

A study of the origins of the English language can add an intriguing element to the literacy curriculum. Such a study may raise more questions than provide answers, which in itself is a good thing if it piques a curiosity leading to deeper study. A study of the history of the English language can inspire a sense of awe over God's Providence and wonder over His Plan for mankind.

Noah Webster, father of American education and literacy, mastered twenty-six languages, including several extinct ones, to complete the linguistic scholarship necessary to write his monumental *American Dictionary of the English Language*. Furthermore, as a suitable foundation for the dictionary, he published as an introduction his *Dissertations on the English Language*.¹

In the *Dissertations*, Webster assumes a Biblical and creationist view with its young earth implications. In the light of Biblical narrative, extra-Biblical history, and the story told in the legacy of persistent root words in the historical languages and place names, we stand amazed at how small the world is in time and extent. Such facts reveal how close we are to our earliest ancestors and their history. Thousands of years divide us, not millions as men often fancy. Christians should abandon the cultural disposition to think in terms of a grinding, diffused, interminable evolution from slime, to caves, to intelligent civilization—as if man determined himself out of the ooze. We must self-consciously reject this monstrous conception of history and replace it with a Christ-centered model. With such a model based upon intelligent Biblical, geological, biological, archaeological, and linguistic associations, we may be astonished at the detail ancient times may yet reveal. We will then know ourselves better because we will know our roots. With such a Christ-centered and Puritan view of history and language, combined with the life-long zeal of his personal calling, Webster virtually single-handedly established American literacy. We should not underestimate his contribution to the establishment of the United States as a nation of unique views, ideals, character, love of liberty, and civil polity to support it.

A Brief History

Webster begins the *Dissertations* speaking of God's creating man and blessing him. He continues citing the mandate to take dominion over the earth, man's superiority over the lower creatures, and his naming the animals. Webster recites Adam's naming of Eve and of making excuse at his disobedience. From these facts, we discern Adam not only to be of a high and fully developed intellect, but gifted with the capacity for elevated speech. The naming of the animals in particular demonstrates man's reasoning ability, required to assign names reflecting the character of the animals. Adam's exultation, "She is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh," represents perhaps the most concise and sublime poetry regarding a woman ever written. Language obviously was a gift of God, highly developed and of the greatest literary character. Contrast this spontaneous excellence with the fact that men must now painstakingly learn language and teach it to their children. Such draws our attention to the great damage sin has done, not only to man's spirit leading to death, but of his very faculties. God demonstrates His economic grace to us in His provision of education. With due investment by faith, we may recover much of our native and potential faculty.

Webster notes that the language of Adam and Eve was not like modern language in its bounty of vocabulary and variety of syntax. Moreover, it no longer exists in its original form, though Webster finds it likely that certain word roots probably continue to exist in various languages. A study of Webster's etymologies included in the Dictionary will demonstrate the marvelous conservation of many word roots from language to language and from time to time. What a wonder to think that we may use some of the same word roots in English our first parents used in the Garden of Eden!

Webster observes that the ancient German tradition maintained a corrupted history of the Great Flood, and of Noah and his sons. Here, we observe Webster's due deference and regard to the centrality of the Scriptures in his understanding and correction of his subject.

Noah's children Shem, Ham and Japheth settled the great plain north and west of the Persian Gulf. The Tower of Babel rose as a monument to man's rebellion before God. God had commanded dispersion over the earth. Rather than obey God, men under the strong man Nimrod apparently attempted to recreate the wicked monolithic and powerful dictatorship of the Antediluvian world. All men spoke the same language. In order to confound the humanistic and imperialistic conspiracy, God confounded the language of men, causing them to disperse and form the beginning of nations. What a powerful effect language imposes on a culture! Christians should be aware that the use of language lies intimately tied to real character and accomplishment. Every language particularly expresses its religious view. Language excellence in thought and expression should rule Christian communication. Such a view of language drove Webster's career.

God's imposed confusion formed several radical languages of equal antiquity. Language quickly further diverged from them. In Webster's day, many Christians preferred to think of English as a legacy of the Hebrew and that Hebrew was the original language. At that time, ancient Hebrew writings were the oldest known by several centuries, contributing to the misconception. Webster notes that Abraham must have spoken Chaldean and that Hebrew was thus a derivative of it, as linguistic patterns confirm. The use of the same words demonstrates their common origin in the single original language of Babel, which Webster believed to be Chaldean. Indeed, the Celtic and Teutonic languages of Western Europe share many common roots with the derivative Middle Eastern Semitic languages. Webster thus concludes that the European languages shared a common origin with the pre-Tower of Babel Chaldean. Furthermore, ancient Greek shared so many common roots with the languages of Western Europe that Webster concludes a common origin among them.

Nations naturally grew out of family oriented communities, which in turn, grew into extended racial associations. Some members would leave the community to form a new one. Thus, they would take their family language with them. However, over time their tongue would again diverge from its parent due to isolation and the local character of its people. In this way, one language would become many. So many words in Greek, Latin, Gaelic, and English suggest commonality with the ancient Persian, that once more, Webster finds a common origin there. Indeed, Webster concludes that the after the Tower of Babel, the Japhetic race migrated to Persia and thence to Europe and western and northern Asia, while the majority of the Japhetic people remained in Persia. Some migrated to India. The Hindu language also shares in its Sanskrit original a common ancestor with the European languages.

From Persia, the ancestors of the Greeks and Romans went west and south to the Mediterranean, while the Celts and Teutons pushed farther north and west. The Celts more quickly reached the westernmost parts of Europe. Celtic tribes inhabited the Danish peninsula, Southern France, and the British Isles. The Welsh, known as the descendents of the Ancient Britons (of King Arthur legend), share a linguistic root with the Celts of ancient Denmark.

Greek and Latin, among the European languages, were the first to produce literature, in conjunction with their cultural development. Modern Italian, Spanish, and French largely developed from Latin. The Roman Empire imposed this linguistic character upon the Romance countries. Webster reckons that about nine tenths of the words of these languages reveal a Latin origin.

The languages of Northern Europe—German, Dutch, Anglo-Saxon, Danish and Swedish—are Teutonic in origin and closely akin, sharing many roots.

Julius established Rome on the British Isle, but never absolutely conquered or subdued its fierce people. Evidence exists, however, that the gospel did quickly conquer the Britons. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the Scots and Picts, always annoying during the Roman occupation, earnestly tormented the Britons. Not even the great wall built by the Roman General Hadrian withstood the wild northern Celts. The Britons paid the Saxon brothers Hengist and Horsa to protect them. The Angles and Saxons thought the Island so attractive, they brutally conquered the Christianized natives. Indeed, the Britons fought valiantly, but the Saxons almost annihilated them in the south, a small remnant taking refuge in Cornwall and Wales. The fall of King Arthur's Camelot mythologically represents this conquest. The Angles and Saxons emigrated en masse, the Angles apparently in entirety, to settle what became known as England. In other parts of England, many Britons remained and intermarried with the Anglo-Saxons. English is thus mainly Anglo-Saxon, but with many Celtic words. After about a hundred and fifty years, Pope Gregory the Great sent Augustine to England, successfully evangelizing the Anglo-Saxons. Though Webster neglects these facts in his *Dissertations*, they are nonetheless important as they reveal the providence of God in building the character of the people who would become the English nation. Later, the Vikings, or Danes, plagued Christian England. After a long fought war, King Alfred the Great vanquished the Danish general Guthrun. Alfred's generals recommended burning the castle and annihilating the vicious and ruthless enemy. Rather, Alfred invited his fallen foe to become Christians and settle as neighbors in England. They did so. Thus, the Scandinavian language came to infuse the English.

The Norman French imposed the last major impact on the English language when William the Conqueror successfully invaded the land. Though Christian, England had remained rude and backward in its culture by European standards. England's pattern of local self-government and personal liberty, with its lack of European-style civil order, annoyed the thoroughly Romanized Duke William. He believed himself to be a kind of feudal father, called to bring order to English chaos. William brutally conquered England, destroying everyone who resisted, and imposed everything French (and supposedly civilized) upon the people, including language. While William intended to eradicate the English language, he did not reckon with the stout and patriotic character of the English people. Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* wonderfully treats in idealistic fashion the beginning of Christian reconciliation between the Norman and the English people in the thirteenth century. By the reign of Edward III, English patriotism had restored English as the official language, as well as the love of everything English. Nonetheless, a French legacy remained. The English people were in the end perhaps more refined. Certainly, the Norman French language made its permanent mark.

As Latin and Greek terms came into common use in scientific writing, English continued to be enriched. Innovation with foreign language in imaginative literature and in the mass media adds to expansion of the English language.

English then consists primarily of Saxon and Danish, and then in decreasing order of significance, Celtic, old Norman French, Latin, modern French, and Greek. The history of the English language is as varied and changed as history itself. As Webster predicts, English continues so to change. He welcomed the introduction of intelligent scientific terms as knowledge expands. He thought less of clever literary innovation for the sake of amusement, as such would muddy the clear historical meaning of words. Webster, though he lamented the decline of the English language in his own time and worked

hard to correct it, surely did not foresee the damage which youth-cult slang would some day inflict. Ironically, this damage occurs with the complicity of the linguistic experts, who routinely accept the debased innovations almost without question. Continued maintenance and growth in the utility, literary, quality, beauty, grace, and power of the English language will depend upon its good stewardship.

A Sense of Providence

The history of the English language may provoke a sense of awe when viewed in the light of Providence. English, in its complex history, shares a linguistic heritage with the four great Biblical world empires spoken of by the prophet Daniel—Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. English partially derives from the Greek and Roman. In turn, all three of these languages share a common heritage with the ancient Chaldean and Persian. If English shares a root with these ancient languages, so the English-speaking people also share a common history with those kingdoms. Moreover, the English dominion with its far-flung planting and America's present prominence suggests a commonality of *empire* with those ancient kingdoms. Though neither centralized nor authoritarian, the English dominion nonetheless has produced lasting impact on the whole world. English is the fourth greatest native language by population, exceeded only by Mandarin, Hindu, and Spanish. In 1998, 486 million people spoke English, ranking second only to Mandarin in total use. More people speak English as a second language than any other.² English is the language of international diplomacy and commerce. In a remarkable manner, the English-speaking people set the standard for civilized society. Native English speaking people populate nations representing perhaps some of the most Christian and free people, including the British Isles, Australia, Canada, and the United States. Although in a corrupted form, the American example began a movement toward liberty for the whole of the western world and with increasing influence on the East. Today, the entire world looks to English-speaking America as the best of friend or the worst of foes. Apparently, almost no one acts in world affairs without consideration of the United States, a power to reckon with. Truly, the English-speaking people, with their faith, have built yet a new world empire.

Whatever the ancient Biblical kingdoms had in common with English linguistically, their characters could not be more disparate. The ancient world kingdoms established themselves upon military conquest. Though superior to the savage earlier Asian kingdoms, conquest still meant subjugation. Rome incorporated native cultures into its empire, but only at the cost of a severe and ruthless rule of humanistic law. Liberty, in the Biblical sense, was unknown in the four world kingdoms. By contrast, England's Christian history left its benign imprint on every colonial expansion. English colonies planted frontier lands, bringing an ethical and economic civilization to previously undeveloped lands. English influence elevated the native people in many ways, not the least of which were civil liberty and justice. The English speaking colonies that adopted the English way, and its religion in particular, produced societies far superior to the Latin countries' colonization efforts. Rather than conquer or rule by mere might, the English-speaking people held as their goal building new, thriving and permanent communities. It is important to remember that England and the English-speaking peoples were once as backward and savage as any people were. Only God must receive the glory for His Providence. The difference is Christ and no other.

One of the most astounding results of English colonization, particularly in America, is the development of the non-racial nation. The United States as a Christian nation seems at least an exemplary fulfillment of the prophecy that those who were not a people would become a people (1 Peter 2:10). In the United States, at least originally, the Biblical principles of righteousness and liberty in Christ distinguished the

nation. Unity in diversity characterized it. Though the colonization and civilization efforts of the English-speaking people have been far from perfect, their legacy remains arguably the highest expression the world has thus known.

Webster's work was pioneering. Today, few if any scholars work from his Biblical presupposition. Archaeological evidence and scientific linguistic and geological discoveries should support his insights. Increasingly deep study may well inspire young scholars to pursue linguistics in Noah Webster's footsteps, furthering and correcting his work.

American Christians have no cause for pride or gloating. America's gift of Christian liberty and diversity, brotherhood and union, law and justice, requires great stewardship and carries a great responsibility to propagate these godly virtues. If we recognize a special hand of God on the English-speaking people, we recognize the greater privilege to serve God and glorify Him. God's blessings represent a solemn and holy stewardship. May His people rise to His call upon our hearts and lives to restore and rebuild our own Christian heritage, as well as to help others to do the same.

¹ Noah Webster, *1828 American Dictionary of the English Language* (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1987), p. 17.

² *The Complete Reference Collection, 1998 Edition, on CD-ROM*. (Compton's Home Library, TLC Properties, 1997).