

THE TOWER OF BABEL

A Biblical Solution to the Sumerian Problem

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One of the primary areas of the Near East where civilization began is the Tigris-Euphrates river valley, comprising portions of modern Syria and all of Iraq. This region, the fertile valley between the two rivers, has been known since the times of the ancient Greeks as Mesopotamia, which translates as "the land between the rivers." This area of course was the home of many peoples familiar to us from general ancient history and the Old Testament, such as the Assyrians and Babylonians. Before these peoples a group known as the Sumerians, the creators of classic Mesopotamian culture, inhabited the southern part of the valley. Ancient historians consider the Sumerian civilization to be the oldest on the face of the earth.

How and when did Sumerian civilization start in this region? In order to at least partially answer this question, we will need to examine both written and archaeological source material; the earliest of that archaeological material comes from cultures in Mesopotamia that did not as yet know the art of writing. The word culture will be used in this article for stages in human development, which were prior to and some of which transitioned into the full-fledged Sumerian civilization.

In looking at archaeological material from these early cultures, we must make several preliminary observations. First, we should remember that people sharing the same basic culture tend to produce similar and in some cases identical material objects. This trend is particularly apparent with pottery, which was used to store food and drink in ancient times. This trend is very helpful to the archaeologist; if he or she is digging in a ruined city and finds a certain style and color of pottery, then this pottery can be compared to pottery found elsewhere. Connections can thus be established between the two sites sharing pottery styles. Such similarities can show how a particular culture spread over a geographical area.

This leads to a second introductory observation. When archaeologists discover a particular culture, it is often given a name by modern scholars, since without written material we have no idea what the people of that culture called themselves. This name is normally the modern Arabic place name of the site where the culture was discovered. It should never be thought that the "Type-site" (the site which gives the culture its name) was necessarily the most important city of the culture, or the place where the culture began. It is simply the first place where modern humans have found an example of that particular culture.

And, finally let us make a third introductory observation about dates. The best way to establish dates is

to have written documents, and even then establishing chronology can be a complex and difficult business. For many periods of history we have such rich written materials that dates are not a problem. We know beyond doubt, for example, that Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in 1933, that Lincoln was killed in 1865, and that the Emperor Augustus died in 14 A.D. But, when we deal with ancient Near Eastern history, especially before the invention of writing, precise dates can be more problematical. This is most true of the periods we call Pre-history, which by definition is the time before writing was invented. For these Pre-historic periods, we must use other methods to calculate dates. There are a number of scientific tests that are regularly used to establish dates for pre-historic cultures. This is not the place to enter into a long discussion of the reliability of these tests; suffice it to say they are not perfect by any means. There are many variables and presuppositions; results are not at all foolproof. The dates for the cultures we will be discussing are only commonly accepted estimates, but they are the best estimates that can be made at the present time.

The earliest major culture in Mesopotamia is called the Hassuna Culture, which is named after the place where it was first discovered, the village of Hassuna.¹ The Hassuna culture dates to the period 5500-5000 B.C., and has been found at a number of places in the northern parts of Mesopotamia. Archaeological evidence suggests that it was confined to the north.

The Hassuna people were agricultural, and were makers of hand-molded pottery, since they did not know the potter's wheel. Their tools were bone and stone; there has not been any trace of metal work found at Hassuna sites. Reed and clay houses have been found, but only at the type site of tell Hassuna itself. The most common tools of the Hassuna culture were wooden sickles with flint teeth for harvesting grain.

Although there is no certain proof that the specialization of labor had yet developed during the Hassuna period; there was some long-range trade. Seashells and foreign obsidian have been found inland at Hassuna sites in northern Iraq and Syria. One interesting feature of this culture was the practice of burial of infants in large pottery urns.

Around 5000 B.C., the Hassuna Culture was replaced by another northern culture, the Halaf. The Halaf Culture lasted until about 4100 B.C. Once again, there was no appreciable spread of this culture from the north into southern Mesopotamia.

Halaf pottery is very beautiful; some scholars consider it the best ever made in the early Near East. It is

black, brown, or orange, and is decorated with depictions of the heads of bulls and double axes. But the most striking thing about Halaf pottery is that the shapes of some vessels are definitely copied from typical shapes of metallic vessels, showing us that the Halaf people knew and used metal for the making of certain vessels. There have also been metal objects such as copper beads found at Halaf sites, proving that these people were among the first, if not the first, users of metal in the world.

Halaf pots have another important new feature. They are often stamped with a picture, probably of a god or goddess of their religion. This picture is different on every pot, and evidently served as a mark of personal ownership or identification. The pictures were made with what is called a stamp seal, an object similar to the rubber stamps we use for similar purposes today.

Halaf towns were much advanced over any other habitation sites in their world. Streets were paved, and two-roomed "Tholos" houses were constructed. The first room of a Tholos house was long and rectangular, and led from outside to the beehive-shaped Tholos room, the main room of the dwelling. Religion was important to the Halafians, since many mother goddess figurines have been found at Halaf sites.

One final interesting thing about the Halaf Culture is that at almost every site where this culture has been found, it ended abruptly. The cause of this is not known. Invasion by a people of inferior culture or some natural disaster are the best explanations, but nothing can be said with certainty. The biblical flood can be ruled out; there are a few Halaf sites where there is no clear break, and the culture developed gradually into a new form. The biblical flood probably took place earlier than any of the cultures we are now discussing.

Before looking at the cultures which developed in southern Mesopotamia, it should be noted here that the earliest evidences of human habitation in the Mesopotamian area are found in the north, near "the mountains of Ararat" [Urartu in ancient texts] where Genesis says Noah's Ark landed. The ancient nation of Ararat/Urartu was located just to the north of northern Mesopotamia where the Hassuna and Halaf cultures first developed.

The next major culture in Mesopotamian pre-history appeared in the southern part of the Tigris and Euphrates river valley, close to the Persian Gulf. This was the Ubaid Culture, named from its type-site, Tell Ubaid. The southern part of Mesopotamia was called Sumer, which is identical to the land of Shinar in the Old Testament. Actually the name Shinar is just a linguistic variation of the name Sumer. This region was not settled at all before 6000 B.C., and its southernmost cities such as Eridu, Ur, and Oueili were not founded until 5600 B.C. at the earliest. The cities of northern Sumer, including Babylon, were founded later still, some time after 5000 B.C.2. In any case, the Ubaid Culture began in Sumer but

spread north to sites such as Tepe Gawra, where it gradually replaced the older Halaf Culture. The Ubaid Culture is noted for its increased use of metal and for the invention of the wheel. The wheel was not used in transport yet, so far as we know, but it was used in making pottery.

The Ubaid Culture lasted from ca. 4100-3750 B.C. Out of it developed another innovative southern culture, the Uruk, which lasted until about 3200 B.C. In this period a significant architectural change took place, baked brick was first used for monumental buildings. Sun-dried brick had been known and used in parts of the Near East as early as 8500 B.C.3. But in the Uruk period it was discovered that brick, if heated in a kiln, became much harder and could be used to build monumental structures such as temples. This revolutionized architecture.

The Uruk Culture thus produced the first great temples in Mesopotamia. It also produced another key invention, the boat. There were almost certainly other earlier methods used for crossing the Tigris and Euphrated rivers, the raft being the most obvious. But the invention of the boat was without doubt an important innovation.

Pre-history in Mesopotamia ended with the next cultural period, the so-called Proto-Literate period, lasting only about 3200-3100 B.C. This remarkable period saw a number of very significant changes that made the difference between pre-history and history. This major development, of course, was the invention of writing. The ancient Sumerians, not the Egyptians as some assume, were the first people on the face of the earth to invent writing. How this was accomplished is a complicated and interesting story; suffice it to say here that this invention enabled humans to leave records and literary works of many types, thus greatly increasing our knowledge of ancient civilization. Another invention of the Proto-Literate period was something called the cylinder seal. This small stone cylinder, with a hole bored through it so it could be worn with a string around the neck, was carved with a highly individualized scene. When rolled on wet clay, it produced a picture, which again identified the object's owner.

Finally, irrigation seems to have been introduced during the Proto-Literate period. The importance of this is twofold. First, the efficiency of agriculture was obviously improved, allowing for population growth and the specialization of labor. Second, in order for irrigation to be done well, there is a need for some advanced degree of political organization and unification. This is not to say that Mesopotamia suddenly became politically unified; but pressure in that direction began. At first, city-states came into existence as political units. Only later did kingdoms and great empires arise, when one city-state began to conquer neighboring city-states in the same area.

How does all this relate to the basic history of the region, and to the Bible? And can we link what we see archaeologically in Mesopotamia to the account of early mankind in the book of Genesis?

When we first see written documents in the Proto-Literate period, they are written in the cuneiform script on clay tablets, and in the Sumerian language. The people who wrote them called themselves Sumerians, and these people spoke a language unrelated, so far as we know, to any other language; and, again as far as we know, the Sumerians were the creators of the first true civilization in Mesopotamia.

But there is something of interest and vital importance in the Sumerian documents. While they are in the Sumerian language, the names of rivers, indigenous plants and animals, and some cities are not Sumerian words. They are words in some unknown language, unrelated to any other language. This tells us that the Sumerians borrowed these words, much like we would find in some parts of our own country. We find in most parts of our nation American Indian place names and words, borrowed by early European settlers when they first came to North America and encountered the native peoples.

In the case of Mesopotamia, these non-Sumerian words suggest that the Sumerians were not the first inhabitants of the southern area of the Tigris-Euphrates river valley. Whenever language scholars find such a borrowing of words, it is generally assumed that an invading people speaking one language conquered another people speaking a different language. Language scholars, who are also called philologists, assume that when the invaders entered they met another older people, a people who had already named plants, animals, rivers, cities, etc. In the case of the Sumerians, philologists assume that the invading Sumerians merely kept the existing place names and agricultural words of the people that they invaded in southern Mesopotamia. But as will be seen, there is major problem with this invasion theory as related to the Sumerians.

This proven language change in southern Mesopotamia raises what scholars call the Sumerian Problem.⁴ Simply put, the Sumerian Problem comprises questions such as: Who were the Sumerians? Where did they come from? What role did they play in the creation of Mesopotamian civilization? And for our purposes, perhaps the most important question, when did they enter Mesopotamia?

Scholars working on the Sumerian Problem are split into two major groups. First, there are the archaeologists. These researchers, led by Henri Frankfort in the 1930's and J. Oates more recently, have made a detailed study of the material and skeletal remains from early southern Mesopotamia. In summary, their conclusion is that the earliest settlers in southern Mesopotamia, the

Ubaid people, exhibit skeletal characteristics and a material cultural which is in continuity with the later inhabitants of the valley. In other words, the Ubaid people, the Uruk people, the Proto-Literate people (also called the Jemdat Nasr Culture), and the Sumerians were all the same people. Consequently, archaeologists deny that the Sumerians entered the area as invaders.

Archaeology provides no proof for an invasion or of a massive infiltration by the Sumerians into southern Mesopotamia. There is no evidence of any change in the material culture in southern Mesopotamia that cannot be explained by normal development. To the archaeologist, the earliest major inhabitants of southern Mesopotamia were the direct ancestors of the Sumerians. Again using the example of the invasion of Native Americans by Europeans, this is like saying that all the artifacts found in North America show that Native American culture simply evolved into European culture, but at the same time saying that there clearly is evidence of an invasion because many of the geographical names are unquestionably in another language(s) other than European languages. Fortunately, as everyone knows, in North America the archaeological evidence matches the linguistic evidence. This is not true in southern Mesopotamia, and this is the essence of the Sumerian Problem.

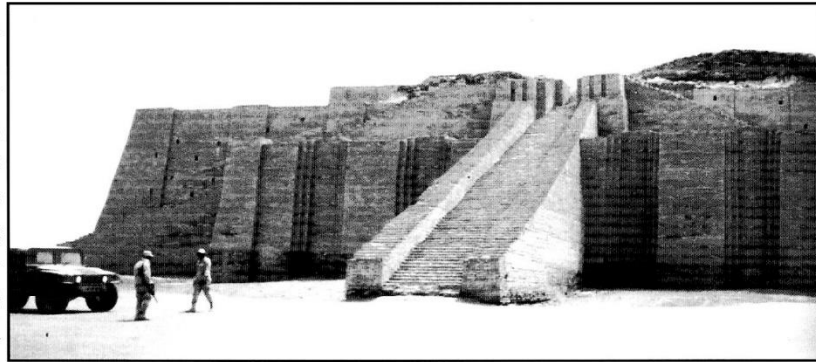
The second group of scholars are the philologists who, as was seen above, argue from a linguistic change that the Sumerians must have come as invaders into southern Mesopotamia. Most of these professional philologists, students of the Sumerian language, have never excavated. On the other hand, many archaeologists cannot read Sumerian cuneiform. It must be remembered that these fields are highly specialized.

The philologists in the early days were led by E.A. Speiser and B. Landsberger, who insisted that many of the words in Sumerian documents are not Sumerian words at all. Landsberger pointed out that this is especially true of words pertaining to agriculture, showing that the basic farming vocabulary and thus farming techniques used in southern Mesopotamia were the invention of what he believes to have been an earlier non-Sumerian people.

To the philologists, then, there must have been an invasion or at least a massive infiltration by Sumerians into the southern Mesopotamia, an event or series of events, which these scholars date to the start of the Uruk period. Philologists draw this conclusion because there is clear evidence in Sumerian texts that there was an older language in use for farming, etc. in Mesopotamia before the Sumerian language was used.

To summarize: professional archaeologists say that the earliest people in southern Mesopotamia were the Sumerians and that there is no archaeological evidence that there was anyone else. Thus, for them the Ubaid people were Sumerians. On the other hand, experts on the Sumerian language say that the Ubaid people must have

been of another ethnic and/or linguistic group, whose language is mainly lost today. In other words for the philologists, the Uruk people must have been Sumerian-speaking invaders, and these scholars also say that it is the language of the Ubiad people appears as agricultural terms and place names in the Sumerian language. Thus, they argue that the Sumerians were invaders, and that their history starts not with the Ubaid period but with the Uruk period.



were solid on the inside with a flight of stairs up one face. At the top of this massive structure was placed a temple to the city's chief deity. The Tower of Babel spoken of in Genesis was certainly a Ziggurat, since it was built with baked brick and

This so-called Sumerian Problem has become one of the most debated issues of ancient history, and has seemingly reached an impasse. Some scholars have even gone so far as to say that the problem cannot be resolved without new information. However, while the secular scholarly community ignores it, the Bible does provide an answer to the Sumerian Problem.

It should be noted at this points that it is only after the Tower of Babel that we find a large number of Semitic and Hamitic names having connections with place names in Mesopotamia. The Babylonians of the Bible were a people who later invaded the Sumerians and who borrowed much from Sumerian civilization and religion, but eventually they replaced the Sumerian language with their own Semitic language. This process was taking place in the days of Abraham. The Tower of Babel was obviously built in the Babylon region, and this is demonstrated by its name and the fact that the Bible tells us it was constructed in the Plains of Shinar (Sumer). But it should not be assumed that it was the later Semitic Babylonians who built it.

Before we attempt to fit the biblical narrative into the context of the Sumerian Problem, it is essential first to examine the origins of urban life and architecture in southern Mesopotamia. Paul H. Seely has pointed out that until the Uruk period (ca. 3500 B.C.) there were no real cities as such in the southern Mesopotamia, and that there was no monumental architecture either.⁵ But, with the advent of baked bricks, the ability to make large (and high) buildings arose. With the rise of cities and massive temples, a new form of building was born, one which would symbolize Mesopotamia throughout its history; this is the Ziggurat.

The ziggurat, as Seely points out, was the most important and visible structure in any Mesopotamian city. It was a pyramid-shaped temple, although it was not a tomb, and it was without interior rooms as was true of pyramids in Egypt. Incidentally, Ziggurats came into existence centuries before Egyptian pyramids. Ziggurats

bitumen/tar (Gen. 11:3). The famous archaeologist Henry Rawlinson found that Ziggurats were indeed made of baked brick and bitumen, just as Genesis ch. 11 states about the Tower of Babel.

Baked brick and bitumen/ tar were materials, which were reserved for religious and ceremonial buildings, and were not used to build simple military towers around cities.⁶ Also, the terminology used for the Tower of Babel in Genesis is typical Ziggurat terminology, of which Seely gives several examples. In the Mesopotamian text named the *Enuma Elish*, the building of the great Ziggurat at Babylon is described just as the building of the Tower of Babel is described in the Bible. In the *Enuma Elish*, the builders are said to have used baked brick in building their Ziggurat. It is also known from archaeology that it was common to use bitumen in the building of Ziggurats. In other texts from other periods, Ziggurats are described as being high and lofty. They also clearly represented the reputation and prestige of the city and its god. So the Tower of Babel was without a doubt an early ziggurat; and ziggurats first appeared in the Uruk period, ca. 3500-3100 B.C.

What does this have to do with the Sumerian Problem, especially regarding the date of entrance of the Sumerians into southern Mesopotamia? The archaeologists tell us that no new people came into southern Mesopotamia after the start of the Ubaid culture; the philologists or linguists tell us that the Uruk people must have been a new people, and that these new people must have been the invading Sumerians. But notice what the Bible tells us that the people of Shinar built a great tower, so God confounded their speech. And that tower, certainly a Ziggurat, can best be dated according to our current archaeological information to the Uruk Culture.

Perhaps what happened is this. The people of Mesopotamia spoke a now unknown language, a few words of which are preserved in place names, river names, and the words for some plants and animals; the Tower of Babel was built, as a monument to human pride and independence from God; God confounded speech, and several new language families (including Sumerian) were created; the Sumerian speakers stayed in Shinar, but the other groups moved on; only the few words now found in Sumerian survive from the first language.

If this solution is accepted, both the archaeologists and the linguists are both partially correct. While many people seem to have left the area after God changed their languages at the Tower of Babel, no invasion took place, so the archaeologists are right. In other words, God changed their languages, but the Bible does not say that He changed their material culture, pottery, etc. On the other hand, a new language, Sumerian, did come into existence in southern Mesopotamia, so the philologists are also correct.

The story of the Tower of Babel in the Bible has support from an ancient Mesopotamian myth. The ancient Mesopotamians themselves had a religious myth, which dealt with a time when all peoples only spoke one language. This original language was changed by the "father of the gods" in some sort of a judgment. In other words, the ancient Mesopotamians themselves had a version of the changing of the languages as seen in the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis ch. 11. Although this non-biblical story almost certainly came from Sumerian sources, the version that we have of the Tower of Babel is found in an Akkadian cuneiform text. George Smith, who was the curator of the Department of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum, reported in 1876 that he discovered a damaged clay tablet in the Museum's collection with the following partially-broken inscription:

1.them? the father
2.of him, his heart was evil
3.against the father of all the gods was wicked,
4.of him his heart was evil,
5.Babylon brought to subjection,
6. [small] and great he confounded their speech.
7.Babylon brought to subjection,
8. [small] and great he confounded their speech.
9. their strong place (tower) all the day they founded;
10. to their strong place in the night
11. entirely he made an end.
12. In his anger also word thus he poured out;
13. [to] scatter abroad he set his face
14. he gave this? command, their counsel was confused
15.the course he broke
16.fixed the sanctuary⁷

There is no explanation given in this text as to why "the father of the gods" was upset with mankind. However, Smith writes of this ancient inscription:

It is evident from the wording of the fragment that it was preceded by at least one tablet, describing the sin of the people in building the tower.

We don't know what that sin was, but we know from this tablet that the "father of the gods" was unhappy with mankind in some sort of a sin and as a result changed their one original language into many, and thereby forced mankind to speak many languages. Except for its polytheistic slant, this story is similar to the story of the Tower of Babel found in Genesis ch. 11. So there is ancient textual support for the story of the Tower of Babel in the Bible.

The Bible, and this ancient Sumerian myth, provides a good explanation for the Sumerian Problem. The Sumerian Problem was a divine language change, which took place in the area of southern Mesopotamia. The Bible states that God changed the one original language at the Tower of Babel into many languages, but the Bible does not say that He changed their pottery or material culture. When compared with the Sumerian Problem, both the archaeologists and the philologists are both right and at the same time wrong. There was a linguistic change, but there was no invasion by the Sumerians.

In conclusion, what is important to note here is that when we theorize and do research on historical events, we need to take the biblical account seriously, rather than ignoring it or attempting to dismiss it away. In many cases, such as the Sumerian Problem, the Bible can provide solutions to otherwise vexing problems in the cults of historical interpretation.

Notes

1. On these cultures see the first volumes of the *Cambridge History of the Ancient Near East*, A.L. Perkins, *The comparative Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*, G. Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, J. Mellaart, *The Early Civilizations of the Near East*, and H. Nissen, *The Early History of the Ancient Near East, 9000-2000 B.C.*
2. Paul H. Seely, "The Date of the Tower of Babel and Its Cultural Implications", *Westminster Theological Journal* 6 (1964), pp. 1-16 ff.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 17, and also John Walton, "The Mesopotamian Origin of the Tower of Babel", *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 1 (1965), pp. 1-10.
4. See Tom B. Jones, *The Sumerian Problem*. New York: Oxford University Press and Sons, 1969.
5. Seely, pp. 16 ff.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
7. George Smith, *The Chaldean Account of Genesis*, London: George Philip, Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1976, p. 160.
8. *Ibid.*

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