

From Babel to the Nations: *Finding God Across Ancient Cultures*

D. Gene Williams Jr., PhD
Defend the Word Ministries
NorthPointe Church

A COMMON BEGINNING: THE TOWER OF BABEL

According to Genesis 11, humanity once spoke one language—possibly Hebrew—and worshiped a single God. After the Tower of Babel incident, languages were divided, and nations were assigned under the authority of spiritual beings, referred to in Psalm 82 as the sons of God. These beings were intended to guide the nations toward God’s sovereignty, but instead, they led people astray.

TRACING THE SUPREME GOD ACROSS ANCIENT CULTURES

Despite the division at Babel, many ancient cultures retained remnants of monotheism, identifying a supreme deity above all other gods:

- **China:** The concept of Shang Di, the “Supreme Deity,” represented divine authority over all creation. Later, this evolved into the notion of Tian (Heaven) as the ultimate force governing the universe.
- **Egypt:** Amun-Ra was the most revered god, considered the creator and sustainer of life, ruling over both gods and men.
- **Hinduism:** While Hinduism worships many gods, they are seen as manifestations of Brahman, the unchanging, transcendent reality behind all things.

- **Greek and Roman Pantheons:** Zeus and Jupiter were recognized as supreme rulers over their pantheons, echoing the concept of a divine hierarchy under one ultimate authority.
- **Native American Beliefs:** Tribes like the Lakota worshipped the Great Spirit (Wakan Tanka), a powerful, all-encompassing force overseeing life and creation.

These examples highlight that despite their polytheistic elements, many cultures retained a concept of a supreme being—an echo of earlier monotheistic knowledge.

THE DIVINE COUNCIL: SPIRITUAL BEINGS AND NATIONS

The Bible describes God presiding over a divine council (Psalm 82), assigning nations under spiritual beings who were supposed to guide them to righteousness. However, these beings failed, leading people into idolatry and corruption.

Similar divine councils appear in other cultures:

- Amun-Ra in Egypt ruled over lesser gods.
- Zeus presided over a pantheon of deities in Greece.
- In Zoroastrianism, Ahura Mazda ruled over divine beings called the Amesha Spentas.

These parallels suggest that many cultures preserved a memory of divine governance that reflects the biblical framework.

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE: HEBREW AS THE PRIMORDIAL TONGUE

The paper argues that Hebrew may have been the original language used by all humanity before Babel. Many early Christian writers and intertestamental texts uphold this idea:

- Origen believed that Adam and Eve spoke Hebrew in the Garden of Eden.
- The Book of Jubilees emphasizes that Hebrew was restored to Abraham as part of God's covenant with him.
- Rabbinic traditions refer to Hebrew as Lashon HaKodesh (the "Holy Tongue"), affirming its role in divine-human communication.

With the division of languages at Babel, the ability to communicate divine truths was disrupted, complicating humanity's relationship with God.

RECONSIDERING PAUL'S "TONGUES OF ANGELS"

In 1 Corinthians 13:1, Paul mentions the "*tongues of angels*." Early Church Fathers, including Origen, Chrysostom, and Augustine, interpreted this phrase metaphorically—not as glossolalia (ecstatic speech) but as a higher form of communication beyond human language. This suggests that Hebrew may have been considered the earthly form of divine communication, though angels communicate through direct intellect and will.

CONCLUSION: A SHARED SEARCH FOR GOD

Throughout history, humanity's search for a supreme being reflects the lingering memory of monotheism before the division at Babel. Whether through Shang Di, Amun-Ra, Brahman, or the Great Spirit, ancient cultures point to a universal longing for divine connection. Similarly, the idea of Hebrew as the primordial language reveals a desire to reconnect with the one true God.

Together, these themes suggest that despite differences in religious practices, humanity shares a common instinct to recognize a supreme deity and communicate with that authority. The echoes of monotheism and divine language across cultures remind us of a shared origin and a universal quest for truth.

APPENDIX A: LANGUAGE ISOLATES AND THEIR CONNECTION TO BABEL

Language isolates are languages that have no demonstrable genetic relationship to other languages, meaning they do not belong to any known language family. Some of these classifications are subject to scholarly debate, and linguistic research may reveal previously unknown relationships in the future.

Below is a list of some well-known language isolates from around the world:

Africa

- **Hadza** (Tanzania)
- **Sandawe** (Tanzania)

Asia

- **Burushaski** (Pakistan, northern India)
- **Korean** (Korea; debated, but often treated as an isolate)
- **Ainu** (Japan; nearly extinct)
- **Nivkh** (Russia, Sakhalin Island)
- **Ket** (Siberia, Russia; Yeniseian languages, sometimes debated)
- **Kusunda** (Nepal; critically endangered)

Europe

- **Basque** (*Euskara*; spoken in northern Spain and southwestern France)

Americas

- **Haida** (Canada, British Columbia)
- **Keresan** (United States, New Mexico; includes multiple dialects)
- **Cayuse** (United States, extinct)
- **Zuni** (United States, New Mexico)
- **Tarascan/Purépecha** (Mexico)
- **Huave** (Mexico; also called *Ombeayiüts*)
- **Yuchi** (United States, Oklahoma; critically endangered)
- **Chitimacha** (United States, Louisiana; extinct)
- **Atakapa** (United States, Louisiana and Texas; extinct)
- **Washo** (United States, California-Nevada border)
- **Mapudungun** (Chile and Argentina; sometimes debated)
- **Tiwi** (Australia; historically classified as an isolate, though newer analyses suggest potential connections)

Oceania

- **Tiwi** (Australia; sometimes debated as an isolate)
- **Kusunda** (Nepal; critically endangered)
- **Extinct Language Isolates**
- **Etruscan** (Italy; ancient)
- **Sumerian** (Iraq; ancient Mesopotamia)
- **Elamite** (Iran; ancient)
- **Meroitic** (Sudan; ancient Nubia)
- **Hurrian** (Near East; ancient)
- **Hattic** (Anatolia, Turkey; ancient)
- **Pictish** (Scotland; debated and poorly attested)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Source

The Holy Bible, *English Standard Version*. Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001.

Secondary Source

Allen, James P. *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005.

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Benziger Bros., 1947.

Augustine of Hippo. *On the Trinity*. Translated by Arthur West Haddan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1873.

Bottéro, Jean. *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Boyce, Mary. *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Brown, Joseph Epes. *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989.

Burkert, Walter. *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Chrysostom, John. *Homilies on First Corinthians*. In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series, Volume 12*, edited by Philip Schaff. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994.

Creel, Herrlee G. *The Origins of Statecraft in China: Volume One - The Western Chou Empire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

Ephrem the Syrian. *Commentary on Genesis*. Translated by Edward G. Mathews, Jr. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994.

Flood, Gavin D. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Grant, Michael. *Gods and Mortals in Classical Mythology*. New York: Dorset Press, 1979.

Hart, George. *The Routledge Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Heiser, Michael S. *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015.

Hirschfelder, Arlene, and Paulette Molin. *Encyclopedia of Native American Religions*. New York: Facts on File, 1992.

Jerome. *Prologus Galeatus*. In *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007.

Origen. *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 12:10*. In *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 83, translated by R. J. Deferrari. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1956.

———. *Homilies on Genesis*. In *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 71, translated by Ronald Heine. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1981.

Radhakrishnan, S. *The Principal Upanishads*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

The Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 38b. Translated by Jacob Neusner. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011.

The Book of Enoch. Translated by R. H. Charles. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913.

Williams, D. Gene Jr. *Spiritual Gifts and the Primordial Language: A Study of Continuation, Cessation, and Early Church Perspectives*. Accessed December 14, 2024. <https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html>.

VanderKam, James C. *The Book of Jubilees*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989.