

## Genesis 1–11 and Its Mesopotamian Problem

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Over the last 150 years the discovery of ancient Near Eastern antecedents to biblical texts has transformed our understanding of the Hebrew Bible. One of the most public moments in this conceptual shift occurred on December 3, 1872, when George Smith announced to a meeting of the British Society of Biblical Archaeology his decipherment of “the Chaldean Account of the Deluge” (from Tablet XI of the Gilgamesh epic).<sup>1</sup> In attendance was the Prime Minister, William Gladstone, who offered the following response, as reported by the *Daily Telegraph*:

I don't know whether it is supposed that the inquiries of archaeological or other sciences are to have the effect of unsettling many minds in this our generation; but I must say, for myself, that on every point at which I am enabled to examine them they have a totally different effect. (*Cheers.*)<sup>2</sup>

Gladstone went on to express his optimism that such new knowledge would contribute to modern man's understanding of the past.

Although the Prime Minister was publicly unruffled by the discovery of the Babylonian flood story, his speech acknowledges a certain degree of anxiety. His prefatory injection of epistemic uncertainty (“I don't know whether it is supposed...”) serves to distance the dangerous possibility that this discovery will “have the effect of unsettling many minds.” His invocation of scientific progress further soothes potential worries. In all, his was a proper Victorian response to the epistemological chasm opened up by this discovery. If the Bible contained a local Israelite version of an older Babylonian myth, then how could it seriously be maintained that the Bible was the revealed word of God? Controversies involving what Gladstone delicately called “other sciences” were already a problem,<sup>3</sup> and now archaeology was joining in.

Most subsequent discussions of the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and Mesopotamian literature have been colored by a similar mixture of optimism and anxiety. The danger of “unsettling many minds” has tended to limit scholarly discourse either to general comments on the relative superiority of the biblical texts over the Mesopotamian, to a delineation of the distinctive features of the

<sup>1</sup> G. Smith, “The Chaldean Account of the Deluge,” *Transactions of the Society of Biblical Archaeology* 2 (1873), 213–34; reprinted in *The Flood Myth*, ed. A. Dundes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 29–48.

<sup>2</sup> M. T. Larsen, “The ‘Babel/Bible’ Controversy and Its Aftermath,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. M. Sasson (New York: Scribner's, 1995), 98–99.

<sup>3</sup> See N. Cohen, *Noah's Flood: The Genesis Story in Western Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), esp. 47–124.

biblical versions, or to awkward silence.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the knowledge that many biblical texts have a family relationship to Mesopotamian and other Near Eastern texts has reconfigured the categories of thought in modern scholarship, such that it is increasingly untenable to have a patronizing or Orientalist view of the various religions and cultures of the ancient Near East. The result is a quandary, in which this cluster of issues continues to be an uneasy presence.

In ancient Israel, the issue of Mesopotamian cultural priority was viewed differently. Ancient Israel knew that it was a relative latecomer in the ancient Near East, and that Mesopotamian civilization was far older and more glorious. But in the Hebrew Bible this knowledge does not seem to have provoked self-doubt or anxiety. Rather, Israel defined its cultural identity in contrast to the older Near Eastern cultures as a new beginning, a supersession. Like the biblical narrative motif of the younger son elevated to primacy – most famously Jacob, Joseph, and David – Israel presented itself as a younger culture that God chose for preeminence. The glories of Mesopotamian civilization were mere “treasures of darkness” (Isa 45:3).

Acknowledging its status as latecomer in the midst of ancient civilizations involved retelling the story of its origins in a way that incorporated this historical plot. The authority of origins had to be counterbalanced by a depreciation of the earliest era of human culture. According to the cultural memory enshrined in the Bible – which is more or less accurate in this case – the earliest human civilization arose in Mesopotamia.<sup>5</sup> Hence the account of origins in Genesis 1–11 has what we might characterize as its Mesopotamian problem.<sup>6</sup> It must negotiate the past such that it includes Mesopotamian priority in the emergence of civilization but privileges the relatively late entry of Israel. This set of concerns requires a revision of the traditional prestige of origins, which should go to the first civilization, but must now be reapportioned to the latecomer.

The narrative of the origins of the cosmos and civilization in Genesis 1–11 adopts several related strategies to achieve this end, including what we may call appropriation, mimicry, and inversion. Strategies such as these are common in

<sup>4</sup> Recent exceptions to these tendencies include H.-P. Müller, “Das Motiv für die Sintflut: Die hermeneutische Funktion des Mythos und seiner Analyse,” in Müller, *Mythos – Kerygma – Wahrheit: Gesammelte Aufsätze zum Alten Testament in seiner Umwelt und zur Biblischen Theologie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991), 88–109; W. L. Moran, “A Mesopotamian Myth and Its Biblical Transformation,” in Moran, *The Most Magic Word: Essays on Babylonian and Biblical Literature*, ed. R. S. Hendel (Washington D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 2002), 59–74; B. Schmidt, “Flood Narratives of Ancient Western Asia,” in *Civilizations*, ed. Sasson, 2337–51; and E. Noort, “The Stories of the Great Flood: Notes on Gen 6:5–9:17 in its Context of the Ancient Near East,” in *Interpretations of the Flood*, ed. F. García Martínez and G. P. Luttikhuis (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 1–38.

<sup>5</sup> By which I mean the complex urban civilization; see, e.g., S. N. Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959); J. Bottero, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 26–40.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the problem of cultural prestige explored by P. Machinist, “The Assyrians and Their Babylonian Problem: Some Reflections,” in *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin Jahrbuch* (1984/85), 353–64.

the discourse of relatively weak or dominated groups, as recent work in postcolonial studies elucidates. For example, James Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* and Homi Bhaba's *The Location of Culture* explore how subordinated groups employ verbal ambiguity, humor, mimicry, carnivalesque rituals, and other types of disguised critique and subversion to assert and define their identity vis à vis the dominant culture.<sup>7</sup>

The situation of ancient Israel in relation to Mesopotamian culture was both similar to and distinct from such modern colonial situations. For much of its history, including the time when the major biblical texts were composed, Israel lived under the indirect or direct authority of powerful Mesopotamian empires – first the Assyrian Empire (esp. 8th–7th centuries B.C.E.), then the Neo-Babylonian (7th–6th centuries B.C.E.) – and suffered massive destructions when the kings of Israel or Judah chose to rebel. For the most part, as far as we can tell, imperial authority over vassal states was relatively benign as long as the vassal state paid taxes and tribute and maintained political loyalty to the Mesopotamian king.<sup>8</sup> This situation of relative local autonomy distinguishes the ancient Mesopotamian imperial structure from most colonial situations in the modern world. More importantly, it provides a historical context that allows us to perceive the various ways that the narratives of Genesis 1–11 deal with their Mesopotamian problem.

### Appropriation

It is analytically useful to distinguish two types of cultural appropriation: in the first type the foreign feature is fully domesticated and its foreign origin effaced; in the second type the feature is only partially domesticated and its foreign flavor is retained. This distinction corresponds to the linguistic difference between a loan-word, whose foreignness is forgotten in normal usage (e.g. “kindergarten,” “restaurant”), and a *Fremdwort* whose foreignness is part of its semantic flavor (e.g. “sommelier,” “schlemiel”). Since I am addressing Israelite strategies regarding Mesopotamian cultural precedence, it is the second type that is most important, i.e. the foreign matter that is semantically marked as foreign. In many cases of cultural appropriation in antiquity it is difficult to tell whether the features of foreign origin retain their sense of foreignness or have been wholly domesticated.

The biblical flood story (of which two versions, from the J and P sources, are edited together in Genesis 6–9)<sup>9</sup> appears to be an appropriation of the first type, in which the originally foreign character of the story has been effaced. Noah and his

<sup>7</sup> J. C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); H. Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> See A. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000–330 BC* (London: Routledge, 1995), 514–18, 531–37; S. W. Holloway, *Assur is King! Assur is King! Religion in the Exercise of Power in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 100–7.

<sup>9</sup> See recently D. M. Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 48–62.

family are not represented in any obvious way as Mesopotamian. But it is arguable that the P version preserves a sense of Mesopotamian color in God's instructions to Noah on the construction of the Ark. These instructions have a good deal of technical vocabulary, some of which is obscure. The pertinent verse, Gen 6:14, is probably best rendered as follows: "Build yourself an ark with gopher wood, with reeds build the ark, and seal it with pitch inside and out." The word "gopher" (*gōper*) is unknown,<sup>10</sup> the phrase "with reeds" (*qānīm*)<sup>11</sup> is grammatically ambiguous, and the verb and noun in the sequence "seal (it) with pitch" (*wēkāpartā ... bakkōper*) occur only here. As commentators have noted, these unusual words and sequences plausibly convey a Mesopotamian flavor.<sup>12</sup> Mesopotamian boats were commonly constructed of wood and reeds and, unlike Phoenician or Egyptian boats, were thoroughly coated with pitch.<sup>13</sup> The unique Hebrew verb and noun for "pitch" (*kāpar* and *kōper*) are reflexes of the normal words in Akkadian (*kappāru* and *kupru*), while the ordinary word for "pitch" in Hebrew is *hēmār*. These words and techniques plausibly give a Mesopotamian flavor to these instructions.

If the P flood story evokes a sense of Mesopotamian provenance, its appropriation serves to assert an Israelite cultural perspective. In the P flood story, the flood serves as a crisis that inaugurates the new era of the Noachic covenant, which in turn anticipates the later covenants with Abraham and Moses. In other words, the flood and the violence that provoked it become a backdrop for the covenantal history in which Israel is exalted above the other nations as God's chosen people. In this large-scale covenantal history, Mesopotamian culture and origins are subordinated to the ascent of Israel.

This sense of history passing Mesopotamia by is further signaled by its place among descendants of Noah in the P source. In the Table of Nations, Asshur (Assyria) is the second son of Shem (after Elam; Gen 10:22). The third son, Arphachshad, is the ancestor of Israel, and it is this younger branch of the Shemite lineage that is foregrounded in the history that follows (Gen 11:10–32, etc.). Asshur's line is not mentioned again; it disappears in the past, yielding to the line of his younger brother. These aspects of the flood story and its aftermath subordinate Mesopotamia to the dominant story of Israel's origins and destiny. This implicit subordination of Mesopotamian culture is striking at a time when Mesopotamia was politically dominant over Israel.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> This obscure word may have been chosen because it rhymes with *kōper*, "pitch," at the end of the verse.

<sup>11</sup> The Masoretic Text vocalizes *qnym* as *qinnīm*, "nests." For the vocalization *qānīm*, "reeds," see E. Ullendorff, "The Construction of Noah's Ark," in Ullendorff, *Is Biblical Hebrew a Language? Studies in Semitic Languages and Civilizations* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1977), 48–49, a reading adopted by several commentators.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Noort ("Great Flood," 9) observes that this instruction is an "indication of an underlying Babylonian heritage," noting the "Israelite unfamiliarity with this technique."

<sup>13</sup> D. T. Potts, *Mesopotamian Civilization: The Material Foundations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 130–32. In the flood story in *Gilgamesh XI*, Utnapishtim uses 3 *sar* (ca. 24,000 gallons) of pitch to seal his boat.

<sup>14</sup> The P source dates approximately to the 7th–6th centuries B.C.E., with some later expansions; see Carr, *Reading*, 133–39, with bibliography.

Another probable example of appropriation in the P source occurs in the creation of humans in Genesis 1:26–28. On the sixth day, as the final act of creation,

God said, “Let us make humans in our image, after our likeness, so that they may rule the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the animals, and every creature that crawls on the earth.”  
And God created humans in his image...

As commentators have noted, the concept of humans as the “image” (*selem*) of God is most likely a borrowing from Mesopotamian royal ideology, in which the king is the “image” (*šalmu*) of one of the major gods.<sup>15</sup> In Genesis the duty of humanity, as the “image” of God on earth, is to rule over the creatures of the earth. Note the result clause: “so that they may rule the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the animals, and every creature that crawls on the earth.”<sup>16</sup> The clause sequence “X so that Y” makes it clear that the creation of humans in the image of God is what authorizes them to rule the other creatures of the earth.

It is likely that the P writer (or the tradition on which he drew) appropriated the Mesopotamian concept of the king as the “image” of god and revised it for a new purpose. In Genesis 1 all humans are created in the “image of God,” and as such have the authority and duty to rule the world. As commentators have noted, this move effects a democratization of Mesopotamian royal ideology, raising humans as a whole to the status previously reserved for the king. This transfer of divine authority from the king to humans in general also implies a critique of Mesopotamian royal ideology, which we presume was well-broadcast among its vassal states.<sup>17</sup> This implicit critique is subordinated to the positive picture of human dignity and authority, but it is nonetheless a part of the cultural meaning of the text. The concept of the “image of God” conveys a rich and multivalent sense of status of the humans in the cosmos, and subtly degrades the ideology and propaganda of the Mesopotamian empire.

Thus far we have considered two probable examples of appropriation of Mesopotamian antecedents in the P source of Genesis 1–11, which diminish Mesopotamian cultural prestige in favor of Israelite cultural identity and religious concepts. The J source also appropriates and revises Mesopotamian traditions, and locates several of its stories in or near Mesopotamia.

The Mesopotamian locale is most evident in the J story of the Tower of Babel (Babylon), which I will address below under the strategy of inversion. But prior

<sup>15</sup> E.g. Enlil, Marduk, Shamash; see recently W. R. Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness: Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 145–49; P. Bird, “‘Male and Female He Created Them’: Genesis 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation,” in Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 134–38; A. Angerstorfer, “Ebenbild eines Gottes in babylonischen und assyrischen Keilschrifttexten,” *Biblische Notizen* 88 (1997), 47–58.

<sup>16</sup> This value is indicated by the injunctive sequence: cohortative + jussive; see B. K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, in: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 577–78; and so rendered by H. Seebass, *Genesis I: Urgeschichte (1,1–11,26)* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1996), 59.

<sup>17</sup> P. Machinist, “Assyria and Its Image in the First Isaiah,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103 (1983), 719–37, esp. 729–34.

to the arrival of humans in the plains of Sumer (Gen 11:2), there is a general sense that they are in the Orient, the regions in and around Mesopotamia. In the J primeval narrative, the first human home is the Garden of Eden, which is “in the east” (*bēqedem*, Gen 2:8), a phrase that has a secondary sense, “in antiquity.” Located in the ancient east, the Garden of Eden is the headwater for four rivers, two of which are the Tigris and the Euphrates, the major rivers of Mesopotamia. The Tigris “flows east of Asshur (Assyria)” (Gen 2:14), the name of the contemporary Mesopotamian empire and its eponymous city at the time of J. Mesopotamia is part of the backdrop of this story, connecting human origins with Mesopotamian antiquity. It may be that the ambivalence of this origin – which culminates in disobedience, punishment, and expulsion – resonates with its eastern location. The ancient east is a place of beginnings but also of transgression, where paradise was lost and the life of pain and mortality began. The punishment of Adam and Eve’s first-born son, Cain, to wander “in the land of Nod (lit. “Wandering”), east of Eden” (Gen 4:16), echoes this sense of the bleak burden of ancient life in the east. Early human history, after the expulsion from Eden, is a painful and dangerous affair.

The J stories seem also to revise the Mesopotamian tradition of the mythic ascent from nature to culture in primeval times. In Mesopotamian literature, the first human is a *lullû-amēlu*, “primitive human,” living a natural life, who only becomes fully human when he learns the arts of human culture and comes to dwell in the city.<sup>18</sup> The fullest example, though displaced from primeval to historical times, is the transformation of Enkidu in the first tablet of the Gilgamesh epic. Enkidu is created as a *lullû-amēlu*, “primitive human,” then is initiated into human sexuality and the cultural arts of clothing and cuisine by a prostitute, and completes his ascent to full humanity when he enters the city of Uruk, where he meets his royal counterpart, Gilgamesh. Later, on his deathbed, Enkidu comes to see that the prostitute gave him the greatest boon – civilized life. As the god Shamash counsels, Enkidu owes her a blessing:

[the prostitute] fed you bread that was fit for a god,  
and poured you ale that was fit for a king,  
who clothed you in a splended garment,  
and gave you as companion the handsome Gilgamesh.<sup>19</sup>

Gilgamesh too, at the end of his travels, comes to understand that the best life for humans is in the context of civilization, in the city. From his reconciliation with human existence, including its hardships and limitations, comes Gilgamesh’s great wisdom: “[he] was wise in all matters.... he came a far road, was weary, found peace.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> On the following, see J. H. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 192–213; W. L. Moran, “Ovid’s *Blanda Voluptas* and the Humanization of Enkidu,” in Moran, *Magic Word*, 23–32.

<sup>19</sup> *Gilgamesh* VII.134–38; trans. A. George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (London: Penguin, 1999), 58.

<sup>20</sup> *Gilgamesh* I.4,9; trans. George, *Gilgamesh*, 1.

The J narratives of primeval humanity appropriate the Mesopotamian and eastern setting of this transformation from nature to culture, bracketed on the one side by the natural innocence of life in the Garden of Eden and on the other side by the building of Babylon, the most glorious of Mesopotamian cities. But the older Mesopotamian theme of the ascent of humans from nature to culture is complicated and to a degree subverted in the Israelite narrative sequence.<sup>21</sup>

In the J primeval narrative, the movement of humans from the Garden of Eden to the Tower of Babel is strikingly similar to the movement of “primitive humans” in Mesopotamian tradition from their initial innocent existence among the animals to civilized life in the city. Both transformations are accompanied by new knowledge, including sex, clothing, human food, and (ultimately) consciousness of mortality. In both traditions, the transformation brings humans to a higher state of knowledge, and they become, to some extent, “like gods.” The most striking difference, however, is that this ascent to a distinctively human existence in civilization comes through transgressions, bringing down curses and punishments in the biblical narratives. In Mesopotamia, the city was conceived as the center of authentic human existence. In Genesis, by contrast, the first city is constructed in the east by Cain, a cursed murderer (Gen 4:17).<sup>22</sup> After the flood, humans collectively build the great city of Babylon, but it is depicted as a work of human hubris, and Yahweh rightly destroys it. The ascent of humans from nature to culture is qualified by the eastern and Mesopotamian character of the first cities, and as such they are dangerous places of hubris and impiety. Because Israel does not yet exist, the ancient city is necessarily foreign and, in the case of Babylon, clearly Mesopotamian. In this appropriation and revision of the thematics of the ascent from nature to culture, the ancient city becomes a site of human rebellion rather than a place where human life is most complete. The pre-Israelite phase of human culture is not a high point, but a site of transgression, curses, and failure.

### Mimicry

Mimicry and inversion as cultural strategies are subcategories of appropriation. Mimicry entails the reproduction of a foreign or dominant discourse laced with subversive humor or irony.<sup>23</sup> Inversion entails a more systematic reversal of a discursive model, with a similar sense of subversion or irony.<sup>24</sup> A striking example of Israelite mimicry of Mesopotamian discourse is the brief account of

<sup>21</sup> Although the nature/culture opposition is a universal in human mythology, as demonstrated by the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, I am addressing its local history in a specific cultural region. As in the relationship between historical linguistics and language typology, local histories are particular instantiations of universal features.

<sup>22</sup> It is probably significant that Cain’s grandson is named ‘Irad, which may be a Hebrew version of the name of the Sumerian city Eridu; see W. W. Hallo, “Information from Before the Flood: Antediluvian Notes from Babylonia and Israel,” *Maarav* 7 (1991), 174.

<sup>23</sup> Bhaba, *Location*, 85–92.

<sup>24</sup> Scott, *Domination*, 166–72.

Nimrod (Gen 10:8–12, J), and a thoroughgoing instance of inversion is the Tower of Babel story (Gen 11:1–9, J).

The history of Nimrod is part of J's Table of Nations, in which the multiplicity of human cultures is mapped as a genealogy stemming from Noah's sons. Nimrod is the son of Cush<sup>25</sup> and is a great-grandson of Noah:

Cush fathered Nimrod, who was the first warrior on earth. He was a great hunter in Yahweh's sight. Therefore they say, "Like Nimrod, a great hunter in Yahweh's sight." The chief cities of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Akkad, and Calneh, in the land of Sumer. From that land he went up to Assyria and built Nineveh, Rehovot Ir, Calah, and Resen, between Nineveh and Calah, that great city. (Gen 10:8–12)

This text introduces Nimrod as a great warrior, hunter, and king, and relates the sequence of his royal cities. As Karel van der Toorn observes, "the list reads as a condensed résumé of Mesopotamian history."<sup>26</sup> Nimrod's kingship begins in the south (Sumer and Babylonia) and then moves to the north (Assyria), a movement that roughly corresponds to the sequence of kingship and empires in Mesopotamian history. This text is an appropriation and epitome of Mesopotamian lore, concentrated around a single archetypal Mesopotamian king. It revises this foreign lore to make it Israelite, in that Nimrod is a great hunter "in Yahweh's sight," literally "before Yahweh" (*lipnê yhw*).

The name of the archetypal Mesopotamian warrior-king, Nimrod, subtly transforms this appropriation into mimicry. The name Nimrod (*nimrōd*, from \**nimrud*) probably echoes the name of the Mesopotamian god Ninurta.<sup>27</sup> Ninurta was a great hunter and warrior and was the patron-god of Mesopotamian kings, characteristics that make him an apt model for Nimrod. The name Nimrod in Hebrew, however, is transparently a verbal form, from the root *mrd*, "to rebel," and means either "we will rebel" or "let us rebel." Rabbinic commentators perceptively linked the meaning of Nimrod's name with the mention of Babylon as his first capital city (Gen 10:10), and inferred that Nimrod was the protagonist of the Tower of Babel story, with its prominent theme of rebellion. This interpretive move suits the intertextual and harmonistic strategies of rabbinic interpretation.

I agree that the meaning of the name has narrative significance, but suggest that this meaning functions more naturally as a gesture of mimicry, a subtle subversion in the account of Nimrod. The sense of "we will rebel" or "let us rebel" in Nimrod's name expresses an implicit desire to rebel. But by whom and against whom? Since the narrative voice is Israelite (and in Hebrew), the most obvious target is Nimrod, the exemplar of Mesopotamian kingship and hegemo-

<sup>25</sup> Cush is a homonymous ancestor of the Cushites and the Kassites; see E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 20.

<sup>26</sup> K. van der Toorn and P. W. van der Horst, "Nimrod Before and After the Bible," *Harvard Theological Review* 83 (1990), 7.

<sup>27</sup> See van der Toorn, "Nimrod," 7–15; C. Uehlinger, "Nimrod," *Dictionary of Deities and Demons*, ed. K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, and P. W. van der Horst (2nd ed.; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 627–28; P. Machinist, "Nimrod," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4.1116–17, who aptly describes the name Nimrod as "a Hebrew corruption and denigrative reinterpretation."

ny. The Israelite narrative links a call for insurrection with the name of Nimrod, injecting a hint of subversive irony or mockery. The story mimics a Mesopotamian version of its world-historical rule, and slips a “hidden transcript” into the text, placing a prediction or invocation of rebellion into the name of the great Mesopotamian king. At the time of the Assyrian empire, the probable time of J,<sup>28</sup> this is a delicious bit of mimicry.

### Inversion

The Tower of Babel story appropriates and inverts the Mesopotamian ideology of the ziggurat (temple-tower). The ziggurat was the most visible part of the Mesopotamian temple complex and served as a cosmic axis, linking heaven and earth. This type of religious symbolism was well-known in Israel, as in the holy site of Bethel, “House/Temple of God,” where Jacob sees the stairway that links heaven and earth (Gen 28:12). The Jerusalem Temple also participates in this type of symbolism.<sup>29</sup> In the Tower of Babel story, the significance of the Mesopotamian version of the cosmic axis is turned upside-down, making it an axis of transgression and evil. As Umberto Cassuto observes, the story is “a kind of satire on what appeared to be a thing of beauty and glory in the eyes of the Babylonians, a parody of their customary assertions and narrations.”<sup>30</sup>

Mesopotamian hymns extol the cosmic quality of the ziggurat, as in the following Sumerian hymn:

Eunir (“House-ziggurat”), which has grown high, (uniting) heaven and earth,  
 Foundation of heaven and earth. “Holy of Holies.” Eridu,  
 Abzu, shrine, erected for its prince,  
 House, holy mound, where pure food is eaten.<sup>31</sup>

The ziggurat of the city of Babylon was named Etemenanki, “House, Foundation of Heaven and Earth.” It was a massive seven-storied ziggurat with a shrine at the top. According to the Babylonian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*, the city, temple, and ziggurat of Babylon were constructed by the gods in primeval times to serve as the earthly dwelling of the high god Marduk. Marduk says to the gods:

<sup>28</sup> See J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Edinburgh: Black, 1885), 338: “In [J] the present everywhere shines through, he in no way conceals his own age; we are told that Babylon is the great world-city, that the Assyrian Empire is in existence, with the cities of Nineveh and Calah and Resen.”

<sup>29</sup> J. D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985), 111–42.

<sup>30</sup> U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis. Part II: From Noah to Abraham* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964), 227. See further the detailed study of C. Uehlinger, *Weltreich und “eine Rede”: Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbauerzählung (Gen II, 1–9)* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1990).

<sup>31</sup> Å. W. Sjöberg and E. Bergmann, *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns* (Locust Valley, NY: Augustin, 1969), 17.

"Make Babylon, the task that you requested,  
 Let its brickwork be formed, build high the shrine."  
 The Anunna-gods set to with hoes,  
 One (full) year they made its bricks.  
 When the second year came,  
 They raised up Esagila, the counterpart of Apsu,  
 They built the high ziggurat of (counterpart-)Apsu,  
 For Anu-Enlil-Ea [i.e. Marduk] they founded his house and dwelling.  
 Majestically he took his seat before them.<sup>32</sup>

In Babylonian tradition the temple-tower of Babel was a cosmic and holy place, built by the gods, where Marduk's presence was manifested on earth.

The biblical story clearly appropriates the Mesopotamian tradition and ideology of the temple-tower of Babylon, but reverses its meaning by placing the plan to "build a city and a tower with its top in heaven" (Gen 11:4) in the mouths of humans, and coloring this desire as an act of hubris and rebellion. The construction of a great tower is not a tribute to the authority of the high god or a place where his presence may be sought, but an act of human self-aggrandizement. The humans desire to make the city and the tower that reaches to heaven "so that we may make a name for ourselves" (Gen 11:4). The construction of Babylon and its temple-tower is a human attempt to reach heaven and acquire everlasting glory, which constitutes a rebellion against the God/human divide. It degrades the cosmic order rather than providing a divinely sanctioned cosmic axis for it.

Notably, the Tower of Babel story foregrounds the strategy of inversion in its literary structure. Nearly every phrase and sequence describing the human actions in verses 1–4 is reversed by Yahweh's countermeasures in verses 5–9. The story "comprises two paragraphs, of almost equal size, that constitute an antithetic parallel to each other in form and content."<sup>33</sup> Note the following correspondences:<sup>34</sup>

"The whole earth had one language" (v. 1)  
     "Each man said to his neighbor" (v. 3)  
         "Come, let us mold (*nlnh*) bricks" (v. 3)  
             "let us build for ourselves" (v. 4)  
                 "a city and a tower" (v. 4)  
                     "the city and the tower" (v. 5)  
                         "that the humans had built" (v. 5)  
                     "Come ... let us confuse (*nblh*)" (v. 7)  
                         "no one will understand his neighbor's language" (v. 7)  
                     "the whole earth's language" (v. 9)

Overlying this elegant structure of symmetrical inversions are other verbal and thematic reversals. The human attempt to go upward by constructing a tower "with its top in heaven" (v. 4) is counterbalanced by Yahweh's movement down-

<sup>32</sup> *Enuma eliš* VI.57–65; trans. B. R. Foster, *From Distant Days: Myths, Tales, and Poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1995), 40.

<sup>33</sup> Cassuto, *Genesis*, 231–32.

<sup>34</sup> After J. P. Fokkerman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (2nd ed.; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 11–45, esp. 22.

ward from heaven to stop them (“Yahweh came down,” v. 5, “Let us go down,” v. 7). The humans’ desire for glory, “lest we be scattered over the whole face of the earth” (v. 4), is reversed by Yahweh’s countermeasure, “Yahweh scattered them from there over the whole face of the earth” (v. 8). Instead of winning a glorious name for themselves (v. 4), the name of Babel is synonymous with infamy (v. 9). The literary structure of the narrative is a masterful weave of inverted words, phrases, and meanings, as befits a story that thematizes the subject of language.

On the political-ideological level, this story inverts the Mesopotamian concept of the temple-tower as cosmic axis and turns it into a paradigm of arrogance and shame. As a result, the most famous Mesopotamian city is pictured as a ruin in primeval times. This primeval civilization is explicitly Mesopotamian – bracketed by the names “Sumer” in v. 2 and “Babylon” in v. 9 – but rather than being a cosmic foundation and the pinnacle of human civilization, it is a site of hubris and punishment. Mesopotamian lore is appropriated and inverted in this story of ancient transgression, lending a sense of shame to this early stage of human culture and, by implication, to contemporary Mesopotamian civilization.

### Conclusion: After Babel

The Hebrew Bible acknowledges that Israel was a relative latecomer in the ancient Near East. The first era of human civilization was in the ancient east, in and around Mesopotamia. According to Israel’s collective memory, the human ascent from nature to culture had to go through Mesopotamia. This temporal priority ought to have given Mesopotamia the glory of cultural origins. For latecomer Israel to be exalted, the temporal priority of Mesopotamia had to be depreciated. In Genesis 1–11 this Mesopotamian problem is addressed by various strategies, including appropriation, mimicry, and inversion, whereby Mesopotamia’s priority is acknowledged but diminished, clearing the path for the ascent of Abraham and his descendants.

The earliest era of human history is characterized by transgressions, curses, and a distancing of humans from God, while at the same time various aspects of human culture are created – clothing, agriculture, cities, pastoralism, music, metallurgy, viticulture. The ambivalence toward human culture that many commentators have detected in the text is reserved for this period of pre-Israelite history.<sup>35</sup> Once Israel enters the historical stage, the goodness of human culture is rarely in doubt,<sup>36</sup> particularly Israelite culture, including the glory of the city of

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 300–3; and with more nuance, R. Albertz, “Die Kulturarbeit im Atramḥasis im Vergleich zur biblischen Urgeschichte,” in *Werden und Wirken des Alten Testaments: Festschrift für Claus Westermann*, eds. R. Albertz, et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980), 55–57; and R. S. Kawashima, “*Homo Faber* in J’s Primeval History,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 116 (2004), 483–501.

<sup>36</sup> The Rechabites, who live in tents and eschew houses, agriculture, and viticulture (Jeremiah 35), are the exception to the rule; S. Talmon, “The Desert Motif in the Bible and in Qumran Literature,” in Talmon, *Literary Studies in the Hebrew Bible: Form and Content* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1993), 216–45.

Jerusalem and its Davidic kings. The psalmist praises Jerusalem as “the city of our God, his holy mountain, beautiful in height, the joy of all the earth” (Psalm 48:2), and Ezekiel regards Israel as “the center (lit. “navel”) of the world” (Ezek 38:12). Culture, in its Israelite form, is the preferred center for human life.

The denigration of the earliest era of culture in Genesis 1–11 involves a critique of the human propensity toward evil and violence, a propensity most explicitly addressed in the motive for the flood in J and P (Gen 6:5–13). This denigration of early culture also conveys, in a less explicit voice, a cultural critique of Mesopotamia, whose kings were the dominant powers over Israel and Judah at the time of the crystallization of the traditions and texts in Genesis 1–11. The Mesopotamian coloring of several of the stories, particularly the Tower of Babel story, makes this implicit critique unmistakable. After Babel, the story of Abraham begins.

Abraham, the first Israelite patriarch, is born in Mesopotamia, in Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen 11:28, 31). Ur was one of the oldest Mesopotamian cities and was prominent in Sumerian times. The Chaldeans were a dominant group in this region during the 8th–6th centuries B.C.E., contemporary with J and P. Though Abraham has his familial origin in Ur, he does not stay there. Terah takes his family from Ur to Haran, a city remembered in Israel as the patriarchal homeland (Genesis 24; 28:1–2; 29:1–14). From Haran, Yahweh calls Abraham to the land of Canaan (Gen 12:1–3), the Promised Land. This sequence – Ur, Haran, Canaan – traces an ascent from Mesopotamia to Israel in what seems to be another résumé of cultural history, comparable to the sequence of cities and regions in Nimrod’s kingship.

The history of Abraham is the link between the Mesopotamian past and the ascent of Israel. The chosen people come out of Ur, but they are not truly constituted until they come to the Promised Land (a journey they will collectively resume after the Exodus), separated from the corrupt civilizations of the pre-Israelite era. Israel’s Mesopotamian problem is resolved by leaving Mesopotamia behind, and by construing the blessed era of human culture as beginning with Yahweh’s call and blessing of Abraham. According to the Hebrew Bible, history comes out of Mesopotamia, but it was a dubious and shameful history until the call and migration of Abraham. However, as the Israelites knew well, Mesopotamian power did not remain in the distant past. Its empires held sway at the time the primeval stories in Genesis 1–11 were cast into writing. The ancient past in these stories offers implicit commentary on Mesopotamian civilization and empire in the present, colored by transgression, hubris, and a desire to rebel.

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