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THE TOWER OF BABEL

E. G. H. KRAELING

UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

EVER SINCE it became definitely known that the great and imposing ruins of Birs Nimrud were remnants of the ziqqurrat of Borsippa, the view that they represented the Tower of Babel has been abandoned by most scholars. This view, according to Koldewey, the excavator of ancient Babylon, was tenable only so long as Oppert's fantastic ideas as to the extent of the city found credence. It is now held as almost certain that Marduk's famous Temple Esagila, with its ziqqurrat E-temen-an-ki, is the structure referred to in Gen. 11.¹ It seems to me however that the ancient and traditional identification of the 'tower of Babel' with the site of Birs Nimrud must be revived.

It is plainly the intention of Gen. 11. 1-9 to tell that Yahweh hindered the builders of the tower, so that they could not complete their work. For only to the temple with its tower and not to the residential sections can the statement in v. 8, 'They had to stop building the *city*' apply. Since the temple of an ancient city was its real heart and centre this synecdoche is not surprising. Furthermore a cessation of 'building the city' would not become very easily the part of a story if referring to the residential part, but a great temple tower that had remained a torso or had fallen into decay would stimulate the imagination profoundly. To this Birs Nimrud bears ample testimony, for the travellers of all times have been deeply stirred by the sight of its vast ruins. The story of Gen. 11, then, clearly arose and circulated at a time when the tower referred to had been a torso for a considerable period.

¹ Cf. Koldewey, *Das wiedererstehende Babylon*, 1913, and *Die Tempel von Babylon und Borsippa*, 1911. The long lost tablet describing Esagila in its final grandeur has been rediscovered and published by Scheil in *Memoires de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres*, vol. 39 (1913), p. 293 f. But the famous Bel-Temple described by Herodotus does not seem to have been the one at Babylon, which was no longer standing in the days of the Greek author, but rather the temple of Borsippa. Cf. Delitzsch in *Festschrift für Eduard Sachau*, 1915, p. 97 f.

Now the J source from which Gen. 11. 1-9 is taken seems to have originated at the time of Solomon, 970-932 B. C.² If this dating may be regarded as fairly secure we must suppose that the story of the tower of Babel is an 11th century story and that the tower at this time had the incomplete or dilapidated appearance therein described.

Unfortunately our knowledge of the history of the temples of Babylon and Borsippa is very meagre. We may here well omit the references to them in very early times. Suffice it to say they had their ups and downs, as the so-called Kedorlaomer texts show, which speak of the pillage of Ezida and Esagila by the hostile Elamite.³ During the period of the Cassite rule, lasting over 500 years, Babylonia seems to have enjoyed prosperity and no doubt the temples were well taken care of. King⁴ has recently called attention to a boundary stone of Merodach Baladan I (1201-1181), one of the last rulers of the Cassite dynasty, on which appears the symbol of the god Nabū (the stylus) supported by a horned dragon set off against a four-stage tower, which can be none other than the ziqqurrat of Borsippa, E-ur-imin-an-ki. At this period, then, 'the house of the seven stages of heaven and earth' was only a four story structure, but we may assume that it was in good condition and had been well cared for by the king. The fall of the Cassite Dynasty, 1150 B. C., brought a repetition of the conditions that had existed before Hammurapi—invasion by the Elamites. We learn that the statue of Marduk was even carried off by them from Esagila, but there is no record of how they dealt with the temples. Under Nebuchadrezzar I, however, a few years later, Babylon recovered the Marduk statue and regained its independence. Among the following kings many bear names compounded with Marduk, and were no doubt zealous in providing for this god's shrine. But the unsettled conditions of the period, the disturbance caused by the Aramaean migration and by the rise of the Assyrian power in the north do not argue for an age of prosperity in Babylon, and only in prosperous days

² Procksch, *Die Genesis*, 1912, p. 17.

³ Re-edited by Jeremias in *Festschrift für Hommel*. Cf. also *Das Alte Testament*², 1916, p. 280 f. Esarhaddon began to rebuild Esagila and the operations were continued by Ashurbanipal and Shamash-shum-ukin; cf. Streck, *Ashurbanipal II*, 1916, p. 146, p. 246 f., etc.

⁴ *History of Babylon*, p. 79.

are building operations carried on extensively by kings. But the ziqqurrat of Babylon seems to have been standing, for when Sennacherib (705-681), the conqueror of Babylon, entered the city he devastated the temple, tore down the ziqqurrat, and threw it into the Arahtu canal.⁵

The ziqqurrat of Borsippa however seems also to have experienced a destruction, and perhaps at an earlier time. Of especial importance in this connection is the inscription of Nebuchadrezzar's cylinder.⁶ 'At that time E-ur-imin-an-ki, the ziqqurrat of Barsip which a previous king had made—42 cubits he had elevated it, not had he raised its head, from a distant day it had collapsed, not were in order the outlets of its water, rain and storm had removed its bricks, the bricks of its covering were split open, the bricks of its body were heaped up like a ruin mound—Marduk, my lord, aroused my heart to construct it.' Now it must be emphasized that the activity of the previous king referred to was also one of restoration, since the temple tower was only elevated 42 cubits.⁷ The four-stage tower of the days of Merodach Baladan I was much higher! The necessary conclusion therefore is that this older temple had been destroyed or had fallen into ruin, and that later on a king, who ruled a long time before Nebuchadrezzar, had begun its restoration. The partially restored ziqqurrat had also in the course of time fallen into ruins. This obviously compels us to seek a much earlier date for the destruction of the temple than that of Sennacherib. In fact the attempt at restoration may antedate this king and is perhaps to be accredited to Merodach Baladan II (721-710) who calls himself 'the worshipper of Nebo and Marduk, the gods of Esagila and Ezida, who provided abundantly for their gates and made shining all their temples, renewed all their sanctuaries.'⁸

⁵ Bavian Inscription, III R 14, l. 51.

⁶ Langdon, *Neubabylonische Königsinschriften*, 1912, p. 98 f.; cf. also p. 114.

⁷ Cf. with this the statement in Langdon, p. 60 (Col I. 44 f.) that Nabopolassar raised the ziqqurrat of Babylon 30 cubits. In both cases it does not seem clear whether this means from the *base up*. Thirty cubits is not even the height of the lowest stage of Nebuchadrezzar's Tower. Furthermore Rawlinson claims to have found the three copies of the cylinder above quoted on the corners of the third stage of E-ur-imin-an-ki, indicating that here the work of Nebuchadrezzar began.—He figured about 8 metres to every stage; cf. *JRAS* 18, pp. 1-34, on the excavations.

⁸ Cf. the Black Stone Inscription.

It seems most likely that immediately after the fall of the Cassite dynasty Ezida and E-ur-imin-an-ki, whether by violence or by neglect, fell into ruins. It seems to have a peculiar significance that the Assyrians in the 9th century founded another temple by the name of Ezida at Nineveh and adopted to a very great extent the worship of the god Nabū.⁹ If the shrine at Borsippa had been flourishing in those days such action would not have been very likely. Thus while the continuity of the temple of Babylon seems to be assured to the time of Sennacherib, there is ground for supposing that that of Borsippa fell into ruin right after the Cassite era, in other words at the time of the rise of the Hebrew kingdom in Palestine when the Jahvist lived.

But an additional argument from the mythological point of view speaks most emphatically for the tower of Borsippa. In the 137th Fable of Hyginus we are told that ages ago mankind spoke only one language. But after Mercury had multiplied the languages and divided the nations, strife began to arise among them. Zeus was angered at Mercury's act but could not change it. The tradition presupposed in this fable seems to have no other analogy in Graeco-Roman legend. And if we recall that Mercury is the equivalent of the Oriental Nabū we must immediately ask ourselves whether this is not an eastern myth that was imported with so much other Asiatic lore in the Hellenistic era. The god Nabū is the author of written language—the cryptic signs that seem so wonderful to the uninitiated; the art of writing is once called 'the mother of language and the father of wisdom.'¹⁰ Equally mysterious, however, must have seemed the sound of foreign tongues. Who else could be their originator in a Babylonian speculative system than the god Nabū? True, we have no direct testimonial to this in the inscriptions. But if Gen. 11 originated in Babylonia—and of this there can be no doubt—then Yahweh has assumed in the present version the role of some Babylonian deity, and this deity by every argument of analogy and probability can only have been Nabū. We should expect the story of the dispersion of tongues to be centered at Nabū's shrine in Borsippa, rather than at Marduk's sanctuary in Babylon.

⁹ Cf. Streck, *op. cit.* 2, 272 f. Shamash-shum-ukin, Stele Inscr. S¹ 1. 13 f., says that he renewed the walls of Ezida which had grown old and weak under a former king.

¹⁰ Cf. Jeremias in Roscher's *Lexicon* 3. 56.

The motif of the deity's prevention of the completion of the tower can however be no integral part of the official cult story of Ezida. This element was added at a time when Ezida and its ziqurrat were greatly neglected. One might be inclined to assign this motif entirely to the imagination of that early Hebrew story-teller who saw in the scene of ruin Yahweh's verdict upon the self-aggrandizement of the people of Babylonia. Yet it also seems possible that the idea of the jealous deity, that is afraid of men's prowess and intervenes in order to defeat their attempt to overthrow him by destroying the ladder on which they seek to climb into heaven, shimmers through the story. The descent of the deity for punitive purposes (v. 7) finds an analogy also in a passage of the so-called Kedorlaomer texts: 'If the king does not speak righteousness, inclines toward wickedness, then his shêdu will descend from Esharra, the temple of all the gods.'¹¹ It may well be therefore that this element goes back to a pre-Hebraic stage. Gunkel's view that the story was heard from Aramaean Beduin on the Babylonian border¹² may not be very far from the truth. The point of view certainly cannot be that of the native Babylonian citizen. Perhaps an ancient Hebrew forerunner of Herodotus who visited Babylonia as tradesman and came into contact with the roving Chaldaean Aramaeans brought back the story to Palestine as he heard it from the lips of these nomads somewhere near the great ruins of Birs Nimrud.

A third stage, however, in the development of the story is assuredly Palestinian—that is its attraction away from Borsippa to Babel. Naturally a traveller would relate it in connection with his visit to the metropolis since the name of Borsippa was too obscure and unimportant for his hearers. And since 'Babel' lent itself so excellently to a pun with *bālal* 'to confuse', the original reference to Nabū's temple was lost. Gunkel has seen that the emphasis on the root *pūç*, 'to scatter,' thrice repeated, prepared the way for another etymology which has been obliterated—that of the temple or ziqurrat.¹³ His own suggestion of an appellation like '*piçū*' (the 'white' tower) is of no value, for

¹¹ Cf. Jeremias, *Das Alte Testament*, p. 180.

¹² Gunkel, *Die Genesis*, *ad loc.*

¹³ Gunkel divides the story into two sources—a city version and a tower version; so also Procksch, who however maintains that the story is a unity in its present form because of the excellent metre.

the towers were many-colored. In seeking the original name we must remember that the key form for the etymology is always the last one used—here *hefiçâm* (v. 9). There is no other Babylonian temple name so nearly like this as E-zi-da, especially if we recall that Sumerian E (house) appears as *hē* in Hebrew (cp. *hēkal* = *ēkallu*). The form *Hēzida* is the most likely representation of the name in Hebrew. An identity of all consonants is not necessary; cp. 'Ēsāw = sē'ār, Gen. 25. 25, etc., where a mere vocalic correspondence was found sufficient.¹⁴ In view of all the other material we have presented it seems certain that this name once stood in the text. That the pun is made with the name of the temple Ezida, rather than with the tower E-ur-imin-an-ki, presents no difficulty since even in the Babylonian texts the latter is only rarely mentioned. The shorter and more familiar name of the greater complex of the temple was more likely to be perpetuated.

Originally a cult story of Ezida, then a popular Aramaean legend, then a Babylonian reminiscence of a Hebrew traveller, and eventually a vehicle of deep religious and philosophical thought—such is the evolution of Gen. 11. 1-9. Surely a fascinating bit of history down whose vistas we here can glance.

¹⁴ A much worse pun on the name of Ezida with Uza occurs in a Babylonian text, cf. King's *The Seven Tablets of Creation*, 1. 209 ff. Rev. 7, and Jeremias, *Altorientalische Geisteskultur*, 1913, p. 30 note. It seems likely however that the Hebrews heard a corrupt form of the name, else a pun with *zīd* 'arrogance' would have been more attractive.