

Another Example of Fake News

IS IT MIGDAL BAVEL, OR IS IT JUST ANOTHER ZIGGURAT?



There is fake news, old news, and exaggerated news. Put all three together and you have the report entitled “Tower of Babel Discovered? Ancient Tablet Describes Mesopotamian Structure Built by ‘Multitudes.’”

Why is it fake news? Because the report wants you to believe that what has been discovered is the biblical Migdal Bavel, the Tower of Babel described in *Bereishis* (11:1-9). Why is it old news? Because the Ziggurat (Mesopotamian temple tower) of Babylon has been known for over a century, and an ancient image of that tower was published in 2011. Why is it exaggerated news? Because it describes a tower built by King Nevuchadnetzar II, the

Babylonian king who destroyed the *Beis Hamikdash*, and therefore cannot possibly refer to the Torah’s Migdal Bavel, which dates back to the time after the *mabul*.

So why bother discussing it? Because the report provides a realistic picture of what such a tower would have looked like and helps us to understand the Torah.

The important old news is that in 2011 information about a stele, an inscribed black stone that commemorates the reconstruction of the Ziggurat of Babylon, was published. The stele dates to between 604 and 562 BCE. When the two pieces of the broken stone are put together, they show a carving of a seven-tier tower structure drawn to an apparently realistic scale. Further, the stele depicts Nevuchadnetzar

wearing a royal conical hat and holding in his right hand a staff, as well as a scroll with the rebuilding plans.

The carving shows a ground plan of the outer walls and the inner arrangement of the rooms, including what must have been the inner temple. It also contains a Babylonian cuneiform inscription explaining that in order to build this tower, Nevuchadnetzar “mobilized all countries everywhere, each and every ruler who had been raised to prominence over all the people of the world...”

While this text was uncovered over 100 years ago, it came into the possession of Norwegian antiquities collector Martin Schøyen, and this resulted in its publication. Differing stories have been suggested

to explain how this ancient text reached a modern collector, but they cannot be regarded as reliable since dealers and collectors often wish to cover up the way in which materials reach them.

But the contents of this document are also old news. Nevuchadnetzar left us another building inscription commemorating the construction of the very same ziggurat. The other inscription, known as the “Four-Column Foundation Cylinder of Etemenanki” (written in four columns) tells the very same story but is actually more complete because someone erased part of the stele in antiquity. Our inscription must have originally been deposited, according to the ancient Mesopotamian custom, somewhere in the foundation.

To avoid confusion, we will refer to the biblical Tower of Babel by its Hebrew name, Migdal Bavel, and to the Mesopotamian structure that has been excavated in the destroyed ancient city of Babylon as the Ziggurat of Babylon. Merriam-Webster tells us that a ziggurat is “an ancient Mesopotamian temple tower consisting of a lofty pyramidal structure built in successive stages, with outside staircases and a shrine at the top.” The term is derived from an ancient Babylonian root meaning “to build on a raised area.” These buildings are similar to the step pyramids in Egypt.

At the top of the tower there was usually a temple. Most scholars see the ziggurat as an effort by those in a very flat part of the world to imitate the mountains, where many ancient peoples were convinced they could be closer to their gods who dwelled in the heavens. They assumed that performing rituals in closer proximity to their deities would somehow make the rituals more efficacious. Numerous ziggurats have been found in ancient Mesopotamia; one of the most famous is located in Ur,

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the city called “Ur Kasdim” in the Torah.

Quite a bit is known about the history of the Ziggurat of Babylon. It was called Etemenanki, Sumerian for “temple of the foundation of heaven and earth.” (The Sumerian language was used in ancient Mesopotamia before the rise of the Semitic Akkadian language [named for the city Akkad], of which Babylonian is a dialect.) The Ziggurat of Babylon was originally built in the time of the famous King Hammurabi (1792-1750 BCE). For a long time it lay in ruins, until King Nabopolassar of Babylonia began to rebuild it. It was finished under his son, Nevuchadnetzar II, after 43 years of work, and was constructed with some 17 million bricks. When the Persian Empire, under Cyrus the Great, conquered Babylon, his troops destroyed the stair ramps leading up to the tower so that it could not be used as a fortress. It was destroyed completely by Alexander the Great (the Gemara’s Alexandros Mokdon) since it had been irreparably damaged.

The structure, probably intuited from its ruins, is described by the Greek historian Herodotus (*Histories* 1.181) as follows: “A square of 440 yards each way, with gates of bronze. In the center of this enclosure a solid tower has been built, 220 yards long and broad. A second tower rises from this and from it yet another, until at last there are eight. It can be climbed by (use of) a spiral way that runs outside up to the height of the towers... In the last tower there is a great shrine.”

The entire structure was 300 feet high.

So what does this have to do with Migdal Bavel? Here we have arrived at the exaggerated news. The claim that this is the biblical Tower of Babel makes no sense. The episode of Migdal Bavel was the origin of the rise of the different peoples of the earth when they were separated into language groups.

What does this have to do with the building of a ziggurat, a common Mesopotamian building, in the sixth century BCE?

The answer lies in our desire to understand what Migdal Bavel could have looked like. The drawings of the external façade and the ground plans provided in this not-so-recently-published stele give us insight into the appearance of that ancient building, and hence, into what Migdal Bavel might have looked like. Talk about old news! Ziggurats have been excavated all over Babylonia, and comparison of any of the reconstructed pictures will show in a minute that archaeologists correctly understood the nature and plan of these buildings. Further, scholars long ago linked this type of architecture to Migdal Bavel.

But we should not feel bad; look how much we have learned from examining some fake, old and exaggerated news. □

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