story of the Patriarchs". The genealogy from Shem to Abraham (Gen 11, 10—26) does not belong to Primeval History. It is used for a solemn introduction of Abraham¹⁴. The first part of the genealogy of Abraham (Gen 5) has two functions. It links Abraham with Adam through Noah (solemn introduction). It is also used to place particular events taken from J in a historical setting. In such a way the history of Abraham has been mixed with the Primeval History.

¹² X. Léon-Dufour, *Słownik teologii biblijnej*, Poznań 1973, 322f.

¹³ W. Röellig, *Der Turm zu Babel*, in: *Der babylonische Turm*, München 1975, 43; C. Westermann, *op. cit.*, 728.

¹⁴ C. Jakubiec, *op. cit.*, 110.

The traditional division of the Genesis attempts to be an historical one. The birth of Abraham is a turning point. Still the theological-literary division is correct. Gen 11, 10—26 belongs entirely to the story of Abraham. Gen 5 belongs to both parts. As for Primeval History we can find in it: a) opening account of creation from P (Gen 1, 1—2, 4a); b) first people, their sin and the collection of information about mankind after the sin from J (Gen 2—10); c) the story of the building of the city which resulted in the dispersion of nations (Gen 11, 1—8).

4. The above division suggests that "The Building of the City" concludes a large work describing the creation of people, their sin and its effects. The brief text Gen 11, 1—8 is used as a summary — it contains the descriptions both of the sin and its far-reaching effects. It can be compared with the technics of inclusion¹⁵.

We can find in chapters 4—10 an account of the growing contentions, misunderstandings and the dispersion of Adam's descendants, from his sons on. If the effects of the act described as the building of the city can be found among the effects of the first people's sin, this act can be identical with the sin from chapter 3.

5. Now we can compare the descriptions of the sin from Gen 3 and Gen 11:

- in both instances the events occurred at the beginnings of mankind,
- in both instances the people committed similar sins,
- the effects of both acts are partially identical,
- the composition of the Genesis suggests that Gen 11,1—8 is the conclusion of chapters 3—10.

The Hebr. text of Gen 11, 1—8 came into being as a story about the first people's sin, explaining some of its effects (internal evidences). Yahwist and the redactor of the Genesis understood the story in the same way (composition).

III. Gen 11, 1—8 and the teaching about the Original Sin

1. We put as first the description of Gen 3, because the Tradition, teaching about the first sin in history, has been interested only in this text. Moreover this description is more extensive than Gen 11, 1—8, which can be discussed rather as a supplement. Both descriptions present the same essence of the sin, but they bring into relief the different problems connected with it.

Gen 3 uses many symbols: the garden, the tree of knowledge, the tree of life, their fruits, the serpent. They are used in the

¹⁵ D. J. Clines, *Theme in Genesis 1—11*, "Catholic Biblical Quarterly" 38/1976/495.

description on the sin to express the internal phenomena — the temptation and accepting it. There are no such symbols in Gen 11, 1—8. This text uses the realities taken from the milieu. A group of people builds a city. The reader knows the place of action and the methods of building. The intentions of the builders are understandable to him. The description concerns the exterior aspects of the resistance to God. The author analyses no psychical experiences and he does not know the Tempter, being interested only in the final result of these processes — pride and desire of full autonomy.

2. The desire of autonomy and of independence seems to be the main motive of the sin in Gen 11, 1—8. This fact is worth commenting on.

The desire of independence is a good desire when we think about the independence of violence, experienced in mutual relations between people. The image of Yahweh in the Genesis is anthropomorphic, which can be a source of mistakes. We must remember the image of God given by the whole Bible. The independence of a jealous demiurg is good, but the independence of the best Father is absurd, wrong and evil. Such independence is not liberation, but its opposition — slavery of sin.

The independence or autonomy need not be synonymous to the resistance or to the war against God. "Making a name" and the idea of building the city do not imply it. Gen 11 describes activity which ignores God. The people misuse freedom. They aim at the full autonomy and they gain it, but the gained autonomy turns against themselves. The breach with God entails the breach between the people. Every nation, every man wants to be independent and opposes somebody else's activities. It yields the discord and the dispersion. It should be noted that everybody who gets into a relationship with another person, thus makes himself dependent on it thereby. Love is the best example of that. The desire of independence proves contradictory to the relationships between the people. The punishment of dispersion is the logical result of the sin of ignoring God.

In such a way the overgrowth of human autonomy brings about the lack of love of God and neighbour. Nevertheless love is the supreme value and the desire of autonomy should be subjected to it. If absolute freedom were the greatest value, we would have ascertained that *L'enfer, c'est les autres* because "others" destroy or limit egocentric "freedom". The freedom should aim at love in the most natural way — freedom should choose love like the eye chooses beauty, without any compulsion. Meanwhile freedom of sinners aims at selfconfirmation and becomes autonomy. Such freedom seems to be independent value, worth protecting from others and from God as well.

3. According to the Semitic thinking putting the first cause in place of secondary ones, God is the direct author of the punishment depriving the people of the fruits of sin. The reasons of God's dissatisfaction are presented anthropomorphically (a fear of the power of mankind). The punishments are immediate and their succession is illogical — the confounding of speech precedes the dispersion. Such simplifications suggest the author wants to teach about the close connection between the sin and its effects.

4. The element of desire of autonomy in the essence of the Original Sin can be used to explain its heredity, to join the "historical" first people's sin with the Original Sin. We know namely the Original Sin has wounded human nature but we cannot explain exactly how that occurs.

One act of independence of God committed by the first people ("the emigration from the Paradise on the earth") entails the same situation of their descendants in a quite natural way. They inherit the outside conditions arisen from the sin as well as its essence — the excessive desire of self-determination. This injury of human nature manifests in egocentrism, which disregards other persons and seeks independence from everything, when it fulfils its own will. Baptism does not remove this state, although ensures God's forgiveness.

We can find the desire of independence of everybody both in the first people's sin ("the building of the city") and in the hereditary sinful state of mankind, which we feel in ourselves ("the dispersion"). Gen 11, 1—8 links these two aspects of the Original Sin.

5. The description of the building of the city presents the people wanting to gain a temporal and material success. It is linked with the essence of the Original Sin, too. If the people disregard God, they will look for the prosperity on the earth. This aim cannot be reached because the people fight with each other after their breach with God.

6. If the sin of the people building the city is identical with the first parents' sin, the ancient idea that the dispersion of nations is a "typological contrary" to the unity in Christ seems worth considering. The Original Sin has destroyed the unity of mankind with God and with itself. The disagreement of nations and the differences between their languages are effects of the lack of unity. Christ, new Adam and Head of redeemed mankind, restores the unity and removes hate and quarrels. The descending of the Holy Spirit and gift of languages restore the unity of speech¹⁶.

¹⁶ J. Daniélou, *La division des langues. Essai sur le mystere de l'histoire*, Paris 1953, 49—50.

7. Gen 3 informs about one couple at the beginning of sinful mankind whereas Gen 11 suggests a large number of the first people. That leads to the problem of monogenism.

The encyclical "Humani Generis" prefers the monogenism rejecting the polygenism. The thesis about the monogenism is linked with the lack of arguments for polygenism in Revelation. Polygenism is declared as not harmonized with the teaching about the Original Sin — but after all monogenism is not proclaimed as a dogma¹⁷.

The text Gen 11, 1—8 interpreted as the description of the first people's sin could be a lacking testimony for polygenism, but this possibility must be considered very carefully. Let us notice that the main argument against monogenism refers to the figurative style of Gen 2—3. The genre of this description does not allow to confirm whether Adam and Eve are real parents of human race or whether they are a metaphor of a group of first people. The same argument can be advanced against finding polygenism in Gen 11, 1—8. The building of the city is only a picture. The style of this text proves figurative, too. The author does not want to write history but to understand the problem of sin. The thinks in the categories of his epoch, so he uses them in the text.

These arguments lead to the thesis that both texts have figurative character. Inspired authors knew nothing about the number of people at the beginning and they were not interested in it. They wanted to explain that the people unanimously committed one sin, what their fault was like, what were the effects of the sin. The Holy Scripture informs about the relation between God and man and not about any scientific facts. The theological knowledge about the beginning of mankind must contain data about its relation to God but it need not contain the information, how many people were gifted with the immortal spirituality. Even if it contained such information, it would not be comparable with the scientific data, which concern the physical side of man and not his ability to contact with God. The knowledge about the number of the first people cannot explain the problem of their sin, of their breach with God.

¹⁷ "As for the so-called polygenism, the sons of Church are by no means entitled to the liberty [of discussion] of this sort (...) it is not apparent at all, in what way such a sentence could be harmonized with that, which sources of the revealed truth and the Magisterium of the Church teach about the Original Sin", DS 3897, transl. of mine. Comp. T. B. Łukaszyk, *Związek dogmatu grzechu pierwotnego z monogenizmem*, Warszawa 1976, 8—17.