

Do You Really Believe That?

Question/Answer

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This is a response to an article posted on the web bearing the above title and is in reference to believing the Biblical account of the construction and subsequent confusion at Babel. The article is posted below with an analysis that follows:

The second installment of "Do You Really Believe That?" will examine another classic Old Testament story, the Tower of Babel. According to this story, in the days after Noah's flood, all humanity spoke one language. Filled with pride and ambition, they came together and began to build a tower "whose top may reach unto heaven" (Genesis 11:4). God witnesses this and is upset, not because the building of the tower displays hubris, but because he actually fears that humanity will become omnipotent if they complete the tower (11:6). He responds by afflicting them with different languages so that they could no longer understand each other, causing them to scatter across the face of the earth, leaving the tower unfinished.

Again, like Noah's flood, there are theists who take this story seriously and believe it actually happened, despite its numerous and obvious absurdities. [Here's one such:](#)

As is evident from the above, I believe that the account of Genesis 11 has a solid historical foundation in early Mesopotamia. The details are authentic and realistic. The identification of the urbanization process and the accompanying development of the ziggurat with fundamental changes in the religious perspectives of the people demonstrates the keen analytical insight of the Biblical author.

First of all, what was it about *this* tower that drew God's punishment? Human beings today regularly rear skyscrapers and other structures that far surpass anything that primitive people working with mud bricks could have built. The Christian Answers site linked above claims that it was not the height of the tower that invited doom, but its devotion to the pagan Babylonian gods. But even so, we regularly build statues, mosques and other edifices to religions which the Bible claims are false. Why have none of the builders of these structures been stricken with curses? Has God calmed down, so that hubris in the present era enrages him less than hubris of past eras? Or is it simply that, in superstitious and pre-scientific times, miracles could be claimed with less fear of contradiction?

Second: What did God fear the builders would achieve? The Christian Answers site says he was merely jealous of the tower's devotion to gods other than himself. This is a classic example of [smoothing out the rough edges](#), where subtle theological explanations developed over centuries are blithely read back into the crude, primitive fairy tales that religions start out as, as if that was the author's intent all along. The Bible says explicitly why God sent his curse:

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.

According to Genesis, God was worried that human beings would become too powerful for him to control if they learned to work together. Thus, his only choice was to keep them divided and separate, prevented from cooperating by barriers of mutual incomprehension. This is, ironically, a fairly good allegory for the effect religion has actually had on the world. But in the context of a literal event, it makes no sense whatsoever. If God was truly all-powerful, it would hardly matter whether people worked together or not. (On the other hand, if the earlier parts of the Old Testament envisioned God as a tribal deity, superhuman but not omnipotent, then this passage makes considerably more sense.)

Third: Why would the confusion of tongues cause the people to give up and scatter? If I woke up one morning mysteriously unable to communicate with my family and friends, I certainly wouldn't abandon them and flee into the wilderness. Why wouldn't the people of Babel stay together? Even if they couldn't communicate, their situation would be no worse than that of many foreign cultures meeting for the first time. (It certainly doesn't prevent the diplomats of the United Nations from working together.) Over time they could learn each other's new languages, develop pidgins and creoles, and finally be able to speak again

and resume building the tower. Not only was the punishment bizarre, it seems as if it shouldn't even have been effective.

But the final nail in the coffin of the Babel story is our subsequent understanding of linguistic evolution. Languages did not suddenly appear all at once, the way the biblical authors evidently imagined and tried to explain with this silly fairy tale. Instead, languages drift apart and evolve from each other over long periods of time, with accents becoming dialects becoming whole new tongues. (This [Talk.Origins Post of the Month](#) gives some examples of the evolution of English.) Though the ultimate roots of human language may be lost to prehistory, we can trace this evolution backwards to see how many languages, [including Hebrew and other Ancient Near East tongues](#), diversified from each other in a given time period. The linguistic evidence offers no support for the idea that humanity was ever united by a single tongue, nor that the varying languages all appeared at once in a sudden event. Like many biblical stories, the Tower of Babel is a tall tale with no basis in evidence or reality, and so I ask: Do you *really* believe that?

(<http://www.daylightatheism.org/2007/07/do-you-really-believe-that-ii.html#comment-25781>)

The above article is filled with many false accusations and innuendos. The Biblical record (Genesis 11:1-9) actually reads as follows:

- 1 *Now the whole earth had one language and 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 *Then they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar.*
- 4 *And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth."*
- 5 *But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built.*
- 6 *And the LORD said, "Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them.*
- 7 *"Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."*
- 8 *So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city.*
- 9 *Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.*

The Genesis Account Affirms:

1. There was a time when the earth had one language.
2. Early man was intelligent enough to advance technology for the building of large structures.
3. Their motives a Babel were to make a name for themselves and to not be scattered.
4. God has an interest in what man builds.
5. God disproved of their work.
6. God confused their language.
7. That particular construction ceased.
8. Man was consequently scattered abroad over the face of all the earth.

Unlocking the full meaning of Genesis 11:1-9 requires our understanding of Genesis 9:1 where the Lord commanded man to fill the earth, *"So God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.'"* Man's motivation to build

a tower in chapter eleven was directly opposed to the ancient command in chapter nine of *filling the earth*. Hence, the tower was erected, “...lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11:4).

What Genesis 11:1-9 Does Not Affirm:

- *God is opposed to man building large structures.* Noah’s ark, for example was around five stories tall and 500 feet long (Gen. 6:15). If God was opposed to man making large structures, then why did He command Noah to build such? God was opposed to the motive behind building Babel—making a name for themselves and not filling the earth. The Lord by confusing their language merely postponed man making large buildings rather than altogether prohibiting such.
- *God fears man will become omnipotent.* Our secular friends seek to imagine that God fears man will become omnipotent if the tower to the heavens is completed. We would ask the brilliant mind who wrote this article to tell us how man erecting a structure into the heavens would make man omnipotent? September 11, 2001 easily reminds us that while we may have buildings 110 stories tall, they can fall into rubble and be a death-bringer for thousands in a moment’s notice. The twin towers certainly made no one omnipotent. We would ask our atheist friend to tell us how he knows “God fears” an “omnipotent manhood” when Jehovah had been watching man go from the womb to the tomb for centuries (cf. Gen 5)? There is nothing in man that is “all powerful” with or without a tower.

Genesis 11:6, does not speak of God *fearing* or *worrying* about anything pertaining to man’s quest for omnipotence. *Daylight Atheism* builds a straw-man to break down when they say, “According to Genesis, God was worried that human beings would become too powerful for him to control if they learned to work together.” Rather, Genesis 11 speaks of God’s wrath upon man for using unity of tongue to do whatever they will to do against God’s law. Atheists would spare themselves embarrassment if they would only read the Biblical text with more care prior to their commenting on it.

- *God despises cities.* God does not deny man the ability to make cities. He is not some blood-thirsty tyrant walking about the face of the earth finding cities to destroy. Nineveh was a great city which took three days to go from one end to the other and the Lord defended His mercy for sparing the city to Jonah (Jon. 3:3; 4:11). Even the ungodly city, Sodom, would have been spared if the city would have produced only ten righteous persons (Gen. 18:26-32).
- *God destroyed the tower because it was dedicated to some Babylonian god.* Such an idea springs only from man’s mind and not from what is written.

Other errors in the article:

1. “First of all, what was it about this tower that drew God’s punishment? Human beings today regularly rear skyscrapers and other structures that far surpass anything that

primitive people working with mud bricks could have built.”

The notion that we regularly build skyscrapers and other structures that “far surpass” anything that those of ancient times have made is false. While we make large and impressive structures, we still cannot duplicate the great pyramids in Egypt.

2. *“Why would the confusion of tongues cause the people to give up and scatter?”* The author vainly speculates how waking up without the ability to communicate with his family would surely not make him want to abandon them and flee into the wilderness. He speculates that such an occurrence would be like foreign cultures meeting for the first time and then tries to explain in jest, *“(It certainly doesn't prevent the diplomats of the United Nations from working together.)”*

How does he know how it would have been? Was he there? And, why shall we try to understand past circumstances by present possibilities? *Daylight Atheism* assumes what it might have been like, but we cannot know for sure. We don't know if the division of tongues affected members of an immediate family (ex., mother to daughter, husband to wife). It would seem that it would not have had to divide families to divide the social structure at Babel. All we can say is that there was a confusion of speech that hit that community so hard that they formed people-groups with others who spoke the same language and eventually migrated to different regions of the world.

Further, using the diplomats at the U.N. as an example of how things could have gotten done is a silly and ironic thought given the fact that they with their learned translators accomplish very little even in a year's time.

3. *“But the final nail in the coffin of the Babel story is our subsequent understanding of linguistic evolution. Languages did not suddenly appear all at once, the way the biblical authors evidently imagined and tried to explain.”*

This supposed, “nail in the coffin” is stated boldly but provides no proof. There is even an open admission of ignorance right from the author's pen when he said, *“Though the ultimate roots of human language may be lost to prehistory...”* Did you get that? If the ultimate roots of human language may be lost, then how can he or anyone else state emphatically, “Languages did not suddenly appear all at once.”

Without knowing the “ultimate roots,” how can anyone say how language started? Details of the origin of language can only be known by faith, for none of us were there to hear the first language or languages. If man evolved, then his first language would have been composed of animal grunts and sounds, admittedly. However, if man was created, then his first language would have been gifted with words filled with meaning. Adam's ability to converse with God and his wife, as well as being able to assign names to animals is cohesive to this fact.

God created man with a *language capacity* and then allowed man to develop it to his liking. It is, I suppose, *possible* to conjecture that various dialects may have arisen in the world in the years prior to the flood. But when Noah and his family entered the ark, only their language survived the world that then existed. After Noah's departure from the ark and until the attempt to build the Tower of Babel, there was only one language.

Unlike the animal kingdom, God created man with a need for language. The very fact that we raise our young for so long before they can do anything for themselves necessitates an environment that nurtures language and vocal play. We show emotion and establish control most often by what we say and how we say it (by the manipulation of the pitch and tone.) As one individual observed:

*"Scanning the field of language in general overview of oratory, debate and literature, we see man has a compulsion to speak and if he lacked language, he would surely explode or become an acrobatic contortionist gesticulating in sign language."*ⁱ

Do You Really Believe?

We would turn the tables and ask:

- Do you really believe that from nothing came something?
- Do you really believe that from something nonliving, came something living?
- Do you really believe that from nothing, a single cell with all of its internal complexity, order and design somehow materialized?
- Do you really believe that all life with its mystifying complexity arose from one single cell?
- Do you really believe that man without God is in control of his own destiny when institutions based on that have fallen and even in language; only theism has produced the best and most lasting literature of all? Further, only monotheism has produced the literary wonder of all times—the Bible?

ⁱ Hall, A *Creation* 2(4):27–34
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