



Did Our Languages Come From the “Tower of Babel”?

Xia chao dui Babel \Rightarrow 2187 BC
Xia chao dui \Rightarrow 2070 BC

“Jehovah scattered them from there over all the surface of the earth, and they gradually left off building the city. That is why its name was called Babel, because there Jehovah had confused the language of all the earth.”—Genesis 11:8, 9.

DID that event recorded in the Bible really happen? Did people start speaking different languages all at once, as described? Some scoff at the Bible’s account of how human languages began and spread. One author claims: “The Tower of Babel myth is definitely one of the most absurd stories ever told.” Even a Jewish rabbi called it “a naive attempt to explain the origin of nations.”

Why do people reject the Babel account? Simply put, it contradicts certain theories regarding the origin of language. For example, some scholars suggest that language groups did not appear suddenly but evolved gradually from one “mother tongue.” Others believe that several original languages developed independently, advancing from simple grunts to complex speech. These and other conflicting theories have caused many

to agree with Professor W. T. Fitch, who wrote in his book *The Evolution of Language*: “We do not yet have fully convincing answers.”

What have archaeologists and researchers uncovered regarding the origin and development of human languages? Do their discoveries confirm any of the proposed theories? Or do the findings support the Babel account? First let us take a closer look at that Bible account.

WHERE AND WHEN DID IT HAPPEN?

The Bible states that the confusion of language and dispersion of the people took place “in the land of Shinar,” later called Babylonia. (Genesis 11:2) When did that happen? “The earth [“earth’s population,” footnote] was divided,” says the Bible, in the days of Peleg, who was born about 250 years before Abraham. So the events

of Babel evidently took place some 4,200 years ago.—Genesis 10:25; 11:18-26.

Some scholars theorize that modern languages stem from one original language—the so-called mother tongue that they thought humans spoke nearly 100,000 years ago.* Others claim that today’s languages are related to several root languages spoken at least 6,000 years ago. But how do linguists reconstruct the development of extinct languages? “That is tricky,” says the *Economist* magazine. “Unlike biologists, linguists do not have fossils to guide them through the past.” The magazine adds that one evolutionary linguist arrives at his conclusions by “mathematically informed guesswork.”

Nevertheless, “linguistic fossils” do exist. What are these fossils, and what do they reveal regarding the origin of human languages? *The New Encyclopædia Britannica* explains: “The earliest records of written language, the only linguistic fossils man can hope to have, go back no more than about 4,000 or 5,000 years.” Where did archaeologists discover these “linguistic fossils,” or “records of written language”? In lower Mesopotamia—the site of ancient Shinar.# Hence, the available physical evidence is in agreement with the facts stated in the Bible.

DIFFERENT LANGUAGES, DIFFERENT THINKING

The Bible account says that at Babel, God acted to “confuse their language that they may not listen to [“understand,” footnote] one another’s language.” (Genesis 11:7) As a result,

* Theories about language usually presuppose that humans evolved from apelike creatures. For a consideration of such claims, see pages 27-29 of the brochure *The Origin of Life—Five Questions Worth Asking*, published by Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Archaeologists have unearthed several pyramidlike, stepped temple-towers in the vicinity of Shinar. The Bible says that the tower builders at Babel laid bricks, not stone, and used bitumen as mortar. (Genesis 11:3, 4) In Mesopotamia, stone was “rare or even entirely absent,” says *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*, while bitumen was plentiful.

A clay tablet with cuneiform writing, from Mesopotamia, third millennium B.C.E.

Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY



the workers “left off building the city” of Babel and were scattered “over all the surface of the earth.” (Genesis 11:8, 9) Thus, the Bible does not say that all modern languages can be traced to a single “mother tongue.” Rather, it describes the sudden appearance of several apparently fully developed new languages, each capable of expressing the range of human feeling and thought and each different and distinct from the others.

What about the language groups of the world today? Are they fundamentally similar or different? Cognitive scientist Lera Boroditsky wrote: “As linguists probed deeper into the world’s languages (7,000 or so, only a fraction of them analyzed), innumerable unpredictable differences emerged.” Yes, although tongues and dialects of one language family, such as Cantonese and Hakka in southern China, may be similar to one another, they are fundamentally different from those of another language family, say West Catalan or Valencian in Spain.

Languages shape the way people think about and describe the world around them—color, quantity, location, direction. For example, in one language a person says, “There is a bug on your *right* hand.” But in another language, one would say, “There is a bug on your *southwest* hand.” Such differences would be confusing, to say the

LEGENDS THAT ECHO THE BIBLE'S ACCOUNT

“Once upon a time all the people lived in one large village and spoke one tongue,” according to a story told by a hill tribe in Myanmar. While building a great tower, the builders “gradually acquired different manners, customs, and ways of speech, [eventually] being scattered all over the land.” Similar legends are found among indigenous peoples of Africa, East Asia, Mexico, and elsewhere.

If the Babel account had been an invention by Moses, the Hebrew writer of Genesis, would it have cropped up in the legends of such far-flung national and language groups? That is very unlikely. Thus, the existence of such diverse legends and tales testifies to the credibility of the Babel account in the Bible.

least. No wonder the builders at Babel found it impossible to continue their project.

GRUNTS OR COMPLEX SPEECH?

What was mankind's original language like? The Bible reports that the first man, Adam, was able to coin new words when he named all the animals and flying creatures. (Genesis 2:20) Adam also composed poetry to express his feelings for his wife, and she clearly described what God had commanded and the consequences of disobeying Him. (Genesis 2:23; 3:1-3) The first language, then, enabled humans to communicate fully and to express themselves creatively.

The confusion of languages at Babel hindered mankind's ability to combine their intellectual and physical powers. Yet, their new languages, like the first language, were complex. Within a few centuries, men built bustling cities, assembled powerful armies, and engaged in international trade. (Genesis 13:12; 14:1-11; 37:25) Could they have made such progress without the use of an extensive vocabulary and grammar? According to the Bible, the original human tongue and the tongues introduced at Babel were, not primitive grunts and growls, but complex languages.

Modern research supports this conclusion. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* states: “Every culture which has been investigated, no matter how ‘primitive’ it may be in cultural terms, turns out to have a fully developed language, with a complexity comparable to those of the so-called ‘civilized’ nations.” Similarly, in his book *The Language Instinct*, Harvard College Professor Steven Pinker states: “There is no such thing as a Stone Age language.”

THE FUTURE OF LANGUAGE

After reviewing the age and location of linguistic “fossils,” the fundamental differences be-

tween language groups, and the complexity of ancient languages, what reasonable conclusion could we draw? Many conclude that the Bible's account of what took place at Babel is a fully credible explanation.

The Bible tells us that Jehovah God confused the people's language at Babel because they rebelled against him. (Genesis 11:4-7) However, he promised that he would “give to peoples the change to a pure language, in order for them all to call upon the name of Jehovah, in order to serve him shoulder to shoulder.” (Zephaniah 3:9) This “pure language,” the truth from God's Word, draws together a people from around the world today. It seems logical that in the future God would unite mankind further by giving them one common language, undoing the confusion at Babel. ■

“God Loves a Cheerful Giver”

What kind of gift would make you feel truly appreciative? No doubt most of us would be happy to receive a gift from a giver who is motivated by love rather than by a sense of duty or obligation. When it comes to giving, motive matters. It matters to us. And more important, it matters to God. Consider the inspired words of the apostle Paul recorded at **2 Corinthians 9:7**.

Why did Paul write those words? He wanted to encourage the Corinthian Christians to support the relief work for their needy fellow believers in Judea. Did he try to force the Corinthians to give? On the contrary, he wrote: “Let each one do just as he has resolved in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” Let us take a closer look at that admonition.

“Just as he has resolved in his heart.” A genuine Christian gives because he has decided “in his heart” to do so, notes Paul. At the same time, a Christian devotes more than passing attention to the needs of his fellow worshippers. The original-language word rendered “resolved” “has the idea of predetermination,” says one scholar. So a Christian ponders the needs of fellow believers and asks himself what he can do to fill those needs.—1 John 3:17.

“Not grudgingly or under compulsion.” Paul notes two types of giving that have no place among true Christians—reluctant and forced. The Greek expression rendered “grudgingly” literally means “out of sadness (or, grief).” A grudging, or reluctant, giver gives “from a heart made sorrowful at the thought of parting with money,” explains one reference work. A forced giver gives because he feels pressured to do so. Who of us

really wants to receive a gift from a reluctant or forced giver?

“God loves a cheerful giver.” Once a Christian decides to give, he should do so cheerfully, or with joy, says Paul. Indeed, happiness is a by-product of giving that is properly motivated. (Acts 20:35) The cheerful giver can hardly hide his joy. In fact, the term “cheerful” could very well describe both the inward feeling and the outward expression of the giver. A cheerful giver touches our heart. He also warms God’s heart. Another

“God loves people who love to give”

translation says: “God loves people who love to give.”—*Contemporary English Version*.

The inspired words of the apostle Paul are a guiding principle for Christian giving. Whether we are giving of our time, energy, or material possessions, let us do so of our own free will and because we find genuine pleasure in being generous to others, especially those in need. Such giving will not only make us happy but also endear us to God, for he “loves a cheerful giver.” ■

SUGGESTED BIBLE READING FOR SEPTEMBER
1 and 2 Corinthians