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Let All the Peoples Praise You: Biblical Studies and a Hermeneutics of Hunger

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> Let all the peoples praise you, O God, let all the peoples praise you. (Ps. 65:7)

If all the peoples are to praise God, surely the praise must be in their own speech, their own culture, their own specific place in the world. And if the field of biblical studies is to contribute to this global chorus of praise, it requires a hermeneutic of hunger.[1] I borrow the phrase "hermeneutics of hunger" from Dorothee Sölle, the late German theologian, who said that theology was in need of more

1. Dorothee Sölle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara Rumscheidt and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 45–49.

than a hermeneutic of suspicion, more than an interpretive mode that critiqued the text to reveal its oppressive powers. To that I add, more than a historical-critical analysis that leaves the text in the past as if its meaning for today were self-evident or, more likely, outside the scope of scholarly work. What Sölle proposed by a "hermeneutic of hunger" is an interpretive stance that engages the religious content of Christian traditions and feeds the world's physical and spiritual hungers. In a similar vein, I agree deeply with the admonitions that the Bishops' Synod addressed to Catholic Biblical Scholars.[2] "While current academic exegesis, including Catholic exegesis, operates on a very high level with regard to historical-critical methodology . . . , one cannot say the same regarding study of the theological dimension of the Biblical texts."[3] The result is that the Bible becomes for its readers a book only of the past, by now incapable of speaking to our present. Under these conditions, biblical exegesis risks becoming no more than historiography and the history of literature.[4] This ecclesial statement and, in different ways, Sölle's hermeneutics of hunger come close to naming what has always engaged me most about our field, that is, the hermeneutical conversation between what the text meant and what it might mean now in specific places, among particular peoples.[5] In the strictest sense, the purpose of our work as a learned society, related in a variety of ways to Roman Catholicism, is the conversation between ancient text and present world, the

2. Synod of Roman Catholic Bishops, 12th Ordinary General Assembly, "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church," *Instrumentum Laboris* (Vatican City, 2008), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20080511_instrlabor-xii-assembly_en.html.
3. *Instrumentum Laboris* 25.
4. "The second consequence, perhaps even more grave, is the disappearance of the hermeneutics of faith indicated in *Dei Verbum*. In the place of a believing hermeneutics, a positivistic and secular hermeneutics insinuates itself, denying the possibility of either the presence, or the accessibility, of the divine in the history of humanity" ("Word of God," prop. 26).
5. See Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Crossing Borders: Biblical Studies in a Trans-Cultural World," in *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 322–37.

discovery and creation of meanings. Whatever philological, historical, archaeological, sociological, and comparative ancient Near Eastern materials are brought to bear on interpretation, the text's power for a wider audience than scholars consists, at least in part, in being put back together as a literary and theological document. Some among us already do this in a wide variety of forums. My thesis is this: biblical studies can better fulfill its promise to church and world if more among us were to expand our methods beyond historical-critical approaches toward a hermeneutic of hunger. To do so may require a transformation of perspectives something akin to what has been happening in feminist biblical studies for decades. Feminist interpretation engages in global conversations about the meanings of texts and has learned what many among us now take for granted—that interpretation is both illuminated and obscured by the interpreter's cultural contexts.[6] To make my argument, I turn to the so-called tower of Babel text in Gen. 11:1-9 (hereafter Genesis 11). After a brief rhetorical analysis of the passage, I present a recent scholarly scuffle about the text, occurring largely in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, followed by readings from other parts of the world that engage in a self-conscious hermeneutics of hunger. I conclude with reflections on the passage from my perspective as a Roman Catholic woman in the United States.

6. See recently D. M. Premnath, ed., *Border Crossings: Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007); and R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Still at the Margins: Biblical Scholarship Fifteen Years after the Voices from the Margin* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2007).

Genesis 11:1-9

A. Translation

Part 1: Human Actions

v. 1. Now [ויהי] all the earth [כל הארץ] [had] one tongue [שפה אחת] and the same words.

v. 2. Now [ויהי] when they migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar. And they settled there [שם].

v. 3. And they said [ואמרו] each to his neighbor [רעהו]: "Come [הבה], let us make bricks, and let us completely burn them." And they had [להם] bricks for stone, and they had [להם] bitumen for pitch.

v. 4. And they said [ויאמרו]: "Come [הבה], let us build for ourselves [נבנה-לנו] a city and a tower [עיר וימגדל] with its head in the heavens. And let us make a name for ourselves [ונעשה-לנו שם] lest we be scattered [נפוץ] upon the face [על-פני] of all the earth" [כל הארץ].

Part 2: Divine Actions and Conclusions

v. 5. And YHWH came down [וירד] to see the city and the tower [את-העיר ואת-המגדל] that the children [sons] of humankind had built.

v. 6. And YHWH said [ויאמר]: "Look, they are one people with one tongue [ושפה אחת] to them all. And this is the beginning of what they will do,[7] and now nothing will be cut off from them of all they plan to do.

v. 7. Come [הבה], let us go down [נרדה] and let us there [שם] baffle[8] [ונבלה] their tongue [שפתם] so that each will not understand the tongue [שפת] of his neighbor" [רעהו].

7. Barry Bandstra, *Genesis 1–11: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*, Baylor Handbook on the Hebrew Bible (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 565.
8. Everett Fox's term (*The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy: A New Translation with Introductions, Commentary, and Notes*, Schocken Bible 1 [New York: Schocken, 1995], 49) for the Hebrew verb with the primary meaning "to confuse," which also mirrors the sound play of the text.

> v. 8. YHWH scattered [ויפץ] them from there [שם] upon the face of [על-פני] all the earth [כל-הארץ]. And they stopped building [לבנת] the city [העיר].
>
> v. 9. Therefore, the city is named [שמה] Babel [בבל][9] because there [שם] YHWH baffled [בלל] the tongue [שפת] of all the earth [כל-הארץ]. And from there [ומשם] YHWH scattered them [הפיצם] upon the face of [על-פני] all the earth [כל-הארץ].

In my view, Gen. 11:1-9 is best understood as a language world, a thing of beauty, a work of art that refuses reduction to a single meaning. Language forges the unity of the people in the text; words unify the text itself, even as God's words move everything in the opposite direction toward the baffling of speech.[10] Although there are many ways to divide the text, I identify two units: Human Actions (vv. 1-4) and Divine Actions and Conclusions (vv. 5-9).

B. The Verbal Structure

One way to approach the literary structure of the passage is through its many verbal repetitions. Words repeat within each unit, and across the two units.

Words Repeat within Each Unit

Words Repeating within Part 1

"Now," ויהי (vv. 1 and 2) "And they said," ויאמרו (vv. 3 and 4) "For themselves," להם (v. 3 twice) "Come," הבה (vv. 3 and 4)

9. Bandstra (*Genesis 1–11*, 575) translates "he called its name" on the grounds that YHWH is the presumed agent, as in the next clause.
10. The text has at work both centripetal and centrifugal literary forces, according to Bernhard W. Anderson, "The Tower of Babel: Unity and Diversity in God's Creation," in *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 165–68.

Words Repeating within Part 2

"Came Down," וירד and נרדה (vv. 5 and 7) "Baffled," ונבלה and בלל (vv. 7 and 9) "YHWH," יהוה (vv. 5, 6, 8, 9 [twice])

Words and Phrases Repeating across the Two Units to Fashion a Unified Whole

"All the earth," כל-הארץ (vv. 1, 4, and vv. 8, 9) "Upon the face of," על-פני (v. 4 and vv. 8, 9) "One tongue," שפה אחת (vv. 1, 6), "their tongue," שפתם (v. 7), and "tongue of," שפת (vv. 7, 9) "Scattered," נפוץ (v. 4) and ויפץ, הפיצם (vv. 8, 9) "Said," "And they said," ויאמרו (vv. 3 and 4) and ויאמר יהוה (v. 6) "Build," נבנה (v. 4) and לבנת (v. 8) "City," עיר (v. 4) and העיר (v. 8) "Name," שם (v. 4) and שמה (v. 9) "There," שם (v. 2) and משם, שם (vv. 7, 8, 9 [twice]) Whatever might be the origins of Genesis 11, and whatever original sources might now thread through it, the passage is a unified composition[11] of two balanced parts with a conclusion in v. 9. The text is a silken weave of words, a fabric of threaded language about language—artful, economical, evocative, turning back upon and echoing itself in a narrative précis about speech. Because language is so closely interwoven across the passage, it is hard to imagine that Genesis 11 could be a compression of two previously existing sources, as Hermann Gunkel proposed.[12] Despite his appreciation of source criticism, Joel S. Baden also challenges Gunkel's assessment of the text as an amalgam of two sources.[13] "Genesis 11:1-9," he writes, "shows none of the hallmarks of a

11. See Joel S. Baden, "The Tower of Babel: A Case Study in the Competing Methods of Historical and Modern Literary Criticism," *JBL* 128 (2009): 209–24, here 217, for a source-critical look at the text's composition.
12. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark Biddle, 3rd ed., 1910, Mercer Library of Biblical Studies (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997) 94–102; and see Baden, "Tower of Babel," 209–24.
13. Baden, "Tower of Babel," 217–18.

composite text: contradictions, doublets, or other narrative inconsistencies."[14]

C. The Narrative Flow of the Passage

Part 1 (11:1-4)

Even as words unify the text, the narrative flow confuses it. Part 1 begins in harmony, unanimity of tongue, one set of words for "all the earth." The migrating population moves as one to settle "there" (שם) in the land of Shinar. The settlers think together and then speak together as one undifferentiated mass, with the intensifying action verb "Come," combined with the cohortative "let us make." "Come, let us make."[15] The unified thinkers and speakers now become unified makers of bricks and bitumen. Again, they speak with an action verb and cohortative, "Come, let us build for ourselves a city and tower," and with these words, the unified thinkers, speakers, and makers (v. 3) become unified builders (v. 4). Finally, with a third cohortative, they tell why they should do these things: "Let us make a name for ourselves lest we be scattered." They are a singular community, an undifferentiated collective, an entity, uniform in thought, word, and deed. The act of building city and tower is itself a form of language, that is, an expression of desire and fear "lest we be scattered" (v. 4). To realize their desires and forestall their fears, all must think, speak, and act alike. Uniformity is a shield against unspecified dangers. Among them, there is no report of conflict, disharmony, or disruption; there is no other thought, no other voice. Such is life in Babel.

14. Ibid., 217. Baden challenges literary criticism for failing "to prove" the unity of the text.
15. According to Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor (*An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990] 34.5.1a, 21 [575]), "The effect of the plural cohortative is frequently heightened by a verb of motion in the imperative, which functions as an auxiliary or interjection" (574).

Part 2 (11:5-9)

Divine speech in part 2 unravels all the human efforts in part 1. Rather than bringing further cohesion, divine language baffles, disturbs, and destroys. YHWH "comes down" to see what humans have built, and YHWH "said" (ויאמר) what the narrator has already said: "They are one people with one tongue" (שפה אחת). To this, YHWH adds the observation that this is only the beginning of what they can think, scheme, or plan to do, however one translates זמם. Next, YHWH continues to speak and also acts, and each of these engagements with humans has a consequence. YHWH's speech mirrors the grammatical pattern of human speech, employing the cohortative twice and repeating the hortatory action word: "Come, let us go down [נרדה] and let us there baffle [ונבלה] their tongue" (v. 7). The consequence of the divine tongue-baffling is that humans cannot understand their neighbors. But for YHWH, baffled tongues are not enough. In v. 8, YHWH acts to scatter (ויפץ) the people from there (שם) upon the face of all the earth (כל-הארץ). The consequence of divine scattering is the end of city building (v. 8). The story could end here, but three interrelated conclusions summarize it and explain it (v. 9):

1. The city is named Babel.
2. There the tongue of all the earth is baffled.
3. And from there, humans are scattered upon the face of all the earth.

The city and tower disappear, and building ceases, not because of divine destruction but because of divine scattering. When YHWH scatters the humans, everyone—*every single human being*—becomes a migrant, a refugee, and a displaced person who cannot understand the language.[16] Genesis 11 celebrates language through verbal repetitions and narrative flow. Its compressed lines; parallel

constructions; wordplays; and repeated sounds, words, and phrases make it as much poetry as prose. Possible meanings appear as tones and hints in a rippling swirl of sounds and words.[17] A perfect postmodern template of the world, the text baffles us by defying reduction to a single meaning, even as it begs for a hermeneutic of hunger.

D. Confusions of Meanings

The text contains confusions that enact and perform the baffling of tongues. Nearly every line of Genesis 11 admits of multiple meanings, meanings left open by the text that lead readers along a path of ambiguity. Is the tower, for example, a work of hubris[18] or merely a city-tower, such as the tower of Shechem (Judg. 9:46)?[19] Does the people's making a name for themselves signify self-promotion in place of God,[20] or is it the means of acquiring honor by which people protect themselves?[21] Is the baffling of languages punishment for sin or a celebration of diversity of language and cultures? Vigorous debate about these and related questions enlivens current scholarly work on the passage. Where the text refuses definitive meaning, however, these interpretations each arrive at a

16. See Jean Pierre Ruiz, "Abram and Sarai Cross the Border: Reading Genesis 12:10-20 with People on the Move," in Premnath, *Border Crossings*, 15–34.
17. See sound plays noted by Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 47: "*Hi eimar* becomes *hiomer*," and *sham, shamayin,* and *shem*, and *balal* and Babel.
18. André LaCocque, "Whatever Happened in the Valley of Shinar? A Response to Theodore Hiebert," *JBL* 128 (2009): 29–41, here 36; and John T. Strong, "Shattering the Image of God: A Response to Theodore Hiebert's Interpretation of the Story of the Tower of Babel," *JBL* 127 (2008): 625–34, here 633.
19. Ellen van Wolde, *Words Become Worlds: Semitic Studies of Genesis 1–11*, BIS 6 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 80–109; Theodore Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," *JBL* 126 (2007): 29–58, here 33–41. See Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, Heritage of Biblical Israel 1 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1966), 73.
20. LaCocque,"Whatever Happened," 36.
21. So Hiebert, "Tower of Babel," 40.

claim for the "one true meaning" of the text. My survey of four recent interpretations finds a great diversity of exposition among them but a common philosophy underlying them that arises from scientific historical-critical approaches.

1. Ellen van Wolde's semiotic reading concludes that Gen. 11:1-9 is not the traditional crime-and-punishment tale that much interpretation claims for it.[22] It is not about human sin, or even much about humans at all. Rather, the scattering of humans expresses divine intention to "fill and cultivate" the earth, a commission in Gen. 1:28-29 that humans have avoided by settling in one place.[23] The text is an ecological expression that reveals the primeval history (Genesis 1–11) to be about God's relation to the created world, in which humans play a minor role, indeed.
2. Building on van Wolde's literary work, Theodore Hiebert agrees that the multiplication of languages in Genesis 11 is not punishment for the sin of human pride.[24] Like others, he notes that the tower, with its head in the heavens, is merely a tall building, mentioned only once as part of the city. The text, instead, celebrates Babylon as the cradle of civilization and the origin of diverse cultures in which God revels.
3. John T. Strong disagrees with Hiebert's diminishment of the tower.[25] Tower building in Genesis 11 is, for Strong, an act of idolatry as suggested by ancient Near Eastern victory stelae (Ashur-nasir-pal of Assyria stela [883–859 BCE]).[26] These stelae established a king's authority over conquered territory and often

22. Van Wolde, *Words Become Worlds*, 80–109.
23. Ibid., 102.
24. Hiebert, "Tower of Babel," 29–59.
25. Strong, "Shattering the Image of God," 625–34.
26. Ibid., 630.

bore the king's image. The tower of Genesis 11 is such a construction, upon which humans put their own image in the place of the divine image. According to Strong, this means that God's creation of humankind in the divine image (Gen. 1:26) has been a crashing failure. After this, only Israel, not humankind, is made in God's image.[27]

4. On source-critical grounds and with the interpretive conviction that "reception history is determinative," André LaCocque also holds to a crime-and-punishment reading.[28] The tower building is an act of prideful idolatry that plays a climactic role in the Yahwist's agenda to depict the growth of sin, later reversed in Abraham. Diversity of language and culture is the consequence of sin.

Each of these recent interpretations is insightful, lucid, and elegant, and each compels assent on some points. Yet all of them attempt to tame the text, to find one meaning, nail it down, and "prove" it objectively with the sharp eyes of the scientific exegete. Van Wolde, for example, writes, "*The point* is not the perspective of the people, but the perspective of the earth."[29] Hiebert says, "The text is exclusively about the origins of cultural difference and not about pride and punishment at all."[30] And Strong declares that the story "conveys the message that God has given up on all humankind." Only one people (i.e., Israel) is "to be made anew in that image."[31] Ironically, van Wolde objects to scholars who "present their work as 'objective datum' that is immediately evident to everyone" (she refers to Jan P. Fokkelman).[32] She adds in her critique, "Ordering

27. Ibid., 633–34.
28. LaCocque, "Whatever Happened," 29.
29. Van Wolde, *Words Become Worlds*, 102.
30. Hiebert, "Tower of Babel," 31.
31. Strong, "Shattering the Image of God," 628.

of the stylistic data seems in fact to be largely dependent on the exegete."[33] These studies of Genesis 11, a text that baffles attempts at one meaning, demonstrate that illusions of scientific objectivity (conscious and unconscious!) still prevail in our field, perhaps in a kind of tower building that obscures rich layers of meaning in the text and the role of interpreters in finding it.[34] Feminist biblical studies and postcolonial criticism point in other directions.

Conversion to the World

When feminist biblical study reappeared in the middle of the twentieth century, it was driven by a hermeneutic of hunger.[35] It sought and continues to seek words of life for women and others excluded both in life and in text. Euro-American feminists used methods we learned in the academy and arrived at our own universalist interpretations. But it did not take long to discover that white middle-class women were reading as if we had discovered the truth for all women. We were assuming that women readers and believers were one uniform entity everywhere, and that the text had one meaning heretofore hidden in the male domain. Soon other women in the United States—*mujerista*,[36] womanist,[37] and Asian American[38]—and women from the two-thirds world[39] began to

32. Van Wolde, *Words Become Worlds*, 89; J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis*, SSN 17 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975).
33. Van Wolde, *Words Become Worlds*, 89.
34. Van Wolde (ibid., 205) acknowledges the reader's participation in meaning making across her study, yet she still holds to the view that the exegete, as opposed to the theologian, "does not focus on the current problems of mankind but on the text." Yet her ecological reading clearly has its catalyst in the current problems of humankind.
35. Kathleen M. O'Connor, "The Feminist Movement Meets the Old Testament: One Woman's Perspective," in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld*, ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 3–24; see the expansion in perspectives across the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza from her groundbreaking *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) to later works, including *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context* (Boston: Beacon, 1998).

reveal the entrenched biases of our race, class, and national identities, hidden behind our privilege, and to underscore how our conceptions of power relations and gender roles afflict our work. Often bitter and acrimonious, these exchanges about texts continue to reveal to Euro-American women who we are, to expand notions of communities with whom we read, and to demonstrate how texts yield interpretations dependent, in part, on contexts of interpreters. This is what the wider field of biblical studies in general has yet to appreciate, though the conversation has been going on for decades, and the culturally specific nature of interpretation is an agreed premise among many of us.[40]

A. Critical Tools Are Necessary to Protect the Text's Strangeness

In emphasizing the role of reading contexts in a hermeneutic of hunger, I am not advocating abandonment of historical-critical methods as the sine qua non of our work. Lawrence Boadt said it well in a recent review in the *CBQ* of a book by John Barton.[41]

36. Feminist and postcolonial literatures are enormous and growing. On *mujerista* interpretation, see especially Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Communication as Communion: Elements in a Hermeneutic of *lo cotidiano*," in Day and Pressler, *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World*, 27–36.
37. Nyasha Junior, "Womanist Biblical Interpretation," in Day and Pressler, *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World*, 37–46.
38. Tat-siong Benny Liew and Gale A. Yee, eds., *The Bible in Asian America*, Semeia 90/91 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002).
39. See Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), esp. 111–24.
40. See the oeuvre of Fernando F. Segovia, including *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000); and Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., *Reading from This Place*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003); and Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995); Vincent L. Wimbush, *The Bible and African Americans: A Brief History*, Facets (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).
41. Lawrence Boadt, review of John Barton, *The Old Testament: Canon, Literature and Theology: Collected Essays of John Barton*, SOTSMS (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), *CBQ* 71 (2009): 665–66.

> Exegesis has its scientific and critical role of unlocking the historical setting, finding the sense of the text's words in original contexts, and analyzing how the text measures up against the standards by which literature is often measured . . . to enlighten the plain meaning of the text. . . . To prevent ideological kidnapping of the meaning of biblical books, scholarship must preserve rigorous neutrality.[42]

Distance from the text is the goal, of course, but neutrality is not possible. To think so is to be trapped in an ideological argument. Historical-critical studies are essential because they remind us that interpretation of ancient texts is a cross-cultural conversation, that the text is "a stranger," foreign to us, whose meaning is hidden by distances of language, worldview, culture, material realities, and profound gaps in human experience. At the same time, Mikhail Bakhtin, Paul Ricoeur, and other postmodern literary critics, philosophers of language, postcolonialists, and feminists urge us to modify our scientific, dualistic assumptions about texts and interpreters.[43] They have convinced many among us of the culturally situated, linguistically multiple, polyglot nature of all texts and interpretations. The problem for interpreters is the abundance of significance that cannot be exposed by one reader or one cultural approach. Genesis 11, by its own multiplicity of meaning, calls for readings from various cultural perspectives. Although both van Wolde and Hiebert employ an implicit hermeneutics of hunger with their respective themes of ecology and diversity, neither does so with the expressed consciousness of the ways in which cultural

42. Boadt, review, 665, 666.

43. See Pam Morris, ed., *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, and Voloshinov* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994); Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). See further Mark Rathbone, "Unity and Scattering: Toward a Holistic Reading of Genesis 11:1-9 in the South African Context," in *Genesis*, ed. Athalya Brenner, Archie Chi-Chung Lee, and Gale A. Yee, Texts @ Contexts (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 99–106 ; and Solomon Avorti, "Genesis 11:1-9: An African Perspective," in *Return to Babel: Global Perspectives on the Bible*, ed. Priscilla Pope-Levison and John R. Levison (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 17–26.

environments contribute to their readings. Interpretations of Genesis 11 from the postcolonial world proceed differently. Here, among others,[44] are three readings from other cultural situations; they exhibit various levels of critical sophistication, but all three engage self-consciously in a hermeneutic of hunger. The late J. Severino Croatto, historical critic from Argentina, agreed that Genesis 11 is a crime-and-punishment tale. The proud sinner, however, is not universal humanity but Babel—the Babylonian empire of the sixth century—with its concentration of power; its oppressive control; and its efforts, in the pattern of empires, to impose a uniform language, normative worldview, and culture.[45] This uniformity imposed by Babylon is the problem that God sees and punishes by destroying the city and tower. José Míguez-Bonino expands Croatto's interpretation in light of Ecuadoran history. Seven years after Pizarro arrived in the new land, the population of native Incans in Ecuador was reduced from seven million to seven hundred thousand.[46] The Spanish conquest imposed a new language and eradicated native tongues. The loss of their languages denied the people everything that gave meaning to life—stories, traditions, songs, words of music, words of family, words of love. Míguez-Bonino sees in Nimrod, the mighty warrior and founder of Babel in the table of nations (Gen. 10:8-12), additional evidence of imperial oppression. But God goes down to thwart the empire's "project of false unity" and to destroy the tyranny of one language, one culture, one economic system.[47] Choan-Seng Song argues something similar from the context of Taiwan.[48] Genesis

44. Genesis 11:1-9 was used to support apartheid in South Africa. See Rathbone, "Unity and Scattering"; Avorti, "Genesis 11:1-9: An African Perspective."
45. J. Severino Croatto, "A Reading of the Story of the Tower of Babel from the Perspective of Non-Identity: Gen. 11:1-9 in the Context of Its Production," in Segovia and Tolbert, *Teaching the Bible*, 203–23.
46. José Míguez-Bonino, "Genesis 11:1-9: A Latin American Perspective," in Pope-Levison and Levison, *Return to Babel*, 13–16.
47. Ibid., 15.

11 is not about conflict within God, threatened by human building, but about conflict within the human community, caused by dictators, religious authorities, and the economically powerful, whose towers and cities have created untold miseries. God demolishes this tower because God stands among women and men who suffer and endure hardship under such towers. These interpreters do not have the luxury, as we do in the world's dominant culture, of being ideologically neutral. They understand their work as a living, Spirit-driven process that feeds their communities. All of them push matters of empire, while we who read from within the empire hardly notice it because we live in a different reality.[49]

B. A Roman-Catholic Feminist Interpretation

When I think about a hermeneutic of hunger from my context as an American Catholic laywoman and pew sitter, I note that women and men in the church are hungry for a living word to get them through their days and to join them more fully with Christ's body in the world. Finding such interpretation is like finding a treasure hidden in a field, more rare than a precious jewels. Although there are many institutional reasons for this "famine" of the word of God in the land (Amos 8:11), I lament it mightily and wonder what happened to the biblical renewal movement that helped fuel Vatican II and drew many of us to the joys of this work. I wonder if at least some part of the problem relates to the ways biblical studies conducts its teaching and communicates its research, too often leaving the text in history; accepting the dualisms of the university; excluding aesthetics, imagination, and faith from the enterprise; and skipping over the

48. Choan-Seng Song, "Genesis 11:1-9: An Asian Perspective," in Pope-Levison and Levison, *Return to Babel*, 27–36.

49. Since Hiebert ("Tower of Babel," 35) limits himself entirely to the boundaries of this story, he finds it anachronistic to include concerns of empire in its interpretation.

"so what" following upon the rigorous technical work that grounds interpretation. But I have more specific concerns in conversation with this text. Influenced by postcolonial readings, I find Genesis 11 to be a passage that both names the predicament of women and others in the church and reveals a God who creates hope for the excluded. As both source of life and place of oppression, Babel evokes my church. In this passage, Babel is the cradle of civilization, as Hiebert insists, the starting point from which everyone migrates, the source of languages, the place from which Abraham and Sarah's family depart. But Babel is also—for readers of the Priestly version of the Pentateuch, as LaCocque and Croatto remind us—the fierce lion that attacks and destroys Judah, Jeremiah's "foe from the north," the symbol of aggrandizing, oppressive empire. The Roman Catholic Church is surely a source of life; a guardian of justice; and a cradle of faith and intellectual life, religious identity, sacramental teaching, eucharistic practice, and contemplative living that abide thick in my bones. It stands so often with the excluded, the migrant, the hungry, and the burdened. And simultaneously, it is an empire—a city and tower of settled thinking, of uniform planning and acting—that seeks to control languages of praise, that negates women's lives and voices, that prohibits speech about subjects it designates as taboo, that cuts off the words of anyone who disagrees on matters affecting their own most intimate lives. It lives with blindness about sexual bodies and gives room for the repressed to return in monstrous forms. The ecclesial city and the tower operate too often from the desire to control and from fear of the world's multiple tongues of faith and many voices of praise. It seeks to impose one language upon "all the people," squelching the Spirit at work among the laity, and even among clerics and episcopal leaders. The city and tower with its head in the heavens tries to impose false unity, relies on the tongue of authority and submission, and can be deaf to other ways

of speaking of the living God. But the theology of Genesis 11 offers a positive vision. This text both hides and reveals God in a baffling glimpse of a divine cohort. It leaves divine motives unnamed behind actions and words. This God acts by coming down among us to see, to look around at the towers and cities of uniform thinking. This God speaks to unsettle, to breed confusion, and to overthrow the dominance of one tongue, one way to speak, one way to understand our neighbors. This is the "unsettled and 'unsettling' God"[50] who removes the shields of protection erected when everyone must think, speak, and act alike. Yet God does not annihilate the builders of city and tower. The baffling God of Genesis 11 acts against fears that muzzle praise. God disperses them over the face of the earth, where they and we become migrants, displaced people who do not know the language of the new place. There we can listen, learn, and meet God anew among the peoples in all their beauteous, blessed, and baffling tongues. Together, perhaps we may create new languages of interpretation and praise, and we may learn that the languages of praise and of interpretation are multiple. This text anticipates the Pentecost scene in Acts 2, where the Spirit comes in tongues of fire. "The crowd gathered and was bewildered [baffled], because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each" (Acts 2:6; NRSV). "All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'" (Acts 2:12). I do not think we yet know, but Acts 2 does not reverse Genesis 11;[51] it fulfills it in the glorious profusion of fiery tongues. "Let all the peoples praise you, O God."

50. See Walter Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).
51. Contra Richard I. Pervo (*Acts: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2008], 61), who asserts that Acts reverses the "linguistic disunity" of Babel, but that Acts 2 leaves intact the languages of the Jews gathered in Jerusalem from all over the world. The new unity is one of understanding in the midst of multiplicity.