
The Tower of Babel

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Babel, Tower of

The popular designation of the tower (Heb *migdōl*) described in Gen. 11, which people migrating from the East built in the midst of their city in the plain of Shinar.

I. The Narrative

Early in the history of mankind, as repopulation was taking place after the ravages of the Flood, a number of people settled in the "land of Shinar." Here they decided to build a city and erect a tower, "its top in the heavens." Their stated purpose was to make a name for themselves, and for this reason the project displeased Yahweh, who put an end to it by scattering the builders far and wide, with consequent diversity of languages; and in the confusion, the project remained incomplete. The narrative finally reveals the name of the city concerned: it is Babel (or Babylon), and the writer links the name with the Heb *bālal*, "He confused" (v 9).

II. Type of Story

It is easy enough to dismiss the whole story as legendary, and deny any historicity in it. But this is an unscholarly procedure; the first step logically must be to endeavor to find out what the narrative means to say. Is its primary purpose to explain the diversity of languages in the world, to explain how Babylon got its name, or to account for the ruined ziggurats that were so plentiful in Mesopotamia? If any of these is the sole answer, then the story may be described as etiological, but completely unhistorical. A further possibility is that the story is basically historical, though interpreted etilogically by the compiler of the stories of Genesis. See VII below.

III. Origin of Languages

It is difficult to concede at once that the wide diversity of tongues could have originated in such a way. Certainly, at the present stage of

philological inquiry, it seems hardly likely that the many languages of the world have a common origin, however remote. Even in the case of Middle Eastern tongues that do perhaps share a common origin, such as the Semitic and Hamitic language groups, it may be argued that this origin must be placed in the very earliest, prehistoric times, long before civilization reached the stage of culture and achievement basic to Gen. 11. On the other hand, the incident described is in terms of a catastrophic happening rather than the prolonged development that linguistic research presupposes.

IV. The Name Babel

The name Babel has no connection with the Heb *bālal*, "He confused." Its meaning is in fact patent in its Assyrian form, *Bāb-ilī*, "gate of god." The final syllable, *'ēl* in Hebrew, is common to all Semitic languages, and means "god"; while *bāb* is well-known in Assyrian, Arabic, Aramaic, and late Hebrew. It seems probable, then, that the narrator of Gen. 11:9 is indulging in a play on words, a verbal irony, or else relating a folk etymology, rather than attempting a serious etymology of the name. He must surely have known that such a word could not possibly derive from a root *b-l-l*.

V. Historical Details

The two preceding paragraphs might seem to indicate that the story is purely etiological and totally unhistorical. Yet a number of details of the story bear the stamp of historicity. The name Shinar, for instance, was evidently well known for Babylonia in early times; cf. Gen. 10:10. It is possibly cognate with Sumer. The mention of a tower in Babylonia is certainly an authentic touch; the ziggurats of Babylonia known to archeologists are many (see X below). Above all, the reference to brick and bitumen is strikingly accurate, for Babylonia did not possess the stone that was so commonplace a building material in Palestine. Baked mud bricks and bitumen were widely used in the vast Tigris-Euphrates plain.

VI. Brevity of the Story

It is difficult to deny the historical accuracy of some details of the story, then. But it is not easy to get a clear picture of any historical event from Gen. 11:1–9, since the narrative is so brief and condensed. There are a number of omissions that cause problems. Was the purpose of the tower religious or secular? (Note that the narrative does not state that the builders were trying to reach heaven thereby; the Hebrew idiom signifies merely that the tower was to be very high.) What exactly was the builders' sin? How did Yahweh scatter them? How did He confuse their language? Without the answers to these questions, we can only guess what historical event, if any, was in the mind of the author.

VII. Setting

The story, like the others of Gen. 1–11, is in a Mesopotamian setting. This is too easily obscured by such phrases as “the whole earth” (11:1); the Hebrew word is *hā'āreš*, which may mean “the land” or “the world”; and it need not be doubted that the author of this story was concerned with just his own immediate surroundings, southern Mesopotamia. This is the stage, then, and the date is probably the 3rd millennium B.C. The situation is that there is at first one language, and a political unity; the story ends with some political upheaval. If we wish to link this with known historical developments, it seems possible that it refers to one of the periodic shifts of population in the Middle East; and a distinct possibility is the influx of Semites, the Akkadians, into the territory of the Sumerian city-states during the first half of the 3rd millennium B.C. This certainly brought with it a linguistic confusion that lasted some hundreds of years, till eventually the Akkadian tongue displaced the Sumerian.

VIII. Theological Implications

The writer viewed the builders of Babel as guilty of some sin (probably that of pride, the besetting sin of Babylon at a later date), and to him the linguistic and political confusion that

ensued was Yahweh's punishment upon them. A lofty monotheism is here displayed; it is not the local deities but Yahweh who controls the vicissitudes of Mesopotamian history. It has also been remarked that the writer exhibits a profound insight when he observes the divisions caused by diversity of language.

IX. Composition of the Story

According to source-critical theories of the composition of the Pentateuch, this story belongs to the original document (or stratum) known for convenience as J (*see* CRITICISM II; PENTATEUCH). The chief indications of this are the use of the name Yahweh for God, and the anthropomorphic style. A number of scholars have contended that the narrative is a conflation of two accounts (J¹ and J²?); it is suggested that in one account a city was built, in the other a tower. Another supporting argument is that the “Let us go down” of v 7 is inconsistent with the previous remark, “And Yahweh came down,” of v 5. When it is understood, however, that such anthropomorphisms are not in any case to be taken literally, the inconsistency is purely verbal, and needs no explaining away. The mere reference to a city and a tower together is not in itself a very secure basis for a theory of conflated accounts, and the present trend of opinion (e.g., Parrot) appears to uphold the unity of the narrative.

Bibliography.—S. R. Driver in HDB; comms on Genesis, esp those of J. Skinner (ICC, 1935); Ryle (CBSC, 1914); and G. von Rad (Engtr, OTL, 1961); A. Parrot, *Tower of Babel* (Engtr 1955).

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X. Archeological Evidences

A. The Ziggurat Babylonian temple towers differed significantly from the Canaanite *migdōl* or watchtower. The watchtower was simply a high structure, probably without any special shape or form, as this depended upon the will of the architect and the nature of the ground upon which it was erected. The tower of Babel or Babylon, however, was a structure peculiar to Babylonia and Assyria. According to all

accounts, and judging from the extant ruins of the various buildings in those countries, Babylonian towers were always rectangular, built in stages, and provided with an inclined ascent continued along each side to the top. Since religious ceremonies were performed thereon, they were generally surmounted by a chapel in which sacred objects or images were kept.

These structures had, with the Babylonians, a special name: *ziqurratu*, apparently meaning “peak,” or the highest point of a mountain. This word was applied to the mountain height upon which Utnapishtim, the Babylonian Noah, offered sacrifices on coming forth from the ark (or ship) when the waters of the great Flood had sufficiently subsided. It has also been thought that these towers were used as observatories when the Babylonians studied the starry heavens. This is probable; but these structures were of no great height, and in the clear atmosphere of the Babylonian plains perhaps there was no real necessity to go above the surface of the earth to make their observations.

B. Location of the Tower of Babel There has been much difference of opinion about the location of the tower of Babel. Most writers upon the subject, following the tradition handed down by the Jews and Arabs, have identified it with the great temple of *Nabû* (Nebo) in the city of Borsippa, now called the *Birs Nimrûd* (explained as a corruption of *Birj Nimrûd*, “tower of Nimrod”). This building, however, notwithstanding its importance, was to all appearance never regarded by the Babylonians as the tower of Babel, for the very good reason that it was not situated in Babylon but in Borsippa, which, though called in later times “the second Babylon,” was naturally not the original city of that name. The structure regarded by the Babylonians as the great tower of their ancient city was *É-temen-an-ki*, “the temple of the foundation of heaven and earth,” called by Nabopolassar and Nebuchadrezzar *ziqurrat Bābilī*, “the tower of Babylon”—the world-renowned temple tower dedicated to Marduk, Babylon’s chief deity, and his consort *Šarpānītum*.

This structure was situated in the southern portion of the city, not far from the right bank of the Euphrates, and according to Weissbach is now represented by a depression within which is the original rectangular core of unbaked brick. From its shape the Arabs have named this site *Şahṇ*, “the dish.” Within the memory of men not so very old, these remains of the great temple of Babylon towered, even in the ruined state, high above the surrounding plain. The burnt bricks of the ancient Babylonians, however, who “had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar” (Gen. 11:3), are still good and have a commercial value; so they were all cleared out, along with whatever precious material in the way of antiquities they may have contained, to repair, it is said, the banks of the *Hindīyah Canal*. Certain records in the shape of conical “cylinders,” however, came into the market and were acquired by the museums of Europe and America. As these refer to the restoration of the building by Nabopolassar, and the part taken by his sons Nebuchadrezzar and *Nabû-šumu-līšir* in the ceremonies attending the rebuilding, it is very probable that they formed part of the spoils acquired.

C. A Babylonian Description *É-temen-an-ki* is generally believed to have consisted of six square stages built upon a platform, topped with a small sanctuary. Primary sources for reconstruction of the tower include a ground plan uncovered in R. Koldewey’s 1913 excavations, a third-century B.C. copy of an earlier Akkadian text, and the description of Herodotus, who visited the city ca 460 B.C.

The pilastered walls of the *É-temen-an-ki* complex enclosed a large open square, 460 by 408 by 456 412 yds (420 by 373 by 417 by 377 m). Surrounding the square were several small buildings variously interpreted as storehouses or shrines of miscellaneous deities.

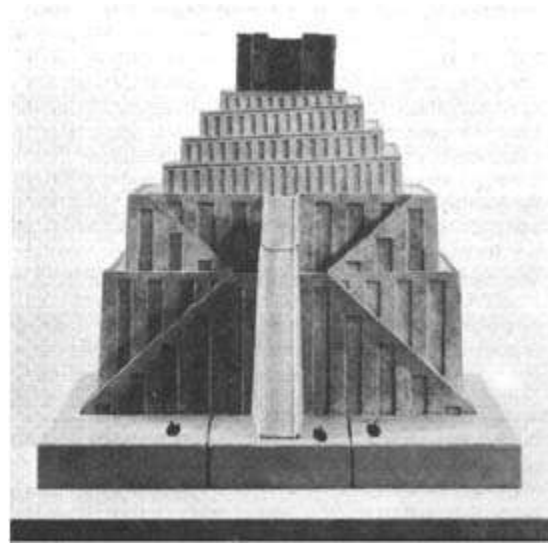
The main feature of the complex, the ziggurat, is described by the Esagil Tablet, which indicates dimensions in terms of the *suklum*-cubit, as used by the Assyrian kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon: “60.60.60 [is] the length, 60.60.60 the breadth To produce the reckoning of it, 3x3.” The height of the *kigal* (tower) of *É-temen-an-ki* was equal to the length and to the breadth. A second, more cryptic description

gives the dimensions in the larger “step-cubit.” Detailed measurements of the tower are indicated in the tablet as follows: 1st story-length 90 m, breadth 90 m, height 33 m; 2nd story-78 by 78 by 18 m; 3rd story-60 by 60 by 6 m; 4th story-51 by 51 by 6 m; 5th story-42 by 42 by 6 m; (6th story-33 by 33 by 6 m); 7th story-24 by 24 by 15 m. Details of the 6th story, omitted by scribal error, are conjectural.

It cannot be said that it was by any means a beautiful structure, but there was probably some symbolism in its measurements. Although various artistic representations have been proposed, in appearance it probably resembled (except the decoration) the temple tower of Calah as restored in the frontispiece to Layard’s *Monuments of Nineveh* (1st series), in which a step-pyramid with a similarly high basement-stage is shown.

With this detailed description the account in Herodotus (i.181ff) agrees. He states that it was a temple square in form, two furlongs (1213 ft, 370 m) each way, in the midst of which was built a solid tower a furlong square (nearly 607 ft, 185 m). This, however, must have been the platform, which, with the six stages and the chapel on the top, would make up the total of eight stages of which Herodotus speaks. Parrot, E. Unger, and others so interpret the Esagil Tablet. The ascent by which the top was reached he describes as running “outside round about all the towers”—wording which suggests, though not necessarily, that it was spiral—i.e., one had to walk round the structure seven times to reach the top. Representations on Babylonian boundary-stones suggest that this view would be correct, though a symmetrical arrangement of inclined paths might have been constructed which would have greatly improved the design. At the middle of the ascent, Herodotus says, there was a stopping-place with seats to rest upon, which rather favors this idea. At the top of the last tower there was a large cell, and in the cell a large couch was laid, well covered, and by it a golden table. There was no image there, nor did any human being spend the night there, except only a woman of the natives of the place chosen by the god, “as say the Chaldeans who are the priests of this god.” These men told Herodotus

that the god often came to the cell and rested upon the couch; “but,” he adds, “I do not believe them.” After mentioning parallels to this at Egyptian Thebes and Patara in Lycia, he goes on to speak of another cell below, wherein was a great image of Zeus (Bel/Marduk) sitting, with a footstool and a large table, all of gold, and weighing no less than 800 talents. Outside of this cell was an altar to the god, made of gold; and also another altar, whereon full grown animals were sacrificed, the golden altar being for sucklings only. The Chaldeans also told him that there was, in the precincts of the building, a statue 12 cubits (5.5 m) high, and of solid gold. Darius I Hystaspes desired to take possession of this valuable object, but did not venture. His son Xerxes, however, was not so considerate of the feelings of the people and the priesthood, for he also killed the priest when the latter forbade him to meddle with it.



Model of the ziggurat at Babylon, based on E. Unger’s interpretation of the Esagil Tablet (Oriental Institute, University of Chicago)

Koldewey’s excavations reveal the remarkable accuracy of the Esagil Tablet as well as Herodotus’ account. Located in a large rectangular enclosure with external dimensions 500 by 450 yds (460 by 410 m) the square foundation of the tower measures

approximately 298 ft (91 m) on each face. The tower was formed with a core of sun-dried bricks ensheathed with an exterior shell (49 ft [15 m] thick) of baked bricks. Three staircases, two against the south face and the third centrally located, at right angles to the façade, provided access to the upper stories from ground level. Extrapolation from archeological data supports the height suggested by the literary evidence, 295 to 300 ft (90 to 92 m).

XI. Destruction of the Tower

There is a Jewish tradition that the tower was split through to its foundation by fire that fell from heaven—suggested probably by the condition of the tower at “second Babylon,” i.e., the Birš Nimrûd. Another tradition, recorded by Eusebius (*Praep. ev. ix; Chronicon* 13; *Chronicon-Syncellus* 44) says it was blown down by the winds: “but when it approached the heavens, the winds assisted the gods, and overturned the work upon its contrivers; and the gods introduced a diversity of tongues among men, who, until that time, had all spoken the same language.”

That the building of the city would have been stopped when the confusion of tongues took place is natural—the departure of the greater part of the inhabitants made this inevitable. When the population increased again, the building of the city continued, with the result that Babylon ultimately became the greatest city of the then known world. The tower, notwithstanding the traditions concerning its destruction, remained; and when, as happened from time to time, its condition became ruinous, some energetic Babylonian king would restore it. Nabopolassar (625–605) and Nebuchadrezzar II (604–562) refurbished the tower, covering the upper temple with blue enameled bricks. Alexander and Philip of Macedon began clearing away the rubbish to rebuild the great temple of Zeus Belos (Bel/Marduk) connected with it, and there is hardly any doubt that the tower would have been restored likewise; but the untimely death of the former, and the deficient mental caliber of the latter for the ruling of a great empire, put an end to the work. The tower therefore remained unrepaired—“The tower was

exceedingly tall. The third part of it sank down into the ground, a second third was burned down, and the remaining third was standing until the time of the destruction of Babylon” (Rabbi Yehanan, *Sanhedrin* 109a).

Bibliography.—A. Parrot, *Tower of Babel* (Engtr 1955); E. Unger, *Babylon, die heilige Stadt* (1931), pp. 191–200.

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