

## CREATION AND FLOOD, THE TOWER OF BABEL, AND THE CITIES OF THE PLAIN

The first 11 chapters in Genesis are the most-criticized portions of the Bible. They record extraordinary events such as the creation of the world, Noah's cataclysmic flood, and the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel. Critics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have assumed these events were part of a much earlier Mesopotamian myth tradition, in which one's religion and folklore are merely expressions of fantasy, storytelling, or lessons in which great glory is given to the king or one's gods, rather than actual historical narrative. However, upon closer examination of these extrabiblical accounts in relation to the biblical record, we find that the Mesopotamian accounts provide us with an earlier, independent record containing a core historical theme that corresponds to the events recorded in Genesis.

### Creation

The *Enuma Elish*, the major Mesopotamian (Babylonian and Assyrian) creation account, was originally discovered as part of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal's literary collection, which was unearthed at Nineveh. Other parts of the story were found at Ashur (Assyria) and Uruk. These seven Akkadian cuneiform tablets, taken to the British Museum, were then rediscovered by a young man named George Smith at the British Museum. In 1876 he published their text as *The Chaldean Genesis*. The tablets were originally composed during the early second millennium BC as a mythic creation account featuring the Babylonian god Marduk as its central creative figure. Its similarities with Genesis were immediately recognized by scholars.

The *Enuma Elish* is not the only story of creation to surface in the ancient Near East. Before the time of Abraham, Egypt had their creation account of Ptah (god of Memphis) who became chief of the other gods, assuming the role of First Principle and the giver of life to all other gods. For the most part, the Egyptian myth of creation with Ptah as the primary mover, according to James Pritchard, was a justification for why the First

Dynasty established Memphis as their capital.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, Ptah would be given a promotion as first among the creator-gods of Egypt since the privileged location of Memphis would then be accepted by all. There are some similarities of this account with the Genesis record of creation. First, Ptah is said to be the creator of all things. Second, Ptah is the giver of life. Third, the origin of creation began in the creator's heart and then was spoken by the tongue.



The *Enuma Elish*. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

In Mesopotamia, not long after Abraham left Ur, a more detailed account of creation emerged known as the *Enuma Elish*. The name of the epic was taken from the opening line of the story, which is translated “When on high....” Here, the story features an assortment of Babylonian gods who represent the physical world such as Apsu (fresh/sweet water), Tiamat (revenge-seeking female deity of oceans/salt water), Ea (the antagonist who kills Apsu), Kingu (son of Tiamat and leader of the revenge-seeking gods), and Marduk (one of many gods in Babylon, who will emerge as the chief creator-god after he promises to vanquish Tiamat and the revenge-seeking others). Marduk emerges as the creator of the constellations (out of the parts of slain Tiamat), firmament, dry land, planets, and human beings. Though creation is one part of the epic, the god Marduk emerges as the myth's main theme. In the end, Marduk is celebrated as the chief of the gods, representing the strength and power of Babylon.

### *Accounting for Similarities Between Genesis and the Myths*

Critical scholars often argue that the similarities found in the Genesis account to the earlier myths are simply a continuation of the kind of stories we find in the Mesopotamian and Egyptian creation records. After all, both Genesis and these myths tell of a chief god who creates through the spoken word; the natural elements of creation are the same (water, firmament, dry land, light, sun, moon, stars, and humans). Since these Mesopotamian accounts are dated much earlier than Moses' account of creation, it is argued, Moses must have borrowed from them.

Though there are few similarities between the Genesis and mythic accounts, they are too close to simply dismiss as outright coincidence. What can be learned from them is not only found in their thematic similarities, but in their crucial differences. Indeed, the differences are the only way to distinguish one thing from another. This standard practice is found in law-enforcement officers' attempts to make a distinction between counterfeit and genuine currency. Besides this, there are several reasons why conservative scholars do not believe Moses dependent upon these earlier creation myths.

First, the critical scholars' overemphasis on similarities has blinded their eyes to the

many differences that set the accounts apart as unique. Unlike the mythic stories, the Genesis account offers one monotheistic God as the creator of all things. The Mesopotamian epic speaks of a pantheon of gods involved in creation. Genesis offers a loving and all-powerful Lord as creator, unlike the *Enuma Elish*, which portrays the gods as conspiring, vengeful monsters who are seeking ill for one another. In the *Enuma Elish*, human beings are created from the blood of a rebel god and are seen as lowly slaves created to serve and feed the gods. This is in stark opposition to the Genesis account, which records that man was made in the image of God and meant to be like His creator—the highest of His creation. Moreover, in the epic, creation was made out of something evil (Tiamat's body) and pre-existing (that is, *ex deo* or *ex materia*), whereas Genesis describes a creation from a good source (that is, God) and out of nothing (*ex nihilo*).

Second, the similarities may be accounted for by the fact that different groups were writing about the same original historical event (creation). If the creation of the world actually occurred, and various civilizations later reinterpreted the story within the contexts of their polytheistic religions and purposes, it would account for the basic similarities in content. Moses would have received his monotheistic creation account directly from God or from oral tradition that was passed down through Noah and his descendants.

Third, we now know the Genesis account is not dependent on or identified with any earlier Mesopotamian, Egyptian, or Assyrian creation tradition because of the recognized *direction* of myth. Near-Eastern scholar D.J. Wiseman and others familiar with myth literature (for example, C.S. Lewis) have understood that an early myth can become even more mythical over time, and that earlier historical events can become embellished with myth over time. But never do we see earlier myth traditions (such as these Mesopotamian and Egyptian creation accounts) become more historical-sounding, believable, and simpler over time. The Genesis record is more simple, historical, natural, and believable than these early myth traditions, and therefore it cannot possibly be dependent on them or classified as just another Near-Eastern creation account. The mythical tone is obvious in the *Enuma Elish*, but it is absent in the Genesis account. The epic tells of Marduk killing Tiamat and splitting her in two parts like a “shellfish” and creating the sky from her body. However, Genesis simply opens with the statement: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). It continues with the simple and natural formula, “Then God said, ‘Let there be...’” (Genesis 1:3,6,11,14).

Fourth, some critical scholars forget that early creation myths are not necessarily concerned with creation per se; rather, they are attempts to justify or elevate the standing of particular deities or cities in the eyes of the people. For example, creation is not the main story of *Enuma Elish*; it is the relatively unknown Babylonian god Marduk. It appears now that the story is an effort by its author to elevate Marduk as the chief god of Babylon, though prior to this story he was not given prominence among the multitude of other deities. In the above example of the Egyptian account, most scholars recognize that the creation elements present are not the main theme, but the raising of the city of Memphis and its god (Ptah) to prominence in order to justify Memphis as the location of the capital city of Egypt.

For these reasons, we must consider the Genesis account as an independent historical tradition, without dependency on the earlier Mesopotamian or Egyptian myth literature.

## The Flood

### *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

The broken tablet pictured here, dated to the fourteenth century BC, is a fragment of the Mesopotamian flood story known as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. This piece was discovered at Megiddo in the 1950s, and is part of a much older tradition that began in 2600 BC. Fragments of 12 tablets have been recovered at various sites spanning different time periods including neo-Assyrian king Ashurbanipal's (668–627 BC) library at Nineveh, which was destroyed in 612 BC. The extreme popularity of the epic is evident from its wide geographic exposure in lands such as Asia Minor (Anatolia), the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and Babylonia, as well as its translation into Hittite, Hurrian, and Babylonian cuneiform languages.



This fragment of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was discovered in Megiddo and is a copy of a much earlier version of the flood story. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

The Gilgamesh flood tradition emerged from the Sumerian literature tradition of myth and legend (third millennium BC), though most scholars are convinced that Gilgamesh (king of the Sumerian city of Uruk/Erech) was a historical person, as attested in other early documents. Eventually, Gilgamesh's search for immortality and special standing as a god led to his popularity among Mesopotamian readers. As George Smith of the British Museum began translation of the texts in the late nineteenth century, he discovered a story line of a great flood that highly resembled at many points the biblical account of Noah's Flood recorded in the book of Genesis. For example, tablet XI of the epic says the gods were displeased with humans; a god (Ea) warns Utnapishtim (the Babylonian "Noah") to build a square ship with pitch inside and out and to bring animals and family aboard; a weeklong deluge ensues; all of humanity is killed in the flood except the inhabitants of the boat; the boat came to rest on Mount Nisir in Kurdistan; the waters subsided and dry land emerged; the last of three birds sent out did not return; Utnapishtim offers sacrifices to the gods; the gods are saddened; and they grant Utnapishtim divine immortality.

### *The Atrahasis Epic*

This kind of flood story line is also found in the seventeenth-century BC Babylonian *Atrahasis Epic*. Like the Gilgamesh account, humans have displeased the gods, causing alienation; a god (Enki) warns Atrahasis of the coming flood; the gods instruct Atrahasis how to survive the deluge; Atrahasis builds a boat and gathers animals and birds into it; all mankind is destroyed except Atrahasis, who makes an offering to the gods in order to restore divine-human relations. As the god Enki speaks to Atrahasis concerning the flood the epic reads,

Flee the house, build a boat, Forsake possessions, and save life. The boat which you build, . . . be equal. . . . Roof her over like the depth, so that the sun shall not see inside her, Let her be roofed over fore and aft. The gear should be very strong, the pitch should be firm, and so give (the boat) strength. I will shower down upon you later a windfall of birds, a spate of fishes.<sup>2</sup>

Then, Atrahasis brings his family and the animals on board the boat, bolts the door shut, and seals it with pitch. It reads,

He brought pitch to seal the door. Adad was roaring in the clouds. The winds were furious as he set forth. He cut the mooring rope and released the boat. . . the flood [came forth], its power came upon the peoples [like a battle]. One person did not see another, they could [not] recognize each other in the catastrophe. [The deluge] bellowed like a bull, the wind [resound]ed like a screaming eagle. The darkness was dense, the sun was gone. . . .<sup>3</sup>

### *Other Flood References*

Other references to the Flood have been found in the literature of nearly two dozen civilizations worldwide, including the Chinese, Jewish, Greek, Mexican, Hawaiian, Babylonian, Sumerian, and Algonquin Indian traditions.

One particular reference to the Flood has been noted in the Sumerian King List, which is dated to the late third millennium BC. The list records pre- and post-flood kings, life spans and length of reigns, reading, “These are five cities, eight kings ruled them for 241,000 years. (Then) the flood swept over the earth. After the flood swept over (the earth) (and) when kingship was lowered (again) from heaven, kingship was (first) in Kish.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the kings prior to the flood are said to have lived extremely long lives—thousands of years. After the flood the life spans were drastically reduced, mostly to hundreds of years. The parallels to Genesis 6–9 in the epics and worldwide presence of flood narratives are striking, which have led some to believe that 1) the story of the great flood is altogether legend, or 2) that the Genesis account simply borrowed from these earlier myth records, or 3) that the Genesis Flood is confirmed by these texts.

### *The Eridu Genesis*

Thorkild Jacobsen identified an additional flood story written in the Sumerian language, *The Eridu Genesis*, which most likely took form about 2000 BC. In this account, which is supported by discoveries of flood texts at Ashurbanipal’s library in Nineveh and other similar Sumerian and Babylonian documents dated to the seventeenth century BC, the god Enlil sends the flood upon the world. Due to mankind’s multiplication of cities and growing population on the earth, there was an increase in “noise” that disturbed the gods’ sleep. Enlil decides to end this disturbance with a catastrophic deluge in which only Ziusudra, his family, and the animals he is instructed to bring aboard a boat survive. As with the other Babylonian and Sumerian records, the stories have a familiar order—creation of man and animals, the establishment and growth of kings, people, and cities, and then the flood. The order is identical in the biblical account offered in Genesis. The similarities can be seen when the god Enki informs Ziusudra of the coming flood.

May you he[ed] my advice! By our hand a flood will sweep over (the cities of) the half-bushel bas[kets, and the country;] [the decision,] that mankind is to be destroyed, has been made. A verdict, a command of the assemb[ly cannot be revoked],....

At the point when Ziusudra is instructed by Enki to build a boat to survive the coming deluge, the text is lost. Then the account starts again at the flood:

All the evil winds, all stormy winds gathered into one and with them, then, the flood was sweeping over the cities...for seven days and seven nights. After the flood had swept over the country, after the evil wind had tossed the big boat about the great waters, the sun came out spreading light over heaven and earth.<sup>5</sup>

After the waters subside, Ziusudra emerges from the boat and offers a sacrifice to the gods. Because of this, he is promptly rewarded with divine immortality.

### *Analysis of the Myths vs. Genesis*

Though the Mesopotamian flood accounts read much like myth, the historical reality of such an event behind them cannot easily be dismissed for several reasons.

First, there are numerous flood stories from different geographical regions and ethnic backgrounds. If the Flood actually occurred, this is what one would expect to see in the historical-archaeological record. Such an event surely would leave a lasting impression on the human psyche and demand an explanation from those who heard about it.

Second, it has been recognized by Near-Eastern scholars (such as Jacobsen) that accounts such as these are part of a mytho-historical tradition in which historical narrative is interwoven with legendary elements that take on the form of the religious culture in which it is written.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, we must be careful not to dismiss the historical nature of these accounts, though we must simultaneously recognize myth when it presents itself.

It has also been widely recognized that the biblical Flood narrative found in Genesis 6–9 cannot be dependent on or a product of these mytho-historical accounts; rather, Genesis emerges from its own tradition. There are five reasons for this conclusion.

1. *The worldviews are opposed to each other.* The Mesopotamian records reveal a polytheistic or henotheistic (worshipping one main god among others) religious culture—unlike Genesis, which portrays a monotheistic religious environment. In the former, the gods are arbitrary, unduly concerned with selfish desires, and at war with each other. The latter reflects an unchanging and uncompromising divine mind that is concerned for His creation.
2. *The focus of the divine characters is different.* In the Mesopotamian accounts, the gods finally realize they need man (for example, the gods become hungry and thirsty because mankind has not made offerings) and what he has to offer the gods. However, Genesis records the opposite: Man is to realize his need for God, and without Him we are prone to wicked selfishness.
3. *Genesis has a worldview progression diametrically opposed to the myth accounts.* The Mesopotamian accounts begin with a positive view of existence—mankind originally is dysfunctional and in need of organization, but steadily progresses to a state that becomes better than it originally was. In the end, the survivor of the flood is either immortalized or given divine status. By contrast, Genesis begins with portraying man as “good” in the Garden of Eden, then the situation steadily worsens over time through the sinful and wicked character of mankind. By the end of the account, the survivor (Noah) is rebuked and chastised for inappropriate action. The former account holds to an optimistic view of life, whereas the biblical narrative reflects a pessimistic view of life. The contrast is made clearer when we recognize that the Genesis account is morally corrective, whereas the

Mesopotamian stories are preoccupied with personal immortality and the anger of the gods.

4. *The reasons for the flood are different.* In the Mesopotamian records the problems that precipitated the flood were nonmoral actions that disturbed the gods (for example, making noise, multiplying population, and so on). Unlike the Mesopotamian stories, Genesis makes clear that the reason for the Flood was due to man's immoral actions and wicked character.
5. *The direction of myth makes literary dependency unlikely for Genesis.* As we discussed previously, the earlier Mesopotamian accounts are most certainly mythological in tone, but the later Genesis story possesses a natural and simple tenor. Though earlier myth can be transformed into a more elaborate mythological story line, it certainly does not become more natural, simple, and believable through time as we find in the later Genesis account. For example, compare the earlier Sumerian Kings List, which records the life spans of kings at tens of thousands of years. The later Genesis narrative notes long lives for many antediluvian individuals, yet they are believable because they are within several hundred years. The direction of myth principle eliminates the later Genesis account from being dependent upon the earlier legends.

For these reasons it is best to classify Genesis within its own historical tradition and as a historical account rather than as part of the Mesopotamian mytho-historical tradition. The following chart will assist in clarifying the differences in the two traditions.

Differences in Mesopotamian and Genesis Flood Accounts	
Mesopotamian	Genesis
Earlier (third millennium BC)	Later (fifteenth century BC)
Mythological tone with some history	Historical narrative without mythical tone
Polytheistic or henotheistic worldview	Monotheistic worldview
Gods are arbitrary and ill-tempered	God is unchanging, patient, moral
Focus is upon gaining immortality (survival)	Focus is upon abolishing evil (moral)
Originally man is wretched	Originally man is good
Optimistic view of existence	Pessimistic view of existence
The problem is growing population and noise	The problem is sin and wickedness
The solution to the problem is government or king	The solution is right relationship to God

Mesopotamian	Genesis
Exaggerated antediluvian life spans	Believable antediluvian life spans
Survivor is hero of the story	God is Hero of the story
Survivor becomes divine or immortal	Survivor is rebuked and chastised
Survivor offers sacrifice of appeasement	Survivor offers sacrifice of thanksgiving
The land was replenished by the gods	The land was replenished by human activity

See chart and description found in Alfred J. Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 53; see also K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 425; Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Eridu Genesis," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 100, no. 4 (December 1981), 527-529.

### *Historical and Doctrinal Nature of the Flood*

For Christians, the historical nature of Noah's Flood is well-established by the New Testament Scriptures, as well as being connected to crucial doctrines of salvation and Christ's second coming. Jesus and Peter refer to the Flood as a historical event and link the story (Matthew 24:37; Luke 17:26) to baptism, a type or picture of what saves us (1 Peter 3:18-22; 2 Peter 2:5), and to the future wicked conditions that immediately precede Christ's second coming (Matthew 24:37-39). This is seen in Peter's statement: "Baptism, which *corresponds to this* [the waters of the Flood], now saves you" (ESV). The Flood provides the historical illustration type for actual salvation. It would make no sense for these statements to be used in support of Christian doctrine if they were actually mythological. It would be absurd to say, "Just as Noah and the Flood are myth, so also this corresponds to real baptism, which is a picture or type of what saves us."

### **The Tower of Babel**

The record of the tower of Babel is preserved for us in Genesis 11:1-9. There it states that the inhabitants of Shinar were building a city and a tower and spoke one language, but later these languages were confused by God. According to most critical scholars, this event found in Scripture is mythical and certainly could not have taken place in Mesopotamia, where it is said to have occurred. Originally, support for this notion was found in the fact that no extrabiblical Mesopotamian record existed that documented such an incredible event. However, archaeological and canonical sources discovered in Mesopotamia give evidence of the historical nature of the Genesis account of the Tower of Babel. There are several reasons why the Genesis account should be viewed as historical.

### *Ziggurats*

First, there have been at least 30 *ziggurat tower* remains found throughout the Mesopotamian region, the oldest of which was located at Eridu, dating to the late fifth to mid fourth millennium BC (the Ubaid period). Ziggurats are built in an ascending stair-stepped pyramid structure similar to the Egyptian pyramids. Though there is still much debate

about the function of the ziggurat in Mesopotamian culture, they did include at the top a temple or shrine to a god or gods.

Excavations conducted between 1922 and 1934 by Sir Leonard Woolley at Abraham's birth city of Ur have located the Ziggurat of Ur-Nammu, which was dedicated to the moon-god Nanna. This structure dates to the late third millennium BC. The ziggurat tradition continued down through the Neo-Babylonian and Persian period as attested through excavations conducted at Babylon, where the city's ziggurat was discovered. The timing and multiple remains throughout the Mesopotamian region confirm there actually existed towers of the sort mentioned in Genesis 11.



The Great Ziggurat of Ur was constructed in ancient Sumer in the late third millennium BC in honor of the god Nanna/Sin. (Library of Congress, LC-matpc-13205/www.LifeintheHolyLand.com.)

### ***Building Materials***

Second, the building materials described in Genesis are consistent with those used to build Mesopotamian ziggurats. Genesis 11:3 reports that the builders sought to use “bricks” that were thoroughly “burnt” as well as “bitumen for mortar” (ESV). Near-Eastern scholars have recognized that sun-dried bricks were in use within the area of Canaan by the eighth millennium BC (Neolithic Period); by the sixth millennium BC sun-dried bricks appear in Mesopotamian sites such as the Samarran area. The Ziggurat of Ur-Nammu at Ur is an example of a tower structure that originally rose over 200 feet high, with its outer walls built of sun-dried mud bricks and bitumen mortar. This type of mortar was expensive; it was reserved for government and cultic buildings of importance, and stands in contrast to the mud mortar used in Israel during earlier periods. In contrast to sun-dried bricks, fired/baked bricks appear in the fourth millennium BC and are used with bitumen mortar, making the wall structure extremely strong.<sup>7</sup>

### ***The Confusion of Languages***

Third, Mesopotamian literature reflects the biblical account of the confusion of languages. For example, the fourth-millennium BC\* Sumerian legend known as *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* appears to contain allusions to a unified language and the subsequent diversifying of language by the gods. The larger story is composed around two main figures, Enmerkar, who is the priest-king who ruled in Uruk, and the lord of

\* Though reflecting a tradition of the fourth millennium BC, the extant copy was most likely *composed* in the late third millennium BC.

Aratta, who ruled a city (Aratta) located far to the east of Uruk, and their love for the woman Inanna. Inanna is the lord of Aratta's wife; however, it appears that Inanna loved Enmerkar more than she did her husband. A series of intellectual challenges between the two men is designed so one can gain the upper hand. The portion of the epic that contains the reference to the languages makes up part of a subsection called "The Spell of Nudimmud." Jacobsen's translation reads,

In those days, there being no snakes, there being no scorpions, there being no hyenas, there being no lions, there being no dogs or wolves, there being no(thing) fearful or hair-raising, mankind had no opponents—in those days in the countries Subartu, Hamazi, bilingual Sumer\* being the great country of princely office, the region of Uri being a country in which was what was appropriate, the country Mardu lying in safe pastures, (in) the (whole) compass of heaven and earth the people entrusted (to him) could address Enlil, verily, in but a single tongue. . . . Enki, lord of abundance, lord of effective command, did the lord of intelligence, the country's clever one, did the leader of the gods, did the sagacious omen-revealed lord of Eridu estrange the tongues in their mouths† as many as were put there. The tongues of men which were one.‡8

Some have suggested that these statements refer to the confusion of languages as an actual historical event that has been embedded in mythic language, similar to what we have seen with the Flood and creation accounts.<sup>§</sup> This appears to be the case since the god Enki is involved, the deity associated with the historical peoples of Eridu. The confusion of language is an event the memory of the people would not soon forget. It may very well be a recounting of the story of what happened in Shinar in terms of the causal connection between their god(s) and the confusion of language.

### *The Word Babel*

Fourth, it is also interesting to note that the word *Babel*,<sup>¶</sup> the term associated with this event by God (Genesis 11:9) is still used today to refer to unintelligible speech. (*What*

\* Samuel Kramer translates this as "harmony-tongued" in Samuel Noah Kramer, "The Babel of Tongues: A Sumerian Version," in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88, no. 1: 108-111.

† In "The Babel of Tongues" Kramer translates "estrange the tongues in their mouths" as "changed the speech in their mouths."

‡ In "The Babel of Tongues" Kramer translates "The tongues of men which were one" as "Into the speech of man that (until then) had been one."

§ As was the case for creation and the Flood, the presence of widespread testimony to the confusion of languages is expected to emerge from various people groups. For more on the confusion of language from other cultures see James George Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament; Studies in Comparative Religion, Legend and Law* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1923), 384ff, in which he mentions cultures in Kenya (the Wasania), Australia, California (the Maidu), Guatemala (the Quiche Maya), and the Tlingit of Alaska, to name a few.

¶ Though the term means "the gate of God," it sounds like the Hebrew word for "confused" (*balal*). For more on the word association of "Babel" see Mark L. Howard, "Therefore it was called Babel," *Journal of Creation* 23 (3) 2009, 56-57.

*are you babbling about?*) It is also interesting that the Mesopotamian city (and area) of Babylon adopted this name from early times; Babylon is in the general vicinity of the land of Shinar, where the events originally took place. It is not only Babylon's beginnings that have been associated with the confusion of language; its fall as an empire is associated with unintelligible writing on the wall to the last Babylonian king, Belshazzar (Daniel 5).

### *Theories of Language Origin*

What is more, of the two main theories of the origin and development of language—namely, the *monogenesis theory*, which holds that all people come from a common genetic and linguistic source and the language evolved over time into diverse languages, and the *candelabra theory*, which holds that languages began in different separate geographical locations and developed based on the social grouping of the population—neither can adequately explain the diverse linguistic phenomena we experience today. The former theory does not allow enough time for the linguistic evolution to take place. The latter theory cannot explain the presence of similar words and speech, which implies a common original language and not a radical division in geographical groups. However, the Genesis account of the Tower of Babel episode appears to overcome these problems, since all people spoke the same language originally, and the time needed to diversify the world's languages is explained by the supernatural and immediate confusion of languages. Furthermore, the fact that there are today multiple languages utilized around the world is a consistent modern testimony to the *result* of such an extraordinary historical event. Despite our limited understanding of how the diversity of language occurred, the effects described in Genesis 11 are consistent with what we experience as a phenomenon in our modern world.

Though external evidence for the confusion of languages in Genesis 11:1-9 is admittedly thin, certainly it is consistent with the biblical account offered in the Scriptures.

### **Ancient Sodom**

#### *Discovery*

The famed biblical “cities of the plain” (Genesis 10; 13:10-13; 19) were once thought by critical scholars to be merely legendary places used by biblical authors to explain a moral metaphor. In 1924, William F. Albright set out to explore the southern end of the Dead Sea, looking for the city of Sodom. As a result, he posited that the city lay beneath the Dead Sea waters, since the water level must have risen over the centuries. Later investigations of the southern sea floor revealed that the waterline had indeed



The stone and mud-brick ruins of Bab edh-Dhra located southeast of the Dead Sea.

risen as Albright suspected; however, no ancient structures were found. Albright began to survey an area near the southeast shores of the Dead Sea in modern Jordan, the city of Bab edh-Dhra pictured here, which he dated to the Early Bronze Age (3150–2200 BC).

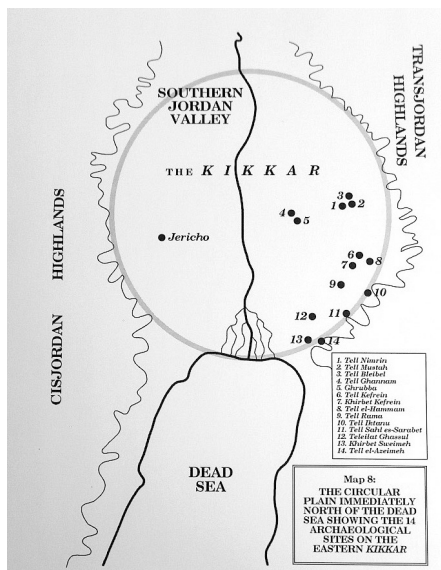
Bab edh-Dhra was later excavated, in the mid-1960s, by Paul Lapp and again in 1973 by Walter Rast and Thomas Schaub. Evidence shows this well-settled and fortified city was equipped with a massive cemetery, homes, building structures, monoliths, cultic structures—enough infrastructure to house a large number of inhabitants. The examination of the cumulative data has revealed that the city was destroyed by an enormous fire, which is confirmed by an extremely thick layer of ash present at the site. In view of these facts, many scholars (including Bryant Wood) have identified Bab edh-Dhra as the biblical city of Sodom.

However, more recent ongoing research conducted by Dr. Steven Collins at the northeastern end of the Dead Sea region (in Jordan) has offered promising evidence supporting the northern location of Tall el-Hammam as the city of Sodom.<sup>9</sup>

### Background and Setting

Sodom and the other “cities of the plain” are referenced early within the table of nations (Genesis 10) and extend to the period of Abraham (Genesis 13; 19). Genesis 19:28 describes Sodom at the time of its destruction as existing in the “land of the valley [plain].” Collins argues for the location of Sodom based on 40 salient points about the geography of the cities of the southern Jordan valley. When referencing the biblical data, Collins noticed the word used for “plain,” or in some translations “valley,” is the Hebrew *kikkar*, which means “disk” or “circle.” The word is used in Old Testament Hebrew over 50 times to refer to “a talent of metal” or a “circular flat loaf of bread,” but none of these usages employ the definite article to convey a sense of location (geography).

However, there are 13 rare geographical usages of *kikkar* (found only in the Old Testament); 10 of these are found in the context of the Sodom story, which



(Photo courtesy of Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project [TeHeP].)



Tall el-Hammam, southwest view of the upper tell surface.

places the location of Sodom in the eastern disk of the southern Jordan valley (Genesis 13:1-12; immediately north of the Dead Sea).

Collins notes that there are many other standard Hebrew terms for “plain” and “valley,” but these are always avoided when the Bible speaks of the *kikkar* of the Jordan or the “cities of the *kikkar*.” From an aerial map looking down on the *kikkar* it reveals that Jericho resides at the western edge of the disk, southeast of Bethel/Ai, where Abraham was positioned when he saw the smoke rising from Sodom after its destruction (Genesis 13:3-4). Genesis tells of Lot separating from Abraham; Lot saw that the Jordan *kikkar* (valley) was well-watered, like the Lord’s garden and the land of Egypt (Genesis 13:10), so he travelled *east* and lived in the cities of the valley and pitched his tent near Sodom (Genesis 13:12). The Scriptures say that Lot viewed the entire Jordan disk with his naked eye, something that would be impossible when looking south toward Bab edh-Dhra. Moreover, Sodom was considered one of the cities of the plain, and no city south of the “mouth of the Jordan” (*hayarden*), like Bab edh-Dhra, would be considered as belonging to the cities of the *kikkar*. To include Bab edh-Dhra in the cities of the disk would force an unnatural meaning on the term *kikkar*. The “*kikkar* of the Jordan” appears to refer only to the disk-shaped alluvial plain directly east of Bethel/Ai and north of the Dead Sea; thus Sodom must be located on the eastern side of the Jordan disk. This conclusion is confirmed by Genesis 10:19, which describes the cities of the plain as the eastern extent of the Canaanite clans.

Collins has identified Sodom’s location as Tall el-Hammam, which is situated on the eastern edge of the Jordan disk, eight miles northeast of the mouth of the Jordan (*hayarden*). It is the largest tell in the southern Levant, measuring 1,000 meters long and containing within its walls 85 acres, a much smaller area than the general occupational spread beyond the walls of 240 acres. The tell itself is comprised of a massive upper and lower area that most likely dates to the Early Bronze Age. The enormous size of the area was anticipated since 1) it is represented by the Bible to be the largest Bronze Age urban center in the eastern *kikkar*, much larger than Jericho, Jerusalem, and any other city in the southern Jordan valley; 2) it is the only *kikkar* city mentioned by itself; 3) King Bera of Sodom is the only spokesperson within the military coalition formed by the cities of the plain (Genesis 14:17-24); 4) Lot was accustomed to sitting in the gates of the city (Genesis 19:1), thus implying defensive fortification; 5) it was situated in close proximity to a major east-west trade route; 6) it had access to abundant fresh water and rich agricultural soil; 7) it had excellent sight lines into the Jordan valley; and 8) it is always mentioned first when speaking of the eastern cities of the plain.

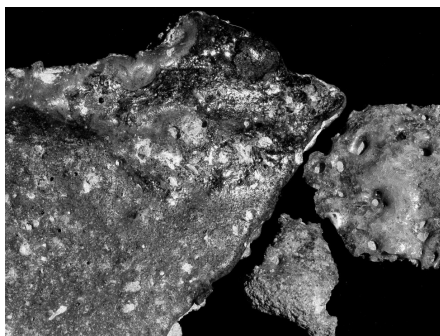


Tall el-Hammam is the largest tell in the southern Levant, with the upper tell alone measuring over 80 acres. (Photo courtesy of Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project [TeHeP].)

### *Key Confirmations of Tall el-Hammam as the Site of Sodom*



Human remains discovered at Sodom in the Middle Bronze Age destruction layer. (Photo courtesy of Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project [TeHeP].)



In addition to other high-heat indicators unearthed at Tall el-Hammam such as the thick layer of ash and debris, charred human remains, and destruction debris, this 4.5-inch-long piece of a melted Middle Bronze Age storage jar (in left of photo) was discovered. Its “frothy” and “glassy” melted appearance reveals that the sherd was briefly exposed to temperatures that far exceeded 2,000° F. (which is about the same heat as volcanic magma). Additional melted sherds have been discovered at various locations across the site, indicating that the city was destroyed in a sudden, intense, high-heat catastrophic event. A similar “melting” phenomenon resulting from brief high-heat exposure is found in the two small greenish pieces of Trinitite (or “desert glass,” pictured in right of photo) taken from ground zero at the United States atomic weapon test area in New Mexico. Astoundingly, analysis of some soil and sand samples from Tall el-Hammam shows they possess qualities similar to Trinitite. (Photo by Michael C. Luddini. Courtesy of Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project [TeHeP].)

After eight seasons of excavation at the site, Collins has discovered several key indicators that confirm the city as Sodom.

First, an abrupt occupational gap of several centuries immediately after the Middle Bronze Age II (1800–1550 BC) offers a perfect fit for the timing of the destruction of Sodom. For some reason, the city was no longer inhabited, which appears strange since it was located on a major trade route, had freshwater springs, possessed fortifications, and was located close to the Jordan River. Sodom had location, location, location! However, during the time of Moses and Joshua (1400 BC) the eastern Jordan disk (“plains of Moab”) is called “the wasteland” below Pisgah (Numbers 21:20), which is consistent with the timing of its destruction and the lack of Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 BC) and Iron Age I (1200–1000 BC) material at the site.

Excavators at the tell, this author (Joseph Holden) being one of them, have noticed the transition from the Middle Bronze Age directly into the sudden appearance of occupation that begins in the tenth century BC (Iron Age II). An example of this abrupt transition can be seen in Field D on the upper tell. Our excavation team uncovered a massive Iron Age II defensive wall built over the Middle Bronze Age mud-brick fortification rampart. It appears the city lay in ruins for several centuries after the conflagration, until it was possibly rebuilt as one of the largest cities in the area under Solomon, as his administrative capital of the Gilead district (1 Kings 4:19).

Second, Tall el-Hammam contains a massive destruction and ash layer (one meter thick in some areas) distributed at

various locations of the Middle Bronze Age layer of the city. The site reveals extensive destruction by fire of architectural features such as roofs, dwellings, walls, fortification barriers, as well as personal items such as jewelry, tools, and pottery. In addition to these, one of the most sobering and striking features involves human remains that depict catastrophic destruction. It appears that many of the inhabitants' bones are charred and distorted, like those pictured, and are situated in a way that indicates a violent high-heat flash event that may have thrown inhabitants to the western side of their dwellings, showing that the destruction could have originated from the east.

Theories positing an earthquake, accompanied by natural gas and bitumen released into the air, as responsible for the destruction have been largely dismissed since the nature of the destruction is not consistent with architectural collapse or lurching, nor is there evidence of pressurized gas and bitumen in the northern Dead Sea area. Besides, if an earthquake were responsible, the city would have simply been rebuilt immediately, as any city at a prime location such as this would have been.

Third, in addition to the architectural destruction, distorted human remains, and pottery, environmental analysis of the site has revealed high-heat indicators that are consistent with the biblical description of Sodom's fiery destruction. For example, one sample of Middle Bronze Age pottery had its surface transformed into glass. After visual and scientific testing of the shard, its transformation could only be explained by an extreme high-heat flash event; only a temperature of thousands of degrees Fahrenheit (much hotter than kilns of that day could heat pottery) could achieve such a process. Related to this, samples of area soil and sand have been examined. These samples give evidence of a high-heat event that was hot enough to turn desert sand into "desert glass," a phenomenon more associated with lightning, airbursts, or atomic explosions in the deserts of New Mexico than the once fertile Jordan River valley. Collins describes the high-heat catastrophic remains when he says,

The latest Middle Bronze Age layer at Tall el-Hammam consists of 1.5 to 3 feet of heavy ash and destruction debris. A fortified town was then built atop the upper tall in the tenth century B.C.E. All of Tall el-Hammam and associated eastern kikkar sites also lay in ruins for this same period of time—approximately seven centuries. The terminal destruction layer at Tall el-Hammam lies across both the upper and lower tall and consists of a matrix of heavy, dark ash mixed with fragments of pottery, mudbricks, a wide range of object fragments and human bone scatter. Numerous pottery fragments of this matrix lie across the site and have outside surfaces melted into glass, with some bubbled up like "frothy" magma, indicating they were burned in a flash heat event far exceeding 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit. The conflagration must have yielded extremely high heat and effected catastrophic damage.<sup>10</sup>

In support of these archaeological finds are the many geographical reasons why Tall el-Hammam fits the biblical account of Sodom. As mentioned, Dr. Steven Collins has compiled a massive assortment of geographical data, some of which is adapted in the

chart below. (For a complete listing of Collins’s points, see appendix B, “Ascertaining the Geography of the Cities of the Plain: 40 Points.”)

Which Location of Sodom Accounts for the Biblical Geography of Genesis 13:1-12?		
Geographical Criterion	Bab edh-Dhra	Tall el-Hammam
Located on the <i>kikkar</i> of the Jordan River	No	Yes
Located on <i>kikkar</i> that is visible from Bethel/Ai	No	Yes
Located on the farthest edge of the Jordan disk (perhaps easternmost of <i>kikkar</i> cities)	No	Yes
In area watered like the Garden of Yahweh	Maybe	Yes
In area of <i>hayarden</i> watered like Egypt	No	Yes
In area of annual delta ( <i>hayarden</i> ) inundation (watered like Egypt)	No	Yes
In lands east of Canaan boundary	Yes	Yes
Accessed by traveling eastward from Bethel/Ai	No	Yes
Likely located on major east-west trade route	No	Yes*

From Steven Collins, “40 Salient Points on the Geography of the Cities of the Kikkar,” in *Biblical Research Bulletin*, vol. 7, no. 1: 5ff. Used by permission.

\*See Steven Collins and Latayne C. Scott, *Discovering the City of Sodom* (New York: Simon and Schuster/Howard Books, 2013).

### Biblical Significance

Ancient writers in the Near East, whether they were writing myth or history, always used actual geographical markers familiar to them to adequately communicate their story. In the case of Tall el-Hammam, the geographical information appears to have exceeded the customary criteria needed to typically consider an ancient ruin a confirmed biblical city. Many existing biblical sites have been confirmed based on much less geographical evidence than that offered for Tall el-Hammam. Indeed, after reviewing the still-increasing amount of archaeological, biblical, and geographical evidence, if one denies that Tall el-Hammam is the biblical city of Sodom, every biblical city that has been confirmed on less than epigraphical evidence must be called into question.

The Tall el-Hammam location seems to possess everything needed to be consistent with the biblical data and the historical context of the Middle Bronze Age, including the following:

1. It is confirmed by Middle Bronze Age chronology based on pottery reading, stratigraphy, and architectural design;
2. it displays catastrophic destruction of infrastructure with high-heat indicators;
3. pottery and human remains depict massive destruction with high-heat indicators;
4. it evidences an occupational hiatus for several centuries after its destruction as attested by Numbers 21:20 and absence of Late Bronze Age materials;
5. 40 points attest to Sodom's geographical location within the eastern *kikkar* (see appendix B, "Ascertaining the Geography of the Cities of the Plain: 40 Points");
6. at least a dozen ancient cities exist in close proximity, none of which are major urban centers in the eastern Jordan disk;
7. the enormous size of the tell fits with the biblical descriptions of the site as a massive urban city-state;
8. the mud-brick sloping fortifications (*glacis*) descending approximately 100 feet from the outer walls of the upper tell down to the surface of the lower tell match the biblical account of Sodom's gates;
9. it is located east of Bethel/Ai; and
10. the site would be within view of Abraham while he was at or near Bethel, so he would have been able to see the smoke rising from Sodom after its destruction.



These sixth- to seventh-century AD ruins (located near the Dead Sea in Jordan) of a Byzantine monastery and church mark the traditional site of Lot's cave. Genesis 19:30-38 tells of Lot and his two daughters fleeing from Sodom to Zoar to escape Sodom's fiery destruction. Later, they moved to the hills, where they settled in a cave (entrance pictured far left). The Madaba Map lists the Church of St. Lot in this very location; several mosaic floors dating to the sixth and seventh century AD—some of which bear dedications to "St. Lot"—attest to this site as an early place of pilgrimage.

Bab edh-Dhra does not appear to fit with the Middle Bronze Age dating or the geographical details mentioned in Scripture. The site is much too early (2600 BC) to fit with the Middle Bronze Age lives of Abraham and Lot.

Worthy of note is the fact that Sodom is the only *major* Bronze Age urban center mentioned in the Bible located on the eastern Jordan disk, and that Tall el-Hammam is the only major Bronze Age urban center on the eastern Jordan disk. There are a handful of other cities; however, they are much too small to be considered major urban centers by any means. In other words, Tal el-Hammam appears to be in the right place, in the right time, with the right stuff.