

The Singularity vs. The Spirit

Genesis 11: 1-9 Acts 2: 1-21

How many people have even heard of “the singularity” before? I’m not too surprised. It’s a word or a concept that is rather science fiction in its nature. But like all science fiction, the aspect of “fiction” may be seen merely as a question of projection of possibilities that already exist or are already discernible.

It was science fiction that people would have a pocket-sized computer and communications device that would work over around-the-world distances, being able to send and receive critical data from a central location. Yet even the most antique, resource-challenged, and non-technological people have in their pocket just such a device that seemed incredibly futuristic when portrayed in the original TV series *Star Trek* in 1966, just 50 years ago. This refers to your cell phone, even an old *Star Trek*-like flip phone.

Today’s smart phone packs far more computing power than the best mainframe computers of 1966. The Apollo astronauts wish they had computers as powerful as the garden variety smart phone today. As we’ve discovered in running Facebook ads to promote the *Belief* series, only a small portion of the people viewing our ads – like 10% - are viewing our ads on desktop computers. Almost all of the views of our ads come from portable devices: laptops, tablets, and smart phones. All of which is to say that science fiction may only be fictional because not enough time has passed.

There have been a host of uses of the term singularity, but inventor and futurist Ray Kurzweil seems to have popularized the notion in his 2005 best-selling book *The Singularity is Near* which also became a movie in 2010. (I’ll try to remember to provide a link to the movie trailer in this week’s blast email.) In an era of colossal technological changes, Kurzweil made the claim that technological advances would come to a point of merger between human beings and technologically developed beings. This point of mutuality is the singularity, where human and technological machine cease to be differentiated, and in fact, technology comes to mastery over the frailties of the human being, resulting in a transformation of life in every way.

Another fairly well known application of the term singularity comes from the study of black holes by astrophysicists like Stephen Hawking. In black holes, there is an infinite level of gravitational force that creates a black hole which itself is regarded as a singularity. This gravitational energy redefines time, light, space, and matter.

Singularity is also used in mathematical formulas, and in complex analysis. It always seems to involve a particular threshold of convergence, and singularity results in extreme, indefinite, unpredictable, and even infinite outcomes.

One more example also comes from *Star Trek* franchise that seems related to Kurzweil’s idea of singularity, and pre-dates it. In the sequel series, *Star Trek: Next Generation*, an adversary was created called “The Borg.” The Borg seemed to be a

negative version of the transformation of human and technological. The Borg was a colony or hive of beings who had had their independent existence assimilated into a greater being which itself was a technological entity. The individuals are assimilated by being “upgraded” with technology, connected and commanded by the central authority. The Borg generated the classic line, *Resistance is futile*. Their standard line of introduction was: *We are the Borg ... We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will adapt to service us. Resistance is futile.*

‘So, Bruce,’ you’re asking at this point, ‘who cares?’ Moreover, how does this idea of singularity relate to the scripture lessons? Excellent question, patient people.

Let’s start with the classic story of the Tower of Babel presented in Genesis 11. This story is the last of what are regarded as “pre-history” narratives that have occupied Genesis since the creation stories. At the end of chapter 11, Abram is introduced, and his story starts in chapter 12 as the first “historical” figure. Watch also for parallels to the first human account in Genesis, the Adam and Eve story, which began the “pre-history” series of narratives as this one ends that series.

This story has no real parallel in other ancient Near Eastern texts, unlike many of the “pre-history” narratives which do have shared origins among other people. This story seems unique for Israel.

In this Tower of Babel story, we find a particular kind of singularity present among God’s human creation. There was one universal language and one common speech throughout humanity.

They’ve migrated to where the great Babylonian Empire would be situated, hence the name of the Tower. The historical aspect and impact of this powerful and ruthless empire on the story-making tradition of ancient Israel ought to be acknowledged.

We then discover that there is a new technology available to them in the making of bricks rather than the use of stone. Let’s understand what brick making is versus the use of stone. **First**, it employs a special technology to create what is desired, of a strength comparable to stone, in a uniform shape and of uniform consistency. **Second**, it can be replicated quite simply and mass production can be achieved at relatively low cost. **Third**, it provides the opportunity to create and produce what you want, when you want it, in the size and shape that you want. This would revolutionize all construction and design. They were no longer reliant on what God provided; they could now create on their own as masters of this new technology.

Having this newfound capability, they decide: ‘Let’s build a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the earth.’

In this thought, we have the concentration of humanity in a single city, gaining and magnifying its strength by exploiting numerical mass. This shows the advancement of their organization and its focus on singular purpose.

To add to this, they've focused on a particular project, building a great tower to break through into the heavens. The wording "make a name for" is what a king would do. It's implied that there would be a challenger to the One who rules the heavens if the human masses can establish their presence in the heavens. This thought ends by expressing the need to control their own destiny, seeking to avoid being scattered across the earth, their power dispersed, and their ascendancy effectively ended.

In brief, the humans, by exploiting all of these assets, have decided to challenge God, perhaps to displace God. At the least, it's certain they sought to gain parity with God, and attain a place on the heavenly council. They've gotten this far because of their exploitation of singularity, leveraging all of the assets and assimilating all of human creation in a mass body acting with singular purpose and seeking to transcend its God-created being with a new form of being which they have developed themselves. They would become God or gods.

Similar to the walk in the Garden of Eden, God is not a heavenly observer. The text suggests that God "came down" and paid the city a visit, wanting to check out the tower. It soon becomes clear what this endeavor is all about. God is distressed to discover what the human creation has been able to do. This was not what God intended, to create a competitor.

God says: *If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.* There is real foreboding in that comment. Human creation has no real spirituality at this point. Remember, the only human with any awareness of the will of God so far has been Noah. The sinfulness of the human creation had been so universal that God had decided with the Flood to wipe out humanity and start again. God has promised never to do again. So, now what?

Disrupt this singularity that they've attained. Again, in this early stage, there is the concept of a divine or heavenly council of God with the gods. God continues: *Come, let us go down and confuse their language so that they will not understand each other.* The singular language and speech is made confused. They scatter, and they stop building.

Like in the beginning of pre-history with the Garden of Eden where the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would have made the human creation like God, humans reached for that very fruit in an attempt to become like God, to become God. Here again, at the close of the pre-history, we find humans having sought singularity that massed their power and technology to once again become like God, to become God. And God disrupts their scheme once again.

At Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples of Jesus brings about a new phase in the development of God's human creation. Where sinful humanity had sought to become God, at Pentecost, God empowers the human creation with spirituality. As opposed to the singularity of Genesis 11 and the building of the Tower, at

Pentecost there is the creation of unity in spirituality, an empowering that enables the Spirit of God to speak, to enable speech, to bridge languages.

One commentator noted the importance of listening in the passage in Acts 2. Listening is also what was absent from the singularity effort in Genesis 11, and for that matter in the Garden of Eden as well. We can understand listening as spiritual activity, listening for the voice of God that speaks to us, but also listening for the voice of God that is speaking through others.

Language is no barrier to human achievement at Pentecost. Instead, a new language of spirituality enables language and understanding that takes what had been scattered and divided, bringing unity in spiritual focus and a new set of gifts.

These gifts are meant not for the work of the great Tower that ascends to challenge God, to become God. These gifts are spiritual gifts meant for the work of the building of the Kingdom, to bring peace, equity and new life. It stands opposite the singularity which sought to attain power for power's sake, to gain equality if not outright superiority to God, which sought to eliminate individuality for the sake of collective ambition, and which sought to exploit humanity and its advancement for unworthy, unrighteous achievement. Different individuals are brought together in unity on Pentecost, not sacrificed with the goal of singularity.

The diversity which God created finds its intended unity and empowerment at Pentecost, fulfilling the promise not only of Jesus to send the Counselor, but also the promise of human creation, bringing together in spirituality what God had intended from the beginning.

At Pentecost, we don't need to be concerned with whether the disciples spoke in tongues, or spoke different languages, or anything else. May we recognize that it was the fulfillment of God's promise to bring unity out of diversity through spiritual empowerment and blessing. It is about listening and hearing the other, bearing a spiritual focus that sees difference, acknowledges it, and works with it, perceiving the nature of this difference in terms of the spiritual gift that comes at Pentecost.

It means our faith doesn't fear different people and diverse populations, doesn't require different people to eliminate their differences and form a singularity that is determined standard, acceptable, and meets required norms. God made us different and made us good. We have shown our incredible ability to screw that up, to take blessing and transform it into sinfulness, pain, and suffering.

At Pentecost, may we see unity amid diversity in the blessing of the Spirit, not singularity that would bless our sinfulness as we pretend to be God. May we celebrate God's spiritual empowerment and go forward as witnesses to the Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus.