



The Devine Source

In the biblical tradition, as described in the book of Genesis, God created Adam, and:

"The Divine Source "whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof."

Alternatively, following Hindu tradition, it is Sarasvati, the wife of Brahma, who is credited with bringing language to humanity. In most religions, there appears to be a divine source that provides humans with language. In an attempt to rediscover this original divine source, a few experiments have been carried out, with rather conflicting results. The basic hypothesis seems to have been that if human infants were allowed to grow up without hearing any language around them, then they would spontaneously begin using language.

The Greek writer Herodotus reported the story of an Egyptian pharaoh named Psammetichus (or Psamtik), who tried an experiment with two newborn babies more than 2,500 years ago. After two years of isolation, except for the company of goats and a mute shepherd, the children were reported to have spontaneously uttered not an Egyptian word but something that was identified as the Phrygian word "bekos," meaning "bread." The pharaoh concluded that Phrygian, an older language spoken in part of what is modern Turkey, must be the original language. That seems very unlikely. The children may not have picked up this "word" from any human source, but, as several commentators have pointed out, they must have heard what the goats were saying. (First remove the "-kos" ending, which was added in the Greek version of the story, then pronounce "be-" as you would the English word "bed" without "-d" at the end. Can you hear a goat?)

King James the Fourth of Scotland carried out a similar experiment around the year 1500, and the children were reported to have spontaneously started speaking Hebrew, confirming the king's belief that Hebrew had indeed been the language of the Garden of Eden. About a century later, the Mogul emperor Akbar the Great also arranged for newborn babies to be raised in silence, only to find that the children produced no speech at all. It is unfortunate that Akbar's result is more in line with the real-world outcome for children who have been discovered living in isolation, without coming into contact with human speech. Very young children living without access to human



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language in their early years grow up with no language at all. This was true of Victor, the wild boy of Aveyron in France, discovered near the end of the eighteenth century, and also of Genie, an American child whose special life circumstances came to light in the 1970s (see Chapter 12). From this type of evidence, there is no "spontaneous" language. If human language did emanate from a divine source, we have no way of reconstructing that original language, especially given the events in a place called Babel, "because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth," as described in Genesis (11:9).