

Bede the Venerable

THE LANGUAGES OF THE PEOPLES



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The Languages of the Peoples
(work of dubious authenticity)

Cover image:

The Tower of Babel, by Pieter van der Borcht (work created between 1582 and 1593)

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INTRODUCTION

This publication presents the English translation of the short work *De linguis gentium*, found in volume 90 of the *Patrologia Latina*, among the works of dubious authenticity of the Venerable Bede (672/3 – 735).

It is one of the first texts of medieval linguistics. Reflection on language would be a genre of study practiced throughout the Middle Ages and would find its most important manifestation in Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*.

The author interpreted the history of languages in the light of Christian theology: in the beginning, humanity spoke the language of Adam, Hebrew. Then, as a consequence of the sin of pride for which humans committed the construction of the Tower of Babel, God punished humanity with the confusion of languages. Hebrew, Greek, and Latin were recognized as sacred languages, since, according to tradition, the sign on Christ's cross was written in these three languages.

Even the end of the work refers to a sacred interpretation of the mystery surrounding the secrets of languages with the quote from St. Paul: "tongues will cease."

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The diversity of languages arose with the building of the tower after the flood. Before the pride of that tower divided human society into the various sounds of the alphabets, there was only one language of all peoples, and that was Hebrew, which the patriarchs and prophets used not only in their speeches but also in the Holy Scriptures.

In the beginning, then, there were as many languages as there were peoples. Later, there were more peoples than languages, since from a single language many peoples emerged. In this case, by languages, we mean words, which are formed through language with that means of expression, since words are named through the medium by which they are named: in the same way, the mouth is usually named in place of words, as the hand is for letters.

Three are the sacred languages: Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, which are the most important in the world. Indeed, Pilate's condemnation of the Lord was written in these three languages on his cross.

Therefore, even because of the obscurity of the Sacred Scriptures, knowledge of these three languages is necessary, so that one or the other can be used if there is any doubt about the name or interpretation of a language.

Therefore, Greek is considered the clearest of all the others. It is, in fact, more harmonious than Latin and all other languages, and its variety is divided into five parts. The first is called koinos, meaning mixed or common, which all use. The

second is Attic, meaning Athenian, which all Greek authors used. The third is Doric, and is spoken by the Egyptians and Syrians. The fourth is Ionian. The fifth is Aeolian, which the Aeolians claimed to speak. There are therefore certain distinctions within this Greek language, in fact their dialect is divided in this way.

Then some said that there were four Latin languages: ancient, Latin, Roman, and mixed. The ancient one is the one used by the most ancient inhabitants of Italy at the time of Janus and Saturn, coarse, like a song in a foreign language. Latin was spoken by the others who lived in Latium at the time of Latinus and the Etruscan kings. It was with this that the Twelve Tables were written. The Roman one, used by the Roman people after the expulsion of the kings, expressed itself by the poets Naevius, Plautus, Ennius, Virgil; and among the orators, Cato the Greek, Cicero, and others. The mixed one, which during the era of the consolidated empire, burst into Roman civilization with its customs and men, corrupting the integrity of the language with errors and barbarisms.

All the peoples of the East contrast their tongues and words in the throat, like the Hebrews and the Syrians, and all the peoples of the Mediterranean pronounce words in the palate, like the Greeks and the Asians. All Westerners chew words in their teeth, like the Italians and the Spanish, while the Syrian and Chaldean resemble Hebrew in speech, being similar in many ways and in the sound of the letters. Some also think that the Chaldean language is the same, since Abraham came from Chaldea. But if we accept this, it is not clear why the

Book of Daniel commands that that language be taught to Jewish children who did not know it.

Anyone, then, can learn Greek or Latin or other languages by listening, or learn it from a teacher by reading. For although the science of languages is difficult, no one is so idle that he cannot learn a language if he lives with those who speak it. For what else could one think but that it is worse than animals? Those express the sound of their voice; this would be even worse because he has no knowledge of his own voice.

Finally, it is difficult to know with what kind of language God spoke when he said, "Let there be light," for languages did not yet exist. Furthermore, what language he used later to express himself to the external ears of men, especially when speaking to the first man or to the prophets, or when God's voice sounded physically as he said, "You are my beloved Son." Here some think that that language was the one and only one, before the confusion of languages arose. For various peoples think that God spoke to them in the language they use among themselves. Furthermore, God speaks to men not through an invisible substance, but through a creature of flesh and blood, through which he also chose to appear to men when he spoke. For the Apostle says, "If I speak with the tongues of men or of angels," where he asks in what language angels speak. Not because angels have any tongues, but this is said by way of exaggeration or emphasis. Moreover, the question arises as to what language men will speak in the future. We cannot know, in fact the Apostle says: languages will end.