

## The Tower of Babel Account: A Linguistic Consideration

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**Name of Author:** Dallin D. Oaks

**Institutional Address:** Department of Linguistics and English Language  
4064 JFSB  
Brigham Young University  
Provo, Utah 84602

**Telephone Numbers:** Office: 801-422-6369  
Cell: 801-472-1422  
Fax: 801-422-0906

**Email:** [dallin\\_oaks@byu.edu](mailto:dallin_oaks@byu.edu)

## **The Tower of Babel Account: A Linguistic Consideration**

### **Abstract**

The biblical account of the Tower of Babel has generally not been taken seriously by scholars in historical linguistics, but what are regarded by some as problematic aspects of the account may actually relate to claims that have been incorrectly attributed to the account. In fact, the account may not be reporting a sudden and immediate confusion of languages, or even a sequence in which a confusion of languages led to a scattering of the people. Indeed, a close examination of the account seems to allow an interpretation of events that is compatible with what linguists have observed about how languages can diversify, though some challenges may still remain in reconciling assumptions about the available post-Babel time frame versus the lengthy time frame that linguists have assumed to be necessary for the current diversification of languages.

## **The Tower of Babel Account: A Linguistic Consideration**

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### **1.0 Introduction**

The biblical account of the Tower of Babel constitutes one of the most well-known explanations for the diversification of the world's languages. Among language historians and academics, however, this account is seldom taken seriously. Representative of the view some hold toward the account, at least as the account is usually understood, is the attitude expressed by one linguistic scholar who views it as 'an engaging but unacceptable myth.' But although many scholars reject the historicity of the account and relegate it to myth or legend status, they should recognize that it is in their own interest to examine carefully such a 'myth' because of the information it could reveal about actual events. For example, one Hebrew scholar explains: 'But modern scholarship has come more and more to the conclusion that beneath the legendary embellishments there is a solid core of historical memory, that Abraham and Moses really lived, and that the Egyptian bondage and the Exodus are undoubted facts.' Ironically enough, much of the hostility among academics toward the account may even derive from mistaken notions about what the account is even claiming. We must be careful to distinguish what some have assumed or attributed to the account from what the account actually says. When we actually look at the

account closely, in fact, we may be surprised at what we see. As one linguist has noted, for example, while the account does indicate a common original language, it doesn't claim that that language was Hebrew or that God necessarily used a supernatural process in confounding the languages. And the account doesn't even claim that the diversification of languages was an immediate event.

This paper will examine one possible interpretation of the Tower of Babel account, namely that God used a scattering of the people to cause a confusion of languages rather than the commonly assumed notion among many readers of the account that He used a confusion of languages to scatter the people. This alternative interpretation, which can be shown to be consistent with well-established principles of historical linguistics, will be examined in light of the scriptural text, historical linguistics, and folkloric accounts from widely separated cultures. By exploring this possible interpretation I do not claim to be able to prove that the event at Babel actually happened. As with some of the remarkable events recounted in scripture, many things come down to a matter of faith. But I do hope to show that when the account is examined for what it actually says, rather than what others have claimed for it, it presents intriguing possibilities for even the most secularly-oriented scholars. In any event, I hope to show that many scholars have been too hasty in their dismissal of the biblical account. There is likely much about this account that we really don't understand.

## **2.0 Language Change from the Perspective of Historical Linguistics**

In the 1970's, at the conclusion of the Vietnam War, the United States Air Force prepared a glossary of recent slang terms for the returning American prisoners of war. This booklet, which was designed to help the POW's in their adjustment, resulted from the recognition that the American English lexicon, at least among the youth, had changed enough during the isolation of these prisoners to justify this type of project.

It is an axiomatic fact that languages continually change. Under normal circumstances the speakers of a given language continue to understand one another as they make the changes together. If however a division occurs within a single speech community, physically isolating some speakers from others, then it is only a matter of time before the separated communities begin speaking differently from each other since the various groups continue to experience linguistic change independently of each other. Thus a division or scattering of a once unified people may introduce a diversification of languages, with the separate communities eventually speaking different dialects and ultimately different languages.

It is such a process that is responsible for the development of the various Romance languages as Latin speakers spread across Europe and lived in separate communities. The brand of Latin that developed in the vernacular in France was different from the Latin in Spain and Portugal, and consequently we have French, Spanish, and Portuguese respectively.

The historical relationship between languages such as Spanish and Portuguese is pretty easy to see. But language historians explain that languages as seemingly diverse as Russian, Spanish, Greek, Sanskrit, and English all derived from a common source, the Indo-European language spoken by a people who inhabited the Euro-Asian inner continent. Eventually these people are supposed to have divided and migrated outward to various areas. Indeed, it was their scattering that accounts for the differences between the various 'descendant' languages of the Indo-European language family.

For some years now there has been an emerging discussion about the possibility that not only is the Indo-European language family related to other language families but that all of the world's languages may have come from a common origin. This language diversification would have likely developed in many cases in the same way that Russian, German, English, Spanish, Latin, and Greek have all descended from a common Indo-European ancestral language, after scattering outward from a common homeland. The research into a monogenesis of all of the world's languages has met with hostility among many linguistic scholars. And even some linguists who might entertain the possibility of a monogenesis of languages nonetheless doubt that any evidence of such a common origin to all the world's languages would still remain and be demonstrable in the modern languages of today. These scholars are also highly skeptical of the methodology of those linguists working to demonstrate the common origin of languages (a language sometimes referred to as 'proto-World'). It is important to note here, however, that the

debate between the two sides doesn't seem to be so much on whether the idea of a common origin to all the world's languages is feasible or not. It is more centered on whether such a common origin can be empirically demonstrated. That is an important point. Many linguists might concede the possibility of a monogenesis of languages but still bristle at the idea that such a common origin could ever be shown.

But the idea of a monogenesis of languages, while probably not empirically demonstrable, is nonetheless an idea that mustn't be rejected out of hand. Its feasibility even gains some possible support from recent genetic studies that suggest a common origin to human beings. And as Vitaly Shevoroshkin, has observed in relation to genetic evidence showing a common origin, if human beings can be traced back to a small common community, then we likely shared a common language at one time.

If a monogenesis occurred, one of the most natural explanations for the subsequent diversification of languages would be a diffusion of the peoples who once spoke that common tongue. With regard to this diffusion it is now appropriate to consult the biblical account concerning the confusion of languages.

### **3.0 The Biblical Account of the Tower of Babel**



The biblical account regarding the confusion of languages is found in Genesis 11:1-9, which describes the events surrounding the construction of the Tower of Babel. The account from The King James (Authorized) version is quoted below:

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.

- 2) And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there.
- 3) And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar.
- 4) And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.
- 5) And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.
- 6) And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.
- 7) Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.

- 8) So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.
- 9) Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

As far as what the account tells us about language change, and leaving aside other issues that people have associated with the account, a common interpretation of the above account is that the people shared a common language and set about to build a tower to reach heaven. God was angry and decided to stop this, so He caused an immediate confusion of their languages, making it impossible to communicate with each other. At this point, the people ceased their project and scattered out across the earth.

The biblical account certainly allows for this interpretation, and this interpretation, with its sudden and immediate change, may well be what is intended. But, as noted, I shall explore another possibility in the text, a possibility that a scattering of people is what caused the confusion of languages rather than vice-versa. In other words, the people were scattered, and their subsequent separation from each other resulted in a differentiation of languages, which would in turn help to keep the people separated from each other. If this latter interpretation better represents the intent of the text, the account is very compatible with the type of explanation scholars in historical linguistics commonly provide for the development of different languages.

One of the important implications of this alternate interpretation is that the confusion of languages would have been gradual rather than immediate. Does the biblical text allow an interpretation suggesting a more gradual change resulting from rather than causing a dispersion of people? A careful look at the account shows that it doesn't actually say that the confusion was immediate. While the account says that the confusion of languages happened 'there' at Babel, the identification of the location could be referring to the place at which the process of language change was initiated, since that was the place from which the dispersion of people occurred, and the dispersion is what caused the ultimate confusion of languages. And while some might believe that immediate change is implied because of their assumption that the confusion of languages caused the construction of the tower to cease, it should be pointed out that the account in Genesis doesn't make such an overt connection, though the apocryphal book of Jubilees does. With no other explanation given in Genesis as to why construction on the tower ceased and the people scattered, it might be natural to assume that the confusion of languages was the immediate cause. But this assumption may just be an inference which has been superimposed upon the account.

An important result of the interpretation argued here is a greater prominence to the scattering motif that occurs in the account. By the traditional interpretation, the scattering is a significant result but not central to the account. In contrast, by the interpretation argued here, the scattering of the people acquires a centrality, with the confusion of languages being a significant

result of the scattering, a result that could also keep the people scattered once they had spread out. By attributing a greater significance to the scattering motif, we may also need to re-evaluate the role of the tower in the account. In fact, the real problem with the tower may have been that it kept the people together. Thus what the account may really be about is the fulfillment of the divine mandate to ‘replenish [or fill] the earth,’ a significant part of which would seem to include scattering and spreading out. In the beginning God commanded the people, among other things, to ‘fill the earth.’ The same commandment was later given to Noah and his children. How does this relate to the Tower of Babel? The unified project of building the tower was keeping all the people together. And it appears as if the intent of the people who organized that project may have been just that. Notice that in verse four of the account they even seem to mention this intention:

And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

Given that the people were building a tower in order to prevent their dispersion, they may have been in open rebellion against God as their intent was to resist one of his commandments. It wouldn't have mattered what they were building. This interpretation is further advanced by W. Gunther Plaut:

The sin of the generation of Babel consisted of their refusal to ‘fill the earth.’

They had been commanded to do so but still tried to defy the divine will. God's action, therefore, was not so much a punishment as a carrying out of His plan.

Confounding the human language was merely an assurance that the Babel incident would not be repeated.

This latter interpretation would suggest that the scattering of the people was not just an additional result of the confusion of languages. It was central to the account. If anything, of the two events (the confusion of languages and the scattering of the people), it is more likely that the confusion of languages is the more incidental though its importance lies in how it might have kept the people separated once they had spread out. This view of the centrality of the scattering may also be supported by some information that Josephus includes in his Tower of Babel account:

Now the plain in which they first dwelt was called Shinar. God also commanded them to send colonies abroad, for the thorough peopling of the earth,---that they might not raise seditions among themselves, but might cultivate a great part of the earth, and enjoy its fruits after a plentiful manner: but they were so ill instructed, that they did not obey God; for which reason they fell into calamities, and were made sensible, by experience, of what sin they had been guilty; for when they flourished with a numerous youth, God admonished them again to send out colonies; but they, imagining the prosperity they enjoyed was not derived from the

favor of God, but supposing that their own power was the proper cause of the plentiful condition they were in, did not obey him. Nay, they added to this their disobedience to the divine will, the suspicion that they were therefore ordered to send out separate colonies, that, being divided asunder, they might the more easily be oppressed.

Hiebert attributes exegetical ‘blindness’ to those interpretations that ignore the builders’ professed motive of not being scattered. Furthermore, in relation to interpretations that attach great significance to the builders’ goal for the tower, Hiebert notes that the people’s explanation that they would build a tower that would reach heaven is an ‘ancient Near Eastern cliché for height,’ not really a professed aim of using it to enter heaven. He refers us, for example, to Deuteronomy 1:28 and 9:1 for similar expressions. But even if gaining access to heaven were at least one of the people’s goals, the Lord’s reaction against their project would surely not have been motivated by a fear that they could actually succeed. Thus in considering His response to their project, we would do well to consider again their own stated goal: “lest we be scattered.”

The fact that the fundamental issue in the Babel account involves dispersion (filling the earth or scattering) may also be illustrated by the chiasmic structure of the account. Chiasmus is of course a common Hebrew poetic form in which ideas are presented and then repeated in reverse order (ABCDCBA), yielding a sort of mirror image within a text. Radday explains that chiasmus may constitute a very useful clue in determining the purpose or theme in certain

biblical texts. One of the points that he makes is that ‘biblical authors and/or editors placed the main idea, the thesis, or the turning point of each literary unit, at its center.’ As it turns out, Radday also examines the chiastic structure of the Babel story and concludes that ‘emphasis is not laid, as is usually assumed, on the tower, which is forgotten after verse 5, but on the dispersion of mankind upon “the whole earth,” the key word opening and closing this short passage.’

All of this is not to say that the biblical account shows that God's intent was only to scatter the people. The Bible makes it clear that He intended to confound the languages as well. But the confusion of languages may have been, as has been pointed out, a means of keeping the people scattered once they had spread out.

#### **4.0 Cross-Cultural Comparison of the Account**

It is significant to compare the biblical account about the confusion of languages with myths and legends that exist throughout the world since sometimes myths and legends are a potentially important source of information about ancient events. Halliday points out that ‘legend has always a basis in some historical reality. The difficulty, however, is to know in any given case where history ends and fiction begins.’ The ubiquitousness of the account around the world, while not proving the actual event, is certainly consistent with a real event that could have affected the ancestors of various groups of people. To be sure, other explanations might be

offered for the widespread occurrence of this account. One might, for example, attribute its commonality to the influence of Christian missionaries. Some accounts in fact do seem to be derivative of the biblical account. But others seem sufficiently different from the biblical text as to suggest independent development, possibly reaching back to an actual event that the people's ancestors experienced. We might, for example, note the following conclusion of a southeast Asian myth about the confusion of languages, which is suggestive of a scattering leading to a confusion of languages:

At last, when the tower was almost completed, the Spirit in the moon, enraged at the audacity of the Chins, raised a fearful storm which wrecked it. It fell from north to south, and the people inhabiting the various storeys being scattered all over the land, built themselves villages where they fell. Hence the different tribes and sects varying in language and customs. The stones which formed the huge tower were the beginning of the abrupt mass of mountains which separate the plain of Burma from the Bay of Bengal.

This situation of the dispersion of peoples causing a subsequent confusion of languages also seems indicated by the following Hindu account of the diversification of languages:

There grew in the centre of the earth, the wonderful '*World Tree*,' or the '*Knowledge Tree*.' It was so tall that it reached almost to heaven. 'It said in its heart: "I shall hold my head in heaven, and spread my branches over all the earth,



and gather all men together under my shadow, and protect them, and prevent them from separating.” But Brahma, to punish the pride of the tree, cut off its branches and cast them down on the earth, when they sprang up as Wata trees, and made differences of belief, and speech, and customs, to prevail on the earth, to disperse men over its surface.’

Notice the order here. The tree (perhaps representing the tower) was preventing the people from separating. The people were punished as branches were cut off the tree and thrown down to the earth (a likely representation of groups of people). This by itself may already suggest a scattering. And notice that the account next speaks of how Brahma ‘made differences of belief, and speech, and customs, to prevail on the earth, to disperse men over its surface.’ This latter part may indicate the intended role of a diversity of tongues in keeping the people dispersed, once they had already been scattered.

Now consider an additional account from another part of the world, where a separation of the people led to a diversification of languages. In this account the separation of peoples is caused by the great deluge, which carried people into different parts of the earth. The attribution of the confusion of languages to the flood rather than the tower is not hard to understand given that both were ancient events. Holmberg reports the Yenisei Ostiaks of Siberia as recounting the following:

When the water rose continuously during seven days, part of the people and animals were saved by climbing on to the logs and rafters floating on the water.

But a strong north wind, which blew without ceasing for seven days, scattered the people far from one another. And for this reason they began, after the flood, to speak different languages and to form different peoples.

And Teit reports a similar motif among the Tahltan people, a Native American group in the northwestern part of North America. Once again the diversification of languages is seen as the result rather than a cause of separation and occurs in connection with the flood. Their flood account contains the following:

After a long time, some people came into contact with others at certain points, and thus they learned that there were people in the world besides themselves. When they met, they found that they spoke different languages and had difficulty in understanding one another. This came about by their being separated and living isolated for a long period of time. That all the people were one originally, is evidenced by many customs, beliefs, and traditions which are common to all.

The idea that a scattering led to a confusion of languages probably, though not necessarily, presupposes a gradual language change. We can see this notion of gradual change in the preceding account where it attributes language difference to 'their being separated and living isolated for a long period of time.' Another Native American account from the same part of the

world also conveys the idea of gradual language change. This account, which was reported among the Sanpoil people, members of the Salish group, describes an ancient feud among the people that got so bad that they ultimately split apart, the first of various subsequent divisions that fostered linguistic diversity. An excerpt from this account explains:

All during the winter the feeling grew, until in spring the mutual hatred drove part of the Indians south to hunt for new homes. This was the first division of the people into tribes. They selected a chief from their own division, and called themselves by another name.

Finding new objects, and having to give such objects names, brought new words into their former language; and thus **after many years the language was changed**. Each split in the tribe made a new division and brought a new chief. Each migration brought different words and meanings. Thus the tribes slowly scattered; and thus the dialects, and even new languages, were formed. [boldface mine]

One likely result of a gradual change in languages would be that some people would be unaware that any languages had even changed at the tower. In this regard we might note two versions of the Tower of Babel story. The first is an East African one which explains:

Bujenje is king of Bugabo. He holds a council with his ministers and the oldest people; he says, 'I want to climb up into the sky. Make me iron beams!' Then he orders trees to be cut down and piled one upon another. They fasten the stems

together with iron, and the pile reaches higher and higher. On the fourth day as the men are climbing, the iron springs apart and the trees break. The men fall down and die. The king suspends his work.

Scott provides another variant found among the southeast Asians, which he summarizes as follows:

The Tawyan have a variant of the tower legend. They set about building a tower to capture the sun, but there was a village quarrel, and one half cut the ladder while the other half were on it. They fell uninjured and took possession of the lands on which they were thus cast.

The notable feature of these two stories is that although both of them mention an unsuccessful attempt at constructing a tower, neither of them mentions a confusion of languages. Assuming that these separate cultures aren't just repeating a story that they learned from missionary contact (it seems unlikely to me that they would retain such a story from more recent contact and yet have no mention of the confusion of languages), then one possible conclusion comes to mind to explain the absence of any mention of the confusion of languages: The changes were so gradual that the people didn't notice them. In addition, it is perhaps significant that even within one account that mentions sudden language change, more particularly an account among the Choctaw people, Native Americans originally from the southeastern United States, the claim is made that its language is the original one. In other words, the account records the belief that only other

people experienced language change. While such a belief by the Choctaws would not necessarily result from an event which involved gradual change, it would certainly be consistent with gradual change, since the Choctaws would be unaware of any change in their own language and might therefore assume that whatever universal change occurred in languages must have left them unaffected.

An interpretation which alters the sequence of confounding and scattering does raise an important question. If the argument that the diversification of all world languages is a result of a scattering rather than a cause, and is assumed to be part of a natural process, a logical question that must be addressed concerns what might have caused a scattering or dispersal of the people at the time of the tower of Babel. The traditional view of the Babel account, as has been mentioned, is that the confusion of languages caused the people to disperse. With a reordered description, we are left without an immediate precipitating cause for dispersal. Of course, any answer to this is speculative, but it is very possible that it resulted from a powerful force of nature. Nibley speculates about this possibility as he points out that some of the Babel accounts mention a great wind. As he shows, wind is mentioned, for example, as destroying the tower in the account given by the historian Tha'labi, as well as in The Book of Jubilees. Add to these accounts the Chaldean and Armenian versions, as well as a sibylline version recounted by Josephus, which also mention how the winds toppled the tower. Furthermore, we earlier saw part of a southeast Asian myth, which records a storm that destroyed the tower, and in the

previously mentioned Choctaw account, which records a confusion of languages as the people attempted to build a great mound, the wind is mentioned as being strong enough to blow rocks down off the mound during three consecutive nights. The possibility of sustained and persistent winds causing the relocation of people does not appear so unbelievable when we view U.S. history. We could, for example, look at the experience of those living in the Oklahoma dustbowl of the 1930's. During that time, many people left the area because of persistent and sustained winds which disrupted their topsoil and consequently the desirability of their land.

Of course it would be misleading to suggest that most myths and legends (only some of which could be included in this paper), or other accounts such as those by Josephus or the apocryphal Book of Jubilees present a unified picture consistent with the interpretation I am advancing here. Some accounts speak of a wind or storm; others do not. Some accounts mention a confusion of languages; others mention the building project but say nothing of a scattering or confusion of languages. One account, as we have seen, mentions a building project and a scattering but no confusion of languages. Some seem to indicate a sudden confusion of languages that preceded a scattering.

An explanation of these differences, however, may not be as problematic as it might initially appear. For example, how could we explain the accounts which are very clear about the confounding of language being sudden and immediate, concluding at the tower site and preceding a scattering?

If some members of the once unified speech community at Babel were scattered and then later reunited, discovering that they no longer spoke a common tongue, there are some good reasons why they might identify Babel (or the tower site) as the place where a confusion of languages occurred. Such cultures, for example, might know through an oral or written tradition that they had spoken a common tongue in an earlier age when building a great tower, that they had ceased to build the tower because of hostile forces of nature, and that after the manifestation of these hostile forces they scattered. With such information the people might conclude that the confusion of languages was completed at Babel, especially since it might have been assumed to have been an immediate punishment. After all, the scattering was perhaps accompanied by unsettling forces of nature on a scale that hadn't previously been known since perhaps the time of the great flood. There was no question in their mind that a divine hand was involved in the scattering, and in the absence of any other explanation for a confusion of languages (a gradual change would have made the transformation go unnoticed), it might have seemed logical to conclude that something of such a universal scale as the confusion of languages was completed at Babel as well. The critical distinction here is whether the confusion of languages was completed at Babel. This is not to question that the confusion of languages occurred at Babel, only whether the process was also completed or merely initiated there.

## **5.0 Mitigating Arguments Related to a Compressed Time Frame for Linguistic Change**

The single largest obstacle to the feasibility of the interpretation presented here is, in my opinion, the time frame in which such a differentiation of languages is supposed to have occurred. More specifically, it could be objected that a naturalistic process such as has been outlined here hasn't had enough time since the Tower of Babel to produce the kind of language diversity that we can find among all the world's languages.

While it isn't necessary here to propose a precise time frame for the Tower of Babel and subsequent confusion of languages, it is probably true that people in favor of the historicity of the account would have trouble reconciling their biblically-influenced time frame, even if they accepted a gradual time frame, with the very lengthy one that scholars in historical linguistics would suggest as being necessary for a monogenesis of languages to have developed the current linguistic diversity that we see.

One approach to the difficulty in time frames might be to try to minimize the scope of language change outlined in the account. In relation to the Babel account, Nibley has pointed out that Hebrew uses the same term, *eretz*, for both 'land' and 'earth' thus presenting a potential ambiguity with the Old Testament form for 'whole earth' (being the transliterated *kol ha-aretz*). This could have important implications for the interpretation of the account. If the reference in the account to how 'the whole earth was of one language' could have been translated as 'the whole land was of one language,' then the account may not necessarily have even been intended to be a description about the diversification of all the world's languages but rather a description



that relates to only a portion of them. This approach could initially appear to reconcile the thorny time frame issue, since it would mean that some of the language differentiation we see in the world today could have begun in some remote past that preceded the time of the Tower of Babel event. But this interpretation presents other challenging questions such as how much of an explanatory benefit in additional years we gain through this interpretation when the biblical story of a universal flood appears to have preceded the Babel incident by perhaps only a few hundred years at most. The universal flood described in Genesis 6-8 could have placed a severe bottleneck on linguistic development from any earlier time, perhaps allowing the survival of just a single language coming forward from the distant past. This then places a serious cap on the number of years we could assume to have been involved in the diversification of all the world's languages prior to the event at Babel. We could of course attempt once again to play with the interpretation of the word *eret*, which also occurs in the flood account, limiting the scope of the flood to a region rather than the entire earth, but this exegetical strategy starts to feel like an all-too convenient crutch, and it seems to violate the etiological intent of the account. Indeed, if the flood account were merely describing a local or regional event, why would Noah even need to have saved the various animals? Is it very likely that all the world's animals had remained in one regional location since the creation and thus stood at risk of annihilation in a regional disaster? Wouldn't many of them by then have migrated to other areas beyond the reach of a regional catastrophe? We would expect that people, as social beings, might have limited

themselves for a while to one region of the world. But would non-domesticated animals have done so as well? The alternative translation of *eretz* as 'land' rather than 'earth' in the Babel account provides at best only a very limited extension of the time frame needed for the diversification of languages in exchange for an interpretation that restricts the global significance of the event at Babel. And I think that to further apply the alternative translation of *eretz* to the flood account would seem to distort the clear intent of that account, though I recognize that some biblical scholars will disagree with me about the universal scope of the flood account.

Rather than looking exclusively at the Babel account to see whether it could tolerate a longer time frame in which a naturalistic development of our current linguistic diversity could have occurred, we might consider to what extent the presumed time frame needed for linguistic change could be modified somewhat. In fact, there are a few considerations that could suggest the possibility of a shorter time frame than what might usually be acceptable to the linguistic scholars, whether this relates to a monogenesis of all languages or just a group of languages. Up until this point I have given arguments for gradual language change since the Babel event. I will now examine some evidence to suggest that the current diversity among languages, while having arrived at its current state through a generally gradual process, could nonetheless have occurred much faster than the rate linguistic scholars would normally consider and may in some ways have even been underway before Babel.

## **5.1 Disparity in Rates of Linguistic Change**

First of all, our notions of time that are necessary for extensive linguistic change are reliant on what has been our experience or on what has been observed. And even within this branch of study, only a few of the languages have left records behind that take us back more than a few thousand years or so. Thus generalizations about language change are indeed generalizations based on the observation of limited data, none of which extends back to the time period in question. Various social factors may exert a great influence on language, and there is a lot about ancient history that we simply don't know. These social events may even alter the rate at which a given language undergoes change. For example, the Norman conquest of England seems to have accelerated the decline and loss of inflectional endings in English. Thus, anyone making assumptions about the time necessary to account for the loss of inflections in English based on the conservative rate of change observed in the history of a related language like German would grossly overestimate the time needed for English to have lost its inflectional endings. The rate of change in this aspect of the grammar is very different between the two languages, even though as Germanic languages their historic relationship is very close. This disparity in the rate of change even between two closely related languages should make us cautious about relying on assumptions of uniformitarianism in language change.

With regard to the rate of linguistic change through time, R.M.W. Dixon argues for what he calls a 'punctuated equilibrium model' of language change in which he

explains that long periods of relatively slow language change and development within and among languages are punctuated by events that dramatically accelerate language change. Interestingly enough, among the factors that Dixon identifies that can lead to accelerated change are ‘natural causes such as drought or flooding.’ We might reflect here once again on the common description of winds that are mentioned in connection with the Babel account.

Even as Dixon would apparently favor a lengthy time frame for the development of the current diversification we see among languages, he expresses amazement at the ‘assurance with which many historical linguists assign a date to their reconstructed proto-language.’ He notes that ‘the only really honest answer to questions about dating a proto-language is “We don’t know.” Or, one might venture something like “probably some time between 5,000 and perhaps 12,000 BP [before the present]”.’ Obviously, whether or not the model of uniformitarianism is applied to the development and change in languages has a lot to do with the expected rate of change in languages. But if we are able to accept that the uniformitarian model may not always be relevant, then we can tolerate a substantially revised time line.

## **5.2 Deliberate Linguistic Change**

A second factor that should allow us to entertain the possibility of a shorter time frame needed for some of the current language diversification we see is also related to the unreliability

of uniformitarian assumptions. This factor stems from the possibility of deliberate language changes introduced by speakers of a particular language. Speakers of a given language have been known to introduce deliberate differentiation in an attempt to distinguish themselves as a separate group within or from another speech community. Of course, such an attempt accelerates the rate of change between speakers that would otherwise be speaking the same language. In an article about deliberate language change, Sarah Thomason concludes that ‘adults are not only capable of inventing new words and new meanings for old words and then adding the innovative forms to their language or replacing old words with new ones; and they are not only able to modify a few fairly minor grammatical rules. They are also able to implement much more elaborate changes in their language, including massive lexical distortion and massive structural change as well.’

It might be useful here to consider a few examples that show the variety of situations and varying degrees to which deliberate language changes have occurred. It should be evident that while some deliberate change is relatively minor in its influence on the language, some can be quite significant. Trudgill has observed that ‘language can be a very important factor in group identification, group solidarity and the signalling of difference, and when a group is under attack from outside, signals of difference may become more important and are therefore exaggerated.’ He discusses an example from Martha's Vineyard, where native residents have exaggerated their pronunciation of a particular vowel combination to distinguish themselves from the seasonal

residents who are now visiting the island in greater numbers. In a more dramatic illustration, Thomason briefly reports on a language from a century ago in a region that is now part of modern day Pakistan. In this case speakers altered their language through such ‘devices’ as adding prefixes and suffixes and by inverting sounds within their words to such an extent that they made their language ‘unintelligible to nonmembers of the speech community.’ Thomason indicates that this resulting new variety could actually be considered a new language. In light of this it is interesting to consider an account from an old Irish history, *Chronicum Scotorum*. In this account we find that Fenius ‘composed the language of the Gaeidhel from seventy-two languages, and subsequently committed it to Gaeidhel, son of Agnoman, viz., in the tenth year after the destruction of Nimrod's Tower.’ While such a tale probably shouldn't be taken at face value, its description of a deliberate human-induced language change happening so soon after Babel should capture our interest.

Another powerful source of deliberate change, though not with any intent to exclude outsiders, is the avoidance of taboo expressions. As Hock explains, language change occurs as speakers try to replace certain vocabulary, with less direct expressions. Eventually, however, such euphemistic substitutions acquire the negative connotations and need to be replaced themselves. We can see this in the creation of numerous expressions for ‘toilet’ (*bathroom*, *lavatory*, *washroom*, etc.).

The avoidance of taboo expressions may result in frequent change, indeed ‘a constant turnover in vocabulary.’ And it apparently isn't limited to avoiding words within a particular semantic field. It can operate with regard to avoiding particular combinations of sounds. Hock explains:

. . . it has been argued that the difficulties of tracing Tahitian vocabulary to its Proto-Polynesian sources are in large measure a consequence of massive taboo: Upon the death of a member of the royal family, every word which was a constituent part of that person's name, or even any word sounding like it became taboo and had to be replaced by new words.

The need for a large number of new terms was satisfied in many cases through ‘metaphorical meaning extensions’ or borrowing. It isn't too difficult to imagine how such a process could contribute to an accelerated rate of language change, perhaps even encouraging scholars who rely on more uniform rates of change to overestimate the time needed for a couple of languages to have reached their current dissimilarity.

Among oral cultures the deliberate lexical change resulting from an avoidance of taboo expressions doesn't appear to have been isolated. And the replacement vocabulary could be readily generated. Frazer provides the colorful example of the Abipones in Paraguay:

New words, says the missionary Dobrizhoffer, sprang up every year like mushrooms in a night, because all words that resembled the names of the dead

were abolished by proclamation and others coined in their place. The mint of words was in the hands of the old women of the tribe, and whatever term they stamped with their approval and put in circulation was immediately accepted without a murmur by high and low alike, and spread like wildfire through every camp and settlement of the tribe. You would be astonished, says the same missionary, to see how meekly the whole nation acquiesces in the decision of a withered old hag, and how completely the old familiar words fall instantly out of use and are never repeated either through force of habit or forgetfulness. In the seven years that Dobrizhoffer spent among these Indians the native word for jaguar was changed thrice, and the words for crocodile, thorn, and the slaughter of cattle underwent similar though less varied vicissitudes. As a result of this habit, the vocabularies of the missionaries teemed with erasures, old words having constantly to be struck out as obsolete and new ones inserted in their place.

Frazer provides similar additional examples of various cultures making deliberate changes to their vocabulary when a word was the same or similar to the name of an individual who had recently died or someone who had become a monarch or leader. Although in some cases taboo vocabulary was eventually resumed by the culture, in many cases it wasn't. Obviously, such extensive lexical replacement could do much to accelerate language change and to mask one language's relationship to another.



It should be pointed out that if deliberate changes to language such as the extensive replacements resulting from massive taboo happened early rather than late in the process of language differentiation, those changes could have affected many 'descendant' languages. In other words, the changes within one language could cause a whole set of other languages (a language 'family') to reflect those same differences. Such random deviations caused by massive taboo in the "parent" language could also make it harder to show the relationship between the set of affected languages and other languages in the world.

### **5.3 Language Classification Paradigms and Methodologies**

A third factor that must be examined when considering the possibility of a shorter time frame involves the prevailing classification of languages and the methodologies used for calculating time frames of linguistic divergence. With regard to one of these methodologies that was commonly used in the past, Hall shows that whether we perceive a given language as a 'descendant' of another, its cognate (descended from a common language), or even having ultimately derived as a pidgin from that other language, can make a large difference in the time we assume is needed for the diversification. He explains:

If we calculate the presumed relationship between Neo-Melanesian and Modern English, using Swadesh's revised basic list of one hundred words, we obtain a figure of two to three millennia of separation between the two languages if we assume that Neo-Melanesian is directly descended from English, or between one

and two millennia if we assume that the two are cognates, descended from the same proto-language. Either of these figures is, of course, wildly divergent from what we know to be the actual length of time involved in the formation of Neo-Melanesian--not over a century and a half since its earlier possible beginnings in the eighteen twenties or thirties.

Hall's example, while specific to one dating method, illustrates the difference that a methodology and initial assumptions can make when assigning dates for linguistic divergence.

#### **5.4 The Possibility of Linguistic Change Already Underway at the Time of Babel**

A final factor to consider in mitigating the time-frame available for language differentiation since the event at Babel is the possibility that some linguistic differentiation began to occur even before the people were dispersed at the time of the tower of Babel. Although we might attribute the diversification of languages to a natural process, a process that God initiated mainly through scattering the people, we might also acknowledge the possibility that dialects or separate language varieties had begun to emerge even while the people were still together. This would cut down some of the time necessary for extensive language change since the tower of Babel. Because a project of the enormity of the great tower probably involved and required the specialization of labor, it is not too unlikely that social dialects began to occur already at the

tower of Babel, just as they occur in modern cities. In such a situation the people would have had a common but mutually understandable language, though that language could have had different dialects. The presence of social dialects would not necessarily preclude a prevailing view among the people that they all shared one language. Ferguson explains that speakers of a language containing both 'high' and 'low' varieties may even deny the existence of the low variety.

As far as the diversification that might have already been underway at the time of the Tower of Babel, it seems logical that after a group disperses, the language that the various constituent communities would take with themselves would be in most cases the 'low' variety (each group having its own particular brand of the low version) since the families and friends would probably use the low variety among themselves. Thus from the outset of the dispersion, language differentiation could have already begun. With the passage of several thousand years, the differentiation would be even more pronounced.

A Southeast Asian myth, whose conclusion has been quoted earlier in this article, is consistent with the view that there might have been some language differentiation already occurring while the tower was being constructed. We'll now return to the larger version of that account, as reported by Scott:

Their story is that once upon a time all the people lived in one large village and spoke one tongue. At a great council, however, having determined that the phases

of the moon were an inconvenience, they resolved to capture that heavenly body and make it shine permanently. This would prevent cattle-raiding and render it easier to guard against sudden assaults from unneighbourly peoples, so they set about building a tower to reach the moon. After years of labour the tower rose so high that it meant days of hard descent for the people working on the top to come down to the village to get supplies of food. Since this was a serious waste of time, they fell upon the plan of settling the builders at various intervals in the tower, and food and other necessities were passed up from one floor to another. The people of the different storeys came into very little contact with one another, and thus they gradually acquired different manners, customs, and ways of speech, for the passing up of the food was such hard work, and had to be carried on so continuously, that there was no time for stopping to have a talk. At last, when the tower was almost completed, the Spirit in the moon, enraged at the audacity of the Chins, raised a fearful storm which wrecked it. It fell from north to south, and the people inhabiting the various storeys being scattered all over the land, built themselves villages where they fell. Hence the different tribes and sects varying in language and customs. The stones which formed the huge tower were the beginning of the abrupt mass of mountains which separate the plain of Burma from the Bay of Bengal.

But the linguistic diversity that might have already existed at Babel could have been more significant than a mere difference in dialects. One biblical commentator presents the possibility that the Babel account may be recording the loss of a common lingua franca that had served to allow speakers of differing languages to understand one another. It is not uncommon for speakers of differing languages to have a common language that they share with others for the purpose of broader communication. In their homes and local communities they may use a native language that differs from the language they speak in larger settings that draw people from a wider area. Thus to say that everyone has a common language or spoke one language is not necessarily to say that they only spoke one language. Furthermore, as we saw in the discussion of social dialects, if the motivation for ongoing social interaction with the larger group is subsequently removed, then the smaller speech communities will often return to their native dialects and languages. We can see this in the aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet Union. While the larger government held the various regions together, with Russian being the language of wider communication, it was not the case that Russian was the only language, or even the preferred language of the constituent groups that together made up the Soviet Union. And as soon as the Soviet Union was dissolved, some of the smaller constituent groups reverted back to their own respective native languages, which they had spoken among themselves all along. We can imagine a setting in which the people at Babel had a common language that they could speak

with others outside their own smaller families and local community while still retaining a separate language of their own. With a scattering outward from Babel, each group could then have used its own native language exclusively. This kind of situation would then greatly reduce the amount of time needed for the groups that had left Babel to become mutually unintelligible to each other. If each group left the area already speaking a distinctive language and didn't pass the lingua franca on to their children (and why would they need to if they were no longer in contact with the other groups?), then that next generation would no longer have a common language with the others groups that had been at Babel.

But there is a potential limitation on our ability to use the argument about existing linguistic diversification at Babel to mitigate the problem of the relatively brief subsequent time frame for our current state of substantial language diversity. That limitation is found once again in the biblical account of the great flood. As noted earlier, the account of the universal flood seems to place a restrictive cap on the number of years prior to Babel in which language diversification could have developed. Thus even while it might be true that the inhabitants at Babel could have had different languages, unified by some kind of lingua franca that allowed them to communicate together, they probably wouldn't have had time since the flood for those languages to have become drastically different. Yet this assumes that only one language came forward through the great flood. That would seem to be a reasonable assumption, but not necessarily a true one.

The Bible never says that there were no other languages from the history of the world up to the time of the Tower of Babel. It only explains that at the time of the great tower the earth ‘was of one language, and of one speech,’ which, as previously explained, could note the existence of a lingua franca shared by diverse speech communities that had their own respective languages. If these languages all developed from the time of the preceding universal flood, we wouldn’t expect them to be vastly different from each other. But is it possible that more than one language came through the great flood? If even just one wife of one of Noah’s sons was bilingual, sharing a language with Noah’s family but also having her own native language, and if she passed that language on to her children, attaching a certain sense of identity with that language and motivating its preservation despite its limited usefulness with respect to the other families, she could have greatly altered the time frame by which the language diversification, even from a biblically influenced perspective, would need to be calculated. If her language survived up to and through the time of the Babel event as a native language distinct from a common lingua franca, then the time frame for the language diversification that we see in the world today would not have developed just from the time of Babel, or even since the time of the great flood, but could instead have developed from language diversity that had been developing since the time of our first human ancestors.

The discussion in this section suggests that even a natural and gradual development of linguistic diversity could have been punctuated by events that accelerated the process at various

times, and that a variety of factors could in fact call into question some of our notions about the extensive time needed for the widespread linguistic differentiation we see today. It could also modify some of our views about the development of language diversity exclusively from the time of Babel.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

I will now summarize some possibilities that seem compatible with the Tower of Babel account as it is recorded in scripture. First of all, the earth (or land) had one language or speech, whether because there were no other existing languages or because they had a shared lingua franca that allowed them to communicate together despite some already existing linguistic differences. Second, this unified community worked together on some kind of massive tower project. The current ruins of large towers around what was anciently known as "Babylon" and the widespread belief among vastly separated cultures that their people had once been involved in such a project argues for this possibility, especially since some of these myths are not so easily linked with Christian teachings. Third, the people were forced to discontinue their project and scatter. Their subsequent separation from each other may have been the primary factor in language differentiation and mutual unintelligibility among groups, a differentiation which



ultimately served to perpetuate the scattering of the people. By this interpretation Babel would still legitimately be considered the place in which the confusion of languages occurred since it was the place from which the process of language differentiation was initiated, or at least the place where a state of mutual intelligibility began to decline through a dispersion of the people. The idea that a separation of a once unified speech community could result in language differentiation is commonly accepted within the linguistic community, though reconciling the time frame that linguistic scholars would assume to be necessary for the monogenesis of languages with the available time frame that many biblical adherents would assume to be suggested by the biblical record poses some challenges. Finally, and most significantly, while the general interpretation I have given here (that the separation of people led to the confusion of languages) varies with the traditional interpretation that people make of the account, it may in fact be supported by the biblical text.

It is hard to say exactly what happened at the tower of Babel, given the brevity and, it could be argued, the vagueness of the account. Though it records actual history, the Bible is above all, a religious record rather than a historical record and thus may leave some historical details a little sketchy.

Whether the view that I present here of the Babel account corresponds with what the biblical account is actually describing, I will not pretend to know. I am, after all, proposing an interpretation, which though feasible, may in fact not be the intended interpretation. But the

possibility of such an interpretation should at least give even secularly minded scholars accustomed to more naturalistic explanations reason to be more cautious before they dismiss the account as a quaint myth. Indeed a strong argument can be made that it is a record of an actual event that resulted in, through whatever means, a confusion of languages.

Notes