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The Tower of Babel Reexamined

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One of the most well-known and neglected explanations for the diversification of the world’s languages is found in the Biblical account of the tower of Babel. Modern language historians either benevolently ignore the account or hastily discount it. Indeed, within the discipline a contemporary linguist’s acceptance of this account is typically perceived as a renunciation of his discipline, an evidence of his inability to approach his science objectively. Yet because objectivity is a revered ideal, which is at least given lip service within the scientific community, a scientist must remain open to possibilities which are feasible, even if unpopular, especially when no particular explanation for an event has been conclusively demonstrated.

Unfortunately for the Babel account, it may have been discounted through strawman argumentation aimed at claims the account may not even be making. Such a misunderstanding and hasty dismissal of the account would be all the more lamentable if it could be shown that what the account actually reveals is in harmony with well-established linguistic principles. What follows is not an attempt to “prove” the biblical account of the confusion of languages; that would probably be impossible to do empirically, just as alternative explanations for the origin of languages remain unproven. Rather, an attempt will be made to reexamine a text whose account has perhaps been misrepresented and whose account provides a reasonable and feasible explanation to the diversification of languages.

The Tower of Babel account comprises the first nine verses of Genesis chapter eleven:

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.

It is important to notice what this account doesn’t say, since much of the skepticism aimed at the narrative may in fact be related to claims not even made by the account but rather by others. For example, notice that the account doesn’t say that everyone spoke Hebrew at this time, or that all languages of the world derived themselves from Hebrew. Frazer explains that the biblical account says nothing about “the nature of the common language which all mankind spoke before the confusion of tongues,” but he explains that “later ages took it for granted that Hebrew was the primitive language of mankind” (374). Such claims, though absent from the account, have been assumed or argued by many of those who take the Babel account seriously and may have served to undermine the credibility of that account.

Another claim not made by the narrative is that the central message of the account involves the
confusion of languages. The Babel narrative is typically perceived as an account intended to describe how the various languages of the world came to be. But while the account does indeed mention the confusion of languages, that issue has perhaps unjustly taken center stage. What the account may really be about is the fulfillment of the divine mandate to fill the earth, in other words, to scatter and spread out. In the beginning God commanded the people to be fruitful, multiply, and replenish (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 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.

Thus the people may have been in open rebellion against God as their intent was to resist one of his commandments. It wouldn't have mattered whether they were building a tower or a tunnel. This latter interpretation may 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. (78-79)

This latter interpretation, which puts a great deal of emphasis on the disobedience to a prior command, removes one of the more perplexing aspects of the traditional interpretations: Why was God so upset by the people building a tower to get to heaven? Surely He could not have actually felt threatened by such an attempt. The fact that God may have been primarily concerned with getting the people to fill the earth or scatter may also be illustrated by the reaction of Jared and his brother in the Book of Mormon. After they have been assured that their language would not be confounded, they still inquire about whether they will be driven from the land. Note that by the traditional interpretation the confusion of languages is supposedly what scatters the people. But as Nibley points out:

. . . our record does not attribute the scattering of the people, as one might innocently suppose it does, to the confusion of tongues. After the brother of Jared had been assured that he and his people and their language would not be confounded, the question of whether they would be driven out of the land still remained to be answered: That was another issue, and it is obvious that the language they spoke had as little to do with driving them out of the land as it did with determining their destination. (Lehi in the Desert, 174)

Jared and his brother are curious about whether the Lord “will drive us out of the land. . . .” (Ether 1:38). If the scattering were merely a consequence of the people speaking different languages, why do Jared and his brother ask the Lord if he will still scatter them? Shouldn’t they be asking themselves if they are inclined to scatter? As a prophet, the brother of Jared may well have understood something about this incident, something which has since then not been clearly understood. It is often difficult to determine what the purpose or point is behind a given text, but 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 argues is that “biblical authors and/or editors placed the main idea, the thesis, or the turning point of each literary unit, at its center” (51). 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" (100). If Radday is right, and the intended emphasis in the account is in fact on the dispersion, then this might explain why the Book of Mormon begins its account of the Jaredites the way it does. As it mentions the Tower of Babel incident it says this: Which Jared came forth with his brother and their families, with some others and their families, from the great tower, at the time the Lord confounded the language of the people, and swore in his wrath that they should be scattered upon all the face of the earth; and according to the word of the Lord the people were scattered. (Ether 1:33)

It is interesting that this verse, which immediately follows the Jaredite genealogy and which begins the Jaredite account, puts such an emphasis on the scattering or dispersion. Indeed, it mentions how God swore in His wrath to scatter the people, (not confound the language of the people). And the scattering is mentioned a second time as we are told that “according to the word of the Lord the people were scattered.” Of course, the Jaredite account in the Book of Mormon contains a few verses that deal with the brother of Jared’s concern regarding language change, but that must not blind us to the fact that the account itself describes the Jaredite colony’s departure from the Babylonian area, their guidance under the hand of God, their crossing of the sea, and their settlements in the new land. All of this is not to say that God’s intention 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 a means of keeping the people scattered, once they had spread out.

One other very significant claim that the Tower of Babel account does not necessarily make is that the confusion of languages was immediate. The traditional or usual interpretation of the Babel story is that God was angered or worried by the building of the tower and immediately confounded the languages as a means of halting that construction. Though the account doesn’t speak of an immediate confusion of languages, the traditional interpretation assumes an immediacy. This assumption is presumably made since the account seems to imply that the confusion was a means of stopping the construction of the tower, and it does not seem likely that if the tower project was to be halted, God would waste time in doing so. Additionally, the account says that the confusion of languages occurred there at Babel. Thus, though the account doesn’t state that the change was immediate, the traditional interpretation of the text might seem to justify this conclusion. As a result of the confusion of languages, the people not only ceased building the tower but also spread to the various parts of the earth. Thus the confusion of languages caused the scattering of the people.

As has been pointed out, the text could be interpreted as suggesting an immediate change, but such an interpretation doesn’t seem to be required by the narrative. This point is a very important one, since to recognize the absence of any mention of an immediate change in languages allows us to explore an alternative interpretation of the Babel account. This alternative interpretation, as well as issues related to it, will occupy the remainder of this paper.

It is a well-documented fact that languages change over time. To a single speech community this will not cause a problem since everyone for the most part makes the changes together, and therefore despite change over time, will continue to understand one another. If however, a division occurs within a single speech community, physically isolating various constituent communities from each other, then it is only a matter of time before the various groups may become mutually unintelligible. This is not because a migration or physical separation caused linguistic change (though sometimes a new environment will necessitate some additional new vocabulary), but because the various groups continue to experience linguistic change independently of each other. Thus a division or scattering of a once unified people may introduce diversification of languages. In fact, it is just such an occurrence that is mentioned in connection with the Indo-European language family. Language historians explain that languages as seemingly diverse as Russian, Spanish, Greek, Sanskrit, Norwegian, 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 Indo-European.

Even more recently we may document the development of the various Romance languages from Latin as speakers of that language scattered into various parts of Europe. Thus the brand of Latin that developed in the vernacular in France was different than the Latin in Spain or Portugal, and consequently we have French, Spanish, and Portuguese respectively. Given the fact that it was a scattering that is supposed to have accounted for the difference between so many languages time and time again, is it so far-fetched to suppose that the same thing may have happened even more anciently? In other words, could it have been a scattering that led to a confusion of languages at the time of the tower of Babel rather than a confusion of languages which led to a scattering? The notion of a scattering leading to a confusion of languages would certainly be consistent with views maintained within the field of Historical Linguistics.

It is of course necessary to examine whether there is textual support for the view that it was the scattering that led to the confusion of languages. Verse 9 of the account in Genesis does mention that the confusion of tongues occurred there at Babel. But if the confusion of tongues was a process, then Babel may be referred to as the point at which the process was initiated. And even though this same verse lists the two important events with the confounding of languages being mentioned before the scattering, it might be premature of us to conclude that this narrative sequence corresponds to the actual historical sequence. Indeed, elsewhere in the account, verses 7-8 may imply a very different historical sequence, signaled by the particular connective device used in the narrative. After presenting God's intention to confound the languages, the narrative does not say, "Then the Lord scattered them abroad"; it says, "So the Lord scattered them abroad." The use of the conjunction "so" could indicate a relationship between the Lord's intention and the means by which that intention was carried out. In other words, the Lord used a scattering to cause a confusion of languages. The fact that God used the scattering to precipitate the confusion of languages seems even more plausible when we examine the Inspired Version of the Bible. Here the connective "so" is used, but unlike with the King James Version in which it is used to report the event after the fact, the Inspired Version account includes this right within God's explanation that he will confound the languages. Verse 5 of the Inspired Version explains:

And the Lord said, . . . and now, nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined, except I, the Lord, confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So I, the Lord, will scatter them abroad from whence, upon all the face of the land, and unto every quarter of the earth. (Genesis 11:5)

Note the possible significance to the fact that this version includes the scattering within the Lord's expressed intention rather than as a subsequent statement about what happened. It is introduced in much the same way as we would introduced a cause-effect relationship: I need a gallon of milk, so I will go to the store. In this case: I need to confound their languages, so to do this I will scatter them abroad. This view in which a separation of a people could lead to a differentiation in languages is in harmony with principles of Historical Linguistics. The notion of sudden language change, which has commonly been assumed with the Babel story, has constituted one of the stumbling blocks to linguists and philologists in their acceptance of the biblical account of the diversification of language. An acceptance of sudden and universal language change probably presents a bigger problem to them than the fact that the account is found in the Bible. After all, the Bible has proven reliable and valuable for a great deal of historical information. And it seems to be used, particularly when an occurrence within a given biblical account though attributed to supernatural means may also tolerate a less supernatural explanation. In such cases, both the believer and the non-believer may regard the biblical account as reporting an event which actually happened. But even if the language historians were to accept the notion that all languages had at one time a common origin, it is difficult for them to abandon the uniformitarian view that languages change and evolve slowly over time, and not in an instant. As a matter of faith, a believer such as myself is not
constrained to believe merely those things that contemporary scientists approve of. I can accept that God changed the languages immediately. But the question remains about whether He did. This is not to doubt that He confounded the languages, but rather to ask about whether that confusion was necessarily an immediate event. We might be guilty of the either/or fallacy if we assume that the only two possibilities are either A) the supernatural one, that God changed the languages immediately or B) the naturalistic one, that God wasn’t involved and that the languages changed naturally and as a result of predictable social and linguistic forces. There is of course another possibility which combines the two possibilities: God confounded the languages by initiating a process that operated over a period of time.

Such an explanation is not to deny the power of God. It merely recognizes that recorded scripture contains not only accounts in which God destroyed cities by fire from heaven, but also accounts in which God inspired a king to attack a city and thus destroy it. The fact that the latter case involves a destruction that may be attributed to a war, does not indicate that God’s hand was absent.

So far, an attempt has been made to show the compatibility between the particular interpretation presented here and the scriptural texts, as well as with one of the mechanisms of change that is accepted by language historians. But there is another issue that must be dealt with if the idea presented here is to be accepted. It is after all, one thing to claim that a group of languages representing a language family such as Indo-European had a common origin, but it is quite another to claim that all languages of the world had a common origin. This is a controversial claim and may have had few if any proponents among linguists in the past.

One obstacle to documenting the common origin of the world’s languages is the apparent lack of systematic sound correspondences. The kinds of systematic sound correspondences such as those that are demonstrable between Germanic and Romance languages, whose different consonants may be explained through the operation of Grimm’s Law, cannot be shown to exist between English and Chinese. In other words, unlike the comparison between a Romance Language such as Spanish and a Germanic language such as English in which there are systematic sound correspondences (for example Spanish “p” corresponding to English “f” as in word pairs such as padre/father, pescis/fish, and pie/foot), English and Chinese show no such correspondences. On the basis of such consistent phonological correspondences, independent of borrowing, English has been determined to be related to Spanish and other Romance Languages as part of the larger Indo-European family tree. Such sound correspondences are perhaps necessary to conclusively prove that two languages are related, but their absence does not disprove such a relationship. Sapir has explained that “…phonetic laws are by no means comparable to the laws of physics or chemistry or any other of the natural sciences. They are merely general statements of a series of changes characteristic of a given language at a particular time” (cited in Haas 33).

Even if we were to accept phonological change as completely regular, other types of linguistic change, as Hock shows are the result of more irregular processes such as borrowing and metathesis and thus may blur the sound correspondences. Hock discusses a number of types of linguistic change: taboo, homonym clash, and reinterpretation. The point that will be made in the ensuing discussion of types of change is that these processes would tend to work against a subsequent attempt by comparative linguistics to demonstrate cognates between two languages as determined by sound correspondences. It should also be noted that these types of changes may occur relatively fast.

One powerful source of change is the avoidance of taboo expressions. Taboos may often lead to “constant turnover in vocabulary” (Hock 294-95). 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. (295)

The need for a large number of new terms was satisfied in many cases through borrowing (295).
Obviously, extensive lexical replacement and borrowing can do much to mask one language’s relationship to another.

Taboos may also affect “innocent homonyms” such as ass, which has largely been replaced with donkey, because the former term sounds like a more offensive word (Hock 295). The word ass will thus likely drop out of the language as a term for an animal and thus leave our language without a cognate for the corresponding term in the Romance languages. In addition, other terms can be changed or eliminated from a language if they sound like a more offensive term. Hock demonstrates how several words phonetically similar to one of our language’s more offensive terms have dropped out of our language. He shows how the words feck and fac (not to mention fuk) have disappeared from usage because of an attempt to avoid any misunderstanding (295).

Homonym clash may also cause language change. Hock explains that in Gascon French the phonetic form for rooster and cat merged. Replacement of one of the terms thus became necessary, since a great deal of difference exists between a cat or rooster loose in the hen house (298).

Another type of change that may occur is reinterpretation. This change occurs when speakers reinterpret a structure or form differently than the way it has previously been interpreted. This new interpretation can affect the way other structures or forms are treated. Hock explains that such a process can for example account for the insertion of “r” in certain environments (262-63). If for example the alternation between the two pronunciations for car, [ka] and [kar], begins to be interpreted as a case of insertion in the latter pronunciation rather than deletion in the former, then we can get a pronunciation such as “idear” in which the “r” previously wasn’t found (262-63).

A further example of reinterpretation is more semantic in nature. As Hock points out, the term bead in Modern English, came from the Old English word for prayer (gebed), but because of the practice in the Middle Ages of using rosary beads to count prayers, the term for prayers came to be more and more closely associated with the item on a rosary (296). This last example illustrates well the importance of knowing a culture’s history in order to understand the development of its vocabulary, even without taking borrowing into account. In the example of bead as well as the other examples that have been given, we may see how two related languages may not have similar terms because of historical and social forces that have come into play. Unfortunately, as we consider the possibility of whether two or more languages are distantly related, we don’t have historical and cultural information that reach back to the point at which much of the differentiation would have occurred if the two languages were, in fact, related.

Even between two very closely related languages such as German and English, semantic change is often variable and unpredictable. For example, in English the meanings for knight and knave have undergone amelioration and pejoration, respectively, while in German they have undergone pejoration and amelioration respectively (Hock 306).

The preceding discussion has been an attempt to show that despite appearances that might suggest the contrary, two languages may arguably be related, despite the absence of clear phonological correspondences between the two languages, particularly if given the passage of enough time. Just as in matters of Theology where an atheist cannot disprove the existence of God through what he deems to be an absence of evidence to prove God’s existence, so also are linguists unable to prove that two languages are unrelated simply because those languages don’t resemble each other. William Bright explains:

There are insurmountable difficulties in proving that languages are not related. Let us suppose that someone states that all languages of the world had a common origin at a time depth of two million years. If we assume that change has always been a fact of linguistic history, and at rates comparable to those observed in recent centuries, then we could hardly expect that any specific lexical items of “Proto-Human” would have survived into modern times. Comparing the vocabularies of, let us say, English and Chinese, we could not expect to find any very convincing list of cognates. And yet we could not say that the alleged common origin was disproven by the lack of such data; we could only say that it is not demonstrable from the data available. The possibility of a single origin for all languages remains neither provable nor disprovable. (206)
But the case for a single origin of languages does not rely merely on the inability of the other side to disprove the argument. While it would probably be impossible to prove whether or not all languages ultimately have their origin in a single language, there has been some serious research lately that suggests a common origin. One team of Soviet linguists is now arguing the likelihood of a common origin of the world's languages, a language they would call "Proto-World." Armed with evidence of possible cognates among vastly different world languages, they argue for a common origin of language. This notion seems supported by some work done by genetic researchers at the University of California at Berkeley who "traced genetic material from women around the world and concluded that all humans alive today are descendants of a tiny population of Homo sapiens that lived in Africa" (Allman 69). A University of Michigan linguist points out that if the conclusion of the genetic researchers is true, then it is likely that such a group would have had a common language (Allman 69-70).

A few other important issues remain, which must be addressed. The first of these issues relates to the cause of the scattering. 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 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. Hugh Nibley points out that many of the Babel accounts mention a great wind. Wind is mentioned, for example, in the accounts given by the ancient historians Eusebius and Tha'labi, as well as The Book of Jubilees. In addition to this, as Nibley points out, the Book of Mormon mentions how the Jaredite barges were driven to this continent by a mighty wind (Lehi in the Desert, 177-80). Add to these accounts, the one by Josephus (78-80), as well as the Babylonian one (White 172), both of which mention how the winds toppled the tower. Furthermore, Thompson docu-
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 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 key notion here is that the confusion of languages was completed at Babel. There is no question that the confusion of languages occurred at Babel, but the interpretation presented in this paper contrasts with some of those accounts as it argues that the confusion of languages was a process that occurred at Babel in the sense that it was initiated there.

In addition, it is interesting to note that even within one of the accounts which mentions the sudden language change, more particularly the Choctaw Indian account, the claim is made that its language is the original one (Tower 263). 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.

In all of this discussion, there remains one issue which must be addressed if the interpretation that is proposed here is to be acceptable. This issue is regarding the time frame in which such 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. The time frame suggested by the Bible seems too constrictive to allow such diversification to have occurred. But an acceptance of the biblical Babel account almost necessitates the acceptance of the implied time frame in which it is supposed to have occurred, since the biblical account contains a genealogy from the time of the flood down to the age of Abraham and beyond, and at a certain point the biblical history including time frames may be matched with surviving secular histories. It thus becomes difficult to argue that the Babel incident occurred too much earlier than about 2200 B.C., though Allen places the event around 2800 B.C., which he associates with a time frame that he says is “fairly consistent with both the early settlement patterns in Mesoamerica as well as with the Old World dating of the tower” (20). If we accept the general time frame suggested by the Bible, then we must acknowledge that a great deal of change must have occurred in a relatively short period of time, a time that seems too brief. Such an objection cannot be lightly dismissed. Indeed the problem involving the time frame is significant enough that if unmitigated it could by itself discredit the entire preceding discussion. Even a linguist such as Shevoroshkin, who believes that all the world’s languages derived from a common origin, might speak in terms of at least 50,000 years being involved in order for such a process to have operated (Robert Wright 40).

There are, however, some possibilities that may at least help bridge some of the gulf between these two time tables. This paper is dealing with the strong hypothesis, that all languages of the world have their ultimate origin at the tower of Babel. It should however be acknowledged that the account may not be saying this. A weaker hypothesis is that the account only deals with a portion of the world’s languages. Nibley explains that Hebrew uses the same term for both “land” and “earth”:

Yet another important biblical expression receives welcome elucidation from our text: though Ether says nothing about “the whole earth” being “of one language and one speech” (Genesis 11:1), he does give us an interesting hint as to how those words may be taken. Just as “son” and “descendant” are the same word in Hebrew and so may easily be confused by translators (who in fact have no way of knowing, save from the context, in which sense the word is to be understood), so “earth” and “land” are the same word, the well-known eretz. In view of the fact that the book of Ether, speaking only of the Jaredites, notes that “there were none of the fair sons and daughters upon the face of the whole earth who repented of their sins” (Ether 13:17), it would seem that the common “whole earth” (kol ha-aretz) of the Old Testament need not
always be taken to mean the entire globe. (Lehi in the Desert, 173)

This is a very interesting point and deserves a little exploration. Language historians argue that the Indo-Europeans left their homeland around two or three thousand years B.C. Baugh and Cable, for example, explain that “it is customary to place the end of their common existence somewhere between 3500 and 2500 B.C.” (35). Of course such a time frame is speculative since there are no written records of the Indo-European; it is a reconstructed language. But notice how closely this time frame fits with what biblical scholars regard as the approximate time period of the tower of Babel (about 2200 B.C.). If Nibley is right about the other possible translation of the account, then the Babel story may be dealing with a language family such as Indo-European rather than all the languages of the world. The significance regarding the closeness of the two time frames becomes that much more intriguing when it is remembered that diversification of the Indo-European languages is presumed to have occurred because the once unified speech community scattered and spread out to different areas. But as a single language family, Indo-European may not have as strong a claim to the Babel story as an account of its diffusion as another language family, Afro-Asiatic (a language family that includes Hebrew, Arabic, and Egyptian). The oldest accounts, after all, come to us through the Jews and Babylonians. If, however, we wished to attribute the account to both language families (Indo-European and Afro-Asiatic), it might not be too hard to do so. While very few linguists would argue a common origin to all the world’s languages, more of them would agree that Indo-European and Afro-Asiatic languages have a common origin. In the postscript to a book that compares both language families, Allan Bomhard explains that “the similarities between Indo-European and Afroasiatic are so numerous that the possibility of common genetic origin can no longer be dismissed — in fact, the data presented in this study compel us to dismiss any other possibility” (291). Arguing that the Babel story discusses the origin of a single language family such as Afro-Asiatic would not require that the event happened too long ago and perhaps around the time that linguists would attribute to the diffusion of such a language family. Any attempt to connect Indo-European to Afro-Asiatic may be unnecessary to the validity of the account, but if the two language families are in fact related, the additional time needed to postulate a more remote origin to both of these language families still may not be stretched back too far beyond when the Babel account is supposed to have occurred. Even if it were demonstrated that Afro-Asiatic and Indo-European were related but at a time depth too remote to be compatible with the Babel account, the weak hypothesis would not necessarily be discredited, since the Babel account, according to the interpretation implied by the weak hypothesis, is not intended to give the origin of all the world’s languages but just the diversification of languages in a certain region.

The weak hypothesis has some interesting possibilities. But the change in translation from “earth” to “land” may not by itself be able to remove all problems associated with the time factor, since the Babel story deals with a time that is apparently only a few hundred years or more after the universal flood, which would presumably have eliminated whatever other languages may have existed. This of course assumes that the word “earth” is not to have been translated as “land” or speaking of a more localized event in passages about the flood such as Genesis 7:17 (cf. Nibley, Old Testament, 65-66), and assumes that Noah’s family, including his children’s spouses, did not differ among themselves in the language they spoke. Barring these latter two possibilities, the translation of a word as “land” rather than “earth” in the Babel account introduces little more than a few hundred years of additional time for language change. This paper will thus continue to explore other factors that may support the time frame implied by the strong hypothesis, that the diversification of all languages had its ultimate origin at Babel.

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 two or three thousand years. 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. As has been mentioned, 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 loss and decline of inflectional endings in English. 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 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 their relationship is historically very close.

In the absence of written records, much of the dating represents estimates based on rates of change which have been observed in languages recently. In other words, it is based on assumptions of uniformitarianism. This assumption, while sometimes useful, may however prove inaccurate. The assumption of uniformitarianism is not immune to criticism. Merritt Ruhlen considers two contrastive views about linguistic evolution:

On the one hand are those who maintain a strict Darwinian position of slow, gradual, progressive, and constant change over long periods of time. Others, however, believe that evolution, biological and linguistic, usually proceeds by swift and sharp transitions between stages, though any stage may persist with great stability over long periods of time. Contrary to Darwin's expectations, the fossil record simply does not support his conception of slow gradual change. A number of linguists have proposed that language also evolved by fits and starts, rather than by slow steady progression. The idea is often expressed that there were certain critical "thresholds" that led from one stage to another, though what those thresholds were, and when (and how often) they took place remain matters of conjecture.

The debate of course not only centers around the origin of language in general, but would presumably apply also to the changes that have occurred within languages. Haas explains that certain types of linguistic change such as "metathesis, epenthesis, syncope, and the like, cannot occur in any fashion other than suddenly" (36). Haas also comments on the prevailing assumption in the linguistic community: "It is a curious thing that many linguists take the view that there is something basically unacceptable about sudden sound change" (36).

Obviously, whether or not the model of uniformitarianism applies to the development and change in languages has a lot to do with the rate of change in languages. If we are able to accept that the uniformitarian model may not always be relevant, then we can tolerate a substantially revised time line. It would also present an interesting resolution to the debate between Greenberg, the Stanford linguist who argues that his data base demonstrates a common origin to all languages, and Hamp, the University of Chicago linguist who dismisses the significance of Greenberg's data since given the passage of enough time, the phonetic similarities between such words should be more obscure (Robert Wright 55). It may well be that the two linguists are both partially correct. All languages could derive from a common origin, and the phonetic similarities between varying languages are apparent because in fact the diversification of languages was an event that was not so long ago after all.

Even within the science of glottochronology, or the examination of the degree of change within the so called stable or basic words in a particular language, we must realize that some conclusions that have been drawn are not immune to criticism. Anttila demonstrates the unreliability of glottochronology the further one goes back (397), and one need not go back very far to see the data become considerably less useful. Glottochronology also relies on the comparison of lists of basic vocabulary words. Unfortunately, just what constitutes basic vocabulary can be problematic. Anttila provides some perspective about the relative reliability of glottochronology:

In at least half the cases it has given reasonable results, which is more than certain proposed universals in culture can claim . . . . Of course, there are cases where a strong literary tradition, contact, or strong tabu effects have distorted results of the method. The method is not without value, but neither is it omnipotent. Although claims about chronology are weak,
further inquiry is justified by the results so far. ... We have returned to an area where more has to be found out about language typology (how to pick out the basic vocabulary) and the influence of society, for example, how it affects the rate of change ..., or the formation of tabus. No area of genetic linguistics is settled for good. (397-98)

It is interesting to note that when given examples of linguistic change, linguists have had a fair amount of success explaining why certain changes have occurred. But that is a very different matter than predicting what changes will occur within the future, and as I might add, declaring with any certainty in the absence of clear data what has happened in the past. Language does not always follow predictable patterns.

A second factor deals with how a prevailing diachronic classification of languages can shape our view of the time needed for language diversification between two languages. Whether we perceive a given language as a descendant of another, its cognate, or even having ultimately derived as a pidgin from that other language, will make a large difference in the time we assume is needed for the diversification. Hall 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. (cited in Romaine 95)

A third mitigating factor is the possibility that dialectal differentiation began to occur even before the people were dispersed at the time of the tower of Babel. If we attribute the diversification of languages to a natural process, a process that initiated through scattering, then we could acknowledge the possibility that dialects began to diverge 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 the differentiation might have already begun to occur before the scattering. 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. The presence of social dialects would not preclude the prevailing view among the people that they all shared one language and one speech. Ferguson shows how speakers of a language containing both “high” and “low” varieties may even deny the existence of the low variety (329-30). If the brother of Jared’s prayer that his language not be confounded was prompted by what he saw around him, as is often the case, we might assume that he was seeing language change already beginning to occur. Parenthetically, though the confusion of language may have already begun to occur, the brother of Jared apparently views the confusion of languages, at least in the case of his people, as a future event. After all, he is not asking the Lord to restore his language and the language of his people.

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. In regards to the compilation of a vocabulary list for use in glottochronology, Diebold provides the maxim “that in speech communities where diglossia occurs, the diagnostic list is to be compiled from the colloquial variant” (1003). Thus from the outset of the dispersion, language differentiation could have been well along its way. With the passage of several thousand years, the differentiation would be even more pronounced.

A final mitigating factor is the possibility that some language change resulted from a deliberate attempt by some speakers to differentiate their speech from other individuals who had previously spoken a common language with them. Speakers of a given language have been known to introduce differentiation in an attempt to distinguish themselves as a separate group within or from another speech community. Obviously, such an attempt
accelerates the rate of change between speakers that would otherwise be speaking the same language. Peter Trudgill discusses how some speakers on Martha’s Vineyard have exaggerated their pronunciation of a particular vowel to distinguish themselves from the seasonal residents who are now visiting the island in greater numbers (23). Trudgill concludes 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” (24).

Cockney rhyming slang is another example in which deliberate manipulation of language may have occurred in order to exclude outsiders. Such slang, in which a set rhyming phrase is used instead of the more standard expression as in “elephant’s trunk” instead of “drunk” (Peter Wright 94), has in London even “spread from the working-class East End to well-educated dwellers in suburbia...” (Wright 97). Peter Wright explains that “most exponents of rhyming slang use it deliberately, but in the speech of some Cockneys it is so engrained that they do not realise it is a special type of slang, or indeed unusual language at all—to them it is the ordinary word for the object about which they are talking” (97). When Cockney rhyming slang is shortened, the resulting phrase may not even contain the rhyming word. For example, the expression for “drunk” is no longer “elephant’s trunk” but rather “elephants” (104-105). If such expressions were to be used extensively, one could imagine how rapidly the language could change, particularly when the shortened forms are used. Interestingly enough, some of the examples of rhyming slang provided by Wright even involve substitutions for vocabulary that glottochronologists would probably consider as basic or stable such as body parts, counting numbers, and family relationships (cf. 94-113). Such basic vocabulary is supposedly relatively immune to borrowing or substitution.

The preceding discussion should provide sufficient evidence to suggest the need for a more serious consideration of the biblical account of the Tower of Babel. Even if the account continues to be regarded by some as a legend or myth, it must be acknowledged that myths are often based on fact. Indeed, if the incredible stories surrounding the character and exploits of a figure such as King Arthur do not automatically prompt historians to doubt the existence of such a character, why should the seemingly incredible events surrounding the tower of Babel prompt such a hasty dismissal of the story and its explanation of language diversification, particularly when the more remarkable aspect of the account may be the result of an incorrect interpretation that others have brought to it?

In conclusion, it has been argued here that God’s primary intent at the tower of Babel may have been to scatter the people. This scattering perhaps resulted in the confusion of languages which may also have been an intended consequence because of the role it could play in keeping the people scattered. The ordered view of this event as presented here varies with traditional interpretations of the account but may be supported by the scriptural texts. Interestingly enough, it may also be supported by the following Hindu account of the confusion of languages:

There grew in the centre of the earth the wonderful “world tree,” or “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 upon its surface. (White 172-73)

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. There they took root and sprang up as separate trees. This by itself may already suggest a scattering. And notice that the account next speaks of how this “made differences of belief and speech and customs to prevail on the earth, to disperse men upon its surface.” This latter part may indicate the intended role of language diversity in keeping the people scattered.

It is hard to say exactly what happened at the tower of Babel. The paper presented here is merely
an attempt to view one additional possibility, which seems to be allowed by the biblical text as well as the Book of Mormon.

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