

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Lessons of Babel

THE SOURCE: "Joseph (Smith) in Egypt: Babel, Hieroglyphs, and the Pure Language of Eden" by Samuel Brown, in *Church History*, March 2009.

OF ALL THE LESSONS OF GENESIS, few were taken more seriously by Joseph Smith (1805–44), the 19th-century prophet of the Mormon Church, than the account of the Tower of Babel. Mankind's effort to build a tower that would "reach unto heaven," according to the Bible, caused an angry God to "confound" the world's single original language and scattered people to the corners of the earth.

Smith, the leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, believed that the destruction of the universal language of the Israelites led to a confusion of meaning, disension, and religious sectarianism that plagued society even into the 1830s, writes Samuel Brown, a physician who is pursuing postresidency training at the University of Utah.

Smith's concern was part of a broad intellectual belief, wide-

Was the Tower of Babel a metaphor for the "infinite multiplications of opinion," errors, and strife within the Christian world?

spread in his time, that the corruption of language had led to the "infinite multiplications of opinion," errors, and strife within the Christian world. Philosopher-critic Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82) thought the problem was not confined to religion. "The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language," he wrote. Methodist, Unitarian, and Congregationalist writers worried that language had become so degraded that it was impossible to convey religious truth.

Joseph Smith believed that ancient languages, particularly the one expressed in Egyptian hieroglyphs, provided a key to recovering the language of the Garden of Eden. This made it logical for Smith and his followers to purchase four mummies

and their papyruses from an entrepreneur who appeared at the temporary Mormon capital of Kirtland, Ohio, in 1835. They paid \$2,400, the equivalent of five years' income for an average farming family.

Only a few years earlier, Smith had miraculously translated the ancient Book of Mormon, the religion's founding text, from a language known as "Reformed Egyptian." It told the story of America's "first settlement by a colony that came from the Tower of Babel, at the confusion of languages," Brown writes. The papyruses Smith acquired in 1835 added details to that account, and enabled Smith and his followers to compile what they described as hieroglyphic grammar that would help guide Mormons toward understanding and, in time, speaking God's original language.

When the Millennium arrived, Brown writes, believers would stand with the original Adam near the primordial Garden of Eden. They would constitute "a human family united by language and mutual awareness, one whose members called each other by sacred and ancient names."

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Farming for Real

THE SOURCE: "Spoiled: Organic and Local Is So 2008" by Paul Roberts, in *Mother Jones*, March–April 2009.

THE \$4 HEIRLOOM TOMATO IS not going to save the world, writes Paul Roberts, author of *The End of*

Food (2008). Organic farming, locally grown vegetables, and vertical pea patches won't feed 6.7 billion people. Achieving truly sustainable farming will require more than merely sparing the herbicides and patronizing the local farmers' market. The expensive

agricultural techniques that have beguiled food activists may have passed their expiration dates.

Organic agriculture supplies less than three percent of America's food, Roberts writes, and ramping up acreage free of synthetic fertilizers to a global level is a chimera. Vaclav Smil, an environmental scientist at the University of Manitoba, says that such an expansion would "require complete elimination of all tropical rainforests, conversion of a



"Living Tower" is one of several vertical farm proposals, but critics say futuristic schemes and rigid insistence on organic methods undermine farmers' efforts to gradually improve agriculture.

large part of tropical and subtropical grasslands to cropland, and the return of a substantial share of the labor force to field farming."

Another greatest hit on the sustainable farming activist checklist is the concept of local food. But most eaters now live in cities, far from the producers. Close-in farmland either is economically prohibitive or requires farmers to concentrate on high-margin products—heirloom tomatoes and mache spring to mind—to survive. Moreover, rural communities can't sustain themselves economically by selling locally. One farmer in Oregon can grow more pears on a few hundred acres than the entire state can eat in a season, according to Roberts.

Dickson Despommier, a Columbia University professor and visionary champion of vertical farming, claims that a 30-story glass skyscraper using nonsoil farming could produce enough food on a single city block to feed 50,000 people. But his farm would cost \$200 mil-

lion to build. Other seers are promoting more modest vertical schemes, such as Sky Vegetables, which would use grocery store rooftops—for example, the four acres atop a typical Wal-Mart superstore.

But if sustainable food is to mean anything for more than the affluent few, long-distance transportation cannot be eliminated, Roberts argues. Parts of Asia and Africa are rapidly running out of water and arable land. And some things simply grow better in certain places.

The quest for the perfect sustainable system cannot be allowed to block the many pathways toward better food practice, Roberts says. Farmers who vastly reduce their use of synthetic fertilizer should not be treated as pariahs because they still use herbicides. The principle of reducing "food miles" might be advanced by curtailing fresh-raspberry airlifts from Mexico, but it shouldn't be used to undermine the efficient bulk-delivery systems supermarkets already have in place.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Medicine Meets the Computer

THE SOURCE: "Use of Electronic Health Records in U.S. Hospitals" by Ashish K. Jha et al., "No Small Change for the Health Information Economy" by Kenneth D. Mandl and Isaac S. Kohane, and "Stimulating the Adoption of Health Information Technology" by David Blumenthal, in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, April 16, March 26, and April 9, 2009.

THE ENDLESS MANILA FOLDERS that hold the medical history of most Americans seem curiously antiquated in a world of routine in vitro fertilization. So the Obama administration's \$19 billion effort to goad the medical establishment into computerizing medical records sounds like an easy part of the huge economic stimulus package. But there are monumental challenges in installing adaptable systems that will truly improve patient care and cut costs.

Only 1.5 percent of U.S. hospitals have electronic records systems covering all their clinical units; an additional 7.6 percent have systems in at least one such hospital division, writes Ashish K. Jha, M.D., who collaborated with seven colleagues at Harvard and one at George Washington University on a survey of 3,000 hospitals. Fewer than one in five doctors uses any kind of electronic records system.

Hospital officials attribute the delay to a lack of capital for the initial purchase and subsequent costs, as well as physician resistance and concerns over whether computerization would cost more than it would save. Privacy concerns, which loom large in the public discussion, were not among the most commonly cited barriers to implementation.