

THE TOWER OF BABEL

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It is argued that more than Scripture actually says has commonly been read into the account of the Tower of Babel. In particular, Scripture does not say explicitly that the diversity of languages began there instantaneously. An interruption of the faculty of speech, followed by dispersion, would, it is suggested, have been enough; diversification of languages would then have followed.

Introduction

Possibly one of the most unusual and most misunderstood event documented in the Bible is that of the Confusion of Tongues at the Tower of Babel. The misunderstanding results from a tendency to accept long-standing interpretations of the biblical account that have lost sight of what is actually stated.

Since at least as early as the time of Josephus, this account has been interpreted as describing an instant diversification of human language; i.e., the miraculous creation of new languages. In Josephus' words:

"... but he [God] created discord among them by making them speak different languages, through the variety of which they could not understand one another."¹

This idea still prevails—even among those who reject the factuality of the account—as evidenced in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

"The mythical story of its [Tower of Babel] construction... appears to be an attempt to explain the existence of diverse human languages."²

However, a careful examination of the biblical text reveals no indication that such a phenomenon occurred.

And the whole earth was of one language and one speech. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. Therefore it is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth...

Genesis 11:1,7,9

No matter how long-standing, no matter how widely accepted, and no matter how popular, the idea of language diversification is not present in the account; verse one notwithstanding. Indeed, the statement in verse one possibly implies that what follows does *not* involve multiple languages; i.e., there was one language before, during, and after the catastrophe. Thus, its purpose is to provide an overall backdrop—the setting—rather than to announce a condition subject to change. (The first biblical recognition of different languages cites Joseph's use of an interpreter.)

So much for what the account does *not* say. It remains to determine what can be concluded from and about the information it does provide; including the reference to the "confounding" of the language.

Time of the Confusion

The biblical passage describing the Confusion stands isolated from all other parts of the Bible, making chronological placement difficult. It is frequently

ascribed to the time of Peleg because of the "division of the earth" in his day (Genesis 10:25). However, not only is this "division" a very ambiguous term (possibly describing a geological event³), the historical context of (presumably) similar towers seems to preclude this view, placing it at a much later date than Peleg. There is also a legendary association of Abraham with the Tower of Babel; this too arguing for a later period.

"And it came to pass that Abraham, who was then in his 48th year, heard of the mighty tower which was being built in the valley of Shinaar. He travelled to the valley and endeavored to make the builders desist from their sinful undertaking, but they refused to listen to him. Abraham thereupon prayed to the Lord of the Universe: 'God Almighty,' he prayed, 'confuse their language and scatter them over the face of the earth.'"⁴

Extent of the Confusion

Legends of a confusion of tongues appear to be few in number, but the geographical distribution of those extant is revealing.⁵ They span nearly the entire length of the North American continent, but other than that are limited to Mesopotamia. Such a distribution argues against its having resulted from diffusion; this implying at least two occurrences of the phenomenon in question. By the same token, each occurrence would have been limited in geographical range. The Bible neither supports nor contradicts the evidence for this contention. It merely documents the effects on a single group of people.

Nature of the Confusion

A straightforward reading of the biblical record negates the highly subjective (unfounded) *interpretation* suggesting the inception of "new languages" and provides a much more reasonable alternative.

The text states that the builders' speech was *confounded*. Judging from the name of the place (Babel), their speech became a babble. This was not just a "collective babble" of the individuals speaking different languages but a babble on the part of each individual affected. In other words, they apparently lost the power of coherent speech! They could only babble!

The oldest known nonbiblical account of this event conveys the same thought. "In his anger also the secret council he poured out to scatter (abroad) his face he set he gave a command to make strange their speech."⁶

Fortunately, this was only a transient effect, and, after some unknown period of time, those affected could again communicate in their original language. However, although not explicitly stated, the confusion and fear forced a dispersion—families remaining intact because of ties stronger than speech. Language diversifi-

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cation then proceeded after the recovery at its own (pardon the expression) uniformitarian pace—one consequence of the separation (but probably previously under way in different parts of the world).

Possible Cause of the Confusion

It is not uncommon for creationists to seek to ascertain physical causes for various biblically recorded upheavals attributed to God. There are presently several competing theories among creationists as to the cause of the Deluge. In all cases, it is accepted that God used some kind of physical instrument to bring about this most devastating of all ancient catastrophes. It is not unreasonable to surmise that God might have made use of another physical instrument to effect His Will at another time and place; e.g., the Tower of Babel. There are documented contemporary experiences that perhaps suggest the nature of a potential candidate for such an instrument.

Given the suggested nature of the Confusion of Tongues, it is entirely possible that it resulted from a physical disturbance of the brain. "Application of an electric current across a group of neurons elicits both excitatory and inhibitory effects . . . Vocalization can be evoked by electrical stimulation of the motor strip, but these vocalizations are never words. Spontaneous language has not been evoked from cortical stimulation. Rather cortical stimulation seems to act on such complex behavior as language as though it were introducing noise into the system. The brain apparently does not have time to compensate for this sudden burst of noise, so its introduction at any point in the complex system involved in language production may interfere with ultimate performance . . . The period of disruption of function is, in large measure, temporary."⁷ Similar conditions have been seen to result from exposure to electromagnetic fields.

" . . . diffuse behaviors, such as ambulation or emotional responses, which are controlled by a variety of environmental stimuli, have been reported to vary as a function of ELF [Extremely Low Frequency] electric or magnetic field applications."⁸

Aside from the familiar shock hazard, lightning is also a source of electromagnetic radiation. It is also the only possibility mentioned in any of the nonbiblical legends of the Confusion.⁹ An interplanetary discharge was cited by Dr. C. J. Ransom¹⁰ as a possible source of the postulated electrical disturbance in response to my original manuscript on this matter. He, in turn, ascribed this suggestion to Immanuel Velikovsky. Two such occurrences would explain the peculiar distribution of the legends.

Hebrew legend has it that the Tower of Babel experienced some kind of pyrogenic assault. "As for the unfinished tower, a part sank into the earth, and another part was consumed by fire; only one-third remained standing."¹¹ Thus, an objective reading of Scripture, legendary evidence, and contemporary experience together suggest that the manifestation of God's wrath loosed upon Babel was possibly in the form of a bolt.

Summary

1. The Bible states that the builders of the Tower of Babel spoke a common language.
2. It does not say that the builders were instantaneously given new languages.
3. Rather, it says that their speech was confounded; i.e., became a babble, incoherent.
4. The confused speech and accompanying terror forced a dispersion, but the speech difficulty was nevertheless a transient effect (suggested by contemporary experiences of electrical disturbances of the brain). It was only some (unknown) period of time until the victims' speech capability was regained, the original language being intact at this point in all groups. Families and family-based groupings would have held themselves intact.
5. Separation of the groups and their subsequent isolation from each other led quite naturally to language variations and independent language developments.

Footnote

In a recent publication, Velikovsky has cited a curious incident in the life of Nabopolassar as recorded by Berosus. "I was on the road to Til-Kunnu. Stormy weather broke loose, the god of Storm did thunder dreadfully. Inside my mouth the word became scarce, and the word came out somewhat stumbling. "And the years came and went and this condition began to play a part in my dreams. And god's hand stuck me in the time of a dream, and the ability of speech I lost entirely."¹² The king obviously suffered a stroke, but the reference to a thunderstorm causes wonder. Was it particularly severe to deserve written recognition? Of course the obvious question is "Was there a cause and effect relationship between the storm's electrical activity and the king's stroke?"

References

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