BABEL AND MIGRATION

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Category: Observations

I'm currently reading Migration and the Making of Global Christianity by Jehu Hanciles (spoiler alert, it's ver good). As the title suggests it focuses on the central role of migration in Christian history. In so doing, it allows a reframing of certain well known Bible stories. As a translator, I've always focussed on the story of Babel in Genesis 11 from the standpoint of narrative. As these quotes show, Hanciles sees the story through the lens of settlement, migration, diversity and security. I find his analysis very convincing.

> *The story of Babel in Genesis 11:1â€“9 forms part of the biblical tradition that portrays primeval history and represents the culmination of the story of human beginnings presented in Genesis 1â€“11. In other words, its function is etiologicalâ€”it seeks to explain human origins. The Babel episode, in fact, is said to mark the climax of the creation story. Essentially, it provides an explanation for the irrevocable cultural diversity that marks our common humanity; and it leaves readers in no doubt that this dimension of human existence is rooted in migration and global dispersion. It also provides major theological insights into the formation of human societies and cultural pluralism...*
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> *In a revision of the â€œpride and punishmentâ€ approach, contemporary scholars who read the text through the lens of liberation or postcolonial hermeneutics see a powerful demonstration of divine liberation from evil empire. Babylon, some note, means â€œgate of the godsâ€ and symbolizes not primeval aspirations but efforts by contemporary entities to usurp powers that belong to God. The story thus highlights the human propensity for imperial or universal domination commonly manifested in the ambitions of nation-states or the actions of tyrannical regimes. The powerful are wont to build economic or political towers of Babel that â€œperpetuate the unjust economic order of the world and control the destiny of humanity.â€ Godâ€™s action not only thwarts the â€œproject of false unity of dominationâ€ but also liberates â€œthe nations that possess their own places, languages, and families.â€ ...*
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> *In other words, â€œthe act of defeating the â€˜imperial projectâ€™ is at the same time an act of deliverance: the peoples can return to their own nation, place, and language!â€ ...*
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> *In this regard, it is the city, not the tower, that holds the key to understanding the story. For the decision to build a city reflected decidedly human concerns for settled existence, stability, and security...*
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> *The buildersâ€™ strivings, adds Ellen van Wolde, â€œseem not to be directed vertically but rather horizontally.â€ At the heart of the story, therefore, is not sinful human rebellion but rather a natural human resistance to migration and the forces of dispersion, evidenced in the expression â€œlest we be scattered abroad on the face of the earthâ€ (Gen. 11:4, KJV)...*

> *All this is to say that the divine response in this story is corrective, not retributive. Clearly, the condition of having the same language and location was not of the buildersâ€™ making; it was â€œthe earthâ€™s original situation.â€ To attribute hubris or sinful pride to the building project is therefore dubious; and this fosters a misreading of the divine action…*
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> *The divine response is corrective because human intent (non-migration and universal cultural sameness) collided with divine purpose. The buildersâ€™ self-preoccupation (v. 4, â€œfor ourselvesâ€) contrasts sharply with the divine purview (vv. 8, 9, â€œthe whole earthâ€). This clash of perspectives is embedded in the storyline: preservation versus propagation, tribalism versus pluralism, singularity versus multiplicity. From this perspective, the divine plan for humanity is not one language but a plurality of languages, not one location but global dispersion, not a single name or cultural identity but a multiplicity of cultures. In this regard, the divine rejection of a single locationâ€”â€œfrom there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earthâ€ (Gen. 11:9, ESV)â€”is strikingly evocative of the modern â€œout of Africaâ€ explanation of human origins…*
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> *The â€œCity of Babelâ€ story, then, establishes that the multiplicity of languages, peoples, and nationalities dispersed throughout the world reflects divine purpose, not divine punishment. That this central truth mattered to the ancients is striking, since linguistic diversity was even greater in the ancient world than it is today.*

I will review the book as a whole in a few days.