

January 17, 2010
Saint Anthony of Egypt

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

I recently confessed a specific ignorance with respect to cats---namely, at what period cats stopped using nouns. Let me now admit that that confession of ignorance was insincere. It was forced from me, in fact, by a personal sense of modesty. Truth at last to tell, I don't think anybody in the world knows when cats gave up the use of nouns.

Over the several decades they have lived in our home, I have studied cats assiduously (a task less demanding than it sounds, inasmuch as cats are awake only about forty-five minutes a day), and I am ready now to announce, with respect to cats, an important theological conclusion---namely, there were no cats involved in that unfortunate episode on the Plains of Shinar.

In view of the sustained study devoted to the Shinar incident by theologians over many centuries, it is surprising that no one---hitherto---has brought this matter to popular attention: Cats were not punished by the multiplication of tongues. Indeed, what Moses wrote of human beings, so many years ago, is still the case among cats: "And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech."

Let me be clear: I do not claim that cats were unaffected by the Fall. I am only saying that cats did not descend all the way down to the level of Shinar. I am uncertain where cats fell to, but I am confident they landed on their feet. To this day, consequently, cats the world over speak the identical dialect. Nor does cat parlance show significant signs of development. Should long-gone Hammurabi rise and return to human society, he would recognize no language commonly used among men. He would, nonetheless, recognize the same meowing heard four millennia ago among the palace mousers at Babylon.

I observed this in my youth, when first I set foot on the venerable soil of France: The alley cats in Cherbourg sounded exactly like the barnyard cats in Nelson County, Kentucky. There was no mistaking it. The citizens at Cherbourg scratched their heads at my pitiful efforts to speak French, but if I had brought a Kentucky kitten with me, she would have fit right in with that city's feline population. Those cats might have rubbed their heads, but not to express confusion.

At the time, I considered the possibility of direct biological lineage among those cats. After all, the cats in Normandy also *looked* very much like Kentucky cats, so one had to consider the possibility they spoke the same language because they all sprang from the same family stock. I mean, if Frenchmen were among

the first white settlers in Nelson County (which is true), would it not be reasonable to suppose they brought their household pets with them?

So I speculated on some common feline ancestor in the distant past---a shared patriarch joining the cats of Normandy and Nelson County---perhaps some stalwart Viking tabby stowed away in the shallow holds of Rollo's karves. If true, this speculation would explain why later I detected the identical cat dialect on the docks at Aalesund in Norway, the very docks from which Rollo's fleet set sail in 885---with scores of cats climbing on the yardarms and clinging to the spars---to lay siege to Paris, where they were surely let loose on the Champs-Élysées. Indeed, come to think of it, the Paris cats did speak with the same accent as the Cherbourg cats (a thing certainly not true of the Parisians and the Cherbourghois).

Since cats all over the world speak the same language, it is not difficult to identify their common biological ancestry. It was that pair of felines stowaways on Noah's ark. We don't know their names, but we are certain that, if they had names, it was Noah and his family who named them. Cats do not name one another. As far as we can tell, cats don't give names to anything. Cats have no nouns.

In speaking of "cat language," I have bowed (*argumenti causa*) to the preference of the behavioral scientists, who regard all vocal noises made by animals as a genus, within which they distinguish certain species, such as human, feline, and so forth.

The real difference among languages, however, has to do with nouns. No nouns, no thoughts.

Thinking involves concepts, and concepts are based on nouns. There is no way around it: a language without nouns is not a language in which it is possible to think. One hates to say it so blatantly---and in the face of loud academic chatter to the contrary---but cats can't think. They're just faking it.

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