

# Babel

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Ba'bel (Heb. *Babel'*, בָּבֶל, *confusion*; and so the Sept.

Σύγχυσις, [Ge 11:9](#)), originally the name applied to the *Tower of Babel* ([Ge 11:9](#)), but afterward extended (in the Heb.) to the city of Babylon ([Ge 10:10](#)), which appears to have grown up around it, and finally to the whole province of Babylonia ([Eze 23:17](#), margin), of which this was the capital. For these latter, [SEE BABYLON](#); [SEE BABYLONIA](#).

**1. Origin of the Tower.** — From the account in [Ge 11:1-9](#), it appears that the primitive fathers of mankind having, from the time of the Deluge, wandered without fixed abode, settled at length in the land of Shinar, where they took up a permanent residence. As yet they had remained together without experiencing those vicissitudes and changes in their outward lot which encourage the formation of different modes of speech, and were therefore of one language. Arrived, however, in the land of Shinar, and finding materials suitable for the construction of edifices, they proceeded to make and burn bricks, and using the bitumen, in which parts of the country abound, for cement, they built a city and a tower of great elevation. A divine interference, however, is related to have taken place. In consequence, the language of the builders was confounded, so that they were no longer able to understand each other. They therefore "left off to build the city," and were scattered "abroad upon the face of all the earth." The narrative adds that the place took its name of Babel (confusion) from this confusion of dialect. [SEE CONFUSION OF TONGUES](#).

**2. Its Design.** — The sacred narrative ([Ge 11:4](#)) assigns as the reason which prompted men to the undertaking simply a

desire to possess a building so large and high as might be a mark and rallying-point in the vast plains where they had settled, in order to prevent their being scattered abroad, and thus the ties of kindred be rudely sundered, individuals be involved in peril, and their numbers be prematurely thinned at a time when population was weak and insufficient. The idea of preventing their being scattered abroad by building a lofty tower is applicable in the most remarkable manner to the wide and level plains of Babylonia, where scarcely one object exists different from another to guide the traveler in his journeying, and which, in those early days, as at present, were a sea of land, the compass being then unknown. Such an attempt agrees with the circumstances in which the sons of Noah were placed, and is in itself of a 'commendable nature. But that some ambitious and unworthy motives were blended with these feelings is clearly implied in the sacred record, which, however, is evidently conceived and set forth in a dramatic manner (ver. 6, 7), and may wear around a historical substance somewhat of a poetical dress (Bauer, *Mythol.* 1, 223). The apostate Julian has attempted to turn the narrative into ridicule; but even if viewed only as an attempt to account for the origin of diversity of languages, and of the dispersion of the human family, it challenges consideration and respect. The opinion of Heeren (*Asiatic Nations*, 2, 146) is far different and more correct: "There is," says he, "perhaps nowhere else to be found a narrative so venerable for its antiquity, or so important in the history of civilization, in which we have at once preserved the traces of primaeval international commerce, the first political associations, and the first erection of secure and permanent dwellings." A comparison of this narrative with the absurd or visionary pictures which the Greeks and Romans give of the primitive condition of mankind, will gratify the student of the Bible and confirm the

faith of the Christian by showing the marked difference there is between the history contained in Genesis and the fictions of the poet, or the traditions of the mythologist. (See Eichhorn, *Diversitatis linguarum ex traditione Semitica origines*, Goett. 1788; also in the *Biblioth. d. bibl. Lit.* 3, 981 sq.)

⇒ [Bible concordance for BABEL.](#)

**3. Traditions concerning it.** — Versions more or less substantially correct of this account are found among other nations. The Chaldaeans themselves relate (Abydenus, quoted by Eusebius, *Prepar. Evang.* 1, 14 comp. *Chron. Armen.* 1, 38 and 59) that "the first men, relying on their size and strength, raised a tower reaching toward heaven in the place where Babylon afterward stood, but that the winds, assisting the gods, brought the building down on the heads of the builders, out of the ruins of which Babylon itself was built. Before this event men had spoken the same tongue, but afterward, by the act of the gods, they were made to differ in their speech." Plato also reports (*Polit.* p. 272) a tradition that in the Golden Age men and animals made use of one common language, but, too ambitiously aspiring to immortality, were, as a punishment, confounded in their speech by Jupiter. In the details of the story of the war of the Titans against the gods may also be traced some traditionary resemblance to the narrative of the Bible (see Pliny, 7:1, 11 and 112; Hygin. *Fab.* 143). "The sibyl," says Josephus (*Ant.* 1, 4, 3), "also makes mention of this town, and of the confusion of language, when she says thus: 'When all men were of one language, some of them built a high tower, as if they would thereby ascend up to heaven; but the gods sent storms of wind and overthrew the tower, and gave every one his peculiar language; and for this reason it was that the city was called Babylon'" (comp. Philo, *Cpp.* 1, 406). The same writer (*ib.* 2) assigns as the reason of this overthrow and confusion the displeasure of God at seeing them act so madly

under the influence of Nimrod, "a bold bad man," who, in order to alienate the minds of the people from God, and to take revenge for the Deluge which had destroyed their forefathers, induced them to build a tower too high for the waters to be able to reach. Aben Ezra (in loc. *Gen.*) has given a more probable explanation. "Those," he says; "who built the Tower of Babel were not so insensate as to imagine they could by any such means reach to heaven; nor did they fear another Deluge, since they had the promise of God to the contrary; but they wished for a city which should be a common residence and a general rendezvous, serving in the wide and open plains of Babylonia to prevent the traveler from losing his way; in order that while they took measures for their own convenience and advantage, they might also gain a name with future ages." *SEE NIMROD.*

**4.** *Its subsequent History.* — The "Tower of Babel" is only mentioned once in Scripture (*Ge 11:4-5*), and then as incomplete. No reference to it appears in the prophetic denunciations of the punishments which were to fall on Babylon for her pride. It is therefore quite uncertain whether the building ever advanced beyond its foundations. As, however, the classical writers universally, in their descriptions of Babylon, gave a prominent place to a certain tower-like building, which they called the temple (Herod. *ut inf.*; Diod. Sic. 2:9; Arrian, *Exped. Alex.* 7, 17, etc.), or the tomb (Strabo, 16, p. 738) of Belus, it has generally been supposed that the tower was in course of time finished, and became the principal temple of the Chaldaean metropolis. *SEE BEL.* Certainly this may have been the case; but, while there is presumption in favor of it, there is some evidence against it. A Jewish tradition, recorded by Bochart (*Phaleg*, 1, 9), declared that fire fell from heaven, and split the tower through to its foundation; while Alexander Polyhistor (*Frag.* 10), and the

other profane writers who noticed the tower (as Abydenus, *Frs.* 5 'and 6), said that it had been blown down by the winds. Such authorities, therefore, as we possess, represent the building as destroyed soon after its erection. When the Jews, however, were carried captive into Babylonia, struck with the vast magnitude and peculiar character of certain of the Babylonian temples, they imagined that they saw in them not merely buildings similar in type and mode of construction to the "tower" (בֵּימָה) of their scriptures, but in this or that temple they thought to recognize the very tower itself. *SEE* [BABYLON](#).

⇒[Definition of babel](#)

**5.** *The "Tower of Belus," presumed to occupy its site.* — Herodotus describes the temple in his own simple but graphic manner (i. 181). "In the other division of the city is the temple of the god Belus, with brazen gates, remaining till my own time, quadrangular, and in all of two stadia. In the middle of the sacred enclosure there stands a solid tower of a stadium both in depth and width; upon this tower another is raised, and another upon that, to the number of eight towers. An ascent to them has been made on the outside, in a circle extending round all the towers. When you reach about half way you find resting-places. In the last tower is a large temple, and in the temple lies a large bed well furnished, and near it stands a golden' table; but there is no image within; nor does any one remain there by night, only a native female, one whom the god has chosen in preference to all others, as say the Chaldseans who are priests of that god. And these persons also say, asserting what I do not believe, that the god himself frequents the temple and reposes on the couch. And there belongs to the temple in Babylon another shrine lower down, where there stands a large golden image of the god, and near it is placed a large golden table, and the pedestal and throne

are gold, and, as the Chaldaeans say, these things were made for eight hundred talents of gold. And out of the shrine is a golden altar; and there is another great altar where sheep-offerings are sacrificed, for it is not permitted to sacrifice upon the golden altar, except sucklings only; but upon the greater altar the Chaldaeans offer every year a thousand talents' worth of frankincense at the time when they celebrate the festival of the god. And there was at that time in the temple a statue of twelve cubits of solid gold; but I did not see it, and relate merely what was told me by the Chaldaeans. Darius Hystaspis wished to have this statue, but did not dare to take it; but Xerxes, his son, took it, and slew the priest who forbade him to move the statue. Thus is this sacred place adorned; and there are also in it many private offerings." These offerings, made by individuals, consisting of statues, censers, cups, and sacred vessels of massive gold, constituted a property of immense value. On the top Semiramis placed three golden statues of Jupiter, Juno, and Rhea. The first was 40 feet high, and weighed 1000 Babylonish talents. The statue of Rhea was of the same weight: the goddess was seated on a golden throne with lions at each knee, and two serpents of silver. The statue of Juno was erect like that: of Jupiter, weighing 800 talents; she grasped a serpent by the head with her right hand, and held in her left a scepter enriched with gems. A table of beaten gold was common to these three divinities, weighing 500 talents. On the table were two goblets of 10 talents, and two censers of 500 talents each, and three vases of prodigious magnitude. The total value of the precious articles and treasures contained in this proud achievement of idolatry has been computed to exceed six hundred millions of dollars. From the Holy Scriptures it appears that when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem and levelled most of the city with the ground, "he brought away the treasures of the

temple, and the treasures of the king's house, and put them all into the temple of Bel at Babylon" ([2 Chronicles 37:7](#)). The brazen and other vessels which Solomon had caused to be made for the service of Jehovah are said to have been broken up by order of the Assyrian monarch, and formed into the famous gates of brass which so long adorned the superb entrances into the great area of the temple of Belus (comp. Hecataeus ap. Joseph. *Ant.* 1, 4, 3).

⇒ [See also the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.](#)

The purposes to which this splendid edifice was appropriated may be partly gathered from the preceding statements. These purposes varied in some degree with the changes in opinions and manners which successive ages brought. The signal disappointment inflicted on its original founders show that even in its origin there was connected with it something greatly displeasing to God. It seems, indeed, always to have existed in derogation of the divine glory. Consecrated at the first, as it probably was, to the immoderate ambition of the monotheistic children of the Deluge, it passed to the Sabian religion, and thus, falling one degree from purity of worship, became a temple of the sun and the rest of the host of heaven, till, in the natural progress of corruption, it sank into gross idolatry, and, as the passage from Herodotus shows, was polluted by the vices which generally accompanied the observances of heathen superstition. In one purpose it undoubtedly proved of service to mankind. The Babylonians were given to the study of astronomy. This ennobling pursuit was one of the peculiar functions of the learned men denominated by Herodotus Chaldaeans, the priests of Belus; and the temple was crowned by an astronomical observatory, from the elevation of which the starry heavens could be most advantageously studied over plains so open and wide, and in an atmosphere so clear and bright as those of Babylonia.

To Nimrod the first foundations of the tower are ascribed; Semiramis enlarged and beautified it (Ctesias ap. Diod. Sic. 2:7); but it appears that the temple of Bel, in its most renowned state, was not completed till the time of Nebuchadnezzar, who, after the accomplishment of his many conquests, consecrated this superb edifice to the idolatrous object to whom he ascribed his victories. That the observatory on the tower was erected in remote times there is good reason to believe. Prideaux mentions (*Connection*, 1, 123) the circumstance that when Alexander made himself master of Babylon, Callisthenes, the philosopher, who attended him thither, found astronomical observations ascending upward 1900 years. *SEE ASTRONOMY.*

**6. Evidence as to its present Remains.** – After the lapse of so many centuries, and the occurrence in "the land of Shinar" of so many revolutions, it is not to be expected that the identification of the Tower of Babel with any actual ruin should be easy, or lead to any very certain result. The majority of opinions, however, among the learned, make it the same as the above-described temple of Belus; and as to its modern locality, the predominant opinion has been in favor of the great temple of Nebo at Borsippa, the modern *Bits Nimrud*, although the distance of that place from Babylon is a great difficulty in the way of the identification. When Christian travelers first began to visit the Mesopotamian ruins, they generally attached the name of "the Tower of Babel" to whatever mass, among those beheld by them, was the loftiest and most imposing. Rawulf, in the 16th century, found the "Tower of Babel" at *Felugiah*; Pietro della Valle, in the 18th, identified it with the ruin *Babil* near Hillah; while early in the present century Rich and Ker Porter revived the Jewish notion, and argued for its identity with the *Birs*. There are, in reality, no positive grounds either for identifying the tower

with the temple of Belus, or for supposing that any remains of it long survived the check which the builders received when they were "scattered abroad upon the face of the earth," and "left off to build the city" ([Ge 11:8](#)); yet the striking general similarity of its form and construction to those structures, taken in connection with its evidently great antiquity, create a presumption in favor of the identification that it is difficult to resist. *SEE SHINAR*. Nor, indeed, does the Biris Nimrud lie much, if any, farther distant from Hillah (the modern representative of Babylon) than do (in an opposite direction) some other ruins (e.g. especially the mound called *Babil*, the only other rival to the honor of representing the ancient Tower of Babel and temple of Belus in the vicinity), which were yet undoubtedly included within the ample circuit of the ancient walls; in fact, the Biris itself will fall within the line of the outer walls of Babylon, if laid down of the extent described by Herodotus. *SEE BABYLON*. Its pyramidal structure, also, with the numerous contractions of its successive stages, still traceable in the ruins, favors the identification (see below).

**7. Description of "Biris Nimrud," its supposed modern Relic.**

— The appearance of this massive ruin is deeply impressive, rising suddenly as it does out of a wide desert plain, with its rent, fragmentary, and fireblasted pile, masses of vitrified matter lying around, and the whole hill itself on which it stands caked and hardened out of the materials with which the temple had been built. Its dreary aspect seems to justify the name which the remnant of the captivity, still abiding among the waters of Babylon, give to the place, namely, "Nebuchadnezzar's Prison;" an appellation which may have been assigned from the circumstance of that monarch's being confined there, under the care of the priesthood, during the period of his madness, or from the King of Israel's having

been incarcerated within its precincts by Nebuchadnezzar after his last conquest of Jerusalem (2 Kings 25). A very considerable space round the tower, forming a vast court or area, is covered with ruins, affording abundant vestiges of former buildings, exhibiting uneven heaps of various sizes, covered with masses of broken brick, tiles, and vitrified fragments — all bespeaking some signal overthrow in former days. The towerlike ruin on the summit is a solid mass 28 feet broad, constructed of the most beautiful brick masonry. It is rent from the top nearly half way to the bottom. It is perforated in ranges of square openings. At its base lie several immense unshapen masses of fine brickwork, some changed to a state of the hardest vitrification, affording evidence of the action of fire which seems to have been the lightning of heaven. The base of the tower at present measures 2082 feet in circumference. Hardly half of its former altitude remains. Of the original pyramidal form, the erections of Semiramis and Nebuchadnezzar appear to have begun at the stage of the former overthrow. From its summit, the view in the distance presents to the south an arid desert plain; to the west the same trackless waste; toward the north-east marks of buried ruins are visible to a vast distance. The bricks which compose the tower are mostly stamped with several lines of inscription, in the cuneiform or Babylonian character. Some extend to four, or even seven lines, but the dimensions of all are the same. The bricks of Babylon are of two kinds, sun-dried and fire-burnt. The former are larger and of a coarser make than the latter. Their solidity is equal to that of many kinds of stone. They are composed of clay mixed with chopped straw or broken reeds, in order to increase their compactness. This is the sort of brick which the children of Israel made while in Egyptian bondage. The unburnt bricks commonly form the interior or mass of a building. This is the case with the great

tower, while it was faced with the more beautiful fabric made in the furnace or kiln. See full particulars in Rich's *Memoir of Babylon and Persepolis*; Ker Porter's *Travels in Persia*; comp. Ritter, *Erchk.* 11, 876 sq.

**8.** *Type and Character of the Building.* — It must be allowed that the Birs Nimrud, though it may not be the Tower of Babel itself, which was at Babylon ([Ge 11:9](#)), yet, as the most perfect representative of an ancient Babylonian temple-tower, may well be taken to show, better than any other ruin, the probable shape and style of the edifice. This building appears, by the careful examinations recently made of it, to have been a kind of retreating pyramid built in seven receding stages. "Upon a platform of crude brick, raised a few feet above the level of the alluvial plain, was built of burnt brick the first or basement stage—an exact square, 272 feet each way, and 26 feet in perpendicular height. Upon this stage was erected a' second, 230 feet each way, and likewise 26 feet high; which, however, was not placed exactly in the middle of the first, but considerably nearer to the south-western end, which constituted the back of the building. The other stages were arranged similarly, the third being, 188 feet, and again 26 feet high; the fourth 146 feet: square, and 15 feet high; the fifth 104 feet square, and the same height as the fourth; the sixth 62 feet square, and again the same height; and the seventh 20 feet square, and once more the same height. On the seventh stage there was probably placed the 'ark, or tabernacle, which seems to have been again 15 feet high, and must have nearly, if not entirely, covered the top of the seventh story. The entire original height, allowing three feet for the platform, would thus have been 156 feet, or, without the platform, 153 feet. The whole formed a sort of oblique pyramid, the gentler slope facing the N.E., and the steeper inclining to the S.W. On the N.E. side was the grand entrance, and here stood the

vestibule, a separate building, the debris from which, having joined those from the temple itself, fill up the intermediate space, and very remarkably prolong the mound in this direction" (Rawlinson's *Herodotus*, 2, 480-3). The *Birs* temple, if the same called the "Temple of the Seven Spheres," was ornamented with the planetary colors (see the plan), but this was most likely a peculiarity. The other chief features of it seem to have been common to most, if not all of the Babylonian temple-towers. The feature of stages is found in the temples at Warka and Mugheir (Loftus's *Chaldea*, p. 129 and 168), which belong to very primitive times (B.C. 2230); that of the emplacement, so that the four angles face the four cardinal points, is likewise common to those ancient structures; while the square form is universal. On the other hand, it may be doubted whether so large a number of stages was common. The Mugheir and Warka temples have no more than two, and probably never had more than three, or at most four stages. The great temple of Belus at Babylon (if Babil) shows only one stage; though, according to the best authorities, it too was a sort of pyramid (Herod., Strab.). The height of the *Birs* is 153.5 feet, that of Babil 140 (?), that of the Warka temple 100, that of the temple at Mugheir 50 feet. Strabo's statement that the tomb of Belus was a stade (606 feet in height) would thus seem to be a gross exaggeration. Probably no Babylonian tower ever equaled the Great Pyramid, the original height of which was 480 feet. *SEE PYRAMIDS.*

**9.** *Its Materials and Manner of Construction.* — On these points more light is to be obtained from the Warka and Mugheir buildings than from the *Birs*. The *Birs* was rebuilt from top to bottom by Nebuchadnezzar, and shows the mode of construction prevalent in Babylon at the best period; the temples at Warka and Mugheir remain to a certain extent in

their primitive condition, the upper stories alone having been renovated. The Warka temple is composed entirely of sun-dried bricks, which are of various shapes and sizes; the cement used is mud; and reeds are largely employed in the construction. It is a building of the most primitive type, and exhibits a ruder style of art than that which we perceive from Scripture to have obtained at the date of the tower. Burnt bricks were employed in the composition of the tower ([Ge 11:3](#)); and though perhaps it is somewhat doubtful what the *chemar* (חֶמֶר "slime") used for mortar may have been (see Fresnel in *Journ. Asiatique* for June, 1853, p. 9), yet, on the whole, it is most probable that bitumen (which abounds in Babylonia) is the substance intended. *SEE BITUMEN*. Now the lower basement of the Mugheir temple exhibits this combination in a decidedly primitive form. The burnt bricks are of small size and of an inferior quality; they are laid in bitumen; and they face a mass of sun-dried brick, forming a solid wall outside it ten feet in thickness. No reeds are used in the building. Writing appears on it, but of an antique cast. The supposed date is B.C. 2300, but little later than the era commonly assigned to the building of Babel. Probably the erection of the two buildings was not separated by a very long interval, though it is reasonable to suppose that of the two the tower was the earlier. If we mark its date, as perhaps we are entitled to do, by the time of Peleg, the son of Eber, and father of Reu (see [Ge 10:25](#)), we may perhaps place it about B.C. 2400. *SEE DISPERSION OF NATIONS*.

**10.** *Advantages of this form.* — It is not necessary to suppose that any real idea of "scaling heaven" was present to the minds of those who raised either the Tower of Babel, or any other of the Babylonian temple-towers. The expression used in Genesis ([Ge 11:4](#)) is a mere hyperbole for great height (comp. [De 1:28](#); [Da 4:11](#), etc.), and should not be taken literally.

Military defense was probably the primary object of such edifices in early times; but with the wish for this may have been combined further secondary motives, which remained when such defense was otherwise provided for. Diodorus states that the great tower of the temple of Belus was used by the Chaldaeans as an observatory (2, 9), and the careful emplacement of the Babylonian temples with the angles facing the four cardinal points would be a natural consequence, and may be regarded as a strong confirmation of the reality of this application. M. Fresnel has recently conjectured that they were also used as sleeping-places for the chief priests in the summer time (*Journ. Asiatique*, June, 1853, p. 529-31). The upper air is cooler, and is free from the insects, especially mosquitoes, which abound below; and the description which Herodotus gives of the chamber at the top of the Belus tower (1, 181) goes far to confirm this Ingenious view.

**11. Confirmation from other Pyramidal Temples.** Mr. Taylor (*Fragments to Calmet's Dict.*) has given views of several similar structures now extant, of which we copy two. The first, rising in several steps or stages, is at Tanjore, in the East Indies; and affords, it is presumed, a just idea of the Tower of Babel. It is, indeed, wholly constructed of stone, in which it differs from that more ancient edifice, which, being situated in a country destitute of stone, was, of necessity, constructed of brick. On the top of this pyramid is a chapel or temple, affording a specimen of the general nature of this kind of sacred edifices in India. These amazing structures are commonly erected on or near the banks of great rivers, for the advantage of ablution. In the courts that surround them innumerable multitudes assemble at the rising of the sun, after having bathed in the stream below. The gate of the pagoda uniformly fronts the east. The internal chamber commonly receives light only from the door. An *external*

pathway, for the purpose of visiting the chapel at the top, merits observation.

The next is an ancient pyramid built by the Mexicans in America; it agrees in figure with the former, and has on the outside an ascent of stairs leading up one side to the upper story, proceeding to the chapels on its summit. This ascent implies that the chapels were used from time to time, and no doubt it marks the shortest track for that purpose, as it occupies one side only.

**12. Literature.** — Kircher, *Turris Babel* (Amst. 1778); Zentgravius, *De turri Babel* (Vitemb. 1774); Hoynovius, *De turri Babylonica* (Regiom. 1694); Colombus, *De causis tur. Bab.* (Regiom. 1675); Cyrill. Alex. *De Turri* (in his *Opp.* 1, 44); Heidegger, *De Turri Babel* (in his *Hist. Patriarch.* 1); Saurin, *Tour de Babel* (in his *Disc.* 1, 135; and *Dissert.* p. 75); Calmet, *Le Tour de Babel* (in his *Commentaire*, 1, pt. 1, diss. 34); Delany, *Of the Building of Babel* (in his *Rev. Examined*, 2, 79); Berington, *The Tower of Babel* (in his *Dissertations*, p. 407); Drew, *Babel* (in his *Script. Studies*, p. 39); Deyling, *De ortu Babelis* (in his *Observat.* 3, 24); Dietric, *Turris Babylonica* (in his *Antiq.* p. 116); Perizonii *Origg. Babylon.* c. 9; Hezel, *Ueb. d. Babyl. Stadt-u. Thurmbau* (Hildb. 1774); anonymous, *Tractatus de locis quibusd. difcil.* (Frcf. 1839); Kurtz, *Hist. of the Old Covenant*, § 29.