Nina Gładziuk

Babel

DOI: 10.35757/CIV.2009.11.03

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.
And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

Genesis 11:1-9[1]

The story told in Chapter 11 of the *Book of Genesis* conceals many mysteries. The united people intends to build a city and

Nina Gładziuk – professor at the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw (Philosophy of Politics Department) and chair of the American Studies at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw.

[1] The biblical quotations are taken from the King James Version.

a tower which is meant to soar above all. The whole tale is particularly secular: we hear neither about Babelians asking God for something, nor about them acting against his prohibitions. When God descends to earth to see their work, he is angered by the fact that "now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do," rather than by the godlessness of the builders. He is angered, then, by the politics of people: their ability to form unions and act in unison. The people of Babel not only resemble architects planning a joint venture, but also builders who are capable of building effectively according to those plans. What is the source of this unusual power of collective action? It is said about the city and the lofty tower that Babelians aim to raise: "let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." One may read this as an indication of the locative ontology belonging to the political community of people: the city is a triumph over space, it towers above it and binds it to heaven to create one political cosmos. It is in the first verse of chapter 11 that we learn that people of Babel were "of one language, and of one speech." We do not hear about any controversies, divisions or differences between the city's inhabitants. Despite their great multitude, they act like a united and unanimous subject. At any rate, it is God who says explicitly: "the people is one, and they have all one language; and [for] this [reason] they begin to [build]."[2]

The parable of Babel indicates in a simple way two conditions for a political community being possible: spatial localism that opposes the dissociative power of space and a common language that makes all agreements and contracts possible. These two conditions strike a familiar note to anyone educated in the ancient Greeks. The Greek *zoon politikon* is not only a being capable of self-government in the spatially limited sphere of *polis* (as opposed to the immeasurable despotism of Asia), but also a being who speaks a tongue comprehensible to his fellow citizens, which

[2] The words in square brackets render the meanings implied in the Polish translation of the Bible [trans.].

differs from the babbling *bar-bar* that fills the bazaars of barbaric nations. Such is the classical reading of the Babel tale which belongs to the breviary of republican wisdom.

But does it exhaust the mysterious message of the biblical parable? It is still unclear whether God has punished people for the blasphemy of forgetting him in their political venture, or whether he has punished them because every political bond is based on pride and disobedience that outrages God. Isn't every lofty tower erected by man a *coup* against the sole majesty of God? Is this not the reason why Thomas Hobbes calls Leviathan "the father of all the children of pride"? The state is a pyramidal condensation of human ambition and, therefore, it is always possessed of some godlessness. Human hubris embodied in the lofty tower is upset by the destruction of the city and condemnation of people to Diaspora in all directions of the world. God has to suppress the pride of mortals who have aimed for an immortal work; in a way reminiscent of Greek tragedies, it is a just return for overstepping the boundaries. It is this thread – suggesting that each political ambition be accompanied by the temptation of omnipotence i.e. tyranny – that makes this Hebrew tale Hellenistic as well. A *polis* will not last without the all-balancing measure which is the law. It is thanks to principles obeyed that the massive buildings erected by human hand stand and, therefore, it is principles that must become the architectonic rules of the *polis*. Back in Plato's *Timaios* there appears the idea of God as a building master: *arche-tekton*. He has much in common with the old-testament Yahweh, about whom we learn from Isaiah:

> Therefore thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste. Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet (*Isaiah* 28,16-17).

If we read Babel as a story told not only in chapter 11 of the *Book of Genesis*, but also in the previous chapter, then a completely

different political parable emerges. In chapter 10, devoted to the genealogy of post-deluge humanity, we learn about Nimrod, Ham's grandson, who was to be "a mighty one in the earth." Not only was he a mighty man, but also a mighty hunter. The narrator of the chapter even informs us that such was Nimrod's fame in the vast lands of Mesopotamia that a saying was coined: "wherefore it is said, Even as Nimrod the mighty hunter before the Lord." Verse 10 states explicitly:

> And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. Out of that land went forth Asshur, and builded Nineveh, and the city Rehoboth, and Calah, And Resen between Nineveh and Calah: the same is a great city (*Genesis* 10,10-12).

Nimrod was, then, a builder of many cities, including the great ones. It is for the first time in the history of post-deluge humanity that the epithet "great" appears in the Bible. Therefore, if chapter 11 is read in the light of chapter 10, then the *pluralis maiestatis* of "Go to, let us build us a city and a tower" loses the tone of a republican cliche and starts to sound like a command of the Babylonian autocrat, whose "kingdom," as we read, "was Babel."

The effective power of collective action, as described in chapter 11, rises with each step, culminating in a state of anthropocentric intoxication. In the same spirit, Flavius Josephus develops his tale of Babelians in book I, chapter 4 of his *Antiquities of the Jews*. He states that they disregarded God's advice, "imagining the prosperity they enjoyed was not derived from the favour of God, but supposing that their own power was the proper cause of the plentiful condition they were in."[3] According to Josephus, this pride of depending on themselves only was aroused by Nimrod, "a bold man," as the author calls him:

> He persuaded them not to ascribe it to God, as if it was through his means they were happy, but to believe that it was their own courage which

[3] Flavius Josephus: *Antiquities of the Jews,* Book I, chapter 4, trans. William Whiston, Internet Sacred Text Archive (www.sacred-texts.com).

> procured that happiness. He also gradually changed the government into tyranny, seeing no other way of turning men from the fear of God, but to bring them into a constant dependence on his power.[4]

The continuation of the story is well-known:

> The multitude were very ready to follow the determination of Nimrod, and to esteem it a piece of cowardice to submit to God; and they built a tower, neither sparing any pains, nor being in any degree negligent about the work: and, by reason of the multitude of hands employed in it, it grew very high, sooner than any one could expect; but the thickness of it was so great, and it was so strongly built, that thereby its great height seemed, upon the view, to be less than it really was. It was built of burnt brick, cemented together with mortar, made of bitumen, that it might not be liable to admit water. When God saw that they acted so madly, he did not resolve to destroy them utterly, since they were not grown wiser by the destruction of the former sinners; but he caused a tumult among them, by producing in them diverse languages, and causing that, through the multitude of those languages, they should not be able to understand one another. The place wherein they built the tower is now called *Babylon,* because of the confusion of that language which they readily understood before; for the Hebrews mean by the word *Babel,* confusion.[5]

The figure of Nimrod exemplifies not only a tyrant who brings submission to the people, but also the one who blasphemies against God:

> He also said he would be revenged on God, if he should have a mind to drown the world again; for that he would build a tower too high for the waters to be able to reach, and that he would avenge himself on God for destroying their forefathers.[6]

In Josephus's account, the building of Babel is a rebellion against God brought to extremes: the lawlessness of the many who have forgotten about God is exploited by the lawlessness of the one, ending in the change of the political world into massive

[4] *Ibidem.*
[5] *Ibidem.*
[6] *Ibidem.*

slavery and technological *hubris*. According to Josephus, Babel is a kind of meteorological tower which is supposed to give Nimrod and his people shelter in case of another deluge. Let us note here that archeological research in the areas of Mesopotamia has discovered many traces of unique sacred monuments: a tower in the shape of a step pyramid. Sumerian builders had in their language a name for such a pyramid which was built of burnt clay brick and oddly truncated at the top: it was *ziggurat*.

Babel is then an elementary political parable; but how should it be read? It has two dimensions or perhaps two parts: the first is the history of Babelians before God's intervention in its republican or despotic version, the second is the fate of Babelians as a result of this intervention. A state of anarchy and turmoil, in which the story ends, might be read as a punishment for both the practice of the people's rule and the practice of the tyranny. In other words, the parable of Babel may equally support those of republican persuasions and their opponents, of the royalist persuasions. It should not surprise us that Babel became the favourite *topos* of controversies launched between the defenders of the monarchy and the advocates of republic in 17th-century England.

Sir Robert Filmer undertakes an endeavor that seems exceptionally problematic. He strives to argue that the absolute power of a king springs from the legitimate inheritance of the monarchy from Adam, the natural forefather of humanity. Proving this would be a virtuosic refutation of the dangerous, then widespread belief in the artificial (as it was contractual) genesis of legitimate power. John Locke, whose first *Treatise on Government* takes up a principled debate with Filmer, believes chapter 11 of the Book of Genesis to be the *experimentum crucis,* testing the coherence of arguments from *Patriarcha*. Let us remember that chapter 11 ends with the picture of humanity dispersed into various nations, speaking separate languages. This is why Locke asks Filmer the following question: How could one

indivisible monarchy have produced many separate kingdoms if power was inherited according to the indisputable principle of the patriarchate, that is, transferred from the father unto the first-born son? Why, after the deluge, was it not transferred onto Shem, Noah's eldest son, but divided among the three brothers? Locke's polemic strategy is accurate: if the king is the heir of Adam and his fatherly authority, then Filmer's theory cannot pass the test of chapter 11. Locke ridicules his adversary's belief that, after the destruction of Babel, seventy-two nations came into being under the rule of different sovereigns. According to Locke, the multiplicity of nations, even in the form of kingdoms, is no less than an argument against the viability of patriarchal deduction of power from Adam, the first father. Within the framework of assumptions accepted in *Patriarcha*, the simultaneous multiplicity of sovereigns can only be explained by a revolt of various clan leaders who refused to obey their sovereign, which is not excluded by Filmer himself. He says of the ill-famed Nimrod from chapter 10 that he achieved his imperial power by violence: "seizing violently on the rights of other Lords of Families."[7] If so, then Filmer's work contains three independent explanations of the genesis of the monarchy government: patriarchal succession, vassals' revolt and violent usurpation of power. The last of these makes Filmer risk the thesis that Nimrod "may be said to be the Author and Founder of Monarchy."[8] It does not need to be added that this introduces a glaring contradiction into his reasoning, given the thesis about the patriarchal inheritance of power from Adam.

Locke brilliantly refutes Filmer's argumentation in the *First Treatise of Government*. If it is so, the author argues, that the rightful monarchy emerges from patriarchal succession (which was not proved by Filmer, as it could not be proved) and from vassal

[7] J. Locke: *Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration,* C. Baldwin, London 1824, p. 116.
[8] *Ibidem*, pp. 116–117.

rebellion, and from usurpation via conquest, then the royalist discourse on absolute power also shows the confusion of at least several languages of political validity. Locke concludes:

> But that there should be kingdoms in the world, whose several kings enjoyed their crowns, "by right descending to them from Adam," that we think not only apocryphal, but also utterly impossible. If our author has no better foundation for his monarchy than a supposition of what was done at the dispersion of Babel, the monarchy he erects thereon, whose top is to reach to heaven to unite mankind, will serve only to divide and scatter them as that tower did; and, instead of establishing civil government and order in the world, will produce nothing but confusion.[9]

In opposition to Filmer, Locke himself interprets chapter 11 of *Genesis* as a biblical example of republican government:

> For the scripture tells us Gen. xi. "They said:" it was not a prince commanded the building of this city and tower, it was not by the command of one monarch, but by the consultation of many, a free people; "let us build us a city;" they built it for themselves as free men, not as slaves for their lord and master; "that we be not scattered abroad;" having a city once built, and fixed habitations to settle our abodes and families. This was the consultation and design of a people, that were at liberty to part asunder, but desired to keep in one body.[10]

Babel is a community risen out of free agreement and enterprise of the people joining in to form a state, and not united under some princely prerogative. The *pluralis maiestatis* of verse 4 from the chapter discussed is evidently republican, according to Locke. He does not find any mention of monarchical power: "God himself says they were [one people]; or else they were a commonwealth."[11]

In order to uphold his republican thesis, Locke must read chapter 11 *per se*, that is, without reference to chapter 10. Doing so, he does not reach conclusions that John Milton, an advocate

[9] *Ibidem,* pp. 111–112.
[10] *Ibidem*, p. 114.
[11] *Ibidem*, p. 115.

of the Cromwellian Commonwealth, had drawn before. For the latter, chapter 11 is the climax of the story started in chapter 10. The post-deluge humanity lived in brotherly equality when Nimrod stepped on-stage:

> Till one shall rise
> Of proud ambitious heart; who, not content
> With fair equality, fraternal state,
> Will arrogate dominion undeserved
> Over his brethren, and quite dispossess
> Concord and law of nature from the earth;
> Hunting (and men not beasts shall be his game)
> With war and hostile snare such as refuse
> Subjection to his empire tyrannous:
> A mighty hunter thence he shall be styled
> Before the Lord; as in despite of Heaven,
> Or from Heaven claiming second sovranty.[12]

As we can see, Milton identifies the story of Babel with the history of Babylon, and Babelians with slaves of Nimrod, the first potentate, bearing the crown of a self-declared ruler. Book XII of *Paradise Lost* tells the tale of how Nimrod could not bear the brotherly union of people, how he was driven by the unquenchable lust for power. In contrast to Locke's reading, Babel does not signify here the pride of commonwealth, but a satanic imperial pride:

> But this usurper his encroachment proud
> Stays not on man; to God his tower intends
> Siege and defiance.[13]

Milton's perspective agrees with that of Josephus: the *hubris* of tyranny is not only a coup directed against the free government of people, but also against God's rule. The tyrannous art of division leads to discord among people. Therefore, in order to undo

[12] J. Milton: *Paradise Lost. A Poem*, printed by C. Whittingham, Chiswick 1831, p. 274.
[13] *Ibidem*, p. 275.

the hideous work of Nimrod, God resorts to beating him at his own game: he divides and scatters the consolidated dominion by dispersing its subjects and confusing their language. The latter is more a preventive measure against the absolute subjection of slaves to the despot's commands than a way of restraining people from communicating with each other. Let us stress that it was not the republican Babel but Babylon, Nimrod's dominion, that was punished. In other words, the sin of pride has tyrannous roots, not republican ones. Babel is a parable of monstrous harm that the arbitrary tyranny of Nimrod did to the human capability of brotherly union. Babel is the menacing Babylon which stands as a satanic city, an exact antonym of the new Jerusalem that the puritan community was to build according to God's law.

Having left the Old World's Babylon governed by Nimrods intoxicated by power and pride, the puritans of the 17th century set themselves the task of millenarian character: to build a "city upon a hill," with the awareness that "[t]he eyes of all people are upon us,"[14] as we can read in John Whintrop's *A Model of Christian Charity*. The formula of puritan covenant that establishes a political body is reminiscent of the *pluralis maiestatis* from verse 4, chapter 11 "Go to, let us build us a city…" Only this time the city is not to be built according to human measures, but God's measures, found in the Scripture. If tyranny is a sin against both people and God, then the form of the puritan government must be at the same time republican and consistent with God's law. It must be a covenant made in the face of God and within His constant presence, in order not to make the mistake of the first builders of Babel, who dismissed God. Then, to avoid the discursive confusion that has been the lot of humanity since the destruction of Babel, the new Jerusalem must be built far from the Old World, in the wilderness of the virgin land. Because the

[14] J. Winthrop: *A Model of Christian Charity*, in: *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Norton, New York 1980, p. 13.

Pilgrim Fathers, as American historiography calls them, dissociated themselves from the Old World, it is not they but their compatriots from the British Isles who created the conceptual foundations for a liberal state of law.

Let us go over the steps already taken: confusion that is symbolized by the tower of Babel is a result of a political sin. It is a rebellion that provokes God's punishment. But in what does this rebellion consist? This question troubled those who were engaged in the lively disputes taking place in 17th-century England during the Great Rebellion and in the *postbellum* period. Is the confusion of civil war resulting from the people's rebellion against a monarch's rule, as the royalists believed? Or is it the result of a tyrant's rebellion against the people, as the republican radicals of Milton's stamp wanted? In other words, what is God's punishment symbolized by the chaos that reigned after the destruction of Babel? Is it a punishment for the parliament's unlawful resistance to the king, if we put the question in the context of 17th-century England? Or is it a punishment for the illegitimate claims of the crown allied with papacy against the freedoms of the parliamentary people, as the parliamentarians had it? Who is the real rebel, i.e., the one who introduces the state of war into the political society: the Babelians or Nimrod, the parliament or the king? The bard of the English revolution speaks of Nimrod in this way:

> And from rebellion shall derive his name,
> Though of rebellion others he accuse.[15]

In Milton, Babel becomes a synonym of the tyrannical power rebelling against the subjects, whose rights are constantly violated. Locke agrees with this view:

> For rebellion being an opposition, not to persons, but authority, which is founded only in the constitutions and laws of the government; those, whoever they be, who by force break through, and by force justify

[15] J. Milton: *op. cit.*, p. 274.

> their violation of them, are truly and properly rebels: for when men, by entering into society and civil government, have excluded force, and introduced laws for the preservation of property, peace, and unity amongst themselves; those who set up force again in opposition to the laws, do *rebellare*, that is, bring back again the state or war, and are properly rebels; which they who are in power [...] being likeliest to do.[16]

In a state of chaos, when the entire public order collapses, it is unknown who the rebel is, and this question remains unanswered until the establishment of the *lexarch*, that is, the ruler of the language and, therefore, of the interpretation of the law. This very question occupied the mind of a very original thinker of 17th-century England, Thomas Hobbes. An allusion to chapter 11 of *Genesis* appears in *Leviathan* in the part devoted to speech, where he says:

> But all this language gotten, and augmented by Adam and his posterity, was again lost at the tower of Babel, when by the hand of God every man was stricken for his rebellion with an oblivion of his former language.[17]

Let us note here a particular pattern: Filmer, Locke and Milton agree that the destruction of Babel is the climax of the tale from chapter 11 of *Genesis* – post-deluge humanity initiated a certain political order and met with punishment for it. However, the participants of the dispute differ in their answers to the three spontaneously arising questions: What order was it? Were people punished for introducing this order? Or rather, were they punished for violating an order by introducing another, i.e., for rebelling against an order which was dear to God? Thanks to Locke's exposition, we can see that Filmer's argumentation is a mixture of a few explanations. Nevertheless, the opposing

[16] J. Locke: *op. cit.*, pp. 264–265.
[17] T. Hobbes: *Leviathan,* republished by Forgotten Books 2008, p. 16 (www.forgottenbooks.org).

republican accounts – for instance Milton's and Locke's – are also multifaceted. Babel as a parable remains a riddle. Whoever strives to solve it participates in muddying the waters.

This situation of interpretative confusion is for Hobbes the main moral of chapter 11. Man has irrevocably lost the clarity of Adam's language, that is, he has found himself in a chronic state of ambiguity, in the discursive state of Babel. The discursive Babel creates the framework for a political community, the latter being a way out of the impasse that man falls into because of the former. Without the discursive Babel, there is no need whatsoever to organize a state by the way of a contract. This is why, according to Hobbes, the model for founding a rightful state is found in the Book of Exodus and not in the Book of Genesis. Exodus, chapter 19, describes the making of a federal contract that is a covenant between God and the Israelites:

> But now by the Covenant made at mount Sinai, the consent of each man being had, there becomes an *institutive Kingdome of God* over them. That *Kingdom of God* so renowned in Scriptures and writings of Divines, took its beginning from this time.[18]

However, the Book of Genesis had already enriched the political dictionary of humanity with "that most famous Covenant [...], which is called the *old Covenant*, or *Testament*."[19] Nevertheless, while Abraham should be honored with having created the concept of the "kingdom of God" based on the covenant, the realization of it only came to pass through Moses. The state based on a contract of individuals presupposes the problem of the discursive Babel, and is its solution in the sense that it establishes a sovereign agency of legal interpretation. This is why the figure of Moses has a central meaning in Hobbes's political philosophy. Moses is the *lexarch par excellence*, the only interpreter of the law, the upholder watching over compliance to the contract recorded in the Decalogue.

[18] T. Hobbes: *De cive*, Constitution Society rendition based on the original 1651 edition, chapter XVI, paragraph IX (www.consitution.org,).
[19] *Ibidem*, chapter XVI, paragraph I.

As a political parable, Babel is meaningful for Hobbes only when it is told in reverse: from the ending backward. Babel is not a parable of God's punishment for, respectively, a republican or despotic government, but a parable about the need for a new kind of state in chaotic conditions of pluralism of languages, opinions and religious beliefs. Similarly, it is not an opposition between the republican people and a tyrant, but a dilemma of humanity dissociated into nations and the community dissociated into individuals. Babel provides the terms for a legitimate question about the modern state: If people have irrevocably set themselves at variance, then the only way to remedy this chaos is by establishing, with the consent of each, a sovereign who is at the same time the *lexarch*. Where the Babel tale ends for Locke, Filmer and Milton is the starting point for Hobbes, for the story of building a new Babel as a state based on the widest consent of all, but topped with the lofty tower of an indivisible power that cannot be renounced.

The qualitative difference between a republic and monarchy, which is clear for Filmerer, Locke and Milton, seems to vanish within Hobbes's conceptual framework. In a peculiar passage from *De cive* that is nonetheless coherent with the author's assumptions, we can read:

> It's a great hindrance to Civil Government, especially Monarchical, that men distinguish not enough between a *People* and a *Multitude*. The *People* is somewhat that is *one*, having *one will*, and to whom *one action* may be attributed; none of these can properly be said of a Multitude. The *People* rules in all Governments, for even in *Monarchies* the *People* Commands; for the *People* wills by the will of *one man*; but the Multitude are Citizens, that is to say, Subjects. In a *Democraty*, and *Aristocraty*, the Citizens are the *Multitude*, but the *Court* is the *People*. And in a *Monarchy*, the Subjects are the *Multitude*, and (however it seeme a Paradox) the King is the *People*.[20]

[20] *Ibidem*, chapter XII, paragraph VIII.

Many people, that is, a multitude, becomes the people only at the moment of making a covenant and transferring the power onto the sovereign. This is why the structure of the public power truly reminds of a pyramid; and it is a pyramid that cannot be inverted. Its base is not the people but a multitude of individuals; "the people" exists only in the form of the sovereign will placed at the top of the structure. In this way, neither a rebellion of the sovereign nor a rebellion of the people are possible.

What interests us here is the fact that Babel as a figure of confusion became almost the self-named epithet of 17th-century England. All the participants of the debate that took place during the revolution or the *postbellum* associated Babel with the conceptual chaos of the civil war. The lively "pamphlet war" then brought a pluralistic forum for public opinion in which all the confused languages of politics were equal. When all could read the Bible, everyone could read the story of Babel in their own way. But nothing could reconcile those who read the divine right of kings in it with those who read the divine right of the people in it. As indicated by Sharon Achinstein, a scholar of the English 17th century and the formation of public opinion, the story of Babel represented the struggle between the many languages of political legitimization.[21] In other words, the author suggests that the polyglossia of Babel made it an ideal parable to render the chaos of public opinion. In the 17th century, Babel was seen as a figure of discursive confusion, as the confusion was experienced in the form of fanatical languages of arguing sects. If the biblical narrator read the word "confusion" in the name "Babel," English public opinion saw the link between various proselytes' arguments and "babble." Classic liberal freedoms that were first exercised in the 17th century – independent reading of the Bible, freedom of conscience, thought and expression – were always accompanied by the figure of discursive turmoil summed

[21] Cf. S. Achinstein: *Milton and the Revolutionary Leader*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1994, p. 85.

up in the ominous onomatopoeic sequence coined by one royalist: *Bible, Babble, Babel*.[22]

Liberalism, if the English-speaking world is acknowledged to be its cradle, constitutes an attempt to escape the impasse of the discursive Babel via the legalistic means of the state of law. According to Hobbes, the irreversible multitude of languages makes one ask what public order can reconcile nominalism in the sphere of political opinion with the social Diaspora of individuals released from the bonds of status or corporation. How to build a state while one Christian faith is disintegrating into many sects fighting each other? How to build a state in the chronic pluralism of the social world and multifaceted dissociation of the traditional community? This is why Babel as a figure of confusion provides the primary conceptual capacity for the liberal organization of the world. Let us repeat once again: for participants in the debate between monarchy and republic, which Hobbes does not enter, Babelians were builders because they used one language. However, the question that starts the liberal discourse, in whose initiation Hobbes is involved, is how to build a second Babel, knowing that people do not have one tongue, and never will have. Within the framework of liberal discourse, even in its earliest 17th-century phase, differing languages of political legitimization are untranslatable. This is why liberal discourse needs to forego the debate of monarchy versus republic, i.e., the qualitative dispute on the form of government, and ask rather what combination of both could best serve the public order and individual freedoms. The Hobbesian state that follows from the free decision of individuals, but whose power is no longer pronounced by those individuals, paradoxically blends the republic of Babel's people and Nimrod's absolute prerogative.

The liberal interpretation of Babel as a world of confusion from which a new political order emerges allows us to overcome the

[22] Cf. *ibidem*, p. 86.

scheme presenting it as a punishment and see in it an element of God's teaching. Through the parable of Babel, God does not teach us about the only legitimate order, but rather about an order that people must constitute in conditions of confusion, and despite this confusion. The destruction of Babel is the beginning of a story rather than its end. Throwing people into confusion and thereby making them experience anarchy and slavery, God directs them to a new architectonic task, which is building another Babel, a state founded on a free contract of all and constituting the supremacy of law respected by all.

The picture of Babelians baking brick, laying the foundations and raising walls evokes the esoteric iconography of Freemasonry. Freemasonry symbolism thrived meaningfully in the tradition of English jurisprudence from the beginning of the 17th century. It might have permeated even the king's thinking, as his coat of arms displayed a trowel. This monarch commissioned the translation of the Bible not from the Latin Vulgate, but from the original biblical languages, and the translation is known as King James Bible. Francis Bacon, Lord Chancellor of England, compared James with Salomon. Locke quoted his words to support the idea of power that respects the fundamental law of a country. In his speech to the Parliament in 1609, James I was to say, as Locke cites in his *Second Treatise*:

> The king binds himself by a double oath to the observation of the fundamental laws of his kingdom; tacitly, as by being a king, and so bound to protect as well the people, as the laws of his kingdom; and expressly, by his oath at his coronation; so as every just king, in a settled kingdom, is bound to observe that paction made to his people by his laws, in framing his government agreeable thereunto, according to that paction which God made with Noah after the deluge [...]. And therefore a king governing in a settled kingdom, leaves to be a king, and degenerates into a tyrant, as soon as he leaves off to rule according to his laws.[23]

[23] J. Locke: *op. cit.*, p. 250.

In this still-feudal imagination of the Freemason-king, the contract between the monarch and the people reminds one of an arch whose keystone is the law. In the architectonics of the arcade or vault, both sides of the contract converge similarly to the biblical arch crowning the covenant between God and Noah. It was only forty years after James's speech that his successor Charles I faced the undoing of the royal vault. It was because the vault directly bound the two sides, who both claimed the right to a separate interpretation of the constitutive laws of England, that the civil war came about between the king and the Parliament. In contrast to the liberal contract, the feudal contract did not acknowledge the experience of the discursive Babel. The irony of this is that Charles was to eat the sour fruits of confusion engendered by his predecessor's decision to make a new critical translation of the Bible available to the wider public. The discursive Babel does not only mean that both sides of the contract – the monarch and the people – differ in their interpretation of the founding laws, but also that from now on the people constitute a multitude of various opinions. This is why it is the pyramid, and not the vaulting arch, that better shows the architectonics of the liberal contract; by separating the two sides of the contract, it creates a stable order. This characteristic separation of the sides is seen already in the covenant made at the foot of Holy Mount Sinai. God first descends on the mountain peak and then commands Moses to keep the people from approaching the mountain. A distance must be kept between the sides of the contract: "And Moses said unto the Lord, The people cannot come up to mount Sinai: for thou chargedst us, saying, Set bounds about the mount, and sanctify it" (*Exodus* 19:23).

Setting bounds about the mount evokes Freemasonry images of God with an open pair of compasses leaning out of the heavens and over the earth, the people's will being the base for the structure topped with absolute power. The people have no direct access to the peak of power, unlike through a political representative

personified by Moses. This structure which is reminiscent of another holy mount, i.e., the Sumerian *ziggurat* that appears in Sir William Blackstone's *Commentaries*, the 18th century bible of British jurisprudence. Describing the political system of the mixed monarchy, whose foundations were laid by the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the author says:

> A body of nobility is also more peculiarly necessary in our mixed and compounded constitution, in order to support the rights of both the crown and the people, by forming a barrier to withstand the encroachments of both. It creates and preserves that gradual scale of dignity, which proceeds from the peasant to the prince; rising like a pyramid from a broad foundation, and diminishing to a point as it rises. It is this ascending and contracting proportion that adds stability to any government; for when the departure is sudden from one extreme to another, we may pronounce that state to be precarious. The nobility therefore are the pillars, which are reared from among the people, more immediately to support the throne; and if that falls, they must also be buried under it's ruins. Accordingly, when in the last century the Commons had determined to extirpate monarchy, they also voted the House of Lords to be useless and dangerous.[24]

In the pyramidal structure of mixed monarchy, it is the contract between the three classes and three powers remaining separated and mutually balanced that constitutes the secret of a stable political system, preventing both the people's rebellion against the king and the rebellion of the royal prerogative against the people.

During the Federal Convention one of the most eloquent speakers for the new republic was James Wilson, a Philadelphia lawyer and later a Supreme Court justice. Opposing the idea of founding the federal government on state governments, he advocated the idea of a direct political pact of all Americans, and the establishment of a national government with extensive powers.

[24] W. Blackstone: *Commentaries on the Laws of England in Four Books*, London 1813, vol. 1, pp. 170–171.

He supported relying on the democratic will of all in drawing up the architectonics of the new country:

> In laying the stone amiss we may injure the superstructure; and what will be the consequence, if the corner-stone should be loosely placed? [...] When we are laying the foundation of a building, which is to last for ages, and in which millions are interested, it ought to be well laid.[25]

While backing the equality of democratic representation, he defended a one-person executive. If the basis is maximally broad and there is one person at the top, it evokes the *topos* of a tower, mountain, or pyramid. And in fact Wilson's speeches often refer to the image of a federal pyramid. We read in Madison's notes taken during the Convention sittings: "Mr. Wilson contended strenuously for drawing the most numerous branch of the Legislature immediately from the people. He was for raising the federal pyramid to a considerable altitude, and for that reason wished to give it as broad a basis as possible."[26] This is how the federal pyramid is a realization of Babel and Sinai at the same time: "Providence has designed us for an united people, under one great political compact."[27] This political compact receives its own cult figure, which is the written constitution, an analog of the Ark of the Covenant.

With the broad basis firmly standing on the earth and the top rising to heavens, the pyramid is a symbol of royal, i.e. political, power with sacred Freemason geometry. The pyramid has its horizontal and vertical orders, each referring to a different aspect of the contract by which individuals establish the liberal state of law. On the horizontal plane it is a voluntary contract of all who form the political body, that is, a *pactum unionis.* This is why the constitution, being an expression of the contract, calls

[25] M. Farrand (ed.): *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1974, vol. 1, pp. 170–171.
[26] *Ibidem*, vol. 1, p. 49.
[27] *Ibidem*, vol. 3, p. 140.

into being the fundamental law. The vertical order, on the other hand, expresses a *pactum subiectionis*, the surrender of all to the constitution, recognized as the supreme law of the country.

Let us remember that the aim of the second Babel, which the thought of English speaking countries has endeavored to erect ever since the English Civil War, is to cope with the irreversible pluralism of the social world. In British jurisprudence there appears the concept of mixture as the principle that organizes the new world. The mixed monarchy itself – as Hobbes, its opponent, vividly calls it – is *mixarchy*. The language of the political order becomes confused on purpose. Confusion as the legacy of the first Babel becomes the mortar cementing the second Babel. According to Lord Viscount Bolingbroke, the 19th-century leader of the Opposition Party, the British political system is formed, as if in an alchemist's retort, as a result of the mixing of many traditions: "so many mixtures of different people, of Britons with Saxons, of both with Danes, of all three Normans."[28] Blackstone echoes this line when speaking about "the intermixture of adventitious nations, the Romans, the Picts, the Saxons, the Danes, and the Normans," who all improved "the texture and wisdom of the whole."[29] Blackstone reiterates Lord Bacon's thought, saying that "Our laws [...] are mixed as our language: and as our language is so much the richer, the laws are the more complete."[30]

This alchemical and Freemason cult of confusion, which can produce a whole that is more united, is also present in the American effort to build the second Babel. All the participants of the Federal Convention shared the belief that the new political system had to unite the thirteen states, which had various territories, dissimilar economies, diverse climates, different traditions and

[28] H.St. John, Lord Viscount Bolingbroke: *A Dissertation upon Parties*, in: *The Works of the Late Right Honourable Henry St. John Lord Viscount Bolingbroke, in Eight Volumes*, London 1809, vol. 3, p. 197.
[29] W. Blackstone: *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 82.
[30] *Ibidem.*

different customs. Order emerges out of chaos, *Ordo ex Chao*, as stated by an 18th-century Freemason motto, or *E Pluribus Unum* displayed on the Great Seal of the United States. The preamble to the American Constitution is opened by the *pluralis maiestatis,* which first proclaims the mysterious aim of "form[ing] a more perfect Union."

The first Babel fell due to the dissociative power of space and confused languages. The second Babel may be raised more effectively by broadening the spatial dimension and deepening the confusion. Paraphrasing Madison, one might say that the second Babel owes its architectonic success to the state of confusion of all languages of opinion and faith, of passion and interest. This is the proper way to understand Madison's famous maxim about extending the government's powers in order to achieve a greater variety of parties, sects and interests. People are able to build a tower rising to heaven as the basis encompasses almost the whole of a continent.

England is a mixture of multiple linguistic and legal traditions, but it is only America that becomes the melting pot of political alchemy, a federal state for immigrants, which mixes individuals, classes, nations and races into one *kosmopolis*. Justice Wilson points out that:

> To frame a government for a single city or State, is a business both in its importance and facility, widely different from the task entrusted to the Federal Convention, whose prospects were extended not only to thirteen independent and sovereign States, some of which in territorial jurisdiction, population, and resource, equal the most respectable nations of Europe, but likewise to innumerable States yet unformed, and to myriads of citizens who in future ages shall inhabit the vast uncultivated regions of the continent. The duties of that body therefore, were not limited to local or partial considerations, but to the formation of a plan commensurate with a great and valuable portion of the globe.[31]

[31] M. Farrand (ed.): *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 138.

This comment refers us to the Freemason ideal of humanity united once again. In James Anderson's "Constitutions" it is said that, being Masons, "we are also of all Nations, Tongues, Kindreds, and Languages." Paradoxically, the liberal regime constitutes a solution to the riddle of Babel if we read the biblical tale in reverse. It turns out, then, that the destruction of the first Babel begins the building of the second Babel, this time the right one; the Diaspora that resulted from the first one is an introduction to the uniting process within the framework of the second Babel.

During the Federal Convention, the *topos* of Babel builders is evoked twice by Benjamin Franklin, both instances being key moments. The first time is when the discussions on state representation are locked in a stalemate, and the seemingly insurmountable crisis threatens to break up the sittings. Warning the listeners not to forget God while building the federal republic, Franklin asks:

> And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writings, that "except the Lord build the House they labour in vain that build it." I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without his concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the Builders of Babel: We shall be divided by our little partial local interests; our projects will be confounded, and we ourselves shall become a reproach and bye word down to future ages. And what is worse, mankind may hereafter from this unfortunate instance, despair of establishing Governments by Human Wisdom and leave it to chance, war and conquest.[32]

The second time the *topos* of Babel builders is mentioned by Franklin is in his closing speech, when he persuades his audience to unanimously accept the prepared project of the Constitution. He points out then that the act of unanimity of the convention – so divided throughout the sittings – will "astonish

[32] *Ibidem*, vol. 1, pp. 451–452.

our enemies, who are waiting with confidence to hear that our councils are confounded like those of the Builders of Babel."[33]

A rich esoteric reservoir of founding themes was contributed by the city of *Phila-delphia*, a city of Quaker and Masonic ideals of brotherly love, a city that first realized the ideal of religious pluralism and tolerance, and at the same time the city that had the most democratic state constitution. Philadelphia is the city where the Declaration of Independence was signed and where the Federal Convention held its sittings, the Convention that gave America its fundamental law: the Constitution. In the light of all this, one should not be surprised by the nickname the state of Pennsylvania received: it is called the Keystone State, the keystone of an arcade, i.e., the middle of the arch of the thirteen states' convention that established the American Republic. Many Americans among the Founding Fathers were active Masons: John Hancock, president of the Second Continental Council; Benjamin Franklin, the united colonies' first ambassador in Europe; George Washington, the first president; John Marshall, Chief Justice of the United States. If we usually associate the American republic with the cold features of the rule of law, it is worth remembering that under the Capitol there is a particular cornerstone, *lapis angularis,* laid there personally by Washington, who was dressed in the ceremonial robes of a Master Mason. Just as Bacon's experimental science emerges out of hermeticism and alchemy, so does the Anglo-american order of the liberal state emerge out of the esoteric threads of the Masonic royal art, protestant Covenant Theology, and finally the Whig cult of the mixed constitutional monarchy. When we see the American Presidential Oath of Office, it is unimaginable without the Bible. But it is not treated here as the Scripture of a revealed religion, but as the Book of Law: of the pact, covenant, contract and testament. If it refers to any theology, then it is the Federal theology.

[33] *Ibidem*, vol. 2, p. 642.

The reverse of the Great Seal of the United States is printed on the American one dollar banknote; it shows a well-known symbol of Freemasonic ideas. It is a quadrilateral pyramid. Thirteen steps lead to the top of the building crowned with the all-seeing Eye. The scroll at its base proclaims *Novus Ordo Seclorum*. The standard translation is "a new order of the ages," but one might refer to the Masonic meaning of the formula, and read it as "a new secular order." The pyramid is built of brick and characteristically unfinished or truncated. Disturbingly, it reminds one of the Sumerian and Babylonian holy mountain, *ziggurat*, i.e., the tower of Babel.

Translated by Anna Fraś

First edition: *Babel*, "Civitas. Studia z Filozofii Polityki" 2001, no. 5, pp. 20–43.