

Pentecost as a Challenge to the Roman Empire's Values and Ethos

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Multiple Languages as a Challenge to Rome's Ethnocentrism

Luke's story of Pentecost (Acts 2: 1-41) that takes place in Jerusalem challenges several of Rome's imperial values and ethos. Luke suggests that the uneducated apostles spoke in other languages on the day of Pentecost and that the many God-fearing Jews who were gathered in Jerusalem that day were surprised to hear them in their own native languages.¹ This story of people speaking in other languages and being understood by everyone is depicted as a fascinating and unlikely phenomenon, akin to a miracle. On a less explicit level, Luke seems to suggest that this phenomenon was potentially a threat to Rome's imperial worldview and political propaganda.

I grew up in the Southern part of India and spent considerable time in several major cities in South India. A common phenomenon in those cities is that multiple languages are often spoken simultaneously by different groups of people. Many people living in these big cities have the capacity to communicate in at least two or three languages that are distinctly different from their native language. Even in instances wherein the different linguistic groups do not understand each other's language but rely on a common language, each language finds acceptance in the public square, whether it is spoken by many or few. Given this background and life experience, my first encounter with the story of Pentecost caused me to wonder why the reality of people being able to communicate across cultural and linguistic differences would have seemed implausible and even threatening to the Roman empire.

The Roman empire is known to have perpetuated the notion that effective communication was unlikely to be possible in contexts where multiple, vastly different languages were in currency. It attempted to impose a unitary language as the *lingua franca* throughout the empire.² Although administrative convenience and efficient communication were the stated reasons for introduction (and imposition) of such a common language, it appears that the real reason was political. It was the empire's hegemonic move aimed at promoting one language as the normative at the expense of the rest and the introduction a specific vision of identity.³ The empire sought to promote a monocultural identity tied to a single language and saw the presence of multiple languages as a problem that needed to be resolved.

In the story of Pentecost, Luke is recalling the image of wind and fire in the context of multiple languages being spoken and, more importantly, understood by everyone who was present in Jerusalem. A possible implication of this story is that Luke is associating multi-lingual communication with the presence of the divine. Luke's comparison of the presence of multiple languages and ethnicities to fire and violent wind takes on a new meaning in light of the extreme devastation caused by the recent wild fires in California and the destructive winds during recent hurricanes.

Luke's readers would have known that fire and wind are two vital elements of nature that are powerful and crucial to sustaining life, but that fire and wind can also be deeply destructive if they are not put to good use and nurtured carefully. Luke's

point in using the imagery of fire and wind to characterize heteroglossia—multiple languages—might be that diversity in terms of languages or race and ethnicities can work either way too. Diversity can be put to good use with care and attention but can also be dysfunctional when not celebrated and appreciated fully.

The Roman empire learned it the hard way. It was Rome's mishandling and a superficial celebration of diversity that, in part, brought the empire down. Rome invested a great deal of time and resources promoting a monolithic culture and undertook an extensive propaganda insisting that smooth and efficient functioning of the empire necessitated promotion of linguistic and cultural homogeneity at the expense of marginal languages and identities. The story of Pentecost showcases a seemingly impossible phenomenon in which communication across disparate languages happens smoothly and people(s) of diverse nationalities share a space—literally and figuratively—with little difficulty. In doing so, Pentecost undermines Rome's case for cultural and linguistic homogeneity.

One of the central ideas that underlies Pentecost, one that was also at the center of vernacularization during Reformation, is that God can be expressed in multiple languages (2:11). And precisely because God is often expressed in multiple languages, no single language can articulate the divine fully. Similarly, no single identity can capture or express the fullness of humanness. Luther recognized vernacularization as a necessary precondition for a fuller realization of life in the spirit. For him, accessibility was an essential aspect of democratization of the Church and for dismantling spiritual elitism. In this way, both Pentecost and Reformation decenter and deprivilege the dominant language and identity and affirm humanity in its various expressions. Prior to the Reformation, the Church's approach to vernacular languages was influenced by the story of Babel that saw multiple languages as a manifestation of God's judgment. Reformation allowed people to move past that paradigm and embrace vernacular languages in the spirit of Pentecost. Just as Pentecost reversed Babel, the Reformation took theology and scriptures to marginal languages. But it also brought those marginal languages to the center of theological discourses, with the result that the vernacular languages and identities are no longer tokens at the table, but essential elements in theological discourse.

Luke tells us that when the uneducated Galileans spoke, everyone heard them in their own language. When did these Galileans learn so many languages? The Greek word used for multiple languages is *heteroglossia*: heteroglossia is about each seeking and acquiring an ability to speak the language of the other and about making an effort to enter the spaces of the other. It is equally about seeking and acquiring an ability to understand the other. In enabling people to speak in other tongues (2:4), the spirit makes them cross linguistic boundaries and learn, on a deeper level, languages whose presence and worth they would not have acknowledged hitherto.

Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian literary theorist, argued powerfully and eloquently that languages are rarely just languages. They represent worldviews, ideologies, and cultures. They represent the histories and stories of communities as well as the communities and their identities. In his view, languages are “specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings, and values.”⁴

Bakhtin also talks about the centripetal and centrifugal proclivities within any given language or linguistic system. These proclivities are shaped by various social

and political forces in their contexts. As he put it, “thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles, and so forth, all given a bodily form.”⁵

Bakhtin argued in a related context that “languages do not exclude each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways.”⁶ An extension of this notion is that profound and fuller communication can happen only when multiple languages are spoken. Living in the oppressive Stalinist regime, he also suggested that authentic truth not only accommodates divergent perspectives but actually requires more than one perspective.

Whereas the empire saw presence of disparate worldviews represented by multiple languages as a problem, the story of Pentecost reflects a political phenomenon that challenges Rome’s centripetal approach to languages, especially in the margins of the empire. But the story also highlights the divine role in attenuating Rome’s hegemonic way of dealing with marginal identities and relegating them to non-existence. Seen this way, Pentecost is a theo-political phenomenon that offered people theological, linguistic, and epistemological imagination to envision relationships between different languages in entirely new ways.

The story of Pentecost envisages a scenario in which communication across languages happens easily, and people(s) of diverse nationalities and ethnicities co-exist with little difficulty. In doing so, the story challenges Rome’s monocultural ethnocentrism and attenuates its imperial propaganda that smooth and efficient functioning of the oikoumene necessitated promotion of linguistic and cultural homogeneity.

Peter Invites People to Turn Their Backs on the Empire

At end of Peter’s preaching, people who were gathered in Jerusalem asked him and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter instructed that they “repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” Peter’s use of the words “repentance” and “baptism” reminds readers of another key figure at the beginning of Luke’s gospel who issues a similar call to his audience. Luke tells us that John the Baptist went around the Jordan “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3). John’s ministry was about preparing and about making straight his paths. There too, the crowd asks John the Baptist, “What should we do then?” John suggests that “anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” And he exhorts tax collectors not to collect any more than required (Luke 3:15-16).

There is a parallel between John’s ministry and Peter’s ministry, as both preached a baptism of repentance. Both offered a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Both had remarkable success with crowds. John is calling on the religious and political elite from Judea and Jerusalem to repent. *Metanoia*, the Greek word for repentance, literally means taking on a new mindset. It has the connotation of making an about-turn and changing course. John was informing his audience that participation in the new kingdom requires a new worldview and a transformed mindset. It also requires them to turn their backs on everything in which they have been complicit and from which they might have been benefiting. Seen in this light, John, and similarly, Peter

are inviting the audience to abandon the empire and to turn their backs on it.

In the story of Pentecost, Peter's exhortation to people to turn their backs on the empire should be interpreted also vis-à-vis its subsequent literary context. Luke tells us that immediately after this call for repentance for people and exhortation to "save yourselves from this corrupt generation," three thousand people were baptized and added to the Church. We learnt that, as an expression of their baptismal commitment and membership in the Church, "all the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need."⁷ Such sharing is consistent with the call John had given (Luke 3:11-12), but it would also have been counter-cultural within the context of Rome's ethos and socio-economic structures.

In a political and economic context where people generally subscribed to zero-sum worldview—the notion that one loses when another gains—and consequently had the proclivity to hoard goods, the early Christian practice of sharing possessions was radical. It ran contrary to the ethos of the empire, and its success among early Christian communities as an alternative economic paradigm potentially undermined the empire's ability to promote zero-sum worldview throughout the empire.

Rome also promoted paradoxical economic structures with the result that there was excessive wealth at the top and abject poverty at the margins of the empire, especially in the colonies. The empire justified such structures by arguing that prosperity at the top was made possible by poverty at the bottom.

Rome's new propaganda suggested that in order for privileged communities to maintain their quality of life, those at the margins would have to sacrifice their dignity, basic necessities, and even life itself.⁸ From a Roman viewpoint, there is a causal connection between the two layers.⁹ Prosperity for the elite was achieved by subjecting those at the margins to abject poverty and by denying them their dignity and right to live their lives in accordance with their own vision and values.

When one interprets the story of Pentecost within this political and economic context, Peter is not only inviting people to turn their backs on Rome's problematic worldview but is also exposing its oppressive economic structures. He is exhorting them to adopt a radically new mindset in their interactions with others. Within the synoptic gospels, Jesus performs the economic miracle of feeding thousands of people. In Acts 2, the believers themselves perform a great miracle of sharing. By imitating Jesus' example and adopting an ethos of sharing, the believers are modeling discipleship. More importantly, the story of people sharing their possessions directly challenges oppressive economic practices and moves people away from a worldview that convinced them their welfare can only be ensured at the expense of others.

Peter Exposes the Myth of Rome's Invincibility

Having persuaded his listeners that the real power lies with Jesus who is "both Lord and messiah" (2:36-37), Peter issues a bold invitation to them to abandon the empire and repent ("turn around"). He manages to convince thousands to turn their backs on the empire and its ethos and shift allegiance to this new empire so that they may live.

In highlighting how Jesus, whom Rome crucified unlawfully, defied the power of the empire by rising from the dead, Peter calls attention to the limits of imperial power. The notion that a marginal Galilean would have triumphed over the empire

would have been deeply threatening to the empire, but Acts 2 (and rest of the book) suggests that Rome's grip on power was shaky precisely because it was abusing it. Acts thus becomes a defiance of the power of the empire whose power has its limits.

Within the current political context, there are at least two factors that resemble the socio-economic phenomena that are depicted in the story of Pentecost. First, as many have highlighted, the current administration's attempts to "make America great again" often has the tone of concentrating power in the hands of the dominant racial group. It can have the effect of positioning one group as the normative and thereby marginalizing all the other groups. Lately, such attempts have been taking the form of increased White privilege and stringent policies against immigrants, refugees, and Muslims. It appears that the political administration has been operating with the assumption that diversity is a problem and that in order to safeguard interests of the dominant community it is fine, and perhaps even necessary, to disregard the basic rights of oppressed communities such as immigrants, Muslims, and African-Americans. Any prophetic preaching within this political context needs to challenge such a zero-sum worldview and attenuate the administration's attempts to perpetuate the privilege already enjoyed by the dominant community. Will the United States, that tried to model itself akin to the Roman empire, learn from the latter's mistakes, or will it repeat the same mistakes and reap the same disastrous consequences?

The second factor pertains to the administration's economic policies such as the massive tax cuts that have been shifting wealth from the margins of the society and concentrating it into the hands of a few. The administration has been perpetuating the notion that its economic policies aimed at enriching the rich are in the best interests of everyone. If Peter or John the Baptist were to preach in this context, they would likely expose the fallacy and inefficacy of such policies that shift wealth to the top as immoral and unsustainable. They would also preach in a way that energizes people to turn their backs on the empire's economic platform and agenda. No doubt the current American empire would feel threatened by such preaching, but that is often what preaching does.

Notes

1 Within the context of first-century Palestine, "Galilean" was often a code word for "uneducated" or "unsophisticated."

2 Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "The Roman World" in Susan Alcock and Robin Osborne, eds., *Classical Archeology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 376-378.

3 Ibid. p. 380.

4 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 291.

5 Ibid, 292.

6 Ibid, 291.

7 Luke 2:44-45.

8 Kurt A. Raaflaub and Mark Toher, *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and His Principate* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 338-339.

9 The scene depicted in the lower tier occurs in places such as Germany and France.

10 John Dominic Crossan, *Roman Imperial Theology*, in *In the Shadow of the Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Response* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 67-68.