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# God Doesn't Have Favorite Languages

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# 1. God’s plan for human language

God is responsible for the fact that there are so many languages in the world, and this is part of his sovereign plan, through all of history.

## Genesis 11:1-9 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. <sup>2</sup> As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

<sup>3</sup> They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. <sup>4</sup> Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

<sup>5</sup> But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. <sup>6</sup> The LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. <sup>7</sup> Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

<sup>8</sup> So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. <sup>9</sup> That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

What were the people trying to accomplish by building the tower?	v 4: They wanted to make a name for themselves and not be scattered over the face of the earth. They were proud and self-sufficient.
Why did God divide the languages?	vv. 4, 6: God didn’t want them to be proud and self-sufficient. He wanted them to recognize that they were not self-sufficient, and that they needed him.
How permanent was the effect of what God did in this passage? How many languages are spoken in the world today?	There are approximately 7,117 distinct languages spoken in the world today! <a href="http://www.ethnologue.org">www.ethnologue.org</a> (February 2020)

### 1.1. The “Tower of Babel effect”

God has decreed that human languages are always changing and dividing. This means that if two groups of people speak the same language, but then separate and no longer have much contact with each other, after hundreds of years their languages will have changed so much that they will now speak two completely separate languages, and will no longer even be able to understand each other. I call this the “Tower of Babel effect”, and I believe it has been in effect from the time God divided the languages in Genesis 11.

To know that this is true all we need to do is study the history of any language or group of languages over a long enough period. 1900 years ago English, German, Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, and Icelandic were all the same language. Or, to put it a different way, in 100 A.D. the ancestors of the speakers of all of these languages belonged to a single local grouping of

people, speaking a single language. No one knows what they called their language, but linguists now call it [Proto-Germanic](#)<sup>1</sup>. Seems incredible, doesn't it?

Similarly, around 2000 years ago all of the Romance languages (Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, French, Romanian, etc.), were all simply the Latin language as it was spoken in Rome, and now they have divided and are very different.

And this same effect is found in every language in the world, to a greater or lesser extent. Actually, what we find is that languages that are very isolated and have little contact with the wider world may change more slowly, whereas languages that are spoken in important commercial or political centers tend to change a lot more rapidly. But no language ever stands still, unless it is a dead language like classical Latin, which is now only found in books, and is no longer the native language of a group of people, used by families in their daily lives from birth to old age.

Another aspect of the "Tower of Babel effect" is that children find it very easy to learn a language, and can even learn several languages at once if they are constantly hearing them all, but adults find it extremely difficult to learn other languages, and can only learn to speak them imperfectly. You could say that children are all linguistic geniuses, but most adults are linguistic idiots! Why did God do this? I'm convinced that he did it for the same reason that he divided the languages in Genesis 11: to limit the pride and self-sufficiency of mankind. But it sure makes the job of world evangelization more complicated!

## 2. God doesn't have any favorite languages. To God, all languages have equal value.

In the Great Commission that our Lord Jesus gave in Matthew 28:19 he says:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...

In Greek the word "nations", ἔθνη, pronounced /ěthnā/, is not referring to different countries or nations as we use the word today, but to distinct **ethnic** groups (which of course is why we call them **ethnic** groups), and in most cases each ethnic group has its own language. So here, Jesus is sending us to all of the ethnic groups in the world. But just so there would remain no doubt about the fact that God cares individually about each one of the thousands of language groups in the world, let's read Revelation 7:9-10:

9 After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and **language**, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. 10 And they cried out in a loud voice:

"Salvation belongs to our God,  
who sits on the throne,  
and to the Lamb."

<sup>1</sup> 100 A.D. is my own estimate after reading and studying a number of sources, none of which agree, including [this one](#), which is probably one of the most rigorous (see particularly pages 29-32). Clearly various dialects already existed, as shown by the maps seen [here](#) and [here](#), but these were all fully mutually intelligible and all still lived in one connected area. The [East Germanic](#) groups may already have split off, in which case this language would actually be [Northwest Germanic](#).

Obviously my list of modern Germanic languages is not complete, though these are the better known languages. As of March, 2018 the [Ethnologue lists 47 Germanic languages](#).

How many of those over 7,000 languages will be represented in heaven? All of them! Here we see the great multitude of God's redeemed, the church from all parts of the world. Here we can see that in heaven there will be individuals from every one of the languages spoken in the world! And we can see another thing: The work of the church, and the work of each Christian, will not be finished until we have carried the gospel to every language and every ethnic group in the world!

The importance of this was seen from the very inception of the church, as we see in Acts 2:1-12:

<sup>1</sup> When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and **began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.**

<sup>5</sup> Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. <sup>6</sup> When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because **each one heard them speaking in his own language.** <sup>7</sup> Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?" <sup>8</sup> **Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?** <sup>9</sup> **Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,** <sup>10</sup> **Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome** <sup>11</sup> **(both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs— we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"** <sup>12</sup> Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

Of the 15 regions listed here, several of them (those marked in red) are known to have had their own local native language. Most of the rest spoke the imperial languages Greek, Latin, or Aramaic, so we know that at least 9 native languages were represented, and it is possible that some of these spoke other local languages that history has not recorded as surviving in these regions. But everyone heard someone preaching God's Word in his own heart language!

### 3. What about the languages the Bible was originally written in?

Still, you might say, "You say God doesn't have any favorite languages, but aren't the languages God used to write the Bible special languages, that God chose because they were special?"

The Bible was originally written in three languages, Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. And if we look closely at these languages, and see what the Bible itself says about them, we see that God didn't choose these languages because they were better than other languages, but just because they were available to use at the time!

#### 3.1. Hebrew

Almost all of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, and this was also the language that the Israelites spoke from the time of Abraham until after the time of Christ, at least in some

regions like Judea.<sup>2</sup> But if we study the Bible and other history carefully, we come across a surprising fact:

**Hebrew was not Abraham’s native language! Then what was it? It was the language of the wicked Canaanites!**

Abraham’s native language was ancient [Aramaic](#). We can see this from various passages:

- The father of the nation is called a “wandering Aramean” in Deuteronomy 26:5. Now this could be talking about Abraham, although the context perhaps suggests Jacob. In either case, it is saying that the family is Aramean in origin and ethnicity.

- Abraham’s relatives who didn’t travel to Canaan are called Arameans<sup>3</sup>, and continued speaking Aramaic.<sup>4</sup> For instance, Rebekah’s father is called “Bethuel the Aramean” in Genesis 25:20, and Genesis 28:5. But Abraham’s children and grandchildren grew up speaking Canaanite, that is, Hebrew, so in Genesis 31:47 when Jacob and Laban make a treaty and set up their “witness heap”, Laban calls it “witness heap” in Aramaic (Jegar Sahadutha), and Jacob calls it “witness heap” in Hebrew (Galeed).

- The language of the Israelites is actually called “the language of Canaan” once in the Old Testament, in Isaiah 19:18, which was written around 701 B.C., long after the establishment of the nation of Israel.

- Archeological and linguistic studies confirm that [the language of the Canaanites was the same as Hebrew](#). The language of the Phoenicians, whose main cities were Tyre and Sidon, was essentially the same, at least in its early stages, whereas Aramaic was quite different.

So, what do we see here? After the exodus from Egypt God commanded that the Israelites destroy the Canaanites completely, but God had already preserved their language by having the Israelites adopt it as their own, and afterwards it was used to write most of the Bible!

Of course, when the Israelites first learned Canaanite, there were still some God-fearing Canaanites, the best example being Melchizedek. It was only later that “the sin of the Amorites...reached its full measure”, as God says in Genesis 15:16.

Still, it seems like God chose a very unworthy language for such a supremely important purpose!<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See my article [The Meaning of the Word “Hebrew” in Genesis](#), footnote 1.

<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that Abraham or any of his relatives were descended from the patriarch Aram, son of Shem, mentioned in Genesis 10:22. In fact, they certainly were not, but were descended from Aram’s brother Arpachshad. This is not to say that some or even most of the other Aramaic speakers were not descended from this Aram, since tradition associates the person Aram with the region of the same name, and in fact they probably were. But Abraham’s family had a different ancestry, even though they spoke Aramaic and are called Arameans.

<sup>4</sup> There is no archeological evidence or any other indication that Aramaic was a written language before about 1000 B.C., but to suggest that the Aramaic language did not exist as early as the time of Abraham (born about 2166 B.C.), as the [Wikipedia article on Aramaic](#) does, among others, is not valid. I am thankful that the article no longer says that in the “12<sup>th</sup> c. BCE Arameans settle in Aram”, since there is no reason to doubt the Bible’s information that the language was spoken in ancient times in the same area it was spoken in later, when writing is first recorded for it, ancient Syria and as far north as [Haran](#).

The problem is that Aramaic was not a written language at this time. The literary and governmental languages in Mesopotamia at the time were [Akkadian](#), a language distantly related to Hebrew and Aramaic but quite distinct, and [Sumerian](#), a totally unrelated language, and these are the languages used for the written records in Haran and in the [Sumerian / Akkadian city of Ur](#) during this time period. But it is known that other languages existed in these areas, their speakers just did not use them for writing (yet). And this would especially be true of peoples with a nomadic herding lifestyle, as evidently Abraham’s family was, very similar to Bedouins of today: they lived in tents, whether in Ur or Haran or Canaan, and could and did travel around extensively. Such nomadic people through the millennia have tended to inhabit the area south of the [Fertile Crescent](#) known as the [Syrian Desert](#), and could and did penetrate into Mesopotamia from any direction.

Hebrew and Aramaic were both Semitic languages. (See my article [When Was Hebrew First Written?](#), especially section **3.1. Semitic Alphabets and Proto-Semitic**. For a map showing where the Semitic languages were probably spoken in ancient times, according to my research, see [Aschmann.net/BibleChronology/Genesis10/SemiticLanguages.gif](#).)

<sup>5</sup> This makes it clear that Hebrew was not the original language that Adam spoke, as many have said. For more details on this question, read section **2.2. But wasn’t Hebrew the original language?** in my article [When Was Hebrew First Written?](#).

## 3.2. Aramaic

A few chapters of the Old Testament were written in Aramaic, about two chapters of Ezra (4:8-6:18 and 7:12-26), and almost half of the book of Daniel (2:4b-7:28), plus a single sentence in Jeremiah 10:11, not counting the place name in Genesis 31:47 already mentioned above. This was not exactly the same Aramaic that Abraham spoke, since about 1,400 years had passed, and any language will change a lot in that amount of time!

This Aramaic was the language of the Babylonian Empire, which was also a very wicked nation. Nevertheless, when the Jews were exiled to Babylon, this language evidently replaced Hebrew as the mother tongue of many, and this remained the language of many of the Jews from the Babylonian captivity until the time of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, this same Aramaic was Jesus' native language, not Hebrew! One thing that shows this is that in the gospels we have a quite a few examples of Jesus speaking in Aramaic, among them his famous cry from the cross, "*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*", "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34), which according to [this page](#) represents the Aramaic phrase: אלהי אלהי למא שבקתני [ʔēlâhî ʔēlâhî lamâ šabaqtanî]. This phrase, like various others in the gospels, is definitively Aramaic, not Hebrew. And it's clear that when Jesus cried out to his father in agony, he must have done it in his heart language!

Once again we see that God chose an unworthy language, derived from an evil empire, for the intimate use of his own son!

## 3.3. Greek

So what about Greek, the language of the New Testament? Well, Greek was the most widespread language in the time of Jesus and the apostles. It had been spread throughout the eastern Mediterranean region by the great conqueror Alexander the Great around 300 years before Christ, and afterwards was encouraged even more under the Roman Empire. So again, it was the language of a great empire.

Now [Ancient Greek](#) had a literary form, in which the classical literature of the Greeks was written, and even in Jesus' day the great writers continued writing in this elegant language. But the New Testament was not written in this [literary Greek](#), but in a very different kind of Greek. The Greek of the New Testament was simply the language of daily life, the Greek of commerce and of the common people. Instead of choosing a supposedly elegant language, God chose the language that was most understandable to the masses, to the general population, to write his most precious and profound ideas!

The worst Greek in the New Testament is that of the apostle John, a really uncultured kind of Greek, the Greek of a foreigner. He was a simple Jewish fisherman, and the Greek that he learned was the Greek that he heard in the market from his gentile neighbors. But in his gospel, in his three epistles, and in the book of Revelation, John wrote some of the most beautiful ideas in the Bible. And God used the most basic kind of language to express them!

Acts 4:13 makes clear that John was not a well-educated person, nor was Peter:

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

## **4. Summary principle: God Values Every Language, and so Should We**

And an important implication of this is how it affects the way we carry out the great commission:

**4.1. We should translate the Bible into every language, and do evangelism and Bible teaching in people's native languages.**

### **4.1.1. Protestant Reformers**

The Protestant reformers considered the translation of the Bible into the mother tongue of the people very important, and this was a big change from the position of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages.

### **4.1.2. Situation during the Middle Ages**

**In Europe during the Middle Ages, the Bible simply was not available in the language of the people.**

The Catholic Church opposed the translation of the Bible into the languages that people spoke. But when the Protestant Reformation took place, this was one of the first things that the reformers changed, and one of the main activities of many of the main reformers was the translation of the Bible into their native languages.

Even before the Protestant Reformation, John Wycliffe (1320-1384) and his coworkers produced the first Bible translation into the English language. This was completed in 1382, shortly before his death.

In the same way Martin Luther (1483-1546) was the first to translate the Bible into German, completed in 1534.

The Westminster Confession of Faith of 1646 expresses very well the views of the Reformers on Bible translation:

## Westminster Confession 1:8

VIII. The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical;<sup>6</sup> so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them.<sup>7</sup> But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them,<sup>8</sup> therefore **they are to be translated in to the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come,**<sup>9</sup> that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship Him in an acceptable manner;<sup>10</sup> and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.<sup>11</sup>

You probably didn't know English was a vulgar language, did you? When this was written, that word simply meant the language of the common people.

**Every language spoken in the world today matters to God. That's why it is so important to translate the Bible into every one of those languages, and to do evangelism and Bible teaching in people's native languages.**

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<sup>6</sup> MAT 5:18: For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

<sup>7</sup> ISA 8:20: To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them. ACT 15:15: And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written. JOH 5:39: Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. 46 For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me.

<sup>8</sup> JOH 5:39: Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.

<sup>9</sup> 1CO 14:6: Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you, except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine? <sup>9</sup> So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? For ye shall speak into the air. 11 Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me. 12 Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church. 24 But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: 27 If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most three, and that by course; and let one interpret. 28 But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God.

<sup>10</sup> COL 3:16: Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

<sup>11</sup> ROM 15:4: For whatsoever things were written aforetime, were written for our learning; that we, through patience and comfort of the scriptures, might have hope.