

DO RUINS OF THE TOWER OF BABEL EXIST?

A common claim about the Tower of Babel is that, "We don't know where the Tower of Babel was. There are ruins of ziggurats all over Iraq. And there was at least one town besides Babylon named Babel." However, authorities who actually study the whereabouts of the Tower -- as opposed to those who for philosophical reasons denounce its existence -- reach the conclusions that (1) there was such a Tower in what is modern Iraq near Baghdad, and (2) the ruins of this Tower still exist.

I. Did the Tower of Babel Exist?

The biblical assertion that the Tower of Babel actually existed is, for the Bible-believing Christian, adequate confirmation that there was such a tower. Ancient Babel, or Babylon, was some 65 miles south of modern Baghdad, Iraq, on the plain called Shinar (Genesis 11:2), equivalent to "Sumer."¹ The Bible presents Nimrod as beginning his kingdom at Babel (Genesis 10:10), which is equivalent to Babylon, the name later applied to the metropolis surrounding the Tower, and even later to the region surrounding the city. The centerpiece of Babel was the Tower, as described in Genesis chapter 11.

Of course, the Biblical record does not indicate whether ruins of the Tower still exist, but if they did, they would be located in what is now Iraq near modern Baghdad. **Thus the actual question for the Bible-believing Christian is not whether the Tower once existed, but whether its ruins exist to this day.**

II. What Happened to the Tower of Babel?

In Genesis 9:1-3, God had commanded for post-flood man to replenish the earth. Obedience to this command required dispersion, so the fact that all mankind was at Babel in the beginning of Genesis 11 makes it clear that there was rebellion against God. Genesis 11:4 explicitly states that the desire was not to disperse, "lest we be scattered." Furthermore, Nimrod is described as the instigator of the project at Babel (Genesis 10:10). **In other words, Nimrod was leading a rebellion against God.**

It is sometimes claimed that Jewish tradition is the source of the idea that there was a rebellion at Babel, but one does not need to go to Josephus or any other source of Jewish tradition to see this. It is obvious from the Bible. On the other hand, the Jewish tradition of rebellion at Babel is merely a reflection of what really happened. This is the same conclusion stated by Henry Morris, who points out that "Nimrod" means "Let us rebel!"² Ken Ham et al. say, "God divided the people at the time of the Tower of Babel because of their rebellion."³ As stated above, this is a obvious conclusion; no recourse to extra-biblical traditions is needed to confirm it. Indeed, Morris and Ham et al. make no reference to traditions. Their only reference is to the relevant Bible verses.

If there were no rebellion at Babel, why was there a need for judgment there? **Linguistic confusion and the hardship it imposed can only be seen as judgment, but God**

does not judge people for obeying Him. A capricious god who judged people for *not* rebelling would certainly not be the God of the Bible. Such a god would belong in, say, the Greek pantheon.

The events which happened at Babel exercised such a strong hold on the minds of mankind that copies of the Tower of Babel were built in all the surrounding region, so that virtually every city in the area now embraced by modern Iraq and Iran had its ziggurat as a copy of the Tower of Babel which was the prototype.⁴ **With many copies of the Tower of Babel in existence,⁵ it would be expected that in later centuries some of them might be confused with the Tower of Babel itself.** In the immediate vicinity of Babylon there were at least two major towers, but only one of these was the Biblical "Tower of Babel."⁶

It is not true to say that we don't know where the ruins of the Tower of Babel might be. **The ruins were unearthed in the 1800s.** Scientist and theologian Henry Morris alludes to the archeological recovery of the complex of Nimrodian cities surrounding the biblical Babel with the Tower as its focus.⁷ Archeologist C.W. Ceram discusses Koldewey's excavation of the Tower in the late 1800s, along with the dimensions and the appearance of the Tower when it was in active use.⁸ **Saddam Hussein was confident enough of the location of the ruins of the biblical Babylon near Baghdad that he spent millions of dollars reconstructing it.⁹** Saddam may have had delusions of grandeur -- he reportedly had plans of restoring the Tower of Babel -- but there were no claims that he was spending his money in the wrong place. As much as Saddam was despised in the West, it is fairly certain that if he had been foolish enough to put his modern reconstruction in the wrong place, the mistake would have been publicized.

Asserting that the whereabouts of the biblical Babel are unknown more a ploy of theological liberals to minimize the historicity of the Genesis account of Babel than a reflection of reality. As mentioned, the location of the biblical Babel has been known for a century. Since theological liberals (along with most proponents of Judaism, not to mention evolutionism) tend to deny the historicity of Genesis 1-11, it is natural for them to deny that we can locate any physical evidence of the history in those chapters.

For instance, John C.L. Gibson's commentary on Genesis does not consider the literal existence of the Tower.¹⁰ The Genesis account itself is assumed to be so late that it coincides with ziggurats of much more recent date than conservative biblical scholarship would warrant. The historicity of Genesis 1-11 is constantly negated: "Genesis is essentially a folk literature"¹¹; Genesis 1-11 are "imaginative stories"¹²; the Hebrew story of Babel "would be most unlikely to have had any reference to the origin of language"¹³; "it is apparent [that the author of Genesis 11] is not really interested in the origin of languages."¹⁴ With sentiments such as these, is it any wonder that the possibility of biblical Babel ruins is often ignored or denied by such skeptics?

After God confused the languages at Babel, the people "left off to build the city" (Genesis 11:8). In other words, the Tower was abandoned. Eventually it fell into ruin. But Saddam was

not the first person to consider rebuilding the tower.

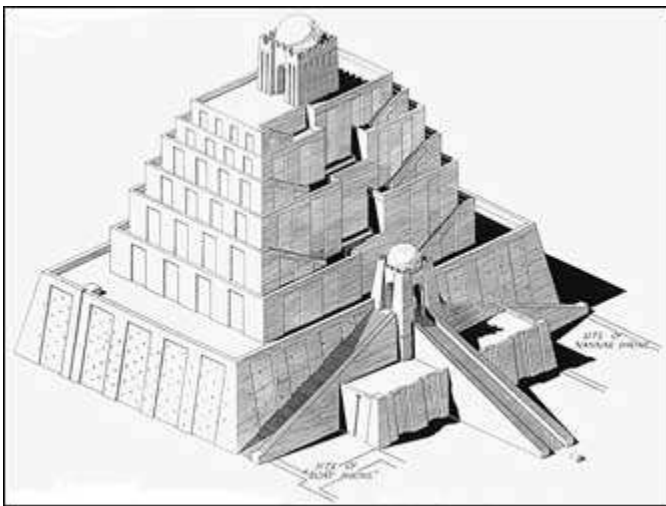
Hammurabi apparently tore down most of the original structure, then Nabopolassar in about 600 BC began to rebuild the Tower in dedication to the god Marduk.

Marduk, or Mero-dach, was to the Babylonians the "chief god," a commemoration of Nimrod himself¹⁵.

Nebuchadnezzar, Nabopolassar's son, fully restored the Tower and built a palace complex around it.¹⁶

The reason the Tower was restored was that it was in ruins, or "destroyed." God had accomplished the destruction of the Tower over time as surely as if He had destroyed it instantly.

Nebuchadnezzar's restoration in turn was eventually taken down by Xerxes. Alexander the Great later cleared away much of the rubble, possibly because he intended to reconstruct the Tower himself. Alexander died before he could carry out his plans, but the ruins as they remained then were unearthed by Koldewey a century ago.



*Reconstruction of the Ziggurat of Nabonidus:
Similar in Appearance of the Tower of Babel*

What did the Tower of Babel look like? There are no accounts of the appearance of the original Tower that Nimrod built. However, if Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar restored the Tower according to its original specifications, we can draw on accounts of those who saw that restoration. It is possible that these two Babylonian kings had access to documented information now lost to us. At least three ancient historians described the Babylonian restoration in records that have come down to us. Of these three historians -- the Babylonian Berossus, Herodotus the Greek, and Ctesias the Persian physician -- the most trustworthy is Herodotus who saw the Tower in about 450 BC.

For many centuries Herodotus was viewed as an untrustworthy source, due mainly to the criticisms of one of Herodotus' successors, the historian Thucydides. **The archeological discoveries of the 1800s showed that Herodotus was substantially correct in his descriptions of the ancient world.** Thus Herodotus within the last century has experienced a "rehabilitation."¹⁷ Herodotus' description of the Tower of Babel as restored by the Babylonian kings claimed that the Tower had eight terraces, plus a temple mounted at the apex.¹⁸ **Archeological excavations revealed seven terraces**

but otherwise the same general structure which Herodotus had described.¹⁹

Although the Tower restoration of 600 BC may have been similar or identical in appearance to the original Tower, in one respect it was very different. **Genesis 11:5 states plainly that the original Tower was constructed of bricks which had been hardened by fire.** A structure so constructed would have been quite durable and quite possibly would have been in good repair when Hammurabi tore it down centuries later.

Virtually all later ziggurats were made of mud brick covered with an exterior facing of fired ("baked") brick. This was the type of construction used in the Babylonian restoration and for other ziggurats discussed below.²⁰ A facing and internal supports of stone or fired brick supported what was actually a huge earthen mound. Such a structure would experience a rapid internal collapse were rainwater not drained efficiently away from the structure. These earthen ziggurats had to be maintained regularly to clear debris from gutters and drains. Furthermore, fired bricks were often taken from abandoned ziggurats for use in other local building projects. The ruins of ziggurats are therefore mounds of earth with fired brick or stone archways and foundations below the earthen rubble.²¹

III. Other Ruins Are Mistaken for the Tower of Babel.

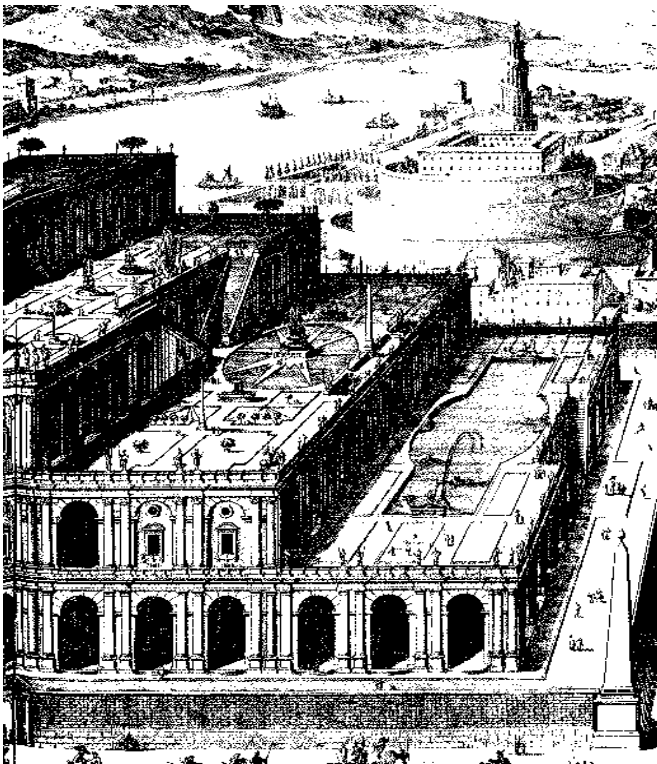
The ruins of some ziggurats are better preserved than those of the Tower of Babel, and because they are notable have become confused with the Tower of Babel itself. A prominent example of a well-preserved ziggurat is the ziggurat of Tchoga-Zanbil built in about 1250 BC in what is now southwestern Iran. It remains the most imposing example of a ziggurat "with the same kind of structure as the Tower of Babel."²² Built by the Elamites near their capital city Susa (the biblical Shushan) about 250 miles from Babylon, it was originally 165 feet high, and had a base 345 feet long on each side. The Tower of Babel was smaller than this, with a base 288 feet on a side, but it was also taller, with a height of about 300 feet.²³

A couple of proposed sites have ancient names harking back to the biblical origin of the Tower of Babel. One of these sites is the mound called Birs-nimrud ("the mound of Nimrod") located at Borsippa (or Barsiffa) about 7 miles south of Babylon, and the other is at a site called "Babil" in the north of ancient Babylon.

Birs-nimrud does not qualify as the Tower of Babel ruins because it is not in Babylon. However, Birs-nimrud is the most imposing remnant of a ziggurat in Iraq, apparently causing a frequent association to be made between it and the Tower of Babel. During the centuries in which the site of the Tower of Babel had been forgotten until Koldewey's excavations, Birs-Nimrud was commonly considered the most likely candidate for the Tower of Babel. The name Birs-nimrud originates either from this traditional association, or perhaps from the ancient memory that Nimrod was ultimately the instigator of all such temple building.

Modern archeology came to life in the early 1800s, and Birs-nimrud was one of the sites first studied then in the search for the Tower of Babel.²⁴ Henry Morris in one of his early books described Birs-nimrud as possibly the Tower of Babel, evidently drawing on the traditional association between the two.²⁵ The ruins at Borsippa continue to be associated with the Tower of Babel.²⁶

The ruins at Babil, though within the boundaries of ancient Babylon, are located in what would have been only a suburb of the ancient city, and not at the center, yet all accounts of the Tower of Babel place it at the center of the city. **These ruins are associated with the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and not the Tower of Babel.**²⁷ The name "Babil" was apparently applied to the site after the ruins had formed a mound which was then erroneously associated with the Tower itself. **The site of the Hanging Gardens, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, was forgotten until the archeological excavations of the late 1800s.**



The Hanging Gardens of Babylon Were Cultivated on the Terraces of the Ziggurat at Babil Near the Tower of Babel

IV. Conclusions

Ruins of the Tower of Babel exist to this day at the site of ancient Babylon in Iraq near modern Baghdad. Various other ziggurat remains have sometimes been confused with those of the Tower of Babel.

Because of the number of times the Tower was destroyed and rebuilt during antiquity, it is probably impossible to say how much of the ruins date from Nimrod's time.

The chronology below shows the persistence of the memory of the Tower of Babel and the failed world unification it signified. **The goal of world unification symbolized by the**

Tower has never really died and in fact persists to this day. For example, the European Union Parliament building at Brussels, Belgium, was designed in the form of an unfinished Tower of Babel, and a stylized Tower of Babel has been used to advertise the European Union's goal of human unification²⁸

Selected Chronology of the Tower of Babel

Date	Event
2350 BC	Built by Nimrod
2350 BC	Linguistic confusion; construction stopped
1800 BC	Hammurabi clears away Tower ruins
600 BC	Nabopolassar begins restoration
600 BC	Nebuchadnezzar completes restoration
475 BC	Xerxes destroys superstructure
330 BC	Alexander plans another restoration
500 AD	Babylon permanently abandoned
1990 AD	Babel motif used by European Union
2000 AD	Saddam makes scale model of Babylon



*Reconstructing a One-World State:
European Union Poster*

Notes

- 1 H.W.F. Saggs, "Babel, Tower of," *The Collegiate Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2, Grolier, 1971, p. 292.
- 2 Henry Morris, *The Genesis Record*, ICR/Master Books, 1976, p. 252.
- 3 Ken Ham et al., *One Blood*, Master Books, 2000, p. 108.
- 4 It has been suggested that other pyramids and mounds in locations far from Babel are also based on the Tower of Babel as prototype. For example, "the most ancient pyramids of Egypt present a vestige of the same form" as the Tower of Babel. See A.J. Maas, "Tower of Babel," *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Appleton, 1912, 1999, <newadvent.org/cathen/15005b.htm>.
- 5 In Mesopotamia in modern Iraq, the area which encompasses the ancient land of Shinar, more than 20 remains of ziggurats exist to this day. See Roman Ghirshman, "The Ziggurat of Tchoga-Zanbil,"

6 There are several common misconceptions regarding ziggurats and the name "Babel." "Ziggurat" is often said to signify an artificial mountain in the form of a pyramid, but the original meaning of "ziggurat" is the idea of "rising to the sky" (ibid., p. 75). Thus, the term ziggurat as originally used by the Sumerians carried the connotation of a temple built "unto heaven" (Genesis 11:4), i.e., unto the glory or worship of the heavenly bodies. Only later did "ziggurat" become associated with the physical form of a certain type of temple mount.

A second misconception is that Babel means "gate of god." The original meaning of the word is "to confuse" (Saggs, op. cit., p. 292). Henry Morris comments that, "It was later that those who remained at Babel tried to upgrade the meaning by claiming it meant "Bab-el," "the Gate of God" (Morris, op. cit., p. 278). This may also be a secondary meaning indicating the religious significance which the Tower of Babel wielded over people's minds in ancient times.

A third misconception, really a falsehood, is that the Biblical story of Babel is a confused reference to later ziggurats, such as the ziggurat at Ur, which Abraham probably saw and, according to this falsehood, caused to be incorporated into Genesis 11 (Saggs, op. cit., p. 292).

7 Morris, op.cit., p. 253.

8 C.W. Ceram, *Gods, Graves and Scholars*, Vintage, 1979, pp. 326-331.

9 The entire city of ancient Babylon has not been reconstructed to date, but Muayyad Saeed, head of Iraq's Antiquities Department "supervised a massive reconstruction in 1987 of the palace at Babylon." See Leon Barkho, "Did the Tower of Babel Exist?," ABC News Science, 1998, <abcnews.go.com/sections/science/DailyNews/babel1980917.html>.

Significantly, none of the secular scholars cited in this article went on record as doubting the existence of the Tower of Babel. They merely asserted that it is not possible to be certain of the Tower's appearance.

10 John C.L. Gibson, *Genesis*, St. Andrew Press, 1981.

11 ibid., p. 2. **12** ibid., p. 11. **13** ibid., p. 207. **14** ibid., p. 209.

15 Morris, op. cit., p. 264. **16** Ceram, op. cit., pp. 326-327.

17 A.R. Burn, "Introduction," Herodotus' *The Histories*, Penguin, 1976, pp. 28-31.

18 Herodotus, *The Histories* (trans. Aubrey De Selincourt), Penguin, 1976, p. 114. Part of Herodotus' description reads as follows: "It has a solid central tower ... with a second erected on top of it and then a third, and so on up to eight. All eight towers can be climbed by a spiral way running along the outside, and about half-way up there are seats for those who make the ascent to rest on. On the summit of the topmost tower stands a great temple with a fine large couch in it, richly covered, and a table beside it. The shrine contains no image ..."

19 See, for example, P.R.S. Moorey, *Ur 'of the Chaldees'*, Cornell University, 1982, p. 234, for a depiction of the ziggurat of Nabonidus

showing seven terraces similar to Herodotus' description of the Tower of Babel.

The site of the Tower of Babel is today submerged below water because of its proximity to the Euphrates River.

20 Ghirshman, op. cit., p. 71.

21 Two notable examples of ziggurat ruins having the appearance discussed here are the Elamite ruins at Tchoga-Zanbil (ibid., p. 77) and the ruins at Birs-nimrud (Frederick and Margaret Simpich, "Where Adam and Eve Lived," *National Geographic*, Vol. 26, no. 2, February 1912, p. 566).

22 Ghirshman, op. cit., p. 69.

23 Ceram, op. cit., p. 328.

24 "Tower of Babel," *American Journal of Science*, Vol. 1 no. 37, 1839, pp. 352-353; in William R. Corliss, *Ancient Man: A Handbook of Puzzling Artifacts*, Sourcebook Project, 1978, pp. 68-69.

25 Henry Morris, *That You Might Believe*, Good News Publishers, 1978, pp. 102-103. This book was first published in 1946 and stated that Birs-nimrud (or Birsnimroud) had a height of 700 feet (p. 103). I have been unable to find confirmation of this, and in fact other sources specify a height of some 150 feet for Birs-nimrud (e.g., Leon Barkho, op. cit.). However, the ziggurat at Ur (nearly 200 miles south of Babylon in modern Iraq) was built around 2100 BC during Abraham's lifetime. It measured 700 feet around the base (*The Last Two Million Years*, Reader's Digest Association, London, 1974, p. 50). The ziggurat at Ur is well known and has even been (erroneously) identified with the Tower of Babel itself (Saggs, op. cit., p. 292), so possibly somehow the 700 foot figure was somehow associated with Birs-nimrud. Or maybe the base of Birs-nimrud was confused with its height.

26 Older references to this association are common. See for example the following: (1) in 1912, Frederick and Margaret Simpich, op. cit., p. 566. (2) in 1912, A.J. Maas, op. cit. (3) in 1953, "Ancient Empires," *The Book of Knowledge*, Vol. 2, Grolier Society, 1953, p. 660: "Tradition says that the Tower of Babel [was] at a place called Birs Nimrud, where ruins remain to this day." (4) in 1971, Saggs, op. cit., p. 292. Recent references to Birs-nimrud as the Tower of Babel seem to be sparse.

The modern trend in reference to ruins at Babel seems to fall into two categories: (1) denial that the Tower of Babel ever existed, as discussed in the text above; (2) identification of the ruins with those excavated by Koldewey. Interestingly, while liberal Christians and other skeptics continue to deny the existence of the Tower, New Age and paranormal devotees are increasingly accepting Koldewey's ruins as legitimate, apparently out of sympathy with the pagan religion established by Nimrod there. See, for example, Lee Krystek, "The Tower of Babel," <unmuseum.mus.pa.us/babel.htm>.

27 Ceram, op. cit., pp. 324-326.

28 The European Union has employed a stylized drawing of the Tower to symbolize its political (and religious?) goals.