

In the beginning, God created difference

Theodore Hiebert's deft reading elicits a fresh awareness of the legitimacy of the other in Genesis.

by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [February 12, 2020](#) issue

In Review



The Beginning of Difference

Discovering Identity in God's Diverse World

By Theodore Hiebert

Abingdon Press

Theodore Hiebert's provocative thesis is that the intent of Genesis, in both its early mythic material and its ancestral narratives, is to attest to the reality of diversity and the honoring of difference. The corollary is that much interpretation (including some of mine) has been mistaken in a way that has been pernicious. What Hiebert finds most suspect in these prior readings is the way they characterize Genesis 1-11 as universal history and, in contrast, Genesis 12-50 as a narrative focused in an exclusionary way on Israel.

Hiebert begins his series of fine textual expositions with a reading of Genesis 11:1-9, the Tower of Babel story. He notes that the breaking up of the tower and the multiplication of languages have generally been interpreted as divine punishment. He judges that locating punishment in the story of Babel is rooted in the Book of Jubilees, not in the Genesis text itself. This view, he argues, has led to a continual misreading of the biblical story.

While I don't think it's correct to say that there is no divine rejection of a one-language system in the Genesis account of Babel, it is clear that God's will is a multiplicity of languages—Hiebert's main point. This interpretation (which was articulated as early as 1994 by Bernhard Anderson, who found in the Babel story that "God's will for his creation is diversity rather than homogeneity") has become increasingly common, particularly within feminist and liberation readings of scripture.

In his second textual study, Hiebert argues that scholars have wrongly seen a narrowing of focus in Genesis 12 and mistakenly viewed Genesis 12-50 as exclusively concerned with Abraham and his heirs. In fact, Hiebert writes, Israel's genealogy is not rooted in Abraham but in the memory of Noah and his son Shem.

I find this judgment quite compelling. Such rootage in Shem allows for the equal awareness of the rootage of the other two sons of Noah who are also operative in the story. To focus on Abraham rather than Shem is to deny the presence of the brothers.

In his third—and perhaps most important—study, Hiebert takes up three narrative cycles in the ancestral narratives. He probes the deep pathos of the story of Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, and Ishmael. He recognizes that while Isaac is preferred, the story does not dismiss Ishmael but honors him and the people who spring from his line.

Hiebert also takes up the story of Esau and Jacob. He notices how both sons are treated with utmost seriousness. The narrator notes the grief surrounding Esau's loss of birthright, as well as the benefits Jacob receives from his mother's cunning behavior. In the reconciliation between the brothers, the story acknowledges Esau's "humanity, generosity, and respect."

In the narrative of Joseph, Hiebert shrewdly comments on the parallel roles of Judah (agent of the southern tradition) and Joseph (practitioner of the northern tradition). As Judah contrives to save Joseph early in the story, so Joseph acts to rescue Judah and his brothers when they find themselves in great need.

Hiebert's deft reading of these narratives elicits a fresh awareness of the legitimacy of the "other" in Genesis. These narratives are fully aware of and open to difference, allowing those who aren't among the chosen people to be full, significant characters in the story. Whereas Cain kills Abel in a refusal of difference (Gen. 4), these later narratives use a variety of strategies to honor difference and make space for the agency of the other. Hiebert's reading invites an engagement that goes beyond the unexamined reductionism interpreters have often brought to these stories.

Hiebert interrupts his positive appreciation of difference to acknowledge the curse of Canaan (Gen. 9:18-27). He gives the curse only three pages, however, noting that it pertains to only one segment of Ham's genealogy and labeling it as "uniquely anomalous." This seems to me too easy a reading of the text. Hiebert also fails to reckon with the fact that this curse generated a trajectory of biblical tradition that shows up in Joshua in violent ways and in the Ezra texts in ideological ways. He is alert to the way white Europeans have used the curse over the centuries to authorize their desire to "possess the earth"—an authorization that shows up recurrently in various nationalist agendas.

The book concludes with a strong study of the Pentecost story in Acts. Hiebert judges that this narrative does not correct or contradict the Babel narrative, as is often claimed. God wills differentiation and diversity at Babel, and Pentecost advances that same divine intention. The Pentecost narrative encourages the early

church to embody multiplicity by including gentiles within the beloved community.

While the contemporary urgency of Hiebert's thesis is mostly tacit in the book, it is inescapable. *The Beginning of Difference* is an invitation to reexamine deep assumptions about how we read scripture, and Hiebert rightly concludes that "the stakes are as high as they have ever been." We can be grateful for his compelling summons and honest reprimand to our frequently mistaken interpretation.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The gift of Babel."