

“Babel without Babble: The Political Rhetoric of the Tower of Babel Story and Its Legacy.”

The Tower of Babel in Gen 11:1-9 has evoked a variety of images of human hubris and divine judgment. As the first narrative depiction of collective action in the Bible, it has functioned as an object of reflection for intellectuals in literary theory, linguistics, art, and political theory. Perhaps no image has been so enduring in modernity as the aspect in the traditional interpretation of the story of the advent of multilingualism as a sign of divine curse. In this workshop, I present findings from a larger project in which I reanalyze the meaning of Gen 11:1-9 using comparative, philological, and source critical observations. I juxtapose these findings with the complex history of interpretation of the narrative, focusing on how the story became a blueprint for the nation state after the 16th century CE to link identity, land, and language. I show that modern political employments of the passage (Pat Buchanan, Rep. Steve King of Iowa, and Pro-English, a group that met with the Trump administration in the hopes to make English the national language of the United States) find the solution to the problem of Babel in language ideology, so-called immigration reform, and national identity. In contrast, the passage in interpretive history until the 16th century CE functioned quite differently. In comparing ancient and modern readings of the text, I hope to achieve two goals: 1) to put biblical criticism in conversation with intellectual history as well as the way in which the Bible functions in modern theopolitical thought (to use Erin Runions’s term); and 2) to put biblical criticism in a corrective conversation with the use of the Tower of Babel in modern politics and nationalistic discourse.