

Rosetta Stone 2

(A Summer Sequel)

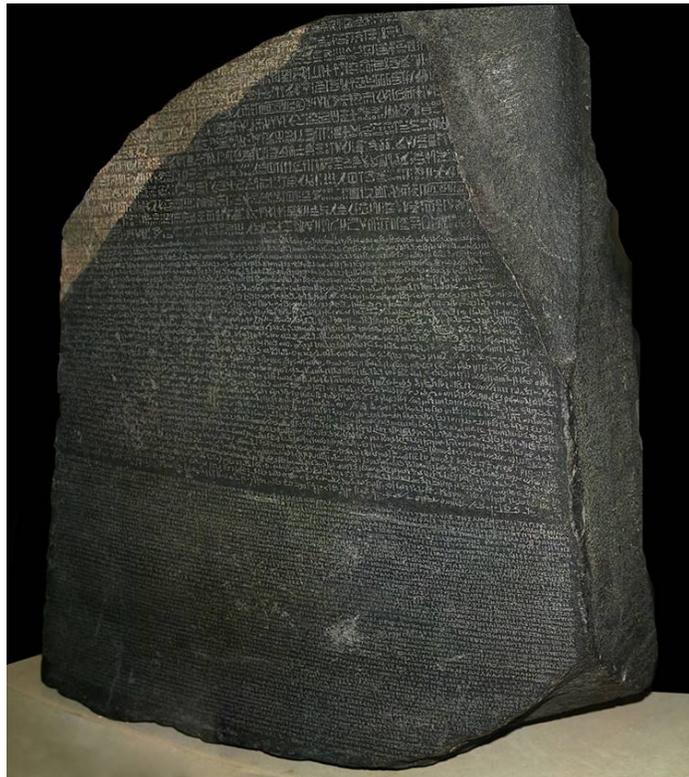
Now the whole earth had one language and the same words . . .
(Genesis 11:1)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 13th Sunday after Pentecost, **August 19, 2018**
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For Hollywood, sequels are common summer fare, a formula for profitability based on a simple premise, “*If it has a big name let’s borrow from the past success of the franchise.*” Movie-goers in 2018 have been treated to a sequel parade borrowing on big names -- *The Avengers*, *Jurassic World*, *Mission Impossible*, and *Mamma Mia*, to name several.

In the spirit of summer sequels I want this morning to offer my own, *Rosetta Stone 2*. The Rosetta Stone was discovered in 1799 by Napoleon’s troops in the Nile River Delta town of Rashid, known as Rosetta. My sequel, then, builds on the franchise of one of history’s most important archaeological discoveries. To get the full story we will have to go back much further than 1799, all the way to 196 B. C. when an Egyptian council inscribed a decree on a black basalt slab affirming the rule of 12 year old Ptolemy V Epiphanes.

What made the Rosetta Stone so incredibly important, though, has nothing to do with Ptolemy V. It’s a game-changer in archaeology because the inscription was tri-lingual — written not merely in Egyptian hieroglyphics, but also in Demotic and Greek, thus providing the key to unraveling the mystery of hieroglyphs, lost for over a millennium. The Rosetta Stone became the foundation of modern Egyptology, which is why one of the most successful language acquiring techniques known today banks on that franchise name for its success . . . Rosetta Stone.



The Rosetta Stone has spawned many sequels, the latest being the Rosetta Disk, which archives 1500 languages of the human family on a only three inches diameter. You see with the naked eye only eight languages, those spoken by the greatest number of humans today and none in danger of extinction, but there's more here than meets the eye.

Often sequels don't measure up to the original in terms of advancing the story. Sequels sometimes seek marketability by ramping up on the thrills. *"We had three colossal car chases in the original. For the sequel, why not double that and script in six even more sensational chases?"*

The Rosetta Disk is similar. *"The Rosetta Stone was spectacular with three languages. Why not script in even more?"* Boy, did they!

On the Rosetta Disk is a collection of translations of the first three chapters of Genesis in 1,500 languages from Abkhaz to Zulu. The project, conceived in 2008 by the Long Now Foundation, is a gift to future linguists, enabling decoders of a distant future to recover the languages of the 21st century, many of which are becoming extinct.

One thousand Rosetta Disks have been distributed to museums, libraries, and sold to individuals, each disk having at least a 2,000 year life expectancy, developed with technology from the Los Alamos nuclear labs to be able to withstand salt water, sunlight, and nuclear radiation. Encased in a glass ball which functions as a magnifying glass, the languages spiral around the edge of the disk, quickly becoming invisible to the naked eye. With magnification, though, the disk is a library of human language, a durable archive of cultures across the globe.

The central image, in fact, is the globe, around which eight major languages spiral quickly into nano-scale, implying simple directions: *"Get a magnifier to see more."* Magnified 1000 times, on the reverse side all 13,000 pages can be read. This is an actual physical text micro-etched into the nickel, so only optical magnification is needed -- no computer, no software -- entirely readable in any future in which computer technology has been lost through global catastrophe. If any language on the disk is still known, as was Greek in 1799, any future discoverer will have the key to unravel the mystery.

Why the first three chapters of Genesis? Was this a religious project? No. In fact, the decision to use a biblical text generated heated debate. The selection, though, was inevitable simply due to the great number of existing translations of the bible. No other work comes close. We People of the Book are, of course, happy Genesis was chosen, its first three chapters foundational to our understanding of the divine-human relationship.



Still, when I saw the disk my first thought wasn't Genesis 1-3, but Genesis 11, the Tower of Babel, an etiological story explaining language multiplicity. It begins with a global perspective ("*Now the whole world had one language and the same words*") and ends with an explosion of languages spinning outward. The disk symbolizes this, its core being the globe, signifying the unity of the human race, then spinning forth with a rich tapestry of linguistic variety.

We are now midway through the season after Pentecost, a day described in Acts 2 with language and tongue playing a key role in the story. Those gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost heard the disciples speaking in their own languages. If Babel was the uncoiling of a linguistic hurricane, Pentecost seems a reversal of Babel, a drawing of these languages back into one language, much like the conjecturing of physicists regarding the Big Bang, that the expansion of the universe could, like a stretched rubber band, begin to contract.

I don't mean this morning to comment on the scientific accuracy of any theory of Beginnings. I'm not qualified to do so. Yet it seems, with respect to languages and the Tower of Babel, that the Big Bang provides an analogy for the expansion of the once primal state of language. The Hebrews would call this the *leshon ha-kodesh* (sacred tongue) from which languages spun forth.

Perhaps our search for *leshon ha-kodesh* is not a search for any one "sacred tongue," but rather an awareness of the sacred nature of this mystery of language, its seductive otherness, ineluctably enigmatic in a way that points to the transcendent. Something beyond our comprehension is happening whenever our breath is winded gently through teeth and lips to form a word.

Ah, language, a wonderful playground of the human spirit. Philip Zaleski tells of a friend who, in his older years has learned to speak a dozen languages, adding a new one every 2-3 years, each new tongue like a vintage fine wine. "*O, for a 1,000 tongues to sing!*" What a way to keep the mind nimble and at play, sporting upon the shore of one of humanity's most exotic privileges, that privilege which cloisters human persons from other species of living things.

I'm happy that the Genesis story of human Beginnings is the story told in 1500 variations on this Rosetta Disk, reminding all who read it in any language of the unity of Eden and how the Fall has left each of us with a shard of Eden in our hearts. The Fall wasn't merely an event in the Garden, but is ongoing. Just as radio telescopes are said to pick up faint echoes of the Big Bang, we can still hear echoes of our Fall from God.

I love the sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory*. It's theme song is one Sherry and I don't fast forward through, but sing along. Remember how our text began? "*Now the whole world had one language and the same words?*" The beginning of the theme song is similar: "*The whole universe was in a hot, dense state, then nearly 14 billion years ago expansion started . . . wait!*" Then the song picks up speed, just as languages spun forth from Babel. The song ends, "*Math, science, history, unraveling the mystery, that all started with a Big Bang – Bang!*"

I mentioned earlier that some physicists conjecture that the end of the Big Bang will be the Big Crunch, a reversal. I would prefer to call it a Re-gathering. Again, I won't comment on scientific matters I'm not trained to understand, but I would use this theory of the cosmos to

point out that theologians see a similar process, that the end of the Fall is the Return. Listen to Paul's Christology in Colossians 1:15 - 20, "*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him all things in Heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible . . . He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together . . . Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether in earth or heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*"

In Christ is the promise of being Re-gathered into the Eden from which we have been banished. Just as the Rosetta Stone was the key to recovering a lost language, the Christ event is the redemptive key to Re-gathering the lost, He came to seek and to save the lost, and in our deepest hearts we experience this call back to Eden as an inward tug.

Thirty-three years ago, in 1985, a humpback whale somehow made it deep enough inland to be trapped in the Sacramento River Delta. A majestic creature from fathomless depths, Humphrey the Humpback caught San Francisco's heart, and the world's. Without deep waters no whale can thrive, but Humphrey could not be coaxed from his paltry bathtub back to the sea, moving inland until finally arriving at a dead-end slough 69 miles from the ocean.

Humphrey was finally guided back to the Pacific Ocean by using a "sound net" in which people in a flotilla of boats make unpleasant noises behind the whale by banging on steel pipes, while simultaneously the attractive sounds of whales preparing to feed were broadcast from a boat making its way to the open ocean. These Intimations of the Deep were music to Humphrey, who made his way to freedom, reaching the Pacific under the Golden Gate Bridge on November 4, 1985 at 4:36 p.m., traffic stopped in both directions as spectators stood at the railing to cheer.

Religion, faith, preaching . . . is not unlike Humphrey's story. If we have veered out of the ocean depths of our home in Eden, traveling inland until reaching a dead end, preaching makes some unpleasant noises warning us from going deeper, then ultimately steers us back to our divine source by broadcasting the pleasant sounds of God's love in Christ. The truth is, as Eknath Easwaran has written, "*we are great creatures made to roam in the deep waters of the Spirit, yet we are often caught in the shallows of a narrow vision of who we are.*"

So I close with words by William Wordsworth, writing of this inward tug toward our true home in his suggestively titled, "*Intimations of Immortality:*"

*Hence in a season of calm weather,
Though inland far we be,
Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.*