

Facts & Fancy About the Bible - 8

Voltaire, writing in the period leading up to the American and French Revolutions, asserted that “there remains not on the earth among the profane authors one vestige of the famous tower of Babel.” But the fact is that archaeologists have found at the sites of many ancient Mesopotamian cities the remains of towers which were constructed in several stories.

Babylonian clay tablets refer to these towers in their language as ziggurats. They show that they were an important element in the religion of the ancient Mesopotamians. A shrine was generally located at the top level, as if to imitate the summit of a mountain. Wikipedia notes that some modern scholars have associated the Tower of Babel with known structures, notably the Etemenanki, a ziggurat dedicated to the Mesopotamian god Marduk in Babylon. A Sumerian myth with some similar elements is told in Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta.

In this story Enmerkar of Uruk (the Erech of Genesis 10:10) is building a massive ziggurat in Eridu (another city) and demands a tribute of precious materials from Aratta (a fabulous city in the eastern highlands) for its construction, at one point reciting an incantation imploring the god Enki to restore (or in Kramer's translation, to disrupt) the linguistic unity of the inhabited regions - “may they all address Enlil together in a single language.”

Remarkably, and very much like the story of the flood, such tower stories are also found in a number of national myths. In Greek mythology there is a myth referred to as the Gigantomachy, the battle fought between the Giants and the Olympian gods for supremacy of the cosmos. In Ovid's telling of the myth, the Giants attempt to reach the gods in heaven by stacking mountains, but are repelled by Jupiter's thunderbolts. Again, as they did with Noah's flood, scholars have suggested the Gigantomachy to be the source of the Genesis account of the Tower of Babel.

The Great Pyramid of Cholula sits on the top of a hill in Puebla state, central Mexico. This is an imposing pyramid of sun-dried bricks, the largest structure built by Mesoamerican Indians, is over a thousand years old. The pyramid is 177 feet (54 m) high and covers nearly 45 acres (18 hectares). The temple of Quetzalcoatl that once crowned the pyramid was replaced by the conquistadores with a chapel.

The parallel with Genesis comes via a 16th century Dominican friar who recounted a myth about this pyramid from a hundred-year-old priest at Cholula, shortly after the conquest of Mexico. He was told when the light of the sun first appeared there, giants appeared and went in search of the sun. Not finding it, they built a tower to reach the sky. An angered God of the Heavens called upon the inhabitants of the sky, who destroyed the tower and scattered its inhabitants.

Another story, whose transmission is attributed to Ixtlilxóchitl, Aztec chieftain of Texcoco Mexico, states that after men had multiplied following a great deluge, they erected a tall tower to preserve themselves in the event of a second deluge. However, their languages were confounded and they went to separate parts of the earth.

Similar myths have been found by the Tohono O'odham people of Arizona, the Cherokee; elsewhere from Nepal, Assam, Botswana, Zambia, Ghana, Congo, Myanmar and Admiralty Islands in Papua New Guinea. Like the Genesis flood narrative, it appears the Tower of Babel event was burned into mankind's memory and so the ultimate source of these national myths.