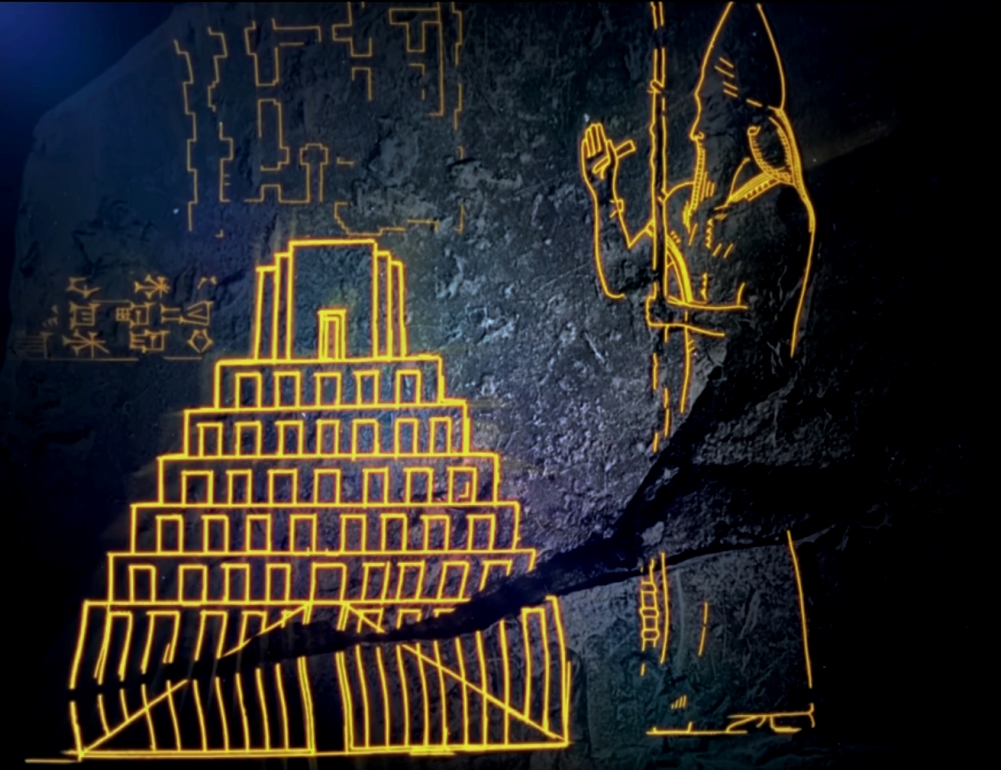
The Tower of Babel: A Polemic against Marduk’s Temple Esagil

*Enuma Elish* describes the Babylonian god Marduk’s plans for a city with a single tower that will serve as his seat of power and as the nexus of all gods. The story of Babel responds to this myth by having YHWH disrupt the construction and decentralize Babylon.

[Prof.](https://www.thetorah.com/author/takayoshi-m-oshima)

[Takayoshi M. Oshima](https://www.thetorah.com/author/takayoshi-m-oshima)



A sketch highlighting the engraving on the so-called Tower of Babel Stele (ca. 600 B.C.E.), showing the image of Etemenanki, the ziggurat of Babylon, alongside King Nebuchadnezzar of Assyria. Wikimedia

A Mesopotamian Story

Up until the story of the Tower of Babel episode in Genesis 11:1–9, the primeval history narrates a series of episodes in which humans are consistently moving or facing eastward (Gen 2:8; 3:24; 4:16). Here, humans move back toward the west to settle. From Israel’s point of view, moving west means approaching the Levant and “home.” Yet the story of Babel remains set in Babylonian territory:

בראשׁית יא:ב וַיְהִי בְּנָסְעָם מִקֶּדֶם וַיִּמְצְאוּ **בִקְעָה בְּאֶרֶץ שִׁנְעָר** וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם.

Gen 11:2 And as they migrated from the east, they discovered **a plain in the land of Shinar**, and they settled there.[1]

The toponym Shinar,[2] and the Hebrew *biqʿah*, translated here as “plain,”[3]—an apparent reference to the valley between the Tigris and Euphrates—locate the people’s stopping-place solidly on the alluvial plain that characterized Babylon’s—and not Israel’s—lived world.[4]

The people attempt to remain united by building a city and tower to make a name for themselves (v. 4).[5] Their construction materials—brick and bitumen—were common for monumental buildings in Mesopotamia, but not in the Levant, where stone and mortar were preferred:[6]

בראשׁית יא:ג וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ הָבָה נִלְבְּנָה לְבֵנִים וְנִשְׂרְפָה לִשְׂרֵפָה וַתְּהִי לָהֶם הַלְּבֵנָה לְאָבֶן וְהַחֵמָר הָיָה לָהֶם לַחֹמֶר.

Gen 11:3 Then, they said to each other, “Let us make bricks and let us fire them fully.” So they used brick for stone and bitumen for mortar.

The story thus explicitly translates the materials from one culture into another: “brick *for*stone and bitumen *for*mortar.”[7]

To prevent the city’s completion, YHWH confuses the people’s language so that they no longer speak the same tongue, leading humans to be dispersed across the world (vv. 5–8). The narrative ends with an etiology explaining the toponymבָּבֶל (*Babel*)—the Hebrew spelling of Babylon[8]—as a wordplay on the root ב.ל.ל, meaning “to garble or confuse”:

בראשׁית יא:ט עַל כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ בָּבֶל כִּי שָׁם בָּלַל יְ־הוָה שְׂפַת כָּל הָאָרֶץ וּמִשָּׁם הֱפִיצָם יְ־הוָה עַל פְּנֵי כָּל הָאָרֶץ.

Gen 11:9 Therefore its name is called Babel, because there YHWH garbled (*balal*) the language of the whole earth, and from there YHWH scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

Was Building the Tower a Sin?

At first glance, a “sin-and-punishment” motif seems to underlie the episode. Among the interpretations offered by scholars are:

* Human striving for fame caused them to rise against God.[9]
* Building a tower reaching heaven is the symbol of human hubris.[10]
* Human willingness to remain united against YHWH’s blessing, “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen 1:28; 9:1), is hubris.[11]

The biblical account, however, nowhere explicitly accuses the people of sinning.

Which Tower Is the Bible Referring To?

Since Late Antiquity, interpreters have attempted to identify Babel’s tower with one of the known Mesopotamian ziggurats,[12] massive constructions of both fired and sun-dried mud brick, soil filling, and bitumen.[13] Several major Mesopotamian cities boasted at least one such structure,[14] the ruins of which were still visible even after the destruction of the cities. Possible candidates include:

**Babylon’s Ziggurat** – The most commonly reiterated theory is that the biblical tower was inspired in some way by Babylon’s ziggurat, Etemenanki (É-temen-an-ki: “House, Foundation Platform of Heaven and Underworld”),[15] which was a multi-stepped temple tower, composed of seven levels.[16] The ziggurat stood in the vicinity of Marduk’s temple, Esagil, (“House [whose] Top is Raised High”).[17] According to the so-called Tower of Babel Stele that preserves the image of Etemenanki,[18] the ziggurat was built by Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 B.C.E.)— infamous from a biblical perspective for his destruction of Jerusalem’s temple and society (2 Kgs 24–25).[19]

The ziggurat fell into disuse by the Hellenistic period and apparently turned into a pile of rubble. Some modern scholars argue that its ruins inspired the story of the Tower of Babylon.[20]

A person riding a camel in the desert

Description automatically generatedFig 1. The remains of the Ziggurat of Borsippa, Matson Photograph Collection. Library of Congress

**The Ziggurat of Borsippa** – Writers from Late Antiquity onwards have regarded the ziggurat of Borsippa—Eurmeiminanki, “House which Gathers the Seven Mes of Heaven and Underworld”[21]—as the Tower of Babel. Its ruins still stand high in the Euphrates valley—over 50 meters above the plain (see fig. 1). As its modern name, Birs Nimrud, suggests, people also associated it with the biblical Nimrod known from Genesis 10.[22]

A large stone structure in the middle of a field

Description automatically generatedFig.2. The remains of the Dur-Kurigalzu ziggurat

**The Temple Tower at Dur-Kurigalzu** – Visitors from the West likewise often believed—or were misled by the local people—that the ruin of the temple tower at Dur-Kurigalzu (modern Aqar-Quf) was the biblical Tower of Babel (see fig. 2).[23] Its ancient name is unknown, but at approx. 52 meters in height, its ruins are almost as tall as that of Birs Nimrud.

**The Ziggurat in Sargon’s Capital City** – Another theory views the ziggurat at Sargon II’s new capital, Dur-Sharrukin, as the model of the Tower of Babel. Like the city of Babel, Dur-Sharrukin was never completed.[24]

Yet scholars looking to connect the Tower of Babel to a particular historical ziggurat overlook the peculiarity of the description of the city in Genesis.

A City of One Tower

The city as described in Genesis has only a tower, and the Hebrew term *migdal* isused here as *pars pro toto*,where the tower symbolizes the entire city:

בראשׁית יא:ד וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָבָה נִבְנֶה לָּנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה לָּנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן נָפוּץ עַל פְּנֵי כָל הָאָרֶץ.

Gen 11:4 Then they said, “Let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its head in heaven, so that we may make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

This focus on the tower as representative of the city as a whole has no historical parallel among the Mesopotamian cities, which would have included an array of noteworthy structures, including palaces, temples, city walls, and gates. It does, however, have a direct parallel, but in a literary source: the 12th century B.C.E. Mesopotamian myth *Enuma Elish*, also known as the *Babylonian* *Creation Epic*.[25]

I do not claim that the author(s) of the Tower of Babel narrative read or heard *Enuma Elish*in the original language, Akkadian, although we cannot reject such a possibility outright. It is possible that at least some Israelites encountered *Enuma Elish* in both word and ritual performance during annual festivals in which the myth was the most salient organizing feature, suggesting the Neo-Babylonian era as the likely period of Judean exposure to the text.[26]

*Enuma Elish*

*Enuma Elish* was composed to promote Marduk, the local god of the city of Babylon, as the new divine king, replacing Enlil, the traditional Mesopotamian supreme deity. It recounts how Marduk was deputized by the other gods to fight Tiamat, the divinized sea and divine matrix, and her army, who were threatening their existence.

Marduk is crowned king of the gods and he proceeds to create the world out of the body of Tiamat; the focus of this myth then turns to the construction of the city of Babylon. The myth thus canonizes Babylon as the new center of the world order and Marduk as the supreme god of the pantheon.[27]

The Tower Esagil

In *Enuma Elish*, the city of Babylon—not the historical Babylon, but Marduk’s mythological dominion, built by the gods—consists of one skyscraper: Esagil.[28] The Akkadian description of the tower in the text may be a gloss on the Sumerian name Esagil (*É-saŋ-íl*), which means “House [whose] Top is Raised High”:

*EE*VI 62 They raised the peak (*ullu reshishu*) of Esagil.

In this context, Genesis’ description of the Tower of Babel as *rosho bashamayim*, “with its head in heaven” (Gen 11:4), does not simply refer to the tower’s height, but is intended as an allusion to *Enuma Elish*and the importance of Esagil.[29]

A Polemic against the Babylonian Worldview

The biblical account of the Tower of Babel is a sharp polemic against the Marduk/Babylo-centric worldview. *Enuma Elish* claims that Marduk plans the construction of Babylon and his temple and humans build it, while the Tower of Babel story recounts that people plan the construction of the city and its tower without YHWH’s approval.

*Enuma Elish* alsodescribes Babylon and Esagil as the permanent residence of the divine king Marduk and nexus of all the gods. Conversely, Genesis presents Babylon as the site of architectural failure. YHWH disperses people by confusing their languages in order to prevent the completion of the city’s and tower’s constructions (11:6–8).[30]

The Tower of Babel story calls Marduk’s temple a *migdal*, a term that typically refers to a tower or watch-tower as part of a fortification or citadel: in other words, a secular (even martial) tall building.[31] The authors thus reject the notion in *Enuma Elish*that Esagil, the deep-rooted skyscraper of Babylon, is a sacred structure built by the gods as the residence of Marduk and the gods.

By denying the Babylonian myth’s main thesis, i.e., Marduk’s newly established status as the divine ruler with Babylon as the center of the universe and the dwelling place of the gods, and the sacred origin of the city and its main temple, Genesis 11:1–9 rejects the Marduk/Babylo-centric worldview.

1. This essay is based on our comprehensive comparative study of *Enuma Elish*and Genesis 11:1–9, T. M. Oshima and A. Acker Gruseke, “*L’homme propose*, *Dieu...disperse: Gen 11:1–9 in Comparative and Spatial Perspective*,”forthcoming. The translations of cuneiform texts and the Hebrew Bible are my own unless otherwise noted. For additional literature on Genesis 11:1–9, see: e.g., Angelika Berlejung, “Living in the Land of Shinar: Reflections of Exile in Genesis 11:1–9?,” in *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Rise of the Torah*, ed P. Dubovský, D. Markl, and J.–P. Sonnet (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 89–111 (at 90–91); Andreas Schüle, *Der Prolog der hebräischen Bibel*: *Der literar- und theologiegeschichtliche Diskurs der Urgeschichte*(*Genesis 1–11*), Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments 86 (Zürich: TVZ, 2006), 379; and Christoph Uehlinger, *Weltreich und*“*eine Rede*”: *Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbauerzählung*(*Gen* *11*, *1–9*), Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 101 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1990), 9–34.
2. Genesis 11:1–9 is not the first reference to Shinar as the place where humankind settled down after the Deluge. The Table of Nations (Gen 10; also non-P) recounts that Nimrod built the first human kingdom in Shinar, with Babylon as its first center:

בראשׁית י:ט הוּא הָיָה גִבֹּר צַיִד לִפְנֵי יְ־הוָה עַל כֵּן יֵאָמַר כְּנִמְרֹד גִּבּוֹר צַיִד לִפְנֵי יְ־הוָה. י:י וַתְּהִי רֵאשִׁית מַמְלַכְתּוֹ בָּבֶל וְאֶרֶךְ וְאַכַּד וְכַלְנֵה בְּאֶרֶץ שִׁנְעָר.

Gen 10:9 He was a mighty hunter by the grace of YHWH; hence the saying, “Like Nimrod a mighty hunter by the grace of YHWH.” 10:10 The mainstays of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Akkade, and Calneh in the land of Shinar.

His capital city is later moved to Erech (Uruk/modern Warka), Akkade (founded by Sargon of Akkad in the third millinnium B.C.E., precise location unknown), and Calneh (location unknown) in Shinar and later to Assyria (Nineveh, Rehoboth-ir, Calah, and Resen; v.11). (Contra E. A. Speiser, “Word Plays on the Creation Epic’s Version of the Founding of Babylon,” *Orientalia Nova Series* 25

1. : 317–323, who offers the emendation *wekullanâ*instead of *weKalneh*, I take Calneh as a toponym yet to be identified.) See Yigal Levin, “Nimrod the Mighty, King of Kish, King of Sumer and Akkad,” *Vetus Testamentum*52.3
2. : 350–366 [at 353]; Yigal Levin, [“Nimrod, Mighty Hunter and King – Who Was He?,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/nimrod-mighty-hunter-and-king-who-was-he) *TheTorah*(2020); and Ran Zadok, “The Origin of the Name Shinar,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 74
3. : 240–244 [at 240].) Noteworthy is the fact that, according to the Table of Nations, Nimrod is not a descendant of Shem, to which the Israelites belong, but that of Ham, alongside Egyptians and Canaanites (v. 8). That is to say that the Table of Nations also sees Shinar not as the land allocated to the Israelites.
4. Yet it is frequently also translated as “valley.” See BDB: “בקעה,” 132; and translating as “valley,” JPS; Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, vol. 1: *The Five Books of Moses: Torah*(New York: Norton, 2019), 38; and Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, trans. J. J. Scullion, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994), 544, “a plain in a valley.”
5. D. T. Potts, *Mesopotamian Civilization: The Material Foundations*(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 6–42. In biblical writing, “Shinar” designates the whole land of Babylonia. Zadok, “Origin of the Name Shinar,” 240–244, proposes that the Hebrew term *Šinʿār* derived from the Akkadian term *Šanḫara*. Originally a reference to a Kassite tribe, during the latter half of the second millennium B.C.E., it came to be used as a reference to Babylonia by people living west of the Euphrates. In the Bible, Shinar is frequently associated with negative divine judgment (e.g., Isa 11:11; Dan 1:2; Zech 5:11).
6. Genesis 11:1–9 actually speaks of the construction of a city *and* a tower (Gen 11: 3, 5), while the tower drops entirely from view in verses 8–9. Nonetheless, it is the tower that has made a lasting impression on all subsequent traditions and interpretations, and thus the modern scholarly soubriquet. It might better be called “Building Babel” (so Danna Nolan Fewell, “Building Babel,” in *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible—A Reader*, ed. A.K.M. Adam [St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2001], 1–15).
7. It is important to note here that although stone was more plentiful in the north, Assyria nevertheless used copious amounts of mudbrick in both its domestic and monumental architecture. On Mesopotamia as a “land of mud and mudbrick architecture,” even for monumental structures, see P. R. S. Moorey, *Ancient Mesopotamian Materials and Industries: The Archaeological Evidence*(Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 301–362 (at 302). Indeed Nebuchadnezzar reports that his ziggurat’s four walls were made of bitumen and fired brick (George, “Stele of Nebuchadnezzar II,” 166, 167, line 54, and 168). Fired brick and bitumen were also used for the construction of his palace and its fortification. See, e.g., Paul-Alain Beaulieu, “Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon as World Capital,” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies*3 (2008): 5–12, and more generally on monumental building practices, Moorey, *Ancient Mesopotamian Materials and Industries*, 302–306; 315–322; 332–335. On construction in Israel, see Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, Library of Ancient Israel (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 21–35; and Peter Dubovksý, *The Building of the First Temple*: *A Study in Redactional*, *Text-Critical and Historical Perspective*, Forschungen zum Alten Testament 103 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), for a recent in-depth study on the First Temple in Jerusalem. Making the same observation regarding the explicitness of the material transposition, including the narrator’s “accurate and detailed knowledge of Mesopotamian construction techniques,” see Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 82 and Speiser, “Word Plays on the Creation Epic’s Version of the Founding of Babylon,” 321.
8. Instead of *Fremdwörter*, whose “foreignness is part of its semantic flavor (e.g. ‘sommalier,’ ‘schlemiel’)” (Ronald Hendel, “Genesis 1–11 and Its Mesopotamian Problem,” in *Cultural Borrowings and Ethnic Appropriations in Antiquity*, ed. E. S. Gruen, Oriens et Occidens 8 [Stuttgart: Steiner, 2005], 23–36 [at 25]), these are *Fremdmaterialen*.
9. The toponym Babylon, (Akk. Bābili) is frequently spelled logographically ká-dingir-ra (lit. the gate of the god) in cuneiform texts. However, *Enuma Elish*V 129 explains that the city is called Bābili because it is the houses of the great gods (*bītāt ilī rabûti*). Put differently, ancient Babylonians regarded Babylon as the earthly divine abode. Nonetheless, its early spelling, bar.ki.bar, probably to be read *babbar*, indicates that Babylon’s logographic writing and the etiology given in *Enuma Elish* are a sort of a *midrash*, an interpretation of the toponym. For an explanation of the earlier name, including the soundshift *r*> *l*, seeP.-A. Beaulieu, *A History of Babylon 2200 bc*–*ad* *75* (Souhthern Gate: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 41.
10. E.g., Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*,trans. J. H. Marks, rev. ed., Old Testament Library (London: SCM, 1972), 152.
11. For a brief overview of previous scholarly works on the pride-and-punishment reading, see, e.g., Harland, “Vertical or Horizontal”; and Fewell, “Building Babel.”
12. This interpretation connects P’s fruitfulness motif to the non-P Babel story, reading the two sources as if they share a similar perspective. Peter J. Harland, “Vertical or Horizontal: The Sin of Babel,” *Vetus Testamentum* 48.4 (1998): 515–533 (at 530), notes that this approach is found in Jewish commentators more so than Christian ones.
13. Some scholars argue that the Tower of Babel narrative belongs to the primeval era and the people in question are not the Babylonians but rather humankind in general. Thus, they observe that it is wrong to relate it to the ancient ziggurats. See, e.g., Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 719–721.
14. The English term ziggurat originates from the Akkadian word *ziqqurratu*, a derivertive of *zaqāru*, “to build high,” an apparent reference to the loftiness of the ancient Mesopotamian temple towers. The term is also used to indicate the height of a mountain, more specifically its summit. For construction of ziggurat, see, e.g., Wilfrid Allinger-Csollich, “Gedanken über das Aussehen und die Funktion einer Ziqqurrat,” in *Tempel im Alten Orient*: *7*. *Internationales Colloquium der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft 11*–*13* *Oktober 2009*, *München*, ed. K. Kainuth, A. Löhnert, J. J. L. Miller, A. Otto, M. Roaf and W. Sallaberger (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013), 1–18; Berlejung, “Living in the Land of Shinar,” 96.
15. See, e.g., Claus Ambos, “Ziqqurrat: A. Philologisch,” *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*15: 323–325; and Peter A. Miglus, “Ziqqurrat. B. Archäologisch,” *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*15: 325–330.
16. For the meaning of its ceremonial name and brief history of the ziggurat, see A. R. George, *House Most High*: *The Temples of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1993), 149, no. 1088.
17. E.g., von Rad, *Genesis*, 150–151; Markus Witte, *Die biblische Urgeschichte*: *Redaktions- und theologiegeschichtliche Beobachtungen zu Genesis 1*,*1–11*,*26*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 265 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998), 302; Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 80; Hendel, “Genesis 1–11 and Its Mesopotamian Problem,” 31–33; Beaulieu, “Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon as World Capital,” 10; Eckart Frahm, “Counter-texts, Commentaries, and Adaptations: Politically Motivated Responses to the Babylonian Epic of Creation in Mesopotamia, the Biblical World, and Elsewhere,” *Orient* 45 (2010): 3–33 (at 14–17); A. R. George, “Xerxes and the Tower of Babel,” in *The World of Achaemenid Persia*: *History*, *Art* *and Society in Iran and the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. Curtis and St. J. Simpson (London: Tauris, 2010), 472–480, (at 473); Berlejung, “Living in the Land of Shinar,” 97; and Ambos, “Ziqqurrat,” 323. Editor’s note: The number seven was broadly significant in ancient Near Eastern culture, beyond Israel, as well. See the brief discussion in Elaine Goodfriend, [“Seven, the Biblical Number,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/seven-the-biblical-number) *TheTorah* (2021), including the examples in footnote 62.
18. For the meaning of the ceremonial name and brief history of the temple, see George, *House Most High*, 139–140, no. 967.
19. = MS 2063. See A. R. George, “A Stele of Nebuchadnezzar II,” in *Cuneiform Royal Inscriptions and Related Texts in the Schøyen Collection*, edited by A. R. George, Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology 17 (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2011), 153–165.
20. This ziggurat would not have been a new structure but rather would have replaced an earlier edifice that had, like all structures made of mudbrick, required rebuilding.
21. E.g., Berlejung, “Living in the Land of Shinar,” 98. During the Hellenistic period, the tower debris was removed from the site, most likely in preparation for restoring the temple tower. Rebuilding plans were never fully carried out, however (Olof Pedersén, *Babylon*: *The Great City* [Münster: Zaphon, 2021], 158).
22. The exact definition of the term *me* is notoriously difficult. Briefly said, Sumerians saw *me*as the very reason why each concrete and abstract thing existed. In his new Sumerian dictionary, Pascal Attinger, *Glossaire sumérien-français*: *principlement des textes littéraires paléobabyloniens* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2021), 718, offers “essences, puissances, potentialités” as its meaning.
23. See Hanspeter Schaudig, *Explaining Disaster*: *Tradition and Transformation of the*“*Catastrophe of Ibbi-Sîn*” *in Babylonian Literature*, Dubsar 13 (Münster: Zaphon, 2019), 182–185.
24. Schaudig, *Explaining Disaster*, 182–185.
25. Uehlinger, *Weltreich und*“*eine Rede*,” 397–399 and *passim*).
26. Scholars have rejected interpreting the Babel story as a response to *Enuma Elish*because they could not find exact parallels between the two texts. Those parallels do exist, but they are obscured by the ways the Hebrew thinkers twisted the wording in *Enuma Elish*to create a brilliant reproof for its original plots.For fuller discussion on the intertextuality between *Enuma Elish* and Genesis 11:1–9, see Oshima / Gruseke, “*L’homme propose*.”
27. See, e.g., Pongratz-Leisten in Simo Parpola, *Assyrian Royal Rituals and Cultic Texts*, State Archives of Assyria 20 (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2017), LXII–LXIII, and likewise Frahm, “Counter-texts, Commentaries, and Adaptations,” 14–17. Editor’s note: On the Babylonian annual festival, see Uri Gabbay, [“Babylonian Rosh Hashanah,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/babylonian-rosh-hashanah-battle-creation-enthronement-and-justice) *TheTorah* (2014). For a discussion of Ezekiel as an example of contact between the Judean scribal community and Babylonian culture, see Laurie Pearce, [“Ezekiel: A Jewish Priest and a Babylonian Intellectual,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/ezekiel-a-jewish-priest-and-a-babylonian-intellectual) *TheTorah* (2017).
28. See, e.g., W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, Mesopotamian Civilizations 16 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 439–444.
29. A caution is in order: In reality Esagil was the name of the lower temple in historical Babylon as well as the enormous temple precincts of consisting of Esagil itself, Etemenanki, and the temples of Ea, Madanu, Amurru, and Belet-Babili (George, *House Most High*, 91). In *Enuma Elish*, however, it is a lofty temple tower of the Apsu (VI 63).
30. According to Speiser (“Word Plays on the Creation Epic’s Version of the Founding of Babylon,” 319), the expression “with its head in heaven” in Genesis 11:4 had its origin in *Enuma Elish.*It probably goes too far to imagine biblical writers being conversant with Sumerian. The temple name, unless explained to them, would have been opaque, but the text of these important sections, as we argue here, would not. On the other hand, if they had been formally educated according to the norms of cuneiform learning, the study of Sumerian would have preceded *Enuma Elish* in the curriculum.

בראשׁית יא:ו וַיֹּאמֶר יְ־הוָה הֵן עַם אֶחָד וְשָׂפָה אַחַת לְכֻלָּם וְזֶה הַחִלָּם לַעֲשׂוֹת וְעַתָּה לֹא יִבָּצֵר מֵהֶם כֹּל אֲשֶׁר יָזְמוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת. יא:ז הָבָה נֵרְדָה וְנָבְלָה שָׁם שְׂפָתָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שְׂפַת רֵעֵהוּ. יא:ח וַיָּפֶץ יְ־הוָה אֹתָם מִשָּׁם עַל פְּנֵי כָל הָאָרֶץ וַיַּחְדְּלוּ לִבְנֹת הָעִיר.

Gen 11:6 And YHWH said, “They are one people, and they have one language for all of them. This is only the beginning of what they will do, and now nothing they propose to do will be safe from them. 11:7 Let us go down and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s language.” 11:8 So YHWH scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth, and they ceased building the city.

1. See, e.g., Schüle, *Der Prolog der hebräischen Bibel*, 411–412; and Uehlinger, *Weltreich und*“*eine Rede*,” 372–380.

Prof.

Takayoshi M. Oshima

Uppsala University

Prof. Takayoshi M. Oshima is an associate professor at Department of Linguistics and Philology at Uppsala University in Sweden, and a research associate at Department of Ancient Studies at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. He completed his doctorate in Assyriology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and a Doctor Philosophiae Habilitatus in Ancient Near Eastern Studies at the University of Leipzig. He specializes in Sumerian and Akkadian religious texts, the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East, including the biblical wisdom literature, and ancient Mesopotamian iconography. Among his publications are *Cuneiform in Canaan*(with Wayne Horowitz), *Babylonian Poems of Pious Sufferers*, *Affronter le mal en Babylonie*(with Stéphanie Antonioz), and *Teaching Morality*, the results of a conference he organized. Currently, he is preparing *Gods’ Punishing Hands*: *The Interdependence of the Divine Will and Human Ethics in Cuneiform Literature*, a revised version of his Habilitationsschrift.

Last Updated

November 2, 2022