

The Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel Account and Its Implications

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This paper investigates the history of ziggurats and brick making as well as the settlement patterns and development of urbanization in southern Mesopotamia. Gen 11:1-9 is interpreted in light of this information, and the conclusion reached is that the tower, as a ziggurat, embodied the concepts of pagan polytheism as it developed in the early stages of urbanization. Yahweh took offense at this distorted concept of deity and put a stop to the project. The account is seen against the backdrop of the latter part of the fourth millennium in the late Uruk phase.

Key Words: ziggurat, Tower of Babel, Mesopotamia, Gen. 11:1-9

The familiar story of the building of the Tower and City of Babel is found in Gen 11:1-9. From the initial setting given for the account, on the plain of Shinar, to the final lines where the city is identified with Babel, it is clear that the events recorded took place in southern Mesopotamia.¹ It is this southern Mesopotamian backdrop that provides the basis for studying the account in light of what is known of the culture and history of Mesopotamia. One of the immediate results of that perspective is firm conviction that the tower that figures predominantly in the narrative is to be identified as a ziggurat. This is easily concluded from the importance that the ziggurat had in the civilizations of southern Mesopotamia from the earliest development of urbanized life to the high political reaches of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. It is common for the ziggurat to be of central importance in city planning. The frequent objection that the Hebrew term לְרִגְלִים (migdal) is used primarily in military contexts or as a watch tower, but never used of a ziggurat, is easily addressed on three fronts.

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1. We do not expect to see the term לְרִגְלִים (migdal) used of ziggurats in Hebrew because the Israelites did not have ziggurats.

2. We do not expect the Israelites to have a ready term for ziggurats because ziggurats were not a part of the Israelite culture.

3. Given the absence of a term in Hebrew, we would expect them to either borrow the word if they had to talk about them, use a suitable existing term, or devise a word. To call the ziggurat a tower is not inaccurate, and as a matter of fact, the term they used is derived from the Hebrew term לָרַג (to be large), which is somewhat parallel to the etymological root of the

¹ Whether Shinar = Sumer is now open to question in light of the analysis of Ran Zadok, "The Origin of the Name Shinar," *ZA* 74 (1984) 240-44, but there is no doubt that it refers to southern Mesopotamia.

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Akkadian word, *ziqqurat* (*zaqaru*, to be high). Despite the fact then that the Hebrew term is used primarily in military senses or as watch towers, the context here and the known background of the narrative prevent us from being limited to that semantic range. A possible nonmilitary function of a *mgdl* may occur in Ugaritic as a place of sacrifice.²

Ziggurats

Nearly thirty ziggurats in the area of Mesopotamia have been discovered by archaeologists.³ In location, they stretch from Man and Tell-Brak in the northwest and Dur-Sharrukin in the north, to Ur and Eridu in the south, and to Susa and Choga Zambil in the east. In time, the span begins perhaps as early as the Ubaid temples at Eridu (end of the 5th millennium BC) and extends through the restorations and additions made even in Seleucid times (3d c. BC). Architectural styles feature stairs in some, ramps in others, and combinations of the two in still others. Ziggurats are of varying sizes with bases ranging from 20 meters on a side to over 90 meters on a side. Frequently the ziggurat is dedicated to the city's patron god or goddess, but cities were not limited to one ziggurat (Kish had three).

The issues most likely to be of importance in the study of Genesis 11 are the origin and function of ziggurats. We may expect that by the study of these we may be able, to some degree, to delineate the role and significance of the ziggurat in Genesis 11.

Origin. The structure at Eridu, the earliest structure that some designate a ziggurat, is dated in its earliest level to the Ubaid period (4300-3500). There are sixteen levels of temples beneath the Ur III period ziggurat constructed by Amar-Sin (2046-2038) that crowns the mound. At which of these levels the structure may be first designated a ziggurat is a matter of uncertainty. Oates comments,

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Convention clearly demanded that the ruins of one shrine should be preserved beneath the foundations of its successor, a practice that probably explains the appearance of the high terraces on which some of the latest prehistoric temples stood, and which may be forerunners of later times.⁴

This same phenomenon occurs with the so-called White Temple of Uruk dated to the Jamdet Nasr period (3100-2900). M. Mallowan remarks,

The so-called ziggurat or temple tower on which it [the white temple] was set had risen gradually in the course of more than a millennium, for in fact beneath the White Temple the tower incorporated within it a series of much earlier sanctuaries which after serving

² Keret IV:166-72.

³ For the best analysis of these, see Andre Parrot, *Ziggurats et Tour de Babel* (London: SCM, 1955).

⁴ David and Joan Oates, *The Rise of Civilization* (New York: Elsevier Phaidon 1976) 132. We would suggest that "convention" is less responsible for this practice than the belief that the location and orientation of the temple had been ordained by the gods and was therefore not to be abandoned. It may also be overstatement to say that the previous shrine was preserved. While not totally demolished, it was filled with brick or rubble so as to serve as a suitable foundation for its successor.

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their time had been filled solid with brickwork and became terraces for later constructions.⁵

It is difficult to determine what should be called a ziggurat and what should not. The criteria used by the ancients is unknown to us. For our purposes, we will define a ziggurat as a staged tower for which the stages were consciously constructed. That seems to be what is taking place in Genesis 11. Therefore, even though the temples on accumulated ruins were probably the forerunners of the staged towers, the "stages" (made up of accumulated ruins) were not constructed for the tower. It is only when builders construct stages (possibly modeled after the piled up ruins) that we will acknowledge the designation ziggurat. This also rules out the oval terraces.

The Early Dynastic period (2900-2350) is the most likely candidate for the origin of the ziggurat so defined. H. Crawford concedes that "there can now be little doubt that some sort of staged tower does go back to the Early Dynastic period, although there is no evidence for an earlier occurrence."⁶ The clearest evidence of this is at Ur. There, "the Early Dynastic ziggurat is completely engulfed by that of Ur-Nammu, but its existence can be safely deduced from the remains of the period in the surrounding courtyard area."⁷ Man also has a firmly established Early Dynastic ziggurat. At Nippur, superimposed ziggurats built by Ur-Nammu (2112-2095) and Naram-Sin (2254-2218)

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have been confirmed, and it seems likely that a pre-Sargonic ziggurat serves as a foundation.⁸

Function. There have been many different suggestions concerning the function of a ziggurat, and the issue is far from settled. Brevard S. Childs presents a brief summary of some of the major opinions:

The older view that the ziggurat was a representation of a mountain, brought from the mountainous homeland of the Sumerians to Babylon, has been shown as only a secondary motif by recent investigation. Busink has demonstrated from Eridu that the original ziggurat had nothing to do with a mountain. However, in that the Babylonians later on compared the ziggurat to a mountain, this may well be at the best a secondary motif acquired during its later development. Then again, Dombart's attempt to find in the ziggurat a throne concept has found little acceptance. Andrae advanced in 1928 the view that the temple-tower must be seen as a unity, the former being the dwelling place of the god, the latter his place of appearing. But in 1939 he retracted this view in favor of one in which the temple-tower provided the holy place for the resting of the divine spirit. Both Schott and Vincent have defended the idea that the tower was the entrance door through which the god passed to the lower temple. Lenzen, however, has attacked this theory, defending that the primary significance is that of an altar. Finally, Busink concludes that a development must have taken place in the long history of the ziggurat as to its meaning.

⁵ Max Mallowan, *Early Mesopotamia and Iran* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) 41.

⁶ Harriot Crawford, *The Architecture of Iraq in the Third Millennium B.C.* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1977) 27.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Parrot, *Ziggurats*, 154.

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He feels that originally perhaps the practical necessity of protecting the temple against flood and plunder was primary, but admits also that religious motives must have played an important role in its development.⁹

One of the earliest interpretations understood the ziggurat as the tomb of a king or a god,¹⁰ although this was not necessarily considered the sole function. There were two major supporting arguments for this view. The first was the obvious similarity in shape to the early Egyptian pyramids. The second is connection in the inscriptional literature between the term ziggurat and *gigunu*, which was rendered "tomb" by Hilprecht.¹¹

In regard to the former, the earliest pyramid, the so-called step-pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara, bears the closest resemblance to the ziggurat form. It has been demonstrated that the architectural form

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of the Egyptian pyramids began as a simple *mastaba* and was built up in several stages.¹² The step-pyramid was a product of the third dynasty in Egypt (mid-3d millennium BC), which was contemporaneous with the Early Dynastic period in Mesopotamia. Although the extant evidence seems to indicate that the architectural form of the ziggurat became fully developed by that period, the development had begun perhaps a millennium earlier. Thus the ziggurat form can in no way be seen as dependent on the pyramids. Furthermore, no literary or artifactual evidence has produced any indication that the ziggurat functioned as a tomb.

With regard to the latter argument, the *gigunu* is no longer understood as a tomb, but rather as a sanctuary at the top of the ziggurat,¹³ though the precise meaning of the word remains uncertain.

One approach to examining the function of a ziggurat—and in my opinion, the only approach that can give objective data, given our present state of knowledge—is to analyze the names given to the ziggurats in the various cities where they were built. Rather than attempting to use our own standard to judge what is a ziggurat and what is not, we will use a list of designated ziggurats from a Neo-Babylonian bilingual geographical list of 23 entries.¹⁴ Following is my translation of the list:

- | | |
|--|----------|
| 1. Temple of the Foundation of
Heaven and Earth | Babylon |
| 2. Temple of the Wielder of the 7 Decrees of | Borsippa |

⁹ B. S. Childs, "A Study of Myth in Genesis I-XI" (Unpublished dissertation, Heidelberg: 1955) 99-100. The assertion that Busink demonstrated that the ziggurat had nothing to do with a mountain is perhaps overzealous. While Busink's evidence suggested other formative elements as more likely, the mountain motif cannot be entirely discarded.

¹⁰ Hermann Hilprecht, *Explorations in Bible Lands* (Philadelphia: Holman, 1903) 469.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 462.

¹² I. E. S. Edwards, *The Pyramids of Egypt* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1946) 46ff.

¹³ *CAD* G, 67-70.

¹⁴ II Rawlinson 50:1-23 a, b.

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Heaven and Earth¹⁵

- | | |
|--|-----------|
| 3. [. . .] <i>gigir</i> | Nippur |
| 4. Temple of the Mountain Breeze | Nippur |
| 5. Temple of Mystery | Nippur |
| 6. ? | Kurigalzu |
| 7. Temple of the Stairway to Pure Heaven ¹⁶ | Sippar |

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- | | |
|---|------------------|
| 8. Temple of the god Dadia | Akkad |
| 9. ? | Dumuzi (?) |
| 10. Temple of the Admirable Throne/Sanctuary | Dumuzi (?) |
| 11. Temple of the Ziggurat,
Exalted Dwelling Place | Kish |
| 12. Temple of the Exalted Mountain | Ehursagkalamma |
| 13. Temple of Exalted Splendor | Enlil (at Kish?) |
| 14. Temple of the god Nanna | Kutha |
| 15. Temple of the Foundation of
Heaven and Earth ¹⁷ | Dilbat |
| 16. ? | Marad |
| 17. ? | Ur |
| 18. Temple which Links Heaven and Earth | Larsa |
| 19. Temple of the <i>Giparu</i> | Uruk |
| 20. Temple of the Ziggurat | Eridu |
| 21. ? | Enegi |
| 22. ? | Enegi |

We may now attempt to categorize the names with the hope of finding some clues about the function of ziggurats.

1. Two of the ziggurats are named for the god (8, 14; probably also 2).
2. Three names seem to involve general praise (13, 21, 22).¹⁸
3. Two names make reference to the structure or parts of the structure (19, 20).

¹⁵ This name is reconstructed, although there is little doubt of the reading. The transliteration is presented as [É.UR₄.ME].IMIN.AN.KI. The name of the ziggurat of Nabu in Borsippa is well-known. ME is a variable in the name, so it may or may not have occurred in this tablet. The meaning traditionally suggested is "Temple of the seven masters of heaven and earth." This would be logical, it is argued, if each of the seven levels of the ziggurat were (as Rawlinson postulated) dedicated to one of the seven major heavenly bodies (cf. *RLA* 1:422). This view, however, does not enjoy a consensus and fails to give adequate explanation of the ME variant. I have posited the present translation based on the role ascribed to manna in *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld* (cf. Falkenstein, *AfO* 14 [1942] 115:14-15; W. W. Hallo and J. van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968] lines 5-8.).

¹⁶ This reading follows the generally accepted emendation. Cf. *ŠL* 2:2, 568#84 and *CAD Z*, 130-31.

¹⁷ The signs on this as they stand would be read É.DU.BA.AN.KI and this is retained by Deimel. I have read SUHUŠ(!) (=išdu) which appears as a combination of DU + BA. The meaning of DU.BA is obscure, although DU alone is a variant of SUHUŠ for išdu.

¹⁸ In #21 the name is restored as É.U₆.DI.GAL.[AN.NA], where U₆.DI + *tabratu*, "praise." #22 is read É.ARATTA₂.KI.KI.SÁR.RA. If ARATTA = Akk. *kabtu*, "honorable" (cf. *ŠL* 3:1, 19, though somewhat dubious) praise would be intended. KI.SÁR.RA = *kiššatu* and expresses totality.

4. Two names feature mountain terminology (4, 12).
5. Six names seem to address the role or function of the ziggurat (1, 7, 10, 11, 15, 18).

Of the six names that seem to address the function of the ziggurat, two indicate a cultic function, that is, that the ziggurat in some way housed the deity (10, 11; this, of course may also be conveyed by the names in category 1). The other four may indicate a cosmological function, that is, they may indicate that the ziggurat symbolized the connecting link between heaven and earth, or between heaven and the netherworld. The ziggurat at Sippar, temple of the stairway (*simmiltu*) to pure heaven, is particularly indicative of such a function because of the occurrence of the *simmiltu* in the myth of *Nergal and*

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Ereshkigal.¹⁹ In this tale, the stairway is used by Namtar, the messenger of Ereshkigal, to journey from the netherworld to the gate of the gods Anu, Enlil, and Ea.²⁰ It serves as the link between the nether-world and heaven.²¹ That the *simmiltu* occurs in the name of one ziggurat and that another means the "Temple which links heaven and earth" (18) may indicate that the ziggurat was intended to supply a connection between heaven and earth—not for mortal use, but for divine use. This is supported to some degree by the total absence of the ziggurats in the cultic rituals. S. Paths remarks,

Anyone who has perused the whole of the material is struck by the remarkable fact that Etemenanki [the fabulous ziggurat of Babylon] is nowhere mentioned in the description of the course of the [*akitu*] festival though numerous other sacred localities in Babylon are referred to. Nor do we meet with any reference to ceremonies performed here. Indeed, I believe I may add that beyond the constant reference to the building of Etemenanki or "its head" in the inscriptions of the Neo-Babylonian kings, and the frequent mention of it in hymns where it is referred to or invoked in conjunction with Esagila, Ekur and other temples, we find nothing about Etemenanki or its religious uses in the entire Assyro-Babylonian literature.²²

¹⁹ O. Gurney, "The Sultantepe Tablets: The Myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal," *Anatolian Studies* 10 (1960) 123:13-14; 125:42-43.

²⁰ Akkadian *simmiltu* has cognates in many Semitic languages. B. Landsberger, "Lexicalisches Archiv," ZA 41 (1933) 230-31 lists the following: "neusyr. *simelta*; mand. *sumbilta*; altsyr. *sebbelta*; hebr., jud.-aram., arab. mit Metathese, *sullam*." Cf. AHW 1045. The Hebrew *sullam* is used only in the story known as "Jacob's Ladder" in Gen 28:12. In Jacob's dream the *sullam* is set up with its head reaching toward the heavens. Messengers of God (cf. Namtar in *Nergal and Ereshkigal*) were going up and down it. This certainly does not indicate a procession, but rather indicates that messengers to earth were using this stairway/ladder to set out on and return from their missions. Upon awaking, Jacob comments concerning the house of God as well as the "gate of the heavens"—thereby conforming quite closely to general ancient Near Eastern perceptions. For discussion of this see A. R. Millard, "The Celestial Ladder and the Gate of Heaven" *ET* 78 (1966) 86-87; C. Houtman, "What did Jacob See in His Dream at Bethel?" *VT* 27 (1977) 337-51; and H. R. Cohen, *Biblical Hapax Legomena in the Light of Akkadian and Ugaritic* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978) 34.

²¹ The ziggurat name ending AN.KI could be translated "heaven and nether-world" rather than "heaven and earth" in that *ersētīm* can refer to either (CAD E). The Hittite texts which speak of a ritual ladder being lowered into pits for the spirits of the dead also use the symbol KUN(₅) for the ladder. See H. Hoffner, "Second Millennium Antecedents to the Hebrew -'ôḇ," *JBL* 86 (1967) 385-401.

²² Svend Pallis, *The Babylonian Akitu Festival* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1926) 103-4. A survey of occurrences of *ziqqratu* in CAD further confirms the lack of references to the cultic use of the ziggurat.

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It cannot, of course, be concluded that the ziggurat was not used in the rituals. We can only say that whatever its use may have been, if it had one, it is unknown to us. While Paths is addressing the

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situation with regard to the ziggurat of Babylon, we would add that the same is true of all of the ziggurats known from the ancient Near East. If the known literature were our only guide, we would have to conclude that people did not use the ziggurat for any purpose.²³

The mountain terminology used in some of the names is also of interest. In ancient mythologies certain mountains were often considered to be the place where deity descended or dwelt. The Bible likewise implies such a connection. YHWH comes down on a mountain (Sinai, Exod 19) and sacrifice is made on a mountain (Moriah, Gen 22; Carmel, 1 Kgs 18). Moses, Aaron, and Elijah, three of the most central figures in Israelite religion, all go up into a mountain for the meeting with YHWH at the end of their lives. In the Ugaritic Baal-Anat cycle, the temple of Baal is built on the summit of Mount Zaphon. The motif is likewise present in Greek mythology, Mount Olympus being the home of the gods.

Although the function of the ziggurat cannot be identified with certainty, our study of the names, the use of the *similtu* in mythology, the use of mountain terminology, and the lack of reference to a function in the cultic practice of the people, leads us to put forth tentatively, as a working hypothesis, the following suggested function:

The ziggurat was a structure that was built to support the stairway (*siminiltu*), which was believed to be used by the gods to travel from one realm to the other. It was solely for the convenience of the gods and was maintained in order to provide the deity with the amenities that would refresh him along the way (food, a place to lie and rest, etc.). The stairway led at the top to the gate of the gods, the entrance to the divine abode.

Before we move on to consider the implications of this function of the ziggurat for the narrative of Genesis 11, we need to look at a few more elements that can be further explained in light of the narrative's Mesopotamian background.

Building Materials

Discussion of the building materials occupies the whole of Gen 11:3. The first half of the verse indicates that burnt bricks are being used and the second half the verse contains an explanation by the author to those who might be unaware of the details of this "foreign" practice.

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²³ By this I mean in general worship. Certainly the fertility rituals where a high-priestess cohabited with deity would have taken place in the deity's chamber on top of the ziggurat. It has also been thought that astrological observation was made from the top of the ziggurat, though I have been unable to confirm any such references to this sort of use prior to the Neo-Babylonian period.

Our current knowledge of ancient architecture and industry confirms the statement made by the author. In Palestine, mud bricks (sun-dried) are first found in levels designated pre-pottery Neolithic A (8th-9th millennium BC).²⁴ This is the only type of brick found in Palestine. Kiln-fired brick is unattested. The practice was rather to use stone for the foundations and sun-dried brick for the superstructure.²⁵

Sun-dried bricks first appear in Mesopotamia at Samarran sites Sawwan and Choga Mami (mid-6th millennium BC).²⁶ Kiln-fired bricks are first noted during the late Uruk period and become more common in the Jamdet Nasr period toward the end of the fourth millennium.²⁷ Bitumen is the usual mortar used with kiln-fired bricks.²⁸ The building technology of Palestine used a mud mortar (as indicated in our narrative). Bitumen of any grade was an expensive item,²⁹ as Singer notes:

Being expensive, it was seldom used for walls of sun-dried bricks... except to make the walls and floors of such buildings impervious to water.... It was, however, widely used in baked brick buildings. These, again because of the cost of fuel, were expensive, and were normally used only for palaces, temples, and other official buildings. The low firing temperature of the bricks (550-600 degrees C.) resulted in a high porosity; thus the mastic was freely absorbed and gave such strength that the walls made of it are stronger than rock and any kind of iron.³⁰

Not only is the description of the building materials an accurate reflection of a true distinction between Israelite and Mesopotamian building methods, but it also gives us some important information. Whole cities were not generally built of these materials. Even ziggurats themselves only used burnt brick and bitumen for the outer layers while using regular sun-dried mud brick for the inner layers. The core was then filled with dirt.³¹ The mention of the expensive

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building materials would thus suggest that the discussion is focusing on public buildings.

Public buildings were frequently of either religious or administrative importance and were often grouped together in one section of the settlement. They became the focal point for the centralization of wealth and for the preservation of many aspects of the individual culture. It

²⁴ Kathleen Kenyon, *Archaeology in the Holy Land* (4th ed.; New York: Norton, 1979) 26.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 46, 87, 91, 164, etc.

²⁶ David and Joan Oates, *The Rise of Civilization* (New York: Elsevier Phaidon, 1976) 104.

²⁷ Jack Finegan, *Archaeological History of the Ancient Near East* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1979) 8; and C. Singer, *The History of Technology* (vol. 1; Oxford: Clarendon, 1954) 462. Cf. Armas Salonen, *Die Ziegeleien im alten Mesopotamien* (*Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae* 171; Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia 1972) 72ff.

²⁸ Cf. Leonard Woolley, *Ur Excavations: The Ziggurat and Its Surroundings* (New York: British Museum and University Museum of Pennsylvania, 1939) 99.

²⁹ R. J. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology* (vol. 1; Leiden: Brill, 1955) 4-22.

³⁰ C. Singer, *The History of Technology*, 1, 250-54.

³¹ I am, grateful to Prof. D. J. Wiseman for this information.

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was the public sector of the city that was fortified and contained the stores of grain. Thus Hilprecht notes,

The temple complex of Nippur, with the dwellings of numerous officials, embraced the whole eastern half of the city, an area of almost eighty acres. The so-called inner and outer walls of Nippur cannot refer to the whole city, as one would have supposed from the inscriptions, but in accordance with the topographical evidence must be limited to the Temple of Bel (even to the exclusion of the temple library).³²

Although it is possible that the author wants to make the point that this endeavor was attempting to build an entire city of the most expensive materials, I find it more plausible that the public sector of the city is intended. In the end, this is probably a difference without a distinction, for the earliest "cities" were simply the administrative buildings. Thus, when the people in Genesis 11 speak of building a city, they are most likely not referring to building of a residential settlement, but would have in mind the building of public buildings, which in ancient Mesopotamia would be largely represented by the temple complex. C. J. Gadd, writing of Early Dynastic times, observes that "the distinction of city and temple becomes dim, for one was only an agglomeration of the other."³³ The focus of any major temple complex would have been the ziggurat, which leads us into the next section.

The Importance of the City and the Tower

We cannot say that the building project described in Genesis 11 was exclusively a temple complex, but a temple complex certainly was included and is the focus of the story. This is confirmed by the nature of the building materials, the nature of the ancient city, and the role of the ziggurat in the narrative. This ziggurat was the dominant building of the complex, so we are not surprised that that draws the attention of the narrator. Although we have already examined the function of the ziggurat, the role of the temple complex as a whole in Mesopotamian society may now be of some significance to our study.

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Reference has been frequently made in the past to the administration of the so-called temple economy, which was deduced by Deimel and Falkenstein mainly from the Early Dynastic texts from Lagash and Shuruppak.³⁴ The main feature of the temple economy was purported to be the exclusive or almost exclusive temple ownership of land. Falkenstein added that the temple had at its disposal not only the labor resources of the temple personnel, but the labor force of the entire city-state for tasks concerning the temple.³⁵ Although this theory has been largely overturned in more recent analyses,³⁶ the temple complex was likely the center of the earliest efforts of urbanization, a process that is characterized by public buildings, specialized labor, and some publicly owned land. Jacobsen comments:

³² Hermann Hilprecht, *In the Temple of Bel at Nippur* (Philadelphia: Holman, 1904) 14-15.

³³ *CAH*³ 1:2, 128.

³⁴ For the limitations of the evidence, see *CAH*³ 1:2, 126.

³⁵ Falkenstein, *The Sumerian Temple City* (Los Angeles: Undena, 1974) 19-20.

³⁶ Benjamin Foster, "A New Look at the Sumerian Temple State," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 24 (1981) 225-41.

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The centralization of authority which this new political pattern made possible may have been responsible, along with other factors, for the emergence of a truly monumental architecture in Mesopotamia. Imposing temples now began to rise in the plain, often built on gigantic artificial mountains of sun-dried bricks, the famous ziggurats. Works of such proportions clearly presuppose a high degree of organization and direction in the community which achieved them.³⁷

So we find that the development of ziggurats and the urbanization process go hand in hand.³⁸ The ziggurat was the architectural focus of the temple complex, which in turn functioned as the central organ in the economic, political, and cultural spheres of early communities in Mesopotamia. The interrelationship of architecture, city planning, and religion has been observed in the interpretation of the finds in ancient Uruk. Hans Nissen says,

We can deduce from the completely different layout of the two shrines in the Late Uruk period that there must have been greater differences here than can be expressed merely by the assumption that we are dealing with different divinities. While in the western area, a terrace that was a good ten meters high, on which stood a high building visible from afar, the precinct of Eanna was completely differently organized. All the buildings were erected upon flat ground without the slightest elevation. Whereas in the western area it was already impossible, from the point of view of the building, for there to be more than one cult building, the layout of Eanna does not exclude the possibility that

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several such cult buildings were in use simultaneously. This difference in external organization can definitely be traced back to differences in the organization of the cult and can thus also clearly be traced back to different basic religious concepts.³⁹

The connections between Genesis 11 and the early stages of urbanization in Mesopotamia are further confirmed by the statement of the builders in Gen 11:4 that they desired *not* to be scattered abroad. Although this statement has often been interpreted as an indication of disobedience on the part of the builders, such a view cannot be warranted.⁴⁰ First, the disobedience that is attributed to the builders is generally explained by reference to the blessings of Gen 1:28 and Gen 9:1, 7 where God says to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. But a correlation here cannot be sustained. The passages that speak of being fruitful and multiplying are better read as blessings granting permission, rather than commands; privileges, rather than obligations.⁴¹ Further, it is clear that even if filling was seen as an obligation, it would be carried out by reproducing, not by putting geographical distance between oneself and one's family. Scattering is not to be equated with filling.

The second point against the disobedience interpretation is the existence of a much more plausible alternative for understanding the statement. If the builders desired to prevent

³⁷ Th. Jacobsen, *Before Philosophy* (ed. Henri Frankfort; Baltimore: Penguin, 1946) 141.

³⁸ Cf. Falkenstein, "The development of civilization is most closely connected with the temples of the country" (*Sumerian Temple City*, 5).

³⁹ Hans Nissen, *The Early History of the Ancient Near East, 9000-2000 BC* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 101; Cf. also pp. 102-3.

⁴⁰ This interpretation is as early as Josephus (*Ant.* 1.4) and persists in many commentaries today.

⁴¹ On the permissive function of the imperative see GKC 110.b.

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scattering, then we must assume that something was forcing them to scatter. The Old Testament does witness to a pressure to scatter that arises from internal conditions. Gen 13:6-9 records a situation that arose between Abraham and Lot in which they would no longer remain together because of conflict between their men. This would have involved competition for prime grazing land and for campsites nearer to water sources. The constant need for the patriarchs to travel to Egypt in time of famine (i.e., when there is not enough food to meet subsistence level requirements) likewise demonstrates what to them was a fact of life: the number of people that can reside in any given area is directly related to the climatic conditions and land fertility. Cooperation among residents (as initially practiced by Abraham and Lot) can increase the ratio, but eventually the growth in numbers will necessitate dispersion. Perhaps more frequently, the cooperative effort will fail. Both reasons are mentioned in Genesis 13—their possessions became too great, and their men fought.⁴²

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Scattering, then, is not being avoided by disobedience. It is rather a fact of life in nomadic and seminomadic societies that is counterproductive to cultural continuity. It is natural that the builders would want to counteract the need to scatter. The solution to this is the development of a cooperative society, which by pooling their efforts and working together can greatly increase production. In a word—the solution is urbanization.

Living together in such close quarters meant that conflicts had, rather, to be actively controlled, leading to the setting up of rules for resolving conflicts. As we have already seen, situations where people lived together in close proximity could only arise in the intensively cultivated irrigation areas. Thus it was also the inhabitants of these areas—that is, especially of Babylonia—who found themselves confronted by these challenges and had to find answers to them. The need to establish rules enabling people or communities to live together is far more important in encouraging the higher development of civilizations than the need to create purely administrative structures.⁴³

From every angle, then, the narrative, taken against its historical and cultural background, continually points us to the early period of urbanization in southern Mesopotamia. But how does this relate to YHWH's response to the builders' efforts? Are we to conclude that urbanization is somehow contrary to YHWH's plan? While some have taken this route, it seems a difficult one to maintain given YHWH's choice of a city, Jerusalem, for the dwelling place of his presence. It is more likely that there would be something that was characteristic of the urbanization process within Mesopotamia that would be identifiable as the problem. Again, our knowledge of Mesopotamian backgrounds can provide some possible explanations.

The administration of the early cities was in the hands of a general assembly.⁴⁴ This form of government lasted only briefly as the need for decisive action led to the evolution of the

⁴² Cf. Gen 36:7.

⁴³ Nissen, *Early History of the Ancient Near East*, 60-61.

⁴⁴ Jacobsen refers to this system of government as "Primitive Democracy." The aptness of this designation is disputed, but the role of the assembly is not. Edzard views the process less a democracy and more a "public sounding board" (cf. *The Near East: The Early Civilizations*, ed. Bottero, Cassin, and Vercoutter; New York: Delacorte, 1967] 80). Jacobsen suggests that the structure can be seen on a larger scale in the role of Nippur and

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institution of kingship. Although its period of operation was relatively brief, the general assembly format of government left a permanent impression on Mesopotamian society in that this was the form of government that mythology depicted as used by the gods. As the urbanized state

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began to function, the universe came to be considered a state ruled by the gods.⁴⁵ Details concerning the pantheon and its operation prior to this shift are few and often obscure. Jacobsen has presented the view that the earlier picture of the gods was one in which each god, or numinous power, was seen as bound up by a particular natural phenomenon through which he was made manifest. The god was seen to be the power behind the phenomenon, and the phenomenon circumscribed the power of the god and was the god's only form.⁴⁶

As the situation developed, however, a change took place. Rather than continuing to emphasize the powerful uncontrolled manifestation of deity in natural phenomena, the view of the cosmos as a state emerged, with the now humanized gods as citizens and rulers. Mesopotamian theology that is reflected in most of the mythology of Babylon and Assyria has an urbanized society as its foundation. This theological perspective arose sometime early in the urbanization process, for even the Early Dynastic literature reflects that point of view. One indicator of this shift is the sudden popularity of the practice of setting up statues in temples that were intended to pray for the life of the benefactor. Nissen observes,

We can assume that it is highly probable that the custom of setting up statues in temples with this intention began in the Early Dynastic Period. This observation is of interest insofar as it certainly reflects a change in religious ideas. A notion of a god that makes it conceivable that the god can be influenced in this way differs fundamentally from the one that sees in the god only what is spiritually elevated. It is a humanization of the divine image such as we have already seen as a precondition for the theological speculations about a pantheon in which the ranking order of the gods among themselves was expressed in the form of family relationships.⁴⁷

The ziggurat and the temple complex provide the link between urbanization, of which they are the central organ, and Mesopotamian religion which they typify. The ziggurat and the temple complex were representative of the very nature of Mesopotamian religion as it developed its characteristic forms. The essence of this new perspective, represented by the ziggurat and temple complex, is highlighted by Lambert.

The theology of the Sumerians as reflected in what seem to be the older myths presents an accurate reflection of the world from which they spring. The forces of nature can be brutal and indiscriminate; so

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Enlil in Early Dynastic I. He refers to this as the Kengir League (*Toward the Image of Tammuz* [ed. W. Moran; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970] 137- 41, 157-72).

⁴⁵ Jacobsen, *Before Philosophy*, 142.

⁴⁶ Jacobsen, "Formative Tendencies In Sumerian Religion," *Toward the Image of Tammuz*, 2.

⁴⁷ Nissen, *The Early History of the Ancient Near East, 9000-2000 BC*, 155.

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were the gods. Nature knows no modesty; nor did the gods.... In contrast the Babylonians grappled with facts and tried to reduce the conflicting elements in the universe to parts of a harmonious whole. No longer using the analogy of natural forces, they imagined the gods in their own image.⁴⁸

Jacobsen further comments:

Particularly powerful and concrete in the new anthropomorphic view was the symbol of the temple, the god's house. Towering over the flat roofs of the surrounding town, it gave the townsmen visible assurance that the god was present among them.⁴⁹

The development in Mesopotamian religion that took place with the development of urbanization, was that men began to envision their gods in conformity with the image of man. Man was no longer attempting to be like God, but more insidiously, was trying to bring deity down to the level of man. The gods of the Babylonians were not only understood to interact with each other and operate their affairs as humans do, but they also behaved like humans, or worse. Finkelstein observes,

The Babylonian gods ... although not themselves BOUND by moral or ethical principles, nevertheless appreciated them and expected man to live by them. The Babylonians, it would seem, fashioned their gods in their own image more faithfully than the Israelites did theirs.⁵⁰

This is what is represented by the ziggurat. The function of the ziggurat that was suggested earlier as a result of our study of the names further supports this. The needs and nature of the deities who would make use of such a stairway reflect the weakness of deity brought about by the Babylonian anthropomorphization of the gods. It is this system of religion that was an outgrowth of the urbanization process as it unfolded in Mesopotamia, and it was this system that had as its chief symbol the towering ziggurat. The danger of the action of the builders then has nothing to do with architecture or with urbanization. Nothing was wrong with towers or with cities. The danger is found in what this building project stood for in the minds of the builders. To the Israelites, this would be considered the ultimate act of religious hubris, making God in the image of man. This goes beyond mere idolatry; it degrades the nature of god.

One could perhaps object to this interpretation on the grounds that it requires the ziggurat or the temple complex in Genesis 11 to be a "silent" symbol of the Mesopotamian religious system. In fact, it

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is no more silent a symbol than the courtyard of Saint Peter's Basilica in Vatican Square. The editor's own presentation of the material demonstrates their understanding of the symbol. In Gen 11:6, YHWH says this is only the beginning of what men will do. What is the end result?

⁴⁸ W. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960) 7.

⁴⁹ Jacobsen, *Toward the Image of Tammuz*, 13.

⁵⁰ J. J. Finkelstein, "Bible and Babel," *Commentary* 26 (1958) 440.

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The editor's answer to that question is given by means of a rhetorical device: "Therefore its name was called Babel" (Gen 11:9). It was the Babylonians who eventually committed the offense.⁵¹ This offense lay not in the building of buildings, nor in the architectural structure itself, nor in the effort that achieved it. In the eyes of the editor, the intentions of the builders were innocent enough, but now, behold what their ziggurat had come to represent! The hubris was committed by those who carried on from that innocent yet auspicious beginning and brought to fruition the very evil that YHWH had foreseen—the degradation of deity. As the modern poet has voiced it:

The more the gods become like men,
the easier it is for men to believe the gods.
When both have only human appetites,
then rogues may worship rogues.⁵²

Unlike the modern interpretations, which suggest that there was no offense and that YHWH, acting in grace, prevented offense from occurring, we would suggest that the offense was not prevented, but rather delayed and isolated by YHWH's action. By confusing the languages, God made cooperation impossible; therefore, scattering could no longer be prevented. Thus the urbanization process was delayed.

We cannot deny the possibility that this account was understood by the Israelites as being pregnant with political implications. Its main intent, though, we would argue, would seem to be not political polemic, nor even the account of yet another offense. Rather, the account demonstrates the need for God to reveal himself to the world. The concept of God had been corrupted and distorted; this would require an extensive program of reeducation to correct. So it was that God chose Abraham and his family and made a covenant with them.

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The covenant would serve as the mechanism by which God would reveal himself to the world through Israel.

The Historical Setting of the Tower of Babel

As is evident from the above, I believe that the account of Genesis 11 has a solid historical foundation in early Mesopotamia. The details are authentic and realistic. The identification of the urbanization process and the accompanying development of the ziggurat with fundamental changes in the religious perspectives of the people demonstrates the keen analytical insight of the biblical author. Is it possible to suggest a particular historical period as the background of the event recounted in this narrative? First, a review of the pertinent information:

⁵¹ Though it is possible that this building project was attempted at Babylon, current evidence suggests that the city is not that ancient. I would allow that the name Babel is used here as identification of the contemporary example of what was wrought in that initial incident.

⁵² Calvin Miller, *The Song* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity, 1977) 32. Cf. C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Macmillan, 1964) 68: "On the one hand, the man who does not regard God as other than himself cannot be said to have a religion at all. On the other hand, if I think God other than myself in the same way in which my fellowmen, and objects in general, are other than myself, I am beginning to make Him an idol. I am daring to treat His existence as somehow parallel to my own."

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1. Development of baked brick technology: Jamdet Nasr, ca. 3100 BC
2. Development of Ziggurat: Early Dynastic Period, ca. 2500 BC (earlier prototypes go back to the Late Uruk phase, ca. 3200 BC)
3. Development of Urbanization: Early Dynastic Period, ca. 2800 BC
4. Government by Ruling Assembly: Early Dynastic I, ca. 2900 BC

When considering the impact of this information, two caveats must be identified. *First*, in the biblical account the tower of Babel is presented as a failed prototype. The result of God's action against the builders was to delay the development of urbanization in Mesopotamia. Consequently, it would be logical to infer that the event recorded in Genesis 11 occurred perhaps centuries prior to the actual development of urbanization as attested by archaeological records. *Second*, development of institutions may have taken place prior to the Early Dynastic period, but written records are not available to inform us of those developments. Writing developed in the Late Uruk period, but is limited to basic economical use for some time.

Besides the archaeological information that has been discussed, we must also consider that the account must have support from our understanding of the history of linguistic development and from settlement patterns in Mesopotamia. Taking all of this information into account, the Ubaid period (5000-3500) is most intriguing. Ubaid is a site in southern Mesopotamia just northwest of Ur. The Ubaid period witnesses the first settlements in southern Mesopotamia, with many of the sites being built on virgin soil.⁵³ The sites in the northern section of Mesopotamia that attest the earlier settlements (e.g., Jarmo, Hassuna, Samarra, Halaf) appear not to continue into this period, though Ubaid cultures are attested in the north as well as the south. This pattern suggests that the Ubaid period witnessed the initial

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migration from the north into southern Mesopotamia, in notable agreement with Gen 11:2. Nissen has described the developments of this period in southern Mesopotamia and suggested a cause for the events:

A prolonged period in which only very scattered individual settlements existed was suddenly followed by a phase in which the land was clearly so densely settled that nothing like it had been seen even in the Susiana of the previous period. With the help of information from the *Meteor* research project, an explanation for this development in Babylonia is now possible. The land, which had been unsuitable for settlement owing to the high sea level in the Gulf or the large amount of water in the rivers, had at first supported only a few island sites, but from the moment the waters began to recede it was open to much more extensive habitation.⁵⁴

And again:

The results of studies of the ancient climate and of the changes in the amount of water in the Mesopotamian river system and in the Gulf ... now present us with a clearer picture of the developments in southern Babylonia. The climatic changes documented for the middle

⁵³ Finegan, *The Archaeological History of the Ancient Middle East*, 8.

⁵⁴ Nissen, *The Early History of the Ancient Near East*, 56.

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of the fourth millennium seem, within a space of two to three hundred years, to have stemmed the floods that regularly covered large tracts of land and to have drained such large areas that in a relatively short period of time large parts of Babylonia, particularly throughout the south, became attractive for new permanent settlements.⁵⁵

Both architecture and pottery of the period show similarity to that found at earlier northern sites.⁵⁶ Archaeologists have observed that the most striking characteristic of the Ubaid period is its uniformity. Mellaart comments: "Never before had a single culture been able to influence such a vast area, if only superficially. The pottery distribution, in spite of minor variations, is fairly uniform."⁵⁷

The principal site of the Ubaid period is Eridu. One of the Babylonian creation accounts says: "All lands were sea, then Eridu was made."⁵⁸ It appears to have had a town wall even in its earliest periods.⁵⁹ Levels 18-6 feature temples, though none approach very closely the ziggurat architectural development. The patron deity of Eridu in the Sumerian periods was Enki, the crafty god, known for his

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association with the arts of civilization and for his many sexual encounters.⁶⁰

The mention of baked brick technology directs our primary attention to the periods coming after the Ubaid period, but Genesis 11 may span these periods. In Gen 11:2 a group of people is identified as having traveled to the plain of Shinar to settle. The traveling group is not necessarily "all the earth" from v. 1, but perhaps just the descendants of Shem, since the genealogy of all of the sons of Noah has already been treated in chapter 10.⁶¹ We would expect here a narrowing of focus to Shem's line. In this scenario, a large group of Semites migrated southeast and settled in Sumer. The text would not demand that even all the Semites were there. The span of time that the text covers is not mentioned. It is possible that the migration should be understood as having taken place in the Ubaid period, during which southern Mesopotamia began to be settled. Then the decision to undertake the project may have come toward the end of the fourth millennium, perhaps during the Late Uruk period, or perhaps as late as the Jamdet Nasr period, when we actually have the beginning of baked brick technology. The project would then result in different (Semitic?) languages being created, or perhaps would represent the differentiation of the Semitic languages from Sumerian. Whatever the case may be, it resulted in the people being scattered throughout the fertile crescent. This scenario would not require that all language groups were formed at this time or that all the languages were represented there. But from that beginning, urbanization in

⁵⁵ Ibid. 67.

⁵⁶ *CAH*³ 1:1, 337, 340, 365.

⁵⁷ J. Mellaart, *Earliest Civilizations of the Near East* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) 130.

⁵⁸ A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) 62:10-12.

⁵⁹ *CAH*³ 1:1, 332.

⁶⁰ Cf. S. N. Kramer and John Maier, *Myths of Enki, the Crafty God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁶¹ For the use of implied antecedents of pronouns in biblical Hebrew see Bruce K. Waltke and Michael O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 16.4-5; 16.3.5c. There are no other occurrences of "all the earth" functioning metonymically as a reference to people and serving as subject of a verb, so it is not easy to determine whether a singular or plural verb would be used. Cf. independently, Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 351.

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southern Mesopotamia was initiated, including the development of ziggurat architecture and the full development of the Mesopotamian religious system that it represented.

It is interesting to note that archaeological evidence shows a clear dissemination of Babylonian culture throughout the ancient Near East at the end of the Late Uruk period and into the Jamdet Nasr period. This is particularly evident in the Zagros area and in Syria. Nissen says,

In the Syrian area, we now encounter yet another variant. In a completely independent local development, individual settlements were

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founded that are absolutely identical with what we know from Babylonia and Susiana, down to the last pottery sherd in the inventory... There does not seem to have been any traffic in the opposite direction. If, in addition, we consider that these alien types of settlement were all either directly on the Euphrates or on its tributaries, there seems to be a relatively simple explanation for the whole situation. We are most probably dealing here with settlements of people who came there directly from the southern lowland plains.⁶²

Furthermore, it is evident that this influence did not last for long but quickly was subsumed by the local cultures. The Habuba settlement in Syria, for instance, hardly survived more than fifty years.⁶³

It is difficult to bring archaeological or historical information to bear on the question of whether the city Babylon was actually the site of this occurrence or whether it was the outstanding example of that system. Excavation at Babylon cannot inform us of its history prior to the second millennium, because the shifting water table of the Euphrates has obliterated the strata.⁶⁴ Historical records do not mention Babylon prior to meager references in the Ur III period, and a year date formula of Sarkalisarri during the dynasty of Akkad.⁶⁵ If it was the site of the event recorded in Genesis 11, it seems to have been abandoned for over a millennium before it was again occupied.

A final item to address would be whether there might be any references to the confusion of languages in the early Mesopotamian literature. Some have suggested that such a reference does exist in the Sumerian epic entitled "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta." There, in a speech of Enmerkar, an incantation is pronounced that has a mythical introduction. Kramer's translation is as follows:

Once upon a time there was no snake, there was no scorpion,
There was no hyena, there was no lion,
There was no wild dog, no wolf,
There was no fear, no terror,

⁶² Nissen, *The Early History of the Ancient Near East*, 120; cf. 113-15.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 115, 122.

⁶⁴ H. W. F. Saggs, "Babylon," *Archaeology and Old Testament Study* (ed. D. Winton Thomas; Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 41-42.

⁶⁵ I. J. Gelb, "The Name of Babylon," *Journal of the Institute of Asian Studies* 1 (1955) 25-28.

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Man had no rival.

In those days, the lands of Subur (and) Hamazi,

Harmony-tongued (?) Sumer, the great land of the decrees of princeship,

Un, the land having all that is appropriate (?), The land Martu, resting in security, The whole universe, the people in unison (?)

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To Enlil in one tongue [spoke].

...

(Then) Enki, the lord of abundance (whose) commands are trustworthy,

The lord of wisdom, who understands the land,

The leader of the gods,

Endowed with wisdom, the lord of Eridu

Changed the speech in their mouths, [brought (?)] contention into it,

Into the speech of man that (until then) had been one.⁶⁶

It is of interest that Enki, the god of Eridu, is related to this myth, which may well represent the memory of an actual event from the late fourth millennium BC.

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⁶⁶ S. Kramer, "The 'Babel of Tongues': A Sumerian Version," *IAOS* 88 (1968) 108-11.