



E-Read



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The Tower of Babel

David Lomax writes:

A few weeks ago a member of my family had the opportunity to attend a concert to celebrate the 80th birthday of the composer, Karl Jenkins. His latest work is called *One World*. I've been able to listen to (on CD) and watch (via YouTube) it being performed since then. It has affected me in numerous ways, but I wanted to share just a couple of them with readers of E-Read.

The second piece within this composition is a version of the story of the Tower of Babel. In the notes from the CD booklet, there is a suggestion that this part of the Bible is today seen as allegorical or part of an “origin story”. I don’t know where this information was taken from. What I do know is that Swedenborg talks about this section of the Bible being part of a story which is not rooted in history, before the narrative focuses on Abram/Abraham (which he says is based on history).

I assume that this was chosen as a source for the text for *One World*, because the story shows something of a movement from people working together to that starting to fall apart. Swedenborg is very clear in his explanation of the story that what stops human beings working together is what we might think of as prioritising ourselves above others. However, although this sounds simple on the surface there is plenty of complexity. In the story, all seems to go well until “God comes down”. Yet Swedenborg suggests that the symbolism of building a tower of bricks and bitumen has the seeds of the later confusion and destruction in it. This is because building upwards can be associated with arrogance. In addition, these artificial building materials are used to suggest what we invent for ourselves rather than being truly open to receive from God.

This makes perfect sense, but I am also aware of how putting this into practice may have some challenges. Swedenborg specifically mentions, in opposition to focusing on ourselves, terms like “the common good”. I have a hunch that establishing what is the common good may be tricky at times, perhaps especially in our complex modern era. To use two examples, is it part of the “common good” to create systems of advanced weaponry and train the personnel to operate them when countries are not able to live in harmony or make compromises or should there be more emphasis on finding ways to change the international landscape to lessen the need for this type of scenario? On another front, if more homes are needed, how do we decide where and how to build them to ensure that the “common good” is part of the decision-making process?

When talking about the Tower of Babel, Swedenborg lays out the example of heavenly communities, which are able to find a oneness stemming from “mutual love”. The only way of cultivating that on earth would seem to be to encourage people to be more loving, but that is a choice that they have to make for themselves. Swedenborg talks about this in mentioning the importance of not taking anything from anyone else’s happiness and maximising their freedom. Elsewhere, he emphasises that this will mean that there is always the potential for people to act negatively towards others. Although society places some restraints around this, the impetus towards this chiefly has to come from each individual. The world can only be changed one person at a time and indeed moment by moment.

Perhaps it is even true to say that Karl Jenkins is trying to do this within this musical work. The lyrics, taken from many different sources, do not shrink from examples of humanity’s foibles or indeed excesses. However, there is also a multi-faceted hope which came over

to me. I would like to share one example of this (and link it with Swedenborg). One of the shorter texts set to music is as follows:

“We gaze at the same stars. We share the same sky. The same universe engages us. Does it matter by what understanding each of us seeks the truth? There cannot be just one route for penetrating so great a mystery.”

This was written by Symmachus, a Roman governor. He was writing to a group of Christians, whose faith he did not share.

I was reminded by the combination of connecting with something universal, but in different forms, of what Swedenborg writes about the night sky. Swedenborg describes the stars in the sky in a number of ways. Often, he emphasises the huge quantity of stars involved (including when related to Abram which comes just a little later in the Bible than the Tower of Babel). Sometimes he speaks of them as representing good and truth, hence that great variety. At other times, he ties our seeing the stars to a similar appearance in the spiritual world and so he links them to angels but also to how the angels live in different spiritual communities (as was mentioned earlier). One of those passages is as follows:

“A vast space full of stars appears in the spiritual world just as in the natural world. How this looks arises from the angelic communities in heaven. Every community there shines like a star to anyone looking up at it, so they know from this how the angelic communities are laid out.” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 65)

Perhaps it would be possible to set this (or similar) texts from Swedenborg to music...?

David Lomax

www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZG3ublh6zY&t=656s

