

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF GENESIS 11:1-9: BABEL OR UR?

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The purpose of this article is to propose a historical event behind Gen 11:1-9 that answers to the two specifically stated results of the "tower of Babel": the breakup of linguistic unity and the scattering of the tower builders. It is common knowledge now that the tower is the ziggurat of the lower Tigris-Euphrates basin, that Shinar is the Biblical equivalent of Sumer, and that burnt brick and bitumen mortar were widely used in the third millennium B.C. in Sumer. No effort will be made, therefore, to detail these points for their own sake but only as they relate to the central suggestion of this article.

Two attitudes toward Genesis 1-11 seem to hinder any attempt to tie the "tower of Babel" to a specific historical event: (1) that historical co-ordinates with the book of Genesis do not become clear or even plausible until Genesis 12, and (2) that Genesis 11 reflects a later Mesopotamian situation but not one predating Abraham and his migration. The first attitude may be illustrated from Robert Davidson in his recent commentary on the *NEB* text of Genesis 1-11. Davidson observes, "It is only when we come to the story of Abraham in chapter 12 that we can claim with any certainty to be in touch with traditions which reflect something of the historical memory of the Hebrew people."¹ Similarly N. M. Sarna asks, "Does this then mean that the patriarchal narratives are merely symbolic and not to be regarded as factual? Are they in the same categories as the stories related in the first eleven chapters of Genesis?"²

This much at least may be agreed on: It is more difficult to tie down historical co-ordinates for Genesis 1-11 than for Genesis 12-50. It is also true, as Davidson says, that the twelfth chapter of Genesis marks the point where the historical memory of the Hebrew people takes its actual point of OT departure. Indeed it is true that Genesis is the point where we can now confidently parallel cultural references with a definite period of ancient Near Eastern history. This is not, however, Davidson's meaning. He means rather that Genesis 1-11 is mythological, while anything concretely historical does not begin until Genesis 12. He identifies the materials of Genesis 1-11 as either "story myths" which are etiological and explanatory about questions concerning life, society and the world, or religious and liturgical myths recited at festivals or other religious celebrations.³

It is worth noting that not so long ago Genesis 12-50 was treated in the same way as Genesis 1-11 is today. But this has all been changed by the Nuzi and Mari

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¹R. Davidson, *Genesis 1-11* (Cambridge: University Press, 1973) 8.

²N. M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 85.

³R. Davidson, *Genesis*, pp. 10-11.

excavations and by various artifactual discoveries.⁴ Sarna reflects this change by beginning his treatment of the patriarchal age with illustrating the new historical approach to Genesis 12-50.⁵

The second attitude may be illustrated by Speiser's treatment. Of the "tower of Babel" paragraph in Genesis he writes, "What inspired the present Biblical theme in the first instance was not monumental architecture but literary tradition. We need look no farther than the account of the building of Babylon and its temple that is given in *Enuma elish* VI, lines 60-62. In describing the construction of *Esagila*, as the sacred precinct was called, the Akkadian text says: 'The first year they molded its bricks. And when the second year arrived they raised the head of *Esagila* toward *Apsu*.'" ⁶ Since Speiser holds to the documentary theory and assigns Gen 11:1-9 to J, the materials could not in his view have been written much before the ninth century B.C. Nor is *Enuma elish* attested before the Iron Age except in very fragmentary form. Most of the copies we have of it come, in fact, from some time well after the beginning of the Iron Age.

Sarna rightly rejects Speiser's literary dependence explanation for the origin of the "tower of Babel" story. He holds that it rests, rather, on a historical event: the founding of the First Dynasty of Babylon in the nineteenth century B.C. He writes, "The Bible has deliberately selected the mighty city of Babylon with its famed temple of Marduk as the scene for a satire on paganism, its notions, mythology and religious forms."⁷ A historical-event explanation is better than a literary-prototype approach because it is more consistent with the realism of Biblical historiography.⁸ Through his treatment Sarna insists on groping back into the recesses of Mesopotamian history for possible ties and parallels. If history rather than mythology or legend is the appropriate approach to the interpretation of the Biblical documents, then it is necessary to probe even farther back in time than the founding of the First Dynasty of Babylon in the nineteenth century before Christ.

Sarna's approach brings up a complication—namely, the dating of the patriarchal period. This, of course, is not the place for a full discussion of that problem. The point of view adopted here for working purposes is that of Albright, Glueck, de Vaux; Wright and Kitchen, that the patriarchal events belong to the Middle Bronze Age, probably MB II (1900-1550 B.C.).⁹ Since the evidence for this view seems convincing and is widely accepted, the placing of the patriarchs this early furnishes the fulcrum for our problem. We shall have to look for an event that predates the call and migration of Abraham (c. 1800 B.C.). If we take

⁴Cf. A. Parrot, *Abraham and His Times* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 1-9, though the relevance of Nuzi and Mari and other similar second-millennium resources is now vigorously disputed by T. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* (New York: de Gruyter, 1974), and J. Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).

⁵N. M. Sarna, *Understanding*, p. 85.

⁶E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (New York: Doubleday, 1964) 75.

⁷N. M. Sarna, *Understanding*, p. 74.

⁸Cf. G. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1973).

⁹K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity, 1966) 41-56.

Genesis 12 as a starting point and push back into chapter 11, the genealogies suggest some span of time between the "tower of Babel" and Abraham's call, assuming a general chronological sequence in the text. Since we do not know the exact meaning of the genealogical numbers in Genesis 5 and 11, there is no way of being sure of the length of the span by genealogical calculation alone. The event may have occurred near the end of the chapter 11 genealogical sequence, near the middle, or near its beginning. If the statement in Gen 10:25, that it was in the days of Peleg that the "earth" was divided, refers to the division of language in 11:1-9, then Genesis 10:18 indicates that the event would have occurred about in the middle of the genealogical sequence since that is roughly the position of Peleg in the genealogy. In any event, it seems desirable to look for an event predating 1900 B.C. with which to tie the Biblical story. Since the founding of the First Dynasty of Babylon did not occur until the middle of the nineteenth century B.C. (c. 1830), it is unsuited to the event sequence of Genesis.

A plausible alternative is the fall of the Third Dynasty of Ur, the event that marked the end of Sumerian civilization about 1960 B.C.

I. THE LOCAL CHARACTER OF GENESIS 11:1-9

At first reading, the language of 11:1 that "the whole earth was of one language and of one speech" seems universal. The context, however, especially the tenth chapter, immediately encourages doubt about universalism in 11:1. Three times in that chapter (10:5, 20, 31) the natural development of diverse languages and dialects is indicated. The intent of 11:1 can therefore hardly be to represent a total worldwide singleness of language after the flood, since the narrator would surely have caught so obvious a contradiction to the immediate context. Several additional considerations encourage a localized view of the "tower of Babel" events.

First, the Hebrew word *'ereš* vacillates from a sharply localized usage to a universal usage throughout the entire OT. In 11:2 the same word is used of the lower Tigris-Euphrates basin in the expression "land of Shinar." Shinar is the Biblical equivalent of Sumer. In the thought of the first few verses of Genesis 11, the sequence of local concepts is the whole Tigris-Euphrates basin, a plain within the basin (v 2), a city within the plain (v 4), a tower within the city (v 4). In 11:2 the term "land of Shinar" brings forward the use of *'ereš* from v 1.

In addition the entire paragraph is full of local expressions such as "a plain in the land of Shinar," "let us build a city, and a tower whose top is unto heaven, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." The unity of language and the tower construction, so far from being universal phenomena, are so localized that the tower builders look out upon their world with fear and are concerned for their security lest they be scattered through the whole earth. The "whole earth" of v 4 is the broadest representation of the earth in the passage but can hardly be worldwide in the modern sense. The tower and the city from which the people are dispersed must be local, and this is confirmed more explicitly in v 9 where the city or region is identified as "Babel."

If Ur and not Babylon is the larger reference of the pericope, then why "Babel"? It is not possible to question a reference to Babylon in v 9. It is possible, however, to question whether v 9 was originally part of the Biblical story. The

etiological character of the verse alone strongly suggests that it is actually a later editorial comment, and the stylistics of vv 8-9 likewise imply that the narrative originally ended at v 8. There is no question that in the hands of this editor the story has been given the flavor of a satire on paganism.¹⁰

Another consideration is that the sequence of thoughts may very well reflect the sequence of events. It is possible to take v 9 as implying that the place where the events of vv 1-8 took place came to be called "Babel" only as a consequence of its judgment by God. If so, then some civilization earlier than the First Dynasty of Babylon is the subject of vv 1-8. This reasoning also leads directly to Ur III, since it is the predecessor. The original story, then, had nothing to do with later Babylon except that in the sequence of kingdoms and civilizations Babylon replaced Sumer in the same general region. (Unnamed) Ur and Babylon are thus co-ordinated by the editor's comment, an outlook consistent with the general cultural homogeneity of the region throughout its long history.

II. THE UNITY OF LANGUAGE

The first and most conspicuous feature of conditions in the "land of Shinar" is said to be the unity of its language. The statement is made in a generalized way and may take in a long period of history, reaching far back into the recesses of the settlement in Mesopotamia. In 1963 Samuel Noah Kramer published a translation of a fragment of the poem entitled "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta." The poem refers to a time in the memory of Sumer when the entire land spoke one tongue only, notes that the situation has changed, and states that Sumer is now "many-tongued."¹¹ In 1968, however, Kramer was able to translate and publish another portion of the same poem extending beyond the first portion. Together the text of these two portions encompasses about twenty lines as follows:

Once upon a time there was no snake, there was no scorpion,
 There was no hyena, there was no lion,
 There was no wild (?) dog, no wolf,
 There was no fear, no terror;
 Man had no rival.

In those days the lands Shubur and Hāmazi,
 Harmony-tongued (?) Sumer, the great land of the decrees of princship,
 Uri, the land having all that is appropriate,
 The land Martu, resting in security,
 The whole universe, the people in unison
 To Enlil in one tongue. . . .
 Then Ada the Lord, Ada the prince, Ada the king,
 Enki, Ada the Lord, Ada the prince, Ada the king,
 Ada the Lord, Ada the prince, Ada the king,

¹⁰N. M. Sarna, *Understanding*, pp. 63 ff. On the theology see G. von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972); R. Laurin, "The Tower of Babel Revisited," in *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies* (ed. G. Tuttle; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 142-145.

¹¹S. N. Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago: University Press, 1963) 285. M. Kline, "Genesis," in *The New Bible Commentary* (3rd edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 91, suggests that "the text (of Genesis) does not attribute all language differentiation to this event nor even claim it as the first instance of such after the flood, nor deny linguistic variations before the flood."

Enki, the Lord of abundance, (whose) commands are trustworthy,
 The Lord of wisdom who understands the land,
 The leader of the gods
 Endowed with wisdom the Lord of Eridu,
 Changed the speech in their mouths,
 And [brought?] contention into it,
 Into the speech of man that (until then) had been one.¹²

Kramer regarded this material as sufficiently convincing evidence of a real parallel to Genesis 11 to give the article the title he did. The texts are in Oxford's Ashmolean Museum; some were dug up at Kish during the 1923-1932 Anglo-American excavations, and the remainder belong to the Weld-Blundell collection. The fact that they come from a time either during or near the fall of the Third Dynasty of Ur is of major importance.¹³ Kramer's comment is of interest: "Our new piece, therefore, puts it beyond all doubt that the Sumerians believed that there was a time when all mankind spoke one and the same language, and that it was Enki, the Sumerian god of wisdom, who confounded their speech. The reason for this fateful deed is not stated in the text; it may well have been inspired by Enki's jealousy of Enlil and the universal sway over mankind which he enjoyed."¹⁴

Sufficient attention must be paid to the fact that the material is from mythological sources. As with other Sumerian mythology, however, there is historical reference, as Kramer suggests. In the text it is quite clear that at a not-too-remote point in the past a linguistic change occurred in which Sumer, once unified, experienced a breakup of language. We cannot, of course, date this with any precision. But the fact that the text comes from about the time of the fall of the Third Dynasty of Ur is suggestive of the connection. During the reign of Shu-sin, the fourth king of the Third Dynasty of Ur, there began serious incursions into Sumer by Amorites from the Arabian desert.¹⁵ These inroads and attacks on Sumerian cities up and down the Euphrates valley were soon supplemented by attacks from the east by Elamites. The attacks ultimately led to the downfall of the Third Dynasty of Ur about 1960 B.C., the event that marked the political end of Sumerian civilization. The Semitic family of languages spoken by the invaders was different from the language of the Sumerians, which had been spoken for at least a thousand years continuously since Sumerian civilization began about 3000 B.C. Kramer notes, "Sumerian was an agglutinative tongue unrelated to the inflected Semitic family of languages of which Hebrew forms a part."¹⁶ There had, of course, been periods of Semitic control of Sumer during the third millennium B.C., the best known being the Old Akkadian period (c. 2360-2180 B.C.).¹⁷ Dur-

¹²S. N. Kramer, "The Babel of Tongues: A Sumerian Version," *JAOS* 88/1 (January-March, 1968) 108-111.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁵S. N. Kramer, *Sumerians*, p. 69.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 298.

¹⁷J. Finegan, *Light From the Ancient Past* (Princeton: University Press, 1959) 46 ff.

ing this period Semites overran the whole of Sumer under their greatest king, Sargon I. A Sumerian revival occurred about 2100 B.C. when the Neo-Sumerian king Gudea re-established Sumerian power and culture at Lagash. This Semitic factor does not, however, diminish the point under consideration. It only suggests that the breakup of the Sumerian language perhaps went on progressively over a period of time. The distintegration and mixing of the language reached its climax with the invading Semites and the fall of Sumerian civilization corresponding with the overthrow of Ur III about 1960 B.C. The connection is plausible since Gen 11:7 notices the linguistic breakup of the "land of Shinar" paralleled in Sumerian poetry.

Finally, in both cases this breakup of language is due to the power and action of deity. But, although the texts do not clearly say so, the breakup was brought on by historical causes, including the invasion of the land by Amorites and Elamites and the normalization of their speech in Sumer. This is consistent with the Biblical pattern of judgment since elsewhere in Scripture the processes of history are regularly used to accomplish divine purposes. The Biblical narrator states only the origin and primary source of the judgment (God) and the final result (confusion of language). He does not state the intervening causes. Thus the narrative is compressed, being only as detailed as was appropriate to the writer's purpose.

III. THE TEMPLE TOWER

All modern students of Genesis agree that the tower of Genesis 11 is the Mesopotamian ziggurat. The earliest known ziggurat was found at Uruk (Biblical Erech—Gen 10:10).¹⁸ The Uruk ziggurat, dating to about 3000 B.C. or slightly earlier, was about 140 by 150 feet and probably stood about 30 feet high.¹⁹ Approximately 32 to 34 ziggurats or ziggurat foundations have been attested in the Tigris-Euphrates basin.²⁰ The oldest literary reference to a ziggurat is to be found in an inscription of Gudea, dating from the twenty-second century B.C. Gudea refers to "the temple of the seven zones" that he erected to Ningirsu.²¹ The best-preserved ziggurat of lower Mesopotamia is the one at Ur, frequently seen in photographs. The ziggurat was begun by Urnammu, the founder of the Third Dynasty of Ur. The evidence for a temple tower at Babylon itself is slender but clear. A text of Sharkalisharri, the king of Agade about 2250 B.C., mentions his restoration of the temple-tower at Babylon.²² This notice, together with the pre-2000-B.C. reference to a seven-storied temple tower at Lagash and the continuous (though late) testimony to a seven-storied tower at Babylon, suggests that there

¹⁸Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 24; cf. R. W. Ehrich, *Chronologies in Old World Archaeology* (Chicago: University Press, 1965) 177 ff.; A. Parrot, *Abraham*, pp. 26-51, where the most worthwhile discussion in English will be found along with photographs and excellent reconstructions and diagrams.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 26-28; cf. M. Beek, *Atlas of Mesopotamia* (London: Nelson, 1962) 151. Beek includes a large map of all known ziggurat remains. The original attempt to make a registry of ziggurats appears to have been that of Parrot, however; cf. A. Parrot, *Abraham*, p. 31.

²¹A. Parrot, *Abraham*, p. 18.

²²D. J. Wiseman, "Babel," in *The New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 116-117.

was not only a ziggurat at Babylon at a very early time but that it may well have been seven stories in height from the very first—and possibly the largest in all of Mesopotamia. Whether it was the first or largest remains to be seen; but if the largest, it might further explain the Babylonian interest of the story in Genesis 11. Regardless of such questions of exacting detail the presence of a ziggurat at Babylon before 2000 B.C. is attested. It is even possible that Urnammu worked on the Babylonian tower since he also built the one at Nippur.

The ideology of the Mesopotamian ziggurat is not yet agreed upon by scholars and researchers.²³ Despite this disagreement the names used for ziggurats are indicative of at least one aspect, if not the most basic aspect, of their meaning. The names show a striking resemblance to the Gen 11:4 characterization as “a tower whose top may reach unto heaven, and let us make us a name. . . .” M. Beek has collected a number of ziggurat characterizations from Sumerian sources.²⁴ At Nippur, Larsa and Sippar the people spoke of the tower as “the house of the link between heaven and earth.” The ziggurat at Babylon was called “the house of the foundations of heaven and earth.” Another text from Nippur speaks of the tower there as “the great mountain of Enlil, whose peak reaches the sky, whose foundations are laid in the resplendent depths.” The tower at Borsippa near Babylon was called “the house of the seven ladders of heaven and earth.” The Sumerian word *enki* itself is actually a compound meaning “heaven-earth.” The Sumerians believed that in early times heaven and earth were one and then subsequently separated. The separation is very important in the myths.²⁵ It appears, therefore, that the *raison d'être* for Sumerian temple-towers was the reunion of heaven and earth.

There are texts from the Third Dynasty of Ur that represent Sumerian thinking about temples and the fame of their builders. The texts represent the period of the founding of the Third Dynasty of Ur about the middle of the twenty-first century B.C. Kramer has given us a number of important Sumerian hymns, among them an Urnammu hymn on the building of the *Ekur*, the great temple of Enlil at Ur.²⁶ Here, too, is the same preoccupation with reaching to heaven. Portions of the hymn read as follows:

Enlil, the Great Mountain, who makes glorious his shrine, his lofty shrine, the
Ekur, like the light of day,

Set his . . . heart,

Commissioned Ur-Nammu, the shepherd, to lift the head of the Ekur heaven-high,
Exalted the king in the land, lifted his head heaven-high. . . .

The house that Enki had adorned beautifully,

Ur-Nammu, the shepherd, raised the lofty Ekur in Duranki (Nippur) heaven-high,
So that the people, all of them, stood before it in awe. . . .

The doors, the lofty, he filled them with seemly beauty, the lofty house he made
awe-inspiring—it was wide in extent, it was most awesome,

²³H. W. F. Saggs, *The Greatness That was Babylon* (New York: Hawthorne, 1962) 355 ff.

²⁴M. Beek, *Atlas*, p. 151.

²⁵S. M. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology* (New York: Harper, 1961) 43 ff.

²⁶ANESTP 583-584.

The storied mountain, the *giguna*, as a dwelling place for the Great Mountain, he established in its midst, like a lofty tower. . . .

I, the Great Mountain, Father Enlil, whose life-giving command and decisions are unalterable—

You have made the lofty Ekur resplendent,
With brilliant facades you have raised it heaven-high.

Faithful man of valor, you made it resplendent in the land. . . .

The text suggests that temple building in general was based on the same notion of unifying heaven and earth.

The same hymn furnishes parallels with the Genesis statement that the purpose of the tower was to make a name for its builders. Another portion of the hymn reads:

Ur-Nammu—of *en*-ship and kingship may you be their-acme,
May your name extend to the zenith of heaven, the depth of Hades. . . .

Another hymn translated by Kramer in *ANESTP* comes from Urnammu's son Shulgi. Here, too, is an illustration of self-laud and concern for name-making. A portion of the hymn reads:

Like my heroship, like my might,
I am accomplished in wisdom (as well),
I vie with its true word,
I love justice, I do not love evil,
I hate the evil word, I, Shulgi, a mighty king, supreme am I.
Because I am a powerful man rejoicing in his "loins,"
I enlarged the footpaths, straightened the highways of the land,
I made secure travel, built there "big houses,"
Planted gardens alongside of them, established resting places,
Settled there friendly folk,
So that who come from below, who come from above,
Might refresh themselves in its cool shade,
The wayfarer who travels the highway at night,
Might find refuge there like in a well-built city.
That my name be established unto distant days, that it leave not the mouth of men,
That my praise be spread wide in the land,
That I be eulogized in all the lands,
I, the runner, rose in my strength, all set for the course,
And from Nippur to Ur,
I resolved to traverse as if it were but a distance of one danna.

Shulgi concludes his self-glorification by expressing interest in the security of his people, thus paralleling the interest in security noted in Gen 11:4:

An set the holy crown upon my head,
Made me take the scepter in the "lapis-lazuli" Ekur,
On the radiant dais, he raised heaven-high the firmly founded throne,
He exalted there the power of my kingship.
I bent low all the lands, made secure the people, the four
corners of the universe, the people in unison, call my name,
Chant holy songs, pronounce my exaltation (saying):
"He that is nurtured by the exalted power of kingship,
Presented by Sin out of the Ekishnugal,
With heroship, might, and a good life,
Endowed with lofty power by Nunamnir,

Shulgi, the destroyer of all the foreign lands,
 Who makes all the people secure, who in accordance with the *me* of the universe,
 Shulgi cherished by the trusted son of An!
 Oh, Nidaba praise!"

We cannot, of course, be entirely sure that similar temple and kingship ideologies were present in Babylon at about the same time. But local Babylonian administrators of Ur III kings, insignificant though they may have been, undoubtedly sought the building of the ziggurat, the erection of temples to specific deities, and the meaning of kingship along the lines of name-making and security. On any reckoning it is remarkable that we have Sumerian texts that illustrate all these themes so exactly and pervasively from the precise period required by the sequential arrangement in Genesis.

The development of ziggurat architecture is parallel with the development of brick industries in Mesopotamia. Gen 11:3 notes that the tower builders said, "Come, let us make brick and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and bitumen had they for mortar." Before 3000 B.C. men learned how to make bricks by baking them in the sun. During the Early Bronze Age the kiln-baked brick was developed. Bricks baked in ovens were considerably harder and more suitable for bearing the great weight and pressures of larger buildings.²⁷ Ziggurat excavation has shown that the general plan of construction was to fill the core of the structure with a solid mass of sun-dried bricks and to encase it in an outer wall of kiln-fired bricks making up a thick wall.²⁸ The use of oven-baked bricks by at least as early as the founding of the Third Dynasty of Ur is attested by excavation at the Ur ziggurat and by references to brickmaking in Sumerian mythology and poetry.²⁹ In his study of the ziggurat at Ur, Woolley found the name of Urnammu stamped into the baked bricks of the outer wall.³⁰ Significantly, he was able to distinguish the baked bricks of Urnammu from the later burnt-glazed bricks of Nabonidus, who repaired and rebuilt the ziggurat. Literary attestation of the use of brick is furnished by the Urnammu text cited above. Near the beginning of the hymn we have these words:

Enlil, the Great Mountain, chose him from among all his people,
 Filled with fearsome awe the confirmed shepherd of Nunamnir.
 To restore the brick work of the Ekur in accordance with the *me*,
 Enlil, the Great Mountain, who makes glorious his lofty shrine,
 the Ekur like the light of day,
 Set his . . . heart,
 Commissioned Ur-Nammu the shepherd to lift the heart of the Ekur heaven-high,
 Exalted the king in the land, lifted his head heaven-high.
 For the fateful shepherd Ur-Nammu, who with the support of Enlil is heroic unto
 distant days,
 He who knows decisions, the lord of great understanding, directed the brickmold,
 Enlil kept under control for Ur-Nammu, the shepherd, his foes and enemies.³¹

²⁷N. M. Sarna, *Understanding*, p. 71.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹L. Woolley, *Ur of the Chaldees* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1929) 88-93.

³⁰Ibid., pp. 88-93.

³¹ANESTP, p. 583.

It is not exactly clear how much we can rely on the term "brickmold" to prove a reference to kiln-burnt bricks as opposed to sun-dried bricks. Regardless, the term falls within the requirements of the language of Gen 11:3.³²

IV. THE FALL AND SCATTERING OF THE SUMERIANS

Sumerian civilization met its end with the fall of the Third Dynasty of Ur under its last king, Ibbi-Sin, about 1960 B.C. A Sumerian poet, like his Jewish counterpart Jeremiah, lamented the destruction of Ur with a lengthy sorrowful poem. At various points the scattering of the people of Sumer is referred to, answering to Gen 11:8b:³³

. . . because in my land there was bitter distress,
I, like a cow for its calf, trudge the earth,
My land was not delivered of fear.

Again he cries out:

Like the sheepfold of a shepherd verily it has been torn down;
My possessions which had accumulated in the city verily had been dissipated. . . .
Me of my city verily they deprived; my Ur of me verily they deprived. . . .

Enlil called the storm; the people groan.
The storm of overflow he carried off from the land; the people groan.
The good storm he carried off from Sumer; the people groan.
To the evil storm he issued directions; the people groan. . . .

Over the blackheaded people the winds swept; the people groan.
Sumer is broken up by the *gišburru* (a weapon); the people groan. . . .

Ur—its weak and its strong perished through hunger; mothers and fathers who did not leave their houses were overcome by fire;
The young lying on their mothers' laps, like fish were carried off by the waters . . . the judgment of the land perished; the people groan.
The counsel of the land was dissipated; the people groan.
The mother left her daughter; the people groan.
The father turned away from his son; the people groan.
In the city the wife was abandoned, the child was abandoned, the possessions were scattered about;
The blackheaded people into their family places . . . were carried off.

A few lines later the poet cries out of the fallen city:

The Subarians and Elamites, the destroyers, made of it thirty shekels,
The righteous house they break up with a pickaxe; the people groan.
The city they make into ruins; the people groan.
Its lady cries: "Alas for my city," cries: "Alas for my house";
Ningal cries: "Alas for my city," cries: "Alas for my house."
As for me, the woman, my city has been destroyed, my house too has been destroyed;
Oh Nanna, Ur has been destroyed, its people have been dispersed.

³²S. N. Kramer, *Mythology*, pp. 61-62; *Sumerians*, p. 181.

³³ANET, pp. 457-463.

Finally near the end he wails:

From distant days, when the land was founded,
 Oh Nanna, the humble who have taken thy path,
 Have brought unto thee their tears of the smitten house;
 before thee is their cry!

Verily thy blackheaded people who have been cast away, prostrate themselves before thee.

These lines are sufficiently clear to indicate that a great destruction and dispersion of the people has occurred throughout the entire land of Sumer. It is not limited to Ur, as many lines in the poem make clear. The invasions of the Subarians and Elamites have scattered and dispersed the inhabitants of all Sumer.

That this convulsive event that marked the political end of Sumerian civilization was not merely limited to Ur is attested by another lament over Sumer and Ur from about the same time.³⁴ It is full of references to destruction, plundering, death and dispersion. The second stanza describes city after city from north to south falling to the invading "storm," the "all-devouring flood." The "storm" is a metaphorical description of the invading Elamites and Subarians. The second stanza begins with Kish in the north, only a few miles from Babylon. Babylon itself is not mentioned, but the reference to Kish is significant. Following the destruction at Kish in the north there is mention of the Sumerian cities of Marad, Isin, Nippur, Kesh, Adab, Erech, Umma, Lagash, Ur itself, and a number of cities to the south including the southernmost Sumerian city of Eridu. There are many references to the fleeing people, the terror, the famine and dispersion as they are carted off to slaughter or resettlement in Elam.

V. CONCLUSION

John Bright in his integrative history of Israel identifies the fall of Ur III as the event in Mesopotamia that fell on the eve of the patriarchal age.³⁵ The artifactual and literary remains of Ur III fit well into this sequence.

There remains the chronological problem. It is virtually certain now that the patriarchal age is the Middle Bronze period and very likely Middle Bronze II (1900-1550 B.C.). Historians and scholars are not in agreement on the exact date of the fall of Ur III. Parrot suggests that it was c. 2016 B.C.,³⁶ Finegan, in agreement with many others, places the event at 1960 B.C.,³⁷ Bright at 1950 B.C.³⁸ If the exodus is placed at about 1280, a date that some evangelicals are still unwilling to allow, 400 years added for the affliction in Egypt and a total of 200 years for the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, the result is sometime in the nineteenth century, about 1890 B.C.³⁹ The Septuagint makes the 430 years in Egypt

³⁴ANESTP, pp. 611-619.

³⁵J. Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959) 34-36.

³⁶A. Parrot, *Abraham*, p. 18.

³⁷J. Finegan, *Light*, p. 49.

³⁸J. Bright, *History*, p. 35.

³⁹Ibid., p. 75.

cover the sojourn of the patriarchs in Palestine as well. This way of reckoning could be based on an early pre-Masoretic Hebrew text. If so, it would loosen up the chronological squeeze. Beyond this at the present time it seems impossible to go. The fall of Ur III occurs on the boundary of the Early Bronze-Middle Bronze ages. The patriarchal age is almost certainly Middle Bronze II. The sojourn in Egypt certainly involves the Late Bronze period. The general sequence is clear enough, but the specific year-dates will have to wait for further clarification.