



BOOK REVIEW

Yuliya Minets, *The Slow Fall of Babel: Languages and Identities in Late Antique Christianity*

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Aaron P. Johnson

Lee University, Cleveland, TN, USA (ajohnson@leeuniversity.edu)

According to Julian ‘the Apostate’, the infamous nephew of Constantine who publicly renounced his Christian faith upon accession to the Roman imperial throne in the 360s, the Genesis narrative of the tower of Babel had all the hallmarks of a philosophically bad story. Not only did the humans of the tale unrealistically imagine they could build a tower to heaven, and not only did the God of the tale feel the need to suffer dislocation by making the long trek down from the skies to check the mortals in their enterprise, but the story itself only explained something of minor importance. Instead of explaining the plurality of languages, Julian surmised, a more necessary aetiology would have accounted for the plurality of cultures and ethnic identities throughout the world (see his *Against the Galileans*, frags. 23–24). What Julian seems to have missed in his polemical assessment, however, is the ways in which language could become implicated in such identities. Indeed, as *The Slow Fall of Babel* demonstrates, Christians had been and would continue to mull over the Babel episode and allow it to become a fruitful locus for developing representations of the ‘alloglottic Other’. Reading, thinking and writing in a diverse range of languages throughout the first six centuries, Christian intellectuals adopted a wide range of interpretations of the passage in their articulation of the world and its peoples, as well as of the God who gifted or punished those peoples with a polyphony of languages.

Minets’ book is more than merely tracing the history of interpretation of the Babel episode. Instead it tackles the entire nexus of early Christian modes of thinking about language diversity and identity: two initial chapters setting the background of the linguistic situation experienced by Christians in late antiquity (chapter 1) and the various ways of thinking about languages and otherness by Greeks, Romans and Jews (chapter 2) precede two central chapters on the varied Christian exposition of the focal biblical passages for this study, namely the Tower of Babel episode (chapter 3) and the accounts of Pentecost in Acts and of tongues-speaking in 1 Corinthians (chapter 4); then follows a chapter specifically addressing the ways in which linguistic diversity contributed to (or was invoked in) formulations of religious universality, which ultimately became a means of perpetuating Greek and Roman notional hierarchies in spite of itself (chapter 5) and finally a chapter on the contradictory uses of miraculous foreign tongues-speaking (*xenolalia*) by saints and demons within hagiographical literature (chapter 6) closes out the book. Throughout, Minets adroitly brings to bear a massive amount of material that is surprisingly lucid while canvassing the great variety in early Christian thinking about languages and identities in late antiquity (and beyond). Remarkable for its

breadth and clarity, the analyses offered in these chapters shed much light on the confused Babel of the polyphony of our sources. The author seems equally at home in the Latin, Greek and Syriac authors that she investigates.

Of particular interest are the shifts in interpretation of the New Testament references to speaking in tongues. Under Minets' wide-ranging and illuminating discussion, we find that an earlier openness to speaking in non-human languages (ecstatic utterances or 'the tongues of angels') is replaced by a singular concern to delimit biblical tongues-speaking as the adoption of foreign languages (*xenolalia*). Eusebius of Caesarea proves to be pivotal in marking this avoidance of ecstatic utterances and focus upon human languages. Minets may, however, be only partly correct in assigning this shift to imperial religious developments (what others have labelled the 'Constantinian revolution'). For, in fact, the Eusebian material most significant for her narrative (in the *Demonstratio Evangelica*) comes from a time when Constantine was on the rise in the West but the ramifications of his fledgling religious innovations, which were piecemeal anyway, had yet to be felt in the East. It may be – and this can only be a suggestion here – that the Christian shift with respect to tongues-speaking was part of broader cultural and philosophical shifts that were ongoing before and after the reign of Constantine (see pp. 272–73 and 330–33, where sensitivity to language alterity is expressly attributed to broader historical changes). In particular, the third-century Platonist Porphyry of Tyre evinced a deep interest in reflecting on language diversity (e.g. in the third book of his defence of vegetarianism) and gleaning wisdom from 'barbarian' others, as did his one-time student Iamblichus. In spite of their different philosophies of language, these pillars of late antique Platonism would seem to indicate a growing curiosity towards the relationship of universal meaning and linguistic pluralism that cannot be explained by any appeal to developments catalysed by an emperor's conversion.

By bringing together Greek, Latin and Syriac traditions, the book sets a solid framework within which to explore some precise points of contention arising among Christians (e.g. Gregory of Nyssa and Eunomius, as discussed in chapter 3), as well as between Christians and their Jewish or pagan critics (especially Porphyry and Julian, as mentioned above). Minets' book is now essential for anyone working on Christianity in late antiquity and will hopefully spur deeper, fine-grained analyses of its entanglements with non-Christian discourses.

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